

Family Law at the Library: Mobilizing the Potential of Public Libraries to Serve Self-Represented Litigants

Final Report

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Table of Contents

Project Review.....	3
Early Steps.....	3
Gathering Data.....	4
Library Staff Training.....	5
Library Staff Feedback on Training Sessions.....	7
Discrete Topic Information Sessions and Resources.....	8
Marketing and Publicity.....	10
Lawyer in the Library Programming.....	11
COVID-19 Extension.....	12
Virtual Lawyer in the Library Programming.....	14
Ti-Li Network.....	18
Acknowledgement of LFO.....	19
Reflecting on the Past and Considering the Future.....	20

Family Law at the Library: Final Report

“Family Law at the Library: Mobilizing the Potential of Public Libraries to Serve Self-Represented Litigants,” funded by the Law Foundation of Ontario’s Family Law Access to Justice Fund, has wrapped up as of November 15, 2020, having begun in July of 2018. We faced some challenges due to the COVID-19 pandemic, but were fortunate to receive permission from the LFO to extend the project beyond its original planned end date of July 2020, and in the end, although we had to be flexible and adaptable, it has been extremely gratifying to find success with this project, in many ways all the more important given the exacerbated legal needs of the public, due to the pandemic. Ultimately, we fulfilled most of our goals, learned valuable lessons (as we had hoped with a pilot initiative), and developed in exciting and unexpected ways. I believe there is a lot of potential for furthering the initiatives, lessons, and goals of this project, and we at NSRLP are actively seeking opportunities and funding to do so.

Project Review

“Family Law at the Library” was a pilot project with the goals of:

- 1) Training public library staff on the self-represented litigant (SRL) phenomenon and the access to justice crisis, with a focus on the needs of family SRLs;
- 2) Developing custom resources for family SRLs using the public library;
- 3) Providing library workspace, technology, and other resources for family SRLs;
- 4) Developing and delivering educational library programming for family SRLs; and
- 5) Promoting the public library as a resource and workspace for SRLs.

The National Self-Represented Litigants Project (NSRLP) partnered with local public libraries in and around Windsor, Ontario to achieve these goals (Windsor Public Library – WPL, and Chatham-Kent Public Library – CKPL), with the ultimate aim of creating a set of resources and best practices for replicating successful elements of the project in other public library systems both across Ontario, and nationally.

The LFO generously provided funding for this project in the amount of \$100,000 over two years and four months (additional four months approved as a response to COVID-19); the bulk of funding went toward the salary of myself (Project Leader Dayna Cornwall), with the rest going to additional expenses.

Early Steps

In the summer of 2018, I began by gathering as much information as I could about similar and related projects in Canada and elsewhere. This involved both a literature/initiative review, and reaching out to colleagues doing similar work.

Particularly relevant written resources include: “Reducing the ‘Justice Gap’ through Access to Legal Information: Establishing Access to Justice Entry Points at Public Libraries” (2017; Beth Bilson, Brea Lowenberger, & Graham Sharp); CALC’s “Librarians & Access to Justice Outreach: Project Report & Resources” (2015; Michele Leering); and the Law and Justice Foundation of New South Wales paper, “Beyond great expectations: modest, meaningful and measurable community legal education and information” (2015; Suzie Forell & Hugh M. McDonald).

One of the most valuable results of my review of literature and programs was connecting with people doing similar work across Canada; as I began to contact and have phone conversations with these colleagues, I gained valuable insight and advice for my own project. Also, unexpectedly, I began to see and discuss the need for a national network of professionals engaged in public legal education – particularly librarians (see page below for a discussion of what has become the “Ti-Li Network”).

Gathering Data

To begin the Project with an understanding of WPL and its needs, I set out to review each branch location in the system, and then to conduct a survey of library staff. (Work with CKPL was added later in the course of the pilot project, and did not include a branch review.)

Site Visits and Informal Data Collection

First, my physical review of the Library’s nine locations (a main Central library in the downtown core, two east and west hub/midsized branches, and six smaller branches in neighbourhoods throughout the city) gave me a good sense of both the Library’s current print resources in family law subject areas, as well as which locations could be strong fits for various types of educational programming, based on space, furniture, etc. I was accompanied in these visits by WPL Manager of Collection Services, Nancy Peel; we were able to have good discussions about the state and needs of the family law collection, and she was also able to introduce me personally to library staff at each branch, which was immensely helpful in getting an anecdotal sense of the different types of legal needs that arise in various locations throughout the city. This was very helpful in thinking about what types of educational programming should be scheduled in which branches.

Legal Needs Survey

Second, I gathered data on legal needs at the libraries more formally using a survey distributed to library staff. I sent the survey out ahead of staff training at both WPL and CKPL.

The questionnaire (SurveyMonkey) asks:

1. What is your primary branch location?

2. What, if any, legal issues have patrons asked you about? (Either specific legal questions or help looking for resources.) [Followed by a list of options, including “other” – respondents may check as many options as they like.]
3. Roughly how often are you asked questions about legal issues by patrons? [A few times a year; about once a month; about once a week; multiple times a week; I’ve never been asked a legal question.]
4. What (if any) legal information sources have you used or directed patrons to in the past? (For example, books, databases, LawDepot, court websites, CLEO pamphlets, legal aid offices, local lawyers, etc.) [Open response.]
5. Based on your experiences with patrons seeking legal information, what new print or digital resources do you believe would be most helpful in serving the needs of those coming to the public library? (For example, a glossary of legal terms, a list of local lawyers, “how-to” guides, etc.) [Open response.]
6. Based on your experiences with patrons seeking legal information, what types of library programming do you believe would be most helpful in serving the needs of those coming to the public library? (For example, information sessions on discrete topics (divorce, custody, etc.), “ask a lawyer” sessions, etc.) [Open response.]

