

**CALGARY'S FAMILY JUSTICE SERVICES
CLIENT UTILIZATION SURVEY:
RESULTS OF THE PRE-TEST**

Prepared by:

Lorne D. Bertrand, Ph.D.

and

Joanne J. Paetsch, B.A.

Canadian Research Institute for Law and the Family

December 2012

The views expressed in this report are those of the authors,
and do not necessarily represent the views of the
Canadian Research Institute for Law and the Family
or Alberta Family Justice Services.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

	Page
Acknowledgements	iv
1.0 Introduction.....	1
1.1 Background.....	1
1.2 Purpose and Objectives.....	1
1.3 Methodology	2
1.3.1 Study Design.....	2
1.3.2 Limitations.....	3
2.0 Survey Findings.....	5
2.1 Background Information.....	5
2.2 Client Needs	6
2.3 Client Experiences with Family Justice Services	9
2.4 Clients' Concluding Comments.....	11
3.0 Summary and Conclusions.....	15
3.1 Summary of Survey Findings.....	15
3.1.1 Demographic Characteristics	15
3.1.2 Client Needs	15
3.1.3 Client Experiences with Family Justice Services	15
3.2 Conclusions	16
3.2.1 Profile of Calgary's FJS Clients.....	16
3.2.2 FJS Clients' Experience and Satisfaction	17
References.....	19

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The authors would like to acknowledge the support of a number of people in making this project possible. First, thanks to Ms Diane Shearer, Senior Manager, Alberta Family Justice Services (FJS) for her unfailing support for this project and her assistance with the logistics of administering the surveys. Thanks also are due to Ms Ralene Noti, Supervisor, FJS, Ms Lisa Lindquist, Manager, FJS, and Ms Ruby Pollard, Business Manager, FJS, for their invaluable assistance in recruiting participants for the study and ensuring the smooth operation of the data collection process.

The support and guidance of Dr. Joe Hornick, Executive Director of the Canadian Research Institute for Law and the Family (CRILF), throughout the project was much appreciated.

A special thank you is extended to all of the FJS clients who completed the survey. We very much appreciate your willingness to share your opinions and experiences during your visit to FJS.

Finally, we wish to acknowledge the ongoing financial support of CRILF by the Alberta Law Foundation.

1.0 INTRODUCTION

1.1 Background

In 2007-2009, the Canadian Research Institute for Law and the Family conducted an evaluation of Alberta's *Family Law Act* (FLA) (MacRae, Simpson, Paetsch, Bertrand, Pearson, & Hornick, 2009). One of the objectives of the study was to evaluate the impact of the procedural changes that resulted from the FLA, including the streamlining of court procedures. The study found that that an increasing number of individuals were proceeding under the FLA without legal representation, resulting in a demand for resources that support self-represented litigants. Likewise, other jurisdictions have experienced a rise in the number of self-represented individuals in family court, and governments have attempted to address this problem by increasing the availability of information and the number of services designed to assist self-represented individuals (e.g., Hilbert, 2009; Malcolmson & Reid, 2006; Zorza, 2002). In Alberta, these supports include Family Justice Services and the Family Law Information Centres.

Family Justice Services (FJS) are a group of programs and services offered by Alberta Justice in collaboration with the courts of Alberta. FJS works directly with individuals to help them get appropriate solutions for their family law issues. Programs include: Court Counsellor Services; Child Support Assistance; Child Protection and Intervention Services; Mediation Services; Courts for Parents and Families; and Assessment and Intervention Services. The Family Law Information Centres (FLICs) provide individuals with information to make family law applications and to help them learn about the Child Support Guidelines and other areas of family law.

The Canadian Research Institute for Law and the Family (CRILF) is conducting this study to examine clients' experiences with accessing Alberta Justice Court Services. Developed from discussions and correspondence with Court Services representatives, the study will assist the Court Services Leadership Team in their efforts to promote continuous improvement of supports and services for families proceeding in family law cases. A proposal was submitted to Alberta Justice in April 2011, and on August 30, 2011, CRILF received confirmation that the project could proceed.

1.2 Purpose and Objectives

The purpose of the study is to assess the impact of court services on the experience of individuals proceeding in family law cases.

