

# Annual Report

**Pivoting *Pro Bono***  
**2020 -2021**



**Pro Bono  
Law Alberta**

Paths to possibilities

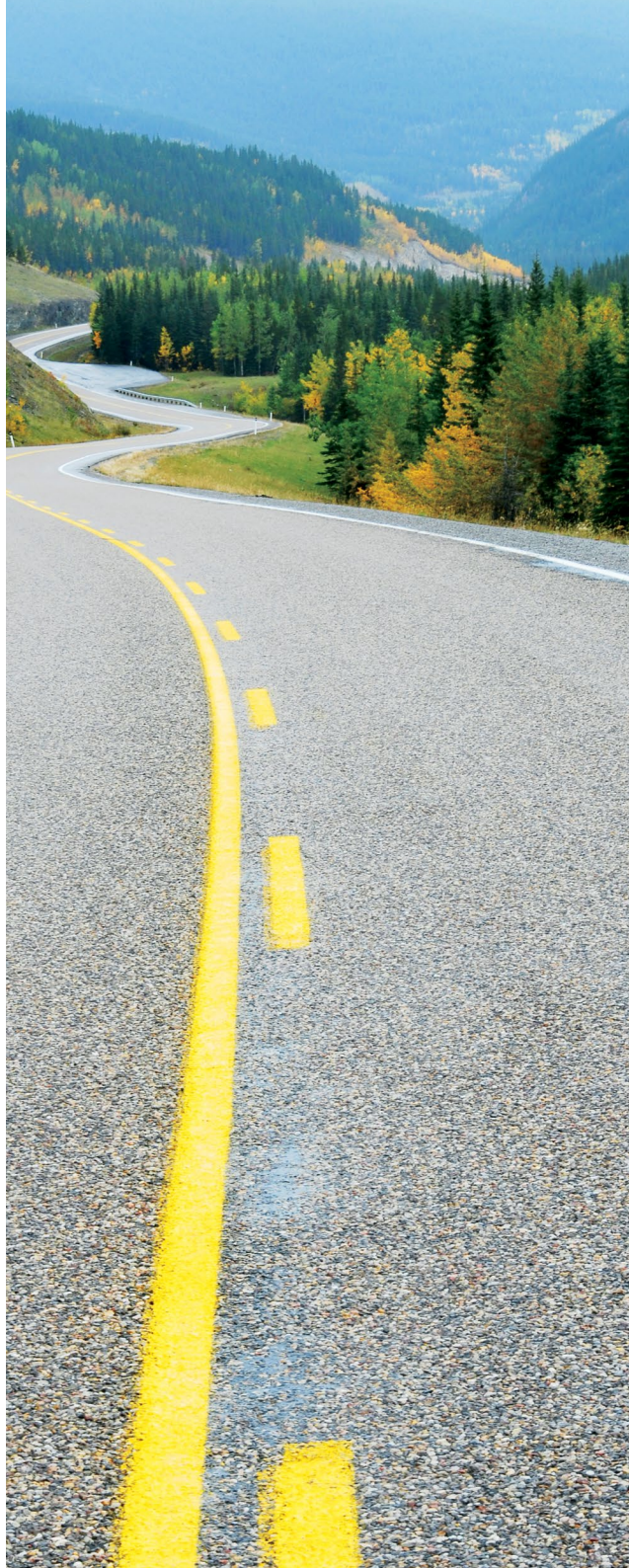
## Our Mission

To be a leader and valued partner in fostering pro bono contributions by the legal community to facilitate access to justice for Albertans.

## Our History

Pro Bono Law Alberta (PBLA) was launched in 2007 as a legacy project of the Law Society of Alberta in recognition of its 100th anniversary celebrations. Consultations were undertaken with representatives from existing and proposed pro bono clinics around Alberta and the Law Society of Alberta's Pro Bono Committee.

Today, PBLA continues to facilitate access to justice by creating opportunities for lawyers to provide pro bono legal services through our court-based legal assistance programs, volunteer lawyer services roster, brokered partnerships on legal initiatives, and more.



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# Message from the President

On behalf of the PBLA Board and staff, I am pleased to present our Annual Report. Two years have passed since I was appointed President of the Board, and to say that it has been an eventful two years would be an understatement. The global pandemic continues to affect our society, economy and the functioning of our justice system. PBLA, like most other organizations and not-for-profits, has had to pivot, adapt and innovate under challenging circumstances.

