

Applying for Legal Aid Ontario Certificates

Tuesday, May 19, 2026 from 12:00 p.m. to 1:30 p.m. EST

Speakers:

Tania Princz-Lebel, Staff Lawyer, Connecting Ottawa

Land Acknowledgement



CLEO acknowledges that our office is located on the traditional territory of many nations, including the Mississaugas of the Credit, the Chippewa, the Haudenosaunee, and the Wendat. This land is now also home to many diverse First Nations, Inuit, and Métis Peoples. This area of Tkaronto, also known as Toronto, is covered by Treaty 13 signed by the Mississaugas of the Credit and the Williams Treaties signed by multiple Mississauga and Chippewa First Nations.

We acknowledge the ongoing impacts of colonization, anti-Indigenous racism, and white supremacy on which this city and our legal system are built. We are all Treaty people and we commit to working in solidarity towards truth and reconciliation.



Steps to Justice – free legal information

- stepstojustice.ca

Guided Pathways – help completing legal forms

- stepstojustice.ca/guided-pathways-home/

CLEO publications – free print resources

- cleo.on.ca

CLEO Connect – training for community workers

- cleoconnect.ca

What can you expect today?



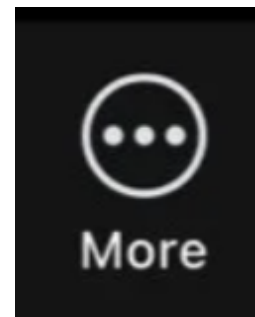
- 90 minutes (2 Q and A).
- The webinar may contain legal information. As a reminder, this is not legal advice. The information is current as of today's date, May 19, 2026.
- Links to the recording, slides, and handout will be sent by email to all registrants within a few days.
- ASL interpretation is available today. Subtitles (closed captioning) have also been enabled.



To use the Closed Captioning feature, click on the icon with two C's in your Zoom controls:



If you don't see this icon, try clicking on the More icon with three dots:





Tania Princz-Lebel, Staff Lawyer, Connecting Ottawa

LEGAL AID ONTARIO CERTIFICATES: *A practical guide for frontline workers*

May 20, 2026

Access to legal information & services for those with communication barriers

WHAT IS A LAO CERTIFICATE?

LEGAL REPRESENTATION OPTIONS IN ONTARIO

Options for legal representation

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graph TD; A[Options for legal representation] --> B[Privately retained representative]; A --> C[Self-representation]; A --> D[Legal clinic]; A --> E[Private legal representative retained via a LAO certificate];
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Privately retained representative

Self-representation

Legal clinic

Private legal representative retained via a LAO certificate

WHAT IS AN LAO CERTIFICATE?

A Legal Aid Ontario (LAO) Certificate is a voucher that allows an eligible person to hire a private lawyer, with LAO paying the lawyer to represent them on a specific legal issue.

This means:

- LAO pays the lawyer directly, not the client.
- The certificate covers only the specific legal issue listed on the certificate; it does not cover unrelated legal matters.
- The lawyer must be empaneled by LAO.
- The lawyer must agree to accept the certificate as payment in full and generally cannot charge additional legal fees for the same legal matter.



LAO CERTIFICATE ELIGIBILITY CRITERIA

ELIGIBILITY

To receive an LAO certificate, the applicant must:

1. Be financially eligible (income & assets)
2. Have an eligible legal problem



FINANCIAL ELIGIBILITY

When assessing financial eligibility, LAO considers the gross income and assets of the applicant and their family unit. The financial eligibility thresholds depend on family unit size.

Who is included in the “family unit”?:

- The applicant
- Their spouse or common law partner
- Their dependent children, including:
 - Children under 18
 - Individuals under 26 who are either living in the family home or in full-time school and financially dependent on the family



FINANCIAL ELIGIBILITY: Income

FAMILY <u>INCOME</u> CANNOT BE MORE THAN:			
Family size	Immigration, refugee, family, and mental health law	Criminal law	Where domestic violence is involved
Single boarder	\$12,330	\$45,440	N/A
1	\$18,795	\$45,440	\$22,720
2	\$32,131	\$45,440	\$32,131
3	\$39,352	\$45,440	\$39,352
4	\$45,289	\$45,440	\$45,440
5+	\$50,803	\$50,803	\$50,803

*A single boarder is someone who is 18+ years old, has no dependents (spouse, partner, children), and who rents a room in shared accommodation (shared kitchen and bathroom).

