



Legal Aid Manitoba  
Aide juridique Manitoba

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## **Legal Aid Manitoba improves French language services to clients**

WINNIPEG, MB -- September 17, 2009 -- Legal Aid Manitoba (LAM) has hired the first designated French trial lawyer in the province. Guillaume Dragon will be working out of the organization's Criminal Law Office on various cases where the client's language of choice is French.

"Although Legal Aid has had bilingual lawyers in the past, trials were always held in English," says Mario Santos, Chair of LAM's Management Council. "We want to ensure that everyone has the right to a fair and balanced justice system in the language of their choice and that includes having a lawyer who can handle everything from interviews and hearings to a full trial in French."

Dragon is working on domestic violence cases, as well as prison law. He will also be spending time in as duty counsel, helping the public understand the court process and assisting people during their first court appearance.

"Lawyers will talk to their clients in French, but then walk into the courtroom and speak English and their clients don't always understand," says Dragon. "The Francophone community has a right to their court proceedings being conducted in French. This is not an accommodation issue; it's a right and my position is correcting the imbalance and creating a more equal system, which is what Legal Aid Manitoba is all about."

In 2008, the Criminal Code was amended to ensure that people are asked during their first court appearance which language they want to use.

"The public has recently started to inquire about their language rights and Legal Aid Manitoba saw that there was a need for a French trial lawyer," says Santos. "This growing demand is largely based on immigration and citizens being informed of their language rights."

Dragon is a member of l'Association des juristes d'expression français du Manitoba (AJEFM), which strives to further the access to French language services in the province in all areas related to justice and the law and to promote the full use of these services.

"We are very pleased that Legal Aid Manitoba has designated a full-time French trial lawyer to service the Francophone community, including the Saint-Boniface and St. Pierre Courts," says Marc Marion, President of AJEFM. "Guillaume Dragon, along with French-speaking trial lawyers in private practice that will work on Legal Aid certificates, will help ensure greater access to judicial services in the French language in the Winnipeg and surrounding areas."

The position is a one-year contract and LAM will assess the demand throughout the year.