

NSW COMMUNITY LEGAL CENTRES STATE CONFERENCE

2008

Justice: CLCs celebrating change and connecting communities

The Citigate Sebal, 28 Albion St, Sydney

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Laurie Glanfield

Director General

NSW Attorney General's Department

I would like to acknowledge the traditional owners of this land and pay my respects to their elders past and present.

I know that the Attorney General is very impressed with the work of Community Legal Centres and wishes that he were here today to personally acknowledge your efforts. However, as Parliament is sitting he is unable to attend. I thank you for allowing me to speak in his place.

CLC's are independent of government but those who work in the public sector and in CLC's share much in common. Primarily the over-riding commitment is to serve the community.

Community Legal Centres are at the forefront in vigorously pursuing one of the fundamental goals of our legal system....equality of justice and accessibility to the justice system for all.

Everyday, Community Legal Centres are at the frontline dealing with the practical challenges facing the justice sector.

Everyday, Community Legal Centres provide legal advice and services to the disadvantaged and marginalised members of society.

In 2006-2007, CLCs in NSW provided around 76,000 legal advices, information and casework services, and 350 community legal education sessions.

In addition to this they were involved directly in over 100 law reform projects. These law reform projects are particularly useful as CLCs are in the unique position of seeing the justice system as a whole and the challenges facing it.

CLCs help the most disadvantaged and vulnerable people in our society. People who often fall between the cracks – whose problems are seen by some to be too difficult or too challenging.

CLCs provide a tremendous service for:

- women facing domestic violence
- ex-prisoners
- people with a mental illness
- young people
- people with disabilities
- Aboriginal people, and
- the homeless.

The clients of CLCs are:

..... those who are facing injustice

..... those who cannot afford to pay for legal services/assistance

..... yet their life circumstances are often greatly affected by their legal problem.

CLCs have the commitment to tackle disadvantage through early intervention, (which is one of the goals of the State Plan). The work of the CLC saves considerable downstream costs which would be incurred were it not for CLC intervention. It is the commitment to addressing the underlying problems facing an

individual that makes the difference. It isn't a band aid approach but a whole of person approach.

In its budget submission to the NSW Government CLCs gave an interesting example:

Lee has an intellectual disability. He called 1900 chat lines on his home phone to make friends. Without understanding the billing system Lee generated a \$35,000 phone bill. The phone company sent Lee a court summons. Lee had no idea what to do but visited the local CLC.

The CLC negotiated an out-of-court settlement with the phone company, reducing the debt to \$2,000, with small weekly repayments.

CLCs early intervention resulted in:

- Improved outcomes for Lee's financial future.
- Cost-savings by the Local Court because the matter resolved without a hearing.
- Cost-savings to other welfare organisations which may have had to provide further services to Lee down the track due to his struggle to pay for a huge debt, for example assistance with rent and other bills such as energy.
- And it may keep Lee out of the Justice System in future.

While doing all this, CLCs have also undertaken a number of innovative projects. A few examples include:

The Consumer Credit Legal Centre commenced an 18 month pilot insurance and casework service.

Kingsford and Elizabeth Evatt Legal Centres and Legal Aid NSW developed a Discrimination Toolkit containing practical information on running a discrimination complaint.

The Hawkesbury Nepean CLC is working on a project to increase Aboriginal access to legal services. This will include:

- Better representation of Aboriginal people in the decision making process in the local area
- Better education of Aboriginal people about their legal rights
- Greater access for Aboriginal people to legal services

The Project focuses on the following key areas:

- Domestic violence
- Training other workers
- Developing community networks
- Promoting the work of the CLC in the community
- Project development

The Redfern Legal Centre and Inner City Legal Centre developed a guidebook and brochure called "Fined Out". It is a comprehensive overview of the fine enforcement process in NSW. Its objective is to help people to understand the fines enforcement system, provide clients with referral information to free legal and

financial services, assist clients to manage their fine(s) and advocate for a better outcome. This publication is widely used in NSW.

The Shoalcoast CLC has published a booklet designed to assist parents and other family members involved in proceedings under the Children and Young Persons (Care and Protection) Act (NSW).

It is a particular credit that CLCs have been able to achieve all this while facing increasing demands on their services and limited resources.

Clearly resources will always be in short supply...we know from the Law and Justice Foundation's research that 90% of people with legal issues do not seek assistance from traditional legal service providers including CLCs. The unmet legal need is enormous. I encourage CLCs to continue to explore ways to increase the coverage of the services they do and with the incredible efficiency with which they do so.

CLCs are maximising the investment in them through harnessing the energy and expertise of volunteers. In NSW well over 700 people, up to 80% of them lawyers and law students, provide regular voluntary assistance to CLCs at any one time. It is estimated that the average contributions of volunteers range between 3-9 hours per month – this equates to a total contribution of between 25,000 to 75,000 hours per annum, representing up to the equivalent of 39 additional full time staff.

I acknowledge the fantastic efforts of all those who volunteer in CLCs, including government and Legal Aid lawyers, the Law Society of NSW and practitioners in the private sector.

CLCs are invaluable to our community and the justice system. I am certainly hopeful we can secure some additional funding in the coming year both at State and Federal level to allow some expansion of services. The Public Purpose Fund trustees have already been discussing with the Legal Aid Commission the issue of supplementary funding.

I am sure your conference will be a great success and a wonderful opportunity to hear about the current issues facing CLCs both individually and collectively. Thank you again for your efforts in providing legal information, advice and representation for so many people who would otherwise be left unable to assert their rights under law.