



You Have to Find Them First and that's a People-Centered Process

Learning about People-Centered Justice
through the Rural Mobile Law Van

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Introduction

Taking into account the ways in which people actually experience a problem is widely, perhaps universally, now recognized as the best way to design and deliver services intended to assist people in resolving vexing problems they cannot resolve on their own. Although this idea has been familiar in legal services literature and practice with terms such as holistic and wrap-around service, it has recently been given prominent and influential expression in a growing body of literature called people-centered justice. The present literature on people-centered justice appears to be focused on the transactional aspects of service delivery, the nature and type of interaction between the service provider and client. However, we know from the legal needs research that people have a common experience when dealing with legal problems that precedes receiving help. That experience is not seeking authoritative assistance when the problem first occurs. This acquiescence arises from a familiar set of causes that are well-documented in the literature: not understanding the legal aspects of the problem, not appreciating the seriousness of the problem, not knowing if anything can be done or not knowing where to find help. The central idea advanced in this paper is that the first step in access to justice and the first step in providing people-centered justice is identifying people with unmet needs and providing them with the pathways with which they will come forward and seek help. This initial aspect of people-centricity addresses the initial experience that many people have when encountering a problem, acquiescing in the problem, and not asking for authoritative help in a timely manner. This is an important aspect of what the rural mobile law van and the fixed-location winter venues are doing in a rural area of southwestern Ontario. Further, the effectiveness of building this early-stage people-centricity seems to be an integral part of the rural character of the community being served.

This paper is an assessment of the Mobile Rural Law Van project¹ at the mid-point of a three-year project, turning the lens of people-centricity on the project. The observations on people-centricity do not represent the results of structured research in which people centricity is defined, indicators developed and measured. Rather, it is part of the accumulating lessons learned as the project matures over time.

People-Centered Justice

People-centered justice has become an important guiding principle in the recent access to justice literature.² The Justice for All Task Force report defines people-centered justice as having access to services that are responsive to their needs and offer alternative and less adversarial pathways to justice.³ Similarly, the World Justice Report characterizes people-centered justice as justice services with a focus on people's lived experiences⁴ and putting people, not institutions, at the heart of the research and policy agenda for peaceful, justice and inclusive societies within a framework that can be applied at the individual level.⁵ Placing people at the centre of legal and justice systems has been the focus of a series of roundtables and high-level events in 2015, 2016 and 2017 by the Organization for Economic Co-Operation and Development (OECD), including those organised jointly with Open Society Foundations. These events focused on deepening the understanding of country approaches for placing people at the centre of legal and justice systems.⁶ According to the OECD, people-centricity refers to an approach that adopts the perspective of people as a starting point and places people at the core when designing, implementing, delivering and evaluating public policies, services and legal procedures within and beyond the justice system. It takes into account the perspectives and needs of specific communities and vulnerable groups.⁷

¹ Throughout this paper the "van" will be used generically to refer to both the summer mobile van and the fixed-location winter venues for ease of expression.

² *Delivering Justice, Rigorously: A guide to people-centred justice programming*, Hague Institute for Innovation of Law, The Hague, 2021 p. 16; Pathfinders, Justice Action Coalition, Justice Action Update, Key Takeaways from the World Justice Forum, June 2022

³ *Justice for All: The Report on the Task Force on Justice*, 2019, p.16

⁴ *Measuring the Justice Gap: A People-Centered Assessment of Unmet Justice Needs Around the World*, World Justice Project, 2019, p.7

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 8

⁶ *People-centered and inclusive legal and justice: A proposal for next steps in 2019-2020*, Organization for Economic Co-Operation and Development, p. 6, 2018

⁷ *Draft Recommendation of the Council on Access to Justice and People-centred Justice Systems*, Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development, 2022, p.2

People-centered justice is transformative for styles of lawyering and for the organization of integrated justice services. A people-centered approach assists people with legal and non-legal problems that reflect the way in which they experience them and by providing resolutions that make sense to them. To accomplish this in holistic justice terms, a “whole client” approach must be mirrored by a “whole lawyer” approach. This goes beyond a transactional lawyer-client relationship focusing on a legal issue to a diffuse relationship between lawyer and client in which the lawyer learns about the person’s problems, providing legal advice and solutions that are unique to the skills of a legal professional but also advice about other strategies where appropriate. In order to address multiple and often complex problems, a people-centered approach requires recourse to a network of access to justice services, placing legal help within the social organization of helping that exists in nearly every community. Further, a continuum of services approach provides the appropriate assistance to the problem, traversing a range of levels of seriousness and complexity.

