

# Extending the Reach of Legal Aid to a Rural Area, What People Did and What they Said about the Mobile Rural Law Van


The Wellington County and North Halton  
Law Van in Summer and Winter

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# 1. THE SUMMER LAW VAN AND WINTER VENUES

The problem that initially gave rise to this project was that people from rural Wellington County had long been underserved among the clientele of the Legal Clinic of Guelph and Wellington County. Based on intake data, the majority of the clientele were from the City of Guelph. This is not an unusual problem for legal aid providers with a large rural population within the service catchment area. A mobile outreach service is not an uncommon response to service delivery problems of this sort. However, the data show that this one has worked well. It is important to share with others information about one approach that has worked well to address a service delivery problem that is common among service providers with large rural areas. This paper looks at the effectiveness and success of the law van and the fixed-location winter venues by asking three questions: What did people do in response to the summer van and the winter venues? What did they say about it? And, Is it a good model for meeting the needs of underserved populations?

The mobile summer law van began as a six-month pilot project in the summer of 2019. The project operated in rural Wellington County, an area spanning about 2,260 square kilometers with a population of approximately 96,500, located about 100 kilometers west of Toronto, Canada.<sup>1</sup> After a hiatus of one year while additional funding was secured, the project continued for three more years with a mobile summer van and fixed-location winter venues that assisted people between November and April when inclement Canadian winters made the outdoor service unfeasible. The initial six-month project was carried out by the Legal Clinic of Guelph and Wellington County. A second community legal clinic, Halton Community Legal Services, joined the three-year project, adding adjacent rural North Halton region to the initiative.

During the 2019 pilot project, 12 small communities in Wellington County were visited by the law van on a regular basis, making about 12 visits to each town. The schedule for the van was posted in community newspapers and on community Facebook pages. Posters were placed in coffee shops, gas bars, grocery stores, and similar places where people go in the course of their daily activities. The law van parked in a highly visible place in the town. A small marquee tent was erected beside the van, and a large sign offering free legal help was placed at the side of the street close to the location of the van. During the three-year project, the mobile summer van made regular visits to seven communities in Wellington County and North Halton. A few other communities in Wellington County were added occasionally, some involving half-day stops. In the winter, fixed location indoor venues operated in the same locations as the seven major summer communities. In Wellington County, other communities were sometimes added to the schedule of indoor locations.

The objective of the law van was to provide legal assistance to people in an underserved rural area. Although the objective was straightforward, the project was not set in motion to run its course unaltered. Many changes were made along the way, constantly searching for ways to improve the service and meet the objective more efficiently. The number of towns visited was smaller during 2021 to 2024 than in 2019. The communities in the three-year project were those that had the largest number of people requesting assistance in 2019, plus two communities in North Halton. The winter venues were held on the premises of various community organizations. The Wellington County venues changed over time in an effort to maximize the number of requests for assistance. The fixed-location venues were at two libraries in North Halton throughout the three-year period.

**A mobile outreach service is not an uncommon response to service delivery problems of this sort. However, the data show that this one has worked well.**

**The objective of the law van was to provide legal assistance to people in an underserved rural area.**

<sup>1</sup> Ab Currie, *Someone Out There Helping: Final Report of the Welcomes Law Van Project*, Canadian Forum on Civil Justice, Toronto, 2019

**Most of the people coming to the van said they had no previous contact with the clinics. People requested help with a wide variety of everyday legal problems.**

## 2. THE DATA

Quantitative data were collected as part of the holistic intake and service interview process at both the summer and winter locations. The data included the date and location of the service, up to three problems reported by people seeking assistance, the service provided, up to three referrals, whether the person lived in the community or elsewhere, and how the person learned about the summer or winter service. Unsolicited, unprompted comments about the service and how people learned about it were recorded in order to contribute qualitative depth to the quantitative data.

Telephone interviews with a small sample of twenty-two follow-up interviews were conducted from the population of 313 individuals who had been assisted at the 2023-2024 winter venues up until February 10, 2024. The sample is not large enough to be statistically representative of this very small population. The data collected in the survey are insightful and valuable but do not provide definitive results.

The project had a quality of ongoing learning through experience. For example, people requesting assistance were asked how they learned about the summer van or winter venue. Responses, such as “learned about it by just passing by”, “from social media”, or “from a community organization”, changed over time, giving hints about the changing connection between the “law van”<sup>2</sup> and the communities being served. Changes were made in response to how people responded to the service.

## 3. HOW PEOPLE RESPONDED TO THE VAN

The quantitative data provide a picture of what people did or how they responded to the outreach service. Over the period from 2019 to 2024, more than 2,700 people were assisted, adding to the number already being assisted at the regular community legal clinics.<sup>3</sup> Most of the people coming to the van said they had no previous contact with the clinics. People requested help with a wide variety of everyday legal problems.

