



South Etobicoke Community Legal Services 2026 Annual Report

September 21, 2026

Introduction

This AGM falls in South Etobicoke Community Legal Services' (SECLS) 40th year of operations. When we look at how much our community has changed in the past 4 years, let alone 40, we're reminded of the need to adapt our legal clinic to evolving client needs. Herein you will find a snapshot of our work, our priorities, and some of what our future may hold.

Casework

SECLS individual client service offerings continue to align with community demand: rental and co-operative housing law constitutes approximately two-thirds of our caseload, followed by income maintenance, immigration law, employment law, and notary/affidavit services. Fortunately, we continue to share an immigration lawyer (**Katie Lynch**) and an employment lawyer (**Danny Barrett**) with our neighbouring clinics Rexdale Community Legal Clinic and West Toronto Community Legal Services. Our in-house staff lawyers each practice both housing law and social assistance law, while our management team adds additional capacity in housing law, disability appeal case management, and notary services.

Case examples

Housing

- A tenant living in social housing had her rent geared-to-income subsidy revoked (and rent increased) after the social housing provider lost several proof-of-income documents that she had submitted. The clinic helped the tenant gather all required documents again, persuaded the social housing provider to reinstate the subsidy, and then submitted a review request challenging the housing provider's use of the prior year's employment income when the tenant had lost her job and was now in receipt of Employment Insurance (EI) benefits. This further reduced the tenant's rent by approximately one third.
- An elderly tenant in seniors-focused social housing approached the clinic after the Sheriff had enforced an eviction order due to his breach of a repayment plan, rendering him homeless. The housing provider refused to reinstate the tenant or agree to a new repayment plan. The clinic obtained an expedited review hearing within two weeks, during which time a family member paid the entirety of the outstanding arrears – and the housing provider finally agreed to reinstate the tenancy.

- An elderly bedbound tenant and her caregiving adult daughter rented a home together in South Etobicoke for several decades, surviving on social assistance income by growing their own fruits and vegetables in a backyard garden and canning their produce before each winter. When their landlord passed away and left the house to their landlord's son, a campaign of repeated eviction attempts began. The clinic helped the tenants defeat several of these eviction applications until the new landlord finally convinced a Landlord and Tenant Board (LTB) member that the decades-old garden constituted "damage" to the yard, such that the tenants were spared eviction only if they would demolish the raised garden beds and re-sod the backyard at their own expense. The landlord then attempted to evict on the basis that the new grass had not grown long enough. The clinic had this eviction order set aside, and shortly after the tenants finally reached the top of a social housing waiting list in a neighbouring municipality.
- After unsuccessfully attempting to persuade a basement tenant to sign a new lease containing an illegal rent increase, a local landlord and her adult daughter attempted to evict the basement tenant for landlord's own use, alleging that the elderly landlord planned to move out of the main floor and down to the basement. The clinic represented the tenant at the eviction hearing and led evidence of the landlord's continuous campaign of terror against the tenant, which included shutting off the heat and opening the main floor windows before leaving the home for a week during the winter, and repeated illegal entries including one occasion in which police needed to restrain the landlord as she was screaming at the tenant. The LTB denied the eviction application, finding it was in bad faith. The landlord has subsequently listed the house for sale.
- After successfully defending a single mother against her corporate landlord's attempt to evict her due to what it called "damage" to an apartment the landlord had failed to maintain, the clinic assisted the same tenant when her landlord served an annual notice of rent increase, she paid the increased rent, and then one month later the landlord claimed it was cancelling the notice of rent increase and replacing it with notice of an Above-Guideline Increase (AGI). Private landlords cannot increase rent more than once every 12 months, and the time period that the LTB had authorized this landlord to seek an AGI had already expired. The tenant continued to pay her lawful rent for one year while the landlord sent harassing letters claiming she owed money. Finally, the clinic assisted the tenant in filing an application seeking a clear ruling from the LTB. Though an increase in the tenant's employment income caused her to no longer qualify financially for clinic representation under Legal Aid Ontario's (LAO) rules, the clinic continued to advise the tenant on how to represent herself. She obtained an order confirming no money was owed, and that

her landlord could not lawfully “cancel” a notice of rent increase and replace it with an AGI notice the next month.

