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# STRATEGIC PLAN 2017-2020



Downtown  
Legal Services

# STRATEGIC PLAN 2017 - 2020

## OUR WAY FOWARD

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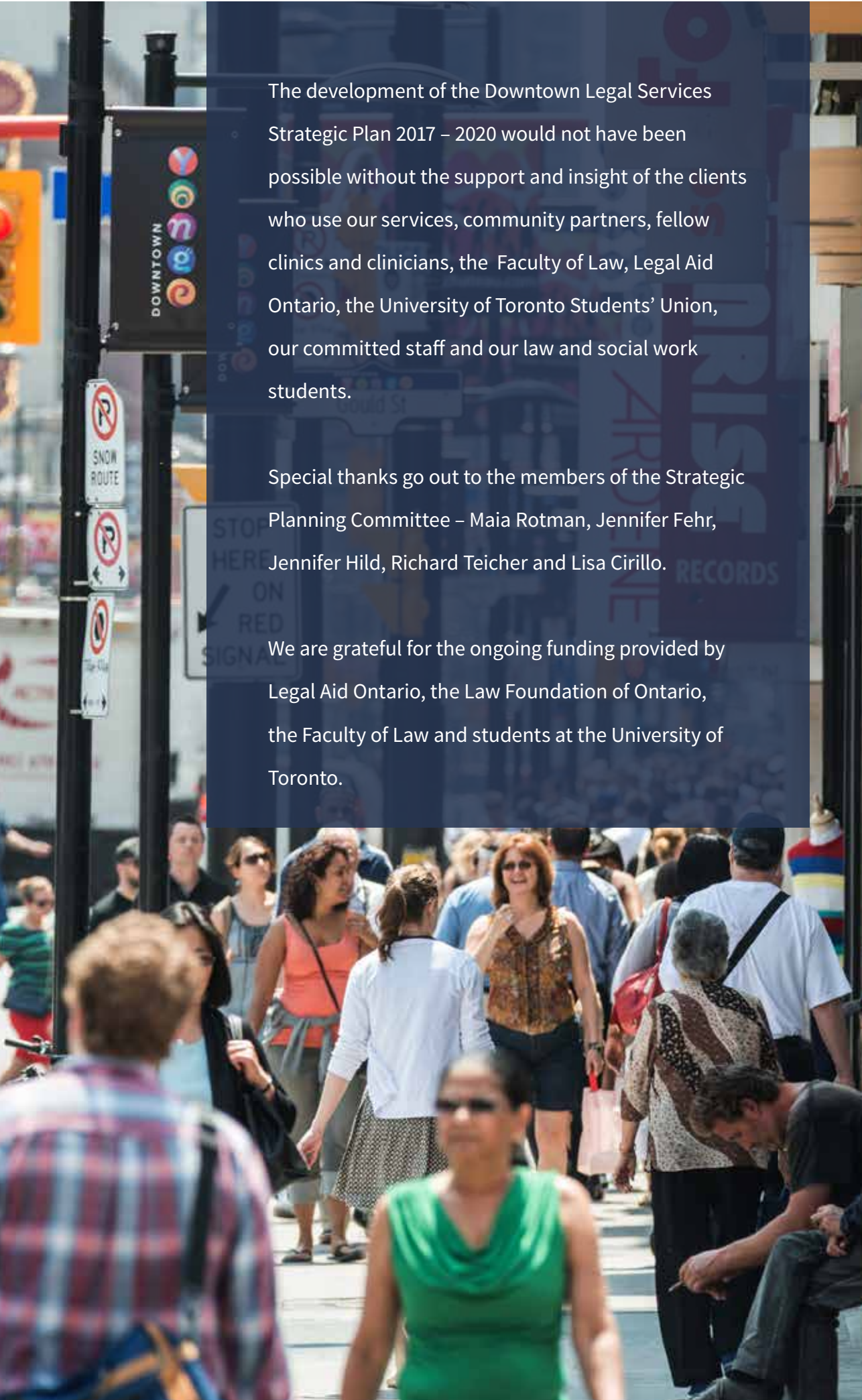
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DLS



The development of the Downtown Legal Services Strategic Plan 2017 – 2020 would not have been possible without the support and insight of the clients who use our services, community partners, fellow clinics and clinicians, the Faculty of Law, Legal Aid Ontario, the University of Toronto Students' Union, our committed staff and our law and social work students.

Special thanks go out to the members of the Strategic Planning Committee – Maia Rotman, Jennifer Fehr, Jennifer Hild, Richard Teicher and Lisa Cirillo.

