



**Do You Need Help with a Family Law Issue During COVID-19?
Do you know where to turn for help in Huron County?**

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Introduction

Families have been strained under the current social conditions of COVID-19. Courts and law enforcement officers are encountering issues that are being addressed for the first time in history because of new stressors compounding on families relating to the pandemic. Conditions surrounding access to children, child and spousal support, family violence and court procedures is taking a toll on the safety of families during this time.

Currently as a result of the pandemic, Courts in Ontario are only dealing with what are deemed “urgent matters”, in addition to some other limited matters. To understand what your rights are or what is being deemed “urgent”, and which matters may and may not proceed, you may wish to consult a lawyer. If you are concerned that you cannot afford a lawyer or you wish to learn about what free services there are, please read on.

It should be noted that as we move forward in the pandemic, so too does the Court’s ability to hear a variety of matters. While this document is current to the date of writing, as the landscape shifts so will the Court’s ability to hear matters. For the most up to date information you can reach the Trial Co-Ordinators, Jodie Grainger for the Ontario Court of Justice and Jennifer Cooke at the Superior Court of Justice, both in Goderich, at 519-524-2990 to obtain any more recent update about what can and cannot proceed.

The following is a list of resources and information on accessing services regarding family law during COVID-19. Most of these services are free and available through telephone, email or internet communication.

Q. Do you need immediate advice to determine if your matter is “urgent”?

- i) You can contact a **family law lawyer** for legal advice about your case; or
- ii) The **Law Society of Ontario (LSO)** is offering 30 minutes of free legal advice during COVID-19 to help people determine whether a family law matter is urgent. This emergency telephone referral service will also guide people on how to proceed if a matter is considered urgent. Call the LSO emergency family law helpline: 1-800-268-7568; or
- iii) **Legal Aid Ontario** offers brief family law advice and criminal law advice by telephone and there is no financial testing at this time. There are three ways to access this family law advice: call 1-800-668-8258 between 8 a.m. and 5 p.m. and a lawyer will call you back within 48 hours; or call the Goderich Court office at 519-524-2990 extension 327 to book a **Family Law Information Centre (FLIC)** appointment; or if it is urgent, call the Huron Legal Aid Office at 519-524-9612 ext.12 and leave a message to talk to a lawyer and the call will be returned as soon as possible; or
- iv) Contact the **Huron Women’s Shelter and Second Stage Housing Family Support Program** by telephone. The shelter provides Legal Support and can issue a 2 hour Legal Aid Advice Certificate. This will allow you two free hours of legal advice with a lawyer of your choosing who is on the Legal Aid Panel. Call the shelter at 1-800-265-5506/519-524-5333, ext. 240 and leave a

message to speak with a **Family Court Support Worker**. In the message leave your name, telephone number, and the best time of day to be reached. If the phone is un-safe, provide an e-mail address if possible. Your call will be returned as soon as possible likely from a blocked or unknown number. An assessment will be completed by telephone for eligibility for a Legal Aid Certificate; or

- v) The newly formed **National Canadian Lawyers' Initiative** may be able to connect you with a family law lawyer for advice. Visit: <https://natcanlaw.com/legal-help/>, and complete the form - select "Family" under legal issue category. Their volunteers will work hard to find a suitable practitioner as soon as possible for all legal help requests.

Q. Do you need a lawyer but you don't know how to find one to help you?

- i) There is a list of local lawyers who practice family law at the end of this document;¹ or
- ii) Check the internet or yellow pages for family lawyers; or
- iii) The **Law Society Referral Service** operated by the Law Society of Ontario is available to Ontario residents. The on-line request, the referral process, and initial consultation of up to 30 minutes are free. The consultation is meant to help determine rights and options – it is not to do free legal work. The consultation could include:
- How the law applies to your situation
 - How to use the law to solve your legal problem
 - How long the legal work may take
 - How much the legal representative will charge

To apply, complete the on-line form. You will be given a referral number and lawyer's phone number. Call the lawyer's office, leave your name, phone number, and the referral number. Someone will contact you within three business days to arrange for your consultation. If you cannot wait up to three

¹ This list is provided for assistance as people do not have access to libraries to assist in their search for a lawyer. DART is not recommending any specific lawyer on this list. There may be other lawyers locally or outside of Huron County who provide advice in family law matters. You should follow the steps above to find them.

days, send an email to lsrs@lso.ca or call 1-855-947-5255 or 416-947-5255 Monday - Friday between 9 am - 5 pm. For more information or to apply visit: <https://lsrs.lso.ca/lsrs/welcome>; or

- iv) **Cliquezjustice.ca** - Trouver un avocat, des organismes et des ressources près de chez vous. Cliquezjustice.ca can assist in finding a lawyer, organizations and resources. Visit: <https://cliquezjustice.ca/>; or
- v) **L'Association des juristes d'expression française de l'Ontario (AJEFO)** est une communauté juridique et un centre d'expertise en français. Fort de plus de 1 000 membres, l'AJEFO est le plus grand regroupement de professionnels francophones de la justice en Ontario. They have a searchable database to help with finding a French speaking lawyer. Visit: <https://www.ajefo.ca/>.

