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## Overview of Civil Justice Project

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Civil law or civil justice is law that regulates interactions between private people or organizations. So family law; law suits about car accidents or breaking contracts; landlord and tenant disputes as well as other kinds of real estate all are examples of civil law. The civil justice system includes all the people and mechanisms involved in enforcing civil law from bailiffs to the courts.

*The Civil Justice System and the Public* is a collaborative research program founded on the belief that a lack of effective communication – both within the system and between that system and the public – is a significant barrier interfering with access to justice. This research is designed to involve both the public and the justice community in identifying changes in communication practice that will improve the system. The goal of the project is to make specific and clear recommendations for effective change that will ultimately improve access to the civil justice system by increasing the ability of the system to hear, involve, and respond to the public.

An Alberta pilot of the project is funded by the Alberta Law Foundation, and funding for a five year national study is provided by a Community-University Research Alliance (CURA) grant from the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada (SSHRC). The project takes a collaborative action research approach and has established a large, national, academic and community partnership representative of all the players involved in the civil justice system.

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Components of the research include a short questionnaire, in-depth interviews, researcher observations, and case studies of good communication practices. Interviews are conducted with people working in all facets of the civil justice system, as well as with members of the public who have been involved in a civil case. So far, data collection has been conducted in Alberta, Nova Scotia, Ontario, Quebec and Nunavut. In the first part of 2004, we will also visit sites in British Columbia.

Also during 2004, the research team will organize focus groups to take our analysis of the research data back to the participating communities for their further input. Additionally, case studies of good communication practices will be identified, providing information about specific programs and a mode for collaborative evaluation of new programs.

In the final stage of the project, we will work with our partners to develop and circulate research products that will ensure our findings lead to new knowledge and improved communication practices.