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## Pro Bono Merging Into the Fast Lane

*Two organizations to become one.*

**T**he crisis of obstructed access to justice continues to worsen in British Columbia, and its steady decline parallels the gradual dismantling of legal aid and the growing complexity of our judicial processes. Tapping into the profession's noble tradition of *pro bono* service, B.C.'s *pro bono* organizations mobilized in the late 1990s and early 2000s to meet the exploding demand for free legal services, all the while maintaining that *pro bono* services are meant to complement and not substitute for a properly funded legal aid system. Operating in virtual silos, the Salvation Army Pro Bono Program, the Western Canada Society to Access Justice and Pro Bono Law of B.C. led the organized *pro bono* charge toward the goal of a more accessible legal system.

In the mid-2000s, the three *pro bono* leaders recognized the counter-productivity of their solitary stances and gradually began to work in close collaboration with one another. The joint administration of projects revealed greater and greater potential for enhanced *pro bono* service delivery, and the organizations flirted with the once unimaginable idea of merging into one. The Law Foundation of B.C. embraced the idea and committed to funding a newly merged *pro bono* organization through its early years and beyond.

Emboldened by funder support

and common sense, Access Justice and Pro Bono Law of B.C. agreed to merge operations by December 1, 2009, and then merge into a single new *pro bono* organization by April 1, 2010. The new (as yet unnamed) organization will combine the operational strengths of its predecessors – Access Justice's advice clinics and Pro Bono Law of B.C.'s representation programs – while working in close coordination with the Salvation Army. Once launched, it will offer seamless “cradle to grave” *pro bono* legal services to a higher number of clients than any other *pro bono* organization in Canada.

The new organization will be well positioned to respond to the rapidly changing and ever-increasing legal needs of B.C.'s marginalized populations. At the same time, B.C.'s *pro bono* funders, lawyers and clients will all benefit from the many synergies and efficiencies that will flow from a merged organization, such as:

- more efficient operations, including more effective client bookings and referrals, and unified lawyer recruitment and training;
- a wider array of *pro bono* services available to individuals in all areas of B.C., and an elimination of service and advocacy redundancies;

- decreased competition for funding from government, foundations, law firms and individuals;
- stable operations with long-term viability and vision for increasing access to justice in B.C.; and
- budget efficiencies permitting more clients to be served at less cost.

The viability of the new organization should be a matter of substantial pride to the B.C. Bar, since it reflects B.C.'s position as the province with the highest rate of *pro bono* engagement among



lawyers. The new organization will serve low and modest income clients in communities ranging from Victoria to Prince Rupert to Fort St. John to Fernie and points in between. Its limitless potential for scope of service is a testament to the undying willingness of B.C. lawyers to provide *pro bono* services where sorely needed.

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