

LEGAL AID COMMISSION OF THE NORTHWEST TERRITORIES

Annual report 2024-2025

COMMISSION D'AIDE JURIDIQUE DES TERRITOIRES DU NORD-OUEST

Rapport annuel 2024-2025



Photo provided by Kate Cannell

If you would like this information in another official language, call us.

English

Si vous voulez ces informations dans une autre langue officielle, contactez-nous.

French

Kīspin ki nitawih̄tīn ē nīh̄yawih̄k ōma ācimōwin, tipwāsīnān.

Cree

Tłıchq̄ yatı k'èè. Dı wegodi newq̄ dè, gots'ō gonede.

Tłıchq̄

ʔerih̄tł'is Dēne Sų́íné yatı t'a huts'elkēr xa beyáyatı theʔą ʔat'e, nuwe ts'ēn yóftı.

Chipewyan

Edı gondı dehgháh got'ıe zhatıé k'ée edatł'éh enahddhę nıde naxets'é edahıı.

South Slavey

K'áhshó got'ıne xədə k'é hederı ʔedıhtł'é yerıııwę nıde dúle.

North Slavey

Jii gwandak izhii ginjik vat'atr'ıjáhch'uu zhit yinoththan jı', diits'at ginohkhıı.

Gwich'in

Uvanittuaq ilitchurisukupku Inuvialuktun, ququaqluta.

Inuvialuktun

ᑕᑦᑭᑦᑲᑦ ᑕᑦᑲᑦᑲᑦ ᑕᑦᑲᑦᑲᑦ ᑕᑦᑲᑦᑲᑦ ᑕᑦᑲᑦᑲᑦ ᑕᑦᑲᑦᑲᑦ ᑕᑦᑲᑦᑲᑦ ᑕᑦᑲᑦᑲᑦ.

Inuktitut

Hapkua titiqqat pijumagupkit Inuinnaqtun, uvaptinnut hivajarlutit.

Inuinnaqtun

Indigenous Languages:

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Executive Summary

The Northwest Territories Legal Aid Commission (LAC) administers the *Legal Aid Act* and the *Legal Aid Regulations*. The LAC promotes access to justice throughout the Northwest Territories by:

1. providing legal aid services to eligible persons;
2. promoting public knowledge of the law;
3. encouraging flexibility and innovation in the provision of services;
4. recognizing the diversity of legal needs; and
5. operating within an independent but accountable framework.

Résumé

La Commission d'aide juridique est chargée de l'application de la Loi sur l'aide juridique et ses règlements, et fait la promotion de l'accès à la justice à l'échelle des Territoire du Nord-Ouest en :

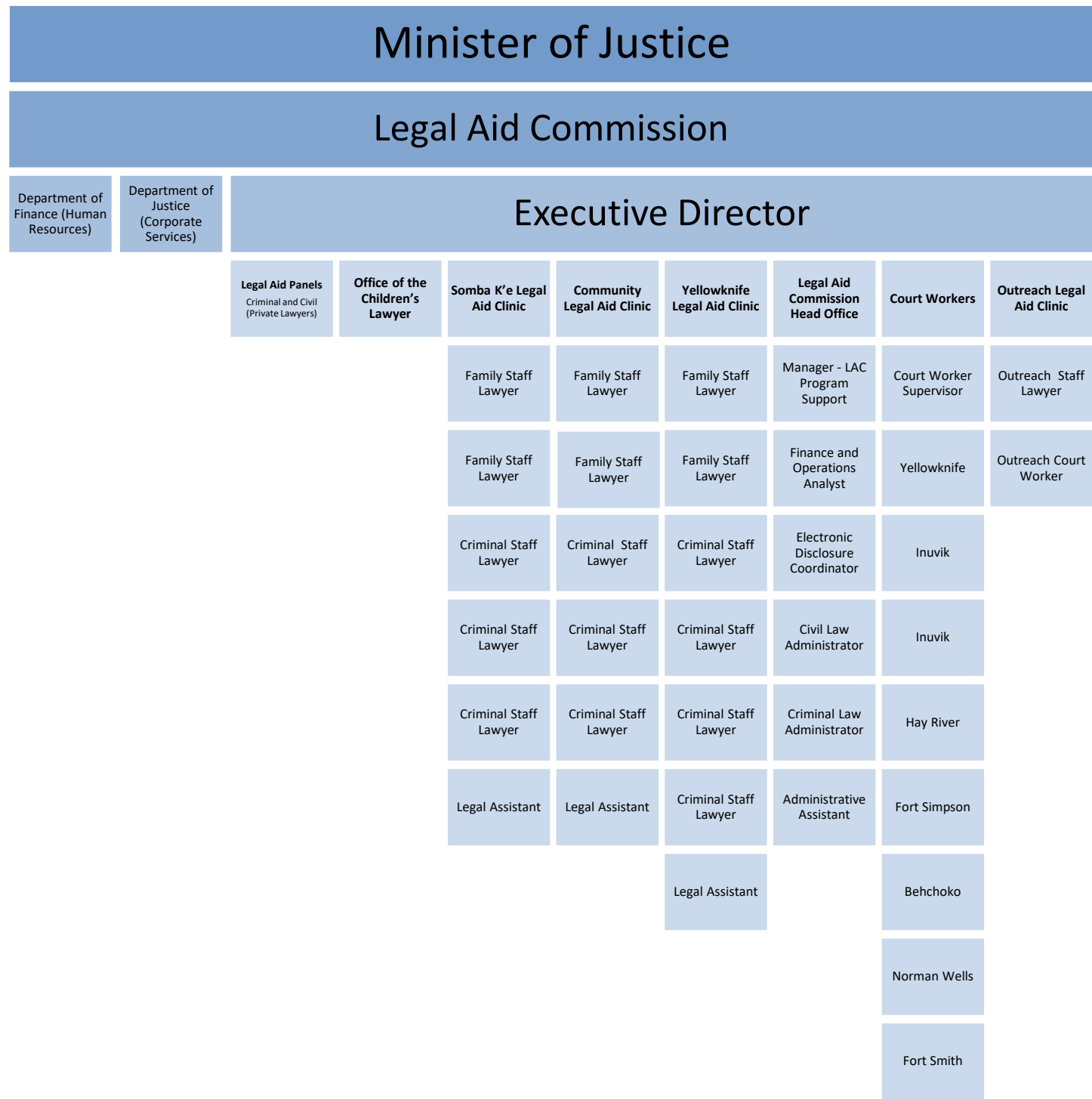
1. fournissant des services d'aide juridique aux personnes admissibles;
2. encourageant la connaissance de la loi;
3. favorisant la souplesse et l'innovation dans la prestation de programmes et de services d'aide juridique;
4. reconnaissant la variété des besoins sur le plan juridique des personnes admissibles;
5. exerçant ses activités indépendamment du gouvernement, mais en étant transparent à l'égard de ce dernier.



Photo provided by Gianne Mercado

Organizational Structure

The following organizational chart reflects the structure of the Legal Aid Commission as of March 31, 2024.



A Message from the Chair of the Commission

It is an honor to continue serving as Chair of the NWT Legal Aid Commission, representing the interests and needs of our residents.

I am pleased to introduce Jennifer Frankie-Smith, our newest Commission Member, who represents the North Slave region.

I extend my sincere gratitude to our dedicated Legal Aid staff. Your hard work and commitment to providing legal services are the foundation of our success.

I would like to thank Tracy Bock, Executive Director, for strong leadership and guidance. Tracy's vision has been instrumental in supporting our staff and in ensuring that we continue to meet the evolving needs of our clients and communities.

This year, we bid farewell to Lacey Black, who served as our Program Support Manager. We are thankful for her contributions during her time with Legal Aid and wish her all the best in future endeavors. At the same time, I'm pleased to congratulate Brandon Blatz on his promotion to Program Support Manager. Brandon has been a valued part of our team. He previously worked as Civil Law Administrator, and we are excited to see him take on his new role.

We appreciate the support and collaboration of the Department of Justice. Working closely together allows us to deliver these critical services to residents across the Northwest Territories.

As we look ahead, the Commission remains committed to providing access to justice. I am excited about the opportunities before us and grateful to my fellow Commission members for their dedication.

Together, we will continue to work towards a stronger, more equitable legal aid system for the people we serve.

Alana Mero
Chair
NWT Legal Aid Commission

THE *LEGAL AID ACT*/ NORTHWEST TERRITORIES LEGAL AID COMMISSION

The Northwest Territories Legal Aid Commission exists to promote access to justice throughout the Northwest Territories. It was established as a corporation by the *Legal Aid Act*, and corresponding regulations which came into force on December 28, 2014, and specifies the mandate, key activities of the Commission. It succeeded the Legal Services Board of the Northwest Territories, which had been established to implement the responsibility of the Government of the Northwest Territories (GNWT) for the provision of legal aid in 1971.

The policies and practices of the Legal Aid Commission have been consolidated into the *Northwest Territories Legal Aid Commission Guidelines for the Provision of Legal Aid*. The Legal Aid Commission also administers the Children’s Lawyer program and follow its *OCL Policies and Procedures Manual* which is also approved by the Commission.

The Commission is an arms-length organization independent of the GNWT. While independent of the GNWT in its operations and decision-making, the Commission reports to the Minister of Justice and functions within an accountability framework to the GNWT regarding financial management and human resources.

The responsibility for funding the Commission is shared by the GNWT and the Government of Canada.

Commission Members

The Minister of Justice appoints members of the Legal Aid Commission under subsection 4(4) of the *Legal Aid Act*. By convention various regions are represented on the Commission. The 2024/2025 Commission was composed of the following:

| | |
|-----------------------|---|
| Joan Mercredi | Representing the South Slave |
| Alana Mero, Chair | Representing the Beaufort Delta |
| Jennifer Franki-Smith | Representing the North Slave |
| Brad Patzer | Representing the Public Service |
| Paul Parker | Representing the Law Society of the Northwest Territories |

Mandate of the Legal Aid Commission

The Commission sets policies and makes recommendations to the Minister about hiring Executive Director. It administers legal aid clinics, maintains a panel of private lawyers for eligible clients for criminal and family matters, and hears appeals in cases where legal aid has been denied or when lawyers believe their payments have been reduced without justification. Additional powers are prescribed under subsection 4(9) of the *Legal Aid Act*.

Commission Meetings

During the 2024-2025 fiscal year, the Legal Aid Commission had two substantive in-person meetings and one by Zoom. The Commission also met virtually on five other occasions to consider Appeals.

Association of Legal Aid Plans of Canada

The Association of Legal Aid Plans of Canada (ALAPC) is a voice for Canada's Legal Aid Plans. It provides a national perspective on legal aid and access-to-justice issues. Every jurisdiction in Canada participates in this voluntary group of Executive Directors, CEOs and senior staff. The objectives of ALAP are to undertake, support and facilitate research concerning access to justice issues; to improve public awareness of access to justice issues; and to undertake such activities, on its own or with others, as may be in the interest of access to justice in Canada. The June 2026 ALAP annual meeting will be held in Yellowknife.



Photo provided by Brandon Blatz

Message from Commission Members

Joan Mercredi, South Slave Representative

My work as a Commissioner on the Legal Aid Commission of the Northwest Territories has been both challenging and fulfilling. Over the past year the Commission has heard several appeals not all of which the outcome would have necessarily satisfied the expectations of appellants. That said, our role is to follow the rules which guide our work. The rules are generally fair although some do need updating which is being undertaken. I believe the Commission plays an important role in the administration of justice to all residents of the Northwest Territories and am honored to be a part of that process. Thank you.

