

Law Help Centres too valuable to lose: O'Connor

By AdvocateDaily.com Staff



Toronto civil litigator [Sarah O'Connor](#) fears a valuable cost-saving program for self-represented litigants may never return if allowed to fail due to a lack of funding.

According to a [CBC report](#), Pro Bono Ontario (PBO) is preparing to shut down its Law Help Centres in Toronto and Ottawa next month because it can no longer afford to pay support staff.

"It's really upsetting because I've seen the good that the program has done," O'Connor, principal of [O'Connor Richardson Professional Corporation](#), tells [AdvocateDaily.com](#).

"There's a chance that once it's gone, it might never come back."

The centres, which are staffed by lawyers volunteering their time, assist unrepresented parties attempting to navigate the civil court system without the help of legal counsel, often due to lack of funds.

"It's a fabulous service which offers benefits to more than just the people who are using it," says O'Connor, who has volunteered with the clinics almost since their inception in 2008. "Everyone in the court system will feel the impact if they shut down."

In fact, a U.S. consulting firm hired by PBO [found](#) the Law Help Centre program provided a \$10 return for every \$1 invested, generating savings of about \$5.76 million to the province for the 2015-2016 fiscal year alone.

"That's an incredible return," says O'Connor, adding those figures do not surprise her. She explains that even simple guidance can make a huge difference to self-represented litigants who would otherwise be left on their own.

O'Connor says she has witnessed the value of the program as a volunteer and while acting for a client in opposition to a self-rep who had taken advantage of PBO help.

"When people can drop in and get their documents checked, everything moves more smoothly," O'Connor says. "Poorly drafted pleadings can be detrimental to everyone involved."

According to the CBC, the provincial government does not contribute funding directly to the program but does provide PBO with rent-free courthouse space to operate.

However, PBO founder David Scott told the news outlet they would need \$500,000 to keep the 11-year-old program going beyond Dec. 14, when private-sector funding for support staff is set to run dry.

In Toronto, that would mean the loss of Law Help Centres at the Small Claims Court location at 47 Sheppard Ave. E., as well as at the Ontario Superior Court at 393 University Ave.

The CBC reports funding discussions with both Premier Doug Ford's administration and the previous Liberal government have not proven fruitful.

In a statement to the news outlet, Ontario Attorney General Caroline Mulroney said she recognized the "importance of pro bono legal services," but added the focus of her meetings with PBO were to encourage it "to work with its private sector partners ... to find solutions to its long-term funding issues."

O'Connor says she's surprised by the lack of funding from the province but says she would be happy with any solution that keeps the program going.

"I would have no issue if the Law Society put a special levy on our fees to fund it," she suggests. "The fee could be tiered to relieve the burden on new calls. I don't think it needs to be a large levy. The program is operating on a shoestring budget, and we all benefit."