Income not included in the income assessment:

- Income earned by children aged 17 years or younger
- Canada Child Benefit
- Indigenous settlements and funding
- Student loans and grants, and scholarships

March 2025-2028 financial threshold

FINANCIAL ELIGIBILITY: Assets

FAMILY ASSETS CANNOT BE MORE THAN:		
Family size	Immigration, refugee, family, and mental health law	Criminal law
1	\$12,330	\$15,000
2	\$18,795	
3+	\$32,131	

March 2025-2028 financial threshold

Assets are items the applicant or their family own that have monetary value, such as:

- Applicable assets determined on a case-by-case basis
- LAO most concerned with significant cash savings, real estate, multiple vehicles, significant investments etc.
- LAO less concerned with basic household belongings, modest vehicles and tools needed for daily life and work, some RRSPs and locked-in savings etc.

If the applicant's assets exceed LAO limits, they may still qualify by agreeing to a contribution agreement.

1. Lump-sum payment: the applicant pays a set amount to LAO upfront.
2. Lien on property: LAO recovers legal costs from the eventual sale of an asset, such as a vehicle or property.

LEGAL PROBLEM ELIGIBILITY

LAO certificates may be available in the following areas of law:

- Immigration and Refugee Law
- Family Law
- Criminal Law
- Mental Health Law

**Certificates are not available for every type of case within these areas of law.*



LEGAL PROBLEM ELIGIBILITY: Immigration and Refugee Law

LAO certificates are generally available for refugee and humanitarian-based immigration matters. They are usually not available for economic immigration matters.

Legal issues covered by certificates	Legal issues NOT covered by certificates
Refugee claims applications	Work permits
Refugee appeals (Refugee Appeal Division and Federal Court) <i>(Some appeals may require a Merit assessment)</i>	Study permits
Pre-Removal Risk Assessments	Visitor visas
PR application on Humanitarian and Compassionate grounds (where the client is vulnerable or they are complex)	One Year Window of Opportunity applications
Danger opinions	Express entry/provincial nominee applications
Sponsorship appeals	Sponsorship applications

**Examples only – not a complete list*

LEGAL PROBLEM ELIGIBILITY: Family Law

LAO certificates are generally available for family law matters involving serious issues, such as child protection, decision-making or parenting time disputes, and cases involving family violence.

Legal issues covered by certificates	Legal issues NOT covered by certificates
Parenting disputes (decision-making and parenting time etc.)	Simple divorces (where there are no children, no support, no property issues involved)
Child support (establishing, varying, enforcing etc.)	Property division, especially where there are significant assets or equity
Family violence (restraining orders, emergency motions, safety-related proceedings etc.)	Independent legal advice for separation agreements
Child Protection matters (temporary care hearings, status reviews, trials etc.)	Matters considered suitable for duty counsel or summary advice instead of full representation

**Examples only – not a complete list*

LEGAL PROBLEM ELIGIBILITY: Criminal Law

LAO certificates are generally available for serious criminal charges, especially where jail time is a possible outcome.

Legal issues covered by certificates	Legal issues NOT covered by certificates
Representation for serious criminal charges	Traffic offences
Sentencing hearings	Regulatory offences unless jail is likely (quasi-criminal offences like environmental offences and workplace safety offenses)
Appeals (assessed based on merit)	Pardons/suspensions
Youth criminal justice cases	Court fines and tickets
Guilty pleas	Representation where jail is not likely and where the Crown is not seeking serious consequences
Complex matters (charter application, multi-day trials, expert evidence)	Bail (handled by duty counsel)

**Examples only – not a complete list*

LEGAL PROBLEM ELIGIBILITY: Mental Health Law

LAO certificates are generally available for mental health matters where a person's liberty or decision-making rights are at risk, such as involuntary hospitalization or treatment decisions.

Legal issues covered by certificates	Legal issues NOT covered by certificates
Consent and Capacity Board hearings (e.g. involuntary admission, capacity to consent for treatment)	Complaints about hospital staff or treatment
Hearings before the Ontario Review Board (ORB) (matters involving persons found not criminally responsible)	Non-legal mental health support services
Appeals of ORB decisions before the Court of Appeal of Ontario	Representation in disputes with ODSP, housing, social assistance for individuals with mental health conditions

**Examples only – not a complete list*

HOW TO APPLY FOR A LAO CERTIFICATE

APPLYING FOR A LAO CERTIFICATE

Apply for a LAO certificate by calling 1-800-668-8258

In limited circumstances, a person may apply online through LAO's portal. To apply online, the applicant must: 1) not own any property AND 2) either have no income or receive their income from Ontario Works or the Ontario Disability Support Program OR, 3) be a newcomer to Canada, be living in a shelter, or be in jail.