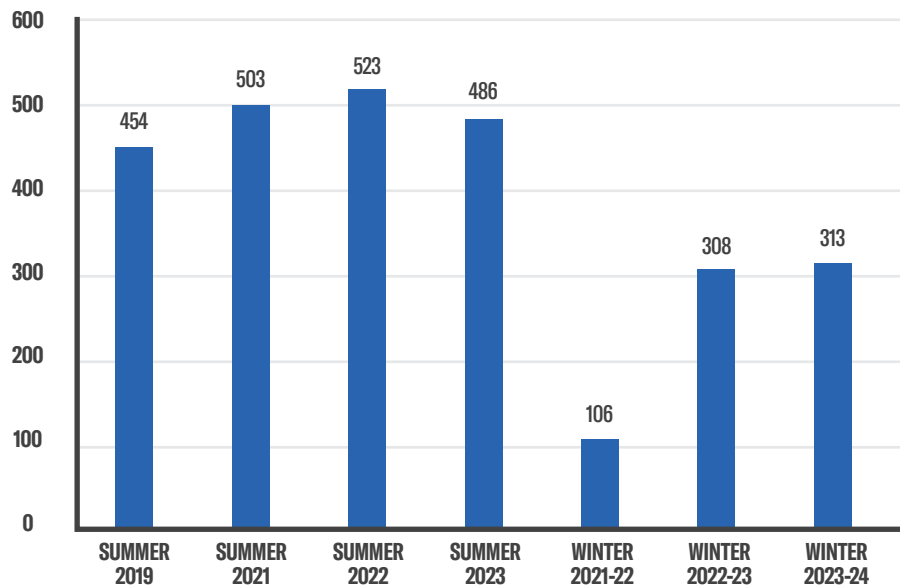
### 3.1 SERVING MORE PEOPLE

Figure I shows the number of people assisted during each summer and winter season, including the 2019 pilot study. The actual number of people served by the summer van was lower in 2023 than in previous years because that summer season ended two weeks early due to unseasonably cold temperatures in September. Adding the number of people served during the last two weeks of 2022, an estimated 526 people would have been served in a comparable time period.

<sup>2</sup> For convenience the terms “van” and “law van” will occasionally be substituted for “the mobile summer law van and fixed-location winter venues” in sentences where there will be no loss of specificity.

<sup>3</sup> About 4,500 people for both clinics combined.

FIGURE I: NUMBER OF PEOPLE ASSISTED AT THE SUMMER VAN AND WINTER VENUES



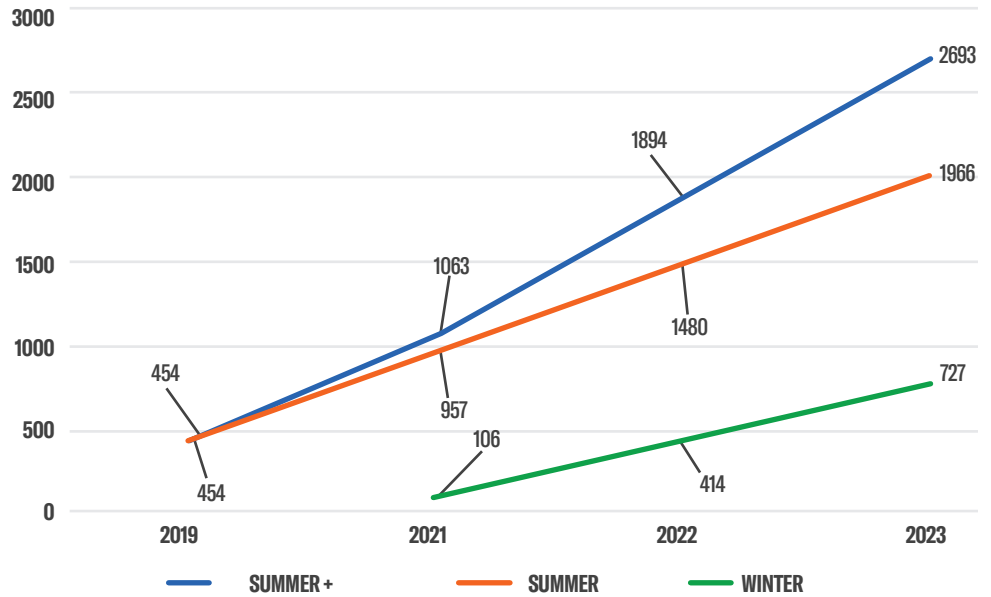
The number of people assisted during the second winter season of 2022–2023 is a dramatic increase over the first winter season in 2021–2022. The winter venues grew in importance compared with the iconic mobile law van after a slow start during the first winter season. The winter venues represent an important element in providing access to justice year-round. Overall, the law van project assists about 800 people per year. Assisting more people is an important objective of outreach projects.

