

Connecting Ottawa

Effective communication
Accessible justice

CATALYST PROGRAM REPORT YEAR 2 JANUARY 1 – DECEMBER 31, 2023

Prepared for :



Submitted: February 27, 2024

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Part I: Applicant Information

Name of Organization	Community Legal Services of Ottawa / Services juridiques communautaires d'Ottawa
Name of Program	Connecting Ottawa/Connexion Ottawa
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Grant Number:	CAT-61-22
Reporting period:	January 1 to December 31, 2023

Part II: Interim Report

Introduction:

This is the final report for Catalyst Grant # CAT-61-22 detailing the activities of the Connecting Ottawa project for the period January 1 to December 31, 2023. As has been the case for our entire grant, we are pleased to report that Connecting Ottawa continues to **meet or exceed** all programming expectations for our funding. We have made significant impacts in our community, increasing the ability and capacity of front-line community workers to support the legal information and referral needs of clients who are linguistic minorities or who have communication barriers due to sensory impairment.

Demand for our project services continue to be extremely strong, in large part due to:

- The ongoing backlog of applications and decision wait times at Immigration and Refugee Citizenship Canada (IRCC), resulting in increased queries related to client immigration and refugee law issues and support.
- New federal and provincial measures put in place to support the influx of refugees and family members from various countries, resulting in queries about these programs by settlement agency workers who are supporting these individuals.
- The ongoing staffing shortage and turnover in many of the agencies in our partnership network, requiring increased and ongoing capacity building efforts to new and existing front-line social service workers.
- Ongoing capacity limits at Ottawa legal clinics, resulting in front-line workers seeking support from Connecting Ottawa to help their clients navigate their legal needs.
- Ongoing significant gaps in free legal support for vulnerable populations in Ottawa in the areas of family law, wills and estates, employment law and consumer law, resulting in increased demand for assistance in these areas from Connecting Ottawa.

We are thankful to the Law Foundation of Ontario for the ongoing support for this project. We specifically want to acknowledge Leah Zilnik, Lili Pach, Noah Aiken-Klar, and Lisa Cirillo for their help and support.

Background and Mandate:

The mandate of Connecting Ottawa is to improve access to justice for linguistic minorities and those who have communication barriers in Ottawa. We achieve this by working with front-line community workers to develop their capacity to provide appropriate legal information and referrals to clients within these target populations.

The Connecting Ottawa project has been a successful and impactful program operating in Ottawa, Ontario since 2012, funded by the Law Foundation of Ontario. From 2012-2021, it was awarded yearly Connecting Regions program funding. In 2021, the project was approved for three-year Catalyst funding.

Connecting Ottawa has developed a partnership network of 57 community, legal, immigration, disability, and social services agencies who work with and address the compounded barriers faced by individuals in the target populations. Connecting Ottawa provides to these organizations and their front-line personnel: case management support services, legal and community informational referrals and coordination, a website directory of legal, social and communication services, a bi-weekly newsletter of legal and social service information updates and activities, and legal education sessions and workshops. We also seek opportunities to coordinate legal and community services to ensure that the access to justice needs of clients are addressed.

Project Goals and Activities

The overarching goals of the Connecting Ottawa project are to:

- Provide information to help front-line social service workers, who act as trusted intermediaries to our target populations, to understand their clients' legal rights, and provide information about the legal services available to help them to exercise those rights;
- Ensure that “every door is the right door” to legal services by training and supporting the information, assessment and referral needs of front-line service providers and other trusted intermediaries to be able to identify when a person from the focus populations requires a legal service and then to connect the person with the right legal information and legal service; and
- Support legal services organizations to provide services to the focus populations within a framework that acknowledges issue complexity and requires a holistic approach to service delivery.

The activities funded under the 2023 Catalyst Grant are to:

- Maintain and expand the Connecting Ottawa partnership network;
- Provide capacity-building on social and legal issues relevant to our target populations to our network of social service and legal partners through direct one-on-one support and consultation;
- Provide capacity-building opportunities on legal issues relevant to our target populations to our network of partners through education workshops, Connecting Ottawa co-hosted workshops with other organizations, educational presentations delivered upon request at partner agencies' on-site locations, and webinars;
- Host the Connecting Ottawa annual conference;
- Promote the use of resources developed by Connecting Ottawa and other organizations to social services and legal workers supporting clients in the target populations;
- Maintain and update the Connecting Ottawa website;

- Share information pertinent to the legal and social services needs of our target populations with our partnership network via our *Communique*, website and social media channels;
- Work with our legal services partner organizations and community service organizations to help “fill the gaps” of legal services available to our target populations via workshops, seminars and clinics;
- Share the lessons learned from the program’s continued development in order to build upon the strengths of the network in Ottawa and to support similar and complementary initiatives in other communities;
- Manage the project effectively and professionally.

Activity Outcomes:

Connecting Ottawa partnership network

The Connecting Ottawa network consists of 57 local social and legal service organizations. This includes 20 community service organizations, 19 immigration and settlement service organizations, 10 legal service organizations, and 8 disability service organizations. During the reporting period we maintained engagement with network members through regular emails, our *Communique* and via one-on-one meetings with agency managers, as required. We also engaged with three new partners: Youth Services Bureau, Inuuqatigiit Legal Navigation Services and Bruyere Continuing Care.

