

Press Release & Backgrounder May 15, 2008
4th Annual Conference Announcement
10th Anniversary Announcement
CCAT Conference 2008

For immediate release
May 15th, 2008

Conference promotes the top standard for tribunals dealing with the public
Do you know your ABC?

Few Canadians may be aware of them – yet they have arguably even more influence than the criminal or civil courts do on their day-to-day lives. They broadly decide rights and entitlements related to licensing, status of people, and money and benefits owed.

They are administrative tribunals, and are often referred to as “quasi-judicial,” or as ABCs, for agencies, boards, and commissions that governments appoint. But tribunals also include appeal bodies and committees for municipalities, colleges, and universities. Professional organizations, sports groups, unions, and other associations also have appeal and discipline tribunals. With the public so involved, shouldn’t they perform to a top-notch “gold standard” when it comes to process, decisions, and transparency?

The Gold Standard of Tribunal Performance is the theme of the fourth-annual conference by an Edmonton-based foundation that trains western Canadian tribunals, and those who appear before them. “We always ask tribunals how they can perform to their best ability,” said Deborah Howes, who is contracted to teach for the Foundation of Administrative Justice.

The foundation’s conference kicks off at the University of Alberta Conference Centre, May 28 with a keynote speech on the gold standard from Paul LeBreton, president of the Council of Canadian Administrative Tribunals. “He’s a dynamic tribunal chair who spends an incredible amount of time and effort promoting best practices nationwide,” said Howes.

Saskatchewan’s provincial court chief judge is the closing-day keynote speaker starting off the conference May 29. Judge Gerald Seniuk will give the court’s perspective on best standards. During the two days, workshops will be held on topics like running fair hearings, recognizing ethical standards, and managing information. “We’re excited to have workshops covering all aspects of how tribunals deal with the public,” Howes said.

Robert Breaker, a former chief with Calgary-area Siksika Nation, and Bertha Robesca Zoe, a leading Northwest Territories First Nations lawyer, will discuss aboriginal issues in the workshop Recognizing Traditions: Best Practices in First Nation’s Tribunals.

A workshop will also be held on best practices for health-professional disciplinary hearings. The conference will wrap up with a plenary panel discussing issues for ABCs in the next decade. It’s a notable topic, as 2008 marks the foundation’s 10th anniversary.

For more information, please contact: Deborah Howes, Foundation for Administrative Justice: (780) 466-0501, or cell 446-9201 (available weekends), or info@foaj.ca

Backgrounder:

The Foundation for Administrative Justice provides training courses for Western Canada's tribunals, and the people who appear before them. These administrative tribunals have a tremendous influence on the day-to-day lives of Canadians, arguably even more so than the criminal or civil courts do. As part of the broad quasi-judicial system, these tribunals decide rights and entitlements related to licensing, status of people and things, and money and benefits owed. They are often known as the ABCs, or agencies, boards, and commissions of the federal and provincial governments. But tribunals also include public-sector appeal bodies and committees for municipalities, colleges, and universities. They reach into the private sector through appeal and discipline committees for professional organizations, sports groups, unions, and other associations. Perhaps your business has had to take out a liquor licence; maybe you want to appeal a municipal development decision; you may have been involved in a labour dispute, or have had an issue with your doctor or teacher. Tribunals are involved, and often central, in all these cases.

Administrative tribunals have come into place as Canadian society has sought to deal with the complex issues and disputes that the country's leaders believe should be solved outside the court system and political process. Tribunal appointees and staff often don't have a legal background, and have found many aspects of their work hard to understand. So teaching them the basics of fair process, like how to run a hearing and interpret laws, was seen as beneficial. The Foundation started in 1998 when the national training committee of the Council of Canadian Administrative Tribunals started its work on the Prairies. While the Saskatchewan and Manitoba CCAT national directors organized in their provinces, FAJ founding member Deborah Howes sent letters to all other Alberta ABCs asking to sponsor a staff member or appointed board member to become instructors. Eight ABCs agreed, including the Worker's Compensation Board, the Advanced Education ministry, the Alberta Transportation Safety Board, and the provincial real estate council. After the first training session for instructors in Saskatoon in December 1998, the Alberta instructors met and formed an informal organization to oversee course delivery. This group of eight started out delivering four courses a year in 1999, and seven years later the education program grew to 11 courses, with over 34 days of training annually. In 2002, the FAJ society contracted High Clouds Incorporated, where Howes serves as executive director, to teach, develop courses, and run the society and its education program. The FAJ membership grew from eight members that year to 195 in 2008.

Howes said ABCs and other tribunals make up 98 per cent of those who take foundation courses. For people looking to be appointed to tribunal, information that they've taken an FAJ course looks good on a resume, she noted. The other two per cent of course students include members of unions, interest groups, and real-estate agents, seeking advice on dealing with tribunals. Noting how an MLA's assistant even once took the training, Howes would like to see more people who appear before tribunals in FAJ's courses. She notes that the key word in FAJ's title is justice, as the group aims for a fairer society.