The objectives of the study are as follows:

- (1) To establish a profile of individuals who access Calgary's Family Justice Services (including the Family Law Information Centre) (e.g., demographics, nature of

case, previous experience with family law system and Court Services, perceptions of their service needs, etc.);

- (2) To establish the combination of court services individuals receive when they access FJS or FLIC;
- (3) To examine clients' experience and level of satisfaction with services received; and
- (4) To assess the impact of services received on outcomes in family law cases.

This report presents the results of the pre-test survey – Family Justice Services Client Survey – and addresses Objectives (1) and (3).

1.3 Methodology

1.3.1 Study Design

The study utilizes a pre-test/post-test design where families proceeding with family law cases are surveyed at their point of court service access (e.g., Family Justice Services, Family Law Information Centre), then again one year later. This design will help to determine the impact of Alberta Justice Court Services on these individuals as they proceed through the court process.

The pre-test survey was administered on a voluntary basis to a cohort of clients at their first point of service access – primarily, the FJS or FLIC information window at the Calgary Courts Centre. The cohort consists of all those who accessed FJS or FLIC between February 6 and August 31, 2012. Blank surveys and envelopes were placed on a table, and FJS or FLIC staff members were asked to encourage clients to participate in the study by completing a survey. Clients were asked to complete the survey on site, seal it in the envelope provided, and drop it off in a bin located near the information window. Alternatively, clients were also given the opportunity to complete the survey at home and mail it directly to CRILF in the addressed envelope provided. FJS and FLIC collected the completed surveys and CRILF picked them up periodically during the pre-test data collection period. A total of 102 completed pre-test surveys were received.

The pre-test survey was developed in consultation with representatives from Family Justice Services, and used a combination of open- and closed-ended questions to establish a FJS/FLIC client profile – i.e., demographic information, previous experience with court services, nature of their case, perceptions of needs, whether they have legal representation, and their experience that day with the court services. Data from the survey have been analyzed both quantitatively and qualitatively.

The pre-test survey form also asked clients to participate in a follow-up survey. Those who agreed to participate were asked to provide their contact information (e.g.,

address, phone number, e-mail address) and indicate the best method for the survey to be sent (e.g., mail, e-mail) so that the follow-up survey could be provided to them. A total of 47 clients who completed the pre-test survey agreed to participate in the follow-up survey.

The follow-up or post-test survey will be administered one year following the initial data collection period, beginning in February 2013. CRILF will send the survey by the method preferred by the participant. Clients will be asked to complete the survey (either electronically or by hard copy) and return it to CRILF within two weeks of receipt.

Using a combination of open- and closed- ended questions, the post-test survey will ask clients about the services received over the course of the year, their experience and level of satisfaction with these services, and whether their expectations were met. Clients will also be asked to provide information on the nature and progress of their case in an effort to assess the impact of services on outcomes. Data from the post-test survey will be analyzed both quantitatively and qualitatively.

1.3.2 Limitations

It should be noted that the results of this survey may not necessarily represent the views of all Alberta Justice Court Services clients because clients who voluntarily choose to complete a survey may be qualitatively different from those who choose not to participate. In addition, the survey was only administered in Calgary, and therefore caution should be exercised in generalizing the results to Alberta.