We regularly connect with community legal service organizations to discuss community worker needs, coordinate activities, and identify partnership opportunities. A longstanding partnership in our network is the Housing Education Group, initiated by Connecting Ottawa and Reach Canada in 2020 with participation from Community Legal Services of Ottawa, Ontario Legal Information Centre, Clinique juridique francophone d’Ottawa, University of Ottawa Community Legal Clinic, Housing Help and Action Logement. This group discusses local sector education needs and coordinates 7-10 education sessions per year for community workers to develop their capacity to identify and assist clients with housing issues (see the list below for the sessions coordinated during the reporting period). This partnership has been beneficial for all organizations and ensures coordination of programming in this area for community workers.

During the reporting period, we also initiated a collaboration among legal service organizations to discuss the gap in family law services for low-income clients in Ottawa. Two meetings were held in 2023 with partners committed to continuing discussions on ways to increase services to vulnerable populations in Ottawa.

To serve disability partner members, we continue to have a strong relationship with Canadian Hearing Services and Reach Canada and regularly seek feedback from them on education needs for community workers in the disability sector.

One-on-one support and consultation

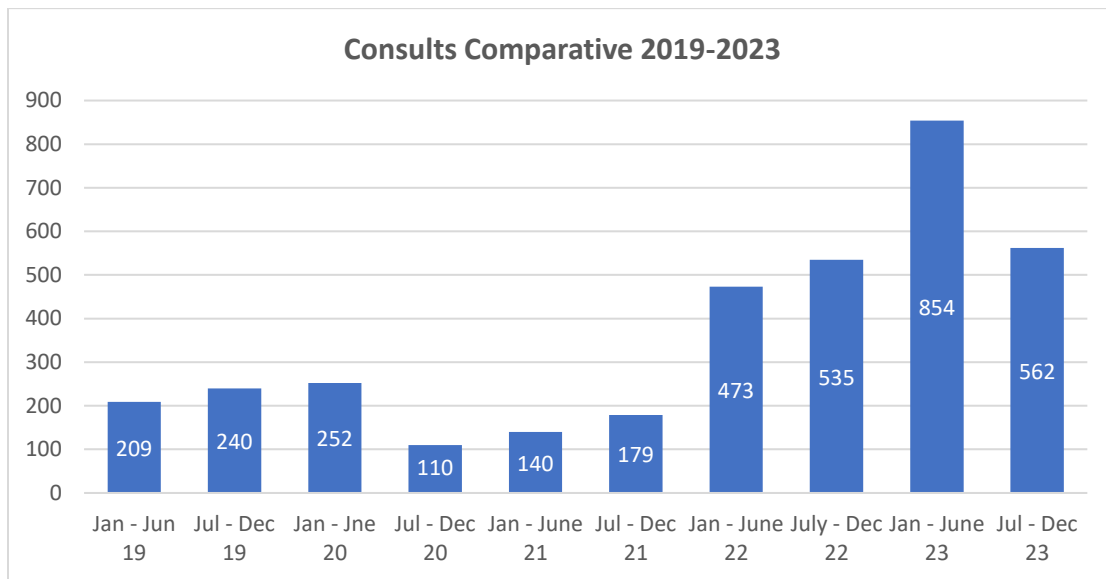
One of the most effective and impactful ways that we have found to develop the capacities of the front-line community workers is for Connecting Ottawa lawyers to consult one-on-one with frontline workers to help them address their clients’ legal issues. Connecting Ottawa lawyers do not work directly with clients. All client communication, follow up, and case management support is conducted by the front-line worker. For each inquiry Connecting Ottawa lawyers determine the level and degree of their involvement and support may include: providing summary legal advice, drafting legal documents, reviewing applications, giving adequate referrals or legal

information, etc. The level of involvement is determined on a case-by-case basis by the lawyer in consultation with the frontline worker.

Connecting Ottawa lawyers assist caseworkers and their clients in the following areas of law: immigration and refugee law services, social assistance (ODSP, OW), federal income support benefits (EI, CPP, OAS/GIS, pandemic recovery benefits), housing, employment/work, human rights, consumer/debt, small claims matters, wills/powers of attorney (not drafting but advising), lost identification, guardianship applications (advising/reviewing), and some family law issues.

From January 1, 2023 to December 31, 2023, Connecting Ottawa lawyers conducted 1416 individual consultations, serving 2395 clients. Of the 1416 consultations, just under half, or 698, required “multiple” interactions with the caseworker, meaning that they were of a complicated nature, requiring follow up by our lawyer prior to fully resolving the query. The demand in our consultation activities continues to be a concern and is not sustainable in the long term. During the reporting period, we applied to two calls for proposals to seek additional funding to increase our staffing capacity but were not successful.

It is often in these cases, that this aspect of our project is the most impactful for the outcomes of the client. Please see the Impact section for two case studies that illustrate this aspect of our work.



Legal education, workshops, and conferences:

As part of our capacity building approach, Connecting Ottawa plans and delivers legal education sessions to front-line community workers. We develop and present sessions that are open to our entire partnership network as well as respond to invitations from individual organizations on specific issues relevant to their practice.

During the reporting period, Connecting Ottawa coordinated and facilitated 15 education sessions that were open to our entire partnership network, reaching a total of 449 front-line workers. Where appropriate, we invite guest speakers to expand the range of topics presented.

