

Students filling the gap in legal service

The coronavirus outbreak has seen a significant increase in the number of people seeking assistance from the Gold Coast Community Legal Centre. Over the past four weeks, the centre has provided legal advice and assistance to over 350 local people and delivered over 1,500 legal services to the Gold Coast Community.

The people coming to the centre generally cannot afford a lawyer and are seeking urgent help with issues such as domestic and family violence, unfair dismissal from their work, problems with accessing Centrelink problems and re-negotiating shared custody of their children. One in three calls relates to issues arising or related to Covid19.

Since the pandemic, Gold Coast Community Legal Centre has seen an increased number of calls from community members seeking psychosocial support as well as legal advice. The issues are complex and often include aspects of mental health, social issues and financial hardship as well as a legal problem. The Legal Centre is working closely with Griffith University, Gold Coast Campus to recruit, train and supervise a group of social work students to provide crucial frontline support.

Victoria Shiel, Director, Gold Coast Community Legal Centre commented, 'Gold Coast residents come to us because they are in trouble and can't afford a lawyer. If a person doesn't resolve their legal problem there can be flow-on effects to a person's health and housing arrangements. Access to legal help and holistic services such as social work can prevent or reduce the escalation of legal problems and reduce costs to the justice system.'

'We are unable to fund an in-house social worker so we rely on social work students to assist our clients. The students are providing crisis support, responding to enforced changes to community member lives, homelessness, navigating financial support and social isolation.'

'While we value the skills and knowledge they bring, we require qualified social workers who can provide supervision and support to students and immediate crisis response to clients who need advanced clinical responses.'

'The support provided by the students has been invaluable especially considering the fact that referrals are made more difficult due to the current circumstances we all are facing.'

'The students can assist clients who are highly distressed and then link the client with a lawyer. We've noticed a big difference in that distressed clients who receive support from the social work students are better able to effectively engage with the legal assistance offered to them. This has allowed our legal team to respond to a greater number of clients who require legal assistance.'

'Ten per cent of the people who work for us do it free of charge. That equates to 180 hours every week this year. Our centres are resourceful and our volunteers are fantastic but I would prefer it if the state government could fund us to employ a social worker full time to undertake this work,' Ms Shiel said.

Ends

MEDIA CONTACT:

Catherine Baker, Communications Manager, Community Legal Centres Queensland

Email: Communications@communitylegalqld.org.au / Phone: (07) 3392 0092 / 0432 105 415



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NOTES:

The Gold Coast Community Legal Centre is a not-for-profit, nationally accredited Community Legal Centre that provides free legal advice, assistance, information and referral to residents of the Gold Coast community.

Since opening in 1984, our team of fully qualified lawyers has provided front line services to the entire Gold Coast region free of charge. Our priority is to assist the most vulnerable and disadvantaged residents in a range of legal areas including family law, domestic violence, consumer issues, minor civil claims, motor vehicle accidents, neighbour disputes and minor criminal matters.

The Gold Coast Community Legal Centre provides urgent legal advice and assistance on complex matters. A core part of the agency's response is also to attend the risk and psychosocial side of these issues, in order to facilitate this specialist social work services, are required.

To find out more go here <https://www.gcclc.org.au/>