The numbers of people assisted year by year are of interest, but the data are not strictly comparable. The time periods vary slightly from one year to the next for the winter and summer seasons. The number of towns and the specific towns visited varied from year to year, especially for the summer van. The number of visits to each town was not consistent. The schedules varied at times, with half-day visits replacing full-day visits. Focusing on the cumulative number of people assisted eliminates the effect of these minor seasonal and structural anomalies.

### 3.1.1 THE CUMULATIVE IMPACT

Figure II below shows the cumulative number of assists provided by the summer van and the winter venues. The number of people served is not an unduplicated count. Some individuals may be counted more than once. The numbers should be interpreted more precisely as counts of assists, rather than persons assisted. A few people said they were returning clients when asked how they learned about the service.

FIGURE II: CUMULATIVE NUMBER OF ASSISTS

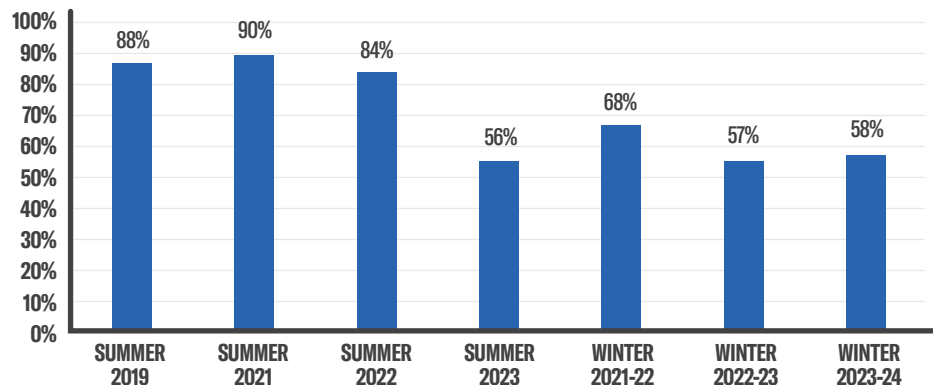


From this perspective, the combined summer and winter components of the law van have provided 2,693 assists to people in rural Wellington County and North Halton. Most of the assists were provided by the mobile summer van. However, the number of assists at the winter venues has increased rapidly from the first year.

**3.2 ASSISTING PEOPLE WHO MIGHT NOT OTHERWISE RECEIVE HELP**

People coming to the summer van and the winter venues may have been seeking authoritative advice for the first time. Figure III shows the percentage of people who, when asked if they had any previous contact with either community legal clinic, said they had not. Although there is no information about what other forms of assistance people may have used, this suggests that most people coming to the van and the winter venues may be obtaining authoritative assistance for the first time. The legal needs literature shows that most people take some action when they experience an everyday legal problem. This usually takes the form of asking advice from friends or relatives, searching the internet, or talking to the other party in a dispute. In terms of the order of advice sought, legal advice comes third or lower in sequences of actions

FIGURE III: PERCENTAGE OF PEOPLE HAVING NO PREVIOUS CONTACT WITH COMMUNITY CLINICS





reported by respondents.<sup>4</sup>

At the beginning, nearly 90% of people requesting assistance reported having no previous contact with either community clinic. It is not surprising that this percentage declined over time as the summer van and the winter venues have established a presence in the communities. About two-thirds of people coming to the van for assistance received a referral. People were sometimes referred to the community clinics if assistance could be better provided there. This occurred with increasing frequency as the number of people saying they had no previous contact with the clinics decreased. The project is evidently meeting a second important goal of outreach: assisting people who would otherwise not receive help.

A few people said they were referred to the summer van or winter venue by the community clinic, when asked about how they learned about the outreach service. It was reported by clinic staff that people who sometimes called the clinic to make an appointment would be told that they could visit the van or the winter venue if the distance from the individual's home to the outreach access point was shorter than to the central clinic. This integration between the clinics and the outreach access points reflects an emerging strength of the overall delivery systems of the two clinics.

### 3.3 HELP WITH ANY PROBLEM

People came to the summer law van and the winter venues requesting help with a wide variety of problems, unrestricted by coverage provisions. The majority of problems fell into a small number of categories representing commonly occurring everyday legal problems. It would be surprising if this were not the case. However, about a quarter of all people requesting assistance presented a variety of issues. Figure IV shows the problems for which people requested assistance in the last two seasons: the summer 2023 and winter 2023–2024 seasons. These data are similar to previous years.

