



Judges and lawyers join forces to train junior lawyers

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Provincial Court judges are working with senior lawyers to increase the skills and knowledge of junior lawyers in Surrey, British Columbia's fastest-growing municipality. To accomplish this, they have formed the "Surrey Inns of Court".

What are "Inns of Court"?

The term "Inns of Court" dates back to the Middle Ages, when societies were formed in London, England to educate lawyers about English law (using the medieval French language) while universities were teaching Roman law in Latin.

Today there are still four Inns of Court in buildings located near the Royal Courts of Justice in London: the Inner Temple, Middle Temple, Lincoln's Inn, and Gray's Inn. The Inns' responsibilities for legal education have varied through the centuries, but since the 1800s they have prepared students for bar exams and authorized them to practise law as barristers (lawyers who represent clients in trials, especially in higher courts).

In Canada and the US, Inns of Court programs have been established by judges and senior lawyers to promote lawyers' competence and professionalism. They adopt the English tradition of informal meetings between junior and senior lawyers and judges to discuss the practice of law and legal issues. Provincial Court judges participate in an Inns of Court program begun in 1984 by Chief Justice Allan McEachern and other BC Supreme Court judges and hosted by the Vancouver Bar Association. In the US, Chief Justice Warren Burger worked to establish Inns of Court in cities around the country in the 1970s and '80s.

How "Inns of Court" came to Surrey

During the winter of 2019/20 discussions about young lawyers' needs for mentoring and professional development led to a partnership between the Surrey Bar Association and Provincial Court judges to develop the "Surrey Inns of Court" program. Although the pandemic soon prevented in-person training events, education was offered online with experienced presenters successfully delivering virtual advocacy training sessions to local lawyers. Good attendance at these events reinforced the need for an Inns of Court program in Surrey.

When pandemic restrictions eased, in-person training returned. From September 2022 to

March 2023, a group of lawyers from all practice areas with less than 6 years experience met monthly with volunteering Provincial Court judges and senior practitioners. They discussed legal ethics, practice management, expert witnesses, trial advocacy, professional responsibility, and more. Each meeting included a speaker and was designed to stimulate conversation among the mentoring senior lawyers, judges, and participants in a relaxed and friendly environment over a meal.

With the support of the Office of the Chief Judge and the Court Services Branch of the provincial government, participants also had a chance to practice direct and cross-examination in a courtroom setting after hours, with feedback from a judge and senior lawyer.

Enthusiastic response

When the sessions ended in March, it was clearly a resounding success filling a need in the local bar. Participants commented:

“The Surrey Inns of Court program was a phenomenal opportunity to connect with other members of our profession and to pick the brains of some of Surrey’s senior counsel and members of the Bench. While each session was full of practical information, having an opportunity to practice direct/cross examination (and receive feedback) in front of a Judge was an invaluable experience - we so rarely get a “test run” in our profession!”

“ ... It was also great to have guest judges and speakers attending both to share their knowledge and perspective and also to make the courtroom a little less intimidating. It was a good and low-stakes environment to ask questions without being worried about being judged or messing something up mid-trial.”

“What I enjoyed most of all was the informal table conversations, where we had opportunities to ask questions and hear from senior counsel and judges, and just get to know them on a more personal level. A lot of the learning for me happened during those table conversations.”

Judge Kathryn Ferriss, one of the judicial mentors for the program, said:

“The Surrey Inns of Court program provided a friendly and relaxing learning experience for young lawyers. They were given a chance to see the judges in a different environment and it gave senior lawyers and judges a chance to relate to the young lawyers who appear in court. I am looking forward to the program that starts in September!”

Chief Judge Melissa Gillespie added:

“By helping junior lawyers to improve their knowledge and skills, the judges and lawyers who volunteer their time as mentors in the Surrey Inns of Court are improving access to justice. Better lawyers can better represent their clients. I congratulate the judges and lawyers in Surrey for this initiative.”

What's next?

Because of its success, organizers have decided to continue the Inns program in Surrey. For more information contact the [Surrey Bar Association](#).

Note: Portions of this article were written by Michael Fortino and were posted on the website of the Surrey Bar Association.

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