



# Outreach legal services to people with complex needs: what works? Executive summary<sup>1</sup>

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This paper summarises a systematic review of research into outreach legal services to disadvantaged people with complex needs. In this review, outreach legal services refers to face to face legal assistance and advice services delivered away from the primary service/office in places accessible to the target group.

A systematic review is a methodology for selecting and synthesising the results of relevant research and evaluation studies, to provide practitioners with practical information that is based on the best available research evidence. Here we review research on:

1. the **effectiveness** of outreach legal services in reaching disadvantaged people with complex needs, and providing the range of legal services they require in a sustainable way
2. the **features** of effective outreach legal services.

This information is gathered to inform evidence-based practice.

The best available research evidence on outreach legal services that we have located and reviewed in this report is a set of eleven evaluation reports on outreach services in Australia and the United Kingdom. These studies generally evaluate outreach legal services conducted over several sites. Four of the UK studies examined different aspects of a £6 million nationwide pilot program of money advice outreach advice services to disadvantaged people.

## FINDINGS

We have collated evidence from these studies into a single set of synthesised findings. Our review indicates that outreach legal services can be effective for clients, for host agencies and for funders. Specifically, outreach legal services can:

- reach disadvantaged clients with complex needs, who have legal problems and otherwise would not have received legal assistance

- reduce client stress and anxiety associated with having outstanding legal issues, particularly debt related issues
- reduce the burden on host agencies by providing them and their clients with access to specialist legal support and expertise.

There is also some evidence that outreach *debt* advice in particular, may have direct financial benefits for clients, in terms of reduced debts and increased income.

Our findings indicate that to best achieve these outcomes, outreach legal services have the following characteristics.

### Planning and collaboration

Effective outreach legal services are planned and are established in collaboration with other local legal and non-legal services which assist the target group, and/or the target group themselves. This is important to ensure the service fills a gap in services and to develop ongoing referral pathways in and out of the outreach services. This review also identifies the importance of maintaining ongoing formal and informal communication with the host agency and other networks.

### Linking with clients

To reach clients with complex needs, services are best located in places that are frequented and trusted by the target groups and which have a flow of clients through that service. Host locations need a private space in which the outreach service can be provided. However appropriate location is not necessarily enough to reach target clients. The reach of the service is also increased by:

- effective referral systems with agencies (including the host agency) and individuals who are known to and trusted by the target group

- services being appropriately marketed to the target group and the front line workers and community members supporting them.

### Appropriate service provision

To ensure that the legal assistance provided is appropriate for the client group, services are ideally flexible in their service provision. Services need the capacity to act quickly if necessary and to spend time with clients, to ‘unpack’ potentially complex issues. Further, services need strategies to stay in touch with transient clients. High quality approachable services, consistency of service and confidentiality were identified as key characteristics of effective legal outreach to hard-to-reach clients.

### Costs, staffing and resourcing

A number of studies in our review noted that it can take more time, more resources and more skills to effectively reach and assist this client group — particularly when the clients have a number of legal problems and other complex needs. However, a study into the cost-effectiveness of outreach debt advice suggested that much of the additional cost of outreach arises from the overhead or ‘fixed’ costs of outreach, rather than the length of advice sessions themselves.

Taken together, the studies we reviewed indicate that for outreach legal services to be effective — to actually reach and provide appropriate assistance to target clients — funding must not only cover advice provision, but also the planning, set up, administration and coordination of the service, ongoing collaboration with host agencies and other relevant services, and the ongoing training and supervision of legal advisers. Depending upon the scale of the project, these tasks may be most effectively undertaken by a coordinator or project manager. Otherwise, this work needs to be factored into the advisers’ time.

Effective outreach legal advisers are experienced, or are trained for the role. Legal advisers need expertise in the relevant areas of law as well as skills in working with clients with complex needs. Clients with complex needs appreciate lawyers who are friendly, approachable, and respectful and skilled at explaining legal issues in plain language. Legal advisers need the capacity to be able to appropriately refer clients for help with issues which are beyond the scope of the service. The studies reviewed recognised the difficulty in finding staff with all the

requisite skills. An ongoing program of training for staff was suggested to address this issue.

Services appear to work more effectively with access to appropriate technology. Access to telephones, internet and electronic filing systems increase the effectiveness of the service provided.

### Monitoring and review

Services and their funding bodies need to set realistic targets and outcomes for monitoring and review. There needs to be realistic expectations of the time and resources it may take to establish a service with its requisite links to the community, and to effectively reach and assist very marginalised clients with complex needs. Non-case work activities which are crucial to the success of the outreach service may eat into casework time quite significantly and this should be reflected in performance indicators.

## KNOWLEDGE GAPS

The findings reported here are a synthesis of the best available evidence on the delivery and effectiveness of legal outreach services to disadvantaged people with complex needs. However, even with the valuable information collated here, the overall amount of rigorous research into outreach legal services in Australia remains limited. In addition to the need for ongoing evaluation of outreach legal services, our review has identified clear gaps in our knowledge. In particular, further high quality research in Australia is needed on the:

- effectiveness of legal outreach for different client groups, different legal issues and in different locations
- relative costs and benefits of outreach legal assistance to ‘hard-to-reach’ client and the community compared to other service delivery models
- role of community legal education in outreach services
- longer term impact of outreach legal assistance on ‘hard-to-reach’ disadvantaged clients.

<sup>1</sup> Executive Summary of Forell, S & Gray, A 2009, ‘Outreach legal services to people with complex needs: what works?’, *Justice Issues Paper 12*, Law and Justice Foundation of New South Wales, Sydney. <http://www.lawfoundation.net.au/publications/justiceissues>