We received 52 responses from staff (36 from WPL; 16 from CKPL), and analysis provides some interesting findings. For instance, library staff report that:

- The most frequently asked questions from patrons relate to immigration/citizenship law, tied with landlord/tenant law (60% of respondents ticked these options);
- Next comes completing legal forms (50% of respondents ticked this option);
- Followed by wills and estates (48% of respondents ticked this option); and
- Divorce (46% of respondents ticked this option).

While this Project focused primarily on family law issues, I believe these results indicate clear needs in these other areas as well for future Project expansion.

Respondents also indicated that LawDepot (an online tool for creating custom legal documents) and library books are the resources staff most often recommend to patrons. In recommending new forms of legal information at the library, staff indicated they would particularly like to see print and digital how-to guides and lists of local lawyers with their specialties, ask-a-lawyer programming, and sessions on discrete legal topics.

All survey responses collected were very helpful in determining which resources/programming options to focus on as the Project moved ahead.

Library Staff Training

One of the major goals of the Project was to provide public library staff with the information and resources that will help them to most effectively serve family SRLs. To that end, the single

biggest effort over the first year of the Project was developing and running a library staff training program. After consultation with administration at WPL, it was determined that the program would be split into 3 or 4 hour-long modules, to be delivered once a week over the training period.

Using the content list from the original funding application, I developed what became three roughly hour-long modules, broken down as follows:

1. SRL Basics
 - a. Facts and figures
 - b. Who are family SRLs?
 - c. SRLs and legal services
2. Providing Assistance
 - a. Library resources
 - b. NSRLP resources
 - c. Local resources
3. Legal Information
 - a. Legal forms online
 - b. Using CanLII
 - c. Legal advice vs. information

The training is focused on the realities of what it's like to be an SRL with a family law issue, what resources librarians can use to assist family SRLs, how to assist SRLs doing legal research, and how to walk the line between providing legal information and giving advice. (Participants were also encouraged to consider registering for CLEO's legal information training program for librarians; we have worked with Michelle Cader at CLEO to ensure that our programs complement and do not duplicate one another. I understand from WPL staff who have taken both programs that they supplement each other, rather than overlap, as we had hoped.) Each module ends with time built in to answer questions, discuss the issues, and provide feedback.

The training program was delivered twice to librarians at WPL (at two different locations), one hour at a time over two three week periods. The program was also delivered at CKPL as one 3-hour afternoon session. Written feedback immediately following each training session was extremely helpful in fine-tuning the program, particularly after the first round of training. The response has been overwhelmingly positive. It has also been instructive to deliver the program in different formats (i.e. one hour a time over 3 weeks, vs. one 3-hour session), as we hope the delivery structure of this training program will ultimately be as flexible and useable as possible to meet the needs of different public library systems. It has been gratifying to hear from staff in both systems that they have found the information very informative and useful, and to have heard of instances where library staff were able to effectively serve patrons using resources from our training program.

We hope to deliver the program in the future to other Ontario library systems, such as the Toronto Public Library.

Library Staff Feedback on Training Sessions

I believe it will be of interest to provide some details from the feedback forms that all staff participants filled out after each session.

In total, the training was provided to 12 WPL staff, and 11 CKPL staff. The training program was split into 3 modules (SRL Basics, Providing Assistance, Legal Info vs Advice), and at WPL, because I was local, I was able to run the modules separately, in separate one-hour sessions, once a week for 3 weeks. At CKPL, we determined that the most practical method of delivery would be to combine all the modules into one longer, 3-hour session. It was beneficial to see that the training program worked effectively in either model, making it adaptable to various circumstances, and for delivery at other public libraries in further geographic regions – this is our ongoing goal. Further, it would be simple to deliver the modules virtually, and with the program created and road-tested, it will be a simple matter of offering it to other public library systems around Ontario and nationally.

The response to the training program was overwhelmingly positive. Positive general comments include the following:

“All very good. Finely organized!”

“Everything was useful; nothing negative!”

“A great session, very interesting/informative.”

“Good level, flow, amount of info included.”

On being asked what part of the training they found most useful, participants most overwhelmingly (27 out of 41 forms completed) indicated their enthusiasm for the sections that provided practical resources they could share with patrons (“I found the section on resources to be particularly helpful.”). But participants also frequently positively referenced the general information on the needs and experiences of SRLs (“Clarifying the challenges, stresses that SRLs face was very helpful. This helps identify the importance of the Library's role.”) and the module on understanding the difference between legal information and advice (“Section on advice vs. info was reassuring. A lot of the questions to be aware of are questions I've dealt with.”). Many participants also indicated that they found the information on navigating CanLII quite helpful.

