

# End of legal aid's immigration work slammed for leaving newcomers in lurch

Hundreds of new immigrants in London stand to be hit by the provincial government's decision to cut funding to Legal Aid Ontario, with many of them likely seeing their claims rejected due to lack of proper representation, a local immigration lawyer says.

**JONATHAN JUHA** Updated: April 16, 2019



(Getty Images)

Hundreds of new immigrants in London stand to be hit by the provincial government's decision to cut funding to Legal Aid Ontario, with many of them likely seeing their claims rejected

due to lack of proper representation, a local immigration lawyer says.

“Refugee and immigration law is a highly specialized area of law (and) most refugees have little or no idea how to represent their cases,” said Ed Corrigan, a London lawyer who specializes in immigration law.

“Without legal assistance, it means that many legitimate refugees will have their claims rejected and be deported from Canada to countries where they are at risk of being put in prison, tortured and even killed.”

In its budget last week, the Progressive Conservative government eliminated legal aid funding for refugee and immigration law services — a move lawyers with the organization called “horrific.”

According to the province, the federal government should shoulder the costs of such cases since immigration is a federal responsibility.

Federal funding in Ontario totals between \$13 million and \$16.5 million a year, short of Legal Aid Ontario’s projected costs of \$30 million to \$34 million for immigration services.

Legal Aid Ontario CEO David Field said in a memo to staff that the province has told the agency it can use only federal funding to cover new immigration and refugee services this year, which means the agency’s lawyers will stop accepting most new immigration and refugee clients beginning Tuesday.

Field said the agency, which is facing an overall reduction in funding of 30 per cent, will honour clients who are already being served and will help some additional clients in limited circumstances.

Those starting new processes, however, will have to find another way to cover their legal costs, Corrigan said, adding the impact could be felt heavily in London, which was the third largest community in the province in terms of new immigrants, behind Toronto and Ottawa.

“They will have to rely on family support. However, many will not have access to funding for their claims,” he said.

Finding the money can be challenging for immigrants who are just settling into a new life in the country, said Elisabete Rodrigues, executive director at LUSO Community Services, a non-profit organization that assists newcomers.

“Not having that support will certainly leave a void for some of the most vulnerable people in our community,” she said, noting legal representation, depending on the case, can cost between \$2,000 and \$10,000.

“Many of the clients we serve are just building their capacity; they just don’t have the disposable income to pay the rates of a lawyer. It’s just not something that is achievable for them.”

Valy Marochko, executive director of the London Cross Cultural Learner Centre, is concerned the lack of funding could lead to lawyers no longer doing immigration work.

“It is very unsettling,” he said. “And it really worries me that if funding is not secured, lawyers will just stop taking the clients.”

*With files from the Canadian Press*