

Update on Legal Aid Ontario Funding Cuts

From Ryan Peck, HALCO Executive Director, June 2019

On April 11, 2019, the Ontario government cut funding to Legal Aid Ontario (LAO) by 30% for this fiscal year (2019-20), with additional cuts over coming years. In addition, the government also made clear that LAO is unable to use any provincial money for refugee/immigration law services.

The HIV & AIDS Legal Clinic Ontario (HALCO) condemns these cuts in the strongest language possible. The legal aid cuts, combined with other cuts made by the province, will have a devastating impact on the people of Ontario.

Refugee/Immigration Law Services

Due to the government decision, LAO is currently limited to the funding it receives for refugee/immigration law services from the federal government. While the federal government provides some funding, it is not enough and refugee/immigration services have therefore been significantly reduced.

Currently, new legal aid certificates will be issued only for assistance with the [completion of Basis of Claim forms](#), which is the document that starts a refugee claim. In other words, there will be no legal aid certificates for refugee hearings or other refugee/immigration law matters (previously issued [legal aid certificates will be honoured](#)). In addition, the LAO Refugee Law Offices (Toronto, Hamilton, Ottawa) will provide certain [services](#). You can find more details on the *News* section of LAO's website at <https://www.legalaid.on.ca/en/news/newsarchives.asp>.

HALCO, however, will continue to provide an array of refugee/immigration law services. Please continue to refer to us people living with HIV in Ontario. While we currently have two refugee/immigration lawyers, if we are unable to assist with a particular issue we will do our best to provide an effective referral.

It is essential that the federal and provincial governments come to an agreement on funding for refugee/immigration law services (see below for a template email to the federal government).

HALCO and Community Legal Clinics

On June 12, 2019, LAO announced how the budget cuts would be implemented. HALCO's funding was cut, but we continue to provide our full array of services and we urge continued referrals to us for people living with HIV in Ontario who are in need of legal services.

Although we escaped the brunt of the initial cuts, other clinics have been targeted for [large budget reductions](https://www.huffingtonpost.ca/entry/legal-aid-ontario-slashes-toronto-budgets_ca_5d00f6b7e4b07551039acbb3) (https://www.huffingtonpost.ca/entry/legal-aid-ontario-slashes-toronto-budgets_ca_5d00f6b7e4b07551039acbb3). We stand with those clinics. In addition, many central supports for clinics have been cut or eliminated, and all clinics have been directed to no longer "prioritize" engaging in systemic advocacy activities.

It is also important to note that [cuts](#) were also made to other legal aid services (see the *News* section of LAO's website, see link above).

This is the most significant attack on community legal services in Ontario's history.

Moving Forward

These cuts, which will be deeper over coming years, will impact those least able to access justice and who rely on legal aid services such as those provided by [community legal clinics](#). Legal aid services are particularly vital for those who face intersecting discrimination and issues linked to poverty, including Indigenous and racialized persons, as well as those living with disabilities, from LGBTQ2+ communities, and facing gender-based violence.

Moreover, the provincial government is currently reviewing the entire legal aid system, including the community legal clinic model. Under threat are the key principles of independent, locally based and community controlled clinics, and the mandate of clinics to provide a broad range of services including systemic advocacy.

Contact Government

We are in the midst of a severe legal aid crisis. The community legal clinic system is at risk of being eliminated by the provincial government, and refugee/immigration law services have been significantly diminished.

Below are suggestions for reaching out to provincial and federal governments:

- **Provincial**

- Email Premier **Doug Ford** and Attorney General **Doug Downey**

- at <https://stoplegalaidcuts.nationbuilder.com/contact>

- Email your local Member of Provincial Parliament (MPP)

- (you can use your postal code to find your MPP

- at <https://voterinformationservice.elections.on.ca/en/election/search?mode=post alCode>).

- **Federal**

- Email Minister of Justice and Attorney General **David Lametti**

- (David.Lametti@parl.gc.ca), Minister of Finance **Bill Morneau**

- (Bill.Morneau@parl.gc.ca), and your local MP (you can use “Find MP”

- at <https://www.ourcommons.ca/Parliamentarians/en/members>). Suggested wording is below:

Subject: Funding for refugee/immigration legal aid services in Ontario

Dear Honourable Ministers Lametti and Morneau,

The legal aid cuts imposed by Ontario were abrupt and unilateral, and we are facing a human rights crisis as a result. I am deeply concerned that the consequences of the crisis will be severe and irreversible for vulnerable families.