The sessions hosted from January 1, 2023 to December 31, 2023 were:

- Violence familiale: préparez-vous pour une intervention ciblée – November 30
- How to properly terminate a tenancy – November 21
- Introduction to Connecting Ottawa for new front-line workers – November 8
- What is the Ottawa Ticket Defence Program – October 11
- What to do when your client receives an N4 – September 26
- Tenant Rights and Responsibilities - June 20
- Legal Aid and Legal Clinics: Services available and how to refer – June 6
- RGI Single Offer – May 31
- New worker orientation: Supporting clients and working with Connecting Ottawa - May 25
- New Property Management Bylaw - May 2
- Safe Third Country Agreement - April 5
- International adoption – March 28
- Social Security Tribunal: Services available for clients - March 22
- Income tax: Why it's important and where to refer clients – February 14
- New worker orientation: Supporting clients and working with Connecting Ottawa – February 2

During the period, Connecting Ottawa also coordinated and delivered 8 in-house partner education sessions, reaching a total of 230 frontline workers. Further, Connecting Ottawa lawyer, Heather Neufeld, presented two workshops for the CLEO Connect network on (1) the changes to the Safe Third Country Agreement and (2) Pathways for Permanent Residency for Ukrainians, reaching 450 front line workers provincially. Connecting Ottawa was also invited as a keynote speaker presenting on the rights of non-status, refugee and immigrant women facing gender-based violence reaching an additional 35 additional front-line workers.

Connecting Ottawa actively promotes education sessions coordinated and delivered by other organizations relevant to the social service and legal education needs of our community service workers. During the reporting period, we shared the following organizations' education information:

- Community Legal Education Ontario (CLEO)
- Reach Canada
- L'Association des juristes d'expression française de l'Ontario (AJEFO)
- Clinique Juridique Francophone d'Ottawa
- The Alliance for Racialized, Refugee and Im/migrant women
- Ottawa Immigrant Services Organization (OCISO)
- Jewish Family Services
- HIV & Aids Legal Clinic
- Woodgreen's Financial Empowerment Team
- Refugee 613
- National Accessibility Week
- Welcome to Ottawa Week

Connecting Ottawa hosts a yearly conference on a timely issue relevant to both social service and legal service workers. The 2023 Conference "Immigration Hot Topics" returned to an in-person format and was held on October 24, 2023 at the University of Ottawa. As an addendum to the conference, Connecting Ottawa partnered with the University of Ottawa to host a hybrid session for legal workers on the topic of Artificial Intelligence (AI) and Access to Justice. Both

events were listed as “Access to Justice Week” events and the AI and Access to Justice keynote was approved for one hour professional development content by the Law Society of Ontario. A total of 67 individuals attended the Connecting Ottawa conference and 161 attended the AI and A2J keynote.

Legal information resource sheets

An important tool for developing the capacity of front-line workers and for helping them to directly assist their clients is information sheets related to specific legal issues that can be referred to on a case-by-case basis. These information sheets can also help to reduce the number of one-on-one case consultations requests received by our lawyers. Connecting Ottawa develops and/or updates and distributes information sheets as the capacity of our lawyers allow. During the reporting period, Connecting Ottawa developed and shared 15 new or updated resources:

- Q & A Sheet on temporary and permanent residence options for Ukrainians (December 1, 2023)
- Tips for a Sponsored Spouse/Common Law Partner completing Generic Application Form for Canada (IMM0008) on the Online Permanent Residence Portal (October 24, 2023)
- Tips for Completing Additional Family Information (IMM5406) as a sponsored spouse/partner on the online permanent residence portal (October 24, 2023)
- Tips for completing relationship information and sponsorship evaluation form (IMM 5532) by sponsor and sponsored spouse together (October 24, 2023)
- Tips for completing Schedule A - Background/Declaration (IMM5669) as a sponsored spouse/partner on the online permanent residence portal (October 24, 2023)
- Tips for completing the application to sponsor, sponsorship agreement and undertaking (IMM 1344) as a sponsor (October 24, 2023)
- Wills and POA Resources Information Sheet (Updated June 16, 2023)
- May 26, 2023 Family Class Immigration Announcement Update (June 7, 2023)
- Expansion of Safe Third Country Agreement - Q & A (April 25, 2023)
- Rights and Responsibilities of Refugees in Canada (July 22, 2022) (Arabic)
- Rights and Responsibilities of Refugees in Canada (July 22, 2022) (Turkish)
- Rights and Responsibilities of Refugees in Canada (July 22, 2022) (Spanish)
- Legal Aid Ontario and Community Legal Clinics (Updated March 20, 2023)
- Overview Canadian Refugee Law (January 31, 2023)
- Canada Dental Benefit (Updated: January 25, 2023)

Connecting Ottawa information sheets are shared via our bi-weekly *Communique* or in conjunction with our education sessions. Recipients are invited to share the resource more broadly across their networks. Our distribution system does not allow for the collection of analytics on the use or further distribution of these resources; however, during the report period, we are aware that six of our information sheets were shared provincially by and uploaded to the CLEO Connect Your Legal Rights resource collection. We are also aware that our translated *Rights and responsibilities of Refugees in Canada* infosheets were shared widely by Refugee 613.

In addition to sharing our internally developed resources, Connecting Ottawa shares resources produced by other local, provincial and federal organizations. 72 resources related to legal and social issues pertinent to our target populations were shared via our *Communique*.

Website

Over the reporting period, Connecting Ottawa's websites have been available in both English (connectingottawa.com) and French (connexionottawa.com). The domain registrations have been extended until April 2024 and we arrange for hosting services through a monthly agreement with a hosting service.

The Connecting Ottawa website is a centralized hub for sharing information about local legal, social services and communication barrier services to partner agencies, other community groups, and the public. A key element of the Connecting Ottawa site is the links to the Community Navigation of Eastern Ontario (CNEO) 211 data base and providing ease of access to legal, social services, and communication barrier resources found there.

