



## Canberra CityNews

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#### Opinion / Facing the law without a lawyer

“Most people feel that getting legal help will be too expensive or too hard and ignore their legal problems. This often leads to additional legal problems,” writes JAMES FARRELL

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**ALL Australians understand and value the idea of a “fair go” – that we can all access justice and fairness, regardless of the size of our bank balance, where we live, or the circumstances we face.**



James Farrell.

This is brought into sharp focus when we have a legal problem.

Most people feel that getting legal help will be too expensive, or too hard, and ignore their legal problems. This often leads to additional legal problems, which affects their health, their family, and their homes.

Most of us can't afford a private lawyer and fewer and fewer people are eligible for legal aid.

That's a problem, as research from the NSW Law and Justice Foundation suggests that almost half of all adult Australians will have a legal problem every year, and only 6 per cent of Australians know about community legal centres and the vital help they can provide.

This week, workers from community legal centres are in Canberra for our national conference to discuss the issues faced by our clients and the ways that we can help them.

Community legal centres provide a vital safety net for people facing legal problems. Almost 200 community-controlled organisations provide free (government-funded) legal help. People can access a lawyer on the phone to get advice about their rights as a renter, or see a lawyer to get advice about their dispute with a bank, or to get someone to represent them in a divorce proceeding.

They help people like Trevor, who was studying at a Brisbane university, and applied for Austudy. Centrelink denied his application, saying he was – or should be – dependent on his parents. His father lived in Fiji and his mother was in the UK and unable to support him. He remembers that someone from Centrelink told him that it would be easier if he just dropped out and went on to the dole.

Trevor sought advice and assistance from Caxton Legal Centre in Brisbane, who helped him understand his rights. The matter was settled outside the courtroom, and Trevor was able to access the payment and receive back pay.

Without this support, Trevor may well have dropped out of university. Instead, with the help of his local community legal centre, he was able to stay in university, which led him into a successful career in small business.

Trevor now sits in the Queensland Parliament, representing the people of South Toowoomba.

He acknowledges that legal help from a community legal centre provided him with great assistance, and he may not be where he is now, without that help.

Nationally, community legal centres help hundreds of thousands of everyday Australians with legal problems every year. We help couples in disputes with banks, women experiencing family violence, people with disability trying to access government services, parents negotiating the family law system, young workers that are unfairly or unlawfully sacked, and victims of crime.

Sadly, we've also been subjected to political gamesmanship here in Canberra.

Just a few months ago, we were expecting a significant reduction in funding to community legal centres. We were troubled by the impact this would have on our services. We're already unable to meet the demand for legal help, even though we harness more than 11,000 hours of volunteer time every week, and have relationships with *pro bono* programs in law firms, and host student clinics to support our work and expand our reach. Despite our ability to leverage on the underinvestment in our work – which the Productivity Commission says needs an immediate and urgent injection of \$200m – nationally we're forced to turn away three out of every five people that reach out for assistance.

Any reduction to services would have had a significant impact in communities across Australia.

Fortunately, Attorney-General Brandis and Minister Cash announced the reinstatement of funding for community legal centres before the Budget. We're grateful that this funding was reinstated and that our members can continue their important work.

But the Federal government's decision merely continues the status quo; in my state of Queensland, that means that only half of the people who reach out to community legal centres will get the services they need. We'll continue to do our very best, and again call on our elected leaders to support our work, and the people that rely on our help.

**James Farrell OAM** is the Director of Community Legal Centres Queensland. [@clc\\_qld](https://twitter.com/clc_qld)

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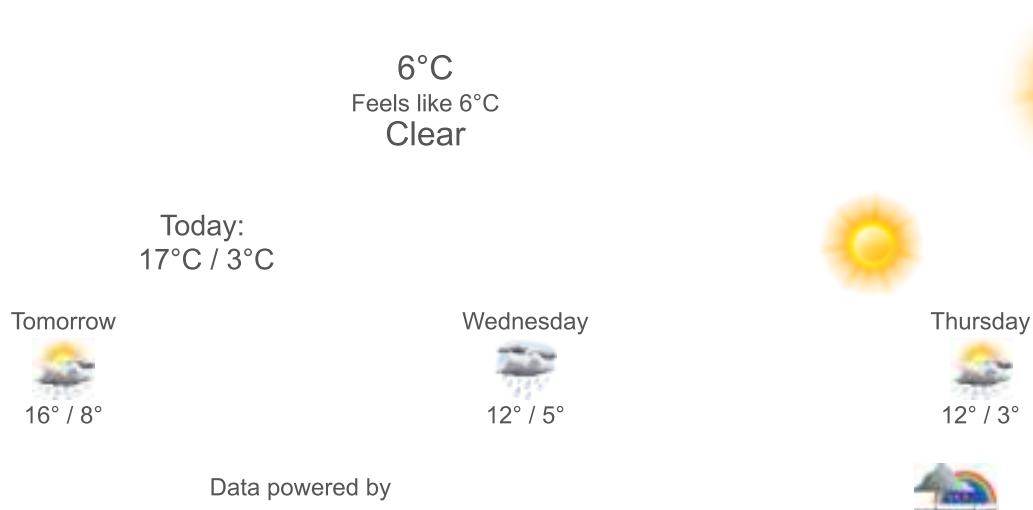
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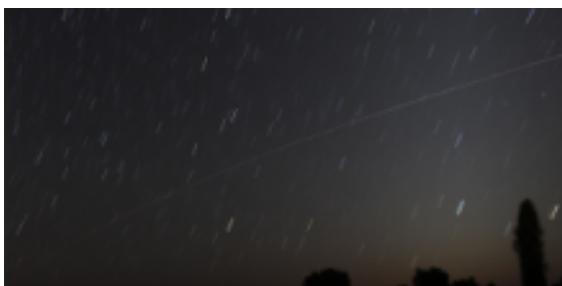
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by [Sonya Fladun](#)

“My strong impression is that the number of people sleeping rough in Canberra’s urban centres has grown in recent years,” writes columnist SONYA FLADUN

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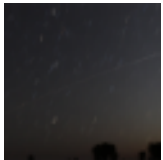
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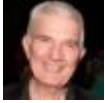
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