- The legal clinic agreed to represent a tenant facing eviction for arrears of rent and persistent late payment of rent. On the morning the hearing, the tenant presented at the legal clinic with a bleeding injury and a written direction from a walk-in medical clinic that the tenant go to the emergency room, accompanied by his social worker. The staff lawyer sent the client to the emergency room and advised the LTB of the situation, seeking to adjourn the hearing. The LTB member refused and directed that the tenant telephone into the hearing and participate from the hospital emergency room. The staff lawyer argued that this was unreasonable and finally persuaded the LTB member to hear a different case while waiting for updates from the hospital. The staff lawyer proceeded to spend the day relaying to the LTB member updates that the tenant had been admitted to hospital, was on a gurney vomiting, connected to an IV drip for rehydration, then undergoing an echocardiogram, a CT scan, blood work, and other procedures. After each update, the LTB member refused to adjourn and continued to direct that the hearing should proceed with the tenant calling in from a hospital bed. News the tenant had been placed on a morphine drip finally persuaded the landlord to consent to an adjournment.
- The same week, another of our staff lawyers called into an LTB hearing for an application that a landlord had renovicted our client in bad faith (with a notice served shortly before Toronto’s new renoviction bylaw taking effect). The landlord sent a paralegal who advised, as the hearing was about to begin, that the landlord could not attend because his mother had passed away and he was attending a memorial ceremony. As the landlord had not given notice of this scheduling conflict in advance, the staff lawyer looked for an obituary online and found that the landlord’s mother had passed away one year earlier. Despite this information, the LTB member granted an adjournment without making further inquiries.

Social Assistance

- A client who had been deaf since birth faced an approximately \$40,000 overpayment charge from the Ontario Disability Support Program (ODSP) due to unreported EI and CERB income during the pandemic. Despite accurately reporting his employment income, the client had limited written English skills and clearly did not understand that reporting obligations included reporting other forms of government assistance: his ODSP benefits had been suspended 21 times over the preceding eight years, and at no time had ODSP met with the client to educate him on his reporting responsibilities. The clinic appealed the overpayment assessment to the Social Benefit Tribunal (SBT), which found that ODSP had failed to

accommodate the client's disability – it had never brought an American Sign Language (ASL) interpreter to any of its meetings with the client, instead relying on the client's friends and written communications exclusively. The SBT reduced the overpayment balance by half and severely limited collection, which will hopefully allow the client enough monthly ODSP income to secure stable housing.

- Another client appealed from her denial of ODSP benefits on a medical basis, where the client's primary condition is a learning disability. The SBT denied the appeal in part because the client's mother testified instead of the client herself, whose learning disability entails extreme shyness. The SBT also ignored a three-page narrative report prepared by the client's family doctor. The clinic filed a request for reconsideration with the SBT, which was denied when the SBT claimed that the narrative report was not current as of the date that ODSP benefits had been originally denied – missing explicit language in the report saying just that. Therefore, the clinic has appealed the decision to Divisional Court.

Immigration

- A refugee client requested assistance because his dependent son had been refused a visa to Canada in early 2025. The son was named on the permanent residence application of his father, our client. The clinic filed judicial review in the Federal Court, pointing out errors in the Officer's decision making. The Officer failed to accept the client's explanation for why the son could not obtain a police clearance from his home country, which continues to be mired in a civil military conflict that has lasted several decades. Earlier this year, the Department of Justice agreed to settle our case, and the file returned to IRCC for continued processing. The client's son obtained his visa and can now travel to Canada.
- The clinic assisted an out-of-status client, who has been in Canada for two decades, to file a temporary resident permit application. Two decades of living without status in Canada, unable to be removed to his country of origin, have caused significant physical and mental health issues. The clinic is awaiting the answer on the TRP application and in the meantime obtained federal health coverage for the client so he can access health services for his chronic pain and severe physical and mental challenges.

