



Final grant report: South Coast Volunteer Court Support Program

Project title	South Coast Volunteer Court Support Program
Grant recipient	Shoalcoast Community Legal Centre
Project manager	Kerry Wright & Jane Mussett
Position	Coordinator & Project Worker
Law and Justice Foundation awarded amount	\$30,303.00
Grant period	January 2013 – February 2014
Date of this report	January 2014

Description of the project

Describe the project in just enough detail so that anyone can understand it. What was the aim of the project, who was the intended audience and what strategies did you implement to achieve the aim?

The aim of this project was to set up and evaluate a Volunteer Court Support Program in the Shoalhaven, in particular with Nowra Local Court, to provide a comprehensive and effective service of supporting court users, their family and friends, through the court system. This has been achieved through training a group of volunteers to work on list days to provide information and assistance to court users as they enter the court, including supporting the Duty Solicitor as people indicate they would like to see them on the day.

The project – what happened?

How did the project come about?

The court environment is unfamiliar to most people and isn't readily understandable to lay persons. Local Court list days can often be the first experience of attending Court for many people. The court staff are busy with their roles, the lawyers are busy with their own clients and the Duty Solicitor has a lot to do. Court Support Programs are an effective way to assist people to understand the information they are being provided with and processes they need to follow on the day to have their matter heard.

Shoalcoast is a member of the Nowra Local Court Users Group. At the June 2012 meeting of this group the issue of additional assistance required by court users to understand what was occurring on court days, particularly unrepresented people was raised by solicitors present. Shoalcoast suggested the option of a volunteer Court Support Program could be investigated by the Centre. This idea was enthusiastically received by those present. This was followed up by a meeting with the local Magistrate, Dr Gabrielle Fleming, and Registrar, Mr Craig Cockburn. They indicated that the Local Court would be willing to work with Shoalcoast to set up a volunteer Court Support Program to assist people coming to court on list days, Mondays and Fridays.

Briefly set out the project stages and what happened in each stage.

Phase 1 – Establishment of Project – January to June 2013

1 Recruitment of Project Worker

The Project Worker position was advertised and Jane Mussett was recruited into the position commencing 11 February 2013.

2 Steering Committee Established

The Shoalcoast Coordinator established the Steering Committee involving Shoalcoast, Nowra Local Court Registrar and a Duty Solicitor. The Steering Committee assisted with the recruitment process for the Project Worker and support of Jane throughout the establishment period.

3 Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) with Nowra Local Court

A MOU was negotiated with the Nowra Local Court Registrar based on the one used by Northern Rivers CLC. This was signed by the Registrar and the Shoalcoast Management Committee.

4 Recruiting Volunteers

A number of information sessions for potential volunteers were held in Nowra at three locations – Nowra Neighbourhood Centre, East Nowra Neighbourhood Centre and the University of the 3rd Age. At these sessions information was distributed regarding the role of the Court Support volunteer and how to apply for a volunteer position. From these sessions 16 applications were received. Each applicant provided the names of two referees. The Project Worker contacted all referees to assess the applicants. During this period one applicant withdrew due to personal reasons. At the end of this process we had 15 successful applicants who were invited to training. All volunteers were also required to undergo Australian Federal Police checks paid for by the Project.

5 Liaising with Nowra Local Court Stakeholders

The Project Worker met with each of the Duty Solicitors working on List Days and other service providers working from the Nowra Local Court to introduce the Project and seek their feedback on what the role of the volunteers should be and what training was required.

6 Training Volunteers

The Project Worker revised and updated the Court Support Volunteer Manual based on the one used by Northern Rivers CLC. The Project Worker and Centre Coordinator attended a session at the CLCNSW May Quarterlies focusing on working with volunteers in CLCs. At this session we were able to meet with staff from other CLCs which have Court Support Programs and discuss key issues that needed to be included in the manual and training.

A risk assessment was undertaken in regards to the Project and a strategy developed as to how to address these risks.

The first volunteer training day was held on 5 June at the Nowra Local Court. This was a full day with guest speakers including: Shoalcoast, Nowra Local Court Registrar, Duty Solicitor, Domestic Violence Court Advocacy Service and Probation and Parole. The volunteers also met the court officer and Magistrate. During June the volunteers attended the list days on Mondays and Fridays with the Project Worker in small groups to get to see how the Court operates and meet with different agency workers also working at the Local Court on list days. The next training day was held on 26 June and

included meeting with all Shoalcoast staff at the office and a visit to the South Coast Correctional Centre to learn about procedures when someone is first taken into custody from the Local Court.

7 Service Equipment and Materials

An A-Frame sign was purchased to put in the Local Court foyer when the volunteers set up each morning. Volunteers have been provided with a name badge and a Shoalcoast shirt to be identifiable when working.

