



2017-2018 Executive & Board of Directors: *

Dr. Dan Ashbourne, President
Brian Burke, President Elect & Treasurer
Maxine Kerr, Secretary

Nicholas Bala
Dr. Kimberly Harris
Michelle Hayes
Andrea Himel

Carolyn Leach
Kaitlyn McCabe
Dr. Jay McGrory
Robyn Switzer

November 23, 2017

The Right Hon. Justin Trudeau, Prime Minister of Canada
c/o Office of the Prime Minister
Prime Minister's Office
80 Wellington Street
Ottawa, ON K1A 0A2
mailed & emailed to: justin.trudeau@parl.gc.ca

AND

The Honourable Jody Wilson-Raybould, P.C., M.P.
Minister of Justice and Attorney General of Canada
284 Wellington Street
Ottawa, ON K1A 0H8
mailed & emailed to: Jody.Wilson-Raybould@parl.gc.ca

AND

The Honourable Bill Morneau, P.C., M.P.
Minister of Finance
House of Commons
Ottawa, ON K1A 0A6
mailed & emailed to: Bill.Morneau@parl.gc.ca

Dear Ministers,

Re: Unified Family Courts Initiative

In January 2017, the Association of Family and Conciliation Courts, Ontario Chapter ("AFCC-O") wrote a letter in support of the expansion of the Unified Family Court ("UFC") throughout Ontario. We believe that now is the right time to move forward with this important initiative, and that many families and children will benefit from the UFC expansion.

The AFCC is an interdisciplinary and international association of professionals dedicated to the resolution of family conflict. AFCC members share a strong commitment to education, innovation, and collaboration in order to benefit communities, empower families, and promote a healthy future for children. We promote a collaborative approach to serving the needs of children among those who work in and with family law systems, encouraging education, research and innovation and identifying best practices. Our vision is a justice system in which all professionals work collaboratively through education, support, and access to services to achieve the best possible outcome for children and families. The AFCC Ontario Chapter, one of two Canadian chapters, has over 400 members in the province, including lawyers, mental health professionals, mediators and judges.

The AFCC-O has publicly supported the expansion of the UFC since our 2011 policy paper entitled "*The Ideal Family Court*", which was adopted following our symposium about the challenges faced by the family justice system. The development of UFC was a primary goal highlighted in that report. In 2014, the

AFCC-O followed up on this initial policy piece by conducting an environmental scan of Ontario government agencies and non-profit organizations to better understand their policy initiatives as well as the gaps they identified in the family law system. We utilized the responses collected from 22 government agencies and non-profit organizations to devise the "AFCCO: *The Ideal Family Court (Revised 2014)*", which is attached hereto. Once again, UFC was identified as a key priority that was and continues to be supported by various stakeholders in the family justice community.

In 2015, AFCC-O conducted research on the issue of domestic family law cases that also involve the child protection system. We found a high volume of complex cases that intersect the various legal and social systems. What is apparent from our research and from prior social science studies is that many families have multiple stressors following separation and divorce, and/or involvement with the child protection system. In November 2016, the AFCC-O organized a symposium to build on this research and to consider how we may improve the provision of services and supports for these families. Once again, the UFC was identified as an important step to facilitate the resolution of family law disputes. The research paper and symposium notes are available on our website, www.afccontario.ca.

The AFCC-O believes that the benefit of the Unified Family Court is threefold: (1) Under the UFC model, families engaged in the child protection and domestic courts are served in a single location with a single set of rules, practices and procedures, and one line of appeal. As such, some of the barriers to access to justice as well as public and private costs are reduced, particularly for self-represented litigants; (2) So long as the UFC is properly resourced, families have better access to a broad range of family law services that are designed to address the multi-dimensional issues and challenges faced by many litigants. These services include support for families and children impacted by domestic violence, intersection cases (domestic family law and child protection); and (3) improved access to mediation.

We commend the federal and provincial governments on the excellent initiatives that have been implemented since June 2011 when the AFCC-O commenced its review of challenges faced by the family justice system. We believe that the expansion of the UFC is the next crucial step, as a single court model can best provide families and children (who are often the most vulnerable in our population) access the services they require. We urge the Minister of Justice to fulfill her mandate with respect to the expansion of the UFC.

In October 2016, the AFCC-O wrote to the Minister of Justice in support of ongoing (predictable, sustained, stable) funding for family law initiatives in order to ensure stability of existing services and the capacity to innovate, develop new service delivery models and to expand on existing services that require additional resources. Today we write to support our belief that an investment in the UFC, a key family law initiative, will not only improve the justice system, but will also lead to reduced costs (financial and otherwise) in areas such as health and criminal justice.

The Association of Family and Conciliation Courts, Ontario Chapter strongly supports the expansion of the UFC. We look forward to working with the federal and provincial governments in any capacity that may be of assistance.

Yours sincerely,



Dr. Daniel T. Ashbourne, C. Psych.
President, AFCC-O



Mr. Brian J. Burke, LL.B.
President-Elect, AFCC-O

DA:kb

* This letter is supported by the AFCC-O Board Members listed above. Judicial Board Members take no position with respect to AFCC-O's support for the UFC.