The idea of access to justice focusing on people rather than the justice system can be found earlier in the literature⁸, and similar language such as holistic and wrap-around justice services have been familiar in the access to justice discourse. The foundation of people-centered justice has its clearest origins in the legal needs research literature, in which the focus was on legal problems from the point of view of the people experiencing them. This approach was the basis of the American Bar Association’s Comprehensive Legal Needs Study⁹ and later, and more influentially, in the Paths to Justice research by Hazel Genn.¹⁰ The Paths to Justice study focused on the widest range of events experienced by individuals as private persons. Justiciable events were defined as problems experienced by an individual which raised legal issues whether or not they were recognized by people as legal and whether or not any action taken to deal with the problem involved any part of the formal civil justice system.¹¹

An important legacy finding from the body of legal needs research following Genn’s seminal study that is a central problem for people-centered justice addressed in this paper is that people often do not recognize the seriousness or legal aspects of the everyday legal problems they experience and do not take appropriate action to deal with them.¹² Earlier research pointed out that people experiencing legal problems often do not use the services of lawyers,¹³ although this emphasis has largely been replaced by less legal-centric approaches to dispute resolution like the more people-centered view that people want resolutions to their problems and not necessarily legal remedies.¹⁴

Most people take some action to resolve the everyday legal problems they experience.¹⁵ However, many do not seek authoritative advice or assistance, often until the situation has become more serious or even desperate.¹⁶ The fact that many people experiencing everyday legal problems do not come forward seeking assistance in a timely way presents a major obstacle for meeting the needs of the public and to resolve problems in a “law thick” world in which a great many of the ordinary transactions and transitions of people’s lives have legal aspects that frequently coexist with non-legal issues. Most people want to do something to resolve problems they experience and for the most part take some action to resolve the issue, such as searching the internet or asking for the advice of friends and relatives. But can people be expected to seek authoritative assistance when one fundamental difficulty lies in the fact that when problems first arise many people do not recognize the seriousness of the problem or the potential legal aspects?¹⁷ The premise of this paper is that the first step in providing people-centered justice is identifying the people who need it. This first step is,

⁸ The idea of using dispute resolution approaches that are most appropriate for preserving on-going relationships is noted in a third wave called the access to justice approach in Mauro Cappelletti and Bryant Garth (eds.), *Access to Justice*, Vol. 1, A World Survey, The Florence Access to Justice Project, Sijthoff and Noordhoff-Alphenaaandrijn, 1972, p. 53. Problems best solved in some way other than the formal Justice system is a theme in Philip Lewis, *Unmet Legal Need in Pauline Morris, Richard White and Philip Lewis, Social Needs and Legal Action*, Martin Robertson, 1973, p. 79.

⁹ *Legal Needs and Civil Justice: A Survey of Americans, Major Findings of the Comprehensive Legal Needs Survey*, The Consortium on Legal Services and the Public, American Bar Association, 1994, p. 2

¹⁰ Hazel Genn, *Paths to Justice: What people do and think about going to law*, Hart Publishing, 1999.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 12

¹² Ab Currie, *Nudging the Paradigm Shift: Everyday Legal Problems in Canada*, Canadian Forum on Civil Justice, Toronto, 2016, p. 38

¹³ Charles E Clark and Emma Corstvet, “The Lawyer and the Public: An A.A.L.S. Survey,” *Yale Law Journal*, Volume 47, Issue 8, Article 2, 1938.

¹⁴ Rebecca L. Sandefur, *Access to What?*, Daedalus, American Academy of Arts and Sciences, Winter 2019.

¹⁵ Ab Currie, *The Legal Problems of Everyday Life*, Rebecca L. Sandefur (ed.), *Sociology of Law, Crime and Deviance*, Volume 12, *Access to Justice*, Emerald, 2009, 1 - 42

¹⁶ *Paths to Justice: Navigating with the Wandering Lost*, Report and Recommendations of the Five County Connecting Regions Project, March 2011

¹⁷ Ab Currie, *Nudging the Paradigm Shift*, Figure VIII, p. 38. 65% of respondents said they did not understand the legal implications of the problem and 42% said they did not understand the seriousness of the problem when it first occurred.

essentially, what has been described as outreach.¹⁸ Importantly, however, to accomplish this first step in the access to justice process effectively it is as important that it be done in a people-centered manner as is the case for later stages in the process of assisting people to find resolutions. The Mobile Rural Law Van provides an example of this first necessary step in people-centered justice.

The Mobile Rural Law Van and the Fixed Winter Venues

The Mobile Rural Law Van was first piloted for a six-month period in the summer of 2019 by the Legal Clinic of Guelph and Wellington County.¹⁹ During that summer the Law Van visited 12 communities in rural Wellington County, located approximately 100 kilometers West of Toronto, Canada. The Law Van visited each small town approximately 12 times each during that summer. After a one-year hiatus, a three-year project Law Van project is now under way from 2021 to 2024. The three-year project involves two community legal clinics, the Guelph community legal clinic and Halton Community Legal Services. The summer Law Van now visits seven small towns, five in Wellington County and two in rural North Halton, which is adjacent to Wellington County. The Law Van makes more frequent visits to the small towns included in the three-year project than was the case for the 12 towns in 2019. The five Wellington County communities are the ones that had the greatest expressed demand for assistance during the 2019 project. The three-year project has winter venues that operate in the same towns as the summer van, between the end of October and the end of April when inclement weather makes the operation of the outdoor summer Law Van impracticable.

During the summer, the Law Van parks in high visibility locations in the communities, often in the parking lots adjacent to other community services. A small marquee tent is erected beside the van and prominent signage is placed beside the street announcing the availability of free legal help.²⁰ From the outset, parking in high visibility locations has been intended to attract as many people as possible to the Law Van by simply passing by as they go about their daily activities. The schedule for the summer Law Van is posted on community Facebook pages, in community newspapers, on the Instagram page of various community organizations, and by means of posters placed in gas bars, coffee shops, grocery stores, and in other places where people ordinarily go in their day-to-day activities. The winter venues are located in libraries, in church halls and on the premises of community organizations. The schedule for the winter “law van” is disseminated in similar ways to the summer Law Van. Service is provided at the summer Law Van and at the winter venues by lawyers and a rural community worker.