2.0 SURVEY FINDINGS

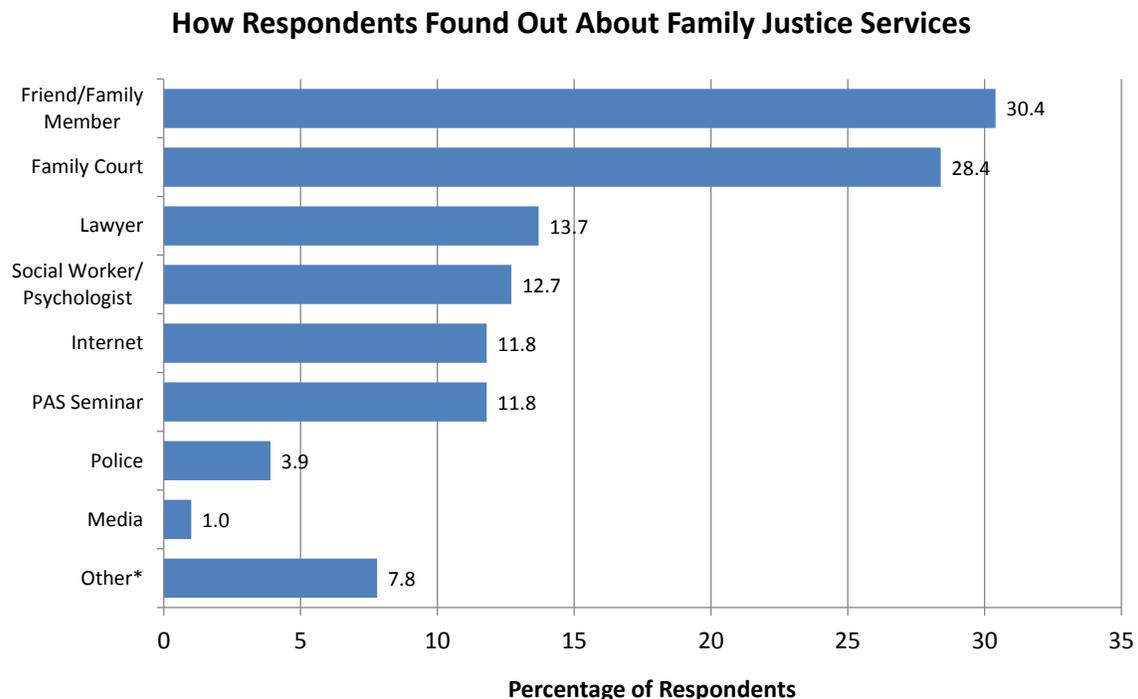
This chapter presents the findings from the Family Justice Services Client Survey. The findings are grouped into the following four areas: (1) Background Information; (2) Client Needs; (3) Client Experiences with Family Justice Services; and (4) Clients' Concluding Comments. Supplementing the findings are write-in comments made by the survey participants, which elaborate upon the opinions expressed in the survey.

2.1 Background Information

A total of 102 surveys were received. Over one-half of surveys (58%) were completed by females and 42% were completed by males. Respondents' ages ranged from 19 to 64 years (mean = 36 years).

Clients were asked how they found out about Family Justice Services (FJS) and their responses are presented in Figure 2.1. The most common response was through a friend or family member (30%), followed by in family court (28%) and through a lawyer (14%). Least common responses were from the police (4%) and through the media (1%).

Figure 2.1



Source of data: Family Justice Services Client Survey

Total N=102

Multiple response data

*Other includes: ex-spouse; by myself/research; Legal Aid; Passport Office; Elizabeth Fry Society

Respondents were also asked if they had used any FJS services in the past and, if so, which ones they had accessed. Over one-half of clients (60%) indicated that they had previously used services offered by FJS. As shown in Table 2.1, the most common FJS services previously used by clients were attendance at the Parenting After Separation (PAS) Seminar (46%) and Family Mediation Services (46%), followed by the Family Law Information Centre (FLIC) (38%), Family Justice Intake Services (25%) and Family Court Counsellors (23%). Less than 10% of clients had previously used Child Protection and Intervention Mediation Services and Caseflow Conferences.

Table 2.1
Family Justice Services Used by Clients in the Past

Services Used	n	% ¹
Parenting After Separation (PAS) Seminar	28	45.9
Family Mediation Services	28	45.9
Family Law Information Centre (FLIC)	23	37.7
Family Justice Intake Services	15	24.6
Family Court Counsellors	14	23.0
Dispute Resolution Officer (DRO) Services	11	18.0
Focus on Communication in Separation (FOCIS) Seminar	9	14.8
Parenting After Separation High Conflict (PASHC) Seminar	7	11.5
Child Protection and Intervention Mediation Services	6	9.8
Caseflow Conference	5	8.2

Source of data: Family Justice Services Client Survey

Total N=102

Multiple response data

¹Percentages are based on the total number of clients who had used any Family Justice Service(s) in the past (n=61).

For clients who indicated that they had used FJS in the past, Table 2.2 presents the number of services they had accessed. Most commonly, clients had used one service (41%); just over one-fifth of clients who had previously accessed FJS had used two services (21%) and 18% had used three services.

2.2 Client Needs

Clients were asked what issues had prompted them to visit FJS on the day that they completed the survey and their responses are presented in Figure 2.2. The most common issue, reported by almost two-thirds of respondents (61%), was parenting. Almost one-third (30%) indicated that they were visiting FJS to seek assistance with child support issues and 23% needed assistance with guardianship issues. Relatively few clients were looking for help with personal safety (8%), spousal support (7%), or property division (3%) issues.

