

Make changes, lawyer tells Stittsville WI

Ottawa lawyer Judy Oyen not only told about recent changes in the law, but also advised Women's Institute members how they could bring about changes in the law, in an address to members of four branches of the WI in Stittsville a few months ago.

Mrs. Oyen, who is a partner in the law firm of Bell, Baker of Ottawa, advised more than 60 women at the meeting hosted by the Stittsville Women's Institute that there are many good reports around about possible changes in the law.

"But," she said, "until people pick it up and push for it," the law is not changed.

She explained that there was a report done in 1976 about changes of name and children keeping the mother's maiden name. The report contained various recommendations about how to sort out the growing confusion about names.

But, Mrs. Oyen pointed out, nothing has been done by the provincial government on this report. She urged WI members to study the proposed legislation and to write to the provincial attorney-general, asking for action on this report.

Another report that is "languishing", Mrs. Oyen said, is one dealing with divorce, which is a federal con-

cern. She said that there is now a report that is on the justice minister's desk recommending the granting of divorces after one year of separation, not three as present.

However, nothing has been done with this report.

Mrs. Oyen, a lawyer for 18 years, said the initiative for legislative changes, such as these two reports are seeking, must come from women's groups, since men are not interested in such topics.

However, there have been some recent changes in the law, and Mrs. Oyen, daughter of one-time federal MP and cabinet minister Dick Bell, pointed out some of the changes.

She explained the chief consequences of the Family Law Reform Act which came into effect in 1983. One consequence is if a couple separates, each spouse is entitled to an equal share of the family assets. These assets are the house and cottage, their contents, plus the family car.

Other assets, such as bank accounts and shares, are divided according to the manner in which the title is held.

Another basic premise in the Family Law Reform Act is each spouse is now responsible for the support of himself or herself and also of the children. Each spouse is also responsible for the support of the other spouse if the other spouse has a need for such support.

There is also a new Power of Attorney Act which has resulted in a simple one-page form for making provision for power of attorney.

Under the new act, the power of attorney can now carry on when the person becomes senile or incapacitated. Previously, once a person became senile or incapacitated, the power of attorney ceased unless a complicated procedure involving doctors was undertaken.

There is also a new Succession Law Reform Act under which a person can now draft a will entirely in their own handwriting, with no witnesses needed. The only essential is that the will must be signed.

Mrs. Oyen feels this is bad legislation, since it leads to a lot of cases where the courts must interpret what the person meant in a will. This can lead to costly legal battles.

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Ottawa lawyer Judy Oyen, centre, talks with members of the four Women's Institute branches which were represented at the Stittsville WI meeting last fall. From left to right, the members are, Mrs. June Gibbs, president of the South March WI; Mrs. Harold Munro of the Huntley WI, who is president of the Carleton West District WI; Mrs. Oyen; Mrs. Doris Sweetnam, president of the Stittsville WI; and Mrs. Catharine Wytenberg, president of the Richmond WI.

Maintaining family documents

Paper plays an important part in our lives. It is used to record various events from birth to death, including education, employment, marriage, property owned and bills paid. Unfortunately, knowing what to keep and where to keep family documents can be a problem.

An estate inventory can ease the search for information in case of emergency. If documents are lost by fire, theft or other means it is easier to replace them if recorded details are available.

Ownership of property, cost of taxable items, a net worth statement, investment records, and insurance policy numbers are some important items to include in an estate inventory. Keep two copies, one in your safety

deposit box and one in your current files where it can be updated.

Store family records which are difficult to replace in a safety deposit box. Such items would be birth, death or marriage certificates, citizenship papers, wills, stocks/bonds, household inventories and real estate papers. It is a good idea to keep a copy of wills and household inventories in your current file so family or friends can locate them quickly in emergencies. Also include your safety box location and list of contents. When you complete an estate inventory and careful storage of family documents, you have the satisfaction of completing a necessary but often overlooked task. You and other family members will be better able to cope with family or financial matters.