



Youth Law Australia's Cyber Volunteer Project: Innovating access to justice for children

Ahram Choi,
Principal Solicitor at
Youth Law Australia.

Youth Law Australia (YLA), previously known as the National Children's and Youth Law Centre, provides essential legal services to children and young people. Based at the University of New South Wales' Faculty of Law, YLA is Australia's only national, technology-based community legal service for young people.

L-R: Matthew Keeley, Maree Selvaraj, Ahram Choi (all YLA), Katrina Rathie, Evie Bruce (both KWM) and the Attorney General of NSW, the Hon. Mark Speakman SC MP at the recent launch of the Youth Law Australia and TeachLaw brands.



Since YLA was founded in 1993, we have always been about the all. All problems solved. All children and young people helped. All services collaborating to provide the best possible service to help a young person through their legal problem. We see first-hand the impact that solving a legal problem can have for a young person; they tell us that it reduces mental distress, it empowers them and gives them hope to know we can help and that they have options. Our ambition to help all children and young people with legal problems was, and continues to be, grand – but thanks to the significant pro bono partnerships that we have established and grown along the way, we have been able to use technology to develop a flexible and effective pro bono program to help ever greater numbers of young people.

Despite our grand vision and national coverage, YLA is a very small community legal centre with only 3 to 5 very dedicated staff members at any given time. We are fortunate, therefore, to have a significant volunteer base of skilled and enthusiastic lawyers through our Cyber Volunteer Project (CVP) to help us to deliver quality legal advice, assistance, information and referrals to thousands of children and young people who contact us every year via our Get Help Now form, email and phone.

The CVP, which was developed and piloted in 2007 through our partnership with King & Wood Malletsons (KWM), provides YLA with volunteer solicitors ('cyber volunteers') and a full-time secondee solicitor to assist in preparing legal advices to children and young people.

The partnership, which developed as a result of our shared passion for children's rights and our deep concern for the enforcement and enjoyment of those rights, especially as it pertains to the safety and welfare of children, created a solid basis for the establishment of a significant pro bono program.

Since that time, with the support of KWM, the CVP has developed and grown into a collaborative volunteering program, adding Telstra, ASIC, Microsoft and ANZ lawyers. We are now very excited to also welcome Australian Government Solicitor lawyers to the CVP to help us advise even more children and young people.

"King & Wood Malletsons is deeply proud of, and passionate about, our now 12 year partnership with Youth Law Australia in delivering the Cyber Volunteer Project. With over 200 current volunteers from KWM, ASIC, Telstra, Microsoft, ANZ and now AGS, we together provide a unique opportunity for Australian children and young people to ask legal questions through a confidential free online platform. The growth of the Project demonstrates both the significant need in the community and the relevance of the platform to improving access to justice for children and young people."

Chloe Johnco, National Manager,
Pro Bono at King & Wood Malletsons



The Cyber Volunteer Project in action: YLA and KWM demonstrating the CVP to the Attorney General of NSW, the Hon. Mark Speakman SC MP.

The CVP now consists of over 200 cyber volunteers who assist us to provide written legal advices to children, young people and their advocates remotely from their offices across Australia.

How the CVP works

Each of the KWM offices has an experienced cyber volunteer coordinator to coordinate a roster and ensure each CVP session runs smoothly. There are five CVP sessions held each week, which consist of a session from each of the KWM offices in Canberra, Perth, Melbourne, Brisbane and Sydney. The sessions are spread out throughout the week to ensure we can manage the allocation of matters effectively.

Each cyber volunteer is provided with training, resources and a coordinator to assist them, and is rostered on for a 2-3 hour session once a month to assist with drafting legal advices to our clients.

Features that make the CVP effective

- The time commitment of around two hours a month is relatively small and manageable for all lawyers — particularly those working part-time.
- The work can be done online and remotely. Many of the corporate cyber volunteers however go to KWM offices for their volunteer sessions so that they have face-to-face support while they are becoming familiar with the work and our bespoke online legal practice management system.
- The work is interesting and important. YLA provides legal advice to children and young people experiencing problems like child abuse and neglect, exposure to domestic or family violence, exclusion from school and education, exploitation or harassment at work and online bullying, sexual harassment and image-based abuse. The volunteers are exposed to new areas of law, which expands their skills and experience, and keeps them coming back!
- Conflicts of interest are addressed upfront with a policy explicitly agreed on before commencing work.
- YLA provides guidance, pro forma advice, and resources that assist the volunteers when they are drafting responses. YLA also provides feedback, including the results from a client's survey with positive feedback on the impact the advice has had on them.
- The project is national, so cyber volunteers in every jurisdiction can become involved.
- The partner firms support the CVP and support employees volunteering during work hours.