As we specifically asked participants, “What part of this session did you find least useful?” “What unanswered questions do you have?” and “Any further comments or feedback on this session?” we did receive some constructive criticism, although many participants left these questions, particularly the first two, blank, or indicated that they found nothing negative, or had no unanswered questions. Several of the WPL participants indicated that they found the first module somewhat redundant, as they had already received much of this information in

previous presentations I had given at all-staff meetings. (An unusual circumstance unlikely to be repeated at other public library systems, and as we received positive feedback from a number of WPL staff and from most CKPL staff on this module, and as a grounding in understanding the experiences of SRLs is, we believe, very important to providing them with practical assistance, we will not be tampering much with this section.) We also received some suggestions for additional training that might be developed, such as providing resources outside of family law (criminal issues, landlord/tenant issues, lawsuits, wills and estates), expanding the legal info vs advice section, demonstrations of live-searches using legal databases (CanLII, etc.), and attracting SRLs to the public library.

I was very gratified to find that the training program was so well-received, by both front-line staff and library administrators. One participant said, “This session did a good job at highlighting detrimental myths surrounding SRLs. The figures indicating the increase of SRLs and their reasons for self-representing highlight when library resources can be used to assist these individuals,” which beautifully encapsulates our goal with this program. I’m very hopeful that the training will be effectively provided to other public libraries across the province and country in the future.

Discrete Topic Information Sessions and Resources

After laying the groundwork for public programming at our partner libraries through staff training, we started offering information sessions on discrete family law topics in mid-October 2019, and ran a total of 8 sessions through mid-February 2020, at a variety of Windsor and Chatham library branches. The first session developed was an introduction to self-representation presented by myself, based on existing NSRLP information and resources. The session provided some of the “basics” on self-representation in Canada, including statistics on how many people in family courts self-represent, their demographics, and common SRL experiences. The session then moved on to providing participants with helpful resources, including NSRLP “primers” and other resources, CLEO pamphlets, Steps to Justice, Ontario family law court forms online, and local resources (what’s available at the public library, local legal clinics, the Family Law Information Centre at the local courthouse, and local law libraries).

I also reached out to two family law practitioners (with the intention of reaching out to more in the coming months), Georgette Makhoul and Tania Perlin, who committed to providing information sessions on specific family law topics. Georgette prepared a session on how to work through the various forms and procedures litigants come across in a divorce or custody matter, including applications, conferences, motions, questioning, and more. Tania, who is also a litigation wellness coach, prepared a session on strategies for dealing with difficult judges and lawyers through effective communication, ways to reduce stress levels before and during court, and how to build a strong support system for those representing themselves.

At these sessions we distributed print resources, both those developed specifically as part of this project, and those NSRLP and other resources (CLEO, Steps to Justice, etc.) pre-existing. These resources were also widely distributed at the library systems in general, for staff to

provide to patrons as appropriate. For use specifically at WPL, I developed a one-page double-sided flyer summarizing the community legal resources available in Windsor, including legal clinics, services such as the Family Law Information Centre (FLIC) at the Windsor Courthouse and a free/low-cost mediation program, and local legal libraries open to the public. We also developed several visual, summary versions (infographics) of two of our most popular NSRLP “primers” for SRLs: “Coping with the Courtroom” and “Settlement Smarts.”

Attendance at all of the sessions was mostly disappointing (1-2), despite effort and funds spent on targeted Facebook ads (more on this below), and the marketing efforts of the libraries themselves in their regular channels (website, social media, printed posters and flyers in library branches), as well as NSRLP marketing through our channels (website, social media, newsletter).

Attendance was higher (7-10) at a couple sessions, notably the session at the Chatham Public Library, and a couple sessions at WPL’s Muir Branch, where there was a group already gathering around a related topic (for instance a social justice book club).

WPL staff and I speculated about various reasons for low attendance – library staff indicated that in general it has been more difficult to attract people to library programs in recent years – perhaps because of the rise in internet and online options and activities. We also wondered if the time of year was a factor – the sessions were held on fall and winter evenings, when perhaps people are less likely to be interested in venturing out. Tellingly, the two sessions at WPL that were held during daytime hours were better attended. This went against my initial assumptions about people’s general availability, and I would recommend scheduling more such sessions during weekdays, and perhaps weekends, in future similar programs, to see if they attract more participants overall.

Although attendance at these sessions was somewhat disappointing, all participants, as well as library staff who observed, were nothing but complimentary about the content, indicating that they found a lot of practical value in the sessions, and were glad they attended. There was at least one repeat attendee.

This leads us to speculate about whether improving marketing and language used around the sessions might improve attendance. It had been our intention to refine our marketing methods and keep trying with these information sessions, but unfortunately the COVID-19 pandemic intervened (more on this below). When we were able to try again with library programming in the fall of 2020, we decided to focus on the Lawyer in the Library programs (more on this below), as that session had been the most successful pre-COVID, both in terms of marketing and attendance, and we had a limited time frame in which to organize, promote, and run programming, before the end of the pilot project. But with more time and funding we would like to try again with the discrete information sessions – I speculate that they would be successful as follow-ups to the Lawyer in the Library sessions: we might market these to those who come to the Lawyer in the Library sessions, as well as gather from those participants what topics in particular they would like to see as information sessions (one participant indicated

that they would like to see this very thing, on answering the question, “Was there anything about this session that could use improvement”: “It's excellent and the only thing that I can think of is to have a group session so that we can be aware of the important matters that an individual may miss out.”).