Table 2.2

Number of Family Justice Services Used by Clients in the Past

Number of Services Used	n	% ¹
1	25	41.0
2	13	21.3
3	11	18.0
4	4	6.6
5	4	6.6
6	2	3.3
7	2	3.3
Total	61	100.0

Source of data: Family Justice Services Client Survey

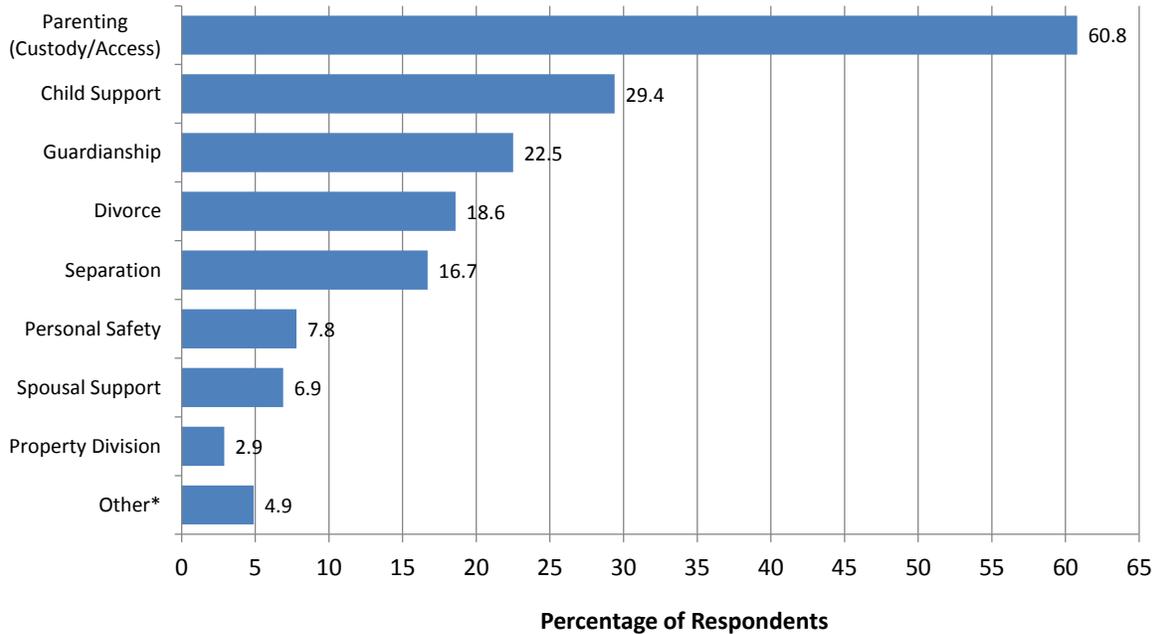
Total N = 102

Multiple response data

¹Percentages are based on the total number of clients who had used any Family Justice Service(s) in the past (n=61).

Figure 2.2

Issues that Brought Respondents to Family Justice Services



Source of data: Family Justice Services Client Survey

Total N=102

Multiple response data

*Other includes: passport applications; guardianship/parenting for grandson; Hague Convention; and templates.

Table 2.3 provides information on the services that clients thought they needed from FJS. Almost one-half of respondents (49%) said that they were looking for general information, while 46% indicated that they needed help with completing forms. Approximately one-third of respondents said that they needed legal advice (36%) and mediation services (32%). Fewer than 10% of FJS clients said that they needed assistance from FJS with child support recalculation, parenting assessment/intervention services, education seminars, financial assistance, supervised visitation/exchange, and child protection and intervention mediation. The same proportion of clients said that they needed one (27%) or two (27%) services from FJS; 13% indicated that they needed three different services.

