

Increasing access to justice for people in rural areas

How can we make sure that people living in poverty or on a low income in rural areas know where to turn when they have problems that require legal help? Are we sure that people who face challenges are aware of their legal rights? Do they know where to turn for legal information when they need it?

Thanks to funding from the Law Foundation of Ontario, Northumberland Community Legal Centre is a part of a new "Connecting Region" project (in conjunction with other three other legal clinics (Belleville, Sharbot Lake, Kingston), Queen's Student Legal Services, and Legal Aid) that aims to find out the answers to these questions in a 5-county wide area. And when we do, we will recommend new initiatives to reach rural residents and problems. We want to consider ways to streamline legal aid services. Is our current system working?

The project will create customized information resource packages for rural communities. The project will work with specialty legal clinics who have a provincial mandate like the ARCH Disability Law Centre, Justice for Children and Youth, The Advocacy Centre for the Elderly (ACE) and the Canadian Environmental Law Association (CELA) to expand the reach of their services to rural areas. And we are pleased to partner with Community Legal Education Ontario (CLEO) and their innovative legal literacy initiatives. We see promising possibilities for a "know your law" learning strategy with rural partners.

What do we envision for the future? Better access to justice. This will include:

- better coordination of legal aid services
- a more holistic approach to clients' needs
- prevention of "referral fatigue"
- new resources to meet currently unmet legal needs
- increased legal literacy
- new partnerships with community-based organizations and local lawyers.

(Article reprinted and adapted with permission from Michele Leering, Community Advocacy and Legal Centre, Belleville)