



Final grant report: Social security regional CLE and outreach clinic

Project title	Social security regional CLE and outreach clinic
Grant recipient	Welfare Rights Centre
Project manager	Amelia Meers
Position	Solicitor
Law and Justice Foundation awarded amount	\$4,580.00
Grant period	February 2013 – March 2013
Date of this report	December 2013

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 overarching aim of the project was to improve access to justice in social security matters for Aboriginal people in central western NSW by:

- providing pathways to free legal advice and advocacy services via self-referral and warm referral processes; and
- providing pathways to access the Centrelink appeals process by building capacity to either self-represent or to better utilise free advice and advocacy services

The project involved two solicitors travelling to Dubbo to provide a two day targeted community education program in augmented by a legal advice outreach clinic. The program included:

- education sessions to Aboriginal community members on social security law: including rights, obligations, appeal processes and how to access free advice and advocacy from the Welfare Rights Centre;
- training sessions on social security law to local legal services and community workers;
- building relationships and establishing warm referral protocols between local legal services and community workers to the Welfare Rights Centre;
- building relationships with key local Centrelink staff to facilitate casework assistance to our clients in the area; and,
- a face-to-face legal advice outreach clinic.

The project – what happened?

How did the project come about?

The Welfare Rights Centre had been concerned that the number of calls to our Centre from Aboriginal clients in the Central West has declined. It had been approximately 10 years since we had conducted CLE in this region where we specifically targeted Indigenous communities.

Through our casework practice, we had identified problems that disproportionately affect Aboriginal clients in regional areas. Many of these were backed up by Senate Estimates and Centrelink data (attached) and included:

- lack of access, awareness and use of appeals process – low rates of appeal;
- many people not receiving most appropriate type of payment;
- difficulties with proof of identity;
- overrepresented in debts, prosecutions and convictions;
- overrepresented in compliance penalties; and
- over represented in crisis payments and certain types of exemptions.

Further, legal services in the area and the Western Aboriginal Tenant Advice and Advocacy Service had confirmed to us that they have observed significant levels of unmet need for advice about and assistance with Centrelink problems.

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

Step 1 partnership

Our first step was to identify a local organisation to partner with. We looked for an organisation with a similar client base, relevant local connections, and an actual presence in the client communities we were trying to reach. We identified the Western Aboriginal Tenant Advice and Advocacy Service as the best fit for a partnership with us.

When we contacted the Western Aboriginal Tenant Advice and Advocacy Service we received an enthusiastic response to our proposed project. We asked them about the need they had observed among their clients and the community in relation to social security matters. They identified a number of social security problems experienced by their clients and also identified social security training needs of their staff. The WATAAS also agreed to:

- assist with the promotion of the project to clients;
- facilitate contact with and promotion of the project to local legal services;
- arrange venues for training and clinics; and
- assist with the administration of the project generally (eg registrations and appointments).

Step 2 obtaining funding and preparation for outreach and clinic

A staff member from Welfare Rights Centre travelled to Dubbo and visited the office of WATAAS in January to meet their co-ordinator in person and make plans. Venues were visited and the Aboriginal Lands Council venue was chosen and booked.

WATAAS promoted the education seminars and clinics in Dubbo, while in Sydney Welfare Rights Centre:

- submitted a funding application and secured funding
- handled registrations
- prepared promotion and advertising materials
- prepared seminar materials
- made arrangements for Centrelink contacts to be ready to take enquiries during clinic sessions
- prepared a kit for outreach clinics and made arrangements for remote conflict searches
- arranged flights, accommodation and venue

Step 3 presentation of CLE outreach, advice clinic and forging relationships

On 28 February and 29 February 2013 two solicitors from the Welfare Rights Centre presented the CLE seminars and ran the advice clinic.

They also met with the Local Centrelink manager and forged new relationships with community workers in the Dubbo area.

Step 4 evaluation

We conducted evaluation surveys and tracked data at the Welfare Rights Centre. We also encouraged informal feedback from all the community organisations involved. More information about our evaluation process can be found at pp 5 and 14 below.

Evaluation

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

We asked a range of questions, but in summary, key evaluation questions were:

- Did people attend and did they find it useful?
- Did we increase awareness of WRC and its services?
- Did we increase awareness of appeal rights and appeal pathways?
- Did we increase awareness of referral options and pathways to legal advice and assistance?
- Did we increase confidence among participants to utilize those pathways?
- Did we increase the number of clients contacting our Centre?
- Did we increase the number of people exercising their appeal rights?
- Did we build new relationships with workers from local legal services, Centrelink and tenancy services?
- How effective have those relationships been in improving pathways to justice?

We created two feedback forms, one for community workers who participated in the CLE sessions and one for clients of the advice clinic. We tried to test outcomes against these questions (without being overly intrusive or giving the feeling that people were being examined). All community workers were asked to complete the forms, however clients were not asked to complete the form if there were concerns that this might put the client off recontacting in the future (this was a concern in most cases).