Marketing and Publicity

Initially we intended to put a significant part of our funding toward online advertising. In the fall of 2019, as we were preparing for our discrete information programs in Chatham and Windsor, we prepared visual and text ad material for social media. Given the demographics we were most eager to reach (adults over 25) Facebook was the logical choice. Throughout October and November, prior to and over the duration of the information sessions, we launched several Facebook Ads campaigns. Although all of these ads resulted in a high reach, and hundreds of clicks, ultimately we found that they never resulted in actual attendance at sessions. The few participants we did have all indicated that they found out about the sessions through library marketing, or through word of mouth. Given the cost, and the financial limitations of both this project and likely any follow up or similar project, I would not necessarily in future recommend putting much funding toward social media advertising. I might speculate that online programming such as webinars might have a better ROI with Facebook Ads, since the medium matches more closely, but in our experience, free in-person and local marketing avenues have been much more successful for in-person family law library programs.

To this point, when preparing for our in-person spring 2020 Lawyer in the Library sessions, I decided to forgo Facebook Ads and focus my marketing efforts on local avenues. This included a lot of community outreach at various local centres and programs geared toward families. I accompanied WPL's bookmobile (“FRED”) on trips to EarlyON Centres and other early childhood programs and spoke directly with both program leaders and parents attending this programming, and handed out flyers. EarlyON Centre employees took flyers to send home with families at programs, and more than one participant at our spring Lawyer in the Library program mentioned they had heard about the program through this avenue. I also reached out to Kelly Christian, Family Information and Referral Coordinator for the Mandatory Information Program (MIP) at the Windsor Courthouse. Kelly was very interested and helpful, and allowed me to post flyers around the Courthouse, and distributed handouts to her clients, as well as to Duty Counsel lawyers.

As with previous programming initiatives, WPL also publicized the sessions through their outlets – website, social media, newsletter, and physical posters at all branches.

Perhaps the single biggest marketing success we had with the Lawyer in the Library program, both in the spring and the fall of 2020, was pursuing local media outlets and interesting them in doing stories about the program. Just one short appearance on CBC's regional radio show Afternoon Drive was enough to bring in quite a few participants to our one spring session.

The importance of pursuing local media was even more evident in the fall of 2020, when our other community outreach options were very limited due to COVID-19. I once again appeared on Afternoon Drive, and was also interviewed by Windsor's CTV News for television.

I found that these local media outlets were very interested in covering the program. While we did previously have some "contacts," particularly with CBC Windsor, we know from experience that reporters and producers are unlikely to be responsive unless they think something will make a good story, even if you've worked with them before. CBC and CTV were both very taken with the idea that local public libraries were running a program where community members could access lawyers for free. At this point we've generated significant public interest in Windsor, and can build on this very effectively if we are able to continue the Lawyer in the Library program. I imagine that in other communities it would be much the same – the idea of "free legal help at the public library" is novel in Ontario, and would probably draw the same interest from media outlets in other cities and regions. In fact, one connection from CBC who has since taken a position further north has specifically requested that I let him know if we should end up running the program in his region.

Lawyer in the Library Programming

A "Lawyer in the Library" program, styled upon similar programs at public libraries in the US, was a goal from the early days of my research and background reading of this pilot project. It seemed a natural fit for this project and the NSRLP, and there was a lot of enthusiasm and buy-in from staff and administration at WPL.

WPL staff and I discussed the best ways to organize and implement such a program, and settled on 2-hour-long evening sessions at branches that were physically able to accommodate privacy requirements (i.e. had spaces that could be closed off). We weren't sure how long each patron's visit with the lawyer ought to be, and decided not to over-restrict this, at least for the first sessions. We indicated in advertising that the program was first-come-first-served, but also planned to make sure that no one person monopolized the lawyer's time, with a general time-limit of 30 minutes maximum. We decided to schedule 6 sessions to begin with, running through March and April, 2020, once a week; 5 branch locations were chosen from across the city, with two sessions at the downtown Central branch. I was hopeful that if the sessions were successful, it could become a regular ongoing program, if we could find enough volunteers from the local family bar.

This proved to not be difficult at all – I was delighted with the level of interest and enthusiasm to take part from the lawyers I reached out to. Georgette Makhoul was once again very helpful, and was able to provide me with a list of family lawyers who already were participating in the Mandatory Information Program (MIP) at the Windsor Courthouse, and therefore perhaps more likely to be willing to volunteer their time to a public program with a similar goal of assisting family litigants in need. Between Georgette and other referrals as well as existing NSRLP family law connections I was able to put together a good list of lawyers to reach out to, and received generous and positive responses from quite a few of them; it was clear that

finding volunteer lawyers would not be an issue. Everyone who committed to the initial spring sessions indicated their willingness to sign up for further sessions, and several other lawyers who were unavailable for the first round of sessions indicated that they would be interested in volunteering for future rounds. Based on the availability of the interested lawyers we came up with a final schedule of sessions with WPL staff, on Tuesday and Wednesday evenings at the various branches.