How long does it take to receive an LAO certificate?

- Processing times vary depending on the type and urgency of the case and whether all required information has been provided. (complex cases may take longer)
- Urgent matters (for example, removal or family violence situations) may sometimes be processed more quickly.

Supporting documents to demonstrate eligibility:

- Financial eligibility: pay stubs, bank statements, income tax returns, information about family property ownership.
- If merit assessment is required: legal documents pertaining to the legal matter.
- The documents can be uploaded through LAO's online portal, or sent by fax to 1-877-750-2009, or mailed to Legal Aid Ontario (730-20 Dundas Street West, Toronto, Ontario, M5G 2H1).

LAO CERTIFICATE – ACTIVE STATUS



Confirmation of Legal Aid Eligibility

Client Name: [REDACTED]

Client Number: [REDACTED]

Date: [REDACTED]

Application Number: [REDACTED]

Information for Clients

This confirms that you can choose a lawyer to represent you on certificate # [REDACTED] Legal Aid Ontario ("LAO") will pay your lawyer for:

- For representation regarding Family Law issues. Tariff maximum of 16 hours for all services prior to the first Rule 17 conference (Family Law Rules), Family Law Act
- Prep and attend, including negotiations with opposing counsel, at each conference under Rule 17 of the Family Law Rules and at each Legal Aid Settlement conference. Tariff maximum of 5 hours. Only enter additional days for 2nd and subseq conferences.
- Limited to proceedings in Ontario Court of Justice or Family Court. Solicitors opinion and Area Directors authorization to proceed in Superior Court are required.
- Additional tariff maximums may apply if there are other substantially contested issues. The Area Director must authorize you to proceed with any other substantially contested issues. The Area Director cannot authorize hours other than as provided for in the tariff. In exceptional cases- a discretionary increase may be requested from the Legal Accounts Officer.
- Authorization to proceed to trial or hearing is required from the Area Director. Additional tariff maximums will then be applicable for preparation and attendance at hearing.
- Acknowledgement of this certificate is restricted to a member of the roster authorized for family law and/or CYFSA
- Requests for travel authorization must be submitted within 30 days of the date you acknowledge the certificate. Travel authorization is granted in exceptional circumstances only e.g. lack of counsel to conduct the case in the jurisdiction of the trial; lack of counsel with sufficient expertise in the jurisdiction of the trial; the client is on a contributory certificate; there is a previous or existing solicitor/client relationship.
- No change of lawyer will be allowed other than as permitted by LAO, having regard to the factors set out in the Change of Lawyer Policy
- Solicitor to consider Legal Aid Settlement Conference and arrange same with the Area Office- or to advise why a Settlement Conference is not appropriate.

If you already have a lawyer

Give LAO the name of your lawyer. LAO will send the certificate directly to your lawyer.

When does an LAO certificate become active?

- When the applicant receives both their Client Number (CLT#) and their Certificate Number (CE#).
- A lawyer can then accept and acknowledge the certificate under their name.

Example of a LAO certificate

FINDING A LAWYER

With an LAO certificate, a client may retain a private lawyer who:

1. Is empaneled by LAO; **AND**
2. Agrees to represent the client; **AND**
3. Accepts the certificate as payment in full



Finding a lawyer who accepts LAO certificates can be challenging, particularly for complex matters. Some helpful resources include:

- LAO’s “Find a Lawyer or Paralegal” search tool: <https://www.legalaid.on.ca/lawyers/>
- The Law Society of Ontario’s Law Society Referral Service: <https://lsrs.lso.ca/lsrs/redefineLocale.action?currentLang=en>
- Referrals from family, friends, colleagues, and legal professionals
- Reach out to specialized legal associations and organizations (for example, the Canadian Hispanic Bar Association, Ukrainian Canadian Bar Association, Federation of Asian Canadian Lawyers, the Canadian Association of Refugee Lawyers, Family Lawyers Association).

