



Calgary Legal Guidance board chairwoman Jean Munn and executive director Larry Horeczy say the organization, which relies on volunteer lawyers, helps the city's most vulnerable get legal help. *ADRIAN SHELLARD*

Volunteers help those most in need

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It is a daunting task to navigate Canada's legal system without proper knowledge and representation.

For socially and economically disadvantaged people, it can be even more intimidating. But a little information can go a long way in leveling the legal playing field for Calgary's most vulnerable populations.

Calgary Legal Guidance has spent the past four decades working to provide adequate representation, information and assistance to those in the city who need it most. First established in 1972 by a group of University of Alberta students from Calgary, the organization works with homeless organizations, family counselling services, immigration organizations and seniors centres.

By partnering with other Calgary organizations to tackle both the legal and social sides of an issue, the organization

has been able to help newcomers to Canada find permanent residency, assist families facing legal troubles and teach people how to navigate everything from speeding tickets to divorce.

"If you don't have legal advice, you're not on the same playing field as the prosecution," says executive director Larry Horeczy.

"Access to justice is not equal by nature, the way it's structured. The only way to level that playing field is to create accessible legal advice. How do you get that if you can't afford it?"

The need for these services is so great that Calgary Legal Guidance can't keep up with demand, Horeczy says. The organization puts on free legal clinics for seniors, immigrants, aboriginal peoples and the homeless, as well as for those who need assistance with family law matters.

Though many problems can be solved in the half an hour a person spends with a volunteer lawyer at the clinic, the need for

greater services is apparent. The organization ran 402 clinics in the city in 2014.

"We receive upwards of 100 calls a day to get advice," says Horeczy, whose background is in children's services.

"The need is there." Sometimes, all it takes to help someone is assisting them in filling out the right forms, says board chairwoman Jean Munn, recalling a case she worked on in 2012 where a father of three who worked in a restaurant needed help applying for permanent residency.

"He came to the clinic with this bag of papers, asking if there was any way that he could stay in Canada," says Munn, who volunteered in the legal clinics for 20 years. "And of course there was."

"There was no controversy in the file," she says. "It was just a matter of filling out all those papers correctly, getting them all complete and getting them submitted."

The man and his family qualified for permanent residency later in 2012, one week before the federal government changed the laws covering temporary foreign workers, changes that would have made him ineligible.

"If he had been left on his own for that stuff, he might have muddled through, but he would have missed that deadline," Munn explains.

Approximately 300 volunteers from about 90 law firms and corporations volunteer with Calgary Legal Guidance, usually committing to one evening shift per week. There are currently 52 applicants waiting to get into a volunteer position.

For Munn and the other volunteers — not all of them lawyers — who offer pro bono work through the organization, Calgary Legal Guidance provides a chance to give back where their help is the most needed.

"It's exceptionally rewarding to give somebody the tools to effect their own success," she says.

FACTS

Who can access Calgary Legal Guidance?

Calgary Legal Guidance assists socially and economically disadvantaged Calgarians who require legal help. Intake forms are available at clg.ab.ca/contact-us/clg-intake-form or by phoning 403-234-9266.

What services are available?

The organization provides legal advice in the areas of domestic violence, elder law, social assistance and issues facing the homeless. It also offers representation to certain applicants in criminal, family, civil, immigration and administrative law matters.

How do I attend a law clinic?

The free, 30-minute clinics are held downtown or at a partner organization and offer confidential legal advice to those who don't qualify for legal aid. Visit clg.ab.ca