

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

March 7, 2017

First of its kind Healing & Reconciliation “Access to Justice” Project Launched in Calgary

The Calgary Legal Guidance Society is launching the city’s first ever program to increase access to justice and legal and cultural supports for urban Indigenous Peoples who are experiencing poverty and are unable to qualify for Legal Aid to resolve their legal matter. An advisory group made up of Elders, Traditional Knowledge Keepers, local Lawyers, and Social Justice Advocates are joining together to guide the Sahwoo Mohkaak Tsi Ma Taas (Blackfoot for “Before Being Judged”) project and discuss the best approaches to meeting the justice related Calls to Action from Canada’s Truth & Reconciliation Commission, through practical legal and support services to Aboriginal Peoples.

Marina Giacomini, Executive Director of Calgary Legal Guidance, stated, “Access to justice is a basic right as well as a key means of defending other human rights. Equal access to justice is a serious problem in Canada, and has been historically for Indigenous Peoples. Justice plays an important role in combatting impunity, ending discrimination and poverty, and paving the way for peace and national reconciliation. Calgary Legal Guidance is honoured to play a role in helping Indigenous Peoples in Calgary and surrounding areas get the legal support they need for their legal need, and that it is offered in an environment of understanding, respect for cultural practices, traditions, and healing between Indigenous Peoples and a system that has historically participated in their abuse and disadvantage.”

Roy Bear Chief, a local expert and consultant on Indigenous issues says “It’s important to build trust with Indigenous people around justice, and it can only be maintained through honesty, respect, and equality.”

Calgary Legal Guidance is launching the program after noting that less than 7% of the people seeking its pro bono legal services (including services for those experiencing homelessness or fleeing domestic violence) identify as Indigenous. “We know that Indigenous Peoples are way over represented in the ‘sorrow systems’ like homeless shelters, domestic violence shelters, child welfare, jails, and prisons. We didn’t understand why they weren’t seeking our services for help more often, until we truly understood the intergenerational trauma and mistrust that Indigenous Peoples may have for those broader systems could also apply to those of us working within them, despite our best intentions”, Giacomini says.

The new program includes an Indigenous Liaison who helps build bridges to justice by first building relationships through outreach to local and nearby Indigenous individuals, groups and communities, as well as an Indigenous Articling Student, and access to Calgary Legal Guidance staff lawyers as well as over 200 local volunteer lawyers. The program will also include connections to traditional knowledge keepers and practices for healing, accountability and restoration, and reconciliation.

The program has been made possible by a generous grant from The Calgary Foundation and the Calgary and Area United Way. The Articling Student and lawyer services are supported through funding from the Alberta Law Foundation.

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