

media release

A report issued today by the national Action Committee on Access to Justice in Civil and Family Matters says that there is a serious access to justice problem in Canada and suggests that the needs of the public be placed first in a coordinated effort by all stakeholders to introduce innovation and fundamental change. The full report may be found at www.cfcj-fcjc.org/collaborations

The Action Committee on Access to Justice in Civil and Family Matters is a group broadly representative of all sectors of the civil and family justice system as well as of the public. It was convened at the invitation of the Right Honourable Beverley McLachlin, Chief Justice of Canada in 2008 and since that time, more than fifty individuals and groups from all sectors of the civil justice system in Canada have participated in its work.

Its report presents a broad consensus among all of those stakeholders that significant change is urgently needed and sets out a broad roadmap for reform.

The report

The Report makes the case that there is a serious access to justice problem in Canada. In spite of the hard work of many, the system too often fails to produce just outcomes that meet the needs of the people it is meant to serve. The system urgently needs attention.

The Action Committee hopes that its final report will lead to: (i) measurable and significant increase in civil and family access to justice; (ii) a country-wide access to justice policy framework that is widely accepted and adopted; (iii) local jurisdictions putting in place strategies and mechanisms for meaningful and sustainable change; (iv) a permanent national body being created and supported to promote, guide and monitor meaningful local and national access to justice initiatives; (v) access to civil and family justice becoming a topic of general civic discussion and engagement – an issue of everyday individual and community interest and wellbeing; and (vi) the public being placed squarely at the centre of all meaningful civil and family justice education and reform efforts.

The Action Committee in cooperation with local stakeholders is organizing a series of meetings across the country starting this month and continuing through the fall of 2013. A colloquium of leaders of the system will also be held in Toronto in January, 2014. The objective of these meetings is to stimulate action.

Justice Thomas Cromwell, who chaired the Action Committee, commented that “It is time to think big together and to take decisive action. All of us who are responsible for the administration of justice must move from words to action.”

Reaction

Chief Justice Beverley McLachlin, who convened the Action Committee, acknowledged the seriousness of the problem, but is hopeful that real improvement can be made: “The broad consensus among the stakeholders on the Action Committee on these issues is unprecedented and gives us an important foundation for change”, she said.

The Minister of Justice and Attorney General of Saskatchewan, **the Honourable Gordon Wyant**, said: “I welcome the Action Committee’s final report and its emphasis on the importance of resolving everyday civil and family legal problems. I also support the report’s emphasis on the importance of coordinated reform effort. The Saskatchewan Ministry of Justice is committed to working collaboratively with others, both in Saskatchewan and across the country, to enhance access to justice.”

The Honourable Elizabeth Crote, Chair of the Canadian Council of Chief Judges noted: “The Canadian Council of Chief Judges welcomes the publication of the Action Committee’s report and the direction it gives for improving access to civil and family justice. The provincial chief judges recognize the importance of judicial leadership and are ready to engage in the collaborative effort essential to bring about change.”

Mary Ellen Hodgins, who served as a public representative on the Action Committee, commented: “It is encouraging to see this broad group of leaders urging change and adopting as the first principle that serving the public must come first in all reform efforts.”

Fred Headon, President of the Canadian Bar Association which worked with the Action Committee, said: “The CBA welcomes this significant report, and is pleased at the degree to which its goals are aligned with the 31 targets in the CBA’s Reaching Equal Justice report, released last month. The leadership and coordination that the National Action Committee provides are key to the success of our mutual efforts to reach equal justice in Canada.”

Gerald R. Tremblay, President of the Federation of Law Societies of Canada, the coordinating body for Canada’s 14 provincial and territorial law societies, noted that the Federation had participated in the Action Committee’s work. He commented that “The Action Committee’s report, with its series of concrete recommendations, makes an important contribution to advancing efforts to improve access to justice for all Canadians who need and use the justice system. He added that “The Federation and Canada’s law societies are committed to doing their part to continue addressing this important challenge and welcome the essential contribution of all stakeholders pursuing the same goal in the public interest.”

Bob Ward, chair of the Association of Legal Aid Plans Canada which also participated in the Action Committee’s work applauded the Report: “The Action Committee’s report provides a much-needed roadmap for reform of the Canadian justice system.”

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For a backgrounder on the final report, go to: www.cfcj-fcj.org/collaborations