

Legal Aid Budget Cuts Will Hurt Ontario Tenants

The provincial government's drastic cut to funding for Legal Aid Ontario means Ontarians will have an even harder time finding and keeping their affordable homes. For legal clinics, these cuts will have a direct impact on their work and the communities they serve – including more than 1.5 million tenant households in Ontario.

For almost 50 years, legal clinics have helped low- and moderate-income people facing housing difficulties. Legal clinics have prevented countless families from becoming homeless by assisting them with their hearings or helping them access crucial financial supports. Legal clinics have strengthened the rights and protections of all renters across the province by pushing for restrictions on rent increases and challenging arbitrary evictions. Legal clinics, along with their coalition partners, were instrumental to the creation of the federal National Housing Strategy that includes commitments to building the affordable housing Ontarians desperately need. Most recently, legal clinics helped expand rent control, introduce a standard form lease, regulate short-term rentals like Airbnb and create programs that helped thousands of low-income people pay their electricity bills.

By ensuring people are adequately housed, legal clinics pay for themselves in the savings their work generates by keeping people out of the costlier health care, shelter and justice systems.

Despite Ontario's legal clinic system being regarded as one of the best in the world, the Minister of Finance slashed Legal Aid Ontario's funding by a third (\$133 million in 2019-2020) – retroactive to April 1 – with additional cuts over the next three years. For legal clinics already operating on the margins after years of justice sector cuts and audits, and experiencing an increasing demand for their services, these budget cuts will have a devastating impact on their work in the midst of an affordable housing crisis.

The bleak outlook for Ontario renters does not end with this budget. The government is set to release amendments to the *Residential Tenancies Act, 2006* in the fall as part of their Housing Supply Action Plan. Following the province's termination of rent control for units first rented after November 2018, the government consultations on the plan suggest that additional tenant protections could be weakened or eliminated to entice landlords into the market. Destabilizing legal clinics will make it more difficult to challenge any upcoming attacks on tenant rights, and in effect quashes any dissent.

Once again, it is vulnerable Ontarians who bear the brunt of the budget cuts. Deep government cuts to refugee legal services, social assistance and public health services would only be made worse by the loss of a robust legal clinic system.

We call on the government to reverse the cuts to Legal Aid Ontario funding and ensure that stable funding is re-committed to programs and initiatives directed at affordable housing.