

Your client got a legal aid certificate. What now?

Thursday, June 11, 2026 from 12:30 p.m. to 2:00 p.m. EST

Speakers:

Laura Chaves Paz, Staff Lawyer, Connecting Ottawa

Liz Majic, Staff Lawyer, Connection Ottawa

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?



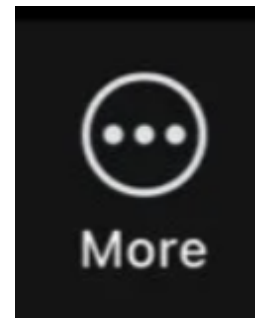
- 90 minutes (2 Q and A).
- The webinar may contain legal information. As a reminder, this is not legal advice. The information is current as of today's date, June 11, 2026.
- Links to the recording, slides, and handout will be sent by email to all registrants within a few days.
- ASL interpretation 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:





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Your client got a Legal Aid Ontario certificate. *What now?*

June 11, 2026

Access to legal information & services for those with communication barriers

AGENDA

1. What is a LAO certificate?
2. Finding and retaining a lawyer who accepts LAO certificates
3. Working with lawyers who accept LAO certificates
4. Communicating with lawyers who accept LAO certificates
5. Changing lawyers on a LAO certificate

WHAT IS A LEGAL AID ONTARIO (LAO) CERTIFICATE?

WHAT IS A LAO CERTIFICATE?

A LAO certificate is a voucher that allows you to hire a private lawyer at no cost for a specific legal issue.

To qualify for a LAO certificate, you must:

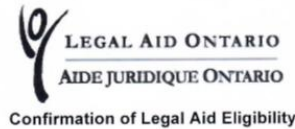
1. Meet LAO's financial eligibility requirements.
 - o LAO financial eligibility criteria: <https://www.legalaid.on.ca/will-legal-aid-pay-for-my-lawyer/>
2. Have a legal issue that is covered by LAO certificates.
3. Find a lawyer who is approved by LAO and is willing to represent you under the LAO certificate.

**LAO will then pay the lawyer directly for authorized work completed under the certificate.*



WHAT IS A LAO CERTIFICATE

LAO certificates can be extremely helpful – but they also have limits



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.

Example of a LAO certificate

For example:

- Not all legal problems are covered – they are only available for certain legal issues, including some immigration, refugee, family, criminal, and mental health law matters.
- Not all people are eligible for a LAO certificate – they must be financially eligible (income + assets).
- Not all lawyers accept LAO certificates.
- Certificates may only cover a limited number of hours.
- Clients may still need to pay for some costs or disbursements.

APPEALING A LAO CERTIFICATE APPLICATION REFUSAL

If you apply for a LAO certificate and are refused, you may challenge that decision by requesting a review of the decision.

If you applied for legal aid certificate and were refused, you can:

- Call LAO at 1-800-668-8258 *OR* submit a request through your LAO client portal *OR* mail the request to Legal Aid Ontario (20 Dundas Street West, Suite 730, Toronto, ON M5G 2C2) to request the review.
- The request must be submitted within 22 business days (52 if you are in the hospital or jail) of receiving the refusal decision.
- The review request must include:
 - Your name
 - Your client number (appears at the top of the refusal notice)
 - Your current contact information (mailing address, email, and phone number)
 - The reason for your review request

**More information from Steps to Justice: https://stepstojustice.ca/steps/abuse-and-family-violence/2-appeal-legal-aids-decision-or-re-apply-if-needed/?gad_source=1&gad_campaignid=334290071&gbraid=0AAAAADsVR0ka2CyMi3vpOJfapxIRgko8_&gclid=Cj0KCQjwlqTRBhCBARIsANrkrxiyQv2lpCfo-SAg_dDJ4XOJNW6JFaPAU2FQj6aKYt-LPCd62BIs9mQaApuqEALw_wcB*

HOW FRONTLINE WORKERS CAN HELP!