For more information, please review Connecting Ottawa’s information sheet on “Finding a lawyer”: <https://connectingottawa.com/wp-content/uploads/2025/06/Info-Sheet-How-to-Find-a-Legal-Representative-June-2025.pdf>

HOW LAO CERTIFICATE COVERAGE WORKS

WHAT ARE THE LIMITS OF A LAO CERTIFICATE?

Hourly/time limits:

Some LAO certificates authorize only a certain number of lawyer hours. Others cover the entire legal matter without a fixed hour limit.

Scope:

A LAO certificate only covers the legal issues it was issued to cover.

Costs/disbursements:

LAO pays the lawyer's fees and may cover some additional costs and disbursements.

Activity:

Certificates may become inactive if the authorized hours are exhausted, the LAO certificate expires, is never activate, etc.



HOURLY/TIME LIMITS

How hourly limits work in practice:

- Some LAO certificates authorize a certain number of lawyer hours to prepare for a legal matter, including all preparation, communication, and legal work on the case (immigration/refugee, family, and mental health law).
 - Hearing attendance time is often billed separately from preparation time.
- Other LAO certificates pay a set amount for a specific services (most criminal law matters).
- Lawyers generally must keep detailed time records (“dockets”) for certificate work.
- Different legal matters receive different amounts of coverage.
- Lawyers can request extra hours from LAO, but there is no guarantee they will be granted.



HOURLY/COST LIMITS – Immigration and Refugee Law

IMMIGRATION AND REFUGEE LAW	
Refugee Claims	
Basis of Claim (BOC) form and IRCC refugee portal	9 hours
Representation before the Refugee Protection Division (RPD)	6 hours (plus attendance in hearing)
Representation before the Refugee Appeal Division	16 hours
Other	
Application for Permanent Residence on Humanitarian and Compassionate grounds	16 hours
Pre-Removal Risk Assessment	10 hours
Appeal of a negative decision on a sponsorship application	16 hours

**Examples only – not a complete list*

HOURLY/COST LIMITS – Family Law

FAMILY LAW	
Parenting/decision making disputes	
Basic allotment	16 hours
Restraining order	4 hours
Child protection matters	
Temporary custody hearing	6 hours (plus attendance in court)
Extended society care/crown wardship	45 hours

**Examples only – not a complete list*

HOURLY/COST LIMITS – Criminal Law

CRIMINAL LAW	
Judicial pre-trial conference	\$386
Guilty pleas to all charges (including sentencing) for a indictable offense	\$1727
Trials	Paid hourly
Preparation of a Gladue report	\$580

**Examples only – not a complete list*

HOURLY/COST LIMITS – Mental Health Law

MENTAL HEALTH LAW	
Consent and Capacity Board Hearing <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Preparation for hearing• Preparation for each subsequent day of hearing	10 hours Additional 2 hours

**Examples only – not a complete list*

FEES AND DISBURSEMENTS

Certificates *may* cover:

- Interpreters
- Translators
- Mediation
- Medical records
- Property appraisals
- CAS records and disclosure
- Courier fees
- Expert reports and assessments
- Psychiatric evaluations
- Etc.

Restrictions:

- Disbursements may be limited to a specific dollar amount or rate
- Some disbursements may require the use of an LAO-approved service provider
- Some disbursements require prior approval from LAO and may only be approved if LAO considers them necessary to the case (merit assessment)



FEES AND DISBURSEMENTS

Certificates will not cover:

- IRCC application or processing fees (for example, for an H&C application)
- Biometrics fees
- Passport fees
- Court or tribunal filing fees (unless specifically pre-approved)
- Travel costs (transportation, accommodations for the client)
- Lost wages or time off work
- Costs incurred before a certificate is issued

These fees and costs are the financial responsibility of the client.



SCOPE

Scope of a LAO certificate:

- A LAO certificate only covers the legal issues listed on the certificate.
- It cannot usually be used for unrelated legal matters.



For example:

- A certificate for a refugee claim cannot also be used for a Pre-Removal Risk Assessment (PRRA) or an H&C application.
- A family law certificate for a parenting issue may not cover related criminal matters, such as charges arising from family violence
- A criminal law certificate for one charge may not cover unrelated charges or appeals

WAYS A LAO CERTIFICATE CAN CEASE BEING ACTIVE



When Does an LAO Certificate Stop Being Active?

