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By KEITH CORCORAN

keith.corcoran@lighthouseNOW.ca

@NewsmanKeith

Bridgewater is the starting point for an experiment to see if trained volunteers at the courthouse can help self-represented people wade through certain aspects of the judicial system.

The Legal Information Society of Nova Scotia in partnership with the Bridgewater Justice Centre hopes to attract at least six volunteers to assume the public navigator role, under supervision of court staff, to aid those without lawyers understand options at their disposal and make better decisions to deal with a legal issue.

Society executive director Heather de Berdt Romilly said the pilot program may be the first of its kind in Canada. Volunteers will be able to provide legal information, including assistance with filling out forms, but not disseminate legal advice. The navigators can be utilized for non-family-related civil matters within the general division of Nova Scotia Supreme Court. Their scope won't include family or criminal proceedings, de Berdt Romilly explained to LighthouseNOW in a telephone interview.

Bridgewater was chosen for the launch because of its modern courthouse and close proximity to Halifax. De Berdt Romilly mentioned local court administrator Paul Fay had an impact, as did the network of volunteer organizations on the South Shore. She specifically identified Bernice Theriault of the Lunenburg Queens Volunteer Partnership and Susan Himmelman of the South Shore Community Justice Society.

“Our purpose with this initiative is about trying to service the regional communities of Nova Scotia,” de Berdt Romilly said. While metro has a need, she said, “it’s much better serviced than most of our other outlying areas.”

In a notice, the society indicated its seeking people with transportation access to the courthouse and participants who can commit at least one afternoon a month. Schedules, the society said, “will be flexible to meet a volunteer’s work and personal commitments.”

The society fashioned the navigator concept after discovering a similar program in New York State. While that stateside group of lawyers disapproved of the idea, the society didn’t seek approval from the Nova Scotia Barristers Society. However, a chief justice in Nova Scotia declared his support for the public navigator plan.

“In terms of preconceived ideas we just want to try and figure out what can work and we’re quite willing to do whatever’s necessary to figure that out but we feel the concept has a lot of merit,” de Berdt Romilly said. She suggested feedback from the participating volunteers and self-representatives will help gauge the success or failure of the program. The hope is to garner funding to support the program in the future.

The volunteers will be required to attend an information meeting. Anyone interested in signing on or learning more about the six-week program is asked to contact the society's web site at <http://www.legalinfo.org> on the internet or phone 902-454-2198.