Jennifer Franki-Smith, North Slave Representative

Serving on the Legal Aid Commission Review Board has reinforced for me the vital role our work plays in ensuring fairness, accountability, and access to justice. Our mandate is clear: to review cases where clients have appealed after being denied legal aid. These appeals often involve individuals facing complex legal challenges and are navigating circumstances that they are facing for the first time, are very stressful, overwhelming, and they can have deep long-lasting impacts for the rest of their lives.

While the initial decision to deny legal aid is based on specific criteria set out in the legal aid act and relevant policies, the appeal process ensures that those decisions can be reconsidered with additional information, new circumstances, or potential oversights. I strongly believe it is not the intention of legal aid to deny services to people as a first option, but there are situations where people are denied, and that is where the review board can consider additional information.



Photo provided by Cassandra Norris

As board members, we bring diverse professional backgrounds, very different life experiences, region-specific knowledge, and new perspectives to each appeal that comes to us.

This diversity strengthens our ability to make well-balanced and fair decisions. For each case we have considered since I joined the board, I truly feel that we have listened to the facts, considered the applicant's individual situation, considered all the applicable policies, while always keeping in mind a person's right to access justice. In doing so, I feel we have made informed and well thought out decisions.

My role on the board is to help ensure that no one is denied representation without having the opportunity for their case to be heard by the review board. For many applicants, this process is not only their last hope for legal help, but also their last belief in a justice system that listens and responds to everyone's needs specific to their situation. As a Tłıchǫ woman born and raised in Yellowknife, I know that racial discrimination exists. I know that Indigenous people represent an overwhelming majority of those that find themselves in the justice system. I know the many social issues in our communities that stem from colonization. I know the systemic issues and barriers within the justice system that Indigenous people face daily, and therefore it is a responsibility I do not take lightly.

Looking ahead, I remain committed to continuing my role on the board in supporting a review process that is fair, thorough, compassionate, and culturally appropriate.



Photo provided by Kate Cannell

A Message from the Executive Director

Tracy Bock

As Executive Director of the Northwest Territories Legal Aid Commission, I am pleased to present our 2024–2025 Annual Report. Every day I see examples of our very dedicated team of lawyers, court workers, and administrative staff going above and beyond to help people. Simply put: Legal Aid cares, and we work hard to make a difference for our clients!

From comprehensive coverage to generous financial eligibility criteria, NWT Legal Aid is one of the best in Canada. Providing professional and committed service to our clients and access to justice remains our focus.

The NWT Legal Aid Commission consists of several core program areas: Criminal, Family and Civil law, the Court Worker program, Outreach services and the Office of the Children’s Lawyer.

Highlights of this past year include:

- The Annual Meeting took place at Inuvik in April. We thank Commission member Alana Mero and the community of Inuvik for their warm welcome and for creating a space where important conversations could take place.
- 2024 marked the 50th anniversary of the incorporation of the Northwest Territories’ Court Worker program.
- Three court workers received long-term service awards: Rose Lamouelle (Behchokò), Sheri Olsen (Fort Smith) and Maureen Maurice-Landry (Hay River) each received their certificates commemorating twenty-five years of service with the Government of the Northwest Territories. We are proud of them, and grateful for the experience, knowledge and community connection they bring to our work.
- We commenced revision of the *Legal Aid Guidelines*:
 - Family Law and Outreach Program *Guidelines* were updated.
 - Criminal Law *Guidelines* are being revised, with plans to finish and implement these in the coming year.
 - In consultation with the NWT Bureau of Statistics, Financial Eligibility *Guidelines* are being reviewed to ensure they align with current economic conditions and cost-of-living realities in the NWT.
- We are trying to better engage the Communities we serve: Since January 2025, the Court Circuit Schedule has changed to allow lawyers to spend more time in communities. Legal Aid is working to ensure there is continuity of counsel, so that where possible clients are helped by the same lawyer for all their Court appearances.

Legal Aid continues to struggle with an ever-increasing workload, burdening already overworked staff. Recruitment efforts are on-going to increase our capacity. However, finding Staff Lawyers continues to prove quite difficult. As such, we rely heavily on panel lawyers for Court Circuits, Bail Hearings (which can be done remotely), and for more complicated Territorial and Supreme Court matters. This is not a sustainable business model for Legal Aid.

Key administrative staff in the Commission office often work overtime to meet ever-increasing demands associated with dockets for Yellowknife and communities, from Show Cause through to Supreme Court. This includes: processing and distribution of disclosure to counsel, applications and approvals for matters beyond Presumed Eligible (pleas of Not Guilty), and of reassignment of counsel where there is either a breakdown or scheduling conflict. We are very lucky to have such dedicated staff.

Recruitment efforts for new counsel include:

- Attendance at the University of Saskatchewan College of Law Career Fair and other remote appearances at several similar functions, we promoted legal practice in the Northwest Territories, discussed opportunities with law students and lawyers as part of our broader strategy.
- We have had success in recruiting junior Staff Lawyers because of our Articling Program. In 2024-2025 we had three Articling Students do a rotation with the Legal Aid Commission, Legal Division at the NWT Department of Justice, and with private firms. Attracting, mentoring and otherwise supporting new lawyers is an important step in ensuring long-term sustainability of legal services in the North.

The Legal Aid Commission is an active participant in several national initiatives: the Federal-Provincial/Territorial Permanent Working Group on Legal Aid, the Tri-partite Working Group on the Aboriginal Court Worker Program, and the Association of Legal Aid Plans of Canada. We are looking forward to hosting the June 2026 in-person meeting of the legal aid plans in Yellowknife.

Legal Aid is a vital part of a fair and functional justice system, ensuring that people can have their voices heard, rights protected, and legal matters addressed with dignity. We are committed to delivering timely, high-quality legal services to the people who need these most, often during the most difficult times of their lives. More and more often we face great challenges in our efforts to this end, particularly in the areas of scheduling and capacity. With compassion, innovation, and hard work, we continue to persevere, knowing there is no alternative for our clients.

We always strive to do better. The Legal Aid Commission is always open to receive feedback on how it can best serve the residents of the Northwest Territories.

I encourage you to explore the remainder of this report to learn more about our programs, and the people driving the important work of legal aid in our territory.

Sincerely,
Tracy Bock

The Legal Aid Outreach Program

The Outreach Legal Aid Clinic is a 2-person office, staffed by a court worker and an outreach lawyer.

The Clinic offers up to 1 hour of free legal advice and coaching to any NWT resident who has a legal problem in the following areas:

- a. Tenant rights;
- b. Family law, including child protection, separation and divorce;
- c. Disability, CPP, EI and Income Support claims and appeals;
- d. Employment rights;
- e. Mental Health;
- f. Debtor/Creditor/Small Claims; and
- g. Wills and Estates advice (not drafting Wills).

Persons seeking assistance from the Clinic do not undergo a financial eligibility test.

Walk-in clinics are held twice weekly in Yellowknife, on Tuesday afternoons and Wednesday afternoons from 1:30 p.m. to 4:30 p.m. Advice is also provided through telephone appointments and email.

In 2024-2025, the outreach lawyer conducted Clinics in Behchokò, Dettah, Fort Smith, Hay River, Inuvik, Ndilo, Norman Wells, Tuktoyaktuk and Whatì.

In the 2024-2025 fiscal year, the Clinic assisted 1059 people, 674 who self identified as Indigenous or Métis.

There is often a waiting list to speak with the outreach lawyer, which can be frustrating for those on the call back list. The court worker plays a pivotal role in triaging calls and inquiries to ensure that persons with urgent needs speak to the outreach lawyer as a matter of priority.

Some people who call the Clinic are unsure whether their problem is a legal one. Most people have a better understanding of their legal rights and obligations after talking with the outreach lawyer for 30 minutes or less. Some matters require longer discussions, and a small number of people use the available hour without having their legal problem resolved. For those who contact the Clinic regarding a legal issue that is outside of the scope of the advice that the Clinic can provide, the Clinic will provide referrals to other lawyers who may be able to assist.

Some of the most frequently asked questions by people who contact the Clinic are:

- What legal steps should I take now that I am separated?
- What do I need to do to get a divorce?
- How can I get child support started or changed?
- What steps do I need to take to relocate with my child?
- I'm having a hard time parenting with my ex. What can I do?

- How can I adopt, or custom adopt a child that I care for?
- A social worker is threatening to take my children. Can I stop them?
- What should I do to get a valid will or power of attorney?
- A family member has died. What do I do?
- I have been named executor in a will. What do I do?
- I have a hearing in front of the Rental Officer and might get evicted. What do I do?
- Can I appeal an order made by the Rental Officer?
- My landlord is doing things I think are illegal. What are my protections as a tenant?
- I got served with an Emergency Protection Order (“EPO”). What can I do?
- I want to change my EPO. Can I do that?
- Is my situation something that the small claims court would deal with?
- My employer is providing me with additional duties without extra pay, what can I do?
- My employment contract has a non-compete clause, is it legally enforceable?
- I am being harassed at work, what can I do?

In addition to giving information about legal rights and responsibilities, the Clinic also encourages the participation in other services and programs including the GNWT’s Parenting After Separation course (now available throughout the NWT by webinar), the Family Law Mediation Program and the YMCA’s Independent Legal Advice and Representation Program. Some people who have multiple points of contact with GNWT programs and services and have legal problems are referred to the Intensive Case Management Program for their ongoing assistance and support.

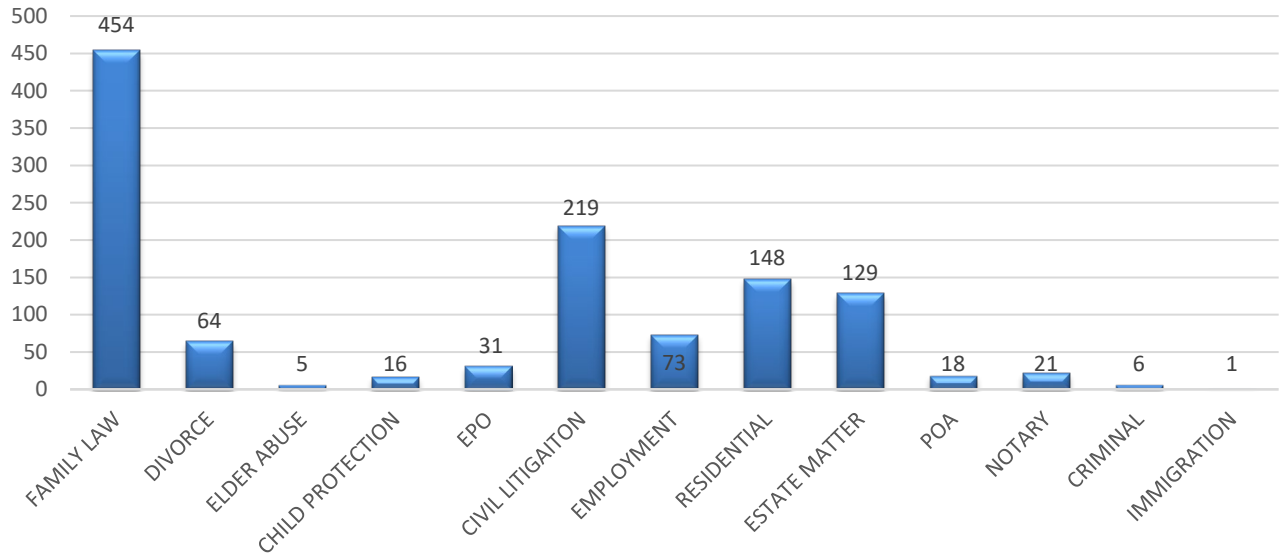
In the upcoming year, the Clinic will strive to continue to deliver services in an efficient and timely manner. Through individualized advice, direction and assistance, the goal is to help each person address their situation successfully in or out of court.