Employment

- The clinic's client worked as a seamstress for a tailor in Toronto and resigned after her employer refused her request to take several weeks caregiver leave (to travel to Ukraine and attend to her hospitalized father). The client had also been working 8 hours per day but was only being paid for 5, as the employer had claimed the other 3

hours per day were for training and therefore unpaid. We represented her in an *Employment Standards Act* claim with the Ministry of Labor alleging reprisal for the employer's refusal to permit her to take family caregiver leave, as well as significant unpaid wages. Following a Ministry investigation and fact-finding meeting between the parties, the employer's argument regarding unpaid training was rejected and he was found to owe the client significant unpaid wages as well as compensation for reprisal.

- Another client signed a fixed-term seasonal contract to provide snow-clearing services to an employer in Toronto. Approximately a week after starting the job, he was terminated without cause following a dispute with his manager. We wrote to the employer seeking compensation for the balance of the contract and damages arising from the manner of his dismissal. After the employer's counsel argued that he was an on-call employee with no guaranteed hours, we challenged that position through negotiations and eventually secured a favourable settlement for the client.

Responsiveness

Through 2025-26, eligible clients seeking assistance in one of our areas of practice received a call back from a staff lawyer within an average of 4-6 hours after they first contacted SECLS. In addition to our reception and intake services by telephone and office walk-ins (ordinarily handed by Administrative Assistant **Azita Dastvar**), this year we have also been pleased to launch our web-based intake form allowing prospective clients and their referring service providers to submit requests for legal assistance online at their convenience, day or night – one of many operational improvements led by Administrative Manager **Hardehn Punia**.

Our primary response to increased housing demand has been to engage partners wherever possible in opportunities to educate tenants on their rights and options before crises develop, and to support and nurture the growth of tenant unions and tenant associations who can build community capacity far beyond our individual casework services. As older adults are a rapidly growing segment of our community population, our staff lawyers have worked hard to expand their capacity to assist with government pensions, various federal benefits delivered through the income tax system, and their often-complex interactions. We have also identified a clear need for expanded services in consent and capacity law – particularly to ensure that clients who lack capacity to instruct us or understand our advice (within our areas of practice) have appropriate and legally-authorized substitute decision makers in place to assist them. This is an area we will continue to develop through research and training.

The clinic's task is not only to meet the needs of our client community, but also the needs of our highly specialized, hard-working staff. Our in-house lawyers and administrative support staff are represented by the Ontario Public Service Employees Union Local 5118. After a few short months of negotiations, the clinic is pleased to announce that OPSEU Local 5118 and SECLS have each ratified a new collective agreement for 2026-2029: one which expands employee health benefits, deepens our policy commitments to workplace safety and protection from harassment, and introduces a new compensation formula that is both highly competitive with other community legal clinics and ruggedized against an unpredictable funding climate.

Community

SECLS continues to enjoy deep and effective partnerships with other public and not-for-profit sector organizations, including the United Way of Greater Toronto, LAMP Community Health Centre, Polycultural Immigrant and Community Services, and the Arab Community Centre of Toronto. Through these partnerships we have collaborated on advocacy campaigns, client referrals, and have delivered targeted, co-hosted public legal education (PLE) workshops highlighting our core areas of poverty law practice and recent changes to legislation.

We have also been pleased to work together with groups of community members who have come together to address urgent legal problems they are facing, particularly in the area of low-income housing law. We have assisted the Federation of Metro Tenants Associations with city-wide tenant education work and the Toronto Tenants' Union with local multi-building organizing in central Etobicoke. We have supported individual tenant associations in their response to AGI applications and proposed demovictions. Finally, we have helped groups of tenants form new tenant associations from their living rooms and building lobbies; we currently represent over half of the tenants in one mid-sized apartment building who have filed a group application to the LTB resisting their landlord's attempts to require that they trade their building entry key fobs for a biometric access system.