Table 2.3

Services Respondents Think They Need from Family Justice Services

Services	n	%
General information	50	49.0
Help with forms	47	46.1
Legal advice	37	36.3
Mediation	33	32.4
Child support determination	16	15.7
Restraining order/Emergency protection order	14	13.7
Legal Aid	14	13.7
Counselling	11	10.8
Child support recalculation	9	8.8
Parenting assessment/intervention services	8	7.8
Education seminars	7	6.9
Financial assistance	5	4.9
Supervised visitation/exchange	4	3.9
Child protection and intervention mediation	3	2.9
Other ¹	4	3.9

Source of data: Family Justice Services Client Survey

Total N=102

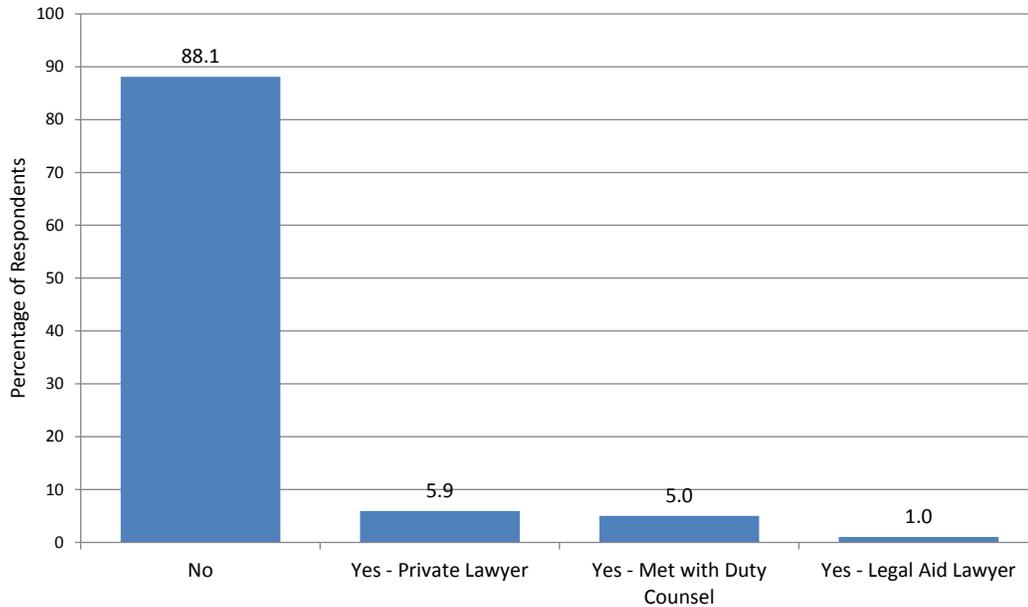
Multiple response data

¹Examples of "Other" services include order restricting relocation, sworn document, and custody/access.

When asked if they currently had a lawyer helping them with their family law issues, the substantial majority of clients said that they did not (88%; see Figure 2.3). Similar proportions of respondents stated that they had a private lawyer (6%) or had met with duty counsel (5%); only one client indicated that he or she had a lawyer from Legal Aid.

Figure 2.3

Whether Respondents Currently Have a Lawyer Helping them with their Issues



Source of data: Family Justice Services Client Survey
Total N=102; Missing cases=1

2.3 Client Experiences with Family Justice Services

Clients were asked a number of questions regarding their experiences with FJS during their current visit. When asked how many lineups they had to stand in at the Courthouse that day, responses ranged from 0 to 10 with an average of 2 lineups. The most common responses were that they did not have to wait in any lineups (28%), or that they had to wait in one (29%) or two (26%) lineups.

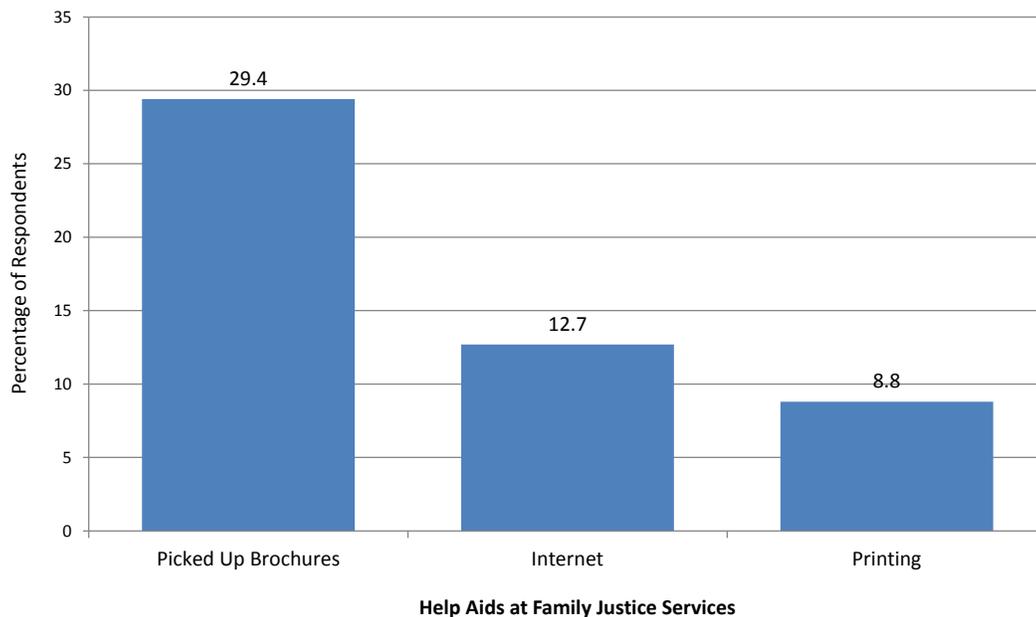
Few respondents (16%) indicated that they had spent time waiting in a wrong lineup. Of those who had spent time waiting in a wrong lineup, the most common reasons they provided for this were that the signs were unclear (44%) or that someone had misdirected them (38%).

