

**Supporting community workers to help people with legal problems**  
A research project for the Law Foundation of Ontario  
by Crystal Resolution Inc.

**BACKGROUND FOR SURVEY PARTICIPANTS**

**THE RESEARCH PROJECT**

Workers in community organizations are often the first point of contact for people who need legal assistance. Although they don't provide legal advice, they help clients to identify legal problems, and to understand their situation and what steps they can take. They serve as trusted and accessible intermediaries between their clients and a complex legal system that is confusing and impenetrable for many people, particularly those who are vulnerable. Some workers may see people once or twice, but very often they build relationships with their clients over time. This enables them to become ongoing resources and advocates for clients who need to exercise their legal rights and navigate the legal system.

It is common for community workers to rely on public legal education and information materials to assist their clients when legal issues arise. Some have taken training specifically designed to support them in their "trusted intermediary" role. Many training initiatives, including those funded by the Law Foundation of Ontario, have produced materials and delivery methods. And some organizations, through collaborative projects and partnerships, have developed networks that continue to build their capacity to help clients with legal information and with referrals to other resources. Initiatives are often customized in light of the wide range of environments in which trusted intermediaries work and the sectors they serve.

Much can be learned from this experience. The Law Foundation has asked an independent team of researchers from Crystal Resolution Inc. to conduct research to gain a deeper understanding of trusted intermediaries and the context in which they work, the training and other strategies that are most helpful to support people in that role, and what more could be done to support them in helping clients use the law to make a difference in their lives. To that end, we are conducting interviews, focus groups, case studies, literature review, and online outreach through a survey that is open to anyone interested in providing input to our research.

**Research team**

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## **WHAT WE ARE HEARING**

Our activities to-date have included interviews with a range of people who shared their thoughts on the experience of community workers who play a trusted intermediary role for clients with legal problems. The lists below highlights perspectives we have heard from them.

### **The “trusted intermediary” role:**

- Trust is key: people often come to a community worker before they go anywhere else with their legal problem, to talk about their problem, to understand their situation and to look for help.
- Relationships are an important feature of the trusted intermediary role; it takes time to build them and they work well in a variety of ways. Turnover in organizations is a reality and can present challenges.
- Often people don't recognize that they have legal problems, and community workers can help them learn about the law and steps they can take to resolve their situation.
- Community workers can help people navigate the legal system, “translate” the law so it is understandable, and complement the work of lawyers.

### **Building capacity:**

- There is a range of training approaches and types for the trusted intermediary role. Training that works is responsive to the on-the-ground needs of workers within a particular sector or a particular community.
- Adult learning models and using lived experience to support learning are effective.
- At the same time, more general training about subject areas of law can be important to build knowledge and capacity.
- Tools like information kits, web-based sources, the PLEI Learning Exchange, checklists, and scenario examples are helpful and can be a key adjunct to training.
- Training initiatives offer a chance for organizations to collaborate on developing good programs, provide networking opportunities, and promote ongoing relationships across organizations and communities.
- Leadership and support for the trusted intermediary role within organizations is important.

### **Challenges and gaps:**

- Finding good legal information can be challenging. There are some good sources, but not everyone knows about them.
- The boundary between providing legal information and providing legal advice can be a challenge to understand and navigate.
- Workers may not be able to attend training due to time demands or location.
- It can be difficult to make a good referral. Legal clinics are a key resource, but clinics don't cover all subject areas, they may be far away from a client, and their resources

are limited. Linking with other legal practitioners can be a challenge. For many reasons the client may not follow up, even if a good referral is made.

- Sustaining learning and knowledge is a challenge. The law changes, and its implication for different contexts can also change over time.

## **ONLINE SURVEY**

We are conducting a survey to hear from a range of individuals and organizations about their perspectives and ideas about the role of frontline community workers in helping people with their legal problems. We want to understand more about the potential value of this work, the form it takes, and the kinds of training and tools that best support the “trusted intermediary” role.

We would like to hear from frontline workers in community organizations and anyone else with an interest in this topic. Participation is voluntary and confidential.

Notes:

- When the survey refers to “legal service providers” it means lawyers, paralegals, or legal clinic community legal workers.
- When the survey refers to “non-legal community organizations” it means non-profit organizations whose missions do not include providing legal advice.

Here is the [LINK](https://www.surveymonkey.com/r/BQQ3PXK) to the survey: <https://www.surveymonkey.com/r/BQQ3PXK>. The survey will be available online until **July 7, 2017** and should take approximately ten to fifteen minutes to complete.

We welcome your input through the survey to inform our research.