The Legal Aid Outreach Clinic also has a mandate to deliver public legal education. The outreach lawyer is a member of the Law Society of Northwest Territories Access to Justice Committee, and the Public Legal Education Association of Canada. The outreach lawyer is currently working on a project to provide online how-to legal guides for common legal issues in the NWT.

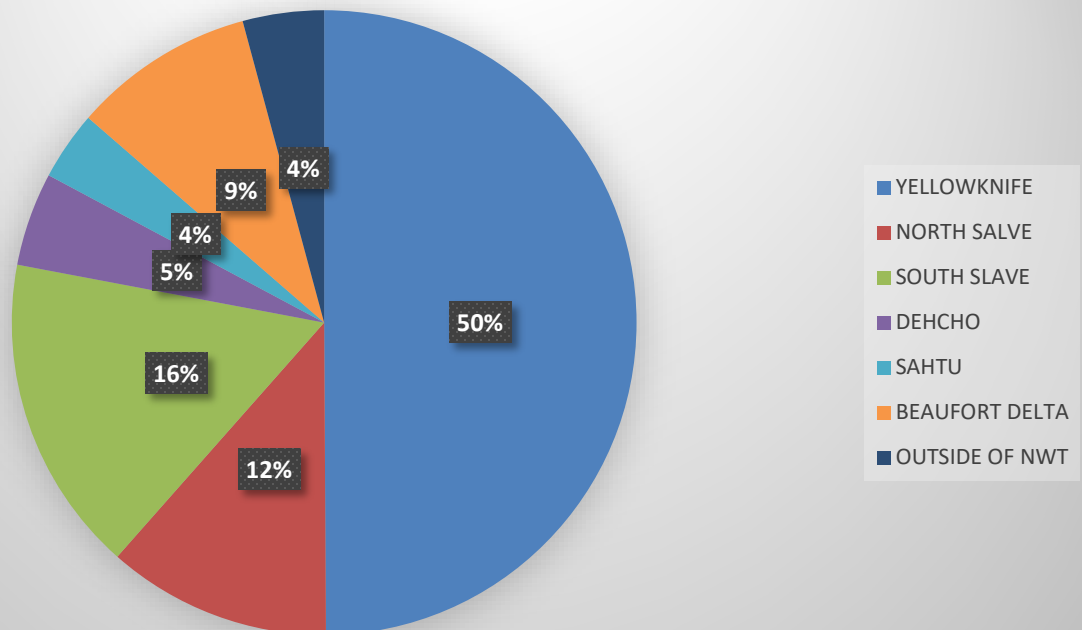


Photo provided by Kate Cannell

Common Legal Issues at the Outreach Legal Aid Clinic



Home Communities for Outreach Legal Aid Clients



The Court Worker Program

Court workers play a crucial role in assisting individuals who interact with the justice system. Their primary responsibility is to aid clients in applying for legal aid, ensuring that all applications and supporting documentation are submitted to the Legal Aid office. Court workers also provide general information and referrals to services within and outside the justice system, acting as a vital link between clients, lawyers, and the justice system—especially in remote communities that lack resident lawyers and where justice is primarily accessed through court circuits.

Some court workers may represent individuals without legal representation in Justice of the Peace Court. They typically assist with guilty pleas, sentencing hearings, and occasionally with straightforward trials. Additionally, they support legal counsel in Territorial Court and Youth Justice Court by ensuring the attendance of clients and witnesses, facilitating translation and communication, gathering information, and conducting client interviews. In certain instances, court workers may also assist clients with guilty pleas and sentencing in Territorial Court.

Court workers contribute significantly to public legal education through their daily interactions with clients, offering information and guidance regarding the court system and referring them to other services. They engage in legal education initiatives by working with school classes and community justice committees, promoting the legal aid program at community career fairs, broadcasting public announcements on the radio, and providing information at seminars and community programs. Some court workers also participate in community inter-agency committees.

The Legal Aid Commission has eight court workers, six of whom are located outside Yellowknife, ensuring service delivery across all regions of the Northwest Territories. These court workers are employees of the GNWT and members of the public service. The Aboriginal Court Worker Program has received federal financial support since 1978.



Photo provided by Cassandra Norris

Office Of the Children’s Lawyer

The position of the Children’s Lawyer was defunded in 2024-2025 following a GNWT-wide fiscal sustainability exercise by the legislature of the NWT. There has been no change in the representation of children’s voices before the Courts of the Northwest Territories. Responsibility for this office rests with the Executive Director. The Program Support Manager of Legal Aid administers the Children’s lawyer program.

The number of children helped has remained consistent over the past ten year. In 2024-2025, the OCL helped 38 children. 25 were from Yellowknife, and 13 were from other communities in the NWT. The OCL acts when appointed by a court.

There is a panel of 5-7 specially trained lawyers that assist children.

The role of the lawyers and procedures for the Office are outlined in the *OCL Policy and Procedures Manual* (“Manual”). This Manual was completed after consultations with interested stakeholders, a cross jurisdictional review, and input from two internationally recognized experts. Furthermore, commentary was added to the Law Society’s *Code of Professional Conduct* to allow panel lawyers who follow the Manual to also meet their other professional obligations. The Manual is subject to ongoing revision and adjustment.

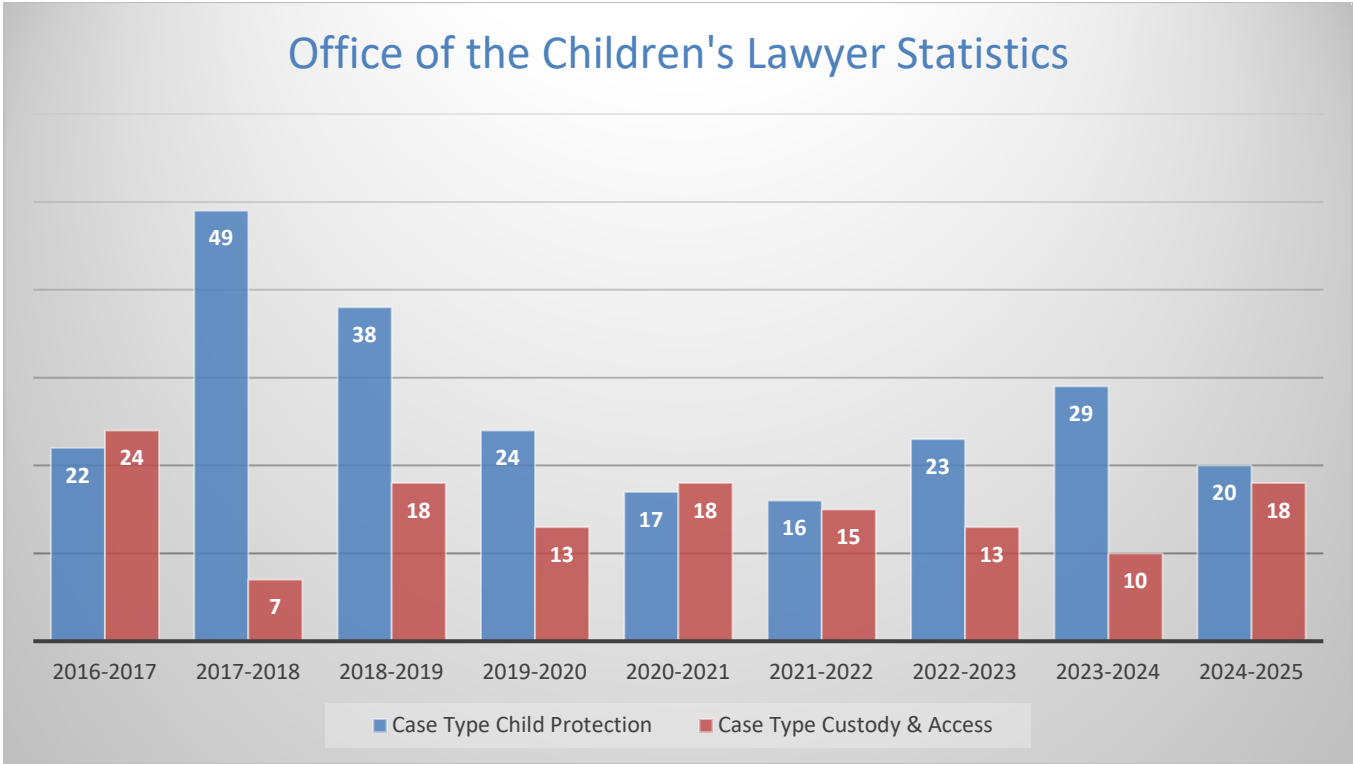
An External Evaluation of OCL program will take place in fiscal year 2025-2026.



Photo provided by Gianne Mercado

OFFICE OF THE CHILDREN’S LAWYER STATISTICS

| Year | Case Type | |
|-----------|------------------|------------------|
| | Child Protection | Custody & Access |
| 2016-2017 | 22 | 24 |
| 2017-2018 | 49 | 7 |
| 2018-2019 | 38 | 18 |
| 2019-2020 | 24 | 13 |
| 2020-2021 | 17 | 18 |
| 2021-2022 | 16 | 15 |
| 2022-2023 | 23 | 13 |
| 2023-2024 | 29 | 10 |
| 2024-2025 | 20 | 18 |



Criminal Defense in the Northwest Territories - What an adventure!

Ash Faeorin-Cruich, Panel Lawyer

As an immigrant to Canada from a small community in Scotland, the sheer size of Canada was intimidating. I trained as an advocate in Scotland before beginning my Canadian adventure and transferring my legal qualifications. I have had the good fortune to live and work in many communities across the country. Building my law practice first in Ontario and later expanding into British Columbia, I have had the opportunity to work on many different types of legal cases.

It was a fortunate conversation that I had with a colleague who was working in Yellowknife at the time that led to me having the opportunity to work as a fly-in defense counsel in the Northwest Territories. I remember reading stories about Canada's wild North as a child. Never would I have thought I would have had the opportunity to visit these places but here I am.

My first Northwest Territories case was a trial in the community of Inuvik - in the height of Summer. Traveling from British Columbia, I landed in Yellowknife thinking that it was a rather small community. I spent the night there and took a walk around the city. In the morning, I then made my way to the smaller Inuvik. As soon as I landed, I met with the characteristic friendliness of the locals. I was offered a ride into town with a trio of ladies who laughed good naturedly at my questions and gave me a guided tour around town. I took a walk around the community taking in the sights before returning to my hotel to prepare for the case.

I remember sitting at the desk working away. The window was open, and I could hear people just outside playing ball and laughing. A colleague sent me a message reminding me to go to bed. I thought that was strange only to look at the time and see that it was already past one in the morning but yet the sun was still shining. Land of the midnight sun indeed.