When asked how long they spent waiting in line at the FJS window, responses ranged from 0 to 90 minutes, with an average of 7 minutes. The most common responses were that they did not have to wait at all (25%) or that they had to wait five minutes (20%). Few clients indicated that they had children waiting with them in line during their current visit (12%). Approximately one-half of respondents (48%) said that they had an appointment booked for that day.

FJS provides a number of help aids that clients may use during their visit to the Courthouse. Figure 2.4 presents the proportion of respondents who indicated that they made use of these aids during their current visit. Almost one-third of clients (29%) said that they had picked up brochures, while 13% said that they had used the Internet and 9% had printed materials while they were there.

Figure 2.4

Whether Respondents Used Various Help Aids at Family Justice Services

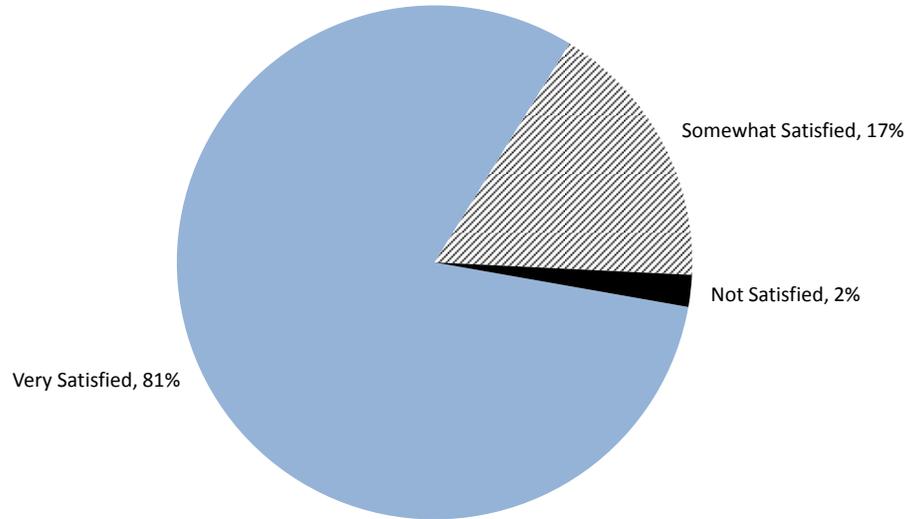


Source of data: Family Justice Services Client Survey
Total N=102
Multiple response data

Finally, clients were asked how satisfied they were with the assistance they received during their current visit to FJS (see Figure 2.5). Overall, clients expressed high levels of satisfaction with the assistance they received, with 81% saying that they were very satisfied and an additional 17% indicating that they were somewhat satisfied. Only two respondents said that they were not satisfied with the assistance they received during their current visit to FJS.

Figure 2.5

How Satisfied Respondents Were with the Assistance they Received



Source of data: Family Justice Services Client Survey
Total N=102; Missing cases=2

2.4 Clients' Concluding Comments

Survey respondents were asked what would have made their experience more helpful, and 48 clients provided 49 comments. Over half of the comments provided were very positive, with clients stating that the information they received was very helpful and that the service was great. Examples of these comments are:

The person that helped us was great – really knew her stuff!

Nothing – our mediator was wonderful – pleasant and helpful. So was our legal counsel amazing. Thank you for not making this experience painful.