People-Centricity and the Law Van at the Beginning of the Access to Justice Process

The summer Law Van and the winter venues are highly people-centered. People-centricity was fundamental to the development of the Law Van project. Although the term was not specifically part of the initial project development, the basic idea of people-centricity is central to the ethos of the community legal clinics involved. A people-centered approach has been developing for a decade in the two community legal clinics involved in the Law Van project.²¹

People-centricity is well-understood as taking into account the experience of the individual confronting the problem. However, people-centeredness is not a concept with a fixed set of defining characteristics. The specific expressions of people-centeredness emerge according to the nature of the project and the community within which it is evolving. The several ways in which people-centricity is expressed in the summer and winter vans are discussed below.

¹⁸ Pascoe Pleasence, Christine Coumarelos, Suzie Forell and Hugh McDonald, *Reshaping legal assistance services: building on the evidence*, Law and Justice Foundation of New South Wales, 2014, p. 27

¹⁹ Ab Currie, *Someone Out There Helping: Final Report of the WellCoMs Mobile Van Project*, Canadian Forum on Civil Justice, 2020

²⁰ The usual practice in legal needs research is to avoid referring to legal need on the assumption that people may not recognize the legal nature of the problem they are experiencing. It is possible that people may choose not to approach the law van or winter venues for the same reason, not realizing that the problem is something about which one might talk to a lawyer. Lawyers in community legal clinics sometimes suggest non-legal approaches even though legal action may be one option.

²¹ Ab Currie, *Extending the Reach of Legal Aid: Report on the Pilot Phase of the Legal Health Check-up Project*, Canadian Forum on Civil Justice, Toronto, 2015; Ab Currie, *Legal Secondary Consultation: How Legal Aid Can Support Communities and expand Access to Justice*, Canadian Forum on Civil Justice, Toronto, 2018; a collection of relevant research reports and blogs can be found in Ab Currie, *The Communities Being Served are the Resources that are Needed*, *Innovation on Community-Based Justice in Ontario: An Anthology of Canadian Research*, Canadian Forum on Civil Justice, 2022

Maximizing Accessibility

Since 2019 the essential feature of the summer Law Van has been to go out to where people live and spend much of their time. Rather than travel the roadways of a rural area, the strategy has been to locate in high visibility areas in several small towns throughout the rural area. A sign offering free legal help is placed at the side of the street or the entrance to the parking lot. Service is offered to people in their place, to a large extent at times determined by them and on their own terms. So far, at the midpoint of the three-year project, the Van seems to have been a success. This highly proactive offer of service has attracted increasing numbers of people coming to the summer van locations for help from the first pilot in 2019 through the first and second summers in 2021 and 2022.

Figure 1: Number of People Served by the Summer Law Van and Winter Venues

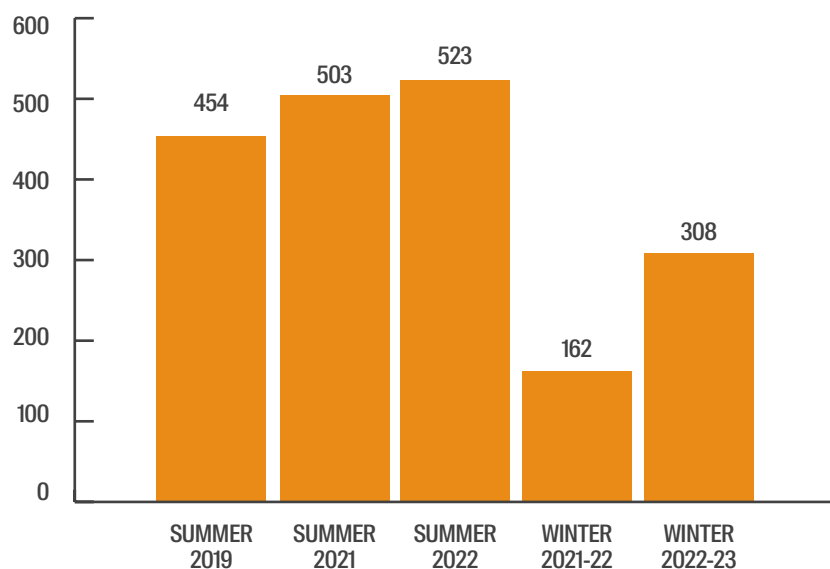


Figure 1 calls attention to the much lower number of people coming to the winter locations. However, the number of people seeking help at the winter venues increased substantially in the second winter. The reasons why the winter venues attract fewer people than the number coming to the summer locations remain uncertain. In the summer the law van goes out to high visibility places where people have easy access by passing by as they go about their normal activities²². In the winter venues, the service still goes out to the places where people live. However, in a partial reversal of the process at the winter locations, people are asked to come to the premises of particular organizations. The winter venues may not be the normal places where people frequent. There may be barriers that are part of the winter venues such as the location, the physical

organization or the building, or the presence of other people and activities at the host organization. Whatever the case, it seems clear comparing the summer and winter venues that the relative success of the summer locations is largely related to maximizing accessibility at the summer van.