Since that first circuit I have had the opportunity to visit many communities throughout the Northwest Territories, including Ulukhaktok, Fort Simpson, Fort Providence, Hay River, Fort Liard, and more. Each time I visit a community it is a pleasure to tour the area and meet the locals. All are distinct in history and culture but share the common thread of friendliness and welcoming that really helps a bewildered Southerner. In my spare time, I enjoy crafting - I spin my own yarn and then use it to knit, often traditional Scottish patterns. I am always thrilled to see local crafts in the communities and have slowly been adding to my collection. Fox fur, beadwork, and leather goods are begging to take over my office space competing with the file folders.

Practicing law in the communities is a very different experience than practicing in the South. The camaraderie between counsel is something that I had never experienced in the South. Being such a small bar, we all know each other and come to rely upon each other in serving our clients. Traveling together and having the opportunity to socialize helps us to share experiences and strategies in an organic way that networking and forced mixers in the larger cities in the provinces dream of being able to replicate.

Entering my third year of practicing in the territory, I am proud of the work that I have been able to accomplish so far. As Legal Aid continues to strive to provide services to clients in the remote communities, I have been able to establish a consistent schedule in the community of Behchokò, along with a colleague Katherine Shortreed. With the two of us returning to the community again for another year, we have been able to develop strong relationships with community providers as well as maintain ongoing relationships with clients offering consistent support both during Court and between circuits.

Practicing criminal law in smaller communities requires careful consideration of many factors as well as thinking outside the normal box that lawyers find ourselves in. There are many factors that need to be considered when preparing for Court in the Northwest Territories from language rights (the Territories recognizing 11 official languages for use in the Courts), geographic considerations (many clients live outside of the urban communities), and logistic issues (sometimes the weather doesn't play ball - sometimes the ice doesn't break up). I look forward to continuing to work in the territories and learn more about the unique cultures and needs of the people who live there.



Photo provided by Brandon Blatz

Working with Purpose: A Reflection on My First Year with Legal Aid

Khushpreet Gumber, Finance and Operations Analyst

Joining the Legal Aid Commission of the Northwest Territories in April 2024 has been one of the best experiences of my life. Working here has been more than just a job; it has been a journey filled with learning, growth, and a deep sense of purpose.

As the Finance and Operations Analyst, I take care of the financial side of our work. I make sure that every payment and report is done correctly and follows the rules. This includes processing invoices, handling the budget, and preparing reports. At first, it sounded like just numbers and systems, but I quickly realized that every task I do plays a part in helping people get the legal support they need.

Legal Aid is not just an office—it's a source of hope for people who may be going through some of the hardest times in their lives. Knowing that my work helps families dealing with custody matters, individuals facing criminal charges, or anyone who needs legal advice makes me feel proud every single day.

What I love most about this job is the people I work with. Everyone here shares the same goal: making sure justice is accessible to everyone. The teamwork and kindness here make it a truly special place to work.

Looking back at my first year, I feel grateful and proud. This job has given me purpose and motivation. It challenges me to grow and reminds me why I love what I do. Working with Legal Aid has truly been the best experience of my life. I look forward to continuing this journey and contributing to the important work of making justice accessible to everyone in the Northwest Territories.



Photo provided by Khushpreet Gumber

Legal Aid Coverage

Brydges Service

The *Brydges* service is a free, 24-hour telephone service available to individuals in the Northwest Territories who are in custody, under arrest, or being investigated by law enforcement before an arrest. It provides immediate advice on *Charter* rights and criminal law. Translation support is available in over 140 languages through this service.

Youth Applications – *Youth Criminal Justice Act (Canada), Youth Justice Act (NWT)*

The Legal Aid Commission provides coverage for youth without the need for financial assessment. The Commission considered the unique circumstances facing youth in the Northwest Territories and looked at approaches from across Canada to this issue. It was determined that access to justice was best served by deleting the requirement where financial means of parents or guardians be considered in assessing youth eligibility.

Adult Applications – *Criminal Code*

Although an applicant may be financially eligible for legal aid, the Commission or the Executive Director may decline to provide legal aid coverage for certain offences in accordance with the discretion extended by the *Legal Aid Act* and the *Regulations* under the *Act*, as well as *Guidelines* established by the Commission.

Presumed Eligibility

Presumed eligibility applies only in criminal law cases. Clients who first appear in Territorial Court are presumed to qualify for legal aid and can receive help from duty counsel with simple, immediate matters, such as guilty pleas and straightforward sentencing hearings. If the lawyer determines that the case requires a preliminary inquiry, trial, or a more complex sentencing process, the client must then apply for legal aid to have their financial eligibility and other factors reviewed.

Family Law Applications

Legal aid is generally provided to financially eligible applicants in family law matters, particularly when issues involve children, spousal support, family violence, or child protection.

After a client applies for family law legal aid, a request for a legal opinion is sent to a staff lawyer or a member of the family law panel. The lawyer advises the Executive Director of the Legal Aid Commission on whether the case has merit. If the lawyer concludes that the matter lacks merit, the applicant receives a “Notice of Denial of Legal Aid” explaining the reasons for the decision.

Approved matters are usually assigned according to the date of application. Exceptions are made when a client has an imminent court date, the matter involves family violence, or the client is involved in child protection proceedings—these cases are given priority in assignment.

Civil Applications

The *Legal Aid Act* authorizes the provision of legal aid services to be provided on a discretionary basis for certain civil matters. The *Act* and its *Regulations* also specify which civil cases are not covered. Most civil matters are usually referred to the Outreach Legal Aid Clinic, where clients can receive summary advice, information, and referrals.

Residency and Reciprocity

A person who is not ordinarily resident in Canada is not eligible for legal aid, except for charges under the *Criminal Code* or the *Controlled Drugs and Substances Act*.

The NWT Legal Aid Commission participates in the Inter-Provincial Reciprocity Agreement, which allows legal aid coverage for applicants from any province or territory who need help with a family law matter in another Canadian jurisdiction.



Photo provided by Cassandra Norris

Financial Eligibility

Legal Aid Applications

Potential clients must complete an application for each matter for which they are requesting legal aid. Court Workers take the applications either in person or by telephone. Applicants must provide detailed financial information, including a statement of income for themselves and anyone else living in their household, along with supporting documents, to determine eligibility for legal aid.

Commission employees review applications in detail to determine an applicant's financial eligibility. Eligible applicants are assigned duty counsel for criminal matters or go into an assignment process for family law matters. Applicants who are not financially eligible are sent a notice of denial. Any applicant may appeal a denial to the Legal Aid Commission.

In some cases, using criteria set out in the *Act*, its *Regulations* and the Commission's policies, staff determine that an applicant can contribute to the cost of their legal aid services. A conditional authorization for legal aid is given to the applicant requiring them to make a contribution. Applicants are usually given a set period to make these payments. In some cases, contributions may be assessed at the completion of the file if the client is expected to receive a financial gain. All contributions and recoveries are deposited into the GNWT Consolidated Revenue Fund and are not used to directly offset the cost of legal aid.



Photo provided by Kate Cannell

Legal Aid Assignments

Panels

The Legal Aid Commission has established both criminal and family law panels of private lawyers who are prepared to accept legal aid assignments. The assignment of cases is determined by Section 15 of the *Legal Aid Act*, which provides that the Executive Director must consider the rights of the client, fiscal responsibility and conflicts of interest. In certain limited situations, the client's preference may also be taken into account. The Executive Director may also consider any other relevant factors when assigning cases.

Clients facing Life Imprisonment

Applicants do not have the right to choose a particular lawyer. However, clients who are charged with an offence for which life imprisonment is the maximum penalty (other than break & enter or trafficking), are entitled upon application, to indicate their preferred choice of counsel from a list established by the Executive Director. This preference, however, is only one factor that the Executive Director considers in assigning counsel to a given matter.

Circuit Counsel

The *Legal Aid Act* requires that the Executive Director arranges to have at least one lawyer (circuit counsel) accompany the Territorial Court on each circuit where a lawyer may be required for the delivery of legal aid. Applicants for these services must meet the same eligibility criteria as all other legal aid applicants. Most of the legal aid services provided on circuits fall under presumed eligibility.



Photo provided by Kate Cannell

Legal Aid Clinics

The Commission has 18 staff lawyer positions: ten criminal lawyers, six family lawyers, one Outreach lawyer, and the Children’s Lawyer. On March 31, 2025, 12 of these positions were filled. Staff lawyers provide services throughout the NWT.

Yellowknife Legal Aid Clinic

The Yellowknife Legal Aid Clinic was staffed at 2024-25 fiscal year end with 1 criminal lawyer, 1 family lawyer and 1 legal assistant.

Community Legal Aid Clinic

This office was staffed at the 2024-25 fiscal year end with 2 family lawyers, 3 criminal lawyers, and 1 legal assistant.

Somba K’e Legal Aid Clinic

This office was staffed in 2024-25 with 3 criminal lawyers, 2 family lawyers and 1 legal assistant.

Outreach Legal Aid Clinic

This office has been staffed since September 2022 with one Outreach Court Worker and an Outreach lawyer. Outreach services are provided in office and throughout the NWT by in-person mobile Outreach clinics.

Appeals

Any decisions on coverage made by the Executive Director may be the subject of an appeal to the Commission. An applicant who is assessed a contribution, or is denied legal aid, may appeal the decision by providing written notice of their intention to appeal. The Executive Director shall then bring the matter before the Commission for an appeal hearing.

Lawyers also have the right to appeal the Executive Director’s taxation of an account. Written notice is required. The Executive Director will then bring the matter to the Commission for a hearing. The Commission’s decision is final, with no further right of appeal.

There were 5 eligibility appeals in 2024/25. The results of the eligibility appeals were as follows:

| | |
|----------|---|
| Allowed: | 3 |
| Denied: | 2 |

Administration and Finance

Funding for the Legal Aid Commission

The Legislative Assembly provides funding to the Legal Aid Commission to administer the *Legal Aid Act* and deliver legal services and other programs under the Act. The GNWT also receives funding for the Legal Aid Program, Indigenous Court Work Program, and public legal education, through the *Access to Justice Agreement* with the Government of Canada. In 2024/25 Justice Canada contributed \$4,241,907 to the total cost of \$9,024,000 pursuant to the funding agreement in place through to 2027.

Personnel

The staff of the Legal Aid Commission are appointed and employed under the *Public Service Act*. They are employees of the GNWT Department of Justice. The Department of Finance provides human resources support to the Commission.

Financial Services

Financial services are generally provided by the Department of Justice, though some services are provided by the Department of Finance. Since the Commission does not hold separate funds, it is audited in conjunction with the Department of Justice. A separate annual independent audit is completed in compliance with the *Access to Justice Agreement* with Canada.



Photo provided by Kate Cannell

LEGAL AID TARIFF

| Experience | Hourly Rates (\$) | Daily Rates (\$) |
|-------------------|----------------------|---------------------|
| Student at law | 59 | 342 |
| Less than 4 years | 90 | 518 |
| 4-6 years | 106 | 670 |
| 7-10 years | 131 | 780 |
| 11 & more years | 146 | 873 |

The rates are the same regardless of the level of court for which legal aid services are provided.

