

NEWS RELEASE

New Partnership Connects Toronto Small Businesses with Free Legal Support at Critical Moments

The Toronto Association of Business Improvement Areas (TABIA) and the Ontario Bar Association (OBA) launch pilot program to help entrepreneurs access legal guidance before small issues become costly problems

Toronto, ON – July 29, 2026 - Running a small business often means making important legal decisions even when there is little room in the budget to hire a lawyer. Whether signing a first commercial lease, bringing on a business partner, hiring employees, or navigating permits and regulations, many entrepreneurs face legal questions that can shape the future of their business, but financial barriers often delay seeking professional advice.

At a time when economic constraints are mounting for small businesses, more turn to online resources and artificial intelligence (AI) to answer complex legal questions. While these tools can help business owners understand legal concepts and prepare questions, they are not a substitute for legal advice tailored to a business' circumstances. For decisions involving contracts, liability, employment, or regulatory compliance, professional legal guidance remains essential.

To help bridge this gap, TABIA and OBA have launched a new pilot program that will connect eligible small businesses and entrepreneurs with volunteer lawyers providing free, limited-scope legal assistance through the OBA's Pro Bono Portal, powered by Paladin.

The initiative is designed to provide early legal guidance before challenges escalate into costly disputes, helping entrepreneurs make informed decisions while strengthening Toronto's local business community. The program aligns with the City of Toronto's 10-year action plan for Toronto's economy, known as *Sidewalks to Skylines*, helping ensure Strong Main Streets, Quality Jobs and Global Competitiveness through support of small businesses throughout the city.

"Small businesses are the backbone of our commercial districts and the heart of our neighbourhoods. Every day, entrepreneurs make decisions that carry legal implications, often without access to affordable professional advice," said John Kiru, CEO of TABIA. "This partnership helps level the playing field by ensuring that business owners can access trusted legal guidance when it matters most. By removing barriers to legal support, we're investing in stronger businesses, healthier main streets, and more resilient local economies."

Through the program, TABIA will serve as the community intake partner, receiving and screening applications from businesses located within Toronto's 86 Business Improvement Areas (BIAs) before referring eligible matters through the OBA's Pro Bono Portal for lawyer matching.

Volunteer lawyers will provide limited-scope assistance in five practical areas that reflect some of the most common legal issues facing small businesses:

- Business formation and structure
- Founder, shareholder, and partnership agreements
- Commercial lease review
- Employment and independent contractor documentation
- Licensing, permitting, and regulatory compliance guidance

"This initiative began with a simple but important idea: access to legal assistance should not be the barrier that prevents a promising small business from starting, surviving or finding its footing," said Louis Frapporti, Chair of the OBA Pro Bono Committee. "Small businesses create jobs, animate neighbourhoods and generate the economic activity that sustains healthy communities. By connecting eligible entrepreneurs with lawyers who are prepared to contribute their time and expertise, we are supporting not only individual businesses, but the vitality and resilience of Toronto's commercial districts."

"Ontario lawyers care deeply about the communities where they live and work, and they want meaningful opportunities to give back," said Katy Commisso, President of the Ontario Bar Association. "Through this partnership, lawyers can use their expertise to help entrepreneurs overcome legal barriers, support local economic development, and strengthen the businesses that help our communities thrive."

"The City is proud to champion this initiative. Partnerships like this demonstrate what's possible when organizations come together around a shared commitment to supporting Toronto's small businesses. It's this kind of collaboration that helps our neighbourhoods remain vibrant, resilient, and economically strong," said Mayor Olivia Chow, City of Toronto.

The pilot responds to a growing recognition that access to legal services is an important part of supporting Toronto's small business community. By connecting business owners with experienced volunteer lawyers, the program aims to reduce risk, improve business resilience, and help entrepreneurs move forward with greater confidence.

Eligible applicants include Toronto-based entrepreneurs, self-employed individuals, and small business owners operating within Toronto BIAs who face financial barriers to obtaining legal services.

Business owners can learn more and apply at www.toronto-bia.com/legalaccess.

Lawyers interested in volunteering can register through the **OBA Pro Bono Portal** at www.oba.org/probono.

About TABIA

The Toronto Association of Business Improvement Areas (TABIA) is the umbrella organization representing Toronto's 86 Business Improvement Areas, which collectively support more than 90,000 business and property owners. TABIA champions vibrant main streets through advocacy, collaboration, research, and programs that strengthen local businesses and communities.

About the Ontario Bar Association

Established in 1907, the Ontario Bar Association is the largest voluntary legal association in Ontario, representing more than 17,000 lawyers, judges, law professors, and law students. The OBA is a leader in professional development, legal innovation, and advocacy for the legal profession and the administration of justice.

About Paladin

Paladin is a leading pro bono technology platform that connects lawyers with opportunities to serve people and organizations in need, helping legal teams expand their impact and advance access to justice.

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