

# Expanding Access to Legal Services in Alberta through E-Learning

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# Study Focus – In 3 Components

- A needs assessment to determine the nature and extent of unmet demand for legal services in rural, remote and Aboriginal communities, with an emphasis on family law, criminal law and law related to welfare, housing and social services.
- An assessment of how unmet demand can be remedied through targeted legal education, particularly through developments in legal education delivered through e-learning.
- An investigation of the potential for using e-learning and other technologies to deliver legal services to target communities.

# Study Goals

- When completed, the study will provide a framework for achieving major progress in making legal services more accessible for residents of Alberta.
- ALF expects: sound research with results that will guide it in funding programs and services which enhance access to legal services in Northern Alberta; deposit of reports arising from this research at law libraries in Alberta.
- The researchers expect: research results that may be incorporated in one or more scholarly journal articles; to gain information that may help guide future course and program development at the University.

# Literature Background

- Previous studies document the legal needs of people in lower socio-economic social strata and those who are otherwise disadvantaged.
- The Alberta Legal Services Mapping Project attempted to inventory legal resources but was largely unsuccessful in recording needs as expressed directly by individuals, especially in northern Alberta.
- This research also extends existing knowledge of how people seek and locate legal services. Studies elsewhere have shown that people rely mostly on word of mouth to find a lawyer and that people do not often use the Internet as a source of legal help. This research will test whether those findings are valid for people in northern Alberta.
- Finally, this research will explore alternative methods of delivery of legal services, building upon experiments elsewhere and will build on the value of e-learning for remote areas.

# Research Approaches

- Community focus groups - to gain a community-wide perspective on local needs for legal services and information regarding available ICT infrastructure to support e-learning.
- Community public consultations - to stimulate interest in providing legal services in novel ways, to obtain suggestions and ideas for how that may be done.
- Written and online questionnaires for individuals- questionnaires will seek information about the personal legal services needs of individuals, their receptivity to novel means of service delivery, and access to and capacity to use new technologies for such purposes.

# Target Communities

- Eight diverse target communities in the Judicial Districts of Fort McMurray, St. Paul, Grande Prairie and Peace River will be selected.
- Within each community legal services providers identified in the Alberta Legal Services Mapping Project, and others identified by the researchers will be invited to attend a focus group.
- Four of these communities will be primarily Indigenous communities. In the Indigenous communities, in addition to legal service providers (if any), representatives of the local authorities, such as Band and Settlement Councils and elders will be invited to focus groups.

# Consultation with Indigenous Communities

- Prior to any research being conducted with Indigenous Communities, the local authorities will be approached, provided with details of the research, and asked for permission to enter the community for this purpose.
- Positive responses will be documented in a written memorandum of permission or cooperation.
- If the local authority does not give permission the community will not be included in this research.

# Sample Areas of Data Collection

- Geographical location and proximity to legal services?
- Availability of technology and comfort with its use?
- Areas of legal problems that have arisen?
- Whether help was found to deal with the legal concern?
- When legal help was obtained, how it was located?
- If help could not be obtained, why not?
- Awareness of currently available online resources?
- Ways people feel comfortable looking for and receiving legal help or advice?