STAFF LAWYER SALARIES

Staff lawyers, as GNWT employees, are paid according to the pay scales established for GNWT legal counsel. These rates are based on legal experience, and were fixed as follows for 2023-2024:

| | Pay Scale | \$ |
|------------------|-----------|------------------------|
| Staff Lawyer I | 18 | \$104,910 to \$125,307 |
| Staff Lawyer II | 20 | \$114,816 to \$137,163 |
| Staff Lawyer III | 22 | \$125,697 to \$150,150 |
| Staff Lawyer IV | 24 | \$137,456 to \$164,190 |
| Staff Lawyer V | 25 | \$143,774 to \$171,756 |



Photo provided by Kate Cannell

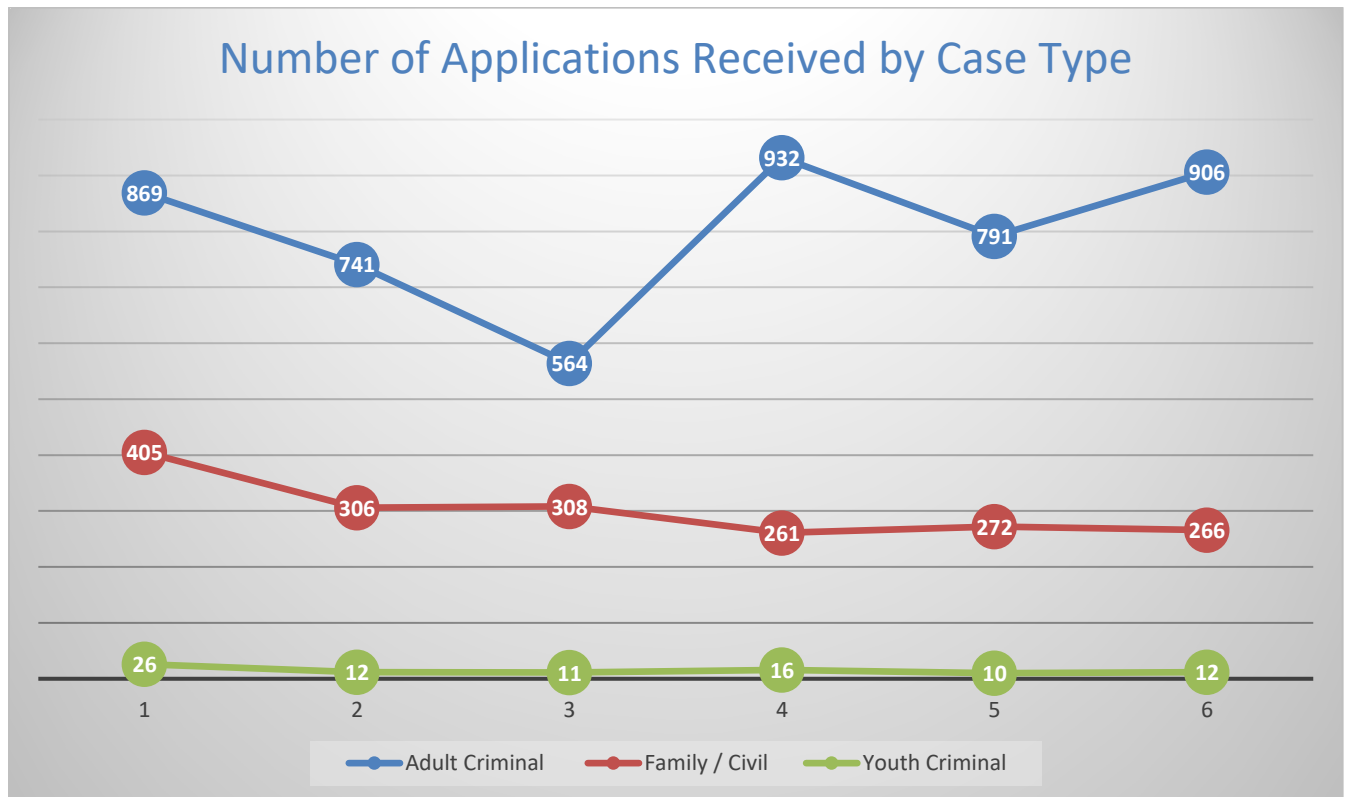
Financial Report 2024-25

| | Actual Expenses | 2024-25 Budget | Variance |
|---|---------------------|---------------------|----------------------|
| Legal Aid Commission Administration (82015) | | | |
| Staff Wages & Benefits | 1,133,910.46 | 966,000.00 | (167,910.46) |
| Operations & Maintenance Expenses | 135,671.00 | 830,000.00 | 694,329.00 |
| Total Administration | 1,269,581.46 | 1,796,000.00 | 526,418.54 |
| | | | |
| Court Workers (82016) | | | |
| Staff Wages & Benefits | 1,115,993.78 | 1,145,000.00 | 29,006.22 |
| Operations & Maintenance Expenses | 29,001.77 | 26,000.00 | (3,001.77) |
| Travel | 178,102.03 | 29,000.00 | (149,102.03) |
| Total Court Workers | 1,323,097.58 | 1,200,000.00 | (123,097.58) |
| | | | |
| Legal Aid Staff Lawyers (82017, 82070 & 82059) | | | |
| Staff Wages & Benefits | 2,435,528.13 | 3,660,000.00 | 1,224,471.87 |
| Operations & Maintenance Expenses | 195,356.20 | 333,000.00 | 137,643.80 |
| Travel | 42,171.78 | 126,000.00 | (405,755.54) |
| Total Staff Lawyers | 2,673,056.11 | 4,119,000.00 | 956,360.13 |
| | | | |
| Legal Aid Commission | | | |
| Commission Expenses | 4,225.00 | | (4,225.00) |
| Total Commission Expenses | 4,225.00 | - | (4,225.00) |
| | | | |
| Panel Lawyers | | | |
| Panel Lawyer Tariff Fees | 2,338,002.09 | 1,363,000.00 | (975,002.09) |
| Travel | 798,440.96 | 336,000.00 | (462,440.96) |
| Total Legal Aid Fees & Disbursements | 3,136,443.05 | 1,699,000.00 | (1,437,443.0) |
| | | | |
| TOTAL | 8,406,403.20 | 8,814,000.00 | (81,986.96) |

STATISTICAL REPORTS FOR 2024/25

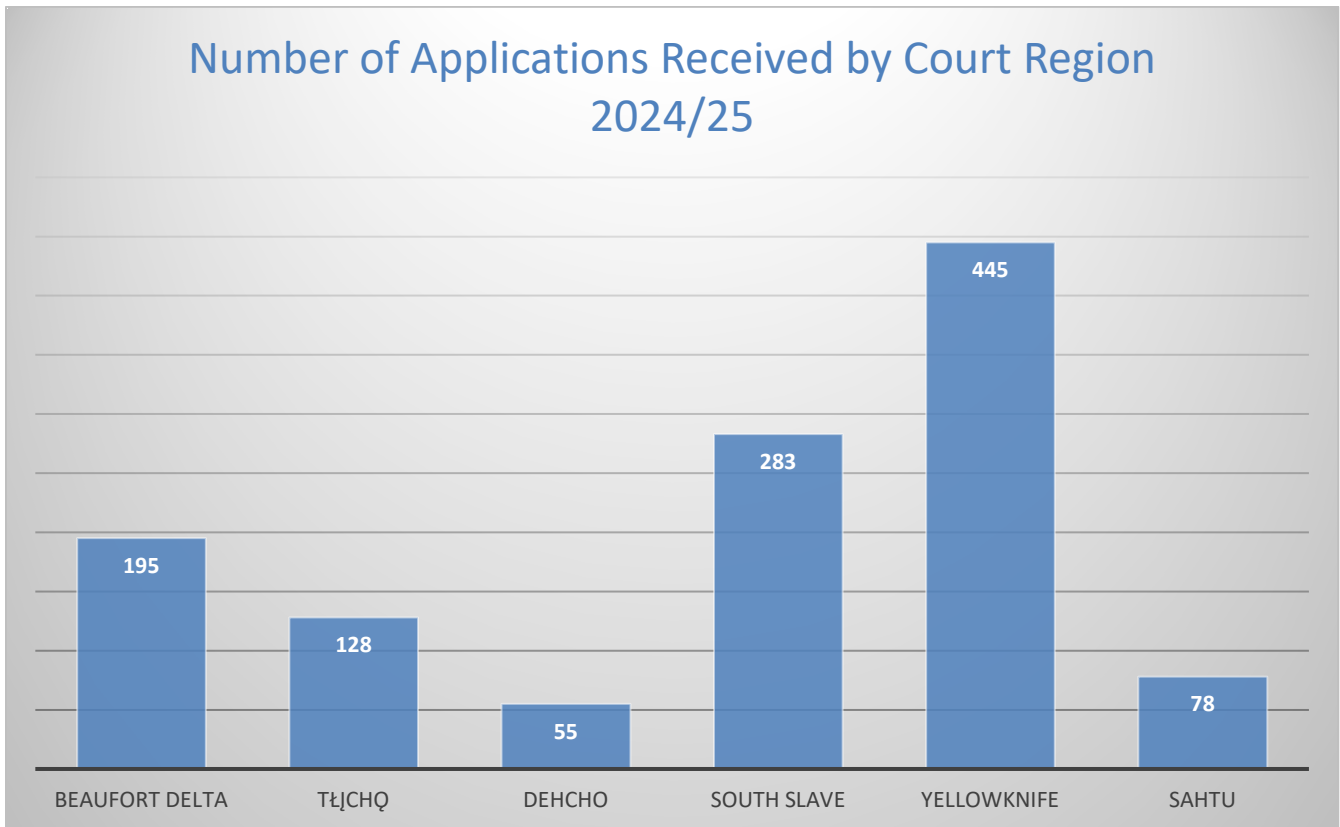
Number of Applications Received by Case Type

| | 19/20 | 20/21 | 21/22 | 22/23 | 23/24 | 24/25 |
|-----------------------|-------------|-------------|------------|-------------|-------------|-------------|
| Adult Criminal | 869 | 741 | 564 | 932 | 791 | 906 |
| Family / Civil | 405 | 306 | 308 | 261 | 272 | 266 |
| Youth Criminal | 26 | 12 | 11 | 16 | 10 | 12 |
| Total | 1300 | 1059 | 883 | 1209 | 1073 | 1184 |