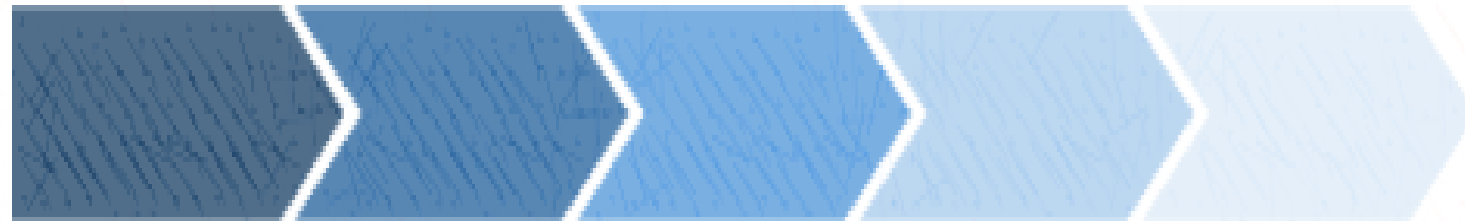
- **Explain what a LAO certificate is**, what it can be used for, and some of its important limitations, including that certificates only cover specific legal issues and may authorize a limited number of hours.
- Help clients **determine whether they may be** financially **eligible** and whether their legal issue qualifies for certificate coverage.
- **Help clients apply for a LAO certificate** by calling LAO with them, explaining questions, and helping gather information needed for the application (with the client's consent).
- **Help clients understand letters, emails, and requests** received from LAO, including any deadlines or additional information that may be required.
- Encourage clients to **keep copies of all LAO correspondence and important documents** in one place so they can be easily accessed later.
- **Support clients if a certificate application is denied** by helping them understand the decision, explore possible next steps, and identify other available legal resources.



FINDING AND RETAINING A LAWYER WHO ACCEPTS LAO CERTIFICATES

FINDING AND RETAINING A LAWYER

General progression towards retaining a lawyer (*some variation is normal*)



FINDING A LAWYER

Finding a lawyer who accepts LAO certificates can be difficult!

You need to find a lawyer who:

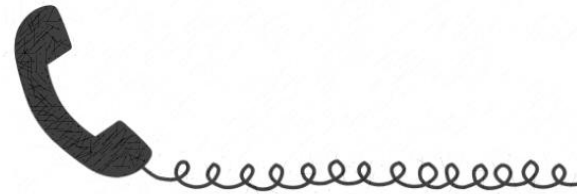
- Is empaneled by LAO.
- Practices in the right area of law.
- Is accepting new clients.
- Is located in the right geographic region, or provides virtual services
- Is a good fit for you!



FINDING A LAWYER

Places to look:

- [LAO “Find a Lawyer” directory](#)
- [Law Society Referral Service](#)
- Ask duty counsel in court for a referral list
- Specialized legal organizations and lawyer associations
- Community organizations and settlement agencies
- Referrals from friends, family, or other lawyers



Tips:

- Tell the lawyer right away that you have a LAO certificate.
- Contact several lawyers – you may not find one right away. Persistence and follow-up are often necessary.
- Provide deadlines and a clear summary of legal issue up front.
- Ask about interpretation or accessibility needs early.
- If applicable, mention who referred you to the lawyer.

THE FIRST MEETING, OR “CONSULTATION”

The first step towards retaining a lawyer usually includes an initial consultation. This is the first meeting between a lawyer and a potential client. It allows both the lawyer and the potential client to decide whether they want to work together.

What to expect during the initial consultation:

- Questions about the legal issue and relevant facts.
- Opportunity to ask questions about the lawyer's experience and how they would approach your case.
- An explanation of how the law applies to your case.
- Review of documents relevant to your case.
- Discussion of next steps, timelines, and expectations.
- Discussion of LAO certificate coverage and any limitations.

Things to remember:

- Consultation ≠ retained.
- Information shared during a consultation is confidential.
- If the lawyer knows the client has a LAO certificate, the consultation should be free.

THE FIRST MEETING, OR “CONSULTATION”

How to prepare for an initial consultation

- Bring all documents relevant to your case.
- Prepare a list of questions to ask the lawyer.
- Be prepared to explain your legal issues clearly, for example, by preparing a written summary and timeline of your legal issue.
- Bring along a notebook, a phone, or a computer, so you can write down what the lawyer tells you.
- Bring someone to interpret if the lawyer does not have an interpreter.
- Ask whether someone else will handle an important part of your case, such as appearing in court.



RETAINING A LAWYER

If both the client and the lawyer decide to move forward, the lawyer is "retained" (hired).