The number of people coming to the winter venues increased substantially in the second winter season, 2022 - 2023. In five of the seven small towns visited there was no change in the host locations, two libraries and one community organization. Two other venues that accounted for the increase did change locations, in both cases to different community organizations.

How People Learned About the Law Van

Most people learned about the Law Van while passing by in the summer 2019 pilot project. During that summer, 59.5% of people receiving assistance said they learned about the Law Van by driving, walking, or cycling past the location. About 14% said they learned about the van through social media. In the summer of 2021 and 2022 the number of people learning about the Law Van in this way decreased to about one third of people assisted. This seems understandable as the Law Van becomes increasingly familiar in the area over time. Social media became a more important way to learn about the van and its winter counterpart. During the winter of 2021-2022 only one person out of 162 people learned about the availability of legal help by passing by the venue, increasing to 3.9% in 2022-23.²³

²² The number of people learning about the summer van by means of social media has increased in importance compared with learning about it through passing by, although at this point both remain significant. See Figure 2.

²³ There may have been some overlap between people saying they learned about the "winter van" passing by and by having seen signs posted since there was signage at the venues and posters elsewhere.

A surprising increase in the number of people learning about the winter venues by means of community organizations occurred in 2022-23. This corresponds with a greater effort by the rural community worker to connect with community service and voluntary associations, suggesting a potential for community organizations to become pathways to justice.

First-Time Seeking Help

The people coming to the summer Law Van and the winter venues may not have previously sought or obtained assistance. Most of the people coming to the summer and winter locations have had no previous contact with either of the two community legal clinics, with the summer van or the winter venues. It is possible that they may have taken some action to resolve the problem.²⁴

However, the problems for which people come to the van for assistance have apparently not been resolved. It can be assumed that these people have not previously obtained authoritative assistance. This is an important impact of the Law Van project, going out to where people live or spend much of the time and serving people who would not otherwise have obtained help.

Being People-Centric by Helping with Any Problem

The mobile Law Van and the winter venues provide a highly accessible proactive offer of service that is open for people to request assistance with any problem. In addition to the three types of problems that make up over half of all problems (housing, family law and civil law matters²⁵), people came to the van with many different types of problems. This represents a third way in which the Law Van is highly people-centered, by providing help on-demand without coverage or financial eligibility restrictions for any problem of sufficient concern for the individual to come and ask for help. For example, in the summer of 2022, a small number of problem types made up the majority of problems for which people asked for assistance. Individuals requesting help with housing problems made up the largest proportion of issues at 30.1%,

Figure 2: How People Learned About the Law Van, Percent

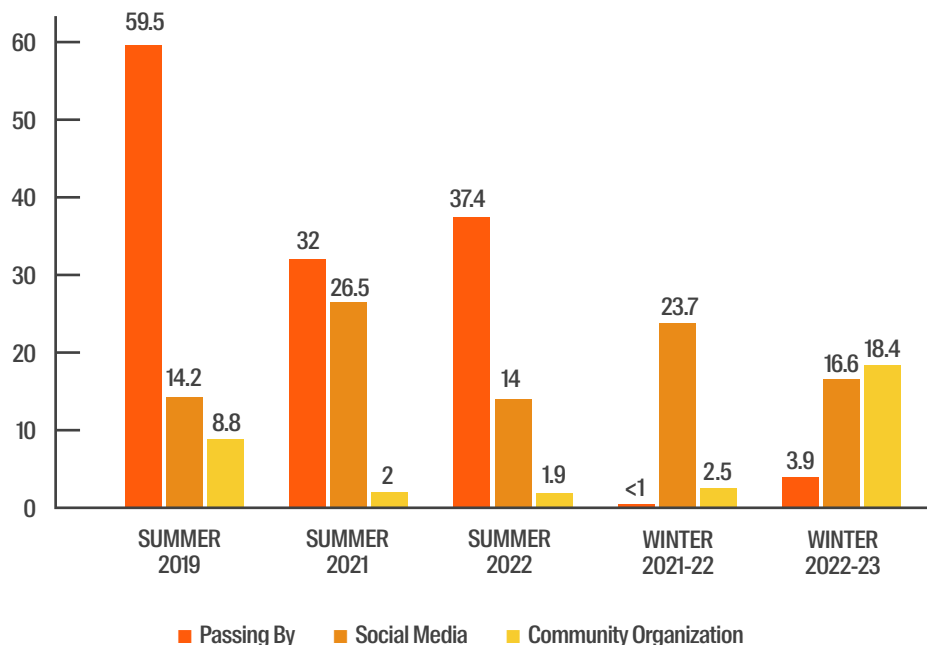
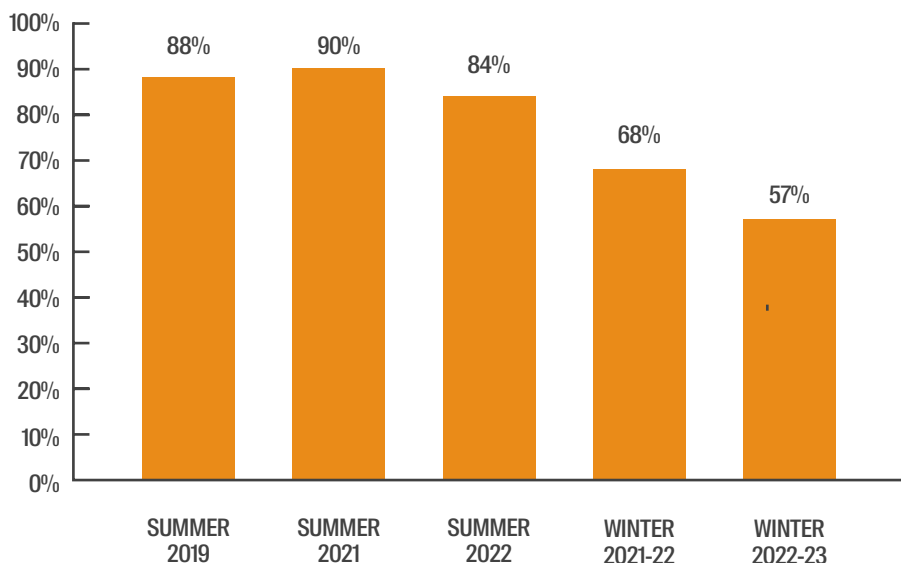