The questions we asked were as follows:

Community worker participants were asked:

1. Does your organisation work only with Aboriginal clients or is it a general service?
2. Why did you come to this training?
3. How did you hear about it?
4. Had you heard about WRC before?
5. Have you ever sent clients to us or contacted us directly?
6. Did you know what we do?
7. Do you feel you know what we do now?
8. Was the content useful?
9. Did you know about Centrelink appeal rights before?
10. Do you feel you know about Centrelink appeal rights and processes now?
11. Would you be likely to tell people about us or recommend that they call?
12. Did you know of the local legal services (ALS, the CLC, Legal Aid and the Tenancy Service) before?

13. Would you call us if you have a client with a Centrelink problem?
14. Do you foresee any barriers to you or your clients contacting us?
15. Would feel ok to deal with Centrelink problems yourself now?
16. How would you go about lodging an appeal to Centrelink?
17. What's the best advice for someone who you think might be entitled to a Centrelink payment?

Clients were asked:

1. Are you male or female?
2. Where to you live?
3. Did you know about us before?
4. Did you know about your appeal rights and how to do it before?
5. What about now?
6. Did you feel confident to ask about or appeal Centrelink decisions before?
7. What about now?
8. Do you feel confident to contact us for advice or help?
9. Would you tell family or friends to contact us?
10. Did you know about the other local legal services before?
11. Where do you usually get help when you have a problem?
12. Do you know which local legal services can help with Centrelink problems?

What data did you gather to answer your questions?

We sought verbal and informal feedback throughout the two days.

We collated the data from the feedback forms described above.

We collected data from our advice and casework database CLSIS to measure numbers of callers from the Dubbo region in the 6 months prior to the delivery of the CLE outreach and advice clinic and the 6 months following.

We attempted to collect data from Centrelink about the number of appeals lodged in the 6 months prior to the CLE outreach and advice clinic and the 6 months following however this information was not available. However we were provided with statistical information that will help inform future visits to that area.

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

Our overarching aim was to improve access to justice by providing pathways to free legal advice and advocacy services via self-referral and warm referral processes, as well as pathways to access the Centrelink appeals process by building capacity to either self-represent or to better utilise free advice and advocacy services

Feedback forms clearly indicated that pathways for warm referrals had been established. Prior to the project, 10 of the 11 community workers who completed forms had never referred clients to us directly before. Only one of the workers indicated clearly that they knew of the WRC. 7 of the 11 had never heard of WRC and the remaining three knew of the centre but rather vaguely. As a result of the CLE:

- All 11 indicated that they would call us if they had a client with a Centrelink problem
- All 11 indicated that they would be likely to tell people about or recommend that they call
- None of the 11 indicated that they foresaw any difficulty contacting us directly (although 4 indicated there may be barriers such as access to telephones, that may affect clients contacting us directly)

CLIS data clearly indicates that the referral pathways we established have been effective. In the six months¹ prior to the CLE the WRC only advised 7 from the area serviced by the Dubbo Centrelink office. In the six months² following the CLE, we gave advice to 17 clients. In that period, the main Dubbo postcode 2830 saw an increase of from 1 client to 9 clients.

We have received referrals from a number of different organisations, many from organisations that participated in the CLE, particularly from Disability Advocacy Service, WATAAS, the Aboriginal Medical Service, Centacare Dubbo and Centacare Narromine but also from other local organisations that heard of us “through the grapevine” such as Lifeline Dubbo.

Current open cases also indicate that awareness of the WRC has increased. For example we are running a number of cases for clients from the Dubbo area living in abject poverty due to compensation preclusion periods³. More than 50 % of our compensation preclusion period cases from the area are for Aboriginal clients.

It is clear that awareness is spreading by word of mouth. We assisted one client who lived on a particular road outside of Dubbo and now have two more clients who live on the same road.

Numbers have also continued to rise since the end of the reporting period. In the four months after the end of the reporting period we provided advice to 13 new clients for people from the 2830 postcode. We currently have 4 major files open for clients from the wider Dubbo area.

¹ 27 August 2012 to 27 February 2013

² 28 February 2013 to 28 August 2013

³ A person who receives lump sum compensation may be subject to a period (often many years) during which they cannot receive Centrelink entitlements and are expected to support themselves with their compensation monies. In cases where the person has run out of compensation but is still precluded, the result is absolute poverty. Where special circumstances exist, the preclusion period may be reduced.

Contact sheets and case studies collected between February and November indicate a very high proportion of Aboriginal clients from the area. Of the 22 collected⁴, 15 clients identified as aboriginal, 6 as non-Aboriginal, one not disclosed.