A lawyer is usually considered retained when:

- You have decided to hire the lawyer
- A conflict-of-interest check has been done.
- The lawyer has agreed to take your case.
- A retainer agreement has been signed.
- You have sent the lawyer your LAO Client Number (CLT #) and Certificate Number (CE #).



THE RETAINER AGREEMENT

A **retainer agreement** is a written agreement (a contract) between you and a lawyer that sets out the terms of the lawyer-client relationship.

A retainer agreement usually includes:

- The legal issue the lawyer will help with.
- What services the lawyer will and will not provide.
- How communication will take place.
- How fees, LAO coverage, and other costs will work.
- The responsibilities of both the lawyer and the client.
- Ways the lawyer-client relationship can end.



Before signing:

- Read the agreement carefully.
- Ask questions if anything is unclear.
- Keep a copy of the signed retainer agreement.

FINDING AND RETAINING A LAWYER: RED FLAGS

Red flags to watch out for (examples only):

- Anyone who guarantees success or promises a specific result.
- Anyone who pressures the client to sign a retainer agreement quickly, without the time to review it properly.
- Anyone who demands extra legal fees on top of the LAO certificate without clearly explaining why.
- Anyone who discourages the client from obtaining a second opinion.
- Anyone who refuses to answer questions clearly, or makes the client feel afraid to ask questions.
- Anyone who asks the client to sign blank documents or sign documents before reading them.
- Anyone who encourages dishonesty, exaggeration, or hiding information.
- Anyone who refuses to provide copies of documents.
- Anyone who has repeated complaints about communication or professionalism (Google reviews, disciplinary history found on the Law Society of Ontario directory, etc.).



HOW FRONTLINE WORKERS CAN HELP!

- **Help set realistic expectations** that finding a lawyer may take time, effort, follow-up, and persistence, especially for clients using LAO certificates.
- Help clients **research lawyers who accept LAO certificates**, practice in the appropriate area of law, and are accepting new clients.
- **Assist clients in contacting lawyers**, booking consultations, and arranging interpretation or accessibility accommodations where needed.
- **Help clients prepare a clear summary of their legal issue** and a chronological timeline of important events before contacting lawyers.
- **Help gather and organize key documents** so that clients can provide accurate information during consultations.
- **Help clients prepare questions to ask during consultations** about the lawyer's experience, approach to the case, communication practices, and LAO certificate coverage.
- **Encourage clients to carefully consider their choice of lawyer before retaining one.** In LAO certificate cases, changing lawyers later can be difficult, so it is important to find someone the client trusts and feels comfortable working with.

WORKING WITH LAWYERS WHO ACCEPT LAO CERTIFICATES

ROLES: THE LAWYER

Lawyers are responsible for:

- Reviewing your legal issue and providing legal advice, including explaining your options, risks, and possible outcomes.
- Preparing legal documents and helping you prepare for hearings, court appearances, and other legal proceedings.
- Reasonably accommodating your needs if you are a person with a disability.
- Keeping you informed about the progress of your case.
- Acting in your best interests.
- Keeping your information confidential.
- Treating you with dignity and respect.



Important reminder: lawyers cannot guarantee success or control how quickly courts, tribunals, or government agencies make decisions.

ROLES: THE CLIENT

Clients are responsible for:

- Providing accurate and complete information – both the negative and positive details.
- Responding to requests for documents or information.
- Keeping contact information up to date.
- Attending required appointments, hearings, or interviews.
- Making decisions about their case! Remember, you are in charge!



WHAT ARE THE LIMITS OF A LAWYER'S RESPONSIBILITY?

A lawyer's responsibilities are defined by the retainer agreement and, in LAO certificate cases, by the certificate itself.

This means:

- A lawyer is only responsible for the legal issues they have agreed to handle.
- Related legal issues may not be covered unless the lawyer has agreed to take them on.
- A lawyer can only act on information they know about, so it is important for clients to share all relevant information and concerns.

Examples:

- A lawyer retained for a refugee claim may not also be responsible for a work permit application.
- A family lawyer handling parenting issues is not responsible for representing the client on related criminal charges.
- A lawyer may help with the legal issue listed on the certificate but may not be able to assist with other immigration applications that are not covered by the certificate.

HOW FRONTLINE WORKERS CAN HELP!



