

MEDIA RELEASE

For Immediate Release

Scarborough Community Legal Services Pilots a Student Social Work Services Program

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TORONTO – This year, Scarborough Community Legal Services (SCLS), in collaboration with West Scarborough Community Legal Services (WSCLS), has been examining how social work students can enhance services in community legal clinics by providing wrap-around support to clients. Thanks to a \$75,000 Seed grant from the Ontario Trillium Foundation in 2019, SCLS was able to pilot this program in the community.

“Community legal clinics are at the front line helping vulnerable people, ensuring that everyone has fair access to justice regardless of their economic means or background,” said Mitzie Hunter, MPP for Scarborough-Guildwood. “There is a high degree of need for services in the community. My office often refers residents experiencing complex problems to Scarborough Community Legal Services for help, so I was happy to learn about their pilot to bring on social work professionals to expand the scope of the clinic's programs and services.”

For almost 40 years, SCLS has provided legal services to the residents of East Scarborough for housing, income maintenance, employment, and immigration. Many seeking legal services have complex circumstances that require a holistic approach to services that social workers can provide.

“This project was conceived out of a desire to learn how we can best work with social work students to bring an interdisciplinary lens to the work of legal clinics, thereby ensuring clients are able to receive wrap-around services,” said Renee Griffin, Executive Director of SCLS. “We hope that providing this much needed support will allow us to better anticipate clients’ future legal needs and ultimately minimize the need for future legal interventions.”

The grant helped with staffing, program and some administrative costs as well. Alicia Lam, Master of Social Work (MSW), was hired as project lead to provide direct social work services. This year, she’s worked with two MSW placement students from the Factor-Inwentash Faculty of Social Work at University of Toronto (UofT) and one Bachelor of Social Work student from Ryerson’s School of Social Work, providing services to over 50 clients. Common requests include help finding affordable housing, advocating for medical care and services, and accessing mental health supports. Lam has been assisted by Vanessa Emery, JD/MSW, who is an experienced staff lawyer at WSCLS.

“When COVID-19 hit, it was a challenge for non-profit agencies to pivot to serving clients remotely,” said Lam. “We found that many clients were struggling with food security and accessing community-based services; these clients turned to the legal clinic as a trusted service provider for help. Our social work services were able to help fill in those gaps and support our clients in staying safe and connected to their community supports. Our project has been shaped and directed by our stakeholders, including other legal

clinics, community partners, and those with lived-experience who sit on our Client Advisory Committee. Their input and feedback have been crucial to the success of the project.”

“This project is a key demonstration of the benefits of social workers practicing alongside lawyers,” said Professor Michael Saini, Factor-Inwentash Chair in Law and Social Work at UofT, and member of the project’s Advisory Committee. “Inter-professional practice between lawyers and social workers responds holistically to the needs of individuals experiencing socio-legal issues by also supporting their mental, emotional, and spiritual wellbeing and adjustment. Access to justice is not just about access to the courts, but it is about providing opportunities to receive individualized support while addressing legal issues. Scarborough Community Legal Services is an exemplary clinic that has successfully integrated holistic legal services by providing their clients with access to social work services. The project plays a vital role in the community for promoting access to justice and for demonstrating the benefits of inter-professional practice to address socio-legal issues,” Saini added.

The project’s research findings will be released in early 2021, and will propose best practices for social work student programs in legal clinics. OTF is an agency of the Government of Ontario, and one of Canada’s leading granting foundations. OTF awarded \$115 million to 644 projects last year to build healthy and vibrant communities in Ontario. www.otf.ca

For further information:

Alicia Lam
416-438-7206, ext. 22
lamal@lao.on.ca

About Scarborough Community Legal Services

Scarborough Community Legal Services is a community legal clinic that provides free legal services to low income residents of East Scarborough in the areas of housing, income security, employment, and immigration law. We also provide free legal education and information to our community members and partners and push for better laws to protect the interests of people living in poverty.