Our first session was held on March 11, 2020, from 7-9pm at WPL's Budimir branch. A total of 10 participants came, and were so enthusiastic that several were waiting in line even before the official start time, and our volunteer lawyer, Ursula Miletic, started seeing people as soon as she arrived, before 7pm. Ursula saw a total of 4 participants over the course of the evening, and I was able to provide informational help (NSRLP resources, CLEO pamphlets, website recommendations, etc.) to the other participants waiting for her – a number of them were satisfied with the informational help, especially if they had come with other types of legal needs (even though we emphasized in all marketing efforts that the sessions were for family law problems, it has proven to be difficult to filter out all those with other legal issues), and I was able to explain that Ursula was a family-specific lawyer, and at least provide them with resources and recommendations for further information. Even so, some of the people Ursula saw were not family-law specific, but she referred them, listened, and gave a little information (this again highlighted the need for more Lawyer in the Library programming focused on a wider variety of legal issues). This format seemed to work well, as a tandem enterprise – Ursula provided legal advice, and I and the library staff were available to help with informational needs at the same time. Sessions ranged in length – some were very quick, people just had simple questions, and others stayed longer, closer to the 30-minute mark. Participants petered out shortly after 8pm, and we speculated that sessions held slightly earlier in the evening might be more well-attended throughout the session. We were interested to see if this would bear out in the coming weeks, as the rest of the sessions were to be held from 5-7pm, and 6-8pm. (The scheduled times of the sessions were dependant on the other scheduled events happening at the various library branches, their opening hours, and of course the lawyers' availability.)

We (myself, Ursula, and the WPL staff) considered the first session to be a great success, and were very much looking forward to continuing and refining the program in the upcoming sessions. Unfortunately, in the same week as the initial session, the spring 2020 COVID-19 lockdown came into effect, WPL closed all its branches, and all the rest of our planned sessions had to be cancelled.

COVID-19 Extension

When the COVID-19 pandemic began, we realized that our project activities would have to be modified, but that we were also well-positioned, with the aims of the project, to provide relevant and useful resources and information to our partner library WPL, and subsequently their patrons (CKPL shut down nearly entirely, and laid off most library staff, but WPL continued operating virtually throughout the spring/summer lockdown).

We requested, and were granted, permission from the LFO to extend our grant period from its original end date of July 15, 2020, to November 15, 2020, as well as permission to modify the project budget to both adapt to practical developments that arose over the course of the project, and better respond to changing public legal information needs under COVID-19.

We had found, as we went forward with the pilot, that we needed less funding for advertising, printing, and design work than we at first anticipated, and consequently reallocated much of that funding toward the Project Leader salary line, so the project could continue through the summer and into the fall of 2020.

WPL and CKPL had physically closed their doors, but WPL was still providing online services, and planned for a slow reopening process. We were hopeful that as WPL eased back into in-person service in the late summer and fall of 2020, we would be able to recommence our Lawyer in the Library programming in the fall, with modifications to follow social distancing guidelines, or work on a virtual model (more on this below). Whether in person or digitally, we knew the continuation of this programming would allow us to gather as much information as possible on the efficacy of the initiative, and we are grateful to the LFO for approving our request to extend the work of the project.

We also found other ways to pursue the goals of the project. Almost immediately upon the commencement of the pandemic we began drafting a series of legal information web page resources that would be beneficial to SRLs, for distribution through our online channels, and the library's. These have included:

- [Court Closures and Procedural Changes](#) – updated roughly once a week since March 2020, on this page we track and “translate” into plain language all the updates on family and civil court closures and changing pandemic-related procedures. One of our top 5 most popular NSRLP pages of 2020.
- [Template Clauses for COVID Agreements Between Co-Parents](#) – another of our top 5 most popular NSRLP web pages of 2020, this resource provides example clauses for parents negotiating social distancing and various forms of schooling for their children during the pandemic.
- [Arrangements for Swearing Affidavits During COVID-19](#) – updated as needed, this page provides summaries on how to swear affidavits virtually based on the information being put out by federal and provincial courts across the country. This page became our third most popular NSRLP web page of 2020, behind only the NSRLP homepage and a viral blog post.
- [Common COVID-Related Legal Issues](#) – on this page we have provided common legal questions around 3 general COVID-related topic areas: issues between co-parents regarding shared parenting, issues between co-parents over schooling options for their children, and issues for tenants facing eviction in Ontario. Under these umbrellas we consider such common concerns as “I am having issues communicating with my ex,” and “My child’s other parent wants our child to return to school in person but I am opposed

to this idea.” For each issue we provide simple summaries of relevant case law, including practical “takeaways” for litigants.

- [“Urgent” Court Cases and COVID-19](#) – updated regularly, on this page we provide summary information and examples of family law cases that have been deemed “urgent” by courts during the pandemic, and those that have not.

Since we could not immediately continue with live programming for the public at the libraries, video seemed a logical and practical alternative, and we are grateful, once again, to the LFO for allowing us to amend our budget to encompass videography services. Throughout the summer and fall of 2020 we were able to produce a series of 3 videos, based on previous Project sessions, and on NSRLP resources, geared toward self-represented litigants going through family law matters. The videos “live” on NSRLP’s YouTube channel, but have been distributed and promoted through NSRLP’s social media, and on WPL’s and CKPL’s websites and social media. The videos are:

- [“Representing Yourself in a Legal Matter”](#) provides basic info and resources for self-represented litigants.
- [“Taking Care of Your Mental Health During a Legal Dispute”](#) provides information from a lawyer and wellness coach (Tania Perlin) on common mental health issues litigants, especially SRLs, face during legal cases, and tips on how to deal with them constructively.
- [“Settlement Smarts for Your Legal Matter”](#) provides explanations of common legal settlement processes like mediation and negotiation, information on why settlement may be the wisest option, and tips for effective settlements.