Figure 3: Percent of People Receiving Assistance Having No Previous Contact with the Community Legal Clinics



**Responses of unknown and no answer eliminated*

²⁴ It is understandable that people first take ordinary measures to deal with everyday problems. Talking to friends or relatives, searching the internet and talking with the other party are frequently mentioned in legal needs surveys as actions taken.

²⁵ The civil law matters category is itself a very mixed grouping of issues.

followed by family law making up 14.4% and a variety of non-family civil law problems at 11.1%. These three categories made up over half of all requests for assistance, in total 55.6% of all problems. The fourth largest number of requests involved wills and powers of attorney with 10.6% of people requesting assistance, followed by people requesting help with social assistance problems equaling 6.3% of people and then criminal law at 2.8%. Just over three quarters of all people requesting assistance made up the six largest problem categories. However, there were 23 other problem types, making up 24.7% of the total, each with requests ranging from employment law, 9 requests for assistance, provincial offences at 7 requests, consumer and bankruptcy with 2 requests each, human rights, fraud, debt, police actions and victim's issues each with one person requesting assistance. The wide range of problems for which people received assistance in summer 2022 is a good indication of people-centricity. The Law Van provides assistance with the full range of problems experienced by people, not limited to those within the normal menu of services for the clinics, although the two community clinics do provide a broad range of services.

The summer 2022 results are consistent from the original pilot project in 2019, with the summer of 2021 and the winter of 2021-2022. Tables 1a and 1b show problem types indicating the point at which the number of people asking for assistance for particular problem types reaches about 50% and 75% of all requests for help. All remaining problems are combined in an "other" category because the frequencies are typically very small, one or two occurrences per type of problem. The other category indicates the wide range of problems for which people are assisted. Housing and family law problems are consistently the top two problems for which people request assistance. In each summer or winter season, three problem types account for about half of all problems for which help is needed.

Table 1: Requests for Assistance by Problem Type

SUMMER 2021			SUMMER 2022		
	%	Cum %		%	Cum %
Housing	22.0%		Housing	30.1%	
Family	22.0%	44.0%	Family	14.4%	44.5%
Wills/POA	12.4%	56.4%	Civil Law	11.1%	55.6%
Civil Law ²⁶	10.2%	66.6%	Wills/POA	10.6%	66.2%
Employment	7.2%	73.8%	Social Assistance	6.3%	72.5%
Social Assistance ²⁷	4.2%	78.0%	Criminal	2.8%	75.3%
Other	22.0%	100.0%	Other	24.7%	100.0%
		N = 501			N = 523
WINTER 2021-22			WINTER 2022-23		
	%	Cum %		%	Cum %
Housing	33.3%		Housing	35.7%	
Family	18.5%	51.8%	Family	16.2%	51.9%
Wills/POA	11.7%	63.5%	Wills/POA	13.8%	65.7%
Employment	6.0%	69.5%	Civil Law	8.9%	74.6%
Social Assistance	4.9%	74.4%			
Other	25.6%	100.0%	Other	25.4%	100.0%
		N = 162			N = 308

Five or six types of problems account for three quarters of all requests for assistance. Wills and powers of attorney

²⁶ The civil law category includes matters such as disputes over contracts, small claims court and consumer debt taken to small claims or Superior Court.

²⁷ For the information of readers not familiar with the Ontario social support system the social assistance category is made up primarily of problems related to one support program, Ontario Disability Support Payments (ODSP).

are ranked third among requests for assistance at the summer Law Van in 2021 and at winter venues in 2021-2022 and ranked fourth at the summer Law Van in 2012 and 2022.

Importantly, in all four seasons about a quarter of all requests for assistance, 21.1% in 2019, 22.0% in the summer of 2021, 25.4% in the winter of 2021-2022 and 24.7% in the summer of 2022, fell outside of the main areas of law, defined here as those that fell within approximately the 75% level of all requests. This indicates that the summer Law Van and the winter venues were highly responsive to a wide range of problems for which people requested assistance. In the summer of 2021 this included 132 individuals asking for advice in 23 problem categories other than the main problem areas. These are described in the paragraph following Figure 2. In the winter of 2021-2022 the other categories of law covered 22 separate categories of legal problems and included small claims, property law, insurance, human rights, tax law, refugee law, personal injury, and police action. The 2021 summer Law Van assisted people in 18 areas of law other than the major ones, including identity theft, elder abuse, credit repair, social assistance, consumer problems, bankruptcy and human rights.

