

Kingsford Legal Centre: Legal services and pro bono support in the time of COVID

2020 has been a challenging year for the community of Kingsford Legal Centre. In March 2020, with the impact of the pandemic growing in NSW, we moved our legal practice and clinical programs off site to a work-from-home model. This coincided with a surge in legal demand, especially in employment law matters and a proliferation of new policy announcements to stay on top of in order to advise clients.

During this time, we worked hard to maintain service delivery, but this was extremely challenging. Our staff and solicitors worked to quickly adapt our well-established services to a remote model. We successfully transitioned our evening advice model to be delivered off site and our lawyers swapped the camaraderie and bad snacks of evening advice for Ugg boots in their home offices. Our volunteer lawyers proved to be adaptable and patient with the challenges of remote lawyering.

Working from home coincided with the commencement of a new secondee from Herbert Smith Freehills who commenced working with us remotely from her dining room. Our secondee showed huge adaptability to become an expert in tenancy law and helped large numbers of students who were being held to tenancies even though they could not enter the country. She provided advice to people across the globe and represented them remotely at the Tribunal.



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Kingsford Legal Centre students and staff participate in a National Day of Action for climate justice

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Likewise, increasing employment demand and the complexity of the legal issues presenting meant that we needed to work quickly to re-establish our pro bono employment law roster. Kennedys, HWL Ebsworth and Bartier Perry were up for the challenge of shifting to a telephone-based remote model and Holding Redlich commenced as a new pro bono partner during this time – which was a huge leap of faith. We also relied heavily on our wonderful long-term volunteer, Alice Paul, who continued to provide pro bono employment law assistance on a weekly basis. For workers who

sought our assistance through the Migrant Employment Legal Service, financial hardship made it even more critical to try and effectively resolve underpayment claims.

Our Health Justice Partnership also continued to provide direct legal support to patients at Prince of Wales Hospital and we worked to ensure that vulnerable people were receiving access to legal advice from their hospital bed.

Long standing supporter of KLC’s discrimination law work, Clayton Utz, offered to provide assistance in discrimination law as demand increased and we developed this pro bono clinic.

At the same time, we worked very hard with our community partners and agencies to ensure that the most vulnerable members of our community had direct access to our services. However, the impact of the digital divide on access to justice during the pandemic has been particularly pronounced for people without access to the internet or phone and for people with disabilities. During this time people in our community experienced increasing financial distress, housing issues, domestic violence and problems with social security. We continue to work closely with our community partners to ensure quick access to our services for these clients. We have also seen a new and growing cohort of people experiencing loss of employment or financial distress for the first time and have developed plain English legal information on Covid-19 legal issues for our website with links to other specialist community legal centre advice.

In August we worked closely with UNSW to convert our offices into a Covid safe space and in September we were thrilled to welcome back KLC clinical students to the Centre. With the influx of 36 students into the service we were also able to open more telephone lines into the Centre and increase service delivery. There is no doubt working in the Covid era has changed the way KLC operates. We no longer have a kitchen full of staff and students at lunch time, no shared birthday cakes or shared stationery but after six months of working largely on our own at home, we were all thrilled to hear the buzz of the Centre again. The next phase of our service delivery is to safely plan how we can work in the community and move to some face to face client work.

This year has taught the Centre a lot about the resilience of our community, the commitment of our volunteers and pro bono partners and the dedication of KLC staff and UNSW Law colleagues to keep the service going, even in the most challenging of circumstances. There’s no doubt with the lemons of 2020 we have tried to make lemonade - a big thank you to everyone connected to Kingsford Legal Centre for their efforts for us in 2020. ■

Emma Golledge is the Director of Kingsford Legal Centre. The Centre provides free legal advice to the local community and specialises in employment and discrimination law. The Centre also provides clinical legal education for UNSW Law Students.