Leadership

This summer, SECLS was proud to host two law student interns from the Bora Laskin Faculty of Law at Lakehead University, whose salaries were generously funded by the Law Foundation of Ontario. Despite Thunder Bay's distance from our clinic, both students have roots in Etobicoke and returned to apply some of the lessons they had learned at law school to assist members of their home community. Our clinic's former student learners

continue to find ways back to our clinic, the legal aid clinic system, and other social justice work: a past SECLS articling student recently became interim Executive Director of one of the province's largest legal clinics; last year's SECLS articling student returned to us this spring on a temporary contract, and a past SECLS receptionist and paralegal placement student returned this fall to provide part-time occasional administrative support.

SECLS Staff Lawyer **Epi Leibovich-Opar** recently became co-chair of the GTA Housing Study Group, a group representing local legal clinic lawyers, paralegals, and organizers practicing low-income housing law. Similarly, staff lawyer **Maxwell Trower** now co-chairs the Social Assistance Committee (SAC), a parallel group representing local clinic caseworkers practicing income maintenance law. Staff lawyer **Dariya Alton** co-lead the South Etobicoke Coordinated Local Access Services and Supports (SE-CLASS) project to a successful conclusion this year, developing a system for multiple service agencies to rapidly obtain informed client consent to provide complementary services to unhoused clients and clients in precarious housing. Three of our clinic staff continue to serve on the steering committee for the GTA & Specialty Clinic regional staff training conference. Executive Director **Benjamin Ries** represents the GTA region on several inter-clinic provincial committees dedicated to housing law and practice, as well as staff learning and training initiatives.

In a city of over a dozen community legal clinics, SECLS is both the smallest by staff count and one of the most powerful in terms of direct contributions to practice excellence, law reform initiatives, and mentorship within the community legal clinic system.

Organizational Strength

Approximately one year ago, our Board of Directors kicked off a policy review and revision cycle beginning with the adoption of our Values and Commitments charter, which sets broad and consistent expectations for what clinic staff and clinic clients can expect from each other. From there, our Board's policy committee – supported by clinic management and in consultation with our Employee-Employer Relations Committee – has redeveloped our Client Complaint Policy and has plans to proceed to further revise clinic policies addressing harassment and discrimination, anti-racism / anti-oppression / decolonization (ARAO-D), case selection criteria, and any other topics requiring more urgent attention.

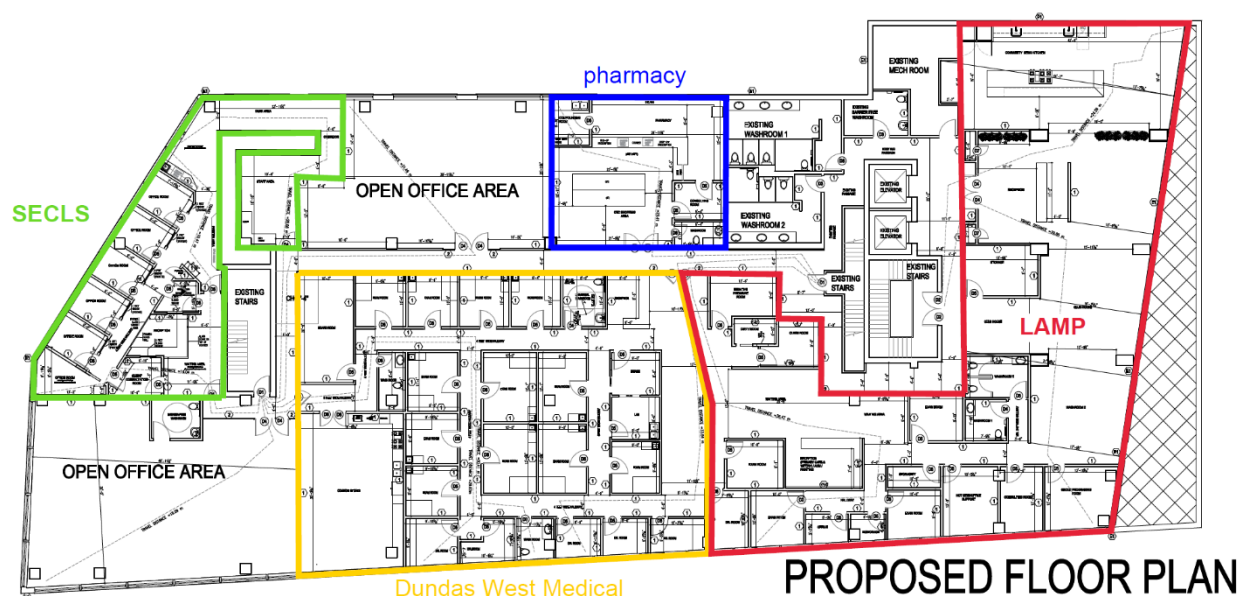
In support of these plans, our Board has adopted and recommended amendments to the clinic's bylaws that would allow the Board to meet quarterly, rather than monthly: creating time for the formation of other committees that could meet regularly during the intervening months. With two new Directors joining our volunteer Board this fall, the timing is perfect.