Connecting Ottawa promotes and integrates legal information resources via the website. Resources that are posted include: Connecting Ottawa information sheets and resources, links to the Steps to Justice information tool, social service and legal information tools available in multilingual formats, and our *Communique*. Any Connecting Ottawa educational resources that are posted on the website are centralized on a dedicated "Resources page". This page link is promoted in any electronic or social media posts. Website analytics show that this practice has resulted in multiple hits to our site and to this specific page as individuals seek out these resources.

During the reporting period, Connecting Ottawa received 8,892 visitors to the site, resulting in 23,226 pageviews. We continue to drive users to the site via links in our *Communique* and by promoting the site in information sessions. The website also has a link for community service workers to request a consultation on behalf of their clients, which is used regularly by network front-line workers to connect with our services.

Capacity to effectively manage and update the website and better promote it to our network continues to be a challenge. During the reporting period we were further limited in our ability to update the site due to the company that originally designed our website going out of business. We have identified and contracted with a new organization to provide website support and maintenance and have scheduled some nominal updates and changes for 2024.

Communique & other media

Connecting Ottawa produces a bi-weekly electronic newsletter, *Communique*. In this newsletter we share information on upcoming education sessions as well as timely information and updates on local, provincial, and federal legal and social service programs of interest to front-line workers serving clients in our target populations. The *Communique* is very popular among front-line workers and we continually receive positive feedback on the content.

During the reporting period, we produced 22 regular issues of the *Communique* plus a special issue on the new family class announcement by IRCC. We encourage recipients to share the document widely and we post the most current issue on a dedicated page on our website. Our distribution system does not allow for the collection of analytics on the use of or further distribution of the *Communique*; however, we are aware that the distribution extends far beyond our current email list and that Community Network of Eastern Ontario regularly shares content in its newsletter that originated from our *Communique*.

Connecting Ottawa also has a Facebook, Twitter and LinkedIn profile. We do not have the capacity to manage these feeds effectively or consistently. Currently, only the most minimal

content is shared. We currently have 706 followers on our Facebook page, 671 followers to our X/Twitter account, and 9 followers to our LinkedIn page.

Fill the gaps

Connecting Ottawa works with our legal service and community service partner organizations to help “fill the gaps” of legal services available to our target populations via workshops, seminars and clinics. We are currently seeking to make an impact in four areas: Newcomer identification replacement, Wills and POA support for low-income clients, employment law support and family law support. We have also undertaken activities to increase support to refugees in Ottawa.

In 2019-20, Connecting Ottawa initiated a partnership with Pro-Bono Students Canada (PBSC) to host a series of newcomer ID clinics to help individuals replace missing or stolen permanent resident or citizenship documentation. The partnership emerged from several settlement partners indicating that this support was unavailable in Ottawa. PBSC works under the direction of lawyers from Borden, Ladner & Gervais law firm and Connecting Ottawa arranges for the location and promotion of the clinics. Our lawyer, Liz Majic, also provides training to PBSC students related to the intricacies of newcomer identification. The clinics were paused during COVID-19.

In 2019-20, two agency partners approached Connecting Ottawa for support and resources to assist their clients with wills and powers of attorney. Ottawa’s legal clinics do not offer these services and many individuals within our target populations were identified as falling through the cracks. Connecting Ottawa has worked with the Renfrew County Legal Clinic, Reach Canada and Community Legal Education Ontario to present information sessions to partner organizations; however, these information sessions do not provide needed services. We are pleased to report that Connecting Ottawa and Reach Canada, in partnership, were awarded a small three year grant (2023-2026) by the McLachlin Foundation to undertake research on a sustainable model for clinic that could be offered regularly in Ottawa. During the reporting period, we developed a plan, hired a research student, appointed an Advisory Committee and initiated our research plan. Connecting Ottawa receives a small coordination fee as co-coordinator for the project. Our project manager serves as the co-coordinator and our lawyer, Liz Majic, serves on the Advisory Committee.

Employment law continues to be an area of concern for individuals in our target populations. Many of these individuals work gig or minimum wage employment jobs and/or are subjected to problematic employment circumstances and discrimination. In 2020 the Employment Law Clinic opened in Ottawa. This is a 4-month service project aligned with the University of Ottawa that is available directly to clients to address their employment law issues. Connecting Ottawa has been working with the Clinic to support funding proposals for full time activity and to share information. To date, the clinic has yet to secure ongoing funding for this essential service.

In 2023, Connecting Ottawa identified an increased trend in demand for family law support among our target populations. This demand accentuated the gap in services in Ottawa as there are few clinics providing this service and/or private bar lawyers accepting LAO certificates. In April of 2023, Connecting Ottawa convened a meeting of local clinics and LAO to discuss the gap and work together to identify potential solutions. There was support for continued discussions and a second meeting was held in the fall of 2023.

Refugee support emerged as a key “gap” when more than 1,000 Roxham Road refugees were transferred to Ottawa hotels by IRCC at the end of 2022. While many are able to receive a legal aid certificate, there are few lawyers who have the capacity to take on these clients and/or the

certificates don't cover the full needs of the individual. Refugee 613, a Connecting Ottawa partner, was advised in 2023 that they would be the recipient of long-term philanthropic funding to support refugee resettlement in Ottawa. Refugee 613 has initiated a process to identify goals and policies to distribute this funding, which will be completed in 2024. At the end of 2023, the funder asked Refugee 613 to identify four 3-month pilot projects for funding. Connecting Ottawa applied for funding to provide one-on-one settlement support to refugees completing their portal applications, which would in turn be reviewed by a lawyer, prior to submission. Connecting Ottawa was awarded the funding for the project, starting January 1, 2024.

