

Law as a Tool of Activism, Advocacy and Change in St. John's: Facing Challenges, Finding Hope

A Trudeau Foundation/Community Workshop

St. Thomas Church (accessible space)
Jan 27, 2009

Workshop Description

More than any other groups of citizens, the lives of vulnerable individuals are dominated by the law. For privileged members of society the law is most often invisible until it is evoked. For them the law serves as a tool to accomplish ends and to protect self, property and rights. For the more vulnerable individuals in our society, experiences with the law are much more often something people suffer or survive. From criminal law, to employment, family and immigration law, to all manner of municipal by-laws, the law often acts as an obstacle in the lives of vulnerable and disadvantaged individuals. What are the realities of these individuals in navigating the law? How do vulnerable individuals access their rights under the law? And, what of the law as a tool for change? We are a society which prides itself on the rights and freedoms protected in our *Charter* and in provincial human rights legislation – but how do these rights work on the ground?

This event will bring together community members, Memorial students, and Trudeau scholars to have a conversation about the limits and the promise of the law as a tool of activism and change in St. John's. The workshop presents an opportunity for a broad sharing of ideas and experiences and, ideally, will present an opportunity for relationship building as well as an opportunity for leaning and strategizing.

Workshop Structure & Objectives

The workshop will be organized around two themes: Common Challenges and Strategies for Hope and Change.

The workshop will begin with a round-table discussion in which community members and advocates will be invited to share examples of the particular challenges their clients and communities face in accessing their rights under the law. The goal of this opening discussion is to create room for the stories and realities of those working with vulnerable communities. The hope is that this will allow for an exchange of experiences and information between workshop participants but also the identification of common challenges faced by disadvantaged communities in St. John's.

The second part of the workshop will entail an open group discussion in which all participants will be asked to reflect on strategies for hope and change. Participants will be asked to share tangible initiatives in which their organizations have engaged that, in some way, address the challenges identified in the first session. Workshop participants will also be asked to reflect on maintaining hope in the promise of the law in the face of the many challenges of social justice work. The goal of this part of the workshop is the exchange of specific initiatives and ideas on how to better use the law.

The third part of the workshop will explore the interest in, and the feasibility of, creating an on-line plain language document database specific to the needs of the St. John's community. The goal of this database would be to create an accessible on-line space for community groups to pool or share their plain language resources. If there is sufficient interest in such a database, then this meeting will also serve as an opportunity to take the first organizational steps towards bringing it about. This part of the workshop hopes to tie together the first two sessions by taking action to address a common challenge faced by many disadvantaged communities in St. John's: understanding and accessing legal and government documents.

Schedule

- 8:00-9:00 **Breakfast**
 - Breakfast open to all community/Foundation workshop participants; Breakfast provided by the Trudeau Foundation
- 9:00-9:30 **Introduction**
 - Introduction to workshop; outlining of workshop objectives
 - Round-table introduction of participants
- 9:30-10:45 **Common Challenges**
 - Round-table discussion by community groups/members
- 10:45-11:00 **Coffee Break**
- 11:00-12:30 **Strategies for Change & Hope**
 - Open group discussion
- 12:30-1:30 **Lunch**
 - Lunch provided by the Trudeau Foundation
- 1:30-3:00 **Plain Language Database Discussion**
 - Focussed discussion on the interest in, and feasibility of creating a plain language database; possible discussion of first organizational steps

Preliminary List of Workshop Participants

Community Groups/Members

Penny Abbott	Independent Living Resource Centre
Catharine Allix	Coalition of Persons with Disabilities
Vyda Ng	Coalition Against Violence
Charmaine Davidge	St. John's Status of Women Council & Women's Centre

Laura Mullally	Association for New Canadians
Michelle Murdoch	Independent Researcher, involved with COD, ILRC, PACSW
Jerry Vink	NL Human Rights Association
Elaine Wychreschuk	NL Provincial Advisory Council on the Status of Women
Janet Meaney	Wiseman Centre (Homeless Shelter for men 30-64)

Trudeau Scholars

Jillian Boyd
Elaine Craig
Jason Morris-Jung
Genevieve Pagé

Memorial Students

To be determined