

27 October 2023

The Independent Review of the NLAP
attn: Dr Warren Mundy
via email: submissions@nlapreview.com.au

To Dr Mundy,

Re: NLAP Review Submission

The Launceston Community Legal Centre welcomes the opportunity to contribute to this important review. We also appreciated the opportunity to meet with you in person during the review.

We have viewed the drafts submissions of our peak bodies CLCA, and CLC Tas, as well as the 4 Rs CLC network. We commend those submissions and the recommendations therein.

The purpose of this submission is to raise a discrete issue, unique to our Centre, for your consideration and possible recommendation.

Early Intervention

The immediate and flow-on benefits of early legal intervention are well known. They clearly underpin the existence of health justice partnerships and domestic violence units and were extensively discussed in the 2014 Productivity Commission *Access to Justice Arrangements* Report. While the early intervention model has typically been one of accessible and timely legal advice in conjunction with community legal education, we have developed a model that goes further. Known as the Legal Literacy Volunteer Program, we have been operating it for approximately 11 years.

The program recruits and trains volunteers in our catchment area to work with clients in their own communities to address issues BEFORE they require legal advice or intervention, and to make them aware of services that can support them if they do require legal assistance. This program is not funded under the NLAP agreement, but under a separate state grant (this is despite the program achieving at least 4 of the 6 desired outcomes for the NLAP¹). Being beholden to state government funding has meant rolling short term funding cycles, with the program ceasing to operate for approximately 18 months between 2020 and 2021 after funding was discontinued. The program recommenced in late 2021. This uncertainty and interruption has impacted the growth and development of the program.

¹ Specifically, it delivers outcomes listed at Paragraphs 14(a), 14(c), 14(d) and 14(e) of the NLAP

PROGRAM OPERATION

Over the life of the program, we have created a network of community volunteers across the North of the State who are provided with comprehensive training and support overseen by our Principal Solicitor and Program Coordinator. This serves to build community capacity and resilience as volunteers can take their newly acquired skills and knowledge into their lives even if they are unable to actively volunteer at community venues.

Program venues range from the local Neighbourhood House, Community/Medical Centre to major hospitals, and Libraries Tasmania sites. Volunteers, who are rostered at these venues, or attend on request, assist clients to complete and understand documents of all kinds. Each volunteer / client transaction is recorded via a data information sheet which is later reviewed by our Principal Solicitor. The volunteers use the opportunities afforded by these client contacts to recognise legal need and refer clients to additional services, when necessary, which leads to early legal intervention. There are no eligibility requirements for clients to be assisted by the program other than a conflict check.

Our volunteers assist clients with issues that fall into five main categories:

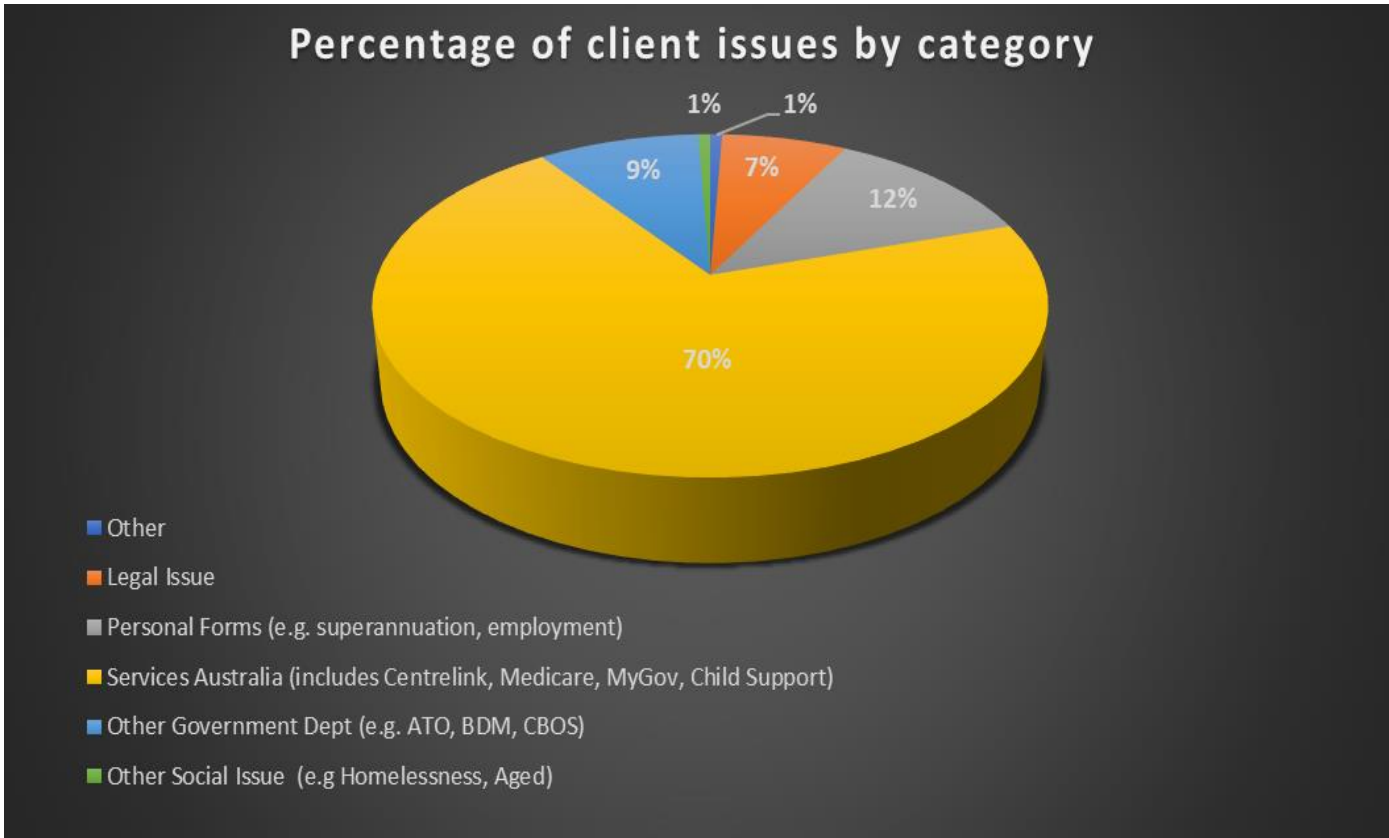
- Centrelink issues
- Other Government service issues
- Community organisation & information
- Personal forms (eg superannuation early release or employment documents, passport applications)
- Legal issues