People-Centric and Community-Centric

Place matters in terms of how people respond to a new service. Some anecdotal evidence from the Law Van project suggests a connection between people-centricity and community-centricity. People-centricity is usually described as providing a service that responds to the way in which people experience needs and problems. Part of the people-centric quality is the extent to which the law van fits with the small rural towns where both the travelling summer law van and the fixed winter venues provide service. This quality of fitting in initially emerged partly by design and partly through a process of discovery. As the project evolves, this quality of being part of the community being served is being developed greater extent by design. Through consistently and repeatedly showing up in small rural towns, the Law Van has earned its place in the rural communities being served. Being accepted by the people who live there as part of the community there is an important aspect of people- and of community-centricity.

In the 2019 project 586 people visited the Law Van. Of that number, 464 people requested assistance with a problem. 20.8% or 122 people initially came out of curiosity. They did not pause for a second look as they passed by, although other people may have. People were not only noticing something new and continuing on their way. They were coming over and asking who are you and what are you doing here? This proprietary sense of place is an expression of rural culture. It is distinct from big city urban life, although it may be similar to urban villages in which ethnic groups live in their distinct neighbourhoods.

This matters because to maximize its success, a service must be accepted by people, by the community being served. People in rural areas may not embrace new services easily. This is a matter of trust. In rural areas people are aware that they are chronically underserved in many ways compared with larger urban areas. Therefore, the trust that matters a great deal may be harder to establish. Also, people value face-to-face contact. They will respond to services provided by telephone or virtual means, but it helps if they know you in-person first. In rural culture trust is bound to a sense of place. In many situations, including service provision. People will often ask, are you from around here? The physical presence of the Law Van, appearing on a regular basis in places that people consider *their place* eventually comes to mean that the Law Van is *from around here*.²⁸

Anecdotally, when the Law Van reappeared in some of the communities in 2021 after a one-year absence, some people coming to the Law Van remarked *we're glad you're back*. In the shorter term, from week to week, people ask on Facebook: *when will you be back? Is there a day they will be coming back?, when will they be back in [town]? and, are you not coming at all to [town] in November?* This suggests an expectation that the Law Van will be there, a regular and expected part of what goes on in the community.

The presence of the Law Van becomes part of the normal social interaction and communication in communities. People coming to the summer van and winter venues are asked how they learned about the service.²⁹ Along with that data, unsolicited, volunteered remarks made by people are also recorded, often revealing in greater depth the ways in which they connect with and feel about the summer Law Van and the fixed winter locations. These unsolicited remarks reveal

²⁸ The ideas in the section were suggested by the Rural Community Worker.

²⁹ See Figure 2.

the ways in which information about the service appears to have become part of the normal patterns of communication among people. One person coming to the van in the summer of 2022 said, *my mechanic suggested I should come in to see you*. When asked how s/he learned about the Law van, another person said in 2022, *the whole town is talking about you*. Another person coming to the Law Van in the summer of 2021 said *my mother saw you on Facebook and said I should come in to see you*. It is common for people to say that they are asking for information on behalf of a friend or relative.

There is a social organization of helping in all communities, although taking different forms from one place to the next. Establishing collaborative partnerships with partner organizations is taking on an increased importance as the project develops. The following example provides an anecdotal illustration drawn from the “winter law van” of how different services can be connected to people needing assistance, through the partner organizations that host the winter venues, and family. In this case, the individual in need of help was a client of the community organization hosting the winter venue in the town. The parents of the individual connected the person in need with the law van through the community group hosting the Law Van. The rural community worker describes the interaction.

One morning I arrived at [location] and the receptionist handed me a post-it note with a name and phone number. She said they were the parents of one of their clients and they had some questions. She was wondering if I would be willing to call them as they couldn't make it in. Of course, I did.

People-centricity and community-focus may be inextricably bound together. Being people-centered is being part of the community being served. This aspect of people-centricity is the way in which the Law Van seems to have become part of the everyday life of the community. This character of the Law Van project manifests itself in different ways so that the Law Van has become embedded in the normal patterns of communication within the community.

The Law Van has earned a place in the communities it serves by being available to people as much as possible *where they are at*, on their own time, their own time and in their own place. The Law Van is sustainable because it has become part of the communities being served. It has earned its place by showing up reliably week after week – when it is hot or cold, when the weather is fine or raining.

Holistic Assessment and Conversations

The Law Van project does more than identify people with problems. About a third receive legal advice³⁰ to help resolve a problem while about two thirds are given information or assistance about how to navigate the situation and a referral. During a typical encounter, as described by one of the lawyers, the individual has the opportunity to describe the situation to the case worker or the lawyer, obtain legal and non-legal advice, get suggestions about priorities and receive practical suggestions about next steps. People are given reassurance if they are worried about something and suggestions about community agencies that might help. This is all made available without an appointment.

Table 2: Advice and Referrals by Percent

	SUMMER 2021	WINTER 2021-2022	SUMMER 2022	WINTER 2022-2023
Legal Advice	32.4%	37.3%	41.6%	36.7%
Referral	67.6%	62.7%	56.4%	59.4%
Brief Service	--	--	--	3.4%

Referrals are given for nearly 100% of family law problems. Referrals are mostly made to sources of legal advice such as Legal Aid Ontario, other specialized clinics, pro bono services, the Law Society of Ontario lawyer referral service or to private bar lawyers in the local area. People are also often referred to the two community legal clinics.

