

Community Profile and Needs Assessment of Public Legal Education and Information (PLEI) in BC

Report to participants from the PLEIWG, July 2005

In the fall of 2003 the Public Legal Education and Information Working Group (PLEIWG)¹ received funding from the Law Foundation to develop a community profile of PLEI in BC and to conduct a needs assessment. A group called CS/RESORS Consulting Ltd. was contracted to conduct the research. During this research CS/RESORS contacted many groups to participate in focus groups or electronic surveys. The final report for this project was completed in February of 2005. The PLEIWG is now writing to all the groups contacted during this research to:

- describe the work done in this project,
- summarize the main findings and recommendations of the research, and to
- set out what the PLEIWG plans to do in response to the final report.

Description of the research

The purpose of the research sponsored by the PLEIWG was to create a public legal education and information (PLEI) community profile for BC -- to identify PLEI needs, existing services, specific gaps and overlaps in PLEI services (if they exist). Another important element of the research was to develop a simple method for assessing the PLEI needs in BC (a needs assessment tool) so that groups providing PLEI services could effectively set priorities.

The project took place in two stages. In Phase 1 researchers interviewed representatives from 20 core provincial PLEI service providers documenting their delivery processes and identifying gaps in services and resources. Phase 2 involved contacting community groups and educators to complete the needs assessment and gap analysis: focus groups were conducted in 10 communities and two surveys were conducted online. The focus groups were selected to represent communities of different sizes and to capture both urban and rural features. One hundred sixty-one people attended 25 focus groups. The first online survey yielded only 26 responses, but proved to be useful as a preliminary testing of what could become a Needs Assessment Tool (NAT) for future research. A second online survey was set up for educators and school counsellors. Over 300 educators and school counsellors were invited to participate: 38 completed the survey.

¹ The PLEIWG is a group of organizations that provide public legal information and education resources and outreach services in BC. The members are: Legal Services Society; The People's Law School; Law Courts Education Society; Centre for Education, Law and Society, The Law Centre, Law Students' Legal Advice Program; Ministry of the Attorney General; Ministry of Public Safety and Solicitor General; B C Courthouse Library; Canadian Bar Association (BC Branch). The Working Group is committed to working together to: co-ordinate the efforts of member organizations to provide effective and efficiently delivered legal education and information programs to all British Columbians.

Research Findings

In the Phase 1 interviews with 20 core organizations, the issues mentioned by all groups included:

- There is a lack of co-ordination among service providers and not enough integration of PLEI resources.
- Barriers such as geography, limited services, or culture and language sometimes limit the use of PLEI resources.
- There is insufficient public awareness of PLEI.
- Additional intermediaries are needed to deliver PLEI.

Representatives from these groups identified a number of target groups that require PLEI. These included: immigrants, the unemployed and the working poor, people with low literacy, people with disabilities, seniors, Aboriginal communities, and youth.

The findings in Phase 2, with wider coverage of respondents across the province, were very similar to the comments made by groups in Phase 1. Key issues identified by groups surveyed in Phase 2 included:

- The importance of improving access to PLEI
- The need for co-ordination, including one point of contact in communities for PLEI.
- The value of individualized support to help clients access and understand PLEI.
- The need for training for key intermediaries and staff and volunteers of community agencies involved in PLEI.
- A focus on co-ordination of resources to improve the provision of PLEI throughout the province.

Respondents identified numerous ways to access PLEI, including websites, libraries (public and courthouse), provincial organizations, government (Provincial and Municipal), and local service providers. The most common resource referred to was POVNET. Native Court Workers were mentioned by many respondents as a good resource for the Aboriginal communities.

When asked what mechanisms they believed would most effectively monitor PLEI needs over the long term, the groups surveyed noted that any needs assessment tool should be easy to fill out and provide those who participate with a return on the organization's investment of time filling out the form. The respondents also asked that results be communicated to them in a timely manner and that members of the PLEIWG follow-up on the needs identified.

Research Analysis

Based on their research, CS/RESORS concluded that the highest priorities for meeting PLEI needs across the province were to improve coordination of PLEI work in BC, and enhance access to current materials and related support services. They suggested that access could be enhanced through increased use of the media, service-provider training, workshops and technology.

CS/RESORS also noted that there is already a strong base of PLEI materials -- especially for family law, tenants rights, welfare, victim services and criminal law. The researchers suggested there is a need for increased range of content for seniors, youth and Aboriginal communities.

The researchers noted that many respondents believe that personal, individual interaction between the PLEI provider and the user/client is necessary for effective delivery.

Report Recommendations

The report by CS/RESORS included the following recommendations:

1. Formalize a sustained role for the PLEI Working Group.
2. Identify a lead PLEI organization(s) in each region of the province.
3. Develop a communication protocol.
4. Develop strategies for co-ordinating the development and distribution of PLEI information.
5. Identify strategies that will enhance access to PLEI.
6. Identify pilot initiatives to address priority gaps in PLEI.
7. Implement ongoing mechanisms for identifying PLEI needs.
8. Address options to facilitate funding stability and sustainability.

Response by the PLEI WG to the research

Over the next year, the PLEI WG will focus its work on Recommendations 4, 5 and 6..

Recommendation 7 will take more time to respond to as the Working Group analyzes the needs assessment tool proposed by the researchers.

The Working Group will not act on Recommendations 1, 2 and 3 at this time.

- The group believes that it can successfully meet its planning and coordination mandate without creating a formal entity with its own activities, infrastructure and budget.
- The group is not convinced of the efficacy of identifying or naming one 'lead' PLEI organization per region to improve coordination and members of the working group wish to follow up further with their constituents
- Communication protocols follow from decisions made about the recommendations and will be addressed by our responses to the following recommendations set out below.

In response to Recommendations 4 and 5 the Working Group has agreed to focus on co-ordinating the development and distribution of PLEI materials in BC as well as on increasing access to PLEI materials through projects such as:

- gathering together information about PLEI resources and services available in BC from different groups and government departments,
- expanding the PLEI Resource Catalogue (BC),
- developing an online clearinghouse or portal that will direct people looking for PLEI resources and services to the appropriate groups and websites, and
- other easy and systematic ways to promote each other's services. , eg. Coordination of training initiatives

In response to Recommendation 6, in the fall of 2005 the PLEI WG will jointly plan an initiative to address one of the gaps identified by the researchers. The Working Group is considering working together on projects relating to: youth and the law, seniors' concerns, or aboriginal legal issues. Because the members of the PLEI WG deal with different constituencies and produce different types of resources, the members would co-ordinate their work to produce different

resources and services that complement one another, and meet the needs of specific segments of the identified audience.

Finally, the PLEI WG will always keep in mind the point made in Recommendation 8 of the need to look for more funding. It is unlikely, however, that the group will find significant new funding sources in the current environment.

Within two years, the PLEI WG hopes to contact community groups such as yours again to find out if we have been successful in improving access to PLEI services to meet your needs, and to once again identify what gaps and overlaps there are in PLEI services or resources in BC that we should address.

Conclusion

Thank you again for agreeing to participate in the research work about PLEI in BC. We know that your organizations are very busy and we appreciate the time many of you took to respond to the research questions. The full report can be found at <http://www.plecanada.org> and will be posted at the following websites in the next few weeks:

- Legal Services Society at www.lss.bc.ca
- Law Courts Education Society at <http://www.lawcourtsed.ca/>
- People's Law School at <http://www.publiclegaled.bc.ca/home/index.htm>

We would be interested in hearing more from you if you have comments about this letter or any part of the research project. Please contact Carol McEown at Legal Services Society and she will pass on any comments to the Working Group.

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