HWL Ebsworth: **Dedicating time and expertise to help meet unmet legal need**

By Karen Keogh, Fanoula Galanakis and Laura Kilgour

Jess and Laura running the Compassionate Communications training.

About the Practice

In 2022, HWL Ebsworth Lawyers formalised its existing commitment to providing pro bono legal assistance by establishing a dedicated national pro bono practice group and appointing Karen Keogh as Head of Pro Bono.

The national pro bono practice group sits alongside 12 other national practice groups at HWL Ebsworth. Karen leads the team which consists of Fanoula Galanakis, Pro Bono Partner, Laura Kilgour, Senior Associate, and Alba Verre, Personal Assistant. The team is supported by coordinators on the ground in each State and Territory of Australia, as well as graduate solicitors that rotate through the national pro bono practice group.

Here the HWLE team share insights on their practice to support the work of community legal centres and to direct the firm's resources to filling areas of unmet legal need.

Targeting Legal Need

Our pro bono practice does not have focus areas or targeted client groups. With a legal team of approximately 1300 lawyers across the country there is a diversity of views, preferences and priorities. Instead, our aim is to provide legal assistance in areas where it is most needed which of necessity crosses many client groups. We do this by working alongside other legal assistance providers where they are unable to assist due to eligibility, expertise or capacity. Specifically, we have relationships with many community legal centres particularly in outer metropolitan, rural and regional areas of Australia. There is an increasing amount of legal need in these regions and, as far as possible, we try to assist in a very small way to fill some of the gaps where there is no other legal provider that can do so.

One of our community legal centre partnerships is with Western Sydney Community Legal Centre (WSCLC) based in Parramatta. It services Western Sydney, where 2.5 million people live and it is estimated 23% of these people are likely to require and qualify for more intensive legal assistance. 40.9% of residents in Western Sydney are from cultural and linguistically diverse backgrounds with more than 1.5 million people identifying that both their parents were born overseas, 16.5% of whom do not speak English well or at all. Many refugees including survivors of war, trauma and torture live in Greater Western Sydney adding significantly to the complexity of needs. WSCLC delivers a number of programs, including domestic violence, tenancy, a children's contact centre and the traditional community legal program.

> *"When determining where to direct the considerable legal resource available within HWL Ebsworth, the focus was to try to fill gaps rather than duplicate pro bono assistance in areas where it is already adequately met."*
>
> **Karen Keogh**, Head of Pro Bono, Partner.

We collaborate in many ways. Earlier this year, Laura and Jessica McLaren, Principal Solicitor, drew on their respective experience in the community legal and not-for-profit sectors to co-design and deliver training to HWL Ebsworth Sydney graduates and the WSCLC volunteers about trauma-informed approaches to legal assistance and building resilience in legal practice.

"I was especially fortunate to be paired with Tiana who consistently delivered high-quality work and exceeded my expectations while on pro bono secondment. Tiana's ability to learn and adapt quickly has been particularly impressive, her legal support made my work all the better and easier."

Michelle Ericoli, Senior Solicitor at WSCLC.

Michelle and Tiana at Rooty Hill.

Boosting Capacity

HWL Ebsworth has a pro bono graduate secondment program where every graduate in every office must attend 6 weeks on secondment over a 12-month period with a pro bono secondment partner. This has been a great success and built our pro bono culture across offices and practice groups. We find that our lawyers who have undertaken a secondment are more likely to be involved in clinic and file work going forward as they progress through the firm. We are also informed by our pro bono partners that our graduates help to boost capacity and although at a junior level they make a positive contribution to the workloads of the solicitors they work with on secondment.

Filling Gaps

The national pro bono practice assists with simple Wills and Estates matters, acknowledging that this is a key area of demand for pro bono legal assistance. We are fortunate to work with a number of stellar Wills & Estates lawyers across the firm who support our work and directly assist clients. We assist First Nations clients with Wills and Letters of Administration when we are asked to help and have recently started collaborating with Gilbert + Tobin and other firms to assist with burial dispute matters which has emerged as an area of unmet legal need. As we have offices in every State and Territory we are also able to accept referrals in simple Wills and Estates matters in some geographical areas where there are very few pro bono options available to individuals and referring partner organisations.

The Future

Our plan for the future is to continue to build and consolidate opportunities for lawyers across the firm to contribute their time and expertise meaningfully in doing our best to meet some of the unmet legal needs of the Australian community. We continue to look for innovative ways to assist and collaborate with both the community legal assistance sector and pro bono sector. We are always open to opportunities to do so. ■

"Working in this space means we take referrals from Cancer Council's Pro Bono Program and I can continue to contribute to the important work being done by my old team, albeit in a different way."

Laura Kilgour, Pro Bono Senior Associate

***Karen Keogh** leads the National Pro Bono Practice Group at HWL Ebsworth Lawyers. In addition to managing the practice, she acts for a wide variety of individuals and not-for-profit clients with a specific focus on charity law. Karen was previously a Health Partner for over 25 years.*

***Fanoula Galanakis** manages the Melbourne pro bono practice and the graduate secondment program nationally. She was previously a Partner in the Commercial and Corporate Practice Group and Head of IP.*

***Laura Kilgour** is a Senior Associate at HWL Ebsworth Lawyers. Her work and practice of law has consistently involved ensuring people who would otherwise face barriers can access legal and financial assistance. Laura started her career in the not-for-profit and community sector and now works in a dedicated pro bono role in Australia's largest legal partnership.*

BACK TO COVER