Statistic collection forms have been created and a wallet card with relevant services for referrals has been created and will be printed up for use by the volunteers. See enclosed.

The Project Worker designed a roster for two volunteers working each day supervised by the Project Worker for the first three months of operations.

The Local Court provides a table and chairs for the volunteers to use. In addition the court list for the day and use of their equipment for photocopying, faxing, etc for the Project.

Phase 2 – Delivery of Project – Commenced 1 July 2013

1 Service Commencement

The Volunteer Court Support Program commenced at Nowra Local Court on Monday 1 July 2013. Initially 2 volunteers were rostered on every Monday and Friday list day – one to offer general assistance to all court users, and one to assist those court users who required advice and, potentially, representation from the duty solicitor(s). The Project Worker considered 2 volunteers would attend court for several hours on each day. However, our experience has established the need for 3 volunteers for no more than 2 hours on each day.

2 Ongoing Service

Since the Program commenced the Project Worker has attended court every day with the rostered volunteers, initially to provide on-the-job training to the volunteers; more recently to provide back-up, should any volunteers feel the need for more detailed information in relation to specific enquiries. Generally, the volunteer participants felt it was important for them to become less reliant on the Project Worker and, since the beginning of October, she took a backseat, while still attending court every day on which volunteers are rostered.

The volunteers wear name tags and orange shirts which identify them as Shoalcoast Community Legal Centre workers. The volunteers have become recognised personnel in the court environs and court users now approach them for information and assistance nearly as often as the volunteers approach court users to ask if they need any assistance.

3 Ongoing training

A follow-up training day was held on Wednesday 2 October 2013 to give the volunteers the opportunity to clarify list-day procedures, and their relationship with court users, duty solicitors and court staff, following on from their having had three months experience on the job.

4 Record Keeping

The volunteers keep a record of the numbers of enquiries they deal with, the numbers of people they assist with applications for legal aid via duty solicitor assistance, the numbers of referrals they make to other relevant organisations, and finally, the numbers of people they assist who need to use the services of a Justice of the Peace (JP). (The latter service is provided because a number of the volunteers are JPs and are keen to use their JP skills and knowledge at the court, so long as it does not interfere with their primary work of providing information and assistance to court users. It should be noted that Court staff and the representative organisation for Justices of the Peace in the Shoalhaven concur with volunteers providing JP services when it does not interfere with their providing volunteer court support services.)

5. *Assistance provided – need to update to include December*

Between 1 July and 31 December 2013 the volunteers gave **general information and assistance to 1165 court users** (including people with matters listed in court on either of the Monday or the Friday lists (both applicants and respondents/defendants); family and friends of that cohort; people appearing as witnesses in Local Court, District Court and Supreme Court matters; people called for jury duty in District Court matters, and people making general enquiries at the Nowra Local Court registry). The volunteers **referred 219 people to Duty Solicitors** for legal advice and assistance, and in 95% of those instances also provided to the person needing assistance a copy of a legal aid application form, the first page of which the person completed prior to referral to the Duty Solicitor. **11 people who required the assistance of a Justice of the Peace received that assistance from a volunteer.** Finally **61 people were referred to other relevant agencies**, thus avoiding their having to speak to Registry counter staff.

6. *Steering Committee*

Since the service commenced the Project Worker has met with the Steering Committee formally each quarter. However there are regular informal catch ups with the Shoalcoast Coordinator plus other members of the Steering Committee as one is the Local Court Registrar and the other is one of the Duty Solicitors.

The Project Worker has also been working closely with the Principal Solicitor of the local practice which manages the Duty Solicitor roster. This has involved regular catch ups to address issues that have arisen. Feedback from these meetings has been valuable to ensure the volunteers are working within their agreed boundaries and also to maintain a positive relationship with all the Duty Solicitors.

Now that the project has concluded, how did the implementation and/or the outcome differ from what was originally intended? Did anything surprise you? Were there any unintended outcomes?

Shoalcoast is very pleased with the outcomes of the Project. It has been very successful from the beginning. This is in most part due to the recruitment of the Project Worker who has the right mix of skills and experience to get the project up and running on time and with the support of all stakeholders. Jane's recruitment and support of the volunteers is also to be commended and will remain with Shoalcoast after the Project funding has ceased in this role. We have also been very pleased with the positive feedback and support being received by the volunteers from Court staff, legal professionals and other agencies working in the Local Court on the list days.

Evaluation

What questions did you ask to evaluate whether you had achieved your aim?

Duty Solicitors

- Has the presence of court support volunteers at Nowra Local Court on Mondays and Fridays helped/ hindered you to carry out functions as duty solicitor?
- Are there other tasks the volunteers could perform/ tasks they ought not to perform that would assist you in your work as duty solicitor?
- Has their presence made any difference to your work in the role of duty solicitor?
- Do you have any concerns with the way the volunteers provide assistance and information to court users?
- Briefly, what is your overall assessment of the program?