[Staff member] was exceptionally helpful in providing guidance regarding the overall process and procedures where duty counsel failed. Easy, step-by-step directions regarding next steps are much appreciated.

Staff could not have been more informed, cordial, and compassionate. Keep up the great work in such a thankless environment.

Fast, friendly and informative services. [Staff member] was very helpful and is a huge asset to your office!

Nothing, I felt very assisted and was directed in all directions by [staff member]. Also all my questions were answered and explained so I could grasp exactly what I needed to do.

The group at the front desk were very helpful. Much appreciated.

I was helped by [staff members] and both of them were exceptional. They cleared up a lot of questions I had and helped me with all the forms. They are both an asset to family justice and the public at large.

Survey respondents also provided suggestions for making their experience more helpful. Some of these comments related to waiting times or lack of time, such as:

Lawyer was very busy and I did not know if she would be finished in time to help me in front of judge – lucky – she did come.

I finally saw a judge at 2:45. I have been here since 8:30.

Less rushed, more time explaining.

Knowing that I had to see a Family Court Worker. I felt rushed.

If we have an appointment waiting 17 minutes seems silly when walk-ups were addressed faster.

Faster service.

If I got to go in right away.

If there were not so many applications for one thing at a time, both applications into one court date, not ten.

The knowledge of EPO and access for Court of QB needs to be in one day.

Other suggestions related to the information provided, or the service received from staff members, such as:

Clearer instructions during telephone interview with clearer instructions via e-mail regarding forms.

Having legal counsel available in mediation that mediator could call upon for questions, that represents neither party.

More information on support for solo parents – everything is directed at co-parent situations. What about parents and kids where no other parent is involved.

Not having two of the three people direct me to the wrong person.

By chance the personnel at Family Justice Services are welcoming because at the filing counter it is another story. Why do they need to make you feel as though you are uninformed, unwelcome, bugging them?

Staff member did not seem as well versed as others I've dealt with.

Correct information.

One client had a practical suggestion: *"The sitting just outside clerk's station should be removed. Every time I have been there is always confusion as to who is next because people loiter."* Another client acknowledged the inherent difficulties involved: *"If getting divorced wasn't so confusing and hard, especially after over 2 years of separation."*

3.0 SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS

The Family Justice Services Client Survey was a pre-test that collected data from a sample of clients visiting Calgary's Family Justice Services (FJS) and Family Law Information Centre (FLIC). The purpose of the survey was to establish a FJS/FLIC client profile – i.e., demographic information, previous experience with court services, nature of their case, perceptions of needs, whether they have legal representation, and their experience that day with the court services. This chapter presents a summary of the survey findings, as well as conclusions that can be drawn from the findings.

3.1 Summary of Survey Findings

3.1.1 Demographic Characteristics

- Over one-half of the 102 survey respondents were female.
- The average age of respondents was 36 years.
- When participants were asked how they had found out about FJS, the most common response was through a friend or family member, followed by in family court and from a lawyer.
- Over one-half of clients indicated that they had previously used services offered by FJS. The most common services previously used were attendance at the Parenting after Separation (PAS) Seminar, Family Mediation Services, and the Family Law Information Centre.

3.1.2 Client Needs

- Almost two-thirds of clients said that the issue that prompted their current visit to FJS was parenting. The next most common issues reported were child support and guardianship.
- When clients were asked what services they thought they needed from FJS, the most frequent response, provided by one-half of participants, was general information, followed by help with completing forms, legal advice, and mediation.
- The substantial majority of survey respondents said that they do not currently have a lawyer helping them with their family law issues.

3.1.3 Client Experiences with Family Justice Services

- Clients reported that they had to stand in an average of two lineups during their current visit to FJS and few clients said that they had spent time waiting in a wrong line.

- Clients said that they had spent an average of seven minutes waiting in line at the FJS window.
- Very few clients said that they had children waiting with them in line during their current visit to FJS and approximately one-half said that they had an appointment booked for that day.
- When asked what help aids they had made use of during their current visit to FJS, almost one-third said that they had picked up brochures, while relatively few said that they had used the Internet or had printed materials while they were there.
- The substantial majority of clients indicated that they were very satisfied with the assistance they had received at FJS during their current visit.