As a result of the pandemic, our in-person programming at the Calgary and Edmonton Courthouses had to be suspended for several months. However, like the justice system itself, PBLA never sleeps. As a result of hard work and creative thinking, our staff were able to develop a platform by which the Court-based programming could be delivered remotely. We are moving towards a more robust remote platform in the next year, and are excited about the possibilities of expanding our reach and providing even more meaningful interactions for our volunteers and clients.

The last year was a busy one for our Board, as we entered into a new stage of a three-year strategic planning cycle. The Board worked with a facilitator and staff over several months and developed an exciting new strategic plan with goals which include increased engagement of the legal profession in pro bono activities, developing accessible pro bono-related data, evidence and research, and optimizing organizational capacity and sustainability.

Our Board also welcomed new Board members, including Judith Hanbury QC, Bob Philp QC, Shay

Vandershaeghe, and Kene Ilochonwu. Several of our Board members received long-standing service awards, including Brett Anderson, Ed Ma QC, and Jana Neal. I wish to thank all of our Board members, past and present, for their dedication, commitment and energy to our organization.

Looking ahead, I am energized by the challenges and the opportunities facing PBLA. We continue our planning to co-host the National Pro Bono Conference, now scheduled for 2022. We continue to engage with our funders, stakeholders and volunteers in order to meet the large and growing demands arising from inequalities in our system.

As the Right Honourable Beverley McLachlin, former Chief Justice of the Supreme Court of Canada has noted “a good justice system must meet three criteria – it must be “just”, “proportionate” and “accessible” (Globe and Mail, July, 2020). The most challenging of these criteria is accessibility. Accessibility may require incremental improvements and modernization, or a radical re-thinking of our systems. Either way, PBLA is ready to grow and adapt to the changes ahead.



A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Karen Fellowes'.

Karen Fellowes, QC  
President

## Message from the Executive Director

Reminiscing about the past year at PBLA stirs up mixed emotions. Like many organizations, the pandemic forced a reset to operations and programs at PBLA - ours was much needed and welcomed. We rode the waves of change, birthed new ideas, embraced new ways of doing and recorded significant successes, including the virtual transition of our court-based programs, and completing a needs assessment on the civil legal document needs of self-represented litigants. I invite you to read further for some of the transformational ways we actioned our mission in the past year – [page 5](#) is particularly interesting!

We appreciate the people and partnerships that contributed to our success in the past year and helped us navigate its challenges. Our staff have managed change on so many levels, while continually innovating and maintaining ongoing projects. They have carried on with remarkable grace and passion, and it has been my privilege to work with such a dedicated team. We are fortunate to be led by an engaged Board and their leadership has made a difference and steadied the course in the past year.

Most people give back when conditions are right, but it takes a special person to give back in challenging circumstances. Our program partners, volunteers, and indeed, every member of the legal profession who rose above personal and professional challenge to do pro bono work in the past year, are the real heroes. We salute and celebrate our community partners, especially pro bono clinics and access to justice organizations, whose tireless efforts to meet the legal needs of vulnerable Albertans continue to inspire us.

Change is often not cheap, and resourcing continues to be challenging,

especially in the current economic climate. We are grateful to our main funders, the Law Society of Alberta, and the Alberta Law Foundation for helping us maintain operations. We also thank the United Way of Calgary and Area for partially funding our VLS Roster Program in 2020. Our capacity to innovate was significantly boosted by funding from the Calgary Foundation and the inaugural Civil Society Fund established by the Government of Alberta. The former enabled us conduct market research to identify a digital platform to effectively administer PBLA's programs while the latter will help us implement the selected solution. Our innovation efforts have also been spurred by the generous contributions of our donors - we are thankful for every cent received.

The pandemic has increased awareness around access to justice issues faced by vulnerable Albertans as they seek recourse for their legal matters. The legal response to the pandemic will be crucial as we transition to recovery and in a post-pandemic world. The legal profession is uniquely positioned to be at the forefront of this response - every member of the profession has something to offer. Alberta's legal profession is renowned as a "giving" bar. We hope you will continue to embrace our collective ethical responsibility by supporting and engaging in pro bono initiatives.

Together in service,



**Nonye Opara**  
Executive Director

# Pro Bono Pivot: How PBLA Adapted to the Virtual Space



## Pro Bono Engagement Activities

PBLA actioned its engagement mission through programs, outreach, advocacy as well as other collaborative and community-based initiatives.

