27 June 2008

Kingsford Legal Centre (KLC) is a community legal centre located in Kensington in Sydney, New South Wales, which was established in 1981. We are committed to human rights and the achievement of social justice. We do a range of advice and casework, law reform work and community education. We work to promote access to and reform of the legal system.

KLC gives free legal advice to people who live, work and study in the Botany and Randwick Local Government areas. We give advice in many areas of civil law and have a specialist employment law clinic. We also have a specialist state wide discrimination law practice. Within our discrimination practice we handle both Commonwealth and State discrimination matters, including complaints of discrimination in employment.

KLC undertakes 2 main strategies for preventing homelessness. One is providing legal advice to people who are homeless or at risk of homelessness on issues such as fines, credit and debt, tenancy disputes, dealing with the Department of Housing and Centrelink, all of which may impact upon a person’s ability to obtain secure accommodation. The second strategy is by providing these services within a community development framework.

1. **Provision of Legal Advice**

In 2007 KLC provided legal advice to over 1,000 people. The main legal issues that our clients had were civil law issues such as fines, car accidents, credit and debt problems, social security, insurance matters, neighbourhood disputes, tenancy, employment and discrimination.

The advice is provided at both day and evening face to face appointments by KLC staff solicitors, volunteer solicitors and solicitors seconded from the law firms Freehills and Allens Arthur Robinson. Services are provided at both the KLC centre which is located within the grounds of UNSW and at 3 outreach locations at Maroubra Junction, Eastlakes and La Perouse.

One of the client groups that KLC provides legal advice to those who are homeless or at risk of being homeless. While these clients may not necessarily be living rough their accommodation may be inadequate, temporary or overcrowded.
Assisting people with their legal problems at an early stage, where these problems can adversely affect clients’ ability to maintain their housing, can be a very effective strategy for helping to prevent homelessness. Many legal problems are exacerbated when they are not dealt with quickly with the remedy becoming more complex and expensive as time goes on.

For example, people who are in financial stress may accumulate unpaid fines which can result in drivers licence disqualification. The inability to drive often affects a person’s capacity to get to work and fulfil other family commitments. If a person loses their job, clearly their ability to pay rent and care for their family is compromised. In the event that they are caught driving without a licence they will incur further fines and penalties, including, at the extreme end, jail. Providing people with advice about fines, whether they can be challenged, and how arrangements can be made to pay them off, can circumvent financial pressures that may result in homelessness.

Similarly, debts if not dealt with in a timely fashion can incur additional interest thereby increasing the debt, and possibly leading to the costs associated with debt recovery. A similar spiral impacting on a person’s capacity to afford secure, appropriate housing is easily and frequently slipped into without early advice and assistance.

Those clients who are already homeless or have temporary or inadequate accommodation are at particular risk, and find it most difficult to get help. It is our experience that it is difficult to maintain contact, and provide ongoing services to clients who have no permanent address. Their accommodation arrangements are often fragile and insecure, and when they break down the client is forced to move. This makes it difficult for the client to stay in contact with services like KLC, and so necessary action to deal with their issue cannot be taken. This not only impacts on client’s access to justice but may also exacerbate the legal problem or as is the case with Centrelink, create more legal issues to be dealt with.

Clearly it can be very difficult for people who are homeless or at risk of homelessness to access services, and they are then faced with the additional problems that arise when you are unable to intervene early. This is especially the case with fines, tenancy issues and in particular with the Department of Housing, Centrelink and other debt issues.

2. Community Development
Community development is an important part of KLC service delivery. This is particularly effective in improving access to the legal centre by homeless people or people at risk of homelessness. Strategies are developed and undertaken to develop links with other service providers, including SAAP services, to promote KLC to SAAP clients and others within the community and to development partnerships in service provision.

Research undertaken by KLC confirmed that networking gets information to clients. Of the clients who received a service in 2007, nearly 20% had found out about KLC from a service provider such as the local neighbourhood centre, Centrelink, hospital social workers and family support services.
KLC uses community development strategies to develop close links with other service providers not only to promote the service but also to train community workers in assisting their clients to recognise when they have a legal problem and where to get the best assistance. In addition KLC refers clients to both legal and non-legal services.

Some of the community development strategies include:

- Ensuring the information on other services is kept up to date and is reviewed regularly
- Providing promotional materials at other services such as neighbourhood centres, family support services - service brochures, fridge magnets, posters, other legal information from other providers such as Legal Aid and other community legal centres
- Holding KLC information stalls at community events, community BBQs, community forums, NADOC celebrations and in local shopping centres
- Regular attendance at interagency meetings such as the Eastern Suburbs Domestic Violence Network, Botany Interagency, La Perouse Interagency, Eastern Suburbs Interagency
- Participation in community forums
- Presentations on services provided by KLC at staff meetings of local organisations
- Provision of services at outreach locations – Junction Neighbourhood Centre, South East Neighbourhood Centre, Guriwal Aboriginal Corporation, Maroubra Junction Uniting Church
- Contributions on relevant legal issues for newsletters produced by local community organisations
- Supporting other community organisations by promoting their services to our clients, acting as returning officer at Annual General Meetings, attending open days and other celebrations
- Kingsford Legal Centre Community Consultation Committee with membership from local community services: Eastern Area Tenant’s Service, The Deli Women and Children Service, Junction Neighbourhood Centre, Killara Women’s Refuge, South East Neighbourhood Centre, Sydney Multicultural Community Service, Shack Youth Service, Randwick City Council Community Workers
- Providing a calendar of community legal education sessions for local community workers
- Distribution of E-Bulletin – KLC newsletter sent to volunteers, interested members of the public, community organisations
- Partnerships with other organisations, for example the writing and publication of the Discrimination Tool Kit with Legal Aid NSW and Elizabeth Evatt Community Legal Centre; the production of Getting off the Referral Roundabout a training DVD on making referrals to legal services; and participation on the organising committee for a community forum on domestic violence
- Providing legal advice provided to community organisations

We appreciate the opportunity to provide our advice in relation to these issues.
Yours sincerely,

KINGSFORD LEGAL CENTRE