



LEGAL CHARITY PILOT FOR THE SELF-REPRESENTED

Devin Stevens

The **Legal Information Society of Nova Scotia** is launching a program to help regular Joes navigate the complex world of self-representation.~

The **Public Navigator Project** will kick off in **Bridgewater** this April with the training of 12 to 14 non-lawyers willing to volunteer their time to help fellow citizens through the legal process.

Executive director **Heather de Berdt Romilly** says the goal is not to provide expert legal advice like a lawyer, or to guarantee victory.

Instead, it aims to help people understand the sometimes complex court processes like how to fill out and understand legal documents in the **Nova Scotia Supreme Court** trial division.

"Very intelligent people, when they're dealing with some sort of conflict, can be thrown completely off, and it's really difficult to process the most basic of information," she said.

"Our hope is that we can build a person's confidence in exercising their choice in a decision that's right for them. That they'll feel more informed."

De Berdt Romilly says she's met with **Chief Justice Michael MacDonald**, who's endorsed the project, and recently had 48 of 50 judges show up for an information session.

The courts and practising lawyers don't have the resources to help the self-represented crowd, says de Berdt Romilly, but research has shown a little bit of legal information can resolve about 85% of legal issues, with only 15% actually requiring the advice of a lawyer.

The Navigator program may help relieve some of the stress on the courts if those cases can be diverted.

If successful, de Berdt Romilly says she'd like to see it across the province and across the country. Judges in provinces from

Newfoundland & Labrador, Quebec and British Columbia have all expressed interest.

But to do that, they'll need funding. The non-profit society runs with fewer than five full-time positions and a budget of \$220,000.

More than half of that comes from the **Law Foundation of Nova Scotia** with the federal government providing \$70,000 in support and the province kicking in \$50,000.

The executive director says they're always looking for new partnerships. Volunteers are also needed, especially those with legal backgrounds like paralegals and law students.

"I think it could demonstrate some of the best of what we want to do from an educational perspective, but also instilling in up-and-coming young legal professionals a sense of giving back to communities," she said.

The charity has been providing legal information to **Nova Scotians** for well over two decades. Its legal help line has processed more than 100,000 calls since its inception and it also offers up a slew of online resources.

It also has a referral service to help people find the experts they need.

A lawyer herself, de Berdt Romilly is a former human resources consultant who joined the society in 2014 (see 2014-03-20).

The **Halifax** native was formerly vp of private consulting firm **de Romilly & de Romilly Ltd.**, which she owned with husband **George de Berdt Romilly**.

After receiving her master's of law from **Dalhousie University**, she was board chair of **Avalon Sexual Assault Centre** and president of the **ADR (Alternative Dispute Resolution) Institute of Canada**.

She is also a former director of policy at the **Nova Scotia Public Service Commission**.

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