### Programs

#### Court-Based Programs

PBLA administers two court-based programs - the Civil Claims Duty Counsel (CCDC) Project and Queen's Bench Court Assistance (QB Amicus) program. Both programs provide summary legal assistance to self-represented litigants engaged in civil proceedings in Provincial Court and the Court of Queen's Bench in Calgary and Edmonton. Assisted by volunteer law students, volunteer lawyers in both programs provide legal advice, document support, procedural and referral information. In the QB Amicus program, volunteer lawyers and articling student act as *amicus curiae* to provide assistance in morning chambers.

PBLA administers both programs in partnership with several law firms, in-house and government legal departments, Pro Bono Students Canada (Calgary and Edmonton Chapters), Student Legal Assistance, Student Legal Services of Edmonton, as well as independent lawyers, articling students, law students and internationally trained lawyers.

Following a suspension in March 2020 due to the pandemic and related courthouse closures, the CCDC Project and QB Amicus programs resumed virtually on December 16, 2020. With the transition to virtual service delivery, volunteer lawyers now provide self-represented litigants with summary legal advice and assistance via telephone and video conference.

The objective and scope of the court programs have not changed with the shift to virtual delivery – the programs remain vehicles of engagement designed to provide lawyers and students with opportunities for pro bono service to self-represented litigants with civil matters in Provincial Court and the Court of Queen’s Bench.

A key feature of the virtual modality is the development of a dedicated document sharing portal that allows lawyers and clients to privately share documents before and shortly after their virtual session. Unlike the pre-pandemic framework for program delivery, clients are now expected to book appointments for virtual assistance.

After successful pilots in December 2020 and January 2021, the programs became operational in February 2021. Between December 2020 and March 31, 2021, more than 140 CCDC volunteer lawyers and articling students provided over 200 hours of pro bono legal services to more than 87 individuals virtually. During the same period, about 94 volunteer lawyers and articling students provided over 117 hours of pro bono legal services to more than 43 individuals.

PBLA’s court-based programs continue to attract interest from law firms, in-house and government legal departments, sole practitioners and individual lawyers. A total of 21 law firms and 3 bankruptcy trustees were involved in Calgary and Edmonton this year.

### **Volunteer Lawyer Services Roster Program**

PBLA also administers a Volunteer Lawyer Services (VLS) Roster Program that tries to match volunteer lawyers with non-profits and charities that have specific legal issues.

VLS Roster lawyers decide the scope of pro bono legal services they provide and volunteer opportunities can be tailored to meet the volunteer lawyers’ schedule. In 2020-21, volunteers assisted several non-profits with legal with matters relating to contracts, bylaw and document review, incorporation, and litigation.



# Our Impact

## Civil Claims Duty Counsel Project (December 2020- March 2021)



## Queen's Bench Court Assistance Program (December 2020- March 2021)



## Volunteer Lawyer Services Roster Program (September 2020- March 2021)



**8**  
Organizations assisted



### Areas of Support

- Charitable registration
- Document review
- Copyright
- Bylaw review
- Litigation



# Volunteer and Client Testimonials



"I'm grateful for the pro bono assistance program organized by PBLA, and help and advice from volunteer lawyers."

— **Queen's Bench (Amicus) Court Assistance Program Client**

"The document sharing portal is easy to use. This is a great addition."

— **Civil Claims Duty Counsel Project Volunteer**

"The volunteer lawyer was fantastic for the limited information I had at the time. She was able to direct me to the next steps I needed to complete."

— **Civil Claims Duty Counsel Project Client**

"It's great to know a bit about what to expect before we get in there, this is a good system!"

— **Civil Claims Duty Counsel Project Volunteer**

"The lawyer that helped me was very kind to me. I appreciate her time and what this program is doing. I left the call in tears in a positive way. This program is so important. Thank you."

— **Queen's Bench (Amicus) Court Assistance Program Client**



## Engaging with our Stakeholders

Through an unprecedented year of change and innovation, we strove to maintain strong ties with our community. Promoting opportunities for legal community engagement in pro bono activities and sharing updates regarding access to justice initiatives continues to be a major focus for PBLA. Through our social media channels and Pro Bono Network News, PBLA's quarterly email newsletter for volunteers and stakeholders, we communicate with members of the public and our partners in the pro bono and legal communities in Alberta and across Canada. We also host a list of current pro bono opportunities from around Alberta on our website.