**People came to the summer law van and the winter venues requesting help with a wide variety of problems, unrestricted by coverage provisions.**

FIGURE IV: PROBLEM TYPES FOR WHICH PEOPLE REQUESTED ASSISTANCE

Season	Problem Types	Cumulative Percent of All Problems
Summer 2023	A. Housing, Family Law, Wills & Power of Attorney (POA)	Group A = 55%
	B. Civil Litigation, Social Assistance, Criminal	Group A + B = 75%
	C. 15 other problem types, including employment, consumer, provincial offences, immigration, personal injury, health law, notary & oaths, identity theft	Group A + B + C = 100%
Winter 2023 - 2024	A. Housing, Family Law, Social Assistance	Group A = 55%
	B. Employment, Civil Litigation, Wills & POA	Group A + B = 75%
	C. 11 other problem types, including criminal, estate law, personal injury, worker's compensation, tax law, human rights, commercial leasing	Group A + B + C = 100%

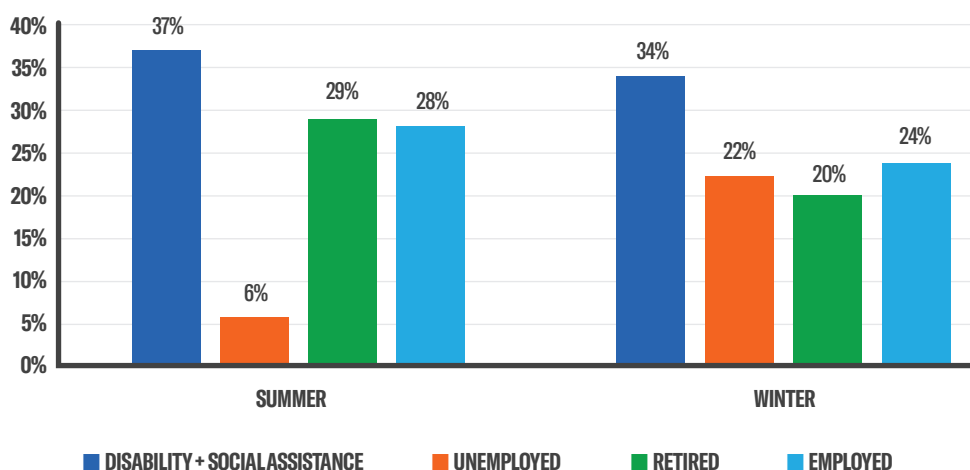
<sup>4</sup> Ab Currie, *Nudging the Paradigm Shift*, Canadian Forum on Civil Justice, Toronto, 2016, p.16

The number and variety of other problem types making up the remaining 25% of problems for which people request help indicate that not only are more people coming to the summer van and the winter venues and that most of them may be seeking out authoritative help for the first time, but also that people do not feel limited in terms of the kinds of problems for which they request help. This is a third feature of effective outreach and represents an expansion of access to justice compared with limits imposed by coverage provisions.<sup>5</sup>

## 4. WHO CAME FOR HELP?

A large percentage of people requesting assistance can be considered disadvantaged or were living on fixed incomes. Using data from the last two seasons, summer 2023 and winter 2023 – 2024, Figure V shows that the source of income of 43% of people requesting assistance at the mobile summer law van in 2023 was disability support payments or social assistance, or they were unemployed. The comparable figure representing disadvantaged people for winter 2023 – 2024 was 46%. Retired people made up 29% in summer 2023 and 20% in winter. This segment of the population seeking assistance is generally people on fixed incomes. Data on the amount of income was not collected. The remaining segment of the population, employed persons, including those employed full-time, self-employed and a small number of people employed part-time, made up 28% in the summer of 2023 and 24% of people coming to the indoor winter venues in 2023 – 2024.

FIGURE V: SOURCE OF INCOME OF PEOPLE REQUESTING ASSISTANCE



## 5. THE EXPERIENCE OF PEOPLE BEING HELPED<sup>6</sup>

### 5.1 OUTCOMES

A small follow-up survey was conducted on a pilot study basis to explore outcomes. Five respondents in the sample of 22 said that the problem had been resolved at the time of the interview.<sup>7</sup> Among the 17 for whom the problem was ongoing, 7 people said the situation was

<sup>5</sup> There may be other barriers. The respondent in one interview expressed the view that anonymity is an issue, and that people were reluctant to come to the summer law van due to the publicly visible nature of the service. Another respondent drawn from the winter venues mentioned that she was glad that the service was inside rather than outside.

<sup>6</sup> Because of the small numbers results of the survey are reported as raw numbers and in narrative form rather than as percentages.

<sup>7</sup> Respondents were not asked about their sense of fairness or satisfaction with the outcome.

better, 8 said it was about the same, and 2 said the situation had become worse.

Out of 14 people who indicated that the help they had received was a referral, 9 said that they had followed up on the referral. Four people said that the referral had been helpful, 3 said the problem was ongoing and they were not sure, and 2 said the referral had not been helpful.