The sessions in which problems are discussed are holistic in nature, lasting between 20 to 45 minutes. As reported by the rural community worker, *people come in with a quick question [but] we always end up having a 20-minute conversation*.

³⁰ Defined as advice about laws, rules and rights applied to your own specific and personal situation.

Three examples illustrate the concrete nature of the assistance. These were all recorded in case notes by the rural community worker.

Example 1. *Today we assisted a returning visitor with drafting a letter to her landlord. The landlord is approaching harassment in their treatment of the tenant. In this visit we recapped past contact the client has had with the Van, we received updates on that situation. Followed by information on new/related issue. We then provided a brief service to assist with drafting a letter, as well as referral information and next steps for dealing with the matter. Some of these next steps included filing a T2/T6 application. We explained where to find information on these forms. Before she left we gave her a verbal to-do list: 1) call rental housing enforcement 2) write a letter to your landlord using our draft 3) prepare evidence for original matter 4) work on tenant applications. A process that may have taken a week or more had the client contacted one of the Clinics directly, has taken 1 visit to the van. The total time for this assistance was 35 to 40 minutes.*

Example 2. *We had a gentleman last week call with a question about his late brother's estate. He provided information on the current situation and mentioned the brother had been a tenant. It was clear the brother's death wasn't expected and has been traumatic for the family. Although we couldn't assist I was able to provide the client with next steps, namely calling the law society referral service. The client stated he was relieved to have direction in his complex situation. I was able to ask if the client was having any issues with the brother's landlord - no issue. He was then sent an email recapping the conversation with our referral information attached. The total time was a 20-minute phone call plus a 15-minute email.*

Example 3. *We had a woman attend in [community]. She came with a question about Wills/POA. However, through discussing her situation it turned into a few different issues. We advised her on tenant rights. We also helped her track down phone numbers for [government] departments in the United Kingdom to call concerning pension plans. She left with a to-do list of next steps, and who to contact. The total time for this assistance was 40 to 45 minutes.*

These examples serve to illustrate how holistic intakes and assessments can be starting points for conversations that identify the range and depth of issues of concern to the people asking for help. According to a senior lawyer and Executive Director of one of the sponsoring community legal clinics, people receive more attention and conversation around referrals than at the clinic and this is a good thing and I have seen people leave feeling better.

Building Greater People-Centricity and Community-Centricity

The central idea advanced in this paper is that identifying people with unmet needs and providing them with the pathways along which they will come forward and seek help is a people-centered process. It addresses the initial experience that many people have when encountering a problem. Often that experience is acquiescing in the problem and not asking for authoritative help in a timely manner. In the rural setting where the summer and winter law van project is doing its work, the process of building this early-stage people centricity is embedded in the community. People respond to proactive offers of assistance through the structures of community in which they live. People-centered justice can be extended through the service agencies and voluntary associations that make up the social organization of helping in a community and by making the law van and the winter venues part of the normal patterns of communication among people.

Data from the 2022-2023 winter venues showed that a larger percentage of clients found pathways to help through community organizations. This occurred either through referrals to the winter venues or by providing information about them. A concerted effort to connect with a larger number of community service and voluntary associations might be a good path forward.

There are many social services agencies and voluntary associations in the communities that assist people with a variety of problems. However, professional and volunteer service providers in these helping organizations may not have a good understanding that the issues for which they are assisting their own clients or members of their constituencies have legal aspects and the extent to which collaborative problem-solving with the summer and winter law van would be to

the benefit of the people they assist.³¹ By informing the staff in these organizations about the assumptions and clinical experience surrounding a people-centered and holistic approach, these organizations might become more effective sources of referrals, information about the summer law van and winter venues, and secondary consultations. This may be an important aspect of people-centricity because it ‘bundles’ the assistance provided through collaboration among service providers that reflects the mix of problems experienced by individuals. A people-centric approach reduces barriers and improves the legal capability of both individuals and the network of helping organizations that assist them. Giving individuals and organizations the tools to think about progressive approaches to justice and access to justice and to create pathways to justice is an important aspect of creating a people-centric service and possibly increasing the number of people assisted.

Greater people-centricity might be achieved by increasing the understanding of holistic service and the everyday legal problems perspective among people in the community, thus reducing their reluctance to seek assistance. The results of legal needs research indicate that people often do not recognize the legal aspects of problems they experience and thus do not take appropriate action. People will know they have a problem but may not think it is legal or that it is serious enough to see a lawyer. One underlying aspect of this barrier may be the perception of lawyers in the popular culture largely shaped by entertainment media. This is a perception that lawyers deal with major problems such as crime, complex legal issues, contentious family disputes in the courts and that the services of lawyers are very expensive. Also, some people with lived experience of poverty and reliance on social assistance might have a negative view of lawyers as part of the system that has treated them unfairly without understanding their lives and problems.³²