Q. Are you concerned that you cannot afford a lawyer?

- i) **Legal Aid Ontario** can issue a legal aid certificate to cover some family law issues and help you pay for your lawyer. For more information call Legal Aid Ontario - 1-800-668-8258 or visit <https://www.legalaid.on.ca/covid-19-legal-aid-services/> or www.legalaid.on.ca. Legal Aid Ontario also has an on-line Family Law Information program: <http://www.legalaid.on.ca/family-law-information-program/>; or
- ii) The **Centre d'information juridique de l'Ontario** offre une rencontre de 30 minutes gratuite avec un avocat à toute personne de l'Ontario faisant face à un problème juridique ou dont le problème juridique s'y situe. The Ontario Legal Information Center offers a free 30-minute meeting with a lawyer to anyone in Ontario who has or has a legal problem. Call 1-844-343-7462 or visit: <https://centreinfojuridique.ca/en/>.

Q. Are you or have you experienced violence at the hands of your partner or spouse?

- i) During COVID-19, **Luke's Place** has expanded their **Virtual Legal Clinic** (VLC) to provide family law support to women anywhere in Ontario who have experienced intimate partner violence. Women can access the **Virtual Legal Clinic** if they are:
 - experiencing violence or abuse in their relationship,
 - involved in a family law process,

- in need of summary legal advice,
- unrepresented by a lawyer,
- capable of committing to preparing and meeting on time with lawyers online, or
- involved in one of Luke's Place's partnering women's shelters in rural or remote areas of Ontario

If you are working with a woman who you believe could benefit from a VLC appointment, email Luke's Place project coordinator at kathryn@lukesplace.ca; or

- ii) **Legal Aid Ontario** has waived eligibility requirements for anyone experiencing **domestic violence** in need of the following legal aid services:
- a legal aid certificate to pay for a family lawyer;
 - up to two hours of free legal advice and referrals.

Call Legal Aid Ontario - 1-800-668-8258 or visit <https://www.legalaid.on.ca/covid-19-legal-aid-services/>; or

- iii) Contact the **Huron Women's Shelter's** 24 Hour Support and Information Line - 519-524-6245 or 1-800-265-5506.

Q. Are there other ways to understand what your rights are in family law?

- i) The **Ministry of the Attorney General** has significant resources on its website to assist. Visit <https://www.attorneygeneral.jus.gov.on.ca/english/family/>. The brochure "What You Should Know about Family Law in Ontario" is also accessible: <https://www.attorneygeneral.jus.gov.on.ca/english/family/famlawbro.php>. Materials are available in different languages; or
- ii) **Family Law Education for Women (FLEW)** is a public legal education project funded by the government of Ontario to assist women in understanding their family law rights. They do not provide individual legal assistance. But they do provide resources on how to find a family law lawyer, how to pay for the lawyer and what to do if you do not have a lawyer and other resources, including in different languages. Visit: <https://onefamilylaw.ca/>; or

- iii) **Cliquezjustice.ca** - un portail canadien d'information simplifiée qui vous aide à comprendre vos droits et obligations pour mieux gérer vos situations juridiques du quotidien. It is a Canadian information portal that helps you understand your rights and obligations to better manage your everyday legal situations. Visit: <https://cliquezjustice.ca/>; or
- iv) The Ontario **Superior Court of Justice** has resources on its website to assist: <https://www.ontariocourts.ca/scj/family/>; or
- v) The **Department of Justice** has resources on its website to assist: <https://www.justice.gc.ca/eng/fl-df/index.html>; or
- vi) The **National Self-Represented Litigant Project** provides information to assists people who represent themselves. Visit: <https://representingyourselfcanada.com/>.

