

Law Access: Our unique collaborative approach is the key to maximising the legal profession's pro bono contribution in Western Australia

By Dominique Hansen, Georgia Pickering, Garth Tinsley

Years spent building a strong, collaborative relationship with the Western Australian legal profession gave Law Access Limited (trading as Law Access) the foundation from which we could rise to the challenges and embrace the opportunities of the last 18 months.

About Law Access

Law Access is a State-wide pro bono referral service which has, for the last six years, assisted the most vulnerable Western Australians and eligible not-for-profit organisations to receive vital legal advice and assistance. We are unique amongst the referral services in Australia in how broadly we operate – we refer matters in the areas of civil, family and criminal law and we are assisted by lawyers from across the entire WA legal profession.

Lawyers and firms accept our referrals, and provide us secondee support and guidance through our stakeholder advisory committee and pro bono coordinators committee. We are a charitable entity established by our sole member, the Law Society of Western Australia (LSWA). We are grateful to receive significant philanthropic and in-kind support from within the profession and beyond, as we are yet to secure ongoing sustainable funding.

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Staff from Hall & Wilcox participating in the 2020 Virtual Law Access Walk for Justice



WA Pro Bono Model

This strong relationship with the profession led to our involvement with both the development and implementation of the WA Pro Bono Model, which was introduced by the WA Government in 2020.

The Model was designed to improve access to justice for the most disadvantaged and marginalised in WA and to contribute to a thriving pro bono culture. Firms providing legal services to any WA Government department or agency are required to subscribe to the Australian Pro Bono Centre's National Pro Bono Target, and undertake pro bono legal work (focussed on the most disadvantaged and marginalised in WA) to the value of 10% of their government work.

Law Access has received funding from the WA Department of Justice to assist with the implementation of the project and works in partnership with Community Legal Western Australia (the peak organisation for WA Community Legal Centres (CLCs)). We have held over 30 consultations with CLCs and other community legal service providers across the State to maximise and streamline the referral of matters appropriate for placement.

Along with processing the increased referrals, we have also facilitated support to CLCs through secondments and pro bono partnerships and developed two sector wide projects with CLCs to utilise pro bono support in priority areas of unmet legal need.

The WA Government is conducting an independent evaluation of the Model and we look forward to learning from this with a view to further refining our role.

Improved awareness of our service has also led to increased referrals in areas of unmet legal need that do not meet the practice areas of most of the Model firms, namely family law and criminal law. We remain grateful for our connections in the broader legal profession to assist these applicants, although placing these matters, especially in family law, is an ongoing challenge which we are proactively investigating new ways to meet.

Unexpected challenges

Our ongoing collaborative relationship with the profession has also ensured Law Access has been able to provide a rapid, flexible response to the recent challenges posed by both COVID-19 and natural disasters.

In 2020, our online application forms and electronic case management system allowed a smooth transition to a paperless environment as we began to work from home when the pandemic required it. Our strong support from the profession also

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Staff from Cornerstone Legal participating in the 2020 Virtual Law Access Walk for Justice





Staff from Midlas Community Legal Centre participating in the 2020 Virtual Law Access Walk for Justice

continued, with pro bono lawyers assisting our applicants remotely, our secondees providing online legal support and the profession contributing donations, energy and some very funny playlists to ensure a hugely successful and well attended “Virtual” Walk for Justice.

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In 2021, we have again transitioned smoothly to working from home during two lockdowns, while also being part of an immediate legal response to both the Woorloo bushfires and Cyclone Seroja. Law Access is part of the team responsible for implementing the Disaster Legal Response Plan WA. We are coordinating both the longer term pro bono support required to assist those affected by these disasters but also have immediate involvement in the day to day response, including finding pro bono lawyers to join a group of community legal and other support agencies providing outreach to cyclone affected communities. A huge number of lawyers across the profession have already volunteered to provide pro bono legal assistance to those affected by both of these disasters.

Whilst proud of our response to the challenges and opportunities over the last 18 months, we remain reflective, always working to ensure we are in the best possible position to help WA’s most vulnerable access justice. With our collaborative relationship with the WA legal profession as our base, we are confident we can jump whatever new hurdles arise in 2021 and beyond. ■



Dominique Hansen is the Chief Executive Officer and Company Secretary of Law Access. In her previous role at the Law Society of Western Australia she helped establish Law Access. She was a Director of the Australian Pro Bono Centre from February 2012 to May 2017.

Georgia Pickering joined Law Access as Principal Lawyer in October 2020. She has extensive experience in Legal Aid and CLCs in remote and regional Western Australia as well as relevant international experience from her most recent role with the Wellington Public Defence Service.



Garth Tinsley is the Senior Lawyer WA Pro Bono Model at Law Access. He has extensive pro bono experience and his previous roles include managing pro bono and corporate partnerships at Community Legal Centres Australia and Senior Associate Pro Bono Manager at Ashurst.