

Bringing In-Person Pro Bono Assistance to Refugees in Northern Tasmania

Tasmanian Refugee Legal Service's Collaboration with Rae & Partners Lawyers



The Rae & Partners Diversity Committee L-R: Claudia Thomas, Zach Lieutier, Jo Byrne, Tim Drew, Louis Benjamin, (absent – Stuart Blom).

The contributions of pro bono lawyers can make a world of difference to underfunded and overworked community legal centres. The Centre reached out to Rae and Partners Lawyers to find out more about an exciting partnership with the Tasmanian Refugee Legal Service that is bringing face-to-face legal assistance to clients in the state's north.

In November 2022, Mr Patrick O'Connor, Chief Executive and Principal at the Tasmanian Refugee Legal Service ('TRLS') reached out to our firm to ask whether we would be willing to partner with his team to provide free legal services to clients in the north of the state.

TRLS is a not-for-profit organisation providing free legal advice, support and advocacy for migrants and refugees across Tasmania, as well as offering a specialised migration service for survivors of family

By Claudia Thomas
with Patrick O'Connor

violence. They have just five lawyers working on over 400 active cases, with clients all over the state. They also provide education to the public regarding immigration and refugee law and policy.

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This partnership with TRLS came at the perfect time, as my colleagues and I were in the process of establishing our firm's Diversity Committee. The Diversity Committee, currently comprised of six lawyers, aims to promote diversity, equality and inclusion within the firm, support underrepresented groups within the wider community, advocate for equality of opportunity for all staff, regardless of race, ethnicity, heritage, gender, age, religion, disability, sexual orientation or gender identity, and to be advocates for change within the firm and the wider community.



The TRLS team L-R: Daisy Katero (Lawyer), Kawindi Batu (Lawyer), Patrick O'Connor (Principal Lawyer, Chief Executive), and Quan Nguyen (Office Manager).

Our Diversity Committee is excited to undertake this project with TRLS and support the incredible work that they do. We appreciate the importance of this project as, with TRLS based in Hobart, there were no in-person legal services available to refugees in Northern Tasmania.

This meant that refugees in the north of the state may not have known about the services offered by TRLS and how they could access those services. It also meant that many of their clients would need to have their appointments by phone or video link. With many of TRLS's clients being from linguistically diverse backgrounds, this created a barrier in communication.

To bridge this gap, and to address the issues and challenges faced by their clients, we aim to support the work that

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TRLS do by offering face-to-face appointments from our office in Launceston. This allows us to provide the advice, representation and support that TRLS clients in Northern Tasmania desperately need.

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Our team predominantly assists TRLS with their family reunification cases. There is a significant amount of work involved in these cases, with each requiring approximately 25 – 35 hours of work to prepare and lodge the application, and a further 25 – 30 hours of work to prepare and lodge the submissions. On average, it takes three years for these cases to be determined.

If TRLS's clients had to instruct a private law firm to complete their applications, they would incur legal costs of approximately \$8,000.00. TRLS estimates that by the end of this financial year, it will have provided approximately \$800,000.00 worth of free family reunification legal work for the Afghan refugee community alone.

Despite the incredible amount of work that they do, and the importance of this work within the community, TRLS continues to operate without National Legal Assistance Partnership funding.

We are assisting TRLS by undertaking the first appointments with clients (in-person), gathering information and documents (such as ID, birth certificates, marriage certificates and immigration documents), assisting them in completing visa application forms, preparing statutory declarations, and eventually, drafting submissions. In doing so, we are hopeful that we will be able to increase TRLS's capacity to take on more clients and spread their support to the wider community.

Many of TRLS's clients, or their families overseas, have experienced some form of physical or emotional abuse, persecution, torture or conflict in their home country. We have noticed that it is understandably difficult for many clients to open up to us about their painful experiences. For this reason, it is particularly important for our team to respond in a trauma-informed way, so that these clients can feel safe and develop trusting relationships with us.

“This project is already having a positive impact within our firm by increasing our lawyers’ skills in migration law and trauma-informed response, and by boosting morale within the firm by giving back to the community.”

Our team are currently operating on a roster system, with Tuesday and Thursday afternoons set aside for the project. We currently have a team of five lawyers involved in the project, meaning that each lawyer is dedicating approximately one afternoon per month.

As a primarily commercial law firm, this project has presented the opportunity for our lawyers to gain experience in migration law, which we may not have otherwise been able to do. To prepare for this new challenge, we have been undertaking training with TRLS since January 2023.

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In spreading awareness about the services offered by TRLS and the collaboration with our firm, TRLS were in contact with the ABC, who published an article in December 2022: [‘Four pro bono lawyers unlock in-person legal services for refugees in Northern Tasmania’](#). The ABC also conducted a follow up radio interview with our firm in April 2023.

We are excited to continue working with TRLS and we hope that this will be the first of many more pro bono projects that our Diversity Committee, and the firm as a whole, will undertake. ■



Claudia Thomas. *Claudia is part of the Civil Litigation and Estate Administration teams at Rae & Partners Lawyers.*

Claudia started at Rae & Partners Lawyers as a paralegal in 2018, while completing a Bachelor of Laws through Deakin University, and a Graduate Diploma in Legal Practice with the College of Law.

Since being admitted to the legal profession in February 2021, Claudia has gained experience in a range of practice areas including civil litigation,

estate litigation, debt recovery and residential tenancy disputes. She has also represented clients in relation to Guardianship and Administration matters before the Tasmanian Civil and Administrative Tribunal (TASCAT).

Claudia is Vice-President of the Early Career Lawyers North Committee, and Vice-Chair of the Rae & Partners Diversity Committee.



Patrick O'Connor. *Patrick was admitted to practice law in 2013 and has practiced predominantly in immigration and human rights law since that time. He has extensive experience representing clients at all stages of the immigration process including at the Administrative Appeals Tribunal, Federal Circuit Court, Federal Court of Australia, Immigration*

Assessment Authority and the Department of Home Affairs. Patrick also has extensive experience in partner and protection visa applications, skilled visa and visa cancellation matters.

Patrick has a strong understanding of current immigration issues. He is passionate about social justice, human rights and refugee issues that exist in contemporary Australia and abroad today. Patrick has also worked pro bono for over 5 years at the Asylum Seeker Resource Centre and Refugee Legal in Melbourne.

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