

Western Suburbs Legal Service Inc.

Annual Report

2003/2004



THE WESTERN SUBURBS LEGAL SERVICE

Our Vision

The Western Suburbs Legal Service Inc. vision is for a fair, just and equitable legal system that can be accessed by all members of the community without restriction.

Mission Statement

