



2022-24 Strategic Objectives and Strategies

Summary

In August 2022, the board of the Federation of Ontario Law Associations (FOLA) met in Woodview, Ontario to set out the organization’s strategic priorities and activities for the next two-year period. The strategic plan resulting from that retreat was approved by the board on October 13, 2022. It is set out in this document.

The months ahead present numerous opportunities for advocacy on the part of local law associations and their members, such as the 2023 bench election, the potential revival of in-person lobby day at Queen’s Park, and the return of FOLA’s plenary meetings for law association presidents, starting with the November 2022 plenary in Niagara Falls.

There are also challenges – some exacerbated by the pandemic, and others by changes in our governance and political landscape. The future of law libraries, the greying of the bar, declining law association membership, member engagement, and financial pressures facing both FOLA and law associations are ongoing threats to the role of county and district law association and the ability of front-line lawyers to practice in communities across Ontario.

For the 2022-24 period, FOLA has identified the following four over-arching strategic objectives:

1. **Improve Communications:** Building awareness among and on behalf of front-line lawyers across Ontario’s regions
2. **Influence Decision-Makers:** Reaching out and influencing justice sector regulators, officials, and governments
3. **Sustain Law Associations:** Ensuring membership growth and leadership succession for county and district law associations
4. **Provide Practice Resources:** Protecting and growing Practice Resource Centres

These objectives are set out, with the related key strategic activities, in the below sections.

Corporate Profile

FOLA represents Ontario’s 46 county and district law associations, and through them, their members.

Together with our associate member, the Toronto Lawyers’ Association (TLA), FOLA advocates on behalf of approximately 12,000 lawyers. These lawyers are on the front lines of legal service delivery, mostly in private practice in law firms across the province. They are primarily ‘main street’ lawyers serving everyday Ontarians and their businesses and organizations.

FOLA is a respected stakeholder and a leading voice in the Ontario justice sector. It maintains close consultative relationships with relevant governments, officials, and regulators – including the Law Society of Ontario, the Ministry of the Attorney General, and Ontario’s courts.

Through our leadership on courthouse libraries on behalf of county and district law associations, FOLA is the *only* Ontario law association with an active presence in all regions of Ontario.

Mission Statement

FOLA is the voice of the practicing lawyer in Ontario.

Strategic Objectives

For 2022-24, FOLA’s board has identified the following strategic objectives to guide its activities, programming, outreach, and advocacy. For each objective, key activities have been identified to support the strategic objective.

Objective #1 – Improve Communications: *Building awareness among and on behalf of front-line lawyers across Ontario’s regions*

ISSUE BACKGROUND:

In the era of social media, 24/7 news cycles, and a loss of local news outlets, FOLA’s responsibility for drawing attention to law and justice issues impacting its members across the province has never been more pronounced. At the same time, like many organizations, FOLA faces challenges engaging law association members in its work and ensuring that it is not contributing to the information overload facing many professionals in their inboxes. In the months ahead, FOLA will work to redevelop its corporate identity and adapt its communication practices. We will do so to both tell lawyers’ stories publicly and communicate with law association members more effectively.

KEY ACTIVITIES:

Complete corporate re-branding exercise and launch redeveloped website.

FOLA has retained a designer to assist in developing new corporate branding for the organization for use across all of its platforms, publications, and media. In concert with this roll-out, FOLA will redevelop its website to provide a clean, professional, and user-friendly interface that serves the needs of its members, the public, and other justice sector participants. The new branding and website will serve as key tools in FOLA’s efforts to improve its communication, outreach, and advocacy profile. This visual ‘refresh’ will serve to re-launch and re-position FOLA at a time that coincides with public advocacy surrounding a bench election and the need for membership re-engagement and growth following the withdrawal seen during the pandemic.

Develop and amplify meaningful and persuasive submissions to ‘official’ consultations.

FOLA has a long history of providing thoughtful submissions to regulators and governmental bodies as part of official consultation processes on law or regulatory reform initiatives. Moving forward, FOLA will continue to provide this sound feedback with input from county and district law association members. Moreover, FOLA will look for opportunities to share its submissions with law association members using newsletters, social media, and its web platform. FOLA will

prioritize participating in calls for consultation that are relevant to its membership base and their practice areas. Most imminently, FOLA plans to provide input on the Law Society’s succession planning policy proposals and the unique impacts this policy may have on sole practitioners and small firms in Ontario.

