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**NEW REPORT HIGHLIGHTS ONGOING HIDDEN LEGAL BARRIERS
UNDERMINING COMMUNITY SAFETY**

STUDY DEMONSTRATES NEED FOR NEW PROGRAM AIMED AT HELPING JUSTICE-INVOLVED
IDENTIFY AND ACCESS LEGAL SUPPORT AND OTHER COMMUNITY RESOURCES

TORONTO – A [new report](#) released today by the John Howard Society of Ontario (JHSO) reveals that unaddressed housing, employment, and other civil legal issues are negatively impacting the lives of justice-involved Ontarians long after they have exited the criminal justice system, and that the lack of awareness and access to legal support and other programs to resolve such issues is undermining community safety.

“Even a short stay in jail can result in someone being evicted from their home, being laid off or losing income support benefits. All of these scenarios have potential legal fallout, as well as legal recourse. Left unresolved, such civil legal issues threaten access to critical supports that can stabilize the reintegration process, leading to a downward spiral of marginalization, and ultimately, recidivism,” states Jonathan Robart, Legal Program Coordinator at the John Howard Society of Ontario. “For this reason, it is critical to community safety that the civil legal needs of justice-involved individuals be identified early, and then be appropriately addressed.”

The report, [Legally Bound: Addressing the Civil Legal Needs of Justice-Involved Ontarians](#), illustrates that civil legal issues are common experiences for people who are low-income and marginalized, and are experienced even more acutely by those involved in the criminal justice system. The research paints a clear picture of the many ways that justice-involved individuals experience common civil legal issues: housing issues (75%) were by far the most frequently reported issue, followed by income maintenance (55%), employment (50%), and family law issues (34%).

The research found that one of the biggest obstacles to accessing civil justice for justice-involved Ontarians is recognizing these issues as legal issues to begin with. When presented with real-world scenarios, the study’s justice-involved participants had difficulty correctly distinguishing a civil legal issue from a non-legal issue. These same individuals, unsurprisingly, also did not see themselves as being in need of legal help.

Even among those who have a more nuanced understanding of the legal nature of their challenges, the study found that there is a clear reluctance to pursue legal remedies, even when there are available resources that could help prevent the escalation of civil legal issues.

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“Our findings revealed that people with past criminal justice involvement feel like the bad things that happen to them in the civil legal realm are just a normalized, everyday part of their lives. They do not see these issues as access to justice issues,” concluded Robart. “Justice-involved individuals tend to harbour distrust for legal systems. When they encounter challenges in their day-to-day life, they tend to reach out first to their social networks or trusted frontline social service staff at community agencies, such as the John Howard Society.”

The report highlights that frontline staff at social service agencies build rapport and trust with their justice-involved clients, and can become, in effect, “trusted intermediaries”: people and organizations that can act as a bridge to accessing legal information, services and resources. The report concludes that a key way to improve access to civil justice remedies for justice-involved populations is to deliver targeted training and public legal education for frontline social service agency staff to empower them as trusted intermediaries, and equip them with the skills to recognize and address the civil legal needs of clients.

Based on the findings of this research, JHSO is developing an innovative, first-of-its kind civil legal training and education program targeting frontline staff who serve justice-involved individuals in Ontario, to break down the barriers to accessing civil justice. The aim of this new program will be to identify and respond to civil legal issues early, to assist with system navigation and build strong referrals to existing legal resources to stop the costly cycle of collateral justice consequences.

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For more than 90 years, the John Howard Society of Ontario has worked to keep the humanity in justice. Through 19 local offices across Ontario, the JHSO delivers more than 80 evidence-based programs and services in support of those affected by the criminal justice system. In doing so, we help build safer, more resilient communities. JHSO’s Centre of Research & Policy specializes in bridging the gap between analysis and frontline service delivery. By collaborating closely with our local offices, the Centre’s team develops policy positions that truly reflect the needs of each community, advances those positions to governments and other organizations, educates the public on the critical issues, and evaluates program efficacy to guide future work.

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