

Legal service going strong for 32 years

SUNCOAST Community Legal Service Inc has been a quiet achiever in the region.

Yet for 32 years, it has filled an important demand in our Coast community which would otherwise have gone unmet.

The organisation was founded in November 1984 by local lawyers Ian McAlister, Bruce McDiarmid and Dennis Callinan – the third such service to be established in Queensland.

Initially operating out of the Maroochy Neighbourhood Centre at Cotton Tree, it hosted legal advice sessions on Monday evenings with start-up funding from the Sunshine Coast Law Association.

The first roster consisted of 13 local volunteer lawyers.

By 1993, the number of people seeking free legal advice and referrals had doubled from the previous decade, attributable in part to the Coast's population boom.

The service's first co-ordinator Edna Birleson began to expand the volunteer roster in Maroochydore to include Tuesday evenings and Wednesday lunchtimes.

In 2004, an outreach service started at the Noosa Leisure Centre.

The service was still largely reliant on the community's generosity to keep operating at that stage.

In 2007, substantial

government funding allowed a move to new premises at Ocean Street, Maroochydore, and the employment of a full-time principal solicitor: Julian Porter.

Co-ordinator Louise Jeffs joined the service in 2008 and both are still employed today.

One of their first tasks was to expand the outreach program further – to Caloundra, Nambour, Landsborough, Maleny and Pomona.

This allowed local lawyers an opportunity to volunteer within their own communities.

Provision of advice, referral and education services remained the primary focus, but having a staff lawyer meant that some limited casework could then be undertaken.

This capacity increased further, with the employment of a specialist family lawyer in 2010.

In 2014, the service moved into purpose-built premises in the Maroochydore TAFE building, provided and paid for by the new University of the Sunshine Coast Law School. For its investment, the university was able to

offer opportunities for its students to work with the service's clients and volunteers in a practical setting from the first year of their degree.

The USC Law Clinic assists in training the next generation of Sunshine Coast lawyers and has increased the service's scope for casework even further.

The worth of the service was recognised in the Australia Day Awards 2016 when it was named the Sunshine Coast's Community Organisation of the Year.

The award honours a local legal profession steadfast in its commitment to universal access to justice and to building community capacity through legal education.

Another highlight for 2016 for Suncoast Community Legal Service was being selected as a regional service provider with

Queensland Statewide Tenant Advice and Referral Service. This is a program designed to assist people requiring tenancy advice and further assistance not available through the Residential Tenancies Authority call centre.

Three experienced tenancy advice workers have been recruited to administer this program.

Most recently, the service has appointed two extra part-time lawyers to its professional staff, as a result of a temporary funding allocation for family law and domestic violence issues.

They join the small professional team and 135 volunteers, 90 of whom are lawyers, who contribute to the provision of access to justice on the Sunshine Coast.

In the 2014/15 operating year, the service assisted 3139 clients with legal advice across its six locations and the 2015/16 year is busier still.

The achievement of these benchmarks is attributable, in large part, to so many volunteers giving generously of their time, some doing so for more than a decade.

Ten have contributed a combined 151 years of service, and the service's "pro bono hero", Cooloom lawyer Ray Barber, has volunteered for more than 30 years.

The volunteers and staff receive professional and personal satisfaction in helping vulnerable people who are facing a legal crisis.

Visit www.suncoastcommunitylegal.org.



The Suncoast Community Legal Service begins in 1984.

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HONOURED: The accolades keep flowing for the Suncoast Community Legal Service.

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