- Help clients understand that they remain responsible for making important decisions about their case, even when they have a lawyer.
- *However*, do not let clients pressure you to make decision for them about their legal case!
- Encourage clients to provide complete and accurate information to their lawyer, including facts that may be embarrassing, uncomfortable, or harmful to their case.
- *Correspondingly*, reinforce that lawyers can only act on information they know about, so important facts, concerns, and updates should be shared as early as possible.
- Help clients understand requests made by the lawyer and the importance of responding within requested timelines.
- Help clients gather documents, respond to information requests, and prepare for meetings, hearings, interviews, or court appearances.
- Help clients prepare questions before meetings and take notes during or after discussions with their lawyer.

COMMON COMMUNICATION PROBLEMS BETWEEN LAWYERS AND CLIENTS, AND HOW TO AVOID THEM

DIFFERENT EXPECTATIONS ABOUT COMMUNICATION

Common situations:

- *A client expects regular updates, while the lawyer only contacts clients when there is new information.*
- *A client expects an immediate response to emails or phone calls.*
- *A client wants frequent meetings, while the lawyer is concerned about limited LAO certificate hours.*

Key takeaways:

- Discuss communication expectations and preferred communication methods early.
- Ask how often updates will be provided and what response times are reasonable.
- Lawyers may not contact clients regularly if there is no new information to share.
- Lawyers may take several days to respond if they are in court, meetings, hearings, or working on urgent deadlines.
- Sometimes there is simply no update from the court, tribunal, government agency, or another party.
- In LAO certificate cases, phone calls, meetings, emails, and document review may all use certificate hours.
- Communication concerns should be raised early, before frustration and misunderstandings build.

DIFFERENT VIEWS ON CASE STRATEGY

Common situations:

- *A client wants the lawyer to spend time on an issue that the lawyer believes is unlikely to affect the outcome of the case.*
- *A client wants to pursue every possible argument, while the lawyer recommends focusing on the strongest ones.*
- *A client disagrees with the lawyer's advice about the likelihood of success.*

Key takeaways:

- Clients bring lived experience and personal priorities; lawyers bring legal knowledge and experience.
- Lawyers should explain their reasoning and how it relates to the legal test that must be met.
- Clients should ask questions if they do not understand the lawyer's strategy or advice.
- Disagreement does not necessarily mean the lawyer is wrong or not listening to the client. Not every fact, document, or argument will be equally important from a legal perspective.
- In LAO certificate cases, lawyers may need to focus limited time and resources on the issues most likely to affect the outcome of the case.

COMMUNICATION ISSUES SPECIFIC TO LAO CERTIFICATES

Common situations:

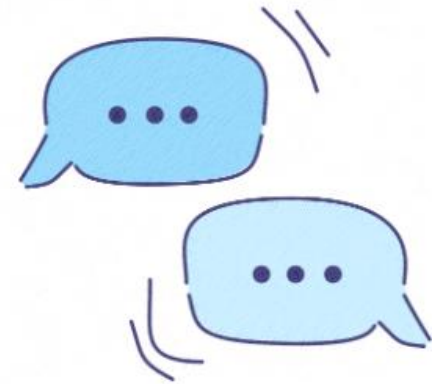
- *A client assumes their lawyer is handling all of their legal issues, but the certificate only covers one specific matter.*
- *A client wants weekly meetings or lengthy phone calls, while the lawyer is trying to preserve time for court preparation, negotiations, or drafting documents.*
- *A client assumes that because they have a certificate, the lawyer can continue working indefinitely.*

Key takeaways:

- LAO certificates cover specific legal issues and specific services. They do not provide unlimited legal assistance.
- LAO certificates often authorize a limited number of hours, and phone calls, meetings, emails, document review, and case preparation may all use certificate hours.
- Lawyers should explain the scope of the certificate and any hour limits from the beginning.
- Additional hours may sometimes be available, but they must be requested and approved by LAO.

HOW FRONTLINE WORKERS CAN HELP!