Collaboration and sharing

Connecting Ottawa actively promotes and facilitates sharing and connecting of resources and knowledge locally. During the reporting period, we:

- Connected with the City of Ottawa to identify education needs for housing workers on various newcomer status and explored opportunities for in-person training in early 2024
- Collaborated with the University of Ottawa to develop Access to Justice week programming
- Helped to arrange for a private bar lawyer to present to Ukrainian clients at OCISO and Jewish Family Services on the topic of economic pathways for residency.
- Regularly referred partner agencies to University of Ottawa Community Legal Clinic, Community Legal Services of Ottawa and other legal clinics to present other legal information sessions directly to clients.
- Shared knowledge and information with the director of the newly funded Inuuqatigiit legal navigation service to support their project coordination.
- Connected a working group of private bar lawyers seeking to provide A2J services in local prisons with LFO to discuss potential funding opportunities.
- Connected the City of Ottawa with the Ticket Defence Program at UOCLC to provide in-house supports for their clients.
- Actively supported the efforts to provide settlement support to the Roxham Road transfers to Ottawa by participating in collaborative processes at the social services, legal and advocacy levels to share knowledge and information that could assist with service provision.

Connecting Ottawa also actively seeks to promote and share the knowledge learned from the program within the larger sector of newcomer and legal support organizations. During the reporting period, Connecting Ottawa staff members participated in and contributed to:

- Consumer (Law) Working Group
- Employment Insurance Working Group
- Refugee 613 Executive Committee
- Refugee 613 Ukrainian Housing Group
- Refugee 613 Refugee Task Force
- Social Security Tribunal Stakeholder Group
- Canadian Association of Refugee Lawyers, Ottawa Chapter
- Workers Rights Action Group
- LAO Clinics Eastern Region Meeting
- Law Foundation of Ontario Catalyst grantees meeting
- Law Foundation of Ontario Grantees Advisory Committee
- Community Legal Education of Ontario document review
- Public Legal Education Association of Canada Conference

Project Management

The lead agency for the project is Community Legal Services of Ottawa (CLSO). They are the grantee, provide the accounting services, and contract project management services for the project. In February of 2023 the project moved human resource services for our lawyers and office accommodation services in-house to CLSO. These services had been contracted to Centre des services communautaires Vanier (CSC Vanier) at the time of Connecting Ottawa's inception. Since that time, the lead organization amalgamated with two other clinics and no longer had capacity limitations to provide these services. With the challenges of COVID behind us, the project felt that 2023 was the appropriate time to centralize all administration services under CLSO.

The project is managed by Dr. Gina Grosenick, an independent consultant under contract for 2.5 days per week to provide project management and coordination. Dr. Grosenick holds a Ph.D. in (non-profit) communication and has an extensive background managing and communicating about community-based programs and networks. In the fall of 2023, Dr. Grosenick provided notice of her retirement from the project. A search for a replacement was undertaken, interviews were held, and Raija Pulkkinen was hired as the new Project Manager commencing January 1, 2023. Raija Pulkkinen was previously the manager of Reach Canada, a partner agency and sister project to Connecting Ottawa.

Connecting Ottawa has two full time lawyers: Heather Neufeld, L.L.M, L.L.B and Liz Majic, J.D. Heather Neufeld is an immigration and refugee lawyer who has more than 10 years of community legal clinic experience. She speaks English, French and Spanish. Liz Majic brings a depth of knowledge in landlord and tenant law, social assistance, and employment law drawing on an extensive background working with vulnerable populations and complex human rights issues. She previously worked at three community law clinics, Canada Without Poverty, and the Feminist Alliance for International Action. Both individuals have strong education and PLE abilities. Both have experience as University lecturers and in offering seminars to front-line workers and clients.

Until May 6, 2023 we also employed Anneka Oh as an articling student, with funding approved by the Law Foundation of Ontario from unspent CON-RE 20 and 21 grants. Ms. Oh has worked with Connecting Ottawa since 2021 as a student and was seeking an articling placement. Ms. Oh greatly helped in supporting our two lawyers with client consultations and legal research. A full report on activities was provided as addendums to CON-RE 20 and 21 grant reports in July of 2023.

Team meetings are held bi-weekly to manage schedules, plan activities, and ensure that funding goals and objectives are being met. Yearly, we undertake a planning session to set goals and objectives for the year.

Connecting Ottawa has appointed an Advisory Group to assist in the effective management of the project. This Advisory Group is an essential resource to ensure that the programs and activities of the project meet the needs of the various groups within our partnership network. The Advisory Group typically meets 4x per year. During the reporting period the group met 3 times.