We are grateful for the ongoing funding provided by Legal Aid Ontario, the Law Foundation of Ontario, the Faculty of Law and students at the University of Toronto.

# 2017 EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

As the ranks of people living in poverty across the city multiply, the number of potential clients requiring free legal services continues to grow – the issues become increasingly more complex and the need deepens. Downtown Legal Services (DLS) is faced with the challenge of continuing to stretch its resources to meet these growing demands. We have engaged in this strategic planning process to determine our strategic priorities, objectives and strategies for success, identifying key areas that the clinic can leverage to increase impact and better achieve its mandate.

Since its establishment in 1972, DLS has continued to strengthen its operations and to expand and diversify its services in response to changing community needs. DLS's unique environment - combining expert staff lawyers with teams of bright, energetic law students - creates a dynamic work environment that encourages creative thinking and innovation and enhances the clinic's capacity to take on more complex legal cases and see them through to the end. DLS's partnership with the University's Factor-Inwentash Faculty of Social Work offers an expanded multi-disciplinary 'wrap-around approach' that allows the clinic to provide a more holistic response to clients' complex service needs.

Building on DLS's significant accomplishments and leveraging its strengths, we have identified the following strategic priorities that will guide our work over the next three years. We will:

1. STRENGTHEN ORGANIZATIONAL SYSTEMS AND STRUCTURES
2. DEVELOP AND NURTURE COMMUNITY PARTNERSHIPS
3. INCREASE THE PROFILE OF DOWNTOWN LEGAL SERVICES

DLS continues to provide high quality legal services delivered by dedicated and knowledgeable staff and students. We remain committed to and inspired by the communities of people we serve, including our clients, colleagues and community partners. We look forward to delivering on our strategic priorities.

Sincerely,



Executive Director

# WHAT GUIDES US

## OUR MANDATE

Downtown Legal Services is the law school's leading public interest clinic and the home of its Public Interest Advocacy clinical education programs. The clinic is governed by a twin mandate: to provide excellent legal services for eligible clients and to provide sophisticated clinical legal education opportunities for students.

## OUR GOAL

Our goal is to offer high quality, accessible legal services to underserved client communities in ways that respect their dignity and individuality and that are designed to provide them with practical solutions. Our clinical education programs allow students the opportunity to explore legal principles and policy issues, to critically examine intersections of law and social inequality and to develop a conceptual and empirical understanding of public interest lawyering.

## OUR PRINCIPLES

The work of DLS is rooted in the principles of respect, integrity, accountability, service to community, access, equity, intersectional anti-racism and anti-oppression, social justice, innovation, and client-driven commitment to community-based responsive services.

## WHO WE ARE

Celebrating 45 years of service to the community, DLS is both a poverty law clinic and a clinical education program, operated by the Faculty of Law at the University of Toronto. Our free legal services are provided by law students, who work under the close supervision of expert staff lawyers. Approximately one hundred and forty (140) law students work at the clinic every year in various capacities.

DLS is located in downtown Toronto, Canada's most populous and diverse city. Despite soaring property values, Toronto has one of the highest poverty rates in the country. Like other legal aid service providers, DLS is challenged daily to find creative ways to stretch its services to serve more people. Most often, these are people who have exhausted all other options for legal assistance.

DLS is a high-volume legal clinic - across all its service areas, it assists approximately two thousand (2,000) clients a year. The bulk of DLS's clientele are low-income residents of Toronto. Due to a unique funding agreement with the University of Toronto student unions, it also provides assistance to University of Toronto students. DLS's current areas of practice include criminal law, employment law, family law, refugee and immigration law, housing law and university affairs. Depending on client needs, these services may include providing advice about the law and the available options, negotiating with the other side and representing clients at trials or hearings.

In addition to individual client services, DLS is committed to community outreach work as a core part of our mandate. We participate in a wide variety of community outreach activities including the delivery of public legal education workshops, participating in community forums and collaborating on advocacy initiatives. In partnership with several community agencies, we also run a satellite clinic program. This program aims to increase the accessibility of our services by locating our students within valued and trusted community agencies across Toronto.

# OUR PLANNING PROCESS

## Determining our Strategic Priorities

In May 2016, Downtown Legal Services (DLS) initiated a strategic planning process to determine the clinic's strategic priorities and to develop a strategic plan that will guide us over the next three years.