## 5.2 FROM THE USER'S POINT OF VIEW

The everyday legal problems perspective presupposes an emphasis on quality-of-life outcomes as well as legal ones. Even though a key element of a problem may be a legal issue, the human experience of the problem is much broader. Experiencing a problem is not neatly partitioned into legal issues and human adversity. Looking at problems from the point of view of the people experiencing them has long been a foundation of the legal needs literature. Holistic and, in more recent terminology, people-centered approaches are integral aspects of viewing legal problems in their broader human context.

Most of the 22 people responded to the question about whether the assistance received had improved their lives. Thirteen respondents said the experience had improved their lives overall, 5 were unsure, and 4 said it had not.

When asked to describe the improvement, 11 people said that it reduced the stress they were feeling. Two people responded that it was very helpful and one remarked about the professional advice, seemingly indicating that the professional advice was reassuring. One person elaborated about how the assistance had alleviated stress with the following unsolicited remark.

*Even though the referral didn't work, I felt like a whole new person.*

Another person was reassured by the professionalism of the assistance:

*"You guys are specialized. You know the material. I go to community resource places and they are not knowledgeable about the law like you guys. They are kind and can listen but you need someone who knows. You guys also have empathy."*

Two respondents offered comments related to more concrete outcomes. The assistance can make a significant difference in people's lives:

*"It prevented an eviction."*

And:

*"Without this I might be eating out of a garbage can."*

As mentioned above, unsolicited comments were also recorded in connection with the question asked of all users about how they learned about the van or the winter location. The case note reported below also addresses quality of life outcomes:

A mother and daughter appeared at one of the 2023–2024 winter venues. They had learned about the service from a post on Facebook. The daughter had multiple problems: a long-term disability matter, an employment matter, and questions about Aboriginal Status applications. The mother had questions about wills, powers of attorney and, generally, wanted to better understand what happens when a loved one passes away. They received several referrals. In addition, an arrangement was made for the daughter to be contacted by the employment lawyer from the clinic. She was also directed to the Indigenous justice coordinator at Legal Aid Ontario.

At the end of the session, one of the two people said:

*"Do you know how much you've helped us? We've only been here a short amount of time."*

**Most of the 22 people [in the small, follow-up pilot study] said the assistance they received had improved their lives overall.**

**The assistance can make a significant difference in people's lives: "It prevented an eviction."**

**"Do you know how much you've helped us? We've only been here a short amount of time."**

“It eased my mind. I liked the fact that the service is in the community, close to home.”

## 6. INDIVIDUAL AND COMMUNITY

From the beginning of the 2019 pilot project, there were indications that there was something distinctive about the character of rural life affecting the way people connected with the mobile law van. During that summer, out of 586 people who visited the Law Van, 464 requested assistance. The remaining 122 people who came to the van, 21%, did not request assistance. They were curious about the presence of something new appearing in their community in such a highly visible manner. According to accounts by the people working at the van, people would introduce themselves with remarks like – I live up the street, I work around here, I live here – and came out of curiosity about something new in their place. This probably would not happen in a big city environment in which people would more likely take notice but pass by. These contacts seemed to have the character: I am from around here, what are you doing here?

These people may have had a problem with which they were helped at another time. Their initial approach to the van was apparently motivated by curiosity about the presence of the van in their community. The rural character of the community and how the van might fit within aspects of rural life were not explored systematically. However, during the remainder of the 2019 pilot study and the subsequent three-year implementation project, it seemed that the regular and dependable visits to the communities established a presence in those places for the mobile summer van and the winter venues. This may have had the effect of making the service a part of the communities being served in the perceptions of the people living there.

According to the rural community worker from 2021 onward who is intimately familiar with the area:

*Trust is big factor. In rural communities it [trust] is even more important and harder for ‘outside organizations’ to obtain. There is a sense in many rural communities that they are left out and forced to fend for themselves. The city gets all the resources, and small communities are a second thought. Historically, city-based organizations come into rural communities for short periods of time, seemingly to boost stats or to access funding. It almost feels like they are ‘using’ the rural community for their benefit rather than the benefit of the rural community. The mistrust deepens. The van, and our consistent presence in each community, gives us credibility. There is also a lack of service in rural areas. Rural communities have 1 or 2 organizations providing social services and they are often done through churches, or informal channels. So, there is a mistrust of formal organizations, especially legal. People are hesitant, and not accustomed to accessing different services. I think there is a different culture in rural communities that makes it necessary to be physically present in order for people to access your services.*

Respondents were asked in the follow-up survey whether they felt that the law van and winter venues are important parts of the community. All 22 people surveyed responded saying that the service is an important part of the community; 20 saying very important, 1 respondent saying that the service is somewhat important, and 1 extremely important. Respondents were also asked if they think of the law van and winter venues as being similar to other services in the community. All 22 respondents answered yes. Four unsolicited remarks made by respondents amplify the importance of the service as part of the community.