The current membership of the Advisory Group is:

NAME	SERVICES SECTOR	PARTNERING ORGANIZATION
Lois McIntyre	Community	Canadian Hearing Society
Radiyah Jouad	Community	South East Ottawa Community Health Centre
Laura McLean	Legal	Community Legal Services of Ottawa
Michelle Maynard	Community	Somerset West Community Health Centre
Mirela Dranca	Immigrant	The Economic and Social Council of Ottawa-Carleton (CESOC)
Christine Sharp	Community	Eastern Ottawa Community Resource Centre
Lisa Lawson	Community	Pinecrest Queensway Community Health Centre
Daniel Dussault	Community	Community Information Centre of Ottawa / 211
Clarisse Titus	Legal	Community Legal Services of Ottawa
Gary Stein	Legal	Retired.
Sofiane Maghrebi	Immigrant	Catholic Centre for Immigrants – Ottawa
Sarah Caspi	Immigrant	Jewish Family Services
Yemane Abede	Immigrant	Ottawa Community Immigrant Settlement Organization

2023 Reflections:

We offer the following reflections on our 2023 activities:

Legal capacity

While demand for consultations by front-line workers have somewhat stabilized in the later half of 2023, we continue to operate well above the capacity of two lawyers. As noted in the graph above, this area of practice for 2022 and 2023 is 200 – 300% of our project’s average prior to COVID. This is unsustainable and the project needs to find a way to hire an additional lawyer or reduce the breadth of areas of law that we provide support on. The latter will decrease our impact and widen the access to justice gap for newcomers and those with communication barriers in Ottawa.

Partnerships

A large part of Connecting Ottawa’s success has been its ability to coordinate and participate in partnerships to maximize efficiencies. As mentioned above, a flagship partnership is our Housing Education Group that presents 7-9 partner education sessions every year. We also partnered with all of the local legal aid clinics in 2023 to develop education sessions and resources to help front-line workers provide better referrals. We have partnered with Refugee613 on a number of initiatives in 2023 to support settlement workers’ support of refugees bussed into Ottawa from Roxham Road and to support the needs of local Ukrainians who have entered Canada on CUAET Visas. Connecting Ottawa maintains a close relationship with Community Legal Education Ontario to bi-laterally share information and our lawyers are legal reviewers for information posted on the CLEO and CLEO Connect websites. These partnerships promote efficiencies, share information and reduce duplication and redundancy.

Respected, solutions-oriented reputation

Connecting Ottawa continues to be held in high regard by the social services and legal sectors in Ottawa. Our lawyers have gained an exemplary reputation for supporting and helping front-line workers identify and navigate the legal needs of their clients and for being active partners. We have worked hard to connect and build relationships with workers to ensure that we are viewed as an essential partner in addressing client needs and identifying solutions to help them move forward.

Communique

Our bi-weekly *Communique* has become an essential tool for front-line workers in Ottawa to assist them in identifying and providing information to clients on legal and social service programs and resources. We regularly receive requests to be added to our distribution list, often by organizations outside of our partnership network. We are currently working with our website designer to find a way to archive past copies and to better manage distribution.

Community Legal Services of Ottawa

Moving the project's human resource requirements to Community Legal Services of Ottawa in 2023 has proved to be very beneficial for Connecting Ottawa. The move not only further centralized these management functions within one organization but our staff now feel more connected to our lead agency and the community legal clinic system as a whole.

Legal worker salaries

We continue to be concerned about the salaries we are paying our lawyers. They are substantially lower than those paid to lawyers providing similar services in Ottawa legal clinics or other non-profit organizations. While we appreciate the 5% budget increase provide by the Law Foundation of Ontario in 2023 and 2024, this increase does not go far enough to allow our project to offer competitive salaries to our lawyers and thus, our project is not secure in its ability to keep quality personnel. In all past LFO grant renewal applications, including the 2021 Catalyst application, we requested funding to increase our lawyer base salaries. We were denied funding for this purpose. This issue has become a critical need. In 2023 we initiated a conversation with Law Foundation of Ontario staff to identify a way to address this challenge and were encouraged to include this ask in our 2025 Catalyst renewal application. We hope that we can work with LFO to identify solutions moving forward.

Project management

Like the challenges with our legal salaries, we have been communicating, for a number of years, that the staffing allocation for project management is inadequate. Connecting Ottawa was fortunate to have a consultant in this role that was flexible and able to provide some uncompensated time to the project. With staffing changes in this role, it is no longer realistic to expect that Connecting Ottawa can maintain the status quo. There will need to be increased resources dedicated to this role to maintain effective management of the project, especially if additional and diversified funding is sought and secured.

Notable achievements

We highlight the following notable achievements for 2023

- Identification and receipt of new funding for refugee support
- Strong and consistent support of and capacity building of front-line workers to help address client legal needs via more than 1400 case consultations.
- Dissemination of timely and helpful information to help front-line workers support client legal information and referral needs via education sessions, information sheets and our Communique.
- Return to in-person Conference format and the successful facilitation of the 2023 "Immigration Hot Topics" conference.
- Ongoing coordination and support of partnerships to help address the gaps in legal services for vulnerable populations in Ottawa.
- Centralization of administrative services under Community Legal Services of Ottawa.
- Ongoing effective management of the project.

Impact:

Our organizational impact is most notable in the areas of capacity building for front-line workers, access to justice for those with communication barriers and filling the gaps of legal aid support for vulnerable populations.

Capacity building

Research has shown that individuals regularly turn to community workers as “trusted intermediaries” to access legal information and receive help with legal issues (“Trusted help, the role of community workers”, 2018), yet these individuals have little training or knowledge in this area. Connecting Ottawa’s major impact is in building the capacity of these community workers to provide legal information and referrals and as importantly, recognize when the information they are providing crosses over the line of legal advice. Connecting Ottawa works with all settlement agencies in Ottawa and many of the social service agencies to build the capacity of their workers through case consultations, education sessions, information sheets, our website and our bi-weekly Communique. We also actively seek out new workers in our partner agencies to provide training on how to provide legal information and referrals to clients. Without Connecting Ottawa, workers would be less informed and potentially be providing misinformation to clients that could result in negative outcomes.

