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London Free Press (Ontario)

September 15, 2008 Monday
FINAL EDITION

Study urges changes to family courts; JUSTICE

BYLINE: BY JENNIFER O'BRIEN

SECTION: NEWS; Pg. A6

LENGTH: 329 words

Ontario's family court system -- which hears all domestic law matters from divorce to adoption -- is "tearing families apart," say authors of a London study.

Costly waits, some years long, and dispersed services are causing families to drop out of the system created to help them, the authors say.

"It's a maze and people can't find the help they need, so they drop out of the system and end up with really bad arrangements . . . they sign something at a kitchen table or they live in chaos," said Peter Jaffe, a London psychologist who often works on family court cases and co-author of the study.

The issue was spotlighted last week after Ontario's chief justice identified a need for changes to family courts.

The plea, made at a ceremony to mark the opening of the Ontario courts, echoed some of the 12 recommendations set out in a 2007 study on family courts.

"I am pleased the chief justices have recognized the need and I just hope they can translate it from a concern to a plan of action," said Alfred Mamo, a family court lawyer who co-authored the study.

Mamo has seen first-hand how the family court experience can cause more problems than it solves for those seeking legal help.

"We have a system that is tearing families apart," he said.

The biggest problem is a lack of federally appointed judges, he said, which is causing a backlog.

Ideally, one judge should manage each case, but "instead we bounce around from judge to judge . . . there are cases that have been adjourned 15 or 16 times, and gone before seven or eight judges," Mamo said.

Family courts need to provide a one-stop shop with a full-time resource co-ordinator, where people could get information on services available on a range of issues, including parenting, housing and legal and financial aid, he said.

The chief justices are calling for more unified family courts in which all family matters are heard.

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Traditionally, custody matters are heard by provincial judges and divorce is heard by federal judges.

LOAD-DATE: September 15, 2008

LANGUAGE: ENGLISH

PUBLICATION-TYPE: Newspaper

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