Court Users

- Have you ever spoken with a Shoalcoast volunteer (in an orange T shirt)? If yes, was the person you spoke with polite? Helpful? Easy to understand?
- What is helpful/not helpful about the service the volunteers provide?
- Do you have any suggestions for improving the service?

Court Staff and Other Service Providers

- Has the presence of court support volunteers in court on Mondays and Fridays made any difference to way the court users (parties/ clients, their families and friends) make use of the registry?
- Do you feel you have been assisted or hindered by having court support volunteers working at Nowra Local Court on Mondays and Fridays?
- Are there any gaps in the work of the court support volunteers which could be addressed through additional training and/or information?

Volunteers

- What are some of the things you have done as a court support volunteer?
- Who are the people you assist in your role as a court support volunteer?
- What difference do you think you have made to the people you have identified in the previous question?
- Did training (formal face-to-face training and on-the-job training) prepare you sufficiently for the role of court support volunteer?

Having worked at the Court for 6 months as a volunteer, can you identify any other training or information which may assist you to perform the role?

What data did you gather to answer your questions?

Throughout October and November the Project Worker surveyed duty solicitors, court staff, court users, volunteers and other service providers to establish the extent to which the volunteer court support program has met its aims and objectives during the first five months of its operation.

Duty Solicitors

The Legal Aid Commission does not run a criminal practice at the Nowra office, thus the duty solicitor scheme is staffed by private lawyers and managed by a local legal firm. Relevantly, for the purposes of this program, two duty solicitors are rostered on Mondays and one duty solicitor is rostered on Fridays. 12 local solicitors are available to be rostered at Nowra Local Court. All were kept up-to-date with progress of the establishment of the program (via correspondence and, where possible, via face-to-face discussion). In October survey forms were sent to all the duty solicitors with whom the volunteers interact. Ten (83%) responses have been received. The program has generally been very well received by the duty solicitors. Since the Program commenced there has been one Duty Solicitor concerned about the Program and role of the volunteers. Their concerns have been expressed to the Shoalcoast Principal Solicitor, Local Court Registrar and the Duty Solicitor Scheme Manager. Subsequent meetings and discussions have addressed these concerns to the best of our ability but due to the overall positive response from all other duty solicitors we believe the Program is working well.

Respondees noted the time saved and the organisational benefits arising from having their clients identified and legal aid application forms completed before the duty solicitors deal with them.

Comments ran along the lines of:

“I am able to work much more quickly because I am not looking for clients.”

“I don’t have to shout for clients ... people are pointed in the right direction. The cold calling is done for us.”

“[The volunteers] have done the mundane work for us and we can get to the nub of the legal issue more quickly than we used to.”

“There is no more mad rush. I can see clients in an orderly and consecutive manner.”

“[Having the volunteers] has allowed me to focus on what I should be doing, rather than spending time answering general questions from stressed people about ‘What court am I in?’ or ‘Where should I go?’ I am no longer distracted by questions that are not relevant to my work as duty solicitor.”

“Having the volunteers in court means things are much calmer and better organised.”

“[Their presence] has cut down time spent with clients.”

Duty solicitors also noted the calming effect of the volunteers have on their clients and court users generally:

“For all of us – duty solicitors and clients – [the volunteers] provide relief and take the pressure off what can be a really stressful situation.”

“I don’t have to shout out for clients needing duty solicitor assistance. People are pointed in the right direction.... Clients are calmer, having spoken to the volunteers.”

“I believe it must be great to be greeted by friendly helpful people when they arrive.”

“I think [their presence] makes it easier for persons coming to court.”

One duty solicitor suggested the volunteers could hand out pamphlets concerning the various diversionary programs available to defendants, but virtually every other respondent advised s/he could think of no other task that usefully could be performed by the volunteers.

Nine respondents noted they had “no concerns” about the way the volunteers provide assistance and information to court users.

General comments about the program from the duty solicitors who responded to the survey included:

“Very useful.....I support continued funding of the program.”

“It’s fantastic!”

“It’s an extremely helpful and successful scheme.”

“[The program] is very helpful and I would recommend it be instituted in other local courts.”

“It works well.”

“On balance, worth doing.”

“Very pleasing.”

Court Users

Over five days in October and November the Project Worker surveyed various court users as they exited Nowra Local Court. A total of 22 people were surveyed. Of these 18 (82%) had had contact with the volunteers. Without exception, those who responded to the survey on the basis of having had some interaction with the Volunteers in the Court Support Program were positive about their experience. People stated the assistance they received reduced the stress associated with having to attend at Court, locate the duty solicitor, complete legal aid application forms, find the call-over court and deal with court staff. People found it incredibly helpful to have someone around who could give them information in a pleasant and polite manner about what they had to do in the Court.

