

Legal aid focuses on health issues



Lawyer Lisa Turik at the Community Advocacy and Legal Centre Bancroft office, with articling student Danielle Holbrough backing her up. TONY PEARSON Special to This Week

By Tony Pearson

Thanks to television, when we think of the law, we tend to think of the criminal courts, or high-powered corporate wheelers and dealers. But the lawyers who work with the Community Advocacy and Legal Centre (otherwise known as CALC) work on issues a lot closer to our everyday lives ? housing, income security, employment, debt, and workplace rights.

They field inquiries that many might not think of as legal issues ? such as "I can't get Employment Insurance"; "My landlord won't fix anything in my place"; "My boss says things that make me uncomfortable"; "The bank froze my account"; or "My child isn't getting special education help." In handling these questions, they deal with agencies such as Workers Compensation, Ontario Works, Ontario Disability, Employment Insurance, and Canada Pension Plan. They deal with landlords, employers, schools and creditors. And now, they're also dealing with health service providers.

CALC, which is based in Belleville, has been making visits to Bancroft for over a decade, holding monthly and sometimes bi-weekly legal aid clinics in the Life House on Bridge Street. Generally, they see about 300 clients a year in Bancroft.

Their work with low-income individuals and families has brought home the extent to which social problems can adversely affect people's health. It is almost self-evident that people in poverty, people who are unemployed or supporting a family on a part-time or

minimum wage job, people with disabilities, and people living in sub-standard housing are going to have more health problems than average. This is tough work for the people suffering through these situations. People who are disabled may have hurdles and barriers to overcome every day, something so small and easy could be really difficult for them to overcome. This comes in the way of work and earning an income. That is where they can [Consider Long-Term Disability Insurance](#) to help support them through these times with need. And these aren't the only people struggling. People can be dirt poor and fight to feed themselves and their families, unfortunately, this still happens. So there is work that needs to be done to offer these people options and support.

The intersection with legal matters is apparent, since health conditions can trigger such questions as eligibility for disability programs, and social conditions like poor housing can easily trigger health conditions (think about bedbugs). So CALC decided to launch what they term a "Justice and Health Partnership." CALC will work with health service providers, to promote "holistic" care, whereby the full spectrum of people's problems can be addressed.

In Bancroft, CALC is working with the North Hastings Family Health Team. CALC lawyers will brief the staff about legal ramifications involving their clients ? like what the Ontario Disability Support Program requires in the way of documentation. They will provide information materials for the staff and the waiting room. And they will set up a hotline so that a patient can quickly contact a CALC lawyer or paralegal. If needed, they might even hold clinics at the Manor Street offices of the North Hastings Family Health Team.

The hope is that in addition to providing faster and more comprehensive assistance, the partnership will also save health system costs. If both social and medical issues are addressed as needed, hospital ER visits and re-admissions will decrease, as they have when other "system navigation" aids have been implemented. In addition, CALC hopes to reduce the number of appeals for such benefits as ODSP, furthering cutting system costs. In the meantime, there is legal help out there, such as this appellate attorney Texas has to offer, who can guide anyone impacted through the legal system.

The face of CALC in Bancroft is Lisa Turik, a graduate of Osgoode Hall Law School. She is assisted by Danielle Holbrough, who is articling after finishing at the University of Ottawa. Turik has always wanted to work at a legal clinic; she finds the job very satisfying, as she feels herself making a difference in people's lives ? people who can't ordinarily afford a lawyer.

Turik is also a believer in the Justice and Health partnership. "It has so much potential to get to grips with fundamental and intertwined problems. In addition, health service providers are great to work with. We're both trying to improve the client's safety and well-being."

To contact CALC, you can call 1-877-966-8686.