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## **Innovative legal project delivers multiple benefits for local young people**

An integrated justice project to help young people on the Border, especially those experiencing family violence, has exceeded the goals of the program and delivered exciting findings to potentially guide future projects nationally and internationally.

The *Pathways to empowerment and justice* The Invisible Hurdles Stage II Research and Evaluation Final Report was launched in mid-November. The Report found Stage II had made effective inroads in responding to the family violence occurring in young people's lives, and was an efficient and effective way to reach young people who would otherwise not have access to a lawyer.

Victoria Legal Services Board + Commissioner Grants Program Manager Sue Ball said the project has the potential for much wider impact as it contributes to building an evidence-base for best practice service delivery across Australia.

"Invisible Hurdles has proven to be highly effective in reaching young people who would not have otherwise had access to legal help," Ms Ball said. "The dedication, determination and skill of everyone involved have benefited many young people, as well as their families and communities."

Ms Ball said the dramatic increase in participation of non-legal professionals in advocacy work as the project progressed was notable. "Empowering young people to self-advocate is a particularly powerful way to achieve long lasting change," she said. "Safe, high-quality service delivery is essential, but to address the broader underlying issues driving the need for your services, this systemic reform work is vital."

Hume Riverina Community Legal Service (HRCLS) has been working in partnership with North East Support and Action for Youth Inc. (NESAY), Wodonga Flexible Learning Centre (WFLC) and the Albury Wodonga Aboriginal Health Service (AWAHS) to run the Overcoming the Invisible Hurdles to Justice for Young People Project (Invisible Hurdles; the Project) since 2016.

HRCLS Acting Principal Lawyer Debi Fisher said the outcomes achieved and the numbers of young people reached, particularly during COVID lockdowns, show the value of investing in relationships and working in partnerships.

"We know that young people, especially vulnerable young people, would not normally walk through our door asking for help so we need to be present in places where they are comfortable, and working with their trusted advisors really helps break down barriers," Ms Fisher said. "All the partners have been so committed to this project over many years now, and we are seeing the effects of that with record numbers of referrals and legal assistance, as well as young people feeling empowered to understand the law and how they can use it to protect and stand up for themselves."

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Upper Murray Family Care

WFLC Teacher Kristy Shaddock described the Invisible Hurdles Project as “extremely rare” in education. With poverty, family violence, drug or alcohol issues, insecure housing, transport, and poor mental health, creating unseen hurdles for people seeking professional help, having the highly responsive legal program helps with those challenges.

“The Project overcomes these hurdles by bringing legal help and information directly to where the young person is,” Ms Shaddock said. “Its impact and growth are a result of the collaborative approach between partners that underpins the program, the empathy HRCLS lawyers Andrea Georgiou and Becky Smith have for the young people at WFLC, and their understanding of the ethos behind the WFLC about why we do what we do.”

Crucial to the Project’s success was lawyers building relationships with young people and the partners by attending each partner location every week, to provide legal education, advice and assistance at locations where young people feel safe. The hope was, that providing access to legal advice and education in these locations where young people had the support of teachers, GPs, nurses, case managers, social workers etc., would lead to young people, who wouldn’t otherwise see a lawyer, seeking legal help about their everyday legal problems (such as fines and debts) and ultimately feel safe enough to ask for help about the family violence so many of them are impacted by.

On the back of the success of Stage 1, additional funding was provided by the Victorian Legal Services Board in 2019 for Stage II which focused on the addition of a Legal Project Worker, Ms Smith. She worked alongside Ms Georgiou with the young people and partner organisations, breaking down even more barriers and building deeper relationships of trust, leading to earlier requests for legal help. This Community Development approach was based on the principles of increasing the reach of the Project by increasing engagement, building capacity, empowering, and collaborating with young people and practitioners.

Ms Smith attended the Men’s Shed and Women’s Circle at AWAHS (usually with home-made baked goods!), as well as important social and cultural events such as community barbeques, Reconciliation Week activities, and NAIDOC celebrations. She also prepared weekly education sessions at WFLC including legal topics on fines and debts, police powers, cyber safety, sexting and consent, alongside Ms Georgiou.

Ms Georgiou and Ms Smith worked closely with the staff at NESAY, helping them to understand and identify legal problems so that they could refer young people earlier and with greater ease. Obviously the impact of COVID has been far reaching, heightening the challenges young people were facing (especially those living in our border communities) while simultaneously reducing access to services including legal advice. Working in partnership with these other organisations eased some of this impact.

Policy and law reform work was an integral part of Stage II with all three partners signing a submission based on the direct voice of young people to help shape the Victorian government's new Youth Strategy. The young people involved in the submission suggested that in relation to addressing family violence, family violence services should attend secondary schools to promote their services, and teachers and wellbeing staff should receive training in identifying and responding to family violence. On the basis of these suggestions, HRCLS made a successful application to the Helen Macpherson Smith Trust to run a new program titled AMPLIFY in collaboration with the Centre Against Violence. AMPLIFY will be rolled out across four secondary schools in North East Victoria in 2022.

Invisible Hurdles has been evaluated, since its commencement, by Hon. Associate Professor Dr Liz Curran and Hon. Lecturer Pamela Taylor-Barnett from the Australian National University, making it one of the longest evaluated projects of legal assistance in Australia. Dr Curran said what makes Invisible Hurdles unique is the "ongoing embedded evaluation" which enables the impact to be measured, noting that genuine impact takes time.

The Report concluded how the connections between the Invisible Hurdles Project and the partner organisations are vital to the communities they serve. With COVID-19 dominating Stage II, people adapted quickly to online communication, and consults with staff and referrals were essentially maintained even though physical presence was not possible for many months. A number of people involved said they could not imagine the service not being there as it had become "an essential service".

"Without the Project, many Aboriginal clients would experience reduced access to justice and many young people would continue to experience the complications of their ongoing, complex legal problems," Dr Curran said.

"Everyone worked seamlessly to identify and assist clients, referral pathways were clear and effective...innovation was demonstrated, and people were flexible and continued to build relationships of trust and find workable solutions when confronted with problems."

Dr Curran said the Invisible Hurdles model has "great power" for other groups who struggle to identify that they need help, or who are invisible or who face barriers leading to exclusion. "This includes people experiencing mental health, disability, discrimination but also remote and rural and urban exclusion," she said.

Dr Curran said "the working model which combines research, compassion, conversations and active listening and inclusionary development of practices creates empowerment and builds confidence...this is the benefit of long-term funding and research".

"The work of the Hume Riverina Community Legal Service and its approach to service delivery has the potential if done mindfully, carefully and genuinely to be

replicated elsewhere,” she said. “It cannot only benefit marginalised communities in Australia, but also in other countries, including developing countries.”