

# Legal Guidance Society officially opens clinic

By **TONY CLARKE**  
Lethbridge Herald

Self-representation in court is not always a result of choice but rather necessity.

According to Alberta Minister of Justice Ron Stevens, the issue we are dealing with in justice is access to it.

"People have a very high need for dispute resolution and many times you need a lawyer to do that," said Stevens. "The system is such that lawyers are generally expensive and it is difficult for many people to afford."

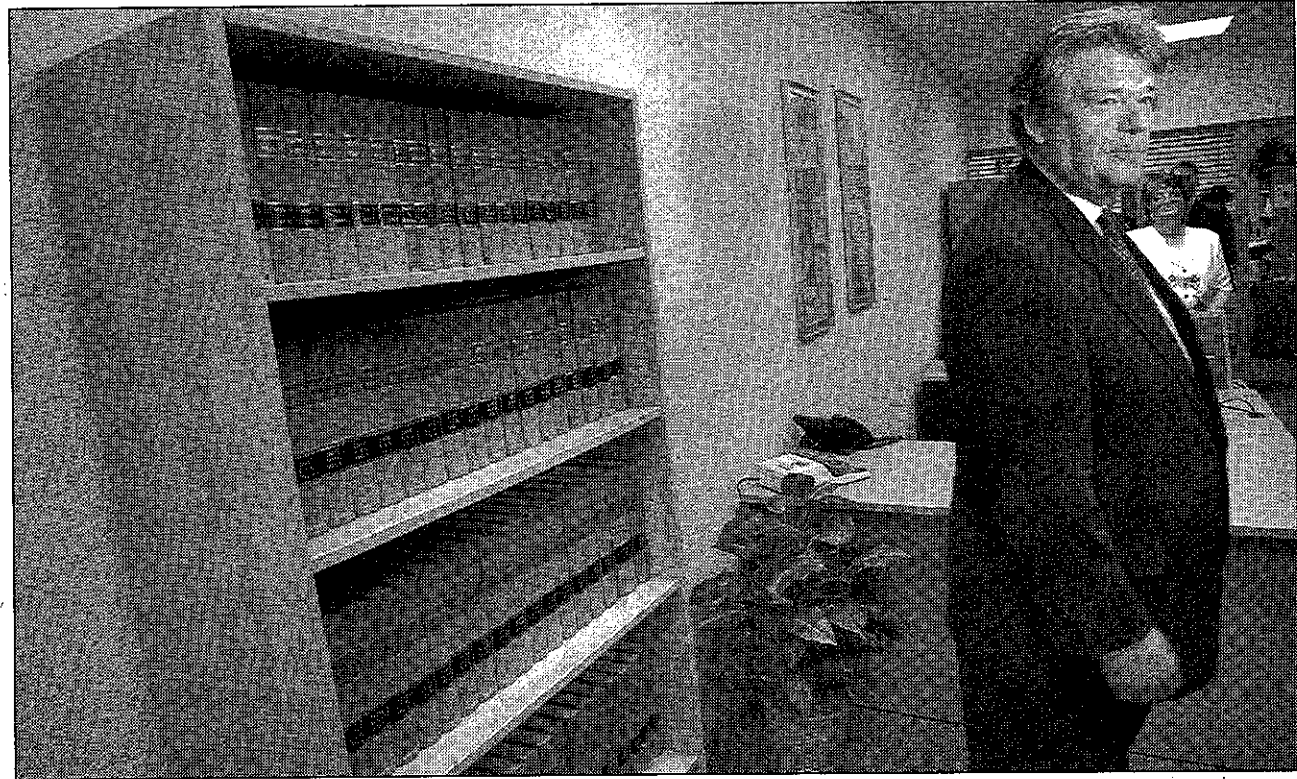
Stevens was in Lethbridge Friday for the grand opening of the Lethbridge Legal Guidance Society, a clinic providing free legal advice, information and education to Albertans not able to afford a lawyer.

Stevens said the clinic is an incredible community initiative offering legal assistance for people who wouldn't have it.

"One of the major issues we have in our courts is the increase of people representing themselves. This type of clinic will provide a lawyer or some legal advice that will assist them in representing themselves in court."

The Lethbridge Legal Guidance Society is made up of local lawyers, volunteering their time to meet with clients. Lawyers provide advice only and do not represent clients in court.

The clinic opened its doors to the public in February and to date



HERALD PHOTO BY DAVID ROSSITER

Minister of Justice Ron Stevens took part in Friday's opening ceremonies for a new pro-bono legal clinic at 423 5 St. S.

lawyers have met with approximately 90 clients — a number exceeding their expectations.

"We always knew that there was a need out there and I think the need is being met," said executive director Shelley Price.

"What happens is people fall between the gaps and they never do get to the court system and what we are doing is making sure people don't fall between the gaps."

Before people can take advantage of the free advice, Price said clients have to meet certain guidelines.

It is based on their income and the number of people in the household.

They then go through an intake and their eligibility is later determined.

Price noted lawyers meet with clients at clinics during the evening because they are volunteers and that is the only time around their work schedules.

Even though lawyers are volunteering and their advice is free, they can still be held liable, according to Doug Hudson, vice-chair of Lethbridge Legal Guidance Society.

He said as a result, the Law Society provides insurance lawyers have for the provision of advice at a pro-bono clinic.

"The Law Society has retained

insurance coverage and that widens the scope of lawyers who are able to participate at this clinic," said Hudson.

Even in a booming economy, Hudson said there are still those who can't afford legal advice.

He added the working poor, unless their problems are enormous, don't feel they can afford legal services.

"Sometimes they don't know what access to lawyers entails, they just need advice and they are afraid, so they don't come and ask. This gives them an opportunity to come in and get some advice without fear of getting a bill."