It might be possible to inform the public and community organizations about the holistic, whole client – whole lawyer style of assistance available from the law van and the winter venues through PLE events, direct contact on Facebook and Instagram posts. Also, with the right emphasis and explanations by the service providers, people being assisted at the van might pass along their perceptions and experiences about holistic service from “a different kind of lawyer”³³ to their friends and relatives. As suggested in the preceding paragraphs, community organizations that are well-informed about the nature of the service might be instrumental in breaking down barriers experienced by individuals to whom they provide service or who are members of their group. PLE and community education about the holistic or people-centered service available might be a way to address one aspect of the remaining unmet need.³⁴

The people-centricity of the law van might be extended to a greater number of people through efforts to expand the geographic coverage of the service. However, the law van and winter venues are highly localized. Between 65% and 90% of people seeking help are from the town where the summer van or winter venue are located. On the other hand, people normally travel to different places within the rural area for shopping and services. The use of social media in places where the summer van does not stop or is not located in the winter might increase accessibility in those places. During the winter of 2021-2022, although in-person services were maintained as much as possible, virtual and telephone assistance were made available because of some interruptions due to COVID-19 and during severe weather. Using these media to further expand accessibility is possible. However, the people-centricity of virtual and remote services requires some development based on practical experience.

The number of people in the wider rural area outside of the towns where the services are located weekly who do not have access to reliable transportation is not known. Similarly, the number of people who do not have an internet service with adequate bandwidth, or do not have internet at all, is not known. Reaching people in these circumstances would no

³¹ Legal Secondary Consultation: How Legal Aid Can Support Communities and Expand Access to Justice, Canadian Forum on Civil Justice, 2018. In the Legal Secondary Consultation project community legal clinics assisted existing community services and voluntary associations already helping people to deal with the legal aspects of their clients’ problems. In that project, an approach was made to community services agencies and voluntary associations already assisting people with various issues explaining that the problems with which they were assisting their own clients or members of their constituencies probably have legal aspects. Legal advice from the community legal clinics could assist them more effectively resolve the problems they were attempting to resolve for their own clients by identifying the legal aspects and assisting the service providers in dealing with them. Both the Legal clinic of Guelph and Wellington County and Halton Community Legal Services have continued to receive requests for secondary consultations since the original pilot project.

³² Extending the Reach of Legal Aid: Report on the Pilot Phase of the Legal Health Check-Up Project, Canadian Forum on Civil Justice, Toronto, 2015; the report of phase two of the project is Engaging the Power of Community to Expand Legal Services for Low-Income Ontarians, Canadian Forum on Civil Justice, Toronto, 2017

³³ This phrase comes from a representative of an organization of people with lived experience of poverty conducted as part of the Legal Health Check-Up project.

³⁴ Other barriers to accessibility such as limited access to transportation and poor access to the internet should also be examined.

doubt present challenges. The people in these situations may be in contact with social services agencies and voluntary associations in the region. Partnerships between the Law Van project and these organizations might be a way to bridge these gaps.

Concluding Remarks

This paper is based on data and observations about a project that is at the mid-point. Results are promising but tentative. Lessons have been and are being learned. They are based on some basic quantitative data and some very informative qualitative information in the form of unsolicited comments made spontaneously by people requesting assistance. Observations made by the service providers at the van and the fixed winter venues are highly informative. The project team is adding to its existing stock of knowledge about people-centricity, learning about people-centricity that is specific to the project as it develops. The idea of people-centricity is not entirely new in the work of the two clinics. A series of projects, the legal health check-up,³⁵ secondary legal consultation³⁶ and the newcomer PLE project³⁷ have all reflected the wisdom of clinical practice that if you sit in your office waiting for people to come through the door asking for help you will already have failed. That accumulated knowledge is responsible for developing the people-centered nature of the Law Van. People-centricity is not just a new lens through which to view this or any other project. It is a tool to improve the accessibility and the quality of legal service.

The Law Van project helps people at the beginning of the process of access to justice, discovering unmet need in a proactive way that takes account of the ways people experience problems, in this case leading to their not obtaining help early on. It is a start toward locating help where people can easily find it. Some level of assistance is immediately available at the summer and winter venues. Through the holistic nature of the assessment an attempt is always made to engage the individual seeking help in a conversation that goes beyond the presenting problem. Another working principle that has emerged as this work proceeds is that even though the law relating to a problem may be complex and technical, we cannot assume we know more about what people need and want than the people themselves. Conversations with people seeking help at the summer Law Van and at the winter venues frequently last from 20 to 45 minutes. A third principle that is part of the wisdom of clinic practice in the two community legal clinics involved in the law van project is that people may not remember everything you told them, but they will remember how you treated them. People will come back for more help. They may come just to tell you what progress they may have made resolving the issue. Word will spread among the community, by word of mouth and through social media and others will come. In this way, people-centricity and the growth and sustainability of the project become inter-related.

The Law Van project advances in a localized but important way recommendation 2 of the OECD Council on Access to Justice and People-Centered Justice Systems³⁸, encouraging the design and delivery of people-centered legal and justice services and recommendation 5 b) ii encouraging people-centered research, data collection and collaboration.

³⁵ Op. cit. Currie, footnote 23

³⁶ Op. cit. Currie, footnote 24

³⁷ Brandon D. Stewart, Building Trusted Relationships Through PLE Conversations: A Report on the Newcomers Conversations Learning Canadian Law Report, Halton Community Legal Services, 2021

³⁸ Op. cit., OECD, footnote 2