3.2 Conclusions

Most Canadian jurisdictions have experienced a rise in the number of self-represented parties in family court, and governments have attempted to address this issue by increasing the availability of information and the number of services designed to assist these individuals. In Alberta, these supports include Family Justice Services (FJS) and the Family Law Information Centres (FLIC).

The Canadian Research Institute for Law and the Family (CRILF) is conducting this study to examine clients' experiences with accessing Calgary's FJS. This report presents findings from a pre-test survey administered to FJS clients. The data collected with the pre-test survey addressed two of this project's research objectives:

- To establish a profile of individuals who access Calgary's Family Justice Services (including the Family Law Information Centre) (e.g., demographics, nature of case, previous experience with family law system and Court Services, perceptions of their service needs, etc.); and
- To examine clients' experience and level of satisfaction with services received.

This section of the report discusses the findings within the context of these research questions.

3.2.1 Profile of Calgary's FJS Clients

The survey findings indicated that the substantial majority of respondents did not have a lawyer at the time of their visit to FJS. This is not surprising since one of the goals of FJS is to provide assistance to self-represented parties. In addition, many individuals visit FJS early in the family breakdown process; it is likely that some of these individuals will go on to have legal representation as their cases progress. The one-year follow up planned with these clients should provide some insight into this.

Over one-half of survey respondents indicated that they had made use of one or more FJS services prior to their current visit. This suggests that clients find the services offered by FJS useful and that they are willing to visit the centre multiple times as their needs change while moving through the separation or divorce process. Most commonly, clients said that they were looking for general information or assistance with completing forms during their current visit to FJS. Also, over one-third of respondents said that they were looking for legal advice, even though this cannot be provided by FJS; however, relatively few clients said that they were seeking Legal Aid.

The most common help aid that clients reported using during the FJS visit was accessing brochures, which is consistent with the majority saying that they were looking for general information. It is therefore important that FJS ensures that the information contained in the available brochures is current, and periodically assesses whether written materials on new topics should be made available to members of the public.

Almost one-third of respondents said that they needed mediation services. This is a positive finding and suggests that members of the public are aware that dispute resolution mechanisms other than the traditional litigation model are available and may be a desirable alternative.

The issues that clients said had brought them to FJS for their current visit were most likely to be child-related: clients were most likely to say that they were looking for assistance with parenting, child support, or guardianship issues. Few FJS clients said that they were seeking assistance with issues directly related to their former partner such as spousal support or property division. This suggests that achieving the best possible outcomes for children may be the paramount consideration for many individuals going through family breakdown.

3.2.2 FJS Clients' Experience and Satisfaction

Overall, clients were very positive about their experience during their visit to FJS and expressed very high levels of satisfaction. This is very encouraging, especially given the emotional turmoil surrounding family breakdown for most people. FJS staff should be commended for making the experience of visiting FJS so positive for many people. In fact, in open-ended comments, many clients mentioned specific staff members by name and expressed great appreciation for their level of knowledge and their assistance.

For the most part, the procedures in place at FJS for processing clients through the system seem to be working quite well: the majority of clients reported relatively short wait times in lineups and indicated that they had to wait in few different lines during their visit. There were a few cases where clients indicated that they waited in a wrong lineup: the most common reasons that they provided for this were that the signs were unclear or that they had been misdirected.

In summary, the findings from the pre-test survey suggest that FJS is providing very valuable services that clients find useful and are willing to access more than once as their needs change. The planned follow-up survey should provide additional valuable information regarding the progress and outcome of clients' cases and the perceived impact of services received from FJS on those outcomes.

REFERENCES

- Hilbert, J. (2009). Educational Workshops on Settlement and Dispute Resolution: Another Tool for Self-represented Litigants in Family Court. *Family Law Quarterly*, 43, 545-569.
- MacRae, L.D., Simpson, S., Paetsch, J.J., Bertrand, L.D., Pearson, S., & Hornick, J.P. (2009). *An Evaluation of Alberta's Family Law Act*. Report prepared for the Alberta Law Foundation. Calgary, AB: Canadian Research Institute for Law and the Family.
- Malcolmson, J., & Reid, G. (2006). *BC Supreme Court Self Help Information Centre Final Evaluation Report*. Vancouver, BC: BC Supreme Court Self Help Information Centre.
- Zorza, R. (2002). *The Self Help Friendly Court: Designed from the Ground Up to Work for People without Lawyers*. Williamsburg, VA: National Center for State Courts.