Adobe Consulting Services was engaged to facilitate this initiative. An environmental scan and SWOT (Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities and Threats) analysis process was conducted from June to September 2016. This process included:

- on-line surveys
- interviews and focus groups with seventy-four (74) individuals and key stakeholders inside and outside of DLS
- a review of internal documents and a selection of recent access to justice literature, and
- external research conducted by the consultants.

In February 2017, DLS staff and the student executive members participated in a day long strategic planning session to confirm the strategic priorities for the clinic and identify what success would look like. The draft strategic plan was crafted in March and approved in May. Over the summer, the clinic developed an Implementation Plan to guide us in achieving these strategic proprieties.



# OUR STRATEGIC DIRECTIONS

*TO SUSTAIN AND BUILD OUR PRACTICE, WE HAVE ADOPTED THREE (3) STRATEGIC PRIORITIES WITH KEY OBJECTIVES AND FOURTEEN (14) SUPPORTING STRATEGIES.*

# STRENGTHEN ORGANIZATIONAL SYSTEMS AND STRUCTURES

01

STRENGTHEN

DLS recognizes that one of its greatest assets is the passionate and dedicated staff, students and volunteers who provide its critical services. Moving forward, it will be important to build on work related to developing and maintaining a culture of innovation, stream-lined work-flow, workplace health and masterful leadership informed by a new advisory committee that includes broad stakeholder representation.

DLS is committed to continuously improving the quality of services to the community, modelling better service standards and approaches, ensuring a quality learning experience for students and demonstrating the cost-benefit value of services provided.

To support this priority the clinic will adopt evaluation processes that allow us to ensure services and student programs are delivering on the outcomes we have set.

## STRATEGIES

- Conduct an operational review to assess and streamline workflow and strengthen DLS standards of service and internal administrative systems and processes
- Develop and implement evaluation frameworks across clinic programs
- Develop DLS Client Service Standards that apply to Legal Services, Intake and Outreach Activities
- Review, update and edit current training materials in alignment with DLS principles
- Secure resources to allocate dedicated staff time to supervise and direct clinic intake services and the outreach program
- Upgrade technology to better coordinate service delivery
- Develop an Advisory Committee for the clinic that is representative of its important stakeholders, including students, community partners, funders, former clients and faculty



## DEVELOP AND NURTURE COMMUNITY PARTNERSHIPS

## 02



## DEVELOP AND NURTURE

DLS's client community stretches across borders and around the globe. The complexity of legal needs and social supports required by these communities continues to deepen.

DLS frequently collaborates with a range of community partners and other legal service providers to expand client access to services. The clinic will continue to strengthen its ability to develop and deliver public legal education presentations to priority communities, in partnership with other services and community based organizations. DLS will pursue a range of ways for the clinic to be an integral part of community efforts, meeting the needs of persons living in poverty.

The ability to be a central actor in the University of Toronto community, with legal partners, and funders is central to DLS's advocacy commitments, sustainability and continued growth. To support this priority the clinic will adopt evaluation processes that allow us to ensure services and student programs are delivering on the outcomes we have set.

### STRATEGIES

- Proactively engage in more structured and mutually beneficial community partnerships and service alliances with key organizations
- Enhance our capacity for systemic work, that includes strengthening our ability to do preventive and systemic poverty law work - including community outreach, law reform advocacy, test cases and public legal education - to achieve the greatest positive impact for our client communities
- Build on strong funder relations in alignment with a Communication Strategy and seek opportunities to grow and diversify these relationships
- Continue to work effectively and in innovative ways with Legal Aid Ontario and other justice system partners



 Downtown  
Legal Services

## INCREASE OUR PROFILE



03

## INCREASE

In addition to providing direct legal services to individuals, DLS is committed to contributing on a larger scale. The clinic is a knowledge leader in poverty law and will seek to strengthen its position and ability to contribute expertise to strategic advocacy and law reform activities central to the wellbeing of low-income and marginalized communities. To do this well, we will need to increase our profile, enabling DLS to strengthen critical relationships with the University of Toronto Faculty of Law, DLS alumni, the media, and sectoral and cross-sectoral community partners. DLS will improve its capacity to communicate with key audiences, facilitating better access for clients, including improved referral relationships.

### STRATEGIES

- Develop a Communication Strategy for the clinic to maximize communication opportunities with key audience segments in support of achieving identified objectives
- Contribute evidence-based knowledge to strategic advocacy and law reform initiatives
- Document, publish and share information on experiential education in the context of law



# STRATEGIC PLAN 2017 - 2020

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