



Alana Schetzer: Youthlaw's Legal Pod Program is helping young care leavers with pro bono support

Every year in Victoria, about 800 young people who are just 18-years-old leave state care and have to figure out the rest of their lives without sufficient support.

It's no easy task.

Due to having lived in state care, or because of the reasons they were placed in state care, many of these young people are vulnerable, with complex issues ranging from housing instability, financial hardship, family violence, mental illness and sometimes drug and alcohol use.

Youthlaw's Legal Pod is a one-of-a-kind program in Victoria that provides a 'pod' of lawyers that work directly with young care leavers for up to three years.

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"The main difference is that it provides long term, wrap-around support for young people experiencing legal problems, as opposed to what exists in the more traditional legal system – if you have a problem, you seek out help and you get one-off help and then off you go," Paula Hughes, Manager of the Legal Pod at Youthlaw, explains.

The Legal Pod - which was based on a successful Queensland program - has been operating through Youthlaw for the past three years and has provided more than 40 young care leavers with legal support, which includes help for significant debts, fines, housing, family violence, freedom of information and if they are victims of crime.

Photo by Wassim Mechergui/Unsplash

"The idea of Legal Pod is that a person comes into the program and we address their urgent, existing legal problems but we also seek to identify any unaddressed legal needs. For vulnerable care leavers, there's often a lot of unaddressed legal problems," Hughes explains.

"And then we provide long-term support, it's not a one-off; it's very much us going on a journey with the client and because we have that relationship with them, if other legal problems arise, they've already got that support in place."

Law firms that provide pro bono support to Legal Pod are Baker McKenzie, Colin Biggers & Paisley, DLA Piper, Gilbert + Tobin, Holding Redlich, PwC, Russell Kennedy and Wisewould Mahony.

Despite the fact that 2020 was an incredibly difficult year for many people, including many Legal Pod clients, a positive development last year was the change in Victoria's state care, which now allows young people to remain in the system until they are 21-years-old, rather than when they turn 18. Paul McDonald, the CEO of the Home Stretch called the change "one of the most significant single reforms in child welfare in a generation" and has the potential to halve the rate of homelessness among young care leavers.

"It's great news, it's a change that we've advocated for for a long time," Hughes says. *"However, it doesn't necessarily change things in our current clients' lives, because we're dealing with people who have already left the system. It will take some time to implement this policy."*

“Youthlaw’s fund for Legal Pod – which was granted for its initial three-year run – unfortunately runs out in August 2021. But Hughes says the organisation is determined to continue their invaluable program and is hoping to attract donations to not only continue, but to expand the Legal Pod, so that more young people can get the help they need.”



Hughes adds that further significant changes are needed to overhaul the state care system so that it better prepares and supports young care leavers.

“The process of transitioning from that system is really not working, and vulnerable young people are not being adequately prepared or supported when they leave.”

“Each person is meant to have a leaving care plan but my understanding is that policy is not consistent with what’s happening in reality. A lot of people are coming out of care not having a plan and that can certainly play a role in some of the issues people have when transiting out.”

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“Continued funding will allow us to extend the work for our existing clients who already have their support in place; we’re seeing some really great outcomes,” Hughes says.

“It would be amazing if we could get more funding to continue that great work and then be able to expand the program. It’s fairly small at the moment, we’ve had 20 young people allocated to pods, but we have always sought to grow the program because there are lots of young people who need this help.”

Youthlaw recently launched its 2021 EOFY appeal and is a registered charity with deductible gift recipient status. For more information, please visit [here](#) ■

Alana Schetzer is a Melbourne-based journalist, academic and communications specialist. She worked at Fairfax Media for nine years, including five years as a news reporter at The Age, covering social justice, health, crime and was a sports columnist and television reviewer for Green Guide. She now freelances across journalism, copywriting and travel writing and has been widely published across The Guardian, Crikey, ABC, SBS, The Daily Telegraph, Women’s Agenda, The Conversation, Vice, News.com.au, Voyeur Magazine, Escape, Daily Life and many more. She has worked in copywriting and communications for clients including Monash University, Victorian Responsible Gambling Foundation, and she teaches journalism at the University of Melbourne. Magazine, Escape, Daily Life and many more. She has worked in copywriting and communications for clients including Monash University, Victorian Responsible Gambling Foundation, and she teaches journalism at the University of Melbourne.