Q. Are you under the age of 18 or a homeless youth under 25?

- i) **Huron Safe Homes for Youth** will connect you to alternative housing if you are age 16 or 17 and do not feel safe where you are staying. Call toll free at 1-800-361-1640, or email safe.homes@sympatico.ca for assistance; or
- ii) **Stratford Perth Shelter Link** is another resource that will connect you to housing while COVID-19 protocols are in place. The shelter is running at lower capacity, but they will find alternative housing for all referrals and intakes. All intakes and referrals are being done by telephone. Call their 24 hour telephone service at 519-272-2294, or email info@shelterlink.org; or
- iii) Contact the **Huron Perth Children's Aid Society** 24 hour call-in service - 1-800-265-5198; or
- iv) **Justice for Children and Youth** provides legal services for young people under 18 and homeless youth under 25 in Ontario. Services are available by telephone. Call toll free at 1866-999-5329. Website: <https://jfcy.org/en/>; or
- v) Contact the **Huron Women's Shelter's** 24 Hour Support and Information Line - 519-524-6245 or 1-800-265-5506.

Q. Do you have a concern that your child/youth or any child/youth that you know may be in need of protection?

The **Huron-Perth Children's Aid Society** investigates allegations of child abuse and neglect for children and youth under the age of 16 and for youth aged 16 and 17 with the youth's consent. If a child/youth is determined to be in need of protection and is living in an unsafe situation, the Huron-Perth Children's Aid Society will assist with providing or connecting to services that may include temporary accommodations. There is a 24 hour call-in service. Call 1-800-265-5198.

Q. Are you worried for your safety or the safety of your children?

- i) If you are worried about your immediate safety or the immediate safety of your children or anyone else, **call 911**.
- ii) If it is not an emergency, call the **Ontario Provincial Police** at 1-888-310-1122.
- iii) If you are worried about your safety and want assistance in staying safe, call the **Huron Women's Shelter 24 Hour Support and Information Line** - 519-524-6245 or 1-800-265-5506 or **Victim Services Huron** - 519-600-4108. You may call anonymously. You do not have to attend the shelter to access services.
- iv) If you are worried about the safety of your children, call the **Huron-Perth Children's Aid Society's** 24 hour call-in service - 1-800-265-5198.

Q. Do you have a custody order or agreement that requires supervised access?

While the doors to the **Supervised Access Visitation & Exchange Huron Perth** remain closed, the program is currently offering two service options for existing clients:

- 1) **Electronic transfer of information:** Through this program, clients can send updates and photos of children to non-custodial parties. Non-custodial parties are able to submit specific child related questions that are forwarded to the custodial parties. This process is used by parties interested in providing child updates

where the children are too young to have a virtual visit independent of the custodial parent, or where there are Domestic Violence related concerns or restrictions.

- 2) **All party off site Virtual Visits:** With the consent of both parties, virtual visits supervised by two staff members are being arranged, in separate locations. Children must be old enough to be able to be in a quiet space in the home on their own and perform simple tasks on the device they are using (such as volume adjustments or camera angle, etc.). The virtual visits are currently offered in 30 minute time slots, once a week. Both parties must have access to a device that has both a camera and a microphone and WIFI or data. The program does not require parties to download anything on to their device in order for it to work and prohibits parties connecting with each other outside of the visit time using this platform.

Clients sign temporary service agreements to engage in these emergency services. Services are voluntary and both parties must consent prior to access beginning. New files referred to the program will go through a virtual intake process. Once the intake is complete and families are determined to be eligible for service, the electronic transfer of information emergency service will be provided until in person access at the Centre resumes. Contact accesslou@wightman.ca, or call 1-888-508-6101.

Q. Do you have a support order or agreement that you need help enforcing?

The **Family Responsibility Office (FRO)** continues to help families during COVID-19 by collecting, distributing and enforcing child and spousal support payments. Clients can call FRO and receive services, but there will be longer than normal wait times. Call Toll-free: 1-800-267-4330 or TTY: 1-866-545-0083. Agents are available Monday to Friday, 8 a.m. to 5 p.m. Automated case information is available 24 hours a day. Visit their website for updates on services: www.ontario.ca/FRO.

Q. Do you need help filling out court forms?

- i) A lawyer can help you; or
- ii) You can call the **Family Law Information Centre** for an appointment. They are offering phone services and will help eligible self-represented people in obtaining the correct forms they need and completing them. Call the Goderich Court office at 519-524-2990 extension 327 to book a **Family Law Information Centre (FLIC)** appointment; or

- iii) **Family Guided Pathways** is a free online tool that helps people complete family law court forms. The service is delivered in a series of online interviews. For more information on the range of services available visit: <https://stepstojustice.ca/family-law-guided-pathways/about>.

