

Brimbank Melton Community Legal Centre: Supporting local communities

The community legal sector provides vital legal support to members of the community, including people experiencing socio-economic disadvantage and marginalisation. Generally under-resourced, and often under-appreciated, CLCs are frequently the first point of contact for people struggling with complex legal need, including referral, advice and casework, duty lawyer services, legal and non-legal support, and interventions.

For many people living in the west of Melbourne in the catchment areas of Brimbank and Melton, this includes assistance around family law and family violence, fines and infringements, car accidents and insurance and debt-recovery matters, criminal law, tenancy and some civil matters.

The Brimbank Melton Community Legal Centre (BMCLC) is a program of CommUnity Plus, and is the primary Victorian Legal Aid funded agency for the Brimbank and Melton areas providing free legal services to vulnerable and disadvantaged people who live, work or study in the Brimbank, Melton and Bacchus Marsh communities.

Our overarching objective is to advocate for and achieve social justice for our communities through innovation, collaboration and early intervention.

Offering far more than basic legal advice and case support, our service is uniquely situated to support holistic, integrated and wrap-around service supports, particularly for those experiencing or at risk of family violence.

One such example is our highly effective Health Justice Partnership, which is a collaboration between Western Health at Sunshine Hospital and BMCLC. Funded by the Department of Justice and Regulation since 2017, this project enables a specialist family violence lawyer to be based at an outreach clinic at Sunshine Hospital, providing critical legal assistance to victim survivors of family violence, and inter-referral through the neo-natal clinics. In addition to offering advice and case support, this partnership also facilitates fundamental legal education to allied health staff to empower practitioners to identify and assess legal need through legal health checks and assessments, offering discrete referral pathways for patients who may be experiencing family violence or vulnerability to other aspects of family law.

CommUnity Plus head office

Organisations that provide pro bono assistance to our initiatives:

- Bacchus Marsh Magistrates' Court Duty Lawyer
- Sunshine Magistrates' Court Duty Lawyer
- Sunshine Family Relationship Centre
- Sunshine Hospital Family Violence Outreach Clinic
- Darley Maternal Care Outreach
- Australian Vietnamese Women's Association

CASE STUDY – MRS J*

Mrs J has been in an abusive relationship with her partner for over 20 years. During a particularly violent altercation with her partner in which she was physically abused, she was defending herself as the police arrived. She was taken to hospital due to the severity of her injuries and was subsequently charged with unlawful assault against her husband. While admitted, a social worker referred Mrs J to the family violence lawyer at BMCLC, who attended the Magistrates' Court to appeal the charges. With the advocacy and support of the lawyer, Mrs J's charges were withdrawn by police and she was rendered additional support to apply for a family violence intervention order against her partner.

While some cases of family violence are straightforward, we know that in many cases where violence occurs, lawyers are rarely the first port of call for victims in disclosing or seeking support. For women in particular, it is not always a physical manifestation of violence that is indicative of familial abuse. There are often other signs such as financial vulnerability, lack of access to food or resources, mental health or other physical health issues which are prevalent, and thus it is through contact with social workers or allied health professionals that disclosures are made, or assistance is sought.

A well-coordinated Health Justice Partnership that provides education to health professionals, pathways for referral, and on-site legal support is an extremely valuable tool for providing holistic, wrap-around service supports to some of the most vulnerable members of the community. This is seen in the case of Stephanie.

CASE STUDY – STEPHANIE*

Stephanie was a victim of family violence for many years with an intimate partner with whom she had a young child. During a check-up at the child and maternal health centre, she disclosed that she was experiencing financial abuse and social isolation as a result of the relationship, with a debt of up to \$15 000. The nurse at the clinic discreetly referred Stephanie to the BMCLC family violence lawyer who was able to provide her with advice and ongoing assistance in relation to her legal matters, particularly regarding applications to relieve her debt and obtain additional supports. Utilising inter-sectoral partnerships with other community services in the area, BMCLC lawyers were able to obtain food vouchers for Stephanie and her child and link her in with a social worker. The lawyers at BMCLC also referred Stephanie to a financial counsellor where she receives ongoing support to help her regain financial independence. With the help of BMCLC and this integrated service delivery, Stephanie has been able to finally leave her abusive relationship and nearly all of Stephanie's debts were waived. Stephanie continues to receive ongoing support from her social worker and family violence counsellor and reports that she and her child are doing well.

**Names have been changed*



The legal team at Brimbank Melton Community Legal Centre

It is through advocacy, collaboration and innovative partnerships that BMCLC continues to offer meaningful, tangible support to the local community who are experiencing legal need. Our two offices in Melton and St Albans and the outreach clinics (through collaborations with key community organisations) enable us to ensure that we spread our resources as effectively as possible to reach as many people as possible in some of the fastest growing regions of Melbourne ■

Community lawyer Talia delivering a community legal education session



Our long-standing relationship with the Victorian Government Solicitor's Office (VGSO) also provides opportunities for their legal staff to undertake 6 week pro bono rotations at our Centre. The contributions made by the VGSO staff have been mutually valuable as they have helped inform and improve our own practice, while simultaneously offering benefit to their staff, and increasing experience and knowledge development in the areas of law we undertake in the community legal centre space.

We recently hosted a secondee from the VGSO on a full time basis for 3 months. This allowed the secondee to gain comprehensive experience in working as a community lawyer at our Centre, and for us to expand our services by way of legal advice and casework for that period of time. During that time, the secondee ran a student-run infringements clinic and also undertook a number of court representations in the criminal law space. They also assisted in a number of other legal clinics. The secondee reported that they felt they learnt a great deal about working in this sector and had thoroughly enjoyed their experience with us.