The following case study exemplifies this area of impact:

On May 6, 2023, Mr. Santo arrived in Canada after fleeing Mexico due to persecution based on sexual orientation. The Government of Canada received Mr. Santo’s refugee claim on July 31, 2023. On July 30, 2023, Mr. Santo felt sharp pain in his stomach. The pain was so severe he thought he would die if he did not seek medical attention. It turns out that Mr. Santo required an emergency appendectomy that day.

Unfortunately, Mr. Santo was not eligible for medical coverage through the Interim Federal Health Program (IFHP) because his medical emergency occurred one day before his Acknowledgment of Claim document was issued. A refugee claimant is not eligible for IFHP coverage until their Acknowledgment of Claim is issued. Therefore, the hospital issued Mr. Santo’s an invoice in the amount of \$697.05 and an invoice in the amount of \$13,620.13. Mr. Santo could not afford to pay these invoices due to his personal circumstances as a refugee claimant and low-income person on social assistance. Mr. Santo went to a settlement agency for help.

On November 1, 2023, Mr. Santo’s settlement counsellor reached out to Connecting Ottawa to ask if there was a way to waive these invoices. After performing some research, Connecting Ottawa’s lawyer determined that Mr. Santo’s case satisfies the criteria for discretionary coverage from the IFHP for these reasons:

- *Mr. Santo was in a refugee-like situation at the time of his medical emergency because he was in the process of getting status, which was subsequently confirmed one day later when his Acknowledgement of Claim document was issued. In addition, Mr. Santo continues to face unreasonable, unjustified, and disproportionate hardship in his home country based on his LGBTQ+ status.*
- *Mr. Santo required immediate and urgent medical attention due to unanticipated, life-threatening appendicitis. An appendectomy was considered necessary and essential to sustain Mr. Santo’s life and could be fatal if left untreated.*

- *Mr. Santo is a low-income refugee claimant who cannot afford to pay the associated invoices based on financial hardship. Forcing him to do so would further plunge him into poverty.*

The settlement counsellor helped Mr. Santo gather relevant information to include with Connecting Ottawa's letter to the IFHP. While assisting Mr. Santo with his request to the IFHP, it came to the settlement counsellor's attention that Mr. Santo did not have a lawyer for his refugee claim. Connecting Ottawa's lawyer advised the settlement counsellor to contact a community legal clinic for help. The community legal clinic referred the settlement counsellor to a private bar lawyer who agreed to take Mr. Santo's case. At the time of submitting this case study, Mr. Santo is still waiting for a response from the IFHP about his request for discretionary coverage. We are hopeful they accept it!

Access to Justice

Newcomers and those with communication barriers face multiple and compounding challenges to fair and equitable access to justice and legal systems in Canada. Racism, language, unfamiliar culture and processes, past trauma and limited funding are just a few of these challenges and exacerbate these individuals' ability to achieve status, housing, fair employment, family stability and protection from fraud and discrimination. Connecting Ottawa's mandate is to increase access to justice for these target populations and thus provide the specialized knowledge and services to address their legal needs and help them understand their legal responsibilities. In 2023, we provided experienced legal support to 2395 individuals in this target population. Without Connecting Ottawa, many of these individuals would not have achieved what they are entitled to or have access to professional legal support.

The following case study exemplifies this area of impact:

Connecting Ottawa was approached by a worker at the Canadian Mental Health Association trying to prevent her client and her client's two young children from being evicted. It became clear that the issue was that the children were American citizens and thus the mother who was granted refugee status lost Ontario Works benefits for the children because they had no status in Canada. The family also lost their rent subsidy for having household members who had no legal status. The problem was that the mother, a Zimbabwean citizen who was a victim of trafficking in the U.S., was granted refugee status in Canada but her children were not.

In exploring the legal issues involved, it became clear to Connecting Ottawa that the only way to fix the problem was for the mother and her two children to apply for permanent residence in Canada. The children had the right to be included as their mother's dependents. However, this client had repeatedly fallen through the service cracks and had not filed a permanent residence application despite receiving refugee status several years ago. Therefore, Connecting Ottawa's immigration lawyer reviewed the online permanent residence application that had been started and never completed, identifying numerous errors and missing documents. Given the client's mental health challenges, the Connecting Ottawa lawyer and the client's mental health worker worked together to gather all the additional information and supporting documents from the client to complete the application. The client had also been given incorrect legal advice in the past and almost lost the opportunity to include one of her children still in the US on her PR application. This child was successfully added.

The application was submitted and the family was then able to access full Ontario Works benefits and restore their housing subsidy. Homelessness was averted and the family is now on route to obtain permanent status.

Filling the gaps

Free legal clinics serving low-income populations are an essential service for newcomers and those with communication barriers. These legal clinics, however do not cover all of the areas of law that may be required for individuals in our target populations and are over-capacity. They also have such a low income threshold for service that many individuals on low-incomes who cannot afford a lawyer are ineligible. In instances where clinics cannot take clients, clients are ineligible or the available free legal services do not provide support, front-line social service workers turn to Connecting Ottawa lawyers. While Connecting Ottawa does not represent the client, often the summary advice provided and the support to the front-line worker provided by Connecting Ottawa goes a long way to resolving the issue. Without Connecting Ottawa, these gaps in legal services would result in many clients not having access to professional, legal advice.

