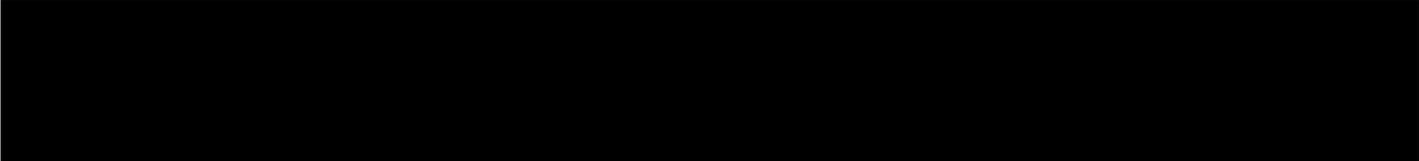


2011 IMPACT REPORT
RAPPORT D'IMPACT 2011



Funded by





March 29, 2012

As President of the Board of Directors of South Ottawa Community Legal Services, I am pleased to send you our annual Impact Report. It offers an excellent snapshot of how our community's legal clinic made a difference in 2011 for the low-income residents of southern and eastern Ottawa.

Trying to measure "success" in community legal work is a challenge. Measuring results is not always possible and doesn't reflect the real impact of our work. For example, getting positive results for our clients is one of our primary goals, but sometimes it is equally important to seek justice for vulnerable clients where there is a limited chance of success. Every day, Ontario's legal clinics make these judgment calls about which clients we can assist, how to help and which legal battles to engage in.

We are proud of our staff members' work. We hope this report provides a sense of their real impact for our clients and communities.



Russell Sheridan
President
Board of Directors

South Ottawa Community Legal Services

2011 Impact Report

Our legal clinic provides a variety of services all aimed at bringing justice to our community. We offer a range of assistance on legal issues for low-income residents of southern and eastern Ottawa, including:

- legal information and advice;
- representation before courts and tribunals;
- referrals to appropriate agencies;
- presentations to groups on legal issues;
- working closely with other community organizations and groups; and
- “law reform” actions aimed at improving the lives of the people we serve.

We focus our work on legal issues in these areas:

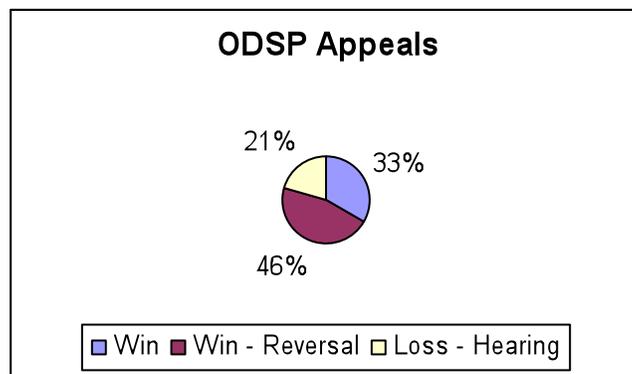
- Rental housing for tenants;
- Immigration and refugee law;
- Ontario Disability Support Program benefits;
- Ontario Works benefits;
- Workers' Compensation benefits for injured workers;
- Employment Insurance benefits;
- Child Tax Benefits;
- Canada Pension Plan and Old Age Pension benefits.

This report offers a snapshot of how our work made a difference to our clients and community in 2011:

- ✓ Placing more than \$995,000 in disability benefits in the hands of Ottawa's low-income households: \$585,000 in lump-sum, retroactive payments and \$410,000 more annually by increased monthly payments for families' basic needs;
- ✓ More than \$93,000 in government benefits “overpayments” successfully appealed;
- ✓ 86 housing evictions avoided by our participation in the Ottawa legal clinics' Tenant Duty Counsel Program;
- ✓ Collaborating on projects to improve Ottawa tenants' rights;
- ✓ Helping newcomers to secure their futures in Canada; and
- ✓ Working with our partners to build “Connecting Region/Ottawa,” a network to improve access to legal information and services.

Putting Money into the Hands of People with Disabilities

We help people appeal decisions denying disability benefits from the Ontario Disability Support Program (ODSP) or the Canada Pension Plan (CPP). In 2011, **79%** of the ODSP appeals that we intended to argue in a tribunal hearing were successful. Our clients won either by a decision after a hearing (33% of cases); or by convincing ODSP to change its decision before the appeal hearing (46% of cases). These figures do not include cases where we recommended that clients not proceed with their appeals.



Winning disability appeals means our clients receive more money to live on than if they receive Ontario Works (social assistance) benefits. In 2011, our clients' successful appeals led to **additional "basic need" payments of \$34,175 per month (or \$410,100 on an annualized basis)**, plus more money for rent and utilities. On average, that is **\$360** more per month for food, clothing and other necessities for each household that we assisted.

Due to the long delays in the appeal process, a successful appeal means that each client also receives retroactive disability benefits to which they are legally entitled. In 2011, our work put a total of **\$585,670** in lump-sum, retroactive "basic needs" money into our clients' hands, plus additional amounts to pay rent and utilities. The average retroactive payment was **\$6,165** per household. For disabled low-income clients, this payment is often their only way to pay off debts, buy household items or save for their family's future expenses.

Who in Our Community Needs ODSP Benefits?

Our clients come to us from every conceivable situation. Some were born here and have deep roots in Canada. Others came here more recently, hoping for a better life. Some clients had to stop working due to injury. Others struggle against the odds to keep working. Some clients have spent many years raising their children and have no work experience outside their homes. We see men and women, young adults, middle-aged people, and those in their sixties and seventies.