Enhance media relations strategy.

FOLA is one of Ontario’s preeminent associations representing lawyers. In order to improve our recognition as a leading voice in the law and justice sector, FOLA will proactively identify opportunities for media coverage of its events, initiatives, and positions. These efforts may include media relations on issues impacting the practice of law or access to justice, or to highlight innovative activities of or challenges facing county and district law associations.

Focus on practice areas with limited voice from other organizations.

In deploying the above-noted strategies, FOLA is aware that some practice areas are prevalent among its member associations and that some practice areas have more advocates than others. For instance, the family and criminal law bar have their own associations, and issues pertaining to Legal Aid are canvassed by many organizations. However, practice areas such as real estate have fewer advocates. FOLA is well-positioned to be a voice for those members of the bar. FOLA will look for and prioritize opportunities to provide its perspective or to speak out on matters of issues to its members where other associations are silent.

Develop practice area-specific resources.

FOLA recognizes the diversity of the professional constituency it serves. FOLA will make efforts to develop practice-area specific resources, communications tools, and email lists to ensure that the right information is getting to the right lawyers. By doing so, FOLA hopes to avoid ‘information overload’ and to return value to local law associations and their members by ensuring they are receiving the most pertinent information for their needs.

Objective #2 – Influence Decision-Makers: *Reaching out and influencing justice sector regulators, officials, and government*

ISSUE BACKGROUND:

As an advocate in the law and justice sector, FOLA punches above its weight. A Law Society bench election is set for 2023, and it represents the next significant forum to shape the debate around the future of the Ontario legal professions. FOLA will use its role to influence the issues that frame this election, but also to encourage local law associations and their members to participate in the democratic process. In addition, FOLA will continue to develop its role as a respected stakeholder that provides sound and policy-minded input to regulators, government officials, and the courts. FOLA will take steps to influence decision-makers on the issues impacting law associations and their members.

KEY ACTIVITIES:

Frame the issues and provide resources to voters in the 2023 bench election.

FOLA has identified county and district law libraries and sustainable Legal Aid funding as its priority issues for the 2023 bench election cycle. In the lead-up to the election, FOLA – in collaboration with local law associations – will work to position these as top-line issues for bench candidates in the election. In addition, FOLA will provide resources for law association

members on candidates in the election, which may include a dedicated webpage, candidate questionnaire responses, and voting history of incumbents on key issues.

Active engagement in consultative bodies and working groups.

FOLA is a member of several working groups, committees, and consultative bodies facilitated by the courts, the Law Society, and other justice sector participants. We are uniquely positioned to provide regional feedback to these bodies from our member law associations, and we will continue to do so. FOLA's board will use regional executive meetings as an opportunity to collect and relay information and feedback between the bar and other stakeholders, regulators, and officials, and to escalate issues where necessary.

Continue to develop FOLA's Queen's Park lobby day.

FOLA held its first-ever lobby day at Queen's Park in 2019 and has since held a 'virtual' lobby day during the pandemic. Both events were popular with the law association members who participated and provided a useful forum for law associations to engage government and opposition MPPs on law and justice issues, while also assisting law association members to build relationships with their local MPPs. FOLA will continue to build on the success of lobby day and consider issue- or practice area-focused lobbying strategies or events.

Improve outreach to Law Society benchers.

FOLA will endeavour to improve its outreach and the regularity of its communication with individual Law Society benchers. In the past, when in-person board meetings were more common, these encounters were more routine. With changes at Convocation and FOLA brought in by virtual meetings and the pandemic, FOLA's board will work to develop other regular touchpoints with benchers through a newsletter, invitations to regional meetings, and other personal outreach opportunities.

Objective #3 – Sustain Law Associations: *Ensuring membership growth and leadership succession for county and district law associations*

ISSUE BACKGROUND:

The bar is 'greying' in many regions of the province, with few recently called lawyers moving to some communities to provide legal services to replace retiring lawyers. To add to this worry, financial pressures, social disengagement spurred by the pandemic, and a loss of in-person events have accelerated a decline in membership for many local law associations. FOLA recognizes local law associations are critical advocates for justice needs in their communities and at their local courthouses. FOLA is also the only regionalized Ontario law association that has a finger on the pulse of these issues in all corners of the province. Having a vibrant law association in every part of the province is part of ensuring access to justice and competent legal service across Ontario. For these reasons, FOLA will take actions to help sustain and grow local law associations.

