

Overcoming the Invisible Hurdles to Justice for Young People Project

What is Invisible Hurdles?

The Invisible Hurdles Project is an Integrated Justice Project involving

- Hume Riverina Community Legal Service (HRCLS),
- Wodonga Flexible Learning Centre (WFLC),
- North East Support and Action for Youth Inc. (NESAY) and
- the Albury Wodonga Aboriginal Health Service (AWAHS).

The partners were chosen for their close work with young people experiencing disadvantage.

supporting young
people aged **15-25**
at risk of, or experiencing family violence

The first project of its kind, it supports the partners to work together to identify systemic issues affecting young people and to undertake collective advocacy to address these issues as well as to provide legal advice, assistance, education, representation and referrals on site at each of the partner locations.

Timeline

The Project has been ongoing since 2015 thanks to partial funding by Victoria Legal Aid (VLA) in addition to the following specific stages:

Stage I

- 1 October 2015 – May 2018
Funding from VLSB+C

- 6 June 2018 – 5 June 2020
Funding from Victorian Department of Justice

- 1 July 2017 – 30 June 2020
Funding from Legal Aid NSW

Stage II

- 1 January 2019 – 1 June 2021
Funding from VLSB+C and
Victorian Department of Justice

Stage III

- 1 July 2021 – 30 June 2023 Funding from
Victorian Department of Justice and Community Safety
- 1 September 2021 – 31 August 2022
Funding from VLSB+C

What are the Invisible Hurdles?

The law causes apprehension for most people, and is even more daunting for youth, particularly for those in vulnerable situations. The Project is named in recognition of the many 'invisible hurdles' that get in the way of young people receiving legal assistance.

Some of these hurdles are:

- lack of understanding of the law/legal system,
- lack of knowledge about how lawyers can help,
- lack of trust in the law/legal system/lawyers,
- lack of a "voice" to make their concerns heard.

These hurdles seem insurmountable when young people also face other issues, such as poverty, family violence, drug or alcohol problems and insecure housing.

Location

The partners are located in Albury, Wodonga and Wangaratta but clients can be drawn from anywhere within our catchment from both sides of the border.



Method

The Project lawyers attend each partner on-site to spend time with young people and staff to provide a range of services as follows:



When not physically on-site, the Project lawyers are working on casework, warm referrals to other organisations where needed, preparing legal education sessions or professional development activities, and are available to both young people and partner staff via mobile phone/ text message and email.

Long term objectives

- ✓ Increase ability of young people to get legal assistance
- ✓ Increase capacity of partners to better identify and refer legal issues
- ✓ Work in a more integrated way on health, educational and justice issues
- ✓ Identify and work on systemic issues which decrease client exclusion

Type of legal issues

Over the past six years, the Project lawyers have helped young people with many issues including:

- Family and domestic violence
- Debts, fines, credit cards, personal loans, payday loans etc
- Problems with Centrelink
- Identity documents - birth certificate, Medicare, Tax File No.
- Housing & tenancy - repairs, eviction, termination, tenant's rights
- Family law, child protection, separation, child support, DNA testing
- Motor Vehicle accidents
- Sexting, consent and online privacy issues

Community Development & Law Reform activities

- Writing letters to Member for Indi Dr Helen Haines about the dangers of removing the responsible lending laws
- Completion of the National Youth Survey
- Submission to the Victorian Government Youth Strategy 2021
- Letters to MPs and cross border commissioners about the ban on learner driving lessons during COVID-19 restrictions
- Advocacy to DHHS Leaving Care panel about the challenges of dealing with the birth certificate system

There's so many stories about how its helped change their [young people] views of what a lawyer can do and that it can be a positive experience of the law. The way that [the lawyers] at the school, they're friendly and approachable... And it seems that young people haven't had that experience of a lawyer or even a legal system before. So, it means they're more confident to get legal support in the future. It's not all lawyers and suits on TV. It's like "well, there's actually a service that's down to earth and approachable and actually here to help make things better for you, rather than judge you".

Quote from a teacher involved in the Project:

A person in athletic wear is captured mid-jump over a hurdle on a running track. The background shows a line of trees under a clear sky. The entire image has an orange tint.

Data January 2019 – February 2021

534 referrals

100% agreed that they can confidently and positively refer

339 advices

100% agreed that the lawyers are responsive to client need.

273 secondary consults

100% agreed there is huge value in assisting patients/clients due to secondary consultations with the lawyers

43% sought advice

where family violence impacted their legal problem and nearly **60% of young people seen were impacted in some way by family violence**

164 cases

32 CLE/Community development sessions

with over 300 total attendees (*most attendees attended multiple sessions)

100 professional development/staff meetings/ “cuppa dates” attended