- The legal matter is completed
- The authorized hours are exhausted
- The certificate expires and is not extended (usually after 3 years)
- No lawyer accepts the certificate within 90 days
- The matter is inactive for too long
- The client is no longer eligible for LAO
- The certificate is cancelled or terminated by LAO

WHAT HAPPENS IF A LAO CERTIFICATE RUNS OUT OF HOURS?

Communication is key:

- The lawyer should explain the limits of the LAO certificate from the start to avoid misunderstandings and manage expectations.
- The lawyer should keep the client updated about remaining hours and whether additional hours may be needed.

For the client:

- The client should understand and respect that the lawyer's time is limited.
- Delays in responding to the lawyer or providing documents may use up valuable time.

Options if the hours run out:

- The lawyer may request additional hours from LAO, but approval is not guaranteed.
- If hours are running low, the lawyer may focus on urgent legal issues and limit meetings, calls, or emails.
- The lawyer generally cannot charge extra legal fees for the same certificate matter.
- If no additional hours are approved, the lawyer may stop representing the client after completing the essential authorized work. In some cases, the lawyer may need permission from the court, tribunal, or LAO before withdrawing from the case.
- The client may then continue self-represented or hire a private lawyer.

THE ROLE OF FRONTLINE WORKERS

HOW CAN FRONTLINE WORKERS HELP?

Before and during the LAO certificate application stage

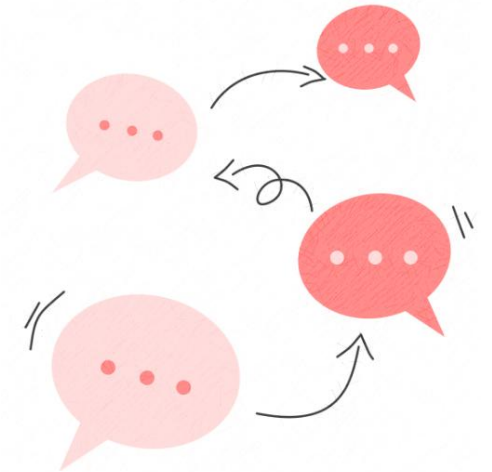
- Help identify legal problems that may require legal representation
- Provide information about what LAO certificates are and how they work
- Watch for signs that a client may be eligible for an LAO certificate
- Help clients apply for LAO, including calling LAO with them if helpful
- Help clients answer questions clearly and accurately
- Help gather supporting documents (for example, pay stubs, OW/ODSP proof, or bank statements)
- Encourage clients to safely record their CLT# and CE#
- Encourage honesty and full disclosure with LAO



HOW CAN FRONTLINE WORKERS HELP?

After approval:

- Help clients find lawyers who accept LAO certificates
- Help schedule and prepare for the first appointment with a lawyer
- Help reduce unnecessary use of certificate hours by helping clients organize documents and communicate efficiently with their lawyer.
- Support clear communication between the client and lawyer, especially where there are language, literacy, or accessibility barriers
- Help clients understand and keep track of deadlines
- Help gather evidence and other supporting documents.
- Help clients keep copies of important documents
- Help clients communicate changes in circumstances or contact information to the lawyer and LAO



For more tips, see Connecting Ottawa's "working with lawyers" information sheet series: <https://connectingottawa.com/about-us/connecting-ottawa-resources/>

LAO CONTACT INFORMATION AND RESOURCES

LAO contact information:

- Phone: 1-800-668-8258
- **LAO Bell Relay Service** for people who are deaf, hard of hearing, or have speech disabilities:

https://www.bell.ca/Accessibility_services/Bell_TTY_relay_service

- **LAO client portal:**

<https://client.legalaidonline.on.ca/psp/paprdc/CUSTOMER/CUST/?cmd=login&languageCd=ENG&>



LAO Resources:

- LAO “Our Services” website:
<https://www.legalaid.on.ca/our-services/>
- Find an **LAO lawyer** nearby:
<https://www.legalaid.on.ca/lawyers/>
- Find a **legal clinic** nearby:
<https://www.legalaid.on.ca/legal-clinics/>
- **Frequently asked questions:**
<https://www.legalaid.on.ca/faq/>

QUESTIONS



[Find your community legal clinic](#) or call 1-800-668-8258

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[Ontario Legal Information Centre](#) offers appointments with a lawyer, in English or French.

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