

Yarra Ranges Community Legal Centre Review

Key Findings – December 2016

Yarra Ranges Community Legal Centre (YRCLC) located in Healesville, in outer metropolitan Melbourne was launched in February 2014 initially with three part-time staff - an intake worker, community development worker and a lawyer. In just over 2 years, YRCLC has supported over 500 clients, provided approximately 600 advices and reached a further 530 people through community legal education.

Geographically, Yarra Ranges is the largest of metropolitan Melbourne's 31 local government areas, comprising 80% of Melbourne's total land area. At its eastern boundary it is 80 kilometres to the city centre. It is home to a population of 144,500, including a growing Aboriginal population. Seventy per cent (70%) of the community live in the urban hubs centred around Belgrave and Lilydale. The balance of the community is spread across 40 townships and suburbs in semi-rural communities, in the hills and valley, separated by large areas of national parks and public land, mountain ranges and reservoirs, serviced by single lane country roads. Half of the population does not have access to public transport. One in two residents leaves the Yarra Ranges to go to work. There are high levels of economic and health disadvantage. The trauma of the 2009 Black Saturday bushfires continues to affect the community.

Before YRCLC opened, by public transport the closest access to free legal advice for those living in the rural townships could be a four-hour round trip.

In addition to providing legal advice and services, the Centre has invested in a community development approach, focusing on building relationships and referral pathways with health and community services. Strong connections have been established with the local Aboriginal community and community organisations. The Centre has contributed to significant community projects, including a publicly available shower for homeless people in the redevelopment of the Healesville & District Hospital and Yarra Valley Community Health and a trial of pharmacotherapy services at the local chemist, saving clients and community agency staff time and money. Both projects were identified through the community development work of the Centre and were successfully negotiated through the consortium of partnerships.

Service providers report the legal needs of their most vulnerable clients are many and complex, compounded by geographical isolation, limited to non-existent public transport, low service literacy and low incomes. Key issues include family violence, family law and multiple housing and homelessness issues. Some service providers report clients having no option but to walk for kilometres to attend appointments.

Local service providers were unequivocal that without the YRCLC:

- the most vulnerable and disadvantaged clients would simply not seek legal advice, inevitably resulting in the escalation of relatively minor legal matters
- women living in rural isolation escaping family violence from partners often with access to guns would not have access to legal advice
- Aboriginal clients with complex legal needs including family violence and child protection issues would not have access to legal advice.

Further, providers agreed that the single most significant impact of YRCLC was that it enabled vulnerable and disadvantaged clients in the region access to legal information and advice. The review has highlighted the time and effort invested by YRCLC in successfully establishing relationships with local services, community groups and community members. It has had outstanding success in building strong and trusting relationships with the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities and community organisations.

The review strongly demonstrates that YRCLC is a critical service that requires continued ongoing funding to enable the Centre to continue to service the most vulnerable, marginalised and under-served members of the community and make a significant difference to the broader community.

The full report is publicly available from ECLC and also on www.eclc.org.au



They can gather agencies together as a broker, because other issues fall out of the legal issues. They are the pivotal community glue. There are no alternatives to this service for our community.

Anchor (community and housing service)

They really involve themselves in the community. The lawyers come regularly to our service. Lots of organisations have a nice Reconciliation Action Plan, but the ECLC actually live it and do it.

Boorndawan Willam Aboriginal Healing Service

508 people have been assisted by the YRCLC

% of female clients



Yarra Ranges Council, Housing stress, 2011

