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# Access to justice is a right for everyone

Submitted by Joel Harden, MPP Ottawa Centre

Imagine your spouse passed away in the prime of his career without leaving any will or family estate. You now struggle to survive financially with two young children, and are forced to contend with a legal system to salvage your family's earnings. Where do you turn?

Now imagine being sued by your mentally-ill brother subsequent to his being involuntarily hospitalized at the order of a family physician. You were appointed a substitute decision-maker for your brother, and made a difficult choice that is now being litigated. Where do you turn?

These are real-life cases, and in each instance, lawyers with Pro Bono Ontario resolved challenging matters for people in their time of need. In our riding of Ottawa Centre and in Toronto, Pro Bono Ontario's Law Help Centres offer access to justice. The centres serve more than 18,000 clients every year, with volunteer lawyers dispensing free advice to those with everyday legal problems including landlord/tenant disputes, predatory lending schemes and estate issues.

Pro Bono Ontario's three centres were slated to close this December given a rise in demand for their services. At the eleventh hour, however, the federal government and legal community stepped in to provide another year's worth of emer-

gency funding after appeals Pro Bono made to the Attorney General of Ontario for financial support fell on deaf ears.

Not only do the Law Help Centres help thousands navigate the legal system, they save the system money. It costs \$500,000 to run the centres, but Pro Bono Ontario has conducted a study which shows how the Centres save Ontario \$5 million a year by reducing court delays, a 10-1 return on investment.

For a small upfront cost, Ontario taxpayers save money, the courts operate more efficiently, and vulnerable people can access the legal support they need. Everyone wins by keeping these centres open, and I want to thank the legal community, including in Ottawa Centre, who rallied to save them.

While the law help centres have been given a reprieve, their future after 2019 is still uncertain. What they need is stable, permanent provincial funding, something that Quebec provides to its pro bono legal services. I've been speaking out about this issue at the Ontario legislature, but I need your help to ensure the centres are always there for people in need. Send an email to attorney general Caroline Mulroney at [attorneygeneral@ontario.ca](mailto:attorneygeneral@ontario.ca) to let her know that you care about access to justice.

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