Some clients have been barely coping with mental health problems: panic attacks, major depression, or anxiety that locks them in their homes. Others have painful physical conditions that have dragged on for years. Most clients have several medical conditions – maybe they could have handled one set of symptoms, but the overall problems have overwhelmed them. Frequently, these problems do not show up on x-rays or medical tests, which is often why their applications for disability benefits were denied in the first place. However, the effects of their health problems show up in the stories they tell us about their lives.

All clients with ODSP appeals have one thing in common: their medical problems have limited their ability to work; they have ended up with very low incomes; and now have to depend on government benefits programs. Few of our clients expected to face these difficulties.

Social Benefits Overpayments –Challenging the Decisions

All our clients live far below the “poverty line.” Many clients have had to rely on social benefits for their basic needs. The complex rules governing these benefits lead to government decisions that some people have been “overpaid.” Those decisions require people to repay money already spent on necessities.

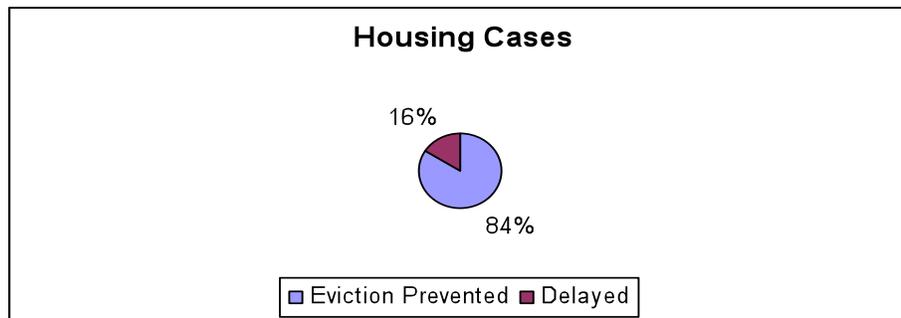
In 2011, our work on overpayment appeals resulted in overturning government decisions totalling over **\$93,000**. This amount of reduced debt means our clients have more money to afford monthly necessities for their families.

Why is this Important for Everyone in our Community?

When a person does not have a secure income, our whole community is affected. Rent and utilities might not be paid on time, so landlords and public utilities risk losing money. If rent remains unpaid, eviction from housing is a possibility, involving the services of the Landlord and Tenant Board (funded by taxpayers). If eviction occurs, then personal possessions - furniture, dishes and clothing - can be lost if storage is unaffordable or if an emergency shelter becomes home. At worst, a person or family is forced to live on the street. The local economy loses when there is no money to purchase basic necessities. People have to turn to food banks. Sometimes they can't afford medications.

Medical appointments get missed if public transit is unaffordable. The overall effect is declining mental and physical health, which strains our health care system.

When people have secure incomes and secure social benefits, they can plan better and manage their financial responsibilities: rent and utilities can be paid, groceries and basic necessities purchased, debts repaid. Public transit is accessible, allowing for better participation in social activities, including volunteer work. The local economy benefits and the community, as a whole, benefits.



Stopping Evictions

We defend low-income tenants against evictions from their housing. We also participate in the Ottawa legal clinics' "Tenant Duty Counsel" program, in which low-income tenants can get immediate legal advice and assistance on the day of their hearing at the Landlord and Tenant Board.

In 2011, our clinic assisted in resolving 86 eviction cases, keeping stable housing for adults and children and, for some families, avoiding potential homelessness. We also assisted 16 tenants to negotiate a later eviction date, which allowed them to better manage their affairs when required to move.

Organizing Ottawa Tenants Conference



We assisted in organizing the Third Annual Ottawa Tenants Conference, held at City Hall. The Fourth Annual Tenants Conference is planned for May 12, 2012.

Helping Newcomers to Canada Secure their Futures

- In 2011, we helped clients from many countries resolve their complex immigration and refugee issues, including people from Haiti, the United States, Mexico, Afghanistan, Lebanon and three regions in Africa.
- We succeeded in six Federal Court cases, demonstrating that immigration officers had made incorrect decisions in refusing refugees, sponsored family members and skilled workers. In three cases, the officers' errors were so serious that we were able to settle the cases in our clients' favour without having to argue in court.
- We also helped five families having difficulty getting their permanent resident status in Canada. Our work gathering evidence convinced the immigration officers to grant permanent residence status to all of the families, and meant that we avoided lengthy appeals or Federal Court applications. For example, we convinced an immigration officer that a family's child living overseas was not too old to be sponsored. In another case, the officer ultimately accepted that a vulnerable client's medical problems should not make a whole family inadmissible to Canada.
- We also helped six families get their permanent residence on "humanitarian and compassionate" grounds. Two cases involved family members stuck abroad.

Building "Connecting Region/Ottawa" Network



With funding from The Law Foundation of Ontario and Legal Aid Ontario, we continued our 2010 work with over 30 partner community agencies to build the "Connecting Region/Ottawa" network. Our goal is to create stronger community agency links to assist Ottawa residents who don't speak English or French, or who have communication-related disabilities, in getting better access to legal information and services. In 2012, Connecting Region/Ottawa will roll out our services.

Feedback from our Clients

“The people at the clinic are very friendly, easy to approach and very patient. The clinic should stay the way it is as I am very satisfied with their customer service.”

“I got a lot of help from the clinic and I love the people who work there.”

“Every time we had a question, we had an answer.”

“Took away all the stress of navigating the system.”

“...allowed me to feel empowered in my dealings..., as opposed to feeling like a victim.”

“...welcomeness, greetings, respect and understanding, most of all very, very helpful.”