



Community Needs Assessment **Report Summary**

January 1, 2014

<http://www.dal.ca/faculty/law/dlas/public-legal-education.html>

Overview

This is a summary of the findings from a community needs assessment conducted between October 7, 2013 and November 20, 2013 by Dalhousie Legal Aid Service as part of the Legal Education for Advocates Project (LEAP). LEAP is a public legal education project, essentially a training program, designed to teach lay advocates about poverty law topics. The purpose of the needs assessment was to allow us to determine what topics to focus on during LEAP training sessions.

Who we heard from

We received input from 186 people: 83 through telephone and in person interviews and an additional 103 through our digital survey. Seventy-seven percent of our respondents identified themselves as playing a front line role of some kind. We heard from many support workers, counsellors and outreach workers from a range of organizations including adult learning associations, career resource centres, family resource centres, transition houses and women's centres.

What we heard

LEAP should focus on Income Assistance and Residential Tenancies. The response to our interview and survey overwhelmingly supports the conclusion that income assistance and residential tenancies are the two most important topics for LEAP to focus on. Eighty-three percent of respondents identified income assistance as the most common poverty law issue facing their clients. Seventy-two percent of respondents identified residential tenancies. The next most common answer was access to legal aid services, which was identified by fifty-six percent of respondents.

People don't know what poverty law means and poverty law issues are not always seen as "legal issues". Respondents very often needed clarification about the term poverty law and about what kinds of issues fell under the umbrella of the term. We operated with two definitions of poverty law:

1. The body of laws, regulations, policies and legal decisions that impact the rights of low-income individuals and families; and
2. Any law, regulation, policy or legal decision intended to respond to poverty.
Examples: Canada Pension Plan Disability; Employment Insurance; Income Assistance; Residential Tenancies

Once the term was explained and the various issues were identified people often responded by remarking that they did not think of those issues as legal issues. Respondents tended to identify legal issues as those that involved going to court.

There is clear demand for public legal education on family law topics. Our interview respondents in particular made clear that they provide advocacy services to people dealing with custody & access issues, child protection matters, divorces and support applications. Family law

topics ranked high alongside poverty law topics as the most common legal issues identified by our interviewees. Respondents made clear that training on family law topics would be extremely valuable.

Any training would be useful. When we asked people what legal information or training would be useful for them we received a wide range of responses. The most common answer, chosen by nearly 1 in 4 respondents, was “any”. The demand was approximately equal for income assistance and residential tenancies, each of which was requested by 1 in 5 respondents. Another fairly common request was for resource guides and plain language reference materials.

Lay advocates provide a similar menu of advocacy services across the province. We asked each respondent to describe the role that they play when someone has a legal issue. The responses that we received were remarkably consistent from one area to another. Nearly all of our respondents provide information and referral. More than half make phone calls on behalf of their clients. One in every two respondents writes letters on behalf of clients and accompanies them to meetings or court appearances. It is uncommon for respondents to speak on behalf of clients at hearings or in court. The basic profile of a lay advocate, based on the responses we received, is a person who provides information and referral, occasionally makes phone calls and accompanies clients to meetings or other important dates, and who rarely speaks at hearings or in the court room. This says nothing of the important role that lay advocates play in providing emotional support and encouraging people to take action on their legal rights.

Lack of knowledge is at the top of the long list of challenges faced by lay advocates. When asked to identify the biggest challenge that they face when assisting someone with a legal issue respondents pointed to a very broad range of factors. The most commonly identified challenge, picked by one in every two respondents, was lack of knowledge about the client’s rights under the law. Other common challenges included: lack of time/resources with the organization; lack of community resources such as transportation supports and systemic factors such as the slow speed of the administrative system and the inconsistencies in bureaucratic decision making.

There are several areas of Nova Scotia where LEAP should do more outreach or should combine training locations. The response to our interview and survey also suggest that there are certain areas of the province where more outreach is required in order for the LEAP training sessions to be well attended. Alternatively, training locations could be amalgamated. As a group, the LEAP team decided that each location would need to have a minimum of 15 attendees to justify our making a trip to the area. We then asked all respondents to provide us with an approximation of how many people from their organizations would be interested in attending LEAP workshops. Based on the responses the following areas require further attention:

Antigonish; Digby; New Glasgow; Port Hawkesbury; Windsor; Yarmouth

There is very high demand for LEAP in the Halifax area. Approximations provided by respondents indicate that we can expect between 47 and 141 people willing to attend our trainings in Halifax. This amount of demand could support more than one training session, however it raises questions for the LEAP team because the focus of the project is supposed to be on rural areas.

Greater than half of our respondents can commit a full day or more to LEAP. The organizations that we heard from are short staffed and underfunded, which means that making time for training can be a challenge. Despite this reality, around sixty-three percent of respondents said they could commit a day or up to two days to LEAP training. There were others who indicated that they would accommodate whatever schedule that we offered since the training was so greatly needed. Still others will have to pick and choose from the training sessions that we offer based on the constraints of their schedules.

What we will do next

Based on the input we received from lay advocates during our needs assessment we will be narrowing the focus of the project to put more emphasis on our income assistance and residential tenancies workshops. These two topics will form the core of the LEAP curriculum.

We will also be narrowing the list of communities that we visit from 12 to 8. We have chosen to amalgamate our trainings in New Glasgow, Antigonish and Port Hawkesbury, as well as our trainings in Digby and Yarmouth and our trainings in Windsor and Kentville. This decision is based partly on the results of the needs assessment, but also partly on the needs of Dalhousie Legal Aid Service and the importance of conserving resources for LEAP. That means LEAP will schedule training sessions in the following 8 communities:

1. Amherst
2. Antigonish
3. Bridgewater
4. Halifax
5. Kentville
6. Sydney
7. Truro
8. Yarmouth

By January 31, 2014 we will have arranged venues for our training sessions in these areas and sent invitations out to groups who participated in the needs assessment.

The training sessions will take place from April to June of 2014.