

**The Honourable
J. Michael MacDonald
Chief Justice**



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February 15, 2017

Friends,

Allow me to update you on our Free Legal Clinic currently offered in Halifax, and to share with you some exciting expansion plans.

A few years ago, with the support of the Canadian Bar Association – Nova Scotia Branch and the Nova Scotia Barristers' Society, I asked several Halifax law firms to consider providing lawyers to staff a free legal clinic at the Law Courts. They generously obliged. We then invited students from the Schulich School of Law at Dalhousie University to help with the administrative details and observe the lawyers in action.

As a result, self-represented litigants in the Halifax area who are going through the civil court process can make an appointment on most Thursdays to receive free legal advice and coaching. The project is now in its fourth year and has provided hundreds of hours of assistance. In 2016 alone, lawyers provided 137 one-hour sessions with self-represented litigants.

By all accounts, the project has been a great success. Surveys completed by those attending the clinic are overwhelmingly positive and the law students who have volunteered their time report that the opportunity to observe effective interactions between lawyers and the clinic's clients is invaluable. The clinic has exceeded my expectations and I thank the many volunteers who continue to support this worthwhile endeavour.

Efforts are now underway to create a similar program in Sydney. We have already secured a roster of generous lawyers in the community and we are considering the feasibility of engaging students from Cape Breton University who may consider law as a career path.

Even more exciting is the fact that we hope to expand not just geographically, but also the scope of the services we offer. At our meeting in January, senior lawyers on the Pro Bono Coordinating Committee suggested we consider offering free full representation for select clients. This would be an adjunct to the existing service.

To this end, we reviewed similar programs in British Columbia, Alberta and Ontario. Given the Halifax clinic's success to date and the ongoing generosity of students and the Bar, we concluded that this approach could work here in Nova Scotia.

As we envision it, rather than having self-represented litigants apply for representation, the clinic's volunteer lawyers would work with staff in the Executive Office of the Nova Scotia Judiciary to identify matters that would benefit from pro bono representation. Care would be taken to ensure the cases referred are of interest to the legal community and manageable. Once identified, an overview of the matter would be provided to a firm or firms that choose to join the roster. The firm or lawyer in question could vet the referral to determine if it is appropriate to proceed and to what extent. Arrangements for disbursement coverage would up to the firm and the client.

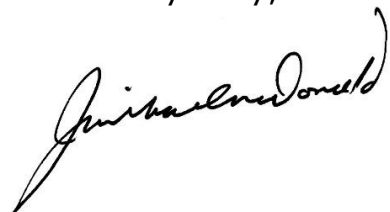
Representatives from other jurisdictions report that this program provides an excellent opportunity for associates to gain valuable litigation experience. One jurisdiction noted that it was not uncommon for lawyers of five years or more at the Bar to have little to no courtroom experience. The roster program is one initiative intended to address that issue.

We therefore ask you to kindly consider volunteering either at our new clinic or for our proposed new pro bono service. If you are interested in either, please contact Peg MacInnis, Executive Director of the Executive Office of the Nova Scotia Judiciary, via email at macinnml@courts.ns.ca or by writing to:

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We expect this expanded service to launch in September. In the meantime, I would encourage you to consider taking part in this opportunity to improve access to justice for all Nova Scotians.

Yours very truly,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "J. Michael MacDonald". The signature is written in a cursive style with a large, sweeping initial "J".

J. Michael MacDonald
Chief Justice of Nova Scotia