The consequences of not having adequate legal representation for refugees and immigrants include deportation, detention, torture, and death. This drastic reduction in legal aid services will not only have devastating impacts on some of the most vulnerable people in Canada, but will lead to bottlenecks in the system. This will inevitably lead to further costs at a time when the immigration system is facing increasing numbers of claimants and perceptions of inefficiencies.

The federal government should urgently come to the table to resolve the funding crisis with the provincial government.

STOP THE CUTS: ACCESS TO JUSTICE FOR ALL!

The Ontario Government's April 11th budget reduced the amount it funds for legal aid by 35%. As a result, on June 12th Legal Aid Ontario cut the budget for Community Legal Clinics by almost \$15M. This means that all clinics will receive cuts, and 20 clinics will deal with budget decreases of between 6 - 45%; cuts that will certainly mean loss of jobs and loss of services. All clinics have been directed to no longer prioritize doing systemic advocacy work on behalf of their communities and clients, even though this work efficiently addresses the issues that affect thousands of low income people.

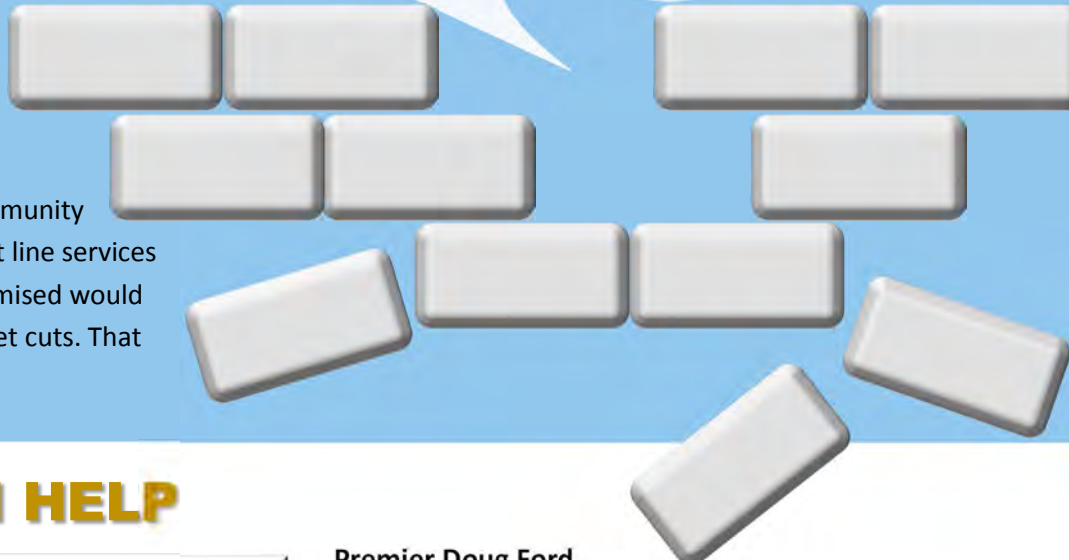
These cuts have stripped low income people of their ability to advocate for their interests. They are an unprecedented attack on the principles of access to justice and equality before the law that underpin our democracy.

These cuts are retroactive to April 1st and they are just the start. The cuts to Legal Aid Ontario will continue to increase, reaching 45% by 2021 – which will mean more cuts to funding for legal clinics.

Community legal clinics are independent, community based non-profit agencies. Clinics help the most vulnerable people in our province with the basic essentials of life:

- **keeping a roof over their head, and**
- **some money to put food on the table.**

This massive cut to funding for community legal clinics will mean reduced front line services – something that Premier Ford promised would not happen with government budget cuts. That promise is broken.



HOW YOU CAN HELP

Send an email to Premier Doug Ford, Attorney General Doug Downey and your local MPP, or telephone them directly.

Tell them you want them to **stop the cuts**, and that the cuts will directly impact the front-line services and advocacy that low-income Ontarians need to help keep a roof over their heads and put food on the table. Tell them they're breaking their promise to not cut services to the people.

Premier Doug Ford
premier@ontario.ca 416-325-1941

Attorney General Doug Downey
attorneygeneral@ontario.ca 705-726-5538

Contacting your own MPP is very important.

Find your MPP by postal code here:

<https://voterinformationservice.elections.on.ca/en/election/search?mode=postalCode>

More info: <https://stoplegalaidcuts.nationbuilder.com/>