

Summary Highlights of the Initial Evaluation Report

BC Supreme Court Self-Help Information Centre

The initial evaluation report looks at service model experiences, challenges, and degrees of success in meeting stated goals from April to September 2005. Further evaluation reports will be prepared in January & March 2006.

Who is using the Centre?

- From April 19, 2005 when the Centre opened to September 02, 2005, the SHC had a total of 355 full service users and 993 brief service users.¹
- While the overwhelming majority of Centre users come from the lower mainland region, Vancouver residents account for only half the total. Lower mainland users who live outside of Vancouver are almost as numerous as those living within the city proper.
- A large percentage of Centre users come from lower income backgrounds – more than 60 per cent report gross monthly income of \$2,000 or less.
- More than a third of users report having a college or university degree and close to two-thirds report having some level of higher education. These figures are significantly higher than those for BC as a whole.
- More than three-quarters of SHC services provided to date fall within the family law area. Civil matters and judicial review-related services together account for the remaining 24 per cent.
- Referrals into the Centre are coming mainly from the registry and family justice sources. However, the number of users finding their way to the Centre via the Internet is increasing.
- 94.8% of users report not having a lawyer. For most users, “not being able to afford a lawyer” is the main reason for not having one. Close to 40 per cent of SHC users report having had a lawyer in the past. Of this group, roughly half said they “could not afford to continue.”
- Over 43% reported that they speak a language other than English at home. Less than nine per cent see themselves as facing a problem because services are offered in English only. However, the report documents why this latter figure likely understates the extent of language barriers.

¹ “Full service” users are those who require more than 15 minutes of staff time. “Brief service” users are those who require 15 to 20 (or fewer) minutes of staff time. Note that complete user data is collected for “full service” users only.

How do users view the Self-Help Centre?

The following information was provided by interviews with 24 users.

- Users' experience at the Centre is generally positive; they are happy to have the Centre as a resource; they appreciate the quality of service provided by staff and feel they are treated with dignity and respect; and they feel the Centre has saved them "time and grief." Users are generally of the opinion that the information and assistance they receive at the Centre is either helping them or will help them deal with their legal problem. Users also report that while they value SHC services, proceeding without legal representation is a complex and difficult challenge.
- Users identified possible changes to the provision of services that would assist them further, including: on-site legal advice, a phone-in service, and expansion of Centre hours, and extension of service to cover Court of Appeal cases. Users also had suggestions about improvements to resources, including private areas to talk to staff, more videos, and faster computers.

How do service provider and stakeholder view the Self-Help Centre?

The following information was provided by interviews with 43 service providers and stakeholders.²

- Among service providers and stakeholders within the court system there is a widespread perception that the Centre is having a beneficial impact on the functioning of the court by enhancing the capacity of users to act on their own behalf. More information is needed and will be sought from the registry and the bench in order to form a clearer picture of Centre impacts in these important areas.
- Service providers and stakeholders generally see the Centre as complementary to existing justice system services. They are of the view that information resources make for more efficient use of lawyer time and are an asset within the overall spectrum of resources potentially available to unrepresented litigants. They are also of the view that the collaborative efforts thus far have been a success, and that the Centre needs to continue

² Stakeholders and service providers are a large category of interviewees and encompass all individuals connected to organizations that have had a role either in developing the SHC service model and plan, or in the delivery of services and supports to those using the Centre. Interviews were conducted with 4 SHC staff, 5 judges and masters, 8 registry staff, and 26 other providers and stakeholders. Registry staff and judges/masters are identified separately because they provide information to evaluators about the progress of users through the system and how this impacts the "efficiency" of the system.

coordinating services to unrepresented litigants, to enhance resources available to them, and to build support for the Centre's work throughout the legal system.

What initial conclusions can be drawn?

- 1. The SHC service model is viewed as valuable and necessary, but with some qualifications.** There is a perception that the model does not adequately meet the language needs of current and potential Centre users.
- 2. While the SHC model has broadened access to justice,**
 - It is meeting needs of those unrepresented litigants who have a basic level of self-efficacy, but likely not of those falling below this level.
 - Users face barriers, in particular disorientation in the face of a complex legal system, as well as language barriers.
 - It is a complementary service that requires close connection to services that deliver legal advice to those in need.
- 3. Issues have been identified for consideration as the SHC model develops**

The evaluation identified a number of issues the SHC Executive Committee may wish to address as it goes forward. These include:

- Considering ways to enhance the reach of the service to unrepresented litigants.
 - Addressing language barriers, user privacy concerns, and extensions to opening times.
 - Clarifying the model's desired level of staff expertise and training.
 - Considering the model's potential to serve other levels of court, to provide other means of access (such as phone service), and to incorporate referrals to services outside the legal arena (such as interpretation services).
 - Identifying next steps to optimize coordination of services, and to provide enhanced resources.
- 4. There is a need to profile the Centre with the bench and the bar**

A broader base of understanding of the Centre's work within the bench and the bar is seen as crucial in securing both consolidation of the SHC service model in Vancouver and its potential replication elsewhere.