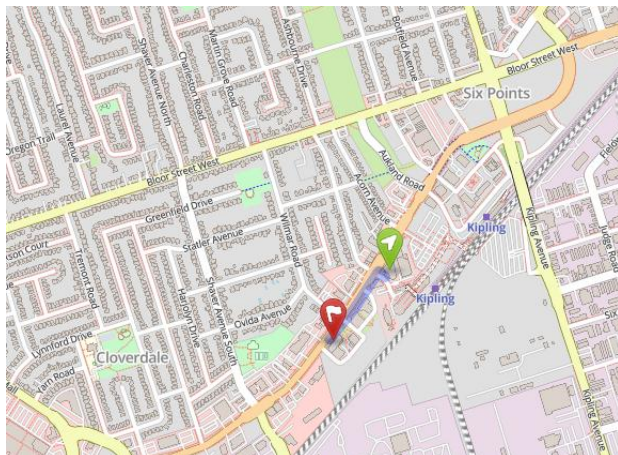
Potential Relocation

SECLS has rented its current offices at 5353 Dundas Street West since the year 2000. Our initial lease and first four lease extensions were all negotiated directly by LAO; then LAO policy changes left clinics to manage leasing and nearly all other expenses on their own, so we negotiated our fifth lease extension three years ago. Needless to say, our rent is going up faster than our funding; our office layout is not a great fit for the way that we currently operate, and LAO tells us that our rented square footage per full-time equivalent (FTE) staff ratio is one of the highest in the Greater Toronto Area.

Our current lease extension expires November 30, 2027. The clinic has been investigating options for relocation – looking to balance increasing costs associated with local development, against predominant client and staff use of transit to reach our offices (which makes remaining near a subway station attractive). The clinic has studied our client needs through feedback surveys and a 5-year analysis of our case records and has concluded that the Bloor-Dundas-Kipling area is remarkably central to the distribution of client addresses in South Etobicoke.

Since late last year, we have been working together with the West Toronto Ontario Health Team (WTOHT, of which SECLS is now a member organization) on the possibility of locating our offices at 5415 Dundas Street West, a new residential building approximately one block west of our current offices that contains commercial space on the ground floor and undeveloped, empty commercial space for lease on the second and third floors. WTOHT and LAMP are planning to lease and build out a new community health centre and community hub space on the far east end of the second floor; in the middle of the second floor the Dundas Medical Clinic and a community pharmacy plan to operate; and SECLS





would ideally lease and build out a new legal clinic space on the west side of the second floor.

This location would give us direct corridor access to LAMP's planned large event space and the Dundas Medical Clinic's planned boardroom space; it would allow us to build a meaningful health-justice partnership through hands-on referrals. A proposed floorplan would see us add an additional

staff office, two client meeting rooms, and an expanded two-seat reception desk, and dedicated student workspaces – all while substantially reducing our rented square footage, through an optimized layout that leverages our largely paperless practice. The agreement under consideration would stabilize the clinic's rental costs for the next decade.

Unfortunately, this leasing opportunity requires SECLS to move in a full eight months before our current lease expires. The rent overlap, plus additional moving expenses, will require one-time funding far beyond the clinic's resources (as with all legal clinics, LAO has not allowed us to retain and save up unspent funds). The clinic is submitting a special funding request to LAO in the hopes that this unique opportunity can be made possible.