Over the past 12 months, the cyber volunteers helped draft over 870 child-friendly and high quality written legal advices to our clients. Importantly, in addition to providing legal advice, we make sure to provide practical steps and solutions to help the young person with their problem and make the appropriate warm referrals to non-legal organisations to ensure that their mental health, safety and wellbeing is also looked after. After all, we want to make sure that our assistance provides meaningful individual benefits to our clients.

“AGS is delighted to join the long-established partnership between YLA and King & Wood Mallesons and be part of the network of dedicated lawyers from a range of organisations across many states working on the Cyber Volunteer Project. This is such an exciting opportunity to provide much needed free legal assistance to Australian children and young people (and their advocates) and our lawyers are very much looking forward to making a significant pro bono contribution to this part of the community.”

Geetha Nair, National Manager,
Pro Bono Services at Australian Government Solicitor

The following are just a few examples of the positive feedback that we have received this past year:

> “The provided information was very carefully and thoroughly put together and very beneficial to assist direction and sources of assistance. Thank you for your help and your service is an extremely needed resource for entire communities.”

– Parent on behalf of 12 year old asking about school bullying

> “Cheers for the help and advice, appreciate not being charged thousands for some good advice”

– 14 year old asking about employment law

> “Hello to the wonderful team of people that work at [YLA]. I have written here twice before and I can wholeheartedly say, you guys are legends”

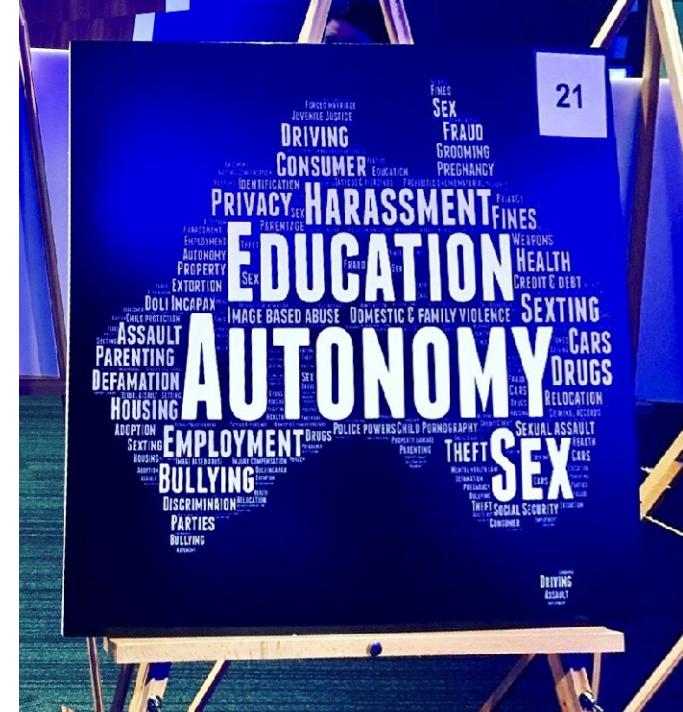
– 17 year old experiencing family violence, asking about leaving home

> “The given information was extremely useful because I could give the link on the [state’s] transgender policies in public schools to my school (before they didn’t know about this mandatory policy).”

– 15 year old asking about school policies

> “The information provided was invaluable. I am glad that all is confidential and the reply was so comforting. I particularly like that you have a short answer and a long answer so if I didn’t understand one I could read the other. I also liked that the long answer was broken down into different sections. It was invaluable. I can’t praise you all enough. Thank you.”

– 19 year old asking about drug laws



Youth Law Australia's areas of assistance

As the only national provider of legal services to children and young people, we are incredibly fortunate to have the support of like-minded pro bono partners at a national level. With approximately half of all young people aged 15 to 24 years experiencing at least one legal problem, we have a long way to go to addressing all the legal problems and helping all children and young people across Australia. However, through the CVP and other pro bono initiatives, such as KWM’s donations and workplace giving programs and the ongoing support of both the Commonwealth Attorney-General’s Department and the UNSW Faculty of Law, we are certainly closer to closing that gap in providing access to justice for all young people. ■