Centrelink was unable to provide data recording the number of appeals for the area Serviced by the Dubbo Centrelink office. However, from the 22 contact sheets and case studies, WRC has advised community workers to lodge, or have lodged ourselves, at least 10 appeals.

Case studies:

Jane contacted WRC directly having been referred from a financial counsellor in relation to Family Tax Benefit debts. WRC helped her collect evidence of the impact of the debts on her mental health and submitted an appeal on her behalf to Centrelink. The debt was waived in full.

A tenancy service contacted us for advice about a charge being imposed by an agent on approximately 40 Aboriginal tenants for use of Centrelink's Centrepay to pay their rent. WRC provided a copy of the government guidelines prohibiting such a charge for the tenancy service to use in its actions to remove the penalty.

Don had received a large compensation payment many years before, but had suffered significant losses with two relationship breakdowns and property settlements, devaluing of investments during the global financial crisis and a number of other circumstances. When changes to workers compensation meant that he would lose his only source of income, he referred to us by community organisation which had participated in our CLE. We lodged an appeal on his behalf to an Authorised Review Officer. The ARO reduced the compensation preclusion period by 18 months, with the effect that he will soon again be eligible for Centrelink payments.

Conclusion and recommendations

What is your conclusion?

Overall, we concluded that the project was successful in achieving its aims and had a significant impact in terms of increasing awareness of our Centre, increasing awareness of social security rights and issues, and improving pathways to legal advice/ assistance and into the social security appeals system.

We saw an increase in referrals to our Centre from the area, both in terms of referrals from community workers and direct contact from community participants or their friends and family.

The Community workers session was a huge success and in the end was the cornerstone of the project's success. It resulted in a number of immediate and subsequent referrals. It also resulted in invitations to speak at future events that will further the aims and longer term outcomes of the project.

⁴Aware that CLSIS data may have limited parameters, copies of advice contact sheets were kept where possible. However, given the very high volume of advice given by our Centre during busy advice shifts, not all advices from the Dubbo area were identified, copied and filed for collecting statistics for this project. Hence the number collected is lower than the CLSIS figures. However, they provide an interesting snapshot.

Although fewer than expected clients “dropped in”, other clients were referred by community workers the same day and the morning after. The advice clinics were effective, but would perhaps have been better provided a few weeks after the Community Workers CLE session to increase the number of participants by direct referral from Community worker participants. This model is extremely effective for the individual clients however as clients were provided with face to face advice and some matters finalised within the two days. Being present meant that one client was able to be interviewed 3 times face to face, as needed

Koori Interagency networks were critical to the success of the project. Most organisations found out about us via the Koori Interagency email list.

Establishing contacts with the local Centrelink office was extremely valuable as it facilitated the quick resolution of some matters that presented at the advice clinic. Also, relationships are now well established with local office Centrelink manager and we were able to provide feedback from local community workers directly to Manager of Centrelink Office at the end of the two days. We were also able to facilitate improvement in lines of communication between local community workers and the local Centrelink office.

Overall, feedback and CLSIS statistics confirmed that

- It was well attended and participants found it useful
- We increased awareness of
 - WRC and its services
 - appeal rights and appeal pathways
 - referral options and pathways to legal advice and assistance
- We increased confidence among participants to utilize those pathways
- There was an increase the number of clients from that region accessing our Centre
- Solid new relationships were forged with local community workers including local indigenous services, financial counselling services, and tenancy services
- Those relationships have already been extremely effective in improving pathways to justice for clients of those services.

Self-referral and warm referral pathways have been clearly established and are working well.

We were unable to use Centrelink data to measure whether there was an increase in the number of people exercising their appeal rights overall.

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?

There were a number of lessons learned:

- It would probably be best to start with a community organisations talk (ie one day, fly in fly out). Then, ask those community workers to help promote (and refer clients to) an outreach clinic, maybe a few weeks or one month later (ie fly in fly out one month later).
- It would have been more successful if more community organisations were promoting it as responsibility for promotion would be wider spread. It also reduces the risk of failure: the whole project won't fall apart if there is an issue at the partner organisation (eg the contact person being on leave).
- Regarding the venue, it would have been preferable to use a host organisation which routinely organises community talks and provides community and social work services itself. Ideally, use community venue where there is already a drop in service or group. Participation will be higher if you can tap into a similar pre-existing client base.
- It may have been preferable to do client CLE sessions in conjunction with other things that are expected to draw a crowd.
- If participants have to travel in from regional areas avoid a 9am start and finish by 4pm at the latest. This also gives time to sort out unexpected potential venue related issues that might arise prior to commencement.
- We might have been a little bit too efficient and think participants would have responded to more cups of tea, more of a meet and greet session.

Be careful to manage expectations for community workers: avoid calling it a seminar if likely to be more interactive. Anecdotes and story-telling were essential to relax people into asking questions and discussing examples.