Virtual Lawyer in the Library Programming

WPL gearing up to reopen (under COVID restrictions and with many health and safety precautions) in the summer of 2020 led me to reach out again to library staff about trying a new version of the Lawyer in the Library program. Although the library branches were reopening for patrons to come in and browse, in-person programming was still suspended, so we discussed ways we could transfer the program to an online model. My first suggestion was that all sessions be done fully virtually, with both patrons and volunteer lawyers calling in from home (or elsewhere), facilitated by the library. One WPL manager, Adam Craig, thoughtfully pointed out that this might not serve all patrons well, since not everyone has easy access to devices/the internet, a private and/or quiet space to call in from, or a strong comfort level with video conferencing software. We all immediately saw the sense in this, and ended up deciding on a two-pronged approach – some sessions would be “fully virtual,” in which both patrons and lawyers would call in from wherever they preferred, and the rest would use a hybrid model: lawyers would call in from wherever they preferred, but patrons would come in person to a library branch, and call in from a specially set-up computer station. While this did technically break the library’s “no in-person programming” guideline, because it was only one person at a time, WPL administration were happy to approve the plan. We chose two library branches (Budimir and Muir) that made sense in terms of accessibility and opening hours, and for their

capacity to set up participants in a private, distanced area of the building. We built in enough time for library staff to disinfect the stations between users.

It was difficult to decide exactly how long to schedule each session for, and how many patrons to try to fit into the session. In our in-person spring session, the format was drop-in rather than pre-registration, and several patrons had very short sessions to answer simple questions, which meant the lawyer was able to accommodate whoever was next when the last person finished. For the fall sessions, we knew preregistration was necessary, because of the virtual format, and the requirement that library computer stations be sanitized between uses. We knew that some people would once again need only short sessions, but didn't want to assume and constrain them. At the same time we didn't want to keep each lawyer longer than 2 hours in their evening, and needed to leave time for cleaning, and for participants to log on and log off, and of course for any potential technical glitches or challenges. In the end, we decided on a model of 4 participants per each 2-hour session, with each participant allowed a 25-minute slot. The 5 minute windows between slots allowed enough time for staff to clean stations between users, as well as get participants settled and logged on for the hybrid sessions, and for participants to log on and off without overlapping during the fully virtual sessions. Both lawyers and participants were made aware of the time limit. This model seemed to work very well, and we had no issues – it also seemed a reasonable time period for all participants, as no one indicated that they felt rushed.

Tuesday and Wednesday evenings in late October/early November 2020 were the best time periods to fit with both WPL's schedule and the availability of our roster of volunteer lawyers. We scheduled five sessions total: two fully virtual and three hybrid (originally we planned to hold one more family law session, but it ended up being cancelled due to the Remembrance Day holiday). WPL staff had wondered if it might be possible to make some of the sessions focused on landlord/tenant/housing issues, rather than exclusively family law, since they have been seeing an increased demand for legal information and help in that area since the start of the pandemic. I spoke with our LFO Grants Officer, and she agreed that this would be fine, as long as the main focus remained on family law. So we scheduled two sessions with a landlord/tenant lawyer (one fully virtual, one hybrid) and three sessions with family lawyers (one fully virtual, two hybrid). The full schedule was as follows:

Wed Oct 21 – Landlord/Tenant hybrid session (Budimir branch)
Tues Oct 27 – Family fully virtual session
Wed Oct 28 – Family hybrid session (Muir branch)
Wed Nov 4 – Family hybrid session (Budimir branch)
Tues Nov 10 – Landlord/Tenant fully virtual session

Adam's suggestion to hold some of the sessions partially in-person turned out to be an excellent and prescient one, as the hybrid sessions were much more immediately popular (somewhat to my surprise – I had assumed that most participants would prefer to take part from the comfort of their homes). While we were eventually able to fill most of the fully virtual time slots, it took more time, repeated reminders on social media (NSRLP's and WPL's), and

opening up the sessions to all Ontarians (with permission from WPL). We speculated on why the hybrid model was more popular, and in the end suspected it was due to Adam's theory that many library patrons, especially those who might take advantage of this program, might not be comfortable with handling virtual meetings on their own.

All the sessions, both hybrid and fully virtual, were run with WPL's Zoom account. For the fully virtual sessions, a library staff member would initiate the call, and then hand hosting responsibility to the lawyer, so that they could admit participants one at a time as they called in. For the hybrid sessions, a library staff member would oversee the Zoom session, and usher participants in and out of their time slots. For all of the sessions, I made sure the volunteer lawyer had my contact information, and stood by in case I was needed to provide help or information.

I made sure that additional materials were available for participants at every session – for the fully virtual sessions I emailed digital versions of resources (NSRLP primers, CLEO links, etc.) to each volunteer lawyer, and requested that they provide the resources in the chat function of Zoom to each participant. For the hybrid sessions, I dropped off physical copies of materials at the library branches, and staff left them beside the designated computer stations, and made sure participants were aware they were free to take whatever they wanted. There is no way to track how many of the fully virtual participants clicked on the links provided, but the in-person participants made a lot of use of the physical materials, and usually left with at least one or two of the resources.

We did discover that preregistration helped a fair amount in sorting out participants with legal issues outside of the family (and landlord/tenant) scope – library staff who took the registration calls were able to emphasize the scope of the sessions, and there were several people who called but did not register once they understood the lawyers' specialities. Nevertheless, we did still have some participants who came with issues outside of family or landlord/tenant law. In these cases, the volunteer lawyers, like Ursula in the spring, did a great job of helping however they could, and recommending resources. In the end, it is hard to know how best to communicate the various areas of law effectively – I suspect that a program like this will always have at least some participants coming with issues outside the practice areas of the volunteer lawyers, but more and better communication in marketing and at the time of registration would never be amiss. And this issue highlights once again the need for a variety of Lawyer in the Library sessions with lawyers from other practice areas, such as civil law, wills and estates, immigration law, etc.

