

West Coast LEAF denounces new cuts to legal aid services

November 6, 2009 – The West Coast Legal Education and Action Fund condemns the recent devastating reductions to B.C.'s already underfunded legal aid system

The Legal Services Society, a non-profit organization funded through the Attorney General's office, announced on November 3 that the LawLINE and all but one of the regional legal aid offices will shut down as of March 2010.

This announcement follows extensive service reductions in January, the closure of the Family Law Clinic in Vancouver in March, and an ending of extended service in Family Law in August. All of this on top of a 40% funding reduction between 2002 and 2004 that particularly affected family law, the legal aid area most often accessed by women.

There is virtually no family law representation available to low income British Columbians.

“This puts women at risk of further violence, poverty and dependence on social assistance. The lack of Family Law Legal Aid contributes to child poverty and costs our society in all of our social services,” says West Coast LEAF Executive Director Alison Brewin. “LSS has cut the very programs intended to fill the gaps created by the funding cuts in 2002.”

A signatory to West Coast LEAF's Access to Justice petition states, “I am a support worker for women who have been abused by their partners. In many cases, women cannot afford a lawyer at all, especially because abuse in intimate relationship involves financial abuse as well. More and more abused women are getting denied for legal aid even before this further funding cut took place. I am certain that this funding cut will put thousands of women and their children in an extremely vulnerable and dangerous position.”

The petition calls for broad systemic reform of legal aid to ensure access to justice for all British Columbians.

“Canada and British Columbia were criticized in 2008 by the United Nations for failing to meet international obligations to ensure that women have equal access to the justice system,” West Coast LEAF Legal Director Kasari Govender says. “The Attorney General argues that funding hasn't been reduced, but provincial government controls the Legal Services Society and has a legal responsibility to fulfill the right to equal and adequate access to justice - even in tough economic times.”

To support the call for Access to Justice in BC, visit www.thepetitionsite.com/1/access-to-justice.

West Coast LEAF's mission is to achieve equality by changing historic patterns of systemic discrimination against women through BC-based equality rights litigation, law reform and public legal education.

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