## Collaboration in the Access to Justice Sector

### CBA – Alberta Branch (Access to Justice and Access to Justice Week Committees)

PBLA also worked with the CBA Access to Justice and Access to Justice Week Committees to promote and organize the 2020 Access to Justice Week in Alberta.

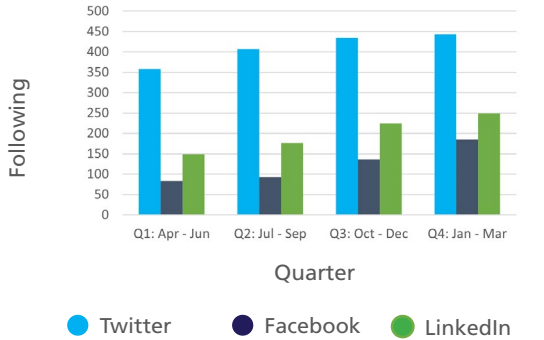
### Access to Justice Week 2020

As a nationwide effort to bring awareness to existing barriers for Canadians in need of legal help, Access to Justice Week was jointly held for the first time from October 26-30, 2020 in Alberta, Saskatchewan, Nova Scotia and Ontario. PBLA's social media channels were utilized to highlight events and initiatives working to improve access to justice in our province.



# Digital Engagement

We continue to see increased engagement on our social media platforms since launching in 2018. PBLA engages the legal community online with regular posts, shoutouts and updates.



Social media played a major role in promoting the virtual relaunch of the Court-Based Programs. Our Facebook page promotes PBLA initiatives to the general public, we connect with the legal profession on LinkedIn and Twitter offers a platform to interact with volunteers, program partners and other non-profits.



Twitter



Facebook



LinkedIn



# Community Engagement and Initiatives

## Calgary Legal Advice Clinic

The 10th annual Calgary Legal Advice Clinic (CLAC) was held on October 29, 2020 in partnership with Norton Rose Fulbright (Canada) LLP and Calgary Legal Guidance. Due to the challenges of the COVID-19 pandemic, the event was delivered virtually to safeguard the health and safety of staff, volunteers, and clients. Clients had the opportunity to pre-book their appointments and connect with their assigned volunteer lawyers through video and phone conference. In total, 35 clients pre-booked their appointments while 30 volunteer lawyers and two volunteer paralegals provided legal advice and resources on matters relating to civil, family, labour, criminal, immigration and other areas of law.

## Alberta Debtor Support Project: Joint Recruitment and Training

PBLA collaborated with Calgary Legal Guidance, the Public Interest Law Clinic and Judith Hanebury, QC on a joint recruitment initiative to boost volunteer capacity to address anticipated COVID-19-related increases in consumer debt matters. The Joint Recruitment Project includes the provision of training on consumer debt matters to volunteers at partner organizations. The project is part of an Alberta Debtor Support Project that also includes triage and debt-negotiation services for individuals dealing with consumer debt.

## Access to Justice (A2J) Collaborative

PBLA continued to participate in and act as steward for communication among the pro bono organizations that form the A2J Collaborative. In September 2020, an Access to Justice Collaborative Board-to-Board Summit was convened to aggregate areas of legal need and challenges faced by self-represented litigants and legal service providers across Alberta in the wake of COVID-19 and the adaptation of court services as well as identify advocacy mechanisms to present and discuss aggregated issues/possible solutions with appropriate entities.

## Alberta Global Talent Conference 2021

Pro Bono Law Alberta exhibited at the 2021 Alberta Global Talent Conference 2021 hosted by Edmonton Region Immigrant Employment Counsel (ERIEC). This is an annual provincial event that celebrates the diverse professional talents present in the region and fosters networking and professional development opportunities. Through this event, PBLA connected with potential volunteers and other non-profit organizations in the area. The conference also offered opportunities to explore potential partnerships and create awareness around PBLA's mandate.

# Research Project: Needs Assessment Into Civil Legal Document Needs



Between October 2019 and November 2020 Pro Bono Law Alberta (PBLA), with the support of the Alberta Law Foundation (ALF), conducted a needs assessment to better understand the civil legal document needs of self-represented litigants (SRLs). The research project comprised three main components: a needs assessment, environmental scan, and a market exploration of document assembly technology.