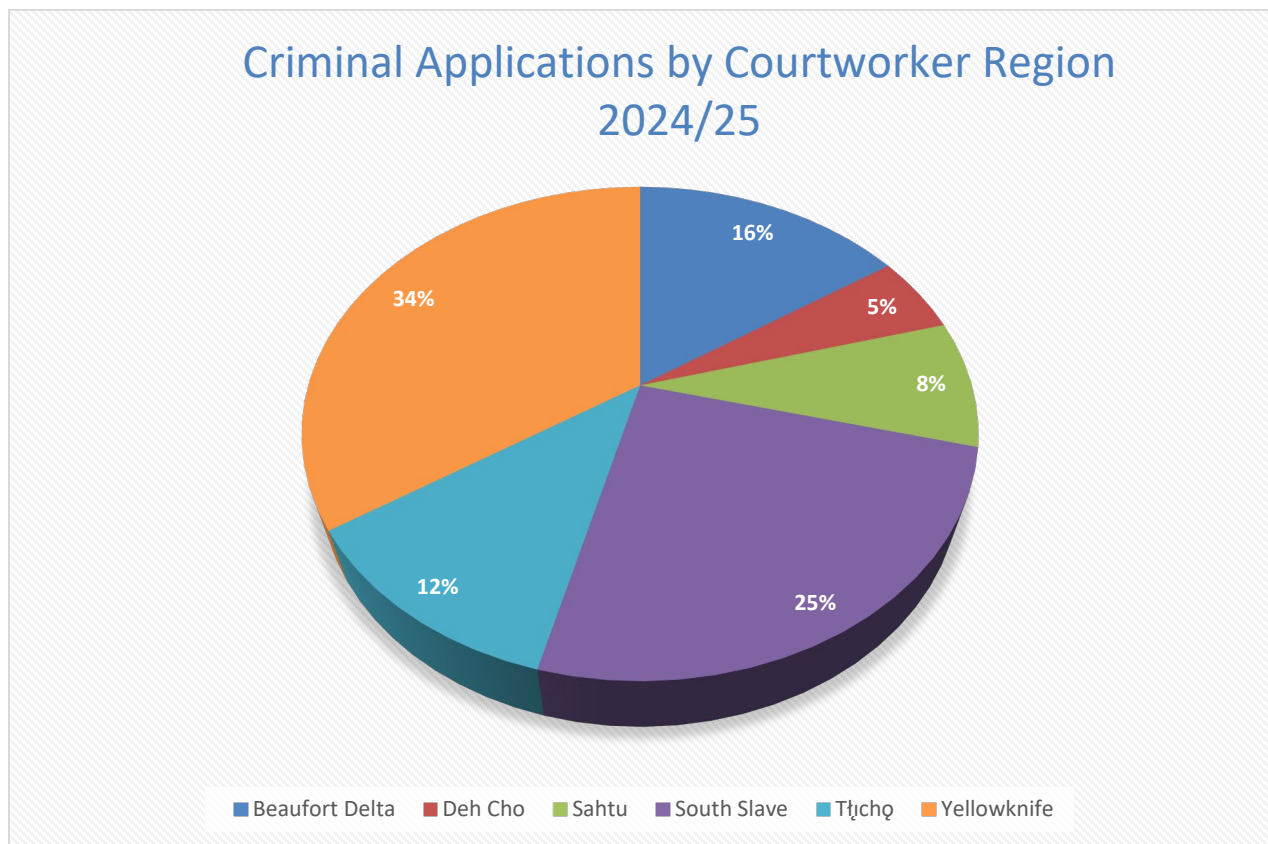
Number of Applications Received by Court Region

| Region | 2024/25 |
|--------------------|-------------|
| Beaufort Delta | 195 |
| Tłıchǫ | 128 |
| Dehcho | 55 |
| South Slave | 283 |
| Yellowknife | 445 |
| Sahtu | 78 |
| Grand Total | 1184 |



Criminal Applications by Court worker Region

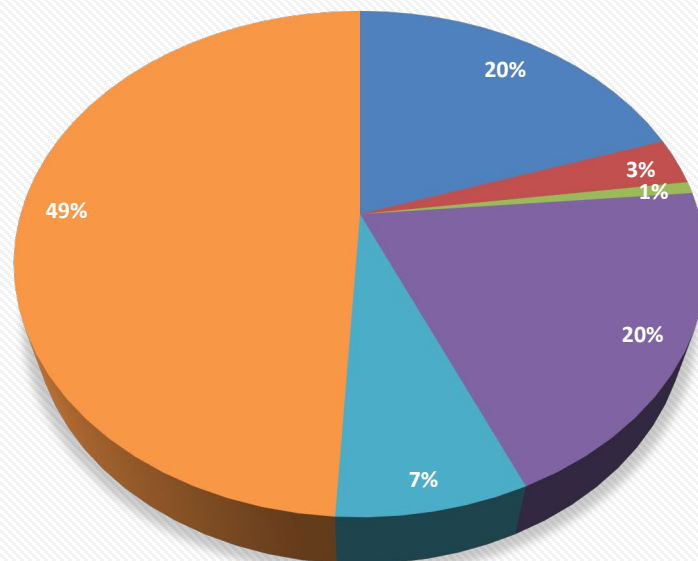
| Region | Criminal (Adult and Youth) |
|--------------------|----------------------------|
| Beaufort Delta | 143 |
| Deh Cho | 47 |
| Sahtu | 76 |
| South Slave | 230 |
| Tłıchq | 108 |
| Yellowknife | 314 |
| Grand Total | 918 |



Family Applications by Court worker Region

| Region | Family |
|--------------------|------------|
| Beaufort Delta | 52 |
| Deh Cho | 8 |
| Sahtu | 2 |
| South Slave | 53 |
| Tłıchǫ | 20 |
| Yellowknife | 131 |
| Grand Total | 267 |

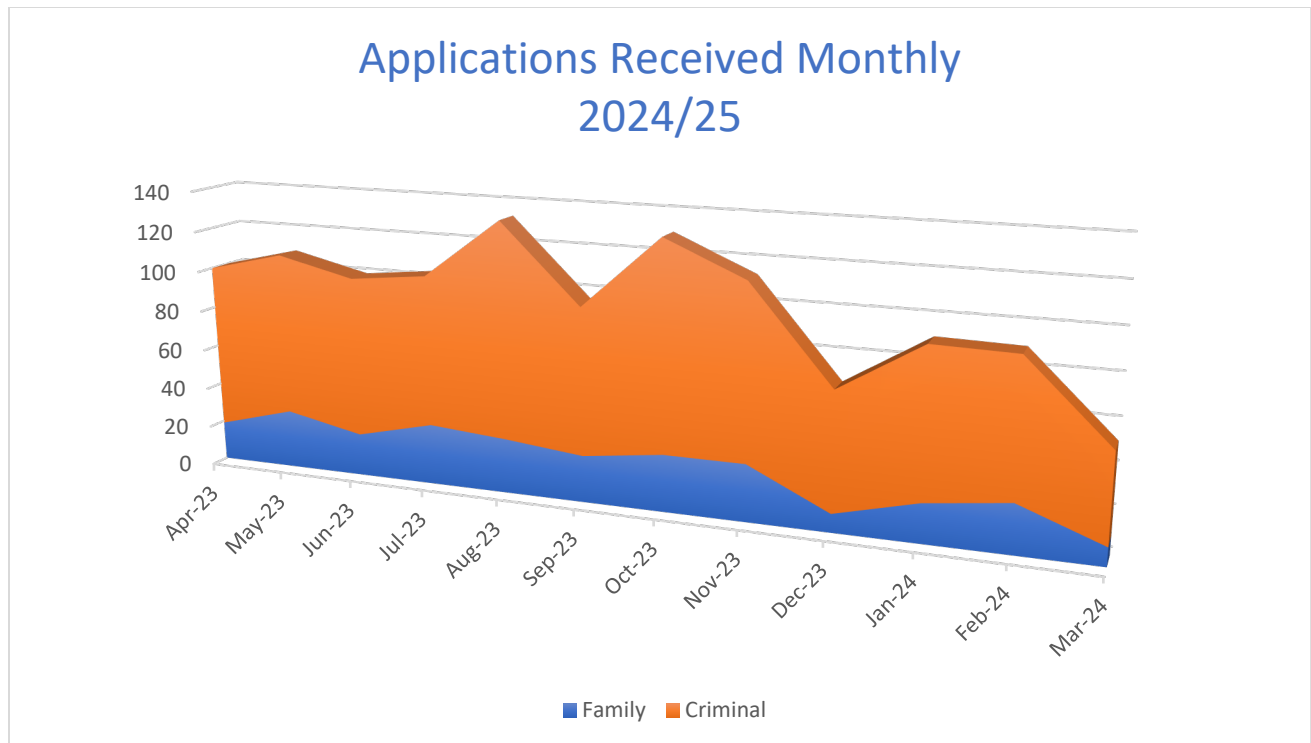
Family Applications by Court worker Region 2024/2025



■ Beaufort Delta ■ Deh Cho ■ Sahtu ■ South Slave ■ Tłıchǫ ■ Yellowknife

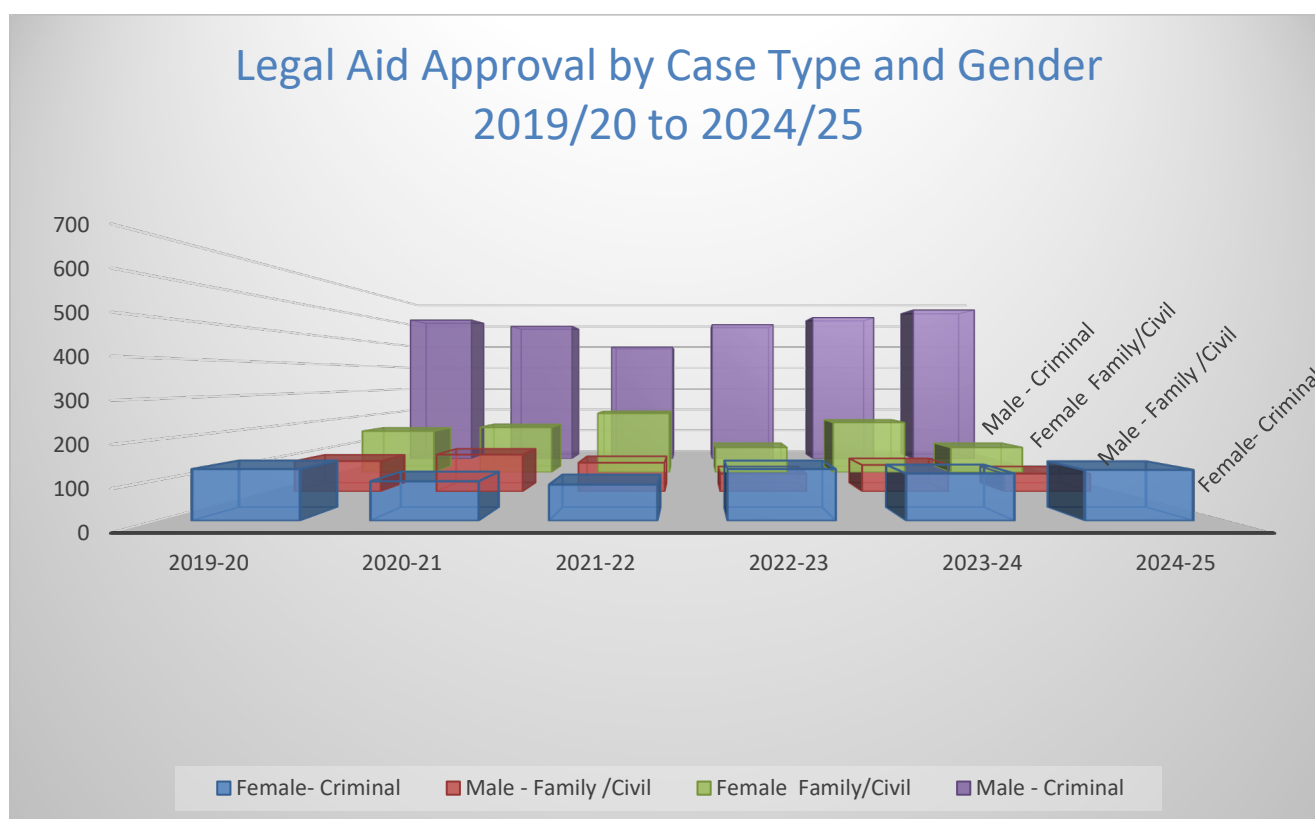
Applications Received Monthly

| Month | Family | Criminal |
|--------------------|------------|------------|
| Apr-23 | 19 | 81 |
| May-23 | 29 | 80 |
| Jun-23 | 21 | 79 |
| Jul-23 | 30 | 74 |
| Aug-23 | 27 | 106 |
| Sep-23 | 23 | 72 |
| Oct-23 | 28 | 102 |
| Nov-23 | 28 | 85 |
| Dec-23 | 9 | 58 |
| Jan-24 | 19 | 72 |
| Feb-24 | 24 | 66 |
| Mar-24 | 9 | 43 |
| Grand Total | 266 | 918 |



