

Pro bono hits boomtown

If enthusiasm is all that is required, Lethbridge lawyer Rod Jerke's utopian hope that every needy Albertan could access a free lawyer would come true.

Idealism aside, Jerke realizes it is lobbying, co-ordination, and patience that will do more in the long run to spread the *pro bono* ethic.

To facilitate that, the Law Society of Alberta (LSA) helped form a new society called the Pro Bono Law Alberta network, as part of the LSA's 100th anniversary legacy project.

"The way we see it, it is the duty of lawyers — who are essentially the gatekeepers — to provide access to justice for all Albertans," Jerke says, adding that he is aware not all lawyers follow the creed.

"But free legal services is one piece in the access-to-justice pie," Jerke cautioned, noting that the new society's aim "is to compliment, not to replace, a properly funded legal aid system."

The LSA gave the new charity \$200,000 as seed stock and the Alberta Law Foundation handed over another \$200,000 to cover its first year of operation. Jerke will act as president.

He says the main efforts of the new society will be to pro-

mote *pro bono*, raise funds, and support providers of *pro bono* services by helping to co-ordinate all of the present and future efforts of those firms, lawyers, and organizations that provide their services with those that seek them.

Susan Billington, LSA's current policy and program counsel who has also been instrumental in formation of the new society, was seconded to serve as its acting executive director for about one year. She will be hiring additional staff to help out.

Alberta is the third province to have a provincewide *pro bono* organization.

Ontario and B.C. were first up to bat and Jerke says what those first two groups are doing is "extremely exciting."

For example, Ontario has specific programs to target needy areas. One is the unaccompanied minors' program for kids who arrive at Pearson airport in Toronto without any adult escort.

Those children need lawyers to help them through the immigration process, Jerke says, adding Pro Bono Law Ontario found a major law firm that would take on that specific work.

The Ontario *pro bono* group also worked with The Advocates' Society there and the courts to provide free lawyers for unrepresented litigants at the appeal court level.

In addition, Jerke says his counterparts in Ontario also reach into remote areas in the north to provide lawyers who communicate with clients through the internet or phone for free.

The Alberta society is also working with other legal aid clinics throughout the province to help them interact with needy clients in remote areas.

One of the unique problems in Alberta is that there aren't enough lawyers to meet demand. In Grand Prairie, located in the heart of an oil exploration area, lawyers can barely keep up with paying customers, let alone help those in need.

Despite that, there is a group there that wants to set up a legal aid clinic and will need the help of Pro Bono Law Alberta to get the initiative off the ground.

— BOB BEATY
beatyr1@telusplanet.net