



Jamie West

Member of Provincial Parliament, Sudbury
Député provincial, Sudbury

August 12 2019

Hon. Doug Downey
Attorney General
McMurtry-Scott Bldg 11th Flr
720 Bay St
Toronto, ON
M7A 2S9

Dear Attorney General Doug Downey,

I am writing to urge you to immediately reverse cuts to legal aid and restrictions on the work of speciality legal aid clinics in Ontario.

Earlier this month people across the province attended rallies, meetings, open houses and pop-ups as part of a provincial day of action to raise awareness of the impact of cuts to legal aid on vulnerable people in Ontario. I am adding my voice to the growing calls for you to reverse these cuts. They are short-sighted and will have far-reaching social and financial impacts for our province and its people.

In my riding of Sudbury, we held a community town hall discussion to raise awareness of the impact of these cuts. Attendees spoke about the critical services legal aid provides to people in our community. People like my constituent Odette St-Gelais who had been denied access to her pension for years before she was able to get help from legal aid. Cuts to legal aid will be devastating for people in our community simply seeking access to justice.

As Official Opposition labour critic, I have grave concerns about the decision to retroactively slash the operating budget of Ontario's three worker focused legal aid clinics: The Injured Workers Community Legal Clinic (IWC), the Industrial Accident Victims Group of Ontario (IAVGO), and the Workers' Health and Safety Legal Clinic (WHS LC). IWC and IAVGO have seen their operating budgets cut by 22% and WHSLC by 30%.

These three clinics conduct valuable work upholding the rights of workers in Ontario. They offer legal advice, referrals, and legal representation to workers across the province; build public awareness of the rights and responsibilities of employers and employees; and advocate for improvements to labour policy and legislation. All three clinics assist injured workers access the compensation they are owed. By the time these injured workers find a legal clinic that is able to help them, many are suffering from mental

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health issues, living in poverty, and feel helpless navigating a compensation system that has let them down. These workers are vulnerable and have nowhere else to turn.

The implementation of these cuts retroactively to April 1st has left the clinics scrambling. WHCLC and IWC have reduced staff, and IAVGO's staff took a 20% cut in pay and reduced their hours. All three clinics are no longer taking on new clients.

WHSLC anticipates that these cuts will make it more difficult to serve Northern Ontario workers who have been wrongfully dismissed for raising health and safety issues - limiting their ability to fulfill their mandate to serve all of Ontario. As a Northern MPP, this is deeply troubling to hear. I have serious concerns about how these cuts will hurt my constituents and people across the province.

The clinics have also been directed by Legal Aid Ontario not to use funding for community and advocacy work. This was a responsibility they were encouraged to take on by Legal Aid Ontario. The experts at these clinics understand the injustices workers face firsthand. They bring an important perspective to legal reform and we need to hear from them at public consultations and committee hearings. This restriction on their work will have a direct impact on the quality of decisions made by this government.

Despite your assurances that these cuts would not impact front line services or vulnerable people in Ontario – this is clearly not the case.

These cuts will severely limit access to justice in Ontario and I urge you to reinstate funding to these speciality legal clinics and local community legal clinics across Ontario.

Sincerely,

Jamie West
MPP for Sudbury

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