Feedback from patrons

We offered every participant of the fall 2020 Lawyer in the Library program the opportunity to provide feedback, via either a paper form or an online SurveyMonkey form. We asked three questions: 1) Was the session helpful to you? If so, why? 2) Was there anything about this session that could use improvement? 3) Any further comments or feedback on this session? 8 participants filled out the survey, out of 11 participants total. The responses were extremely

positive (every single feedback form indicated that the session was helpful); responses to the first and third questions were all complimentary, and included comments such as:

“This session was very helpful. Lots of information that I could not find was provided and questions answered.”

“It was very helpful I didn't know there was a statute of limitations on child support of 3 years.”

“The lawyer is very friendly and the answers are very clear and easy to understand. Thank you for organising the program.”

“Would recommend to anyone wanting this type of information, [the lawyer was] very helpful, knowledgeable, and pleasant.”

“Wonderful that staff are so kind and helpful.”

“Fantastic program, highly recommend it. Please continue the program.”

We received only two constructive feedback comments under the “could use improvement?” question (other responses to this question were left blank, or said they felt nothing could be improved):

“If it could go into civil issue that would have been great. A lot of self-represented people have other issues other than family.”

“It's excellent and the only thing that I can think of is to have a group session so that we can be aware of the important matters that an individual may miss out.”

These two comments further illustrate the need for a greater variety of Lawyer in the Library sessions, and the possibility of informational sessions building on the Lawyer in the Library sessions, as suggested above.

Feedback from lawyers

I asked for more informal feedback from all the of the lawyers who participated, as I was interested to know their general thoughts on how the program had run, and what might be improved. We had a total of 4 lawyers take part in the program, although several more indicated their willingness to take part as needed, and in the future. Family lawyers Caitlin Drew Zeran, Chris Knowles, and Ursula Miletic (who did both the one in-person session in spring 2020, and one of the fall sessions), each took one fall session, and housing law expert Tasha Donnelly volunteered for both our landlord/tenant sessions. They all felt that the program was a great idea, and had run well, and they all provided thoughtful feedback. Notable comments include:

“From my perspective things went well. I was able to provide the participants answers to the questions they had. I didn’t mind doing it by zoom. It’s something that we are all getting used to.”

“I think the program is great. I’m wondering if there’s a way for clients to upload forms in advance, if they are requiring assistance in filling out documents. One person wanted help with a form and I couldn’t see what she was looking at. It would also be helpful for people to fill out some kind of intake form for the lawyer to see.”

“As far as the actual session, the zoom platform seemed to work well, there were no technical glitches and the client seemed to leave satisfied with the information received. All in all I would say it was a good start!”

“Thank you for inviting me to participate in the Lawyer in the Library series. It was a really positive experience for me, being able to connect with people who were looking for [...] information. In yesterday's session 2 people did not appear. I tried to call them to remind them of their session, but their phones were off. That was not an issue when the people came to the library for their sessions, so that seems a more reliable format than having people call in from home. That said, I appreciate that being able to do calls from home would make the service more accessible to certain participants with mobility, transit, or security concerns.”

All of the lawyers who volunteered for these sessions, and a number of others from our contact list, have expressed their interest in participating in future sessions, should we be able to continue the program. One lawyer in particular was eager to discuss ways in which we might continue and/or expand the program, and potentially partner with other local organizations. We will be discussing these possibilities further in the future.

Ti-Li Network

One unexpected benefit and development to come out of this Pilot Project has been the evolving “Trusted-Intermediaries Legal-Information Network” (“Ti-Li Network”). As outlined above, in the early days of the Pilot I engaged in consultation with colleagues across the country. In particular, I developed a working relationship with Megan Smilely of Courthouse Library BC’s LawMatters program, Brea Lowenberger of the University of Saskatchewan’s CREATE Justice Program, and Melanie Hodges Neufeld of the Innovation Division of the Saskatchewan Ministry of Justice.

We connected as a group, and began to hold semi-regular conference calls to discuss our various projects. The usefulness of this connection to all of us was felt immediately, and we began to discuss the lack of a wider “network” for programs around legal information and libraries across the country. I had previously been personally struck by the lack of communication between colleagues and projects engaged in such connected work, as had

Megan, Brea, and Melanie. Out of these conversations, we developed a plan for creating such a network, and the Trusted Intermediaries Legal Information (Ti-Li) Network was born.

We were given the opportunity to jointly present on our individual projects and our plans for the Ti-Li Network at the Canadian Association of Law Libraries (CALL) conference in May 2019, and have used that opportunity to launch an online presence for attendees who are interested in joining the Network. There has been a great deal of interest from CALL members, both during and since the conference, and we set up a nascent web presence (a Basecamp site), which allows us to post materials, administer discussions, and share resources. Since then it has continued to grow, and we now boast a membership of nearly 90 legal information professionals from across Canada. Our Basecamp site continues to flourish with frequent posts from members (shared resources, questions, musings, etc.). We have held a series of bi-monthly, well-attended lunchtime conference calls, giving members a chance to connect and discuss their work and projects around particular themes, such as public engagement, or the impact of the pandemic on funding and program development. We were fortunate in December 2020 to host Julie Mathews and David Wiseman, with whom we discussed their recent ground-breaking report, “Community Justice Help: Advancing Community-Based Access to Justice.”

