

Speaking Notes
Jonathan Denis, MLA for Calgary Egmont
Pro Bono Law Alberta Annual General Meeting

Tuesday, June 24, 2008
Red Deer Lodge
Piper Creek Room
4311 – 49 Avenue
Red Deer, Alberta

Introduction

- Good evening and thank you for that kind introduction.
- On behalf of the Honourable Alison Redford, Minister of Justice and Attorney General, it is my pleasure to congratulate you on a successful year.
- I know Minister Redford would have loved to have been here tonight, and I am honoured be able to join you and bring you an update about the Legal Aid program and Law Information Centres.
- I'm also very pleased to congratulate tonight's award winners.
- Thank you, so very much, for your contributions to increasing access to justice for Albertans in central Alberta.

Access to Justice

- Access to justice is a fundamental part of Albertans' rights and freedoms; it is also an important component of how we judge the communities we live in.
- For these reasons, access to justice is a main focus of the Ministry of Justice, and a mission of Pro Bono Law Alberta.
- Your work has helped so many Albertans.
- As we all know, the legal system can be intimidating to those who are unsure how to navigate it.
- I recall when I was 20 years old an ran my first small claims trial. This would not have been possible without the assistance of who – a pro bono lawyer
- Through your expertise and generosity, you have ensured that Albertans of all income levels are able to seek legal representation, advice and a guiding hand.
- Thank you for your hard work and dedication and for taking a lead role in offering and coordinating pro-bono services throughout the province.

Legal Aid

- As access to justice is a priority of the Ministry of Justice. The department has moved forward with initiatives designed to assist lower-income Albertans in getting the legal assistance they need, including legal aid and the Law Information Centres.

- As you know, access to justice is a critical service provided by Legal Aid Alberta. This is made possible by cooperation with the Law Society of Alberta, as well as funding also provided by Alberta Justice.
- This year's legal aid budget is \$53.8 million, an increase of \$8.5 million from the previous year.
- In addition to our annual grant, Alberta Justice, along with the other Provinces and Territories, is asking the Federal Government to step up and provide more criminal legal aid funding and new civil legal aid funding.
- Through your services, and the legal aid program, we can ensure that Albertans are getting the assistance and advice they need.

Law Information Centres

- In terms of programming, Law Information Centres are another way Alberta Justice is helping to ensure access to justice.
- There is little doubt that Albertans who do not have a legal background often find the court system daunting.
- Since opening on April 2, 2007, the centres have assisted almost 34,000 people!
- The Law Information Centres in Red Deer, Edmonton and Grande Prairie have seen a wide variety of people come through their doors.
- They've helped clients deal with a breadth of issues, including landlord and tenant issues, collections, emergency protection orders, and family and divorce matters.
- So far, the centres have referred over 3,000 clients to other justice service providers, including the Alberta Law Line, Alberta Legal Aid and the Family Law Information Centre.
- An evaluation of the centres was conducted recently, and a report is expected later this year.
- The positive results coming from the Law Information Centres also heightens our excitement for the development of a centre in Calgary, which we are looking forward to this fall.
- While providing access to legal information, these centres are reducing frustration and the amount of time needed to deal with court cases involving self-represented litigants.

Conclusion

- Thank you again for inviting me to join you tonight.
- And thank you for your commitment to providing access to justice for Albertans who need a helping hand.
- During the last campaign, one of my opponents campaigned against me because I was a lawyer.

- I didn't fully realize until this campaign that many people have a negative impression of our profession.
- It is people like you that see beyond billable hours and the bottom line,
- who donate their time to those who need legal services but cannot afford them on their own,
- who are improving the public's perception of lawyers – and I can't tell you how proud I am to speak to you today
- Again, I offer my sincere congratulations on an excellent year, and my best wishes for a successful 2008.
- Enjoy the rest of the evening.

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