Legal Aid Approvals by Case Type and Gender

| | 2019-20 | 2020-21 | 2021-22 | 2022-23 | 2023-24 | 2024-25 |
|---------------------|------------|------------|------------|------------|------------|------------|
| Female- Criminal | 127 | 97 | 89 | 127 | 116 | 125 |
| Male Family/Civil | 94 | 114 | 89 | 55 | 82 | 55 |
| Female Family/Civil | 153 | 167 | 219 | 92 | 185 | 92 |
| Male - Criminal | 604 | 577 | 486 | 584 | 615 | 648 |
| Total | 978 | 955 | 883 | 858 | 998 | 920 |



Legal Aid Approval by Case Type and Self-Identification

| | Indigenous | Non-Indigenous | Did not self-identify |
|---------------------|-------------|----------------|-----------------------|
| Criminal | 804 | 57 | 45 |
| Family/Civil | 233 | 30 | 3 |
| Youth | 11 | 0 | 1 |
| Annual Total | 1048 | 87 | 49 |

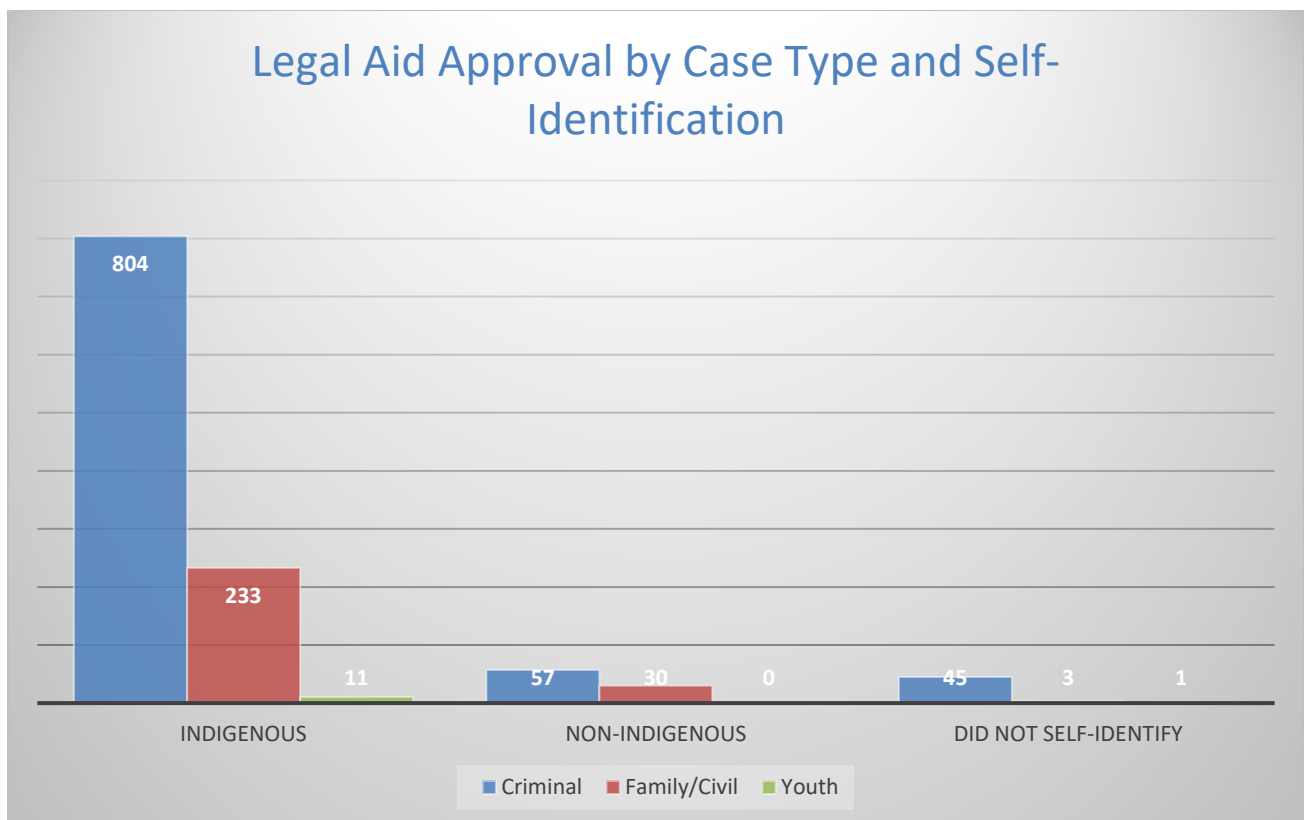


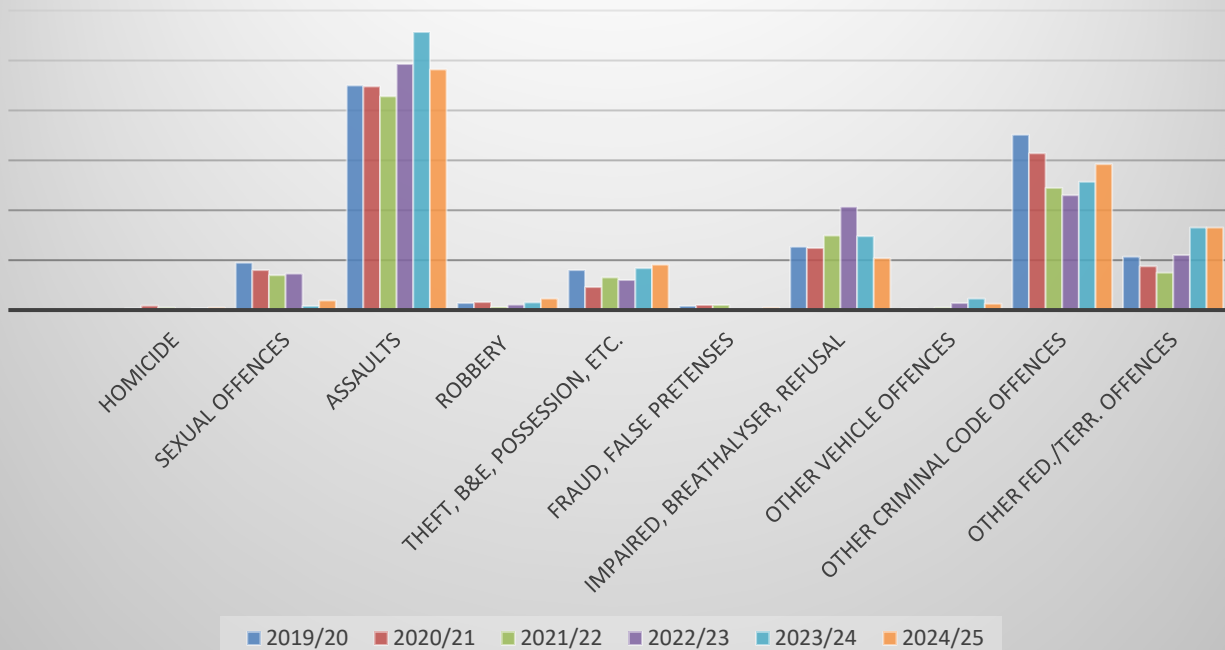


Photo provided by Kate Cannell

Number of Calls to Brydges Services by Offence Type

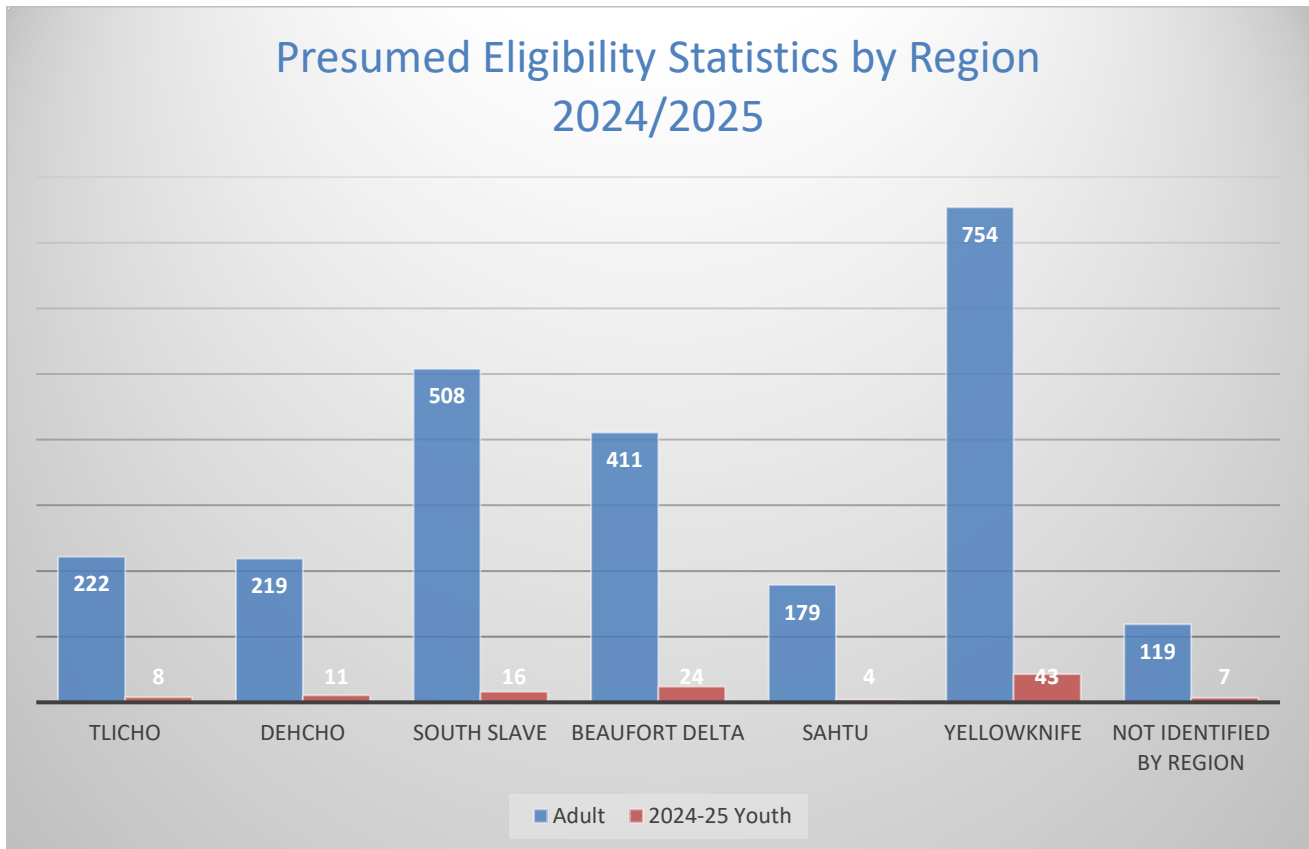
| | 2019/20 | 2020/21 | 2021/22 | 2022/23 | 2023/24 | 2024/25 |
|---------------------------------|-------------|-------------|-------------|-------------|-------------|-------------|
| Homicide | 3 | 9 | 5 | 1 | 4 | 5 |
| Sexual Offences | 95 | 80 | 70 | 73 | 8 | 19 |
| Assaults | 450 | 448 | 428 | 493 | 557 | 482 |
| Robbery | 14 | 16 | 6 | 11 | 15 | 23 |
| Theft, B&E, Possession, etc. | 80 | 46 | 65 | 60 | 84 | 91 |
| Fraud, False Pretenses | 8 | 10 | 10 | | 2 | 5 |
| Impaired, Breathalyser, Refusal | 127 | 124 | 149 | 207 | 148 | 104 |
| Other Vehicle Offences | 3 | 2 | 5 | 14 | 23 | 13 |
| Other Criminal Code Offences | 351 | 314 | 245 | 230 | 257 | 292 |
| Other Fed./Terr. Offences | 107 | 88 | 75 | 110 | 165 | 165 |
| Annual Total | 1238 | 1058 | 1048 | 1198 | 1263 | 1199 |

