

Cancer Council's Pro Bono Program: Connecting communities affected by cancer with professional support since 2010

This year, more than 144,000 Australians will be diagnosed with cancer. For many, a diagnosis can cause considerable financial and emotional distress for them and their families. In recognition of the significant financial impact of cancer and to address unmet legal need for patients and carers who are unable to afford the cost of professional advice, the Cancer Council established its Pro Bono Program in 2010.

In the first year, 636 people were referred to the program. Since then the service has been rolled out to all states and territories and it has expanded to provide vital financial planning, workplace and small business support. The program now receives referrals for more than 3,000 people affected by cancer each year. The Cancer Council Pro Bono Program facilitates the provision of free advice by matching eligible clients with lawyers, financial planners, human resources professionals and small business accountants who volunteer their time through the program. Last year the commercial value of the advice provided by professionals was estimated to be \$5,172,950 nationally.

Laura Muir, a Pro Bono Case Manager for the Cancer Council, discusses the Cancer Council Pro Bono Program:

As you might imagine, a cancer diagnosis may lead to a range of legal, financial or workplace issues that can cause significant stress in addition to everything else they are dealing with. These issues can vary from an urgent need to contemplate their end-of-life legal documents to accessing alternative income streams (such as superannuation, insurance and Centrelink). People may be experiencing discrimination in the workplace and need employment advice or may be finding it hard to keep up with repayments and need help with credit and debt matters. Our program aims to relieve this financial burden, provide respite from these issues, and contribute to people's well-being by reducing stress.

Of course, we couldn't provide this service to people affected by cancer without the generosity and pro bono support of the organisations involved in our program. In total, we have just over 1,100 professional organisations registered. This includes law firms, financial planning practices, HR and recruitment teams and small business accounting firms. We often hear from professionals that the pro bono assistance they provide through our program is rewarding. It allows them to use their expertise to help people during a very difficult time in their lives and it is something they are not normally exposed to in their day-to-day commercial work.



Laura Muir

Every day, we hear from people affected by cancer about the challenges of facing these issues at an already difficult time. In particular, some of the issues people are facing in terms of claiming insurance can be particularly challenging because insurers can cling to technicalities - we had one client tell us that an insurer had denied her life insurance claim because her brain tumour was "on her brain" not "in her brain." We were able to connect this client with a pro bono lawyer who successfully helped her to access her life insurance entitlements in full.

As a Pro Bono Case Manager, I manage client referrals across the country, ensuring advice sought fits within the parameters of our program and that people are connected with the most appropriate professionals. I work closely with key stakeholders, including referring health professionals and our professional service providers. I particularly enjoy managing our team of paralegals and our cohort of volunteer law students without whom we could not run the service. In the last financial year, we were supported by 63 law student volunteers who typically work 1 to 2 days per week and who are at the forefront of contacting clients to assess their eligibility for free assistance and unpack the practical issues they need help with.





Rania Tannous

Rania Tannous, Manager, AMP Legal and Governance Pro Bono Program, discusses AMP's legal and governance (L&G) pro bono project with the Cancer Council:

I am a Senior Legal Counsel at AMP and have been involved in the set up and ongoing management of the AMP L&G pro bono program (program) from its commencement in March 2018.

A lot of work went into setting up the program including speaking to the Australian Pro Bono Centre, reading the in-house pro bono guide, meeting with our panel firms to discuss their pro bono program, meeting potential charity partners and surveying our staff to understand their preferences and willingness to commit. All this listening helped us create a program that complemented AMP's purpose which is to help people own their own tomorrow.

After meeting with a number of charities and pro bono referrers, we felt there was most alignment with the Cancer Council. AMP has a well-established program between Cancer Council and our financial planners. We do a lot of work with them also through AMP Foundation and they are our fundraising charity partner for 2019 as well!

The program is available to all staff in L&G and participants volunteer to take on a referral after we post a confidential summary of the matter on our Workplace page. We provide advice to cancer patients in areas such as insurance, superannuation and income protection and we have also assisted in the review of fact sheets and booklets published by the Cancer Council.

The program is a flexible one and has strong support from everyone across the team and also the pro bono industry. We check in with our participants in the program to get regular feedback and some of the feedback we have received includes:

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- *"I know that I am helping someone in the worst time of their life"*
- *"I don't know anyone who has been affected by cancer, it was a real awakening as to the realities of how cancer can affect people's lives"*
- *"Gives you a reality check that we are really fortunate – it was a privilege to help others in need"*
- *"Being part of the program made me feel empowered; that my legal skills could be helpful to others who aren't in the best of health and aren't legally trained"*

Despite the alignment with purpose, the realities of an in-house workload and the challenges with resourcing can sometimes mean we are at capacity and cannot take on a matter when the Cancer Council comes calling. But I have been heartened that as soon as capacity is eased our people immediately volunteer. Their generosity of spirit, time and expertise keeps me passionate to ensure that this program and partnership can continue well into the future.

Not only is it our duty as lawyers to serve those less fortunate, but it is an honour. ■