In the words of one respondent:

*“It eased my mind. I liked the fact that the service is in the community, close to home.”*

Three other people remarked:

*I like the fact that the service is in the community.*

*I can go somewhere where someone is supportive.*

*It is good to know the service is there when needed*

One lengthy response seems consistent with the views of the rural community worker with regard to the importance of rural place and also provides a user's perception of the service:

*Oh god, there is no support in [name of community] for us. You're coming in from Guelph, you are coming to our stomping ground. Coming to the little village [from] the big city. We know you are still connected to Guelph [larger services]. See, I can talk it out with you, confidentiality is so important. I've gained strength and confidence through you. I was afraid [about my] housing. Now I am able to speak confidently. Isolation – you are it, you are the gateway. When you guys are coming on Wednesday, you aren't from here, we can ask you anything. All about the confidentiality, no judgement, and support.*

The mobile summer van and the fixed-location winter venues fit with the rural community being served. That goodness-of-fit with rural life probably contributes to the success and the sustainability of this component of the delivery models of the Guelph and Halton clinics.

## 7. PROVIDING A HOLISTIC SERVICE

The research did not directly measure the holistic character of the service. Elements of holistic service were not defined and operationalized. However, the summer and winter service provided holistic intake and discussions of people's issues. As described by the rural community worker who was present at the summer van and winter venues all of the time along with different lawyers who attended the van at different times:

*People often come in thinking they have a simple question and expecting a ten-minute answer. However, they may end up talking for 25 minutes, occasionally up to 45 minutes, about problems being experienced.*

Multiple problems were identified through the holistic conversations. Up to three problems were recorded. People coming to the summer and winter van did not identify multiple problems as frequently as one might expect. During the 2023–24 winter season, 311 first or presenting problems were recorded. People identified 41 second problems and 6 reported third problems. In the summer 2023 season, people identified 484 presenting problems along with 68 second problems and 4 third problems. This compares with the 2013 national survey of everyday legal problems carried out by the Canadian Forum on Civil Justice in which 560 respondents reported having experienced 560 problems, 297 reported two problems, and 169 reported three problems.<sup>8</sup> The number of second problems in the winter 2023–24 data is 13.2% of first problems. Third problems are 14.6% of second problems. In the summer 2023 data second problems are 14.0% of first problems and third problems equal 5.9% of second problems. In comparison, using the 2013 national data, second problems equal 51.2% of first problems while third problems are 56.3% of second problems. These data indicate that second and third problems are reported far more frequently in the national legal needs survey than in the summer and winter law van data. It may be that people come to the van for assistance with one problem at the top of their mind. Even with holistic interviewing, they might wish to deal with the matter concerning them most at that time.

A good indication of the holistic nature of the service lies in referrals. About one third of people requesting assistance at the van received advice only. However, more than 70% received a referral along with advice or one or more referrals only. This indicates that attention is on multiple aspects of problems or non-legal issues. Figure VI shows that on the basis of winter 2023 – 2024 data, that about two-thirds of all assistance were referrals to sources of help other than advice at the venue.

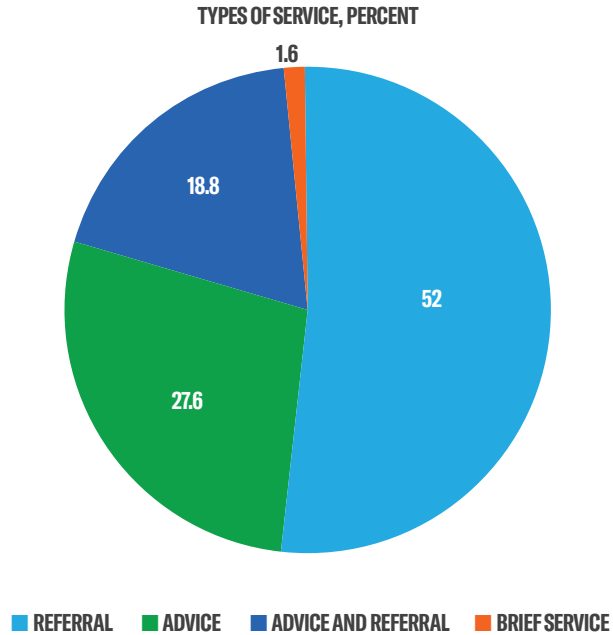
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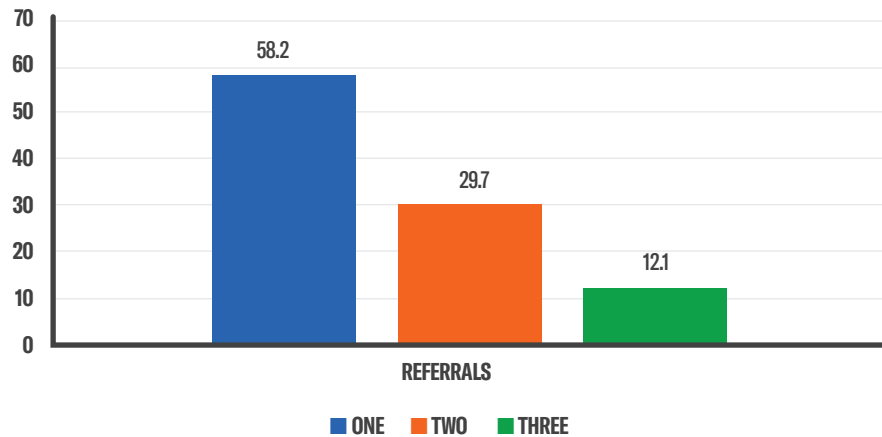
**Referrals to community organizations made up almost 30% of second referrals and were ranked first.**