Number of Calls to Brydges Services by Offence Type



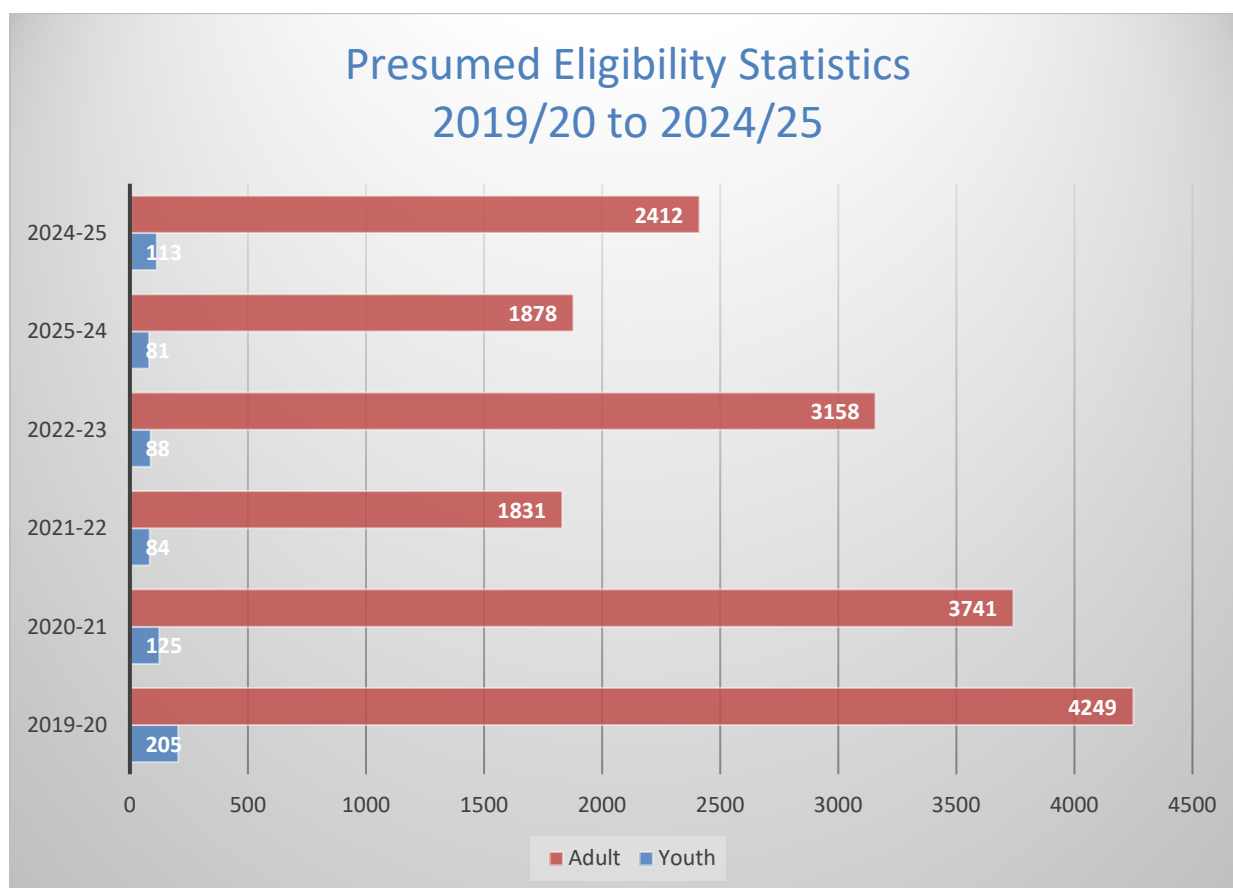
Presumed Eligibility Statistics by Region 2024/2025

| | Adult | Youth |
|--------------------------|-------------|------------|
| Tłıchǫ | 222 | 8 |
| Dehcho | 219 | 11 |
| South Slave | 508 | 16 |
| Beaufort Delta | 411 | 24 |
| Sahtu | 179 | 4 |
| Yellowknife | 754 | 43 |
| Not Identified by region | 119 | 7 |
| Annual Total | 2412 | 113 |



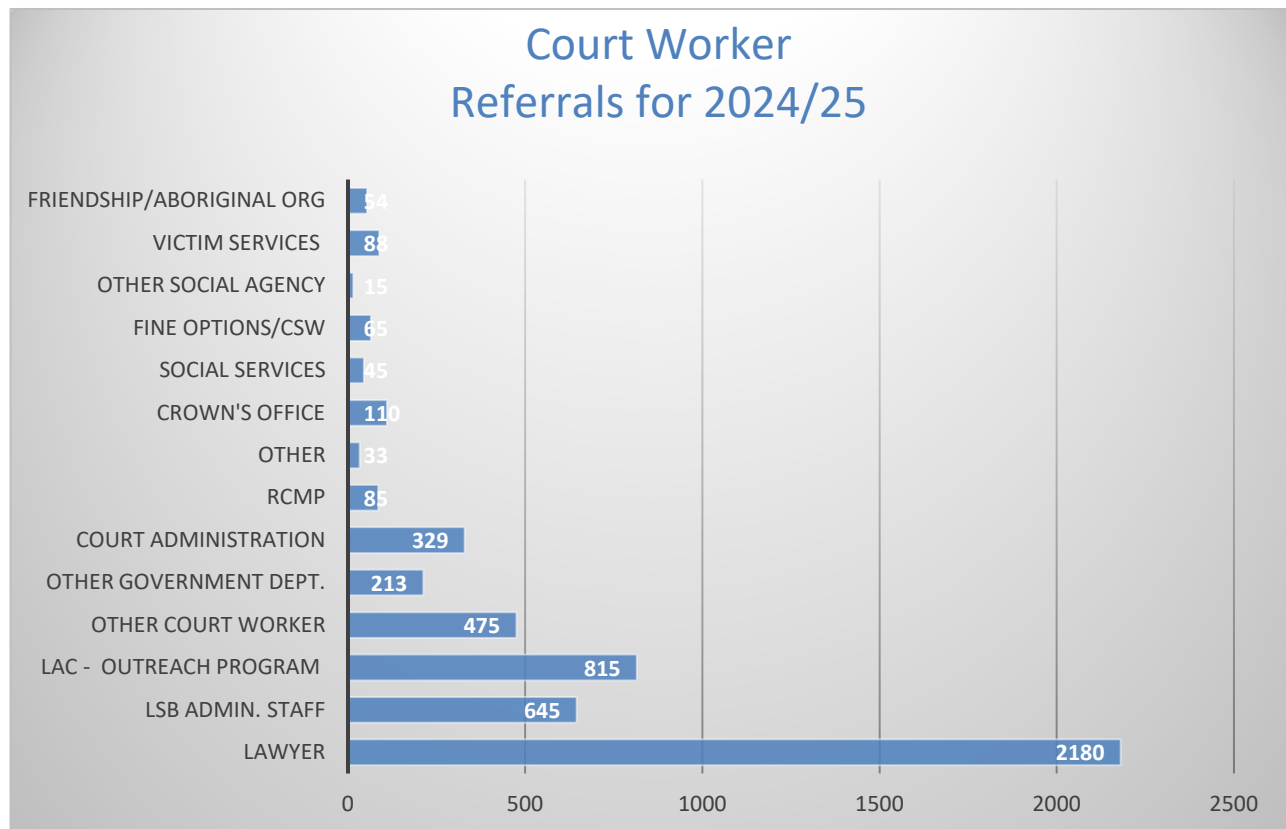
Presumed Eligibility Statistics by Year

| | 2019-20 | 2020-21 | 2021-22 | 2022-23 | 2023-24 | 2024-25 |
|--------------|---------|---------|---------|---------|---------|---------|
| Youth | 205 | 125 | 84 | 88 | 81 | 113 |
| Adult | 4249 | 3741 | 1831 | 3158 | 1878 | 2412 |



Court Worker Referral

| Referral | Total |
|---------------------------|-------|
| Lawyer | 2180 |
| LSB Admin. Staff | 645 |
| LAC - Outreach Program | 815 |
| Other Court Worker | 475 |
| Other Government Dept. | 213 |
| Court Administration | 329 |
| RCMP | 85 |
| Other | 33 |
| Crown's office | 110 |
| Social Services | 45 |
| Fine Options/CSW | 65 |
| Other Social agency | 15 |
| Victim Services | 88 |
| Friendship/Aboriginal org | 54 |



MAP OF THE NORTHWEST TERRITORIES



OFFICE LOCATIONS AND CONTACT NUMBER

LEGAL AID COMMISSION

4915 48th Street
3rd Floor, YK Centre East
P.O Box 1320
Yellowknife, NT X1A 2L9
Tel: (867) 767-9361 ext. 82281
E-Mail: lac@gov.nt.ca

LEGAL AID CLINICS

Community Legal Aid Clinic

8, 4915 – 48th Street
3rd Floor, YK Centre East
Yellowknife, NT X1A 3S4
Tel: (867) 767-9383 ext. 82319

Somba K'e Legal Aid Clinic

5, 4915 – 48th Street
2nd Floor, YK Centre East
Yellowknife, NT X1A 3S4
Tel: (867) 767-9377 ext. 82309

Yellowknife Legal Aid Clinic

4, 4915 – 48th Street
3rd Floor, YK Centre East
P.O Box 11028
Yellowknife, NT X1A 3S4
Tel: (867) 767-9372 ext. 82299

Outreach Legal Aid Clinic

1, 4915 – 48th Street
3rd Floor, YK Centre East
Yellowknife, NT X1A 3S4
Tel: (867) 767-9384 ext. 82325

Beaufort Delta Region

151 Mackenzie Road, P.O. Box 1100
Inuvik, NT X0E 0T0
Tel: (867) 777-7338
Toll Free: 1-844-836-8050

Deh Cho Region

2nd Floor, Nahendeh Kue Building,
P.O. Box 178
Fort Simpson, NT X0E 0R0
Tel: (867) 695-2106

Fort Smith

195 McDougal Road, P.O. Box 170
Fort Smith, NT X0E 0P0
Tel: (867) 872-6568

Sahtu Region

09 Woodland Ave, P.O. Box 36
Norman Wells NT, X0E 0V0
Tel: (867) 587-7250

South Slave Region

106 – 31 Capital Drive, P.O. Box 4324
Hay River, NT X0E 1G2
Tel: (867) 874-2475

Tłı̨chǫ Communities

General Delivery
Behchokö NT X0E 0Y0
Tel: (867) 392-6386

Yellowknife Area

3rd Floor YK Centre East, P.O. Box 1320
Yellowknife NT X1A 2L9
Tel: (867) 767-7387 or (867) 767-93

COURT WORKERS



Photo provided by Kate Cannell