Court Staff

All court staff were given a survey form to complete. Five responses were received from those staff members who had some interaction with the volunteers or whose work was impacted by the presence of the volunteers.

All five respondents noted the presence of the volunteers on list days had had a positive effect on their work, specifically in terms of reducing the number of counter enquiries; reducing the confusion of court users about the court process; and helping the call-over to run more smoothly and efficiently. One staff member noted that the presence of the volunteers had certainly reduced the level of stress experienced by counter staff and all staff members were very positive about the scheme and supported its continuance because of the assistance the volunteers provided to the registry staff.

Other Service Providers

The Project Worker surveyed other regular court users for their assessment of the value of the volunteer court support program and how it had impacted in their court work:

Women’s Domestic Violence Court Advocacy Service: The Project Worker spoke with the Supervisor of the Service who advised she and her co-workers had absolutely no cause for concern regarding the volunteer court support program. WDVCAS finds the volunteer service very helpful because “We are running around like flies and we can’t be everywhere. Knowing the volunteers are upstairs, the DVCAS

workers are confident the volunteers will assist our clients and get them to where they need to be. The volunteers streamline the service WDVCS offers and alleviate our and our clients' concern about potential incidents. The volunteers reduce the likelihood of any incident for the DV clients, and no-one has said they have been spoken to inappropriately or been given a bum steer by any volunteer". The Supervisor was adamant that if she had any cause for concern she would have advised the project worker.

Aboriginal Legal Service: The following comments concerning the volunteer court support program were received from the two solicitors who work at the Aboriginal Legal Service:

"Please thank all the Court Volunteers, ..., for me. They have done a tremendous job and made a very positive difference in ensuring that court attendees - be it defendants, PINOPS [persons in need of protection], families and supporters of the aforementioned, have a well delineated (and from what I have observed, a cheerful, pleasant, and helpful) point of assistance in the whole process."

"Whenever our clients have slipped through the net, the volunteers have directed our clients to the ALS. To my knowledge they have never directed ALS clients to an inappropriate solicitor. They are always pleasant and helpful. It is a good service."

Police Prosecution Service: The Project Worker spoke with the Senior Police Prosecutor, whose view was the volunteer court support program had not impacted on the work of the police prosecutors at all, including that the volunteers had caused no problems for his staff in doing their job. He had received no feedback from the DV Police Liaison Officers (to whom the volunteers have been directing AVO respondents) and his comment in that respect was "no news is good news".

Community Corrections: the Project Worker spoke with one of the Community Corrections officers who advised she has had no negative experiences arising from the work of the volunteers in the Court Support Program. She has certainly experienced less anxious enquiries from the general court user population since the program commenced operation because the volunteers are fielding the sorts of questions she used to deal with regularly. Otherwise the officer had no particular comments to make about the program.

Volunteers

Initially 15 volunteers were recruited and trained to provide information and assistance under the program. All 15 volunteers were asked to provide feedback concerning their experience of the program. Nine (60%) volunteers responded. The responses were thorough and informative. Though it is difficult to summarise such detailed responses it is reasonably evident the volunteers understand their purpose (especially the *breadth* of their 'client base') and found both the formal training and the on-the-job training equipped them to deal with straightforward enquiries. Some have made excellent suggestions for more specific training, and the project worker will pursue that training in the new year. The volunteers have clearly appreciated the opportunity to be involved in a project that extends their knowledge and is valued by its target audience. They have developed a strong sense of themselves as a team and are keen to continue in the program.

Did you achieve your aim? What did you find out?

Shoalcoast believes we have achieved the aim of this Project and in the short period that we have been operating have established a worthwhile Volunteer Court Support Program which has become part of the operations of the Nowra Local Court on list days. We have found out that there are people within our local community who see the need and are willing to volunteer with the Project. We have also found out that having a Volunteer Court Support Program can have a positive effect on court users and the general operations of the Local Court.

Conclusion and recommendations

What is your conclusion?

Shoalcoast has concluded that the Program is worthwhile and a positive addition to services being provided from Nowra Local Court for court users. Shoalcoast intends on continuing the Program at Nowra Local Court beyond the life of this initial project funding as well looking at other South Coast Local Courts to investigate extending the Program.

What are your recommendations for improvements both for the intended audience of your project, and for the strategy you used to achieve your aim? What would you do differently next time?

Shoalcoast believes that all strategies used were sufficient and effective in enabling us to meet the aims of this project and would do the same if we were establishing another Court Support Program in our region – which we hope to do in the future.