FIGURE VI: TYPES OF SERVICE, WINTER 2023-2024



Turning to Figure VII, 239 referrals were recorded in winter 2023-2024. Almost 60% of these were single referrals, about thirty percent involved two referrals and 12% involved three referrals. The fact that more than 40% of referrals involved two or three referrals illustrates the holistic nature of the service.

FIGURE VII. NUMBER OF REFERRALS, WINTER 2023-2024



Another feature of referrals, indicating the holistic nature of the service, is the types of organizations to which referrals were made. Figure VIII shows that single referrals were most frequently made to sources of legal help. Referrals to community organizations that would provide assistance with the non-legal aspects of problems were present, although they ranked fifth when one referral was made. However, referrals to community organizations made up almost 30% of second referrals and were ranked first. Among third referrals, referrals to community organizations made up slightly less than 50% of all third referrals and were ranked first. Referrals to government agencies at the federal, provincial, and municipal/regional levels combined maintained a constant rank of third or fourth. These sources of help may have provided assistance with administrative rather than strictly legal issues.

FIGURE VIII: ORGANIZATIONS TO WHICH REFERRALS WERE MADE

	First Referral		Second Referral		Third Referral	
	Rank	Percent	Rank	Percent	Rank	Percent
PRO BONO	1	43.1%	2	25.5%	2	12.2%
LAO/FLIC	2	19.9%	5	5.7%	3	9.8%
GOVERNMENT	3	11.7%	4	13.2%	4	7.3%
CLINIC	4	11.6%	3	19.8%	4	7.3%
COMMUNITY	5	10.2%	1	29.3%	1	48.8%
MP/MPP	6	1.4%	--	--	6	2.4%
PRIVATE BAR	8	1.0%	6	4.7%	4	7.3%
OTHER	7	1.1%	7	1.8%	5	4.9%
	N = 216		N = 106		N = 41	

**The overall indication is that the project represents a good fit with certain aspects of the rural character of the communities being served.**

The holistic nature of the service is also illustrated by the qualitative data. Below is the summary of a case note illustrating the holistic service provided:

A person came to the van for help in the summer 2021, experiencing several income and housing related problems. She was provided with assistance with these issues. During the course of the discussion, it was discovered that she had worked in the UK for a period of time and thought that she might be entitled to a pension. However, she did not know how to contact the relevant authorities. The people at the van identified the pension authority in the UK and provided the individual with the contact information.

## 8. A MODEL FOR ADDRESSING UNMET NEED IN UNDERSERVED RURAL PLACES

This project was developed to meet the needs of a particular underserved area in southwestern Ontario. Does it represent a good model for addressing unmet need in roughly similar rural places? The answer would seem to be yes, although a few caveats might be offered. All innovations have unique features to one extent or another. The approach taken and the way success should be judged depend on the resources and capacity of the service provider and the characteristics of the population being served. The determination of the organization delivering the service to “make it work”, even to the extent of drawing on whatever reserves exist and chipping in their own resources, can be a determining factor in success. The success of an innovation is sometimes attributed to the special, extraordinary talents of the individuals involved, usually by parties who for different reasons may be inclined to offer only grudging acknowledgement of the success of the project.

Is this a good model for other rural places? The answer to that question is yes, but with a note of caution that only partial or fragmentary indications were observed throughout the course of the project. The overall indication is that the project represents a good fit with certain aspects of the rural character of the communities being served. Place is important to the people living in rural places. Feelings about place have a proprietary nature. This is illustrated by the people coming to the van apparently out of curiosity during the first summer of the project in 2019.

In the beginning, a major way in which information about the schedule was posted was on community Facebook pages and later also on the websites of the two legal clinics. During the course of the project, as people were asked how they learned about the van or the winter venue,

**The fate of successful innovations is often the Cinderella Effect.**

**The story should continue with an increase in operational funding or longer-term discretionary funding, allowing the service provider to continue building the ongoing delivery model by integrating the successful innovation.**

there were indications that communicating about the van was becoming part of the normal patterns of communication among people in the communities.

