

Public Legal Education and Information Organizations in Canada: Their Unique Role and Contribution

Meaningful “access to justice” – such that all people in Canada can access the justice system and effectively participate in it – requires that those who are governed be aware of and understand the laws that apply to them. People in Canada gain an understanding of “the law” that applies to them through many channels: the media, schools, community agencies, information centres and libraries, government communications, friends and families, and a broad array of websites.

Canada is fortunate to have a relatively robust sector of independent organizations that specialize in building awareness and understanding of the law and related skills that, together, equip people to take meaningful action. Sole-purpose public legal education and information organizations, or PLEI organizations, play a pivotal role, delivering an impact that goes well beyond their size and budget.

Here are some of the unique features and roles of PLEI organizations in 2018:

- **PLEI organizations are set up, and have the skills and expertise, to be responsive to the needs of the public or groups of the public – a “user-centred” approach.** As smaller, community-based organizations (reporting to independent boards of directors), PLEI organizations are nimble and creative in the ways that they address those needs.
- **An ongoing commitment to monitoring and responding to needs means that PLEI organizations produce education and information in ways that are most effective in meeting the high-priority needs of the public,** such as the needs faced by newcomers to Canada, those who are elderly or disabled, and those of modest means who often can’t afford a lawyer.
- **The smaller size and singular mandate of PLEI organizations means that they are able to actively promote and lead collaborative initiatives that can be used and adapted by many partners.** PLEI organizations – appreciated for their independence – collaborate with numerous legal, government, academic, and community partners (as well as among themselves).
- **Because PLEI organizations wear multiple hats – as legal organizations, community-based organizations, and literacy organizations – PLEI organizations are uniquely positioned to serve as a bridge between the justice and community sectors.** In particular, PLEI organizations work closely with a range of community organizations and other “trusted intermediaries” – in other words, they “help the helpers”. Research shows that most people turn for help with their legal problems to people and places in their community that they trust – newcomer agencies, shelters, doctors, teachers, librarians, religious leaders, and newcomer agencies, to name a few.
- **As a bridge between the often impenetrable legal system and communities of people, PLEI organizations convey practical, useful information about how to navigate the justice system in the “real world”.** PLEI organizations offer grounded information about how “the law” works – for example, the pros and cons of peace bonds and restraining orders (ease of

obtaining, likelihood of enforcement). Their information reflects more than the laws set out in statute, regulations, and policies, and conveys essential practical guidance on how people interact with the law in their everyday lives.

- **PLEI organizations specialize in providing up-to-date information and education about the law that is easy for the intended users to understand.** The plain language expertise of PLEI organizations and their ability to design and disseminate programs and materials intended for specific users are reflected in the range of high-quality resources they provide.
- **Depending on a community's needs, the programs and resources may be provided in English, French and other languages in innovative formats disseminated through accessible channels.** For example, the Nova Scotia PLEI organization is innovating by developing accessible legal apps while, in New Brunswick, the PLEI organization offers workshops for people in the midst of family law problems. The Quebec PLEI organization is a leader in offering user-friendly online legal information. A PLEI organization in BC provides materials on human trafficking in several languages; one in Ontario offers resources in Arabic intended for newcomers.
- **Because of PLEI organizations' expertise and unique role – in particular, their broad and deep reach with on-the-ground community intermediaries – they are able to reach people facing legal problems with critical information early on, before their problem escalates.** Their expertise in providing law-related programs in educational settings, for example, equips youth and others with the knowledge, skills and confidence that help them take informed actions that prevent the emergence of legal problems later on.

How PLEI organizations expand the reach of access to justice partners

These organizations' key features – community responsiveness, plain language expertise, agility, and ability to innovate – enable them to boost the efforts and expand the reach of other organizations that are also working to advance access to justice. As described above, their work:

- Directly supports and helps to build the capacity of marginalized communities, including the diversity of newcomers to Canada, to understand the law
- Strengthens the ability of people in Canada who have lower or modest incomes – those who cannot access legal aid and cannot afford to pay for assistance from a trained legal professional – to participate in the justice system in a meaningful way
- Supports “legal literacy” and “legal capability”: a better educated and informed “public” who are equipped to prevent or minimize the severity of legal problems

In these ways, PLEI organizations contribute to advancing a fair justice system that is accessible to all Canadians. The impact of their work is enormous in proportion to the resources they receive.