Legal issues are either dealt with through the provision of basic legal information, referral, or assistance under the supervision of the Principal Solicitor. Over 50% of clients presenting for assistance with legal issues are referred to our Centre for legal advice. However, it is important to appreciate that only 9% of all clients engaging with the program needed assistance with legal issues. The vast majority seek assistance with matters which have potential to escalate into a legal issue but for the assistance provided at this early stage. In other words, most of their work is preventative.

Legal Literacy Volunteers have become ambassadors for our Centre in their community and aim to foster community awareness of the law, making access to legal assistance more equitable and accessible within their community. Many of our volunteers are based in smaller rural or remote communities, which has the additional benefit of extending access to early intervention to those whose location would prevent them from receiving face to face assistance. It is important to consider that Tasmania has the lowest levels of adult literacy in Australia², the highest proportion (38 per cent) of the Australian population living in areas that fall into the most disadvantaged socio-economic

² Australian Bureau of Statistics, Adult Literacy in Tasmania, 2006 (Tasmanian State and Regional Indicators 1307.6 June 2008).

quintile³, and by far the lowest level of digital inclusion in the country⁴. This is becoming an acute problem in remote and rural communities as Government services increasingly withdraw into cyberspace and capital cities. Having trained local volunteers in those communities can provide important face to face assistance of these people. It also greatly extends the coverage of the Centre’s solicitors, noting that Tasmania has by far the lowest level of solicitors per capita in the country and of those that are here, only 5% practice outside of a city⁵. Having trained volunteers based in remote and rural communities also provides an avenue for early legal and non-legal assistance before, during and after a natural disaster.



STRUCTURE AND BUDGET

³ At a State and Territory level, 21 per cent of the NSW population live in the most disadvantaged socio-economic quintile, 16 per cent in Victoria, 22 in Queensland, 25 per cent in South Australia, 16 per cent in Western Australia, 32 per cent in the Northern Territory and 0.2 per cent in the Australian Capital Territory. As found at Australian Bureau of Statistics, Socio-economic Indexes for Areas (SEIFA), Australia, 2021, Index of Relative Socio-economic Disadvantage (IRSD), Distribution of Statistical Area Level 1 (Sa1) Deciles 2021.

⁴ Dezuanni, M et al., 2017, Measuring Queensland’s Digital Divide – The Australian Digital Inclusion Index 2017: Queensland, RMIT University, Melbourne, for Telstra.

⁵ Urbis, 2022 National Profile of Solicitors.

The structure of our program, which reflects the needs of the community we service, requires the equivalent of 3 full time positions (Program Coordinator, Administrative Support, Solicitor). The solicitor helps develop and deliver training content, respond to legal queries from volunteers, review volunteer client records, and deal with the increased volume of clients attending the centre, referred by volunteers. The program, which currently has volunteers based at 9 different locations, (7 in small, rural or remote communities), assists hundreds of people each year.

Expense item	Cost (\$)
Staff wages and on-costs	250,000
IT	9000
Insurance	3000
Marketing	5000
Travel (not including new vehicle)	6000
Other typical business related expenses, including a share of rent	27,000
TOTAL	300,000

RECOMMENDATION

We commend this program as a cost-effective model for prevention and early intervention particularly suited to the community legal sector. However, it is a model that takes time to establish and build, so it requires the sort of long-term funding the NLAP was designed to bring.

Recommendation: The Legal Literacy Volunteer Program be funded under the NLAP as an example of early-stage intervention and prevention.

Recommendation: The Legal Literacy Volunteer Program be evaluated as an operational model of preventative legal assistance, including a cost benefit analysis, to determine if it warrants expansion beyond Northern Tasmania.

If you have any queries or would like to further discuss this submission, please do not hesitate to contact us.

Yours sincerely



Stephen Karpeles
CEO