*My mother saw you on Facebook; she told me I should come and see you.*

Word-of-mouth was a frequent way in which people learned about the van. One person said:

*My mechanic said I should talk to you.*

Another person said in response to the question, “how did you learn about us?”:

*Oh, I don't know. The whole town is talking about you.*

As pointed out by the community worker who is intimately familiar with this particular area, people living in rural areas are keenly aware that services are not as available as in urban centers. Coming to the smaller place is appreciated by the people there and it is an important aspect of the service becoming embedded in the communities being served. What one respondent said (quoted more extensively above) about the value of the service applies as well to why the service works in the small town.

*Oh god, there is no support in [town] for us. You're coming in from Guelph, you are coming to our stomping ground. Coming to the little village [from] the big city. We know you are still connected to Guelph [larger services]....You are the gateway.*

It might be concluded that the summer and the winter venues became a presence in the communities being served. In winter and summer, the van made frequent visits to the communities. It became a reliable presence, week in and week out (or nearly so), year after year, earning a place in those rural places.

## **9. DISCUSSION**

The story of how the summer law van and the winter venues worked has been told in the body of this paper. It can be fairly concluded that the project worked well from the point of view of people with unmet needs and from the perspective of the two community legal clinics that developed the project. Successful innovations should not end when the discretionary or project funding comes to an end. The reason for carrying out the project in the first place is to find a better way of doing things. In the case of the law van, the clinics involved are now attempting to integrate a successful project into their respective delivery models. However, even at a lower level of intensity, this requires at least some additional resources. Without an increase in funding to support the service on an ongoing basis, the project schedule has been reduced to two days a week; visiting two communities in North Halton and four in northern Wellington County less frequently on a half-day basis. Early reports coming directly from individuals coming to the summer van and from community organizations reflect disappointment at the reduced service.

The fate of successful innovations is often the Cinderella Effect. After a brief period of being applauded at the ball, at the stroke of midnight the belle of the ball is sent back down to the scullery. Adding one more metaphor familiar in the field of access to justice, when the discretionary funding comes to an end, the fence at the top of the cliff is replaced by a more expensive ambulance at the bottom. The story should continue with an increase in operational funding or longer-term discretionary funding, allowing the service provider to continue building the ongoing delivery model by integrating the successful innovation.

There is no doubt that core funders of legal aid and donor organizations that provide time-limited discretionary project funding have deep commitments to expanding access to justice. The funding provided for innovation is extremely valuable for testing ideas and approaches that can then be adopted with appropriate modifications by other service providers, scaled up on



a system-wide basis, or integrated into the delivery model of the organization that developed it.

Change is often said to be constant. So also is innovation. The externally funded pilot project phase of an innovative approach is not the end but perhaps, as once famously said, just the end of the beginning. There is often ongoing or valuable additional work to do as lessons are learned from the initial innovation. For example, with the law van, there were days when the number of clients coming to the van was small. This may be the result of a number of factors that cannot easily be controlled. However, some additional effort could be put toward trying to even out or even increase client flows. The access points tended to be somewhat localized. Most people assisted largely came from the places where they requested help. There might be ways of reaching out to people in parts of the rural area apart from the limited number of access points served by the summer mobile van and the fixed-location winter venues. Greater outreach to community services and voluntary associations that already assist people would extend access to justice by building collaborative partnerships that might result in more referrals and requests for secondary legal consultations. Noting the ongoing issues that should be addressed points out that on-going operational funding would not necessarily (?)

A legal clinic cannot ordinarily make these improvements on its own. Clinics are usually working in a continuous state of limited funding. Even a modest addition to the service risks becoming overwhelmed and disappointing the increased number of people asking for assistance. A strategy of robbing Peter to pay Paul does not go far when resources are already limited. Noting the ongoing issues that remain to be addressed in the preceding paragraph indicates that ongoing operational funding would not necessarily cover the adoption into the delivery model of the same innovation developed in a pilot study. Issues discovered in the pilot phase require resolution, and this presents new ground in the access to justice landscape. Innovation builds on innovation, discovery upon discovery. Funding the adoption into the delivery model is not supporting something more-or-less static, something already accomplished. It can be funding an environment for experimentation and ongoing innovation.<sup>9</sup> Innovation funding and core funding could be approached in a more integrated and systematic way by all funders so that good ideas that would significantly advance access to justice do not evaporate in the post-project funding desert.

**Greater outreach to community services and voluntary associations that already assist people would extend access to justice by building collaborative partnerships that might result in more referrals and requests for secondary legal consultations.**

<sup>9</sup> Ab Currie, *Creating an Environment for Experiment and Innovation in Community Legal Clinics*, Canadian Forum on Civil Justice, Toronto, 2024