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Alberta Legal Services Mapping Project: Brief Overview

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Alberta Legal Services Mapping Project

Brief Overview

The *Alberta Legal Services Mapping Project* is a collaborative action research initiative undertaken by the Canadian Forum on Civil Justice in association with a broad partnership of justice community representatives. The research will lead to the creation of a province-wide “map” of legal services that provide to the Alberta public - information, education, legal advice, legal representation and/or other support or assistance related to legal problems. The map will include the central services provided by *pro bono* initiatives, clinics, public legal education services, courts, legal aid, the private Bar and social services relevant to the needs of users of the justice system, and will extend to civil, family, criminal and administrative justice programs.

A ‘mapping process’ is a form of needs assessment research that takes a collaborative network approach to creating a picture of what programs and services exist, and how they are experienced. This process will also reveal strengths in current programs on which to build and gaps in services that need to be addressed, in order to improve the administration of justice in Alberta.

There is growing empirical evidence that the majority of Canadians lack knowledge and understanding of the justice system, its processes, and how those processes relate to their legal issues. Public participants in the *Civil Justice System & the Public* research by the Canadian Forum on Civil Justice, invariably told us they knew little about the civil justice system and had not recognized a need to gain that knowledge before they became personally involved in a legal dispute. As a result, the public typically seeks information about the civil process while under stress and experiencing serious social and/or emotional crisis. Other research confirms that many people with legal problems do not recognize their need for legal assistance or do not know where to begin in seeking legal information and representation. Consequently, when they need legal information and services they often have a difficult time identifying, accessing and negotiating the elements of the justice system and related legal services that they need.

This province-wide mapping project will involve funders, government, legal service providers, educators, law reform organizations, the Bar, the judiciary, courts administration and the public in a joint initiative. This unique project takes a collaborative approach designed to strengthen relationships within the Alberta legal community, provide increased understanding of existing legal services and of the needs of the citizens who use them, and help to ensure that the way of doing business evolves into a coordinated, effective and user-focused approach.

Three broad research questions are posed:

1. *What programs, services and facilities relating to the administration of justice, public access and public understanding, are available in each Alberta judicial district?*
2. *What do we know about the users of current legal education, information, advice, representation and support services?*

3. *How can current legal services be enhanced to better meet client needs and how can service gaps be effectively filled?*

The answers to these questions will provide information that is much needed by policy makers, program designers, service providers and users. The information gained will assist in:

- enhancing existing programs and services that work well;
- shifting resources where duplication is identified;
- creating new programs and services where gaps exist, and
- identifying needed changes to current law, rules and practice.

Central products of this research will be an assessment of the effectiveness of current services and the identification of service gaps which need to be addressed. This will enable those who provide services to ensure that their programs are designed to meet the needs of users.

The Alberta Law Foundation has committed to provide significant funding which will allow us to complete a crucial pilot of this multi-year project, and will actively participate as a partner in the project. Alberta Justice is also providing funding. The project is expected to be of central interest to other Alberta justice community stakeholders it provides an opportunity to jointly undertake a concrete initiative that will provide information critically needed by both the justice community and the Alberta public.

A collaborative approach is taken with the expectation that each representative will participate as they are able to as the project develops. In this regard, we have adopted a definition of collaboration developed and applied in previous projects:

Working together in a cooperative, equitable and dynamic relationship, in which knowledge and resources are shared in order to attain goals and take action that is educational, meaningful and beneficial to all. It is understood that this definition entails that research is conducted with, and not on, the community; and that all collaborators have different but equally important knowledge and resources to share and gain from each other.

For more information about the *Alberta Legal Services Mapping Project* please visit our website at www.cfcj-fcjc.org or by e-mail or telephone to the Canadian Forum on Civil Justice contacts listed below.

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