

Clinic welcomes Ukrainian visitors to Canada for study tour

We are delighted to be hosting an afternoon visit (out of a week-long study tour of Ontario's community legal clinics) from the Open Society Institute (OSI), International Renaissance Foundation (IRF) and the managers of 8 Ukrainian community law centres and regional networks.

Ukraine has undergone a complicated economic transformation since becoming an independent state and now experiences significant socioeconomic transformation. For the last 3 years the OSI's Justice Initiative has been working with the IRF to promote legal aid reforms. A new legal aid law is in the works and the Ukrainians hope to create a system for provision of basic legal information and advice for the poor.

A number of initiatives have been undertaken to ensure "Legal Empowerment of the Poor" in Ukraine. Since 2009, the IRF and OSI have supported this initiative aimed at the development of a network of 8 new community legal aid centres in 4 regions of Ukraine (mainly rural areas). The centres will provide local residents with legal information and support, including a range of legal services using a mixed model of lawyers, paralegals, law students, and trained community volunteers. Similar to Ontario's clinics, these centres will also be engaging their communities to create solutions to their own problems by increasing their knowledge of rights, and undertaking systemic advocacy and law reform projects. It is anticipated that the provision of systematic legal aid to the community will intensify the willingness of the people and give them strength and empower them to advocate for themselves.

We have much to learn from one another and our common struggle to increase access to justice for low income and vulnerable communities. The tour will begin in Belleville on June 23, followed by visits to sister clinics in Sharbot Lake, Kingston, Queen's law students legal aid services. The visit in Northumberland will take place on June 28, from 2 to 5 pm. From there, our visitors will go to Toronto to meet with staff from other legal clinics, the Association of Community Legal Clinics of Ontario (ACLCO) and key Legal Aid Ontario staff.

Thanks to Michele Leering, Executive Director of Community Advocacy Legal Centre in Belleville, for making all the arrangements.

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