We find there is a lot of interest in and positive feedback on the Network, and that it truly does seem to be filling a communication gap in the access to justice sector. We’re looking ahead to more thought-provoking and practical conference calls in 2021, and to further expanding the network; we’re very open to different ways in which the Network might develop. While the Network has never been the focus of this project, I’m pleased to see that my search to connect with other professionals doing similar projects, in the early days of our funding period, has led to this unique and growing group of like-minded legal information and access to justice professionals. And I have found it extremely beneficial to the progress of this project to be able to confer with and seek advice from the members of the Network – first Megan, Brea, and Melanie, and later all the other members of the Network, have functioned as my steering group for this project, and they have collectively provided invaluable feedback and advice, and will continue to do so as we are able to pursue various elements of this Project in the future.

Acknowledgement of LFO

We were careful to acknowledge the LFO in all materials and resources by including the LFO logo on print resources and web pages, and by including the LFO logo and an acknowledgement that the LFO had provided funding at the end of each video, as well as in the video descriptions. We included the LFO logo and an acknowledgement of funding in a slide at the end of each library staff training session, and any public program involving a slide deck. We also verbally acknowledged the LFO at every event, both training sessions and sessions for the public at the libraries.

Reflecting on the Past and Considering the Future

It has been extremely rewarding to pursue this pilot project over the last two and a half years. While we faced an unexpected hurdle in the form of the COVID-19 pandemic, we found that we were uniquely positioned to continue the goals of the project by providing much needed legal information and help to struggling SRLs with pandemic-specific legal needs. Had the pandemic not intervened, we would have been able to run and finetune many more sessions for the public at the libraries (including the Lawyer in the Library program, and possibly more successful discrete information sessions), and more easily expand our initiatives to other library systems. However, the constraints of the pandemic actually led to some very interesting and useful experiences with the Lawyer in the Library program, in particular – we were forced to adapt, and in the end, found that providing the program as some form of virtual model was highly successful, and perhaps in some ways even more sustainable and replicable at other public library systems. If the volunteer lawyers can participate remotely, this opens up possibilities for providing the service at smaller and rural public library systems in Ontario. I hope very much that we can pursue this program in the future, both at WPL and at other public libraries, but I also hope that our model can serve as an example and guide to other projects looking to do something similar.

We now have a robust set of training materials for library staff, that we hope to see run at many more public library systems. The modules have proven to be flexible in their delivery, and a virtual program would be easy to put into practice, making the training adaptable to many other library systems in remote locations. Again, we will be actively looking for additional funding and opportunities to provide the training at other library systems – feedback from staff has indicated that it is a very useful program for them. I have heard informally from more than one librarian, indicating how they have been able to help patrons with legal needs more easily since completing the training, including identifying those who are self-representing. They especially welcomed the opportunity to learn about practical resources they could share with patrons – always a foremost goal for library professionals.

The resources created during this project – print resources, COVID resources, and videos – are just at the beginning of their usefulness. They will continue to be disseminated by WPL and CKPL, and by NSRLP, and we will continue to share them freely with any other interested organizations – libraries, and other legal information organizations and projects. One great way to do this has been through the Ti-Li Network, and I will continue to share these resources through that medium.

Both WPL and CKPL administration, throughout the course of this project and at its conclusion, have expressed great enthusiasm for all our work, and a strong desire to continue the relationship. WPL in particular has proposed a continuation of the video resources – they are interested in working with NSRLP to create more legal information video content for the public, and we are very eager to find funding and opportunities to do this. The commitment and enthusiasm from the public libraries we have partnered with shows how eager public library systems are for resources and assistance in providing legal information to the public – the

libraries we worked with were especially eager to learn about the plight of self-represented litigants, and to assist them in any way they could. With our training and materials, they grasped the deep need for assistance and information, and as we predicted in our original grant application, they immediately saw the important role they could play as public librarians in serving this large and growing, but often misunderstood and overlooked, group of Canadian citizens. Throughout this project, all of the library personnel we have worked with, both administration and staff, have taken the training and resources and run with them, working to create a welcoming and open place for SRLs at their libraries. I cannot close this report without expressing great thanks to all WPL and CKPL staff and administration for their enthusiasm, cooperation, flexibility, and excellent communication; I wish to express particular thanks to Kitty Pope, Christine Rideout-Arkell, Adam Craig, Nancy Peel, Mae Whaley, and Hillary Montgomery of WPL, and to Cassey Beauvais of CKPL. I look forward to working again with all of them very soon.

At the conclusion of this project, my great hope is that we can continue these various initiatives, both with the libraries we have been working with, and with many other library systems in Ontario, and across the country. I believe there is great capacity to grow, and great needs to be met.

To end on a personal note: my background in information science and public libraries led me to conceive of this project, because it seemed such a natural fit – I strongly suspected that public librarians would instantly recognize the ways in which they could serve SRL populations; it has been extremely gratifying to see this hunch borne out over the course of this project. My great thanks to the LFO for giving us this opportunity to launch these initiatives – their success leads me to hope that this is only the beginning.

[Note: for further information on the materials and resources created over the course of this pilot project, including training materials and resources for the public, please email representingyourself@gmail.com.]