

The Community Legal Assistance Society – Who We Are

The Community Legal Assistance Society (CLAS) is an umbrella organization that provides legal advice, assistance, and representation to disadvantaged people and to the groups that represent them. CLAS also helps to develop law that benefits disadvantaged groups as a whole. We are a non-profit organization governed by a 17-member board of directors comprised of individuals from the legal profession, the community at large, and the executive of the Law Students Legal Advice Program.

- CLAS is nationally recognized as a leader in the non-profit sector of poverty, disability, mental health and equality law.
- CLAS provides assistance to thousands of people each year through direct service components within our Mental Health Law Program and our involvement in the Law Students' Legal Advice Program.
- CLAS has conducted hundreds of test cases at various administrative tribunals and through all levels of court, including over 20 cases in front of the Supreme Court of Canada. We have achieved significant landmarks for disadvantaged individuals and groups in this work.
- Our Mental Health Law Program has been a model for all of Canada in its provision of legal services in this area and we are the only organization in B.C. that has a program specializing in mental health law.
- CLAS has also facilitated and participated in numerous community law reform initiatives and has provided public legal education to advocates throughout the province.

Structure: CLAS is an umbrella organization that believes individuals and groups can best achieve their legal objectives by working together and by sharing the limited resources that are available to them. We work hard to ensure that the qualities of consultation, co-operation and compromise are at the forefront of all of our programming.

- CLAS currently operates six Programs all of which draw on a combination of strategies in order to achieve the greatest impact. We have a service case component that provides direct legal assistance to a large number of people. This work is carried out primarily through our Mental Health Law Program and our Law Students' Legal Advice Program.

CLAS also supports law reform work which is carried out across all program areas, except our Law Students' Legal Advice Program. This work draws on a combination of strategies including: *Charter* and test case litigation.

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We also utilize community development and public legal education strategies in order to assist those that we work with as well as to ensure we are kept apprised of issues and goals relating to the groups that we work with.

- CLAS has grown from a staff of 5 in 1971 to a current staff of 28. We provide legal services through staff lawyers and paralegals that specialize in issue specific areas. Our annual operating budget for fiscal 2001/02 was \$1,592,000.00.

Programs: As an umbrella organization, we manage and operate a number of distinct programs under one roof. All programs aim to provide service to disadvantaged individuals such as people who are physically, mentally, socially, economically, or otherwise disadvantaged and to the groups who represent them. Our services mainly benefit people receiving social assistance, old age and/or disability pensions, or those on a low income. The programs we currently operate include:

- **The Community Law Program.** The mandate of the Community Law Program is to conduct *Charter* litigation, test case litigation, law reform, community development and public legal education in the areas of poverty law, workers' compensation, employment insurance and equality law.
- **The Disability Law Program.** The mandate of this Program is to provide legal resources that support individuals with disabilities, their organizations and advocates in effecting social change leading to equality and independence. The Disability Law Program has three major components: legal representation with an emphasis on test cases brought under the *Charter* and human rights legislation, law reform, and legal education for the community of persons with disabilities, the private bar, and the public at large.
- **The Law Student Legal Advice Program.** For over 30 years, CLAS has supervised and provided support to the law students involved in UBC's Law Students' Legal Advice Program. This Program provides students with hands on experience in a variety of matters relating to the law and provides the community with a viable legal resource. Our supervising lawyer reviews all students' work, provides advice, direction, and consultation. Last year, over 5000 people were seen at these clinics and were provided with legal advice, referral and follow-up services. CLAS also helps to ensure quality control of student's work and is responsible to ensure that students are effectively administering their program.
- **The Mental Health Law Program.** The mandate of this Program is to provide legal services to patients with a mental illness in B.C. The Mental Health Law Program has become a model for all of Canada in the provision of these services. This Program utilizes a combination of three major components in order to achieve its objectives: service case work, test case and *Charter* litigation, and law reform and community interaction.

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- **Health Care Consent Advocacy Program.** CLAS is named as the Prescribed Advocacy Organization (PAO) under the *Health Care (Consent) and Care (Facilities) Admission Act*. We operate a Health Care Consent Advocacy Program and provide the legal services of the PAO, which are mandated in the *Act*, on a provincial basis.
- **Human Rights Program.** In partnership with the B.C. Human Rights Coalition, we are currently providing representation to persons whose human rights complaint has moved to the hearing stage of the complaints process. We expect to have further involvement in the new human rights system when final legislation is passed this fall.

In addition to operating the above Programs, CLAS acts as an **Expert Resource** for many community advocates and for many Law Students' Legal Advice Program volunteers. Our staff lawyers are regularly called upon as a source of expertise, both for advice and referral of cases, mainly in the areas of poverty, employment insurance, workers' compensation, mental health, disability, and human rights/equality law.

CLAS's **publication** entitled "Society Guide for British Columbia" is used by numerous non-profit groups throughout the province to assist them in their incorporation. Our lawyers also help to staff emergency legal advice clinics during the months when law students are in exam periods. CLAS is also used as a **resource for legal education** and training by many groups and advocates throughout the province. Staff are available on request to train community and self advocates from poverty and disability groups, social workers, MLA constituency offices, unemployment action centers, and other organizations.