

OPICCO Leadership Statement

The leadership of OPICCO¹ believes that certain global economic and political trends are affecting Ontario society to create a shift in the balance of power that threatens the future possibility of any kind of meaningful life for people with low incomes. These trends may also threaten the ability of community legal clinics to remain independent in their representation of people with low incomes and to remain independent in their advocacy for social justice with people with low incomes and their allies.

The leadership of OPICCO also believes that there are reasons to be hopeful. There continue to be broad social forces working for social justice in Ontario. Therefore there continues to remain significant support and capacity for community organizing within community legal clinics in Ontario.

The leadership of OPICCO believes members of OPICCO can, in a variety of ways, play an important role in 'pushing back' against the economic and political forces that threaten the quality of life of people in Ontario with low incomes.

A summary of the main themes of those conversations follows, and is the background to this Leadership Statement. The summary includes a brief discussion of the OPICCO leadership's analysis of the social forces working for and against community legal clinics doing community organizing. It also includes a discussion of the 'trend' in the social forces and their implication for the quality of life of people in Ontario with low incomes; and the implication of these social forces for the ability and capacity of community legal clinics to continue community organizing work.

Economic Analysis

The economy is going through a cyclical and a structural shift with a different impact on the wealthy and the poor. There may be an economic 'recovery' for the wealthy and for a portion of the middle class. The economy however is undergoing a systemic shift for the poor and major portions of the working and middle classes. Much of the labour market is becoming more precarious and the social safety net is eroding.

Political Analysis

The reduction of the welfare state is occurring as the result of an ideological push by the right that wishes to decrease the role of the state. A reduced welfare state is the new norm for the clients of community legal clinics. Income inequality, already pronounced will increase. It is compounded by people who have become alienated from the political process and become 'cynical' as a result about the influence of politics and the state. As a result the political process has become largely 'uncontested'.

¹ This Leadership Statement arises from an ongoing conversation within the OPICCO steering committee in preparation for the 2011 OPICCO Forum, and reflects the feedback of clinic staff who attended the Forum.

Some of the consequences of this shift to the right include an agenda to reduce government expenditures particularly in social services.

The implications of this for people with low incomes are persistent and deepened impoverishment. The politics may increase fear of organizing by people with low incomes. The insufficient recognition of how women, Aboriginal people, racialized communities, newcomers, people with disabilities, seniors, youth, lone-parent families and other historically marginalized groups face higher rates of poverty will continue. The framing of poor people as 'deserving and undeserving' will become more deeply accepted and that may fuel a backlash and can increase public 'bullying' of people with low incomes.

The implication of this for community legal clinics includes increasing demands for casework. The recession means increasing 'needs' among middle class and therefore pressure for them to be served by legal aid. The community legal clinic system may see increasing cuts to funding; increased emphasis on casework; and introduction of a competitive 'project' funding model.

Role of Community Organizing by Community Legal Clinics in Response to this Analysis

There is community organizing capacity in community legal clinics and continued support and mandate for it in the clinic funding agreement. Casework provides a legitimate foundation for community organizing. There is a growing awareness of poverty in Ontario society reflected in the media. There are broad social forces which support social justice including the destabilization of the middle class by the recession.

There are challenges to effective community organizing within community legal clinics including an overarching belief in 'brute sanity' i.e. 'We will win this because we are right/the law is on our side'. This perspective does not provide direction to developing strategies to build community level power to resist and contest the social injustice caused by the economic and political forces described earlier. The culture of community organizing is not consistent through the clinic system.

Role of Ontario Project for Inter Clinic Community Organizing (OPICCO)

Give real support to community organizing in legal clinics in the following ways:

- Lead discussion to frame and define the issues in the community legal clinic system that can be addressed through community organizing
- Develop/provide tools to support community organizing in legal clinics, to help caseworkers balance the needs of individual clients with the need to organize for broader social change
- Be a resource to developing/organizing the community base of community legal clinics
- Help create 'space' and create 'room' for community organizing; help inspire hope and optimism
- Build solidarity among community legal clinic staff and Boards, across clinic regions and with the Association of Community Legal Clinics of Ontario