Workplan

Below is the workplan submitted to Law Foundation of Ontario on August 18, 2022 noting progress in planned activity areas. Activities that have been completed as per workplan are indicated with a green background and an X. Any shaded cells without an X indicate that the activity happened but was not part of the original workplan.

	J	F	M	A	M	J	J	A	S	O	N	D
Project Planning and Management												
Staff Planning Session	X											
Data collection and analysis	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X
Review of Activities							X					
Team Meetings	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X
Annual Conference planning						X	X	X	X			
Advisory Group Meetings	X			X			X			X		
Maintain and Grow Partnership Network												
Meetings with high-use partners to receive feedback		X		X		X		X		X		X
Meetings with disability partners to receive feedback			X							X		
Identify and follow-up potential new partners	X		X		X		X		X		X	
Coordinate programming/workgroups among partners			X			X			X			X
Website, Communique and Other media												
Maintain/update Connecting Ottawa Websites (minimal)	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X
Produce bi-weekly <i>Communique</i>	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X
Share information via social media							X	X	X			
Capacity Building for Front-line workers												
Provide consultations to front-line workers	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X
Offer in-house education sessions on demand	X		X		X		X		X		X	
Offer network education session by CO lawyers		X		X		X		X		X		X
Offer network education sessions by CO partners	X		X		X		X		X		X	
Develop short education videos and post on website											X	
Develop and distribute Infosheets/resources as required	X		X		X		X		X		X	
Annual Conference									X			

	J	F	M	A	M	J	J	A	S	O	N	D
Fill the Gaps												
Plan and offer ID Clinic		X	X							X	X	
Coordinate other clinics/sessions as required					X				X			
Share Lessons Learned												
Continue participation in sector roundtables/committees	X		X		X		X		X		X	
Participate as guest speaker on request		X						X				
Set up info table at sector conferences				X				X				X
Share Communique to extended network	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X
Administration												
Review and renew Project Manager contract												X
Review and renew staff contracts	X											
Renew accommodation contract									X			
Prepare yearly budget							X					
Financial review and analysis		X		X		X		X		X		X
Report to the Law Foundation of Ontario	X							X				X
LFO Application for 2024								X				

Acknowledgement Report

Annual report	Y/N/Pending or N/A
Mentioned the Foundation by name	Y
Showcased the Foundation's logo	Y
E-newsletter / electronic communications	
Linked or "Tagged" the Foundation	Y
Mentioned the Foundation by name	Y
Showcased the Foundation's logo	Y
Event or workshop	
Mentioned the Foundation by name	Y
Showcased the Foundation's logo	Y
Used the Foundation's signage	N
Verbally recognized the Foundation's contribution	Y
Media	
Notified Foundation prior to grant announcement	n/a
Foundation and grant acknowledged by name in news release and interviews	n/a
Foundation boilerplate included in news release (optional)	n/a
Printed material	
Mentioned the Foundation by name	Y
Showcased the Foundation's logo	Y
Published report	
Disclaimer added	
Showcased the Foundation's logo	Y
Showcased the Foundation's name	Y
Social media	
Foundation acknowledged by name ("tagged") at time grant was made	n/a
"Tagged" Foundation in posts when possible	n/a
Follow the Foundation on LinkedIn	n/a
Follow the Foundation on Twitter	Y
Like the Foundation on Facebook	Y
Website	
Foundation logo on website, with hyperlink to Foundation website	Y
Foundation logo on 'funders' page, with hyperlink to Foundation website	Y
Video	
Disclaimer added	n/a
Mentioned the Foundation by name	n/a
Showcased the Foundation's logo	n/a

Financial Report

Project income and expenditures to December 31, 2023 are below.

CONNECTING OTTAWA - GENERAL FUND			
FOR THE YEAR ENDED		DECEMBER 31, 2023	
		Budget	Actuals
REVENUE			
Law Foundation of Ontario	Received During Year		264,363.00
	Holdback Receivable		29,375.00
	Total LFO	293,738	293,738.00
	Other Income	-	-
	Total Revenue	293,738	293,738.00
EXPENSES			
Website Hosting, Management and Administration			
	Translation		-
	Website Hosting, Management and Administration	5,000	5,252.88
			-
		5,000	5,252.88
Education Sessions on New Areas of Law			
	Training and Meeting Expenses	1,250	1,029.90
	Equipment Purchases	750	850.00
			-
		2,000	1,879.90
Legal Services/Social Services Collaboration			
	Accommodation	12,000	11,997.99
	Cloud/Mobile Services	2,000	1,925.42
	Equipment Purchases	1,250	1,361.82
	Materials and Supplies	750	767.34
	Meeting Costs	250	289.92
	Salaries and Benefits	195,500	196,575.96
	Training/Professional Development	1,500	1,322.10
	Translation/Interpretation	1,250	1,050.00
	Travel	1,200	639.25
	Sundry	-	-
		215,700	215,929.80
Shared Lessons Learned			
	Annual Conference	3,000	2,294.92
	Materials and Supplies	488	401.50
	Travel	750	814.01
		4,238	3,510.43
Administration			
	Project Co-ordinator and Administration Costs	57,000	57,462.54
	Lead Agency Stipend	6,500	6,500.00
	Accounting and Audit Expenses	3,300	3,200.00
	Other	-	-
		66,800	67,162.54
	Total Expenses	293,738	293,735.55
EXCESS OF REVENUE OVER EXPENSES (EXPENSES OVER REVENUE)		0	2.45