PBLA surveyed over 200 individuals through online surveys and conducted an environmental scan (which included a focus group) to understand existing document supports in Calgary and Edmonton as well as stakeholder perspective on the needs and challenges faces by SRLs looking for civil document supports. We appreciate everyone who participated in the project.

The DASS Project determined that a sizeable population of self-represented litigants face several barriers in receiving quality civil legal document support and services. Barriers include difficulty of document completion, complexity of legal vocabulary and uncertainty around court processes for civil legal documents. While implementing a document assembly software would not address all the barriers faced by SRLs, it would help increase their understanding of court documents, limit completion time, and simplify what is typically a lengthy and taxing process. Building on these findings, PBLA plans to enhance document assistance supports available through its court-based programs to better support self-represented litigants (SRLs) with their documentation and filing needs.

## KEY FINDINGS

- The need for assistance with completing documents pertaining to civil claims **52%**
- Difficulty understanding court procedures, how to access court forms, or where to go for help with document completion **28%**
- Agreement that Document completion is challenging and time-consuming **52%**
- The use of a document assembly technology if it were available to them **60%**

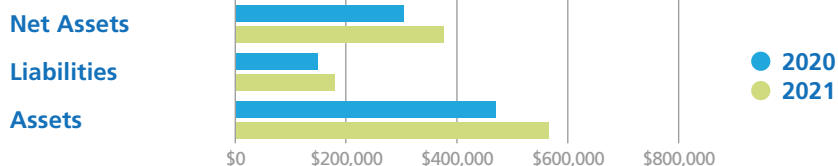


# Financial Statements

## Statement of Financial Position

As of March 31, 2021

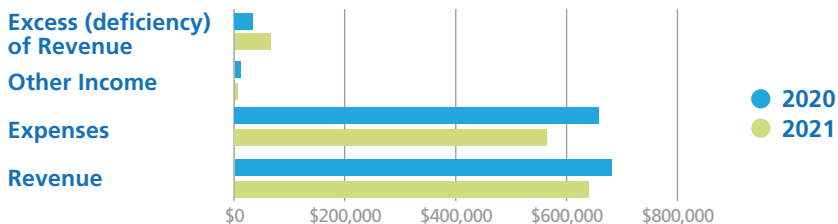
	2021	2020
Assets	\$561,088	\$464,701
Liabilities	\$186,298	\$162,620
Net Assets	\$374,790	\$302,081



## Statement of Operations

For the year ending March 31, 2021

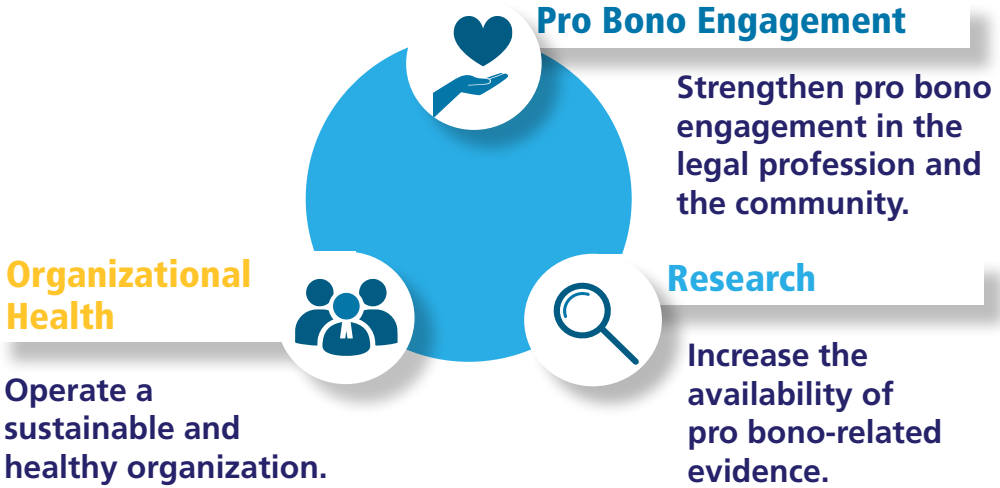
	2021	2020
Revenue	\$650,586	\$674,213
Expenses	\$580,117	\$637,933
Other Income	\$2,240	\$5,153
Excess (deficiency) of revenue over expenses	\$72,709	\$41,433



For a copy of PBLA's audited financial statements, email [info@pbla.ca](mailto:info@pbla.ca).

