

# From Injustice to Health Equity via a Health Justice Program

By Yasmin Ildes

Imagine seeking asylum in a new country... Imagine suffering from severe mental health issues because of the trauma you experienced from your home country and the ongoing uncertainty regarding your visa status... Imagine that your mental health has worsened due to now experiencing workplace discrimination and domestic violence from your partner... How do you feel? This is one of the thousands of stories the clients who have sought the services of World Wellness Group are experiencing. Their situations involve health, legal and social complexities.

*“WWG’s social health model works to address the social issues that adversely affect our clients’ health, including housing, employment, legal issues, family violence, discrimination, language and cultural barriers. Through an embedded wraparound care model, we have found that legal problems and lack of access to justice are major barriers for many of our clients who are already facing social disadvantages which significantly impact their health and mental health.”*

## World Wellness Group’s Health Justice Program

World Wellness Group (WWG), a multicultural social enterprise health clinic, established a Health Justice Program (HJP) in 2020 as part of a wraparound health care model supported by professional indemnity insurance from the Australian Pro Bono Centre. WWG is based in Brisbane and has a mission to reduce health inequity and provide access to universal health care. We run a health clinic providing medical and allied services, including mental health services, to minority groups. Our patients include migrants, refugees and people seeking asylum. Our motto is #HealthEquityJustice.

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Lawyer and client at the World Wellness Group’s Health Justice Partnership clinic.

care model, we have found that legal problems and lack of access to justice are major barriers for many of our clients who are already facing social disadvantages which significantly impact their health and mental health. With the support of two key lawyers, a legal advocate and volunteers at our clinic, we have provided legal advice, representation and advocacy and navigation support to help clients understand their legal matters, connect

them with further legal expertise when necessary and provide legal advice and representation. This wraparound support is provided alongside our focus on their health and mental health issues.

## How it started

In response to many clients’ health issues being impacted by legal issues, WWG commenced providing legal advocacy services for internal clients of the service to ensure they were able to find appropriate legal help, but also remain engaged in their existing legal processes. Remaining engaged can often be a challenge due to mental health, language and cultural issues. We also wanted to ensure that our health practitioners felt supported via training and secondary consults, as their clients often brought up legal issues in their health consults and many practitioners felt overwhelmed.



World Wellness Group's clinic in Brisbane.

***“For the past three years, the HJP has contributed over \$300,000 in pro bono legal services on top of additional legal advocacy and support. It is the largest pro bono program WWG has undertaken.”***

In starting this process, we lifted the lid on a high level of unmet need. Every week, multiple clients were referred to the HJP for a range of issues from migration legal support to family and domestic violence, administrative law and workplace discrimination matters. It was clear too that there was no referral pathway for some of these clients, and many of them were falling through gaps in the legal system as a result of their poor mental health. In response to this, in 2020, the HJP transitioned to start providing legal advice and representation, as well as advocacy. I was employed in-house and Stephanie Manger was a volunteer lawyer who supervised my work and assisted with the overwhelming workload. Other volunteer barristers and lawyers were integral to the program and provided expertise to assist clients at trial and in various disputes.



*Yasmin Ildes is an early career lawyer who has worked primarily in the not-for-profit, multicultural and community legal sector. Yasmin led the establishment of a Health Justice Program at World Wellness Group, and is extremely passionate about social justice, access to justice and the health justice model. Yasmin has also worked in another Health Justice Partnership - the Older Persons Advocacy and Legal Service at Caxton Legal*

*Centre. Outside of work, Yasmin is a passionate performer and female empowerment advocate. From 2014, Yasmin founded and ran a not-for-profit – Glamourzonians – aimed at empowering young girls to redefine beauty standards, as well as look beyond themselves to bigger world issues such as girls' education. Yasmin was a top 4 finalist in the 2020 Queensland Young Achievers Awards.*

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For the past three years, the HJP has contributed over \$300,000 in pro bono legal services on top of additional legal advocacy and support. It is the largest pro bono program WWG has undertaken. We believe that our commitment to health justice is an essential component in achieving health equity for our clients.

### Highlights of the Health Justice Program

There are a number of multi-faceted cases which have been highlights of the program. These include successful immigration appeals as well as innovative coordination of clients' legal problems, where we have not only worked collaboratively with other health disciplines within our service, but also worked with lawyers from other firms to provide less fragmented legal services for a client with multiple legal issues.

A case that we are very proud of is an unfair dismissal matter for a client who was referred by his GP for urgent mental health support from WWG. His clinician identified a potential legal issue as the client disclosed being harassed and bullied at work and feeling that he was forced to resign. I worked closely with his mental health clinician and a multicultural peer support worker (who provided language and cultural support) to make an unfair dismissal claim. For the final hearing, we had the assistance of a pro bono barrister to represent our client and achieved a successful outcome. You can read the full decision [here](#).

### Next steps

We strongly believe in the health justice model to increase access to justice for our clients and improve their health outcomes. We are excited to continue to grow this work in our new HJP, which we have established in partnership with Caxton Legal Centre – the Multicultural Advocacy and Legal Service. This service will be based at WWG but be available to any clients from multicultural backgrounds whose mental health has been affected by their unmet legal needs. #HealthEquityJustice. ■