

Seniors set justice trend

National team wants to learn from city program

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THE Law Council of Australia has looked to Townsville for inspiration as part of a national inquiry into access to justice.

President Fiona McLeod SC said the Law Council's Justice Project team was calling for submissions to gather evidence for its comprehensive review.

Townsville has been highlighted for its "particularly innovative" Seniors Creating

Change program, an initiative of the Townsville Community Legal Service.

"They're a group that sings songs at retirement villages, it's older people singing," Ms McLeod said. "Apart from songs that everybody loves, they're talking about the legal issues that many old people face and are challenged by."

Ms McLeod said she would like to see the program implemented elsewhere in Australia.

Ms McLeod and others from The Justice Project team travelled to North Queensland last week to meet with community leaders and visit organisations including Townsville Legal Aid, the North Queensland Women's Legal Service and the North Queensland Aboriginal Torres Strait Islander Women's Legal Service.

Ms McLeod said the region had a number of factors that may prevent residents from accessing justice, including a high population of indigenous

Australians, seniors and people

living in remote areas.

She said while 14 per cent of Australians lived below the poverty line, just 8 per cent are able to access legal aid.

"We have a huge gap in terms of legal aid, which means there are people struggling, they just cannot access a lawyer," she said.

"We rely on the community legal services to provide free legal advice, they turn away more than 160,000 clients a

year, because they're unable to service that need."

Ms McLeod said providing access to justice improved society as a whole, not just outcomes for defendants.

"For most members of the community, (jailing offenders) gives people a false sense of security," she said.

"The people who have been jailed for minor offences are doing an apprenticeship within that jail with more serious offenders, and are more likely to

reoffend and go into a cycle of offending once they're out of jail. "(Diversionary programs) actually work more effectively and cost less."

The Justice Project is chaired by former High Court Chief Justice Robert French AC and overseen by a steering committee of lawyers, jurists and academics.

The review is focusing on justice barriers faced by people with significant social and economic disadvantage, and

will deliver a final report by December. To make a submission, visit justiceproject.com.au