- Help clients understand that communication with their lawyer may be affected by the **limited hours authorized under the LAO certificate**. Phone calls, meetings, emails, document review, and case preparation may all use certificate hours.
- **Encourage clients to raise concerns early** rather than waiting until frustrations have built up.
- **Help clients recognize when expectations may be unrealistic**, while also helping them identify situations where communication concerns are legitimate.
- **Help clients distinguish between poor communication and normal delays** that are common in legal matters.
- **Encourage clients to ask questions** when they do not understand legal advice, strategy, terminology, or next steps rather than making assumptions.
- **Help clients understand that "no update" is often an update**. In many legal matters, long periods of waiting are normal, and a lack of communication does not necessarily mean that nothing is happening or that the lawyer is neglecting the case.



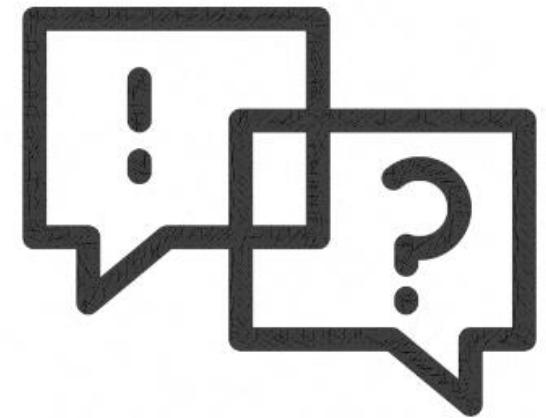
CHANGING LAWYERS ON A LAO CERTIFICATE

CHANGING LAWYERS ON A LAO CERTIFICATE

Once a lawyer has accepted an LAO certificate, LAO must approve any request to change lawyers. These requests are only granted in exceptional circumstances, especially if the lawyer has already begun work on the case.

Before requesting a change of lawyer, it is best to:

- Contact your lawyer first to discuss the issue and try to resolve any concerns directly → *In some cases, communication problems or misunderstandings can be resolved through an open discussion about expectations, concerns, and next steps.*
- Consider that changing lawyers will likely delay progress in your case.



WHEN WILL LAO APPROVE A CHANGE OF LAWYER REQUEST?

LAO considers a number of factors, including:

- Work completed and overall costs.
- Stage and complexity of the case.
- Reasons for the requested change.
- Irremediable breakdown of the lawyer-client relationship.
- Client's position and previous requests to change lawyers.
- Lawyer conduct and any prior concerns.
- Client's individual circumstances or vulnerabilities.
- Whether current lawyer supports change.

LAO will often approve requests where:

- The lawyer has closed, or will soon close, their practice.
- The lawyer is taking an extended leave of absence (for example, medical or parental leave) or has been disbarred.
- The lawyer is unable to continue representing the client.

BUILDING A STRONG CHANGE OF LAWYER REQUEST

Change of lawyer requests are assessed on a case-by-case basis. Simply preferring a different lawyer is usually not enough!

Helpful information may include:

- Specific examples of communication problems.
- Missed appointments or repeated failures to respond.
- Evidence that concerns were raised and attempts were made to resolve them.
- Documentation supporting the request, where available (emails, letters, text messages, appointment records, etc.).
- Information about any vulnerabilities or circumstances that make the current lawyer-client relationship unworkable.

LAO generally considers whether a reasonable client of modest means would change lawyers in the same circumstances.

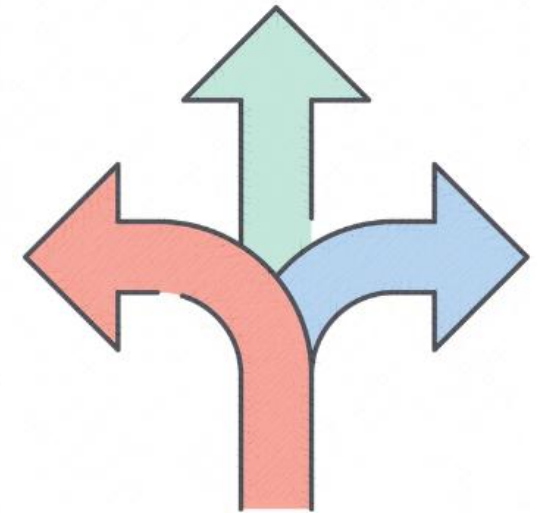
HOW TO REQUEST A CHANGE OF LAWYER

- **Step 1: Contact Legal Aid Ontario**
 - Telephone: 1-800-668-8258
- **Step 2: Explain the Reasons for the Request**
 - An LAO representative will gather information and complete the application process.
 - There is no separate "change of lawyer" form.
- **Step 3: LAO Reviews the Request**
 - LAO may request additional information or supporting documents before making a decision.
- **Step 4: Receive the Decision**
 - The decision will be provided through the Client Portal, by email, or by mail.
 - If the request is approved: A new Legal Aid certificate will be issued, and a new lawyer who accepts Legal Aid certificates will need to be retained.
 - Processing times vary, but decisions can take several weeks (sometimes up to six weeks).

