

For Immediate Release

April 15, 2019

30% CUTS TO LEGAL AID ARE AN ATTACK ON RACIALIZED COMMUNITIES, IMMIGRANTS AND REFUGEES

Toronto, ON – The Colour of Poverty-Colour of Change (COP-COC) strongly denounces the Ontario Government’s decision to cut legal aid funding by \$133 million, representing over 30% of the provincial contribution to the Legal Aid Ontario (LAO) budget.

“The Ontario Government claims it is charting a ‘reasonable path’ to balance in its first budget. Calling it the ‘Goldilocks approach,’ its position is that the cuts are not too fast but ‘just right.’ There is nothing reasonable about cutting legal aid funding by nearly a third; there is nothing balanced or right about denying access to justice to the most vulnerable people in this province,” said Samya Hasan, Executive Director of the Council of Agencies Serving South Asians (CASSA), and a steering committee member of COP-COC.

Disturbingly, the Ford Government singled out immigrants and refugees as the targets for their cuts when they explicitly prohibited LAO from using provincial funding for immigration and refugee law services.

“The impact of this devastating cut will be felt by all low-income Ontarians, regardless of their status in Canada. A 30% cut to legal aid means slashing services to those who will never be able to afford to hire a lawyer or paralegal – no matter how low their rates are. It will also disrupt services to those whose issues cannot be addressed by the private bar – either paid or pro bono – because of the complexity of the issues and the extreme vulnerability of these clients,” said Debbie Douglas, a COP-COC founding member and the Executive Director of OCASI – Ontario Council of Agencies Serving Immigrants.

Women fleeing domestic violence, seniors and people with mental health challenges facing evictions by unscrupulous landlords, and newcomers working in non-unionized low-waged jobs who are exploited by their employers are but some of the individuals who will likely be turned away when they seek help from community legal clinics, which capacity to serve them will be drastically reduced.

While all low-income people will be affected, the cuts will disproportionately impact people of colour and Indigenous peoples. These groups are over-represented among the poor in the province; the 2016 Census confirmed that 20.8% of people of colour in Ontario are low-income, compared to 12.2% of non-racialized residents.

Racialized group members also have higher unemployment rates relative to their white counterparts. Specifically, racialized men are 24% more likely to be unemployed than non-racialized men. Racialized women are 43% more likely to be unemployed than non-racialized

men. Due to systemic racism, they also face more legal challenges; examples include carding, racial profiling, and workplace discrimination. These impacts will be even more profoundly felt by Indigenous communities.

Given current economic uncertainty, which is often accompanied by increases in unemployment and poverty, the cuts cannot come at a worse time.

“Ontario’s legal aid system is regarded as one of the best in the world. The cut announced by the Ford Government is by far the most significant blow to the system that the province has ever seen,” said Neethan Shan, Interim Executive Director of the Urban Alliance on Race Relations, also a COP-COC steering committee member.

COP-COC calls on the Ontario government to choose the right path by restoring funding to the legal aid system. COP-COC also calls on the Federal Government to step up and significantly increase its contribution to legal aid.

COP-COC is a campaign made up of individuals and organizations working to build community-based capacity to address the growing racialization of poverty and the resulting experience of increased levels of social exclusion and marginalization of racialized communities (First Peoples and peoples of colour) across Ontario. COP-COC works to build concrete strategies, develop tools, and build community-based capacity through which individuals, groups and organizations work together to address the growing structural ethno-racial inequalities across Canada.

For more information, please contact:

Samya Hassan, CASSA, at (416) 943-1359 ext. 13

Amy Casipullai, OCASI, at (416) 524-4950

Neethan Shan, UARR, at (416) 824-3399

Justin Kong, Executive Director, Chinese Canadian National Council Toronto Chapter at media@ccnctoronto.ca