# Looking to the Future

## Strategic Direction 2021-2024



## Mark your calendars!

PBLA is hosting the next **National Pro Bono Conference** in **Calgary, Alberta, Canada**. Originally scheduled for Fall 2021, we have postponed the conference to **September 21 to 23, 2022** in view of ongoing impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Visit the Conference website to subscribe for email updates!



Join us in **2022**

**National  
Pro Bono  
Conference**

[www.probonoconference.ca](http://www.probonoconference.ca)

**Same City.  
Same Venue.  
New Year.**

# Thank You



## Board of Directors

Karen Fellowes, QC,  
President (Calgary)

Ed Ma, QC, Vice President  
(Calgary)

Jana Neal, Treasurer  
(Calgary)

Brett Anderson (Calgary)

Robert (Bob) Philp,  
QC, LSA Bencher  
Representative to  
*February 2021*  
Director from *February*  
*2021* (Edmonton)

Eleanor Carlson (Calgary)

Marija Bicanic (Calgary)

Judith Hanebury, QC  
(Calgary)

Shay J. Vanderschaeghe  
(Red Deer)

Kene Ilochonwu, LSA  
Bencher Representative  
from *February 2021*  
(Calgary)

## Advisory Board

Chair: The Honourable  
Mr. Justice Rodney A.  
Jerke, (Court of Queen's  
Bench, Lethbridge)

Bruce Churchill-Smith, QC

Cheryl C. Gottselig, QC  
(Burnett Duckworth &  
Palmer LLP)

Donald G. Bishop, QC  
(Bishop & McKenzie LLP,  
Edmonton) to *March 31,*  
*2021*

Phyllis A.L. Smith, QC  
(Emery Jamieson LLP,  
Edmonton)

The Honourable Allan  
H. Wachowich, QC  
(Edmonton)

The Honourable John C.  
(Jack) Major C.C., QC

The Honourable Judge  
A.H. Lefever (Provincial  
Court, Edmonton)

The Honourable Madam  
Justice J.M. Ross (Court  
of Queen's Bench,  
Edmonton)

The Honourable Madam  
Justice M.S. Paperny  
(Court of Appeal, Calgary)

The Honourable Mr.  
Justice John T. Henderson  
(Court of Queen's Bench,  
Calgary)

## Staff

Nonye Opara  
Executive Director

Alex Montiel  
Director of Projects and  
Engagement

La Salette Encarnacion  
VLS and Program  
Coordinator (Edmonton)

Jolisa Odagwe  
Communications  
and Development  
Coordinator

Marilou Stegmeier  
Finance and  
Administrative  
Coordinator

Anah Aslam  
Document Assistance  
Support Service "DASS"  
Project Coordinator  
to *November 2020*

## Program and Project Partners

Ackroyd LLP

A. Farber &  
Partners

Anderson James  
McCall Barristers

BDO Financial  
Recovery Services

Bishop and  
McKenzie LLP

Blake, Cassels &  
Graydon LLP

Borden Ladner  
Gervais LLP

Brownlee LLP

Burnet,  
Duckworth &  
Palmer LLP



## Program and Project Partners (Cont'd)

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 Carbert Waite LLP  
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 City of Edmonton Law Branch  
 Dentons Canada LLP  
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 Emery Jamieson LLP  
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 Ogilvie LLP  
 Osler, Hoskin & Harcourt LLP  
 Parkland Corporation  
 Parlee McLaws LLP

Pro Bono Students Canada - National, Calgary and Edmonton Chapters  
 Resolution and Court Administration Services  
 Reynolds Mirth Richards & Farmer LLP  
 SVR Lawyers  
 Stikeman Elliott LLP  
 Witten LLP

## Pro Bono Community

Association des juristes d'expression française de l'Alberta  
 Calgary Legal Guidance  
 Central Alberta Community Legal Clinic

Centre for Public Legal Education Alberta  
 Edmonton Community Legal Centre  
 Fort McMurray Community Legal Clinic

Grande Prairie Legal Guidance  
 Lethbridge Legal Guidance  
 Medicine Hat Legal Help Centre  
 Public Interest Law Clinic

Student Legal Assistance  
 Student Legal Services of Edmonton

## Donors

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 Accenture Canada Matching Donation Program

Robert Hall  
 Brett Anderson  
 Olive Lukey

## Funders





# Pro Bono Law Alberta



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