ALTERNATIVE OPTIONS

Options if LAO does not approve the change of lawyer request

- **Request a review or appeal of the decision:** If there is additional information or evidence that was not previously provided, you may ask LAO to reconsider the decision. Requests for reconsideration must be made within 22 days from the date of the refusal notice, and a response typically takes 30 to 45 business days.
- **Hire a different lawyer privately:** A client can choose to end the LAO-funded relationship and retain a different lawyer at their own expense.
- **File a complaint with the Legal Aid Ontario:** *see next slide.*



MAKING A COMPLAINT

You can make a complaint to LAO against a LAO lawyer or staff member:

- For example, a complaint may be appropriate if:
 - You are asked to pay money in addition to what is covered by the LAO certificate.
 - There is a breach of privacy or confidentiality.
 - The lawyer engages in professional misconduct, such as discrimination, dishonesty, or other unethical conduct.
- A complaint can be made by a client, opposing party, lawyer, third party, or member of the public.
- How to make a complaint:
 - By phone: 1-866-874-9786
 - By email: complaints@lao.on.ca
 - By mail: Complaints Department, Legal Aid Ontario, 20 Dundas St. W., Suite 730, Toronto, ON M5G 2H1

Note: submitting a complaint does not necessarily affect a change of lawyer request.



HOW FRONTLINE WORKERS CAN HELP!

- Explain to your clients that they must first raise concerns with their lawyer **directly** before requesting a change, where it is safe and appropriate to do so.
- Explain that LAO **does not approve every change request** and that simply preferring a different lawyer is usually not enough.
- **Help clients document** communication problems, missed appointments, unanswered messages, or other concerns that may support a change-of-lawyer request.
- **Support clients in contacting LAO** to discuss the change-of-lawyer process.
- Remind clients that the goal is not to prove the lawyer is a "bad lawyer," but rather to explain why the lawyer-client relationship is no longer workable.
- **Help a client begin searching for alternative lawyers** who accept LAO certificates in case the request is approved.



RESOURCES:

- Connecting Ottawa's information sheet series on finding and working with lawyers (not LAO lawyers specifically):
 - [Info Sheet: How to Find a Legal Representative](#) (June 5, 2025) (Also available in [French](#) and [Arabic](#))
 - [Info Sheet: Communicating with Legal Representatives](#) (June 5, 2025) (Also available in [French](#) and [Arabic](#))
 - [Info Sheet: Legal Fees – How Do Lawyers and Paralegals Charge Clients?](#) (June 5, 2025) (Also available in [French](#) and [Arabic](#))
 - [Info Sheet: Hiring a Legal Representative](#) (June 5, 2025) (Also available in [French](#) and [Arabic](#))
 - [Info Sheet: Firing a Legal Representative](#) (June 5, 2025) (Also available in [French](#) and [Arabic](#))
- CLEO/Connecting Ottawa webinar on “Applying for a LAO Certificate”:
 - <https://cleoconnect.ca/resource/yourlegalrights/applying-for-a-legal-aid-ontario-certificate/>

QUESTIONS?



CONNECTING OTTAWA – CONTACT INFORMATION

- To visit Connecting Ottawa's website: <https://connectingottawa.com/>
- To email Connecting Ottawa: info@connectingottawa.com
- To request a consultation (*frontline workers in Ottawa only*): <https://connectingottawa.com/request-for-information-consultation/>
- To subscribe to Connecting Ottawa's newsletter: <https://connectingottawa.com/connecting-ottawa-communique/sign-up-for-communque>

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

Legal Aid Ontario: [How do I apply for Legal Aid?](#)

[Visit Pro Bono Ontario](#) or call 1-855-255-7256

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

Thank you for joining us!



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QUESTIONS or COMMENTS?

Contact info@cleoconnect.ca