KEY ACTIVITIES:

Undertake a governance and committee review.

As part of good governance practices, FOLA's will undertake a review of its organizational structure to ensure that areas of practice and issues of concern to local law associations are appropriately reflected in the committee structure and that FOLA committees are appropriately filled. These committees directly inform and drive FOLA's advocacy on various issues and it is

imperative that the bodies be in touch with the challenges of law associations and their members.

Advocate for a competence levy to apply to all Law Society licensees.

Lawyers in Ontario support the operations of county and district law libraries (now known as Practice Resource Centres, or PRCs) through the payment of their annual fees to the Law Society. This ‘competence levy’ is collected from lawyer licensees but not paralegal licensees. FOLA believes that all providers of legal services ought to meet standards of professional competence. By ensuring paralegals are contributing toward the cost of PRCs, law libraries – which are the backbone of their associations – will be more financially sustainable. This will be more incentive for paralegals to become members of their local law association, where such membership is available.

Support law associations in promoting membership benefits.

Law association membership numbers are declining for many associations. FOLA will continue to highlight the benefits that are available to members of their local law association, including exclusive pricing and promotional offers through its members-only website. In addition, FOLA will share best practices with associations to improve member engagement and participation in their events and initiatives.

Review FOLA biannual plenary format and meeting cycle.

Under section 26 of the *Law Society Act*, the Treasurer of the Law Society is to convene a meeting with the president of each county or district law association. It is under this provision that FOLA has convened plenaries in the fall and spring of each year for law association presidents (or their designate). FOLA recognizes the significant value of in-person meetings and building relationships among the bar and between the presidents, benchers, and other attendees. It has had mixed success with virtual plenaries during the COVID-19 pandemic. However, with the increased flexibility of virtual meeting formats and cost pressures, there may be opportunities to alter the meeting cycle or frequency, or to change the format of one of the two plenaries each year. In addition to possible cost savings, there may be value in a regionalized format for at least one of the two plenaries.

Objective #4 – Provide Practice Resources: *Protecting and growing Practice Resource Centres*

ISSUE BACKGROUND:

County and district law libraries (now known as PRCs) are managed by their local law association but funded in large part by the Legal Information and Resource Network (LiRN). LiRN is a corporation governed in accordance with the unanimous shareholders’ agreement struck between the Law Society, FOLA, and the TLA. FOLA speaks on behalf of law associations in this governance process and has a role, through the agreement, to ensure that LiRN continues to implement its mandate in a manner that is responsive to the needs and circumstances of the associations. FOLA will take steps to protect and grow PRCs within this evolving governance and policy landscape.

KEY ACTIVITIES:**Continue active and candid LiRN engagement.**

LiRN has a mandate to develop policies and other requirements to ensure some consistency and baseline standards of service, governance, and financial accountability at PRCs. Some of these have created unique challenges and pressures for law associations. FOLA will continue to actively engage and provide feedback on proposed material from LiRN and to maintain candid and productive relationships with LiRN management and board members.

Arrange LiRN shareholder meetings where necessary.

The LiRN shareholders' agreement reflects a mutual understanding and collaborative model between the shareholders. It is built upon a shared desire to uphold the competence of Law Society licensees across Ontario. FOLA is committed to this goal and will maintain open lines of communication with the other shareholders of LiRN by having both formal and informal shareholders' meetings where necessary to relay law association feedback and concerns.

Support law associations with PRC recruitment and staffing issues.

FOLA recognizes the diversity of its member law associations and the unique challenges posed by the current labour market in many parts of the province. FOLA also recognizes that library staff are critical to the sound functioning and administration of most county and district law associations. FOLA will make efforts to assist law associations in efforts to recruit and maintain knowledgeable and qualified library staff, including by sharing best practices, circulating opportunities, and maintaining an open dialogue with library staff associations.

Provide management resources and supports to law associations for PRCs.

As requirements for the management of PRCs come into effect over the next 12-24 months, law association executive members will need to be more fluent in the day-to-day affairs and financial administration of their association. FOLA will provide resources and educational opportunities – including at its upcoming plenaries – to ensure that this information is available to all county and district law associations.

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