



# INFORMATION REPORT

<b>TO:</b>	Chair and Members Emergency & Community Services Committee
<b>COMMITTEE DATE:</b>	December 7, 2017
<b>SUBJECT/REPORT NO:</b>	Legal Aid Ontario: Cuts to Immigration and Refugee Law Services (CES17051) (City Wide) (Outstanding Business List Item)
<b>WARD(S) AFFECTED:</b>	City Wide
<b>PREPARED BY:</b>	John Ariyo 905-546-2424 ext. 1564
<b>SUBMITTED BY:</b>	Grace Mater Acting Director, Neighbourhood & Community Initiatives Division Community & Emergency Services Department
<b>SIGNATURE:</b>	

## Council Direction:

At its meeting on July 14, 2017, City Council received correspondence from the Regional Municipality of Waterloo to local members of the Provincial and Federal Parliament advocating for adequate funding to Legal Aid Ontario to avoid cuts to its immigration and refugee law services.

City Council directed staff to report back to the Emergency and Community Services Committee on the status and impacts this will have on the City of Hamilton.

## Information:

Legal Aid Ontario: Budget challenges for immigration and refugee law services

In May 2017, Legal Aid Ontario first announced its intention to cut immigration and refugee services program because of overwhelming increase in demand for services, stagnant program funding and budget challenges in other program areas. The effective date would have been July 1, 2017.

LAO indicated then that the immigration and refugee services program had historically cost approximately \$20 million annually. Between 2015 and 2016 the cost jumped to \$27 million, with a forecast of \$33.6 million in the 2017/2018 fiscal year. LAO wanted to bring the budget back to \$20 million annually, and estimated that 14,000 immigrants and refugees used its legal services in 2016.

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*OUR Vision: To be the best place to raise a child and age successfully.*

*OUR Mission: To provide high quality cost conscious public services that contribute to a healthy, safe and prosperous community, in a sustainable manner.*

*OUR Culture: Collective Ownership, Steadfast Integrity, Courageous Change, Sensational Service, Engaged Empowered Employees.*

The federal government provides about \$7 million to LAO's immigration and refugee legal aid services but according to the LAO, the amount hasn't changed since 2002. In addition to the federal funding, LAO also allocates between \$9 million and \$14 million annually to support the program.

Between May 23 and June 16, 2017, Legal Aid Ontario held a series of in-person and online public consultation on the proposed cuts. A meeting was held in the Hamilton area on May 25, 2017. As a result of overwhelming feedback received from various stakeholders, LAO has now abandoned the plan to cut services. Instead, LAO will maintain services at current levels and continue to talk with the government to find a permanent solution to the budget pressure.

**Current Status:**

Legal Aid Ontario (LAO) has now reversed its earlier decision of May 2017 to cut immigration and refugee law services. The reversal is due to public concern, outcry from various advocacy groups and feedback from their 2-month public consultation held between May and June 2017. LAO has further indicated it will maintain services at current level, and continue discussion with the government for a sustainable funding solution.

Access to justice is important for newcomers as many don't understand their rights and privileges under the Canadian law. Any reductions to the immigration and refugee legal aid services would certainly have a negative effect on ensuring social justice and safeguarding the rights of refugees and newcomers.

Staff will continue to engage with key community stakeholders, including the Hamilton Community Legal Clinic. Staff will further monitor the current status and advise Council if advocacy support is required or there are any other changes to the reversal status of this cut by Legal Aid Ontario.

**Appendices and Schedules Attached**

None