Q. Are you concerned that you, your spouse or your children are experiencing stress, anxiety, an increased use of drugs or alcohol or is in crisis?

- i) **The Huron Perth Helpline and Crisis Response Team** remains available to residents in Huron and Perth County. **Crisis staff** are available for face-to-face assessment in ER's at all hospitals in Huron and Perth. The transitional house in Clinton is still running but at limited capacity and people accessing the transition house are required to stay for longer periods of time due to COVID. The 24 hour crisis phone service continues to be available (for crisis assessments, brief crisis therapy and crisis education): 1-888-829-7484.
- ii) **Rural Response for Healthy Children - supports families** by listening to parenting and household challenges and developing plans to ease the stress. The plan may include connecting parents/caregivers to community support agencies, providing activities and information for families to build understanding and connection at home and delivery of food and gift cards. Call 1-800-479-0716 (please leave a message & call will be returned), or text 226-210-0954 or email mail@rrhc.on.ca. Weekly virtual parenting programs are also available. Visit <http://www.rrhc.on.ca/event-calendar/>.
- iii) **John Howard Society of London and District** – provides brief and long-term **counselling** services by phone for individuals 16 and over to help with managing crises, solving problems and learning new coping skills. The Society also delivers a Navigating Relationships Program and Anger Management Program on an individual basis. For more information or to schedule an intake contact 519-438-4168. The Society also provides the Huron County **Partner Assault Response Program (PAR)** which is conducting intakes, sessions and partner calls by phone. To contact the Partner Assault Response Program, call 226-219-6421. To access other programs operated by the John Howard Society, call 519-438-4168.

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- iv) **Choices for Change: Alcohol, Drug & Gambling Counselling Centre.** If you need help with **addictions**, call 1-877-218-0077 and staff will provide phone support. Information is also available on their Facebook pages and website: <https://choicesforchange.ca/>. The Addiction Medicine Clinics are considered an essential service and continue to operate.
- v) **Canadian Mental Health Association Huron Perth (CMHA)** – If you need help with your **mental health and wellness**, call CMHA Huron Perth - 519-273-1391 or 1-888-875-2944, ext. 0 for reception.
- vi) Are you concerned about **food, housing, or financial issues**? **Huron County Social Services** may be able to help you if you are a resident of Huron County. Benefits and services available include: Emergency Assistance; Ontario Works Financial Assistance; COVID-19 Emergency Benefit; Pathways to Self-Sufficiency; Discretionary Benefits; United Way Perth-Huron COVID-19 Urgent Needs Fund; Low-income Energy Assistance Program (LEAP) – EARTH Power Customers. Call to see how you can be helped: 519-482-8505 or 1-888-371-5718 ext. 4501 or email owteam501@huroncounty.ca.
- vii) Call **211** or visit **211Ontario.ca** for current government, social and community services.

Q. Do you need help with other related legal issues?

- i) The **Huron Perth Community Legal Clinic** offers free legal services for low income residents of Huron and Perth Counties. They can help with problems with:
- Ontario Works
 - Ontario Disability Support Program
 - Employment and work problems, including Employment Insurance
 - Landlord and tenant problems, including information about Tenant Duty Counsel
 - Canada Pension Plan
 - Powers of Attorney

Call the Huron office at 519-524-4406 or toll Free: 1-866-867-1027 or visit <https://www.huronperthlegalclinic.ca/>.

- ii) **Legal Aid Ontario** has changed services to people in prison or jail, people in need of social assistance, people with housing issues along with their services for high risk people with various other legal concerns. For more information call Legal Aid Ontario - 1-800-668-8258 or visit <https://www.legalaid.on.ca/covid-19-legal-aid-services/>.

Q. Do you have other questions?

The Steps to Justice website is easy to navigate and provides useful information to people in need of legal assistance information during COVID-19 about different areas of law (abuse and family violence, family law, housing, employment, income assistance). The Steps to Justice webpage is updated regularly to provide answers to common family legal aid issues relating to COVID (for example; leaving violent partners, obtaining restraining orders, child protection): <https://stepstojustice.ca/covid-19>.

Q. Do you want to know more about Huron DART or services for family safety in Huron County?

This document is brought to you by the **Huron Domestic Assault Review Team** (DART). For more information about services available to support families in Huron County, Ontario. Please visit: www.hurondart.ca.

Attachments:

- Article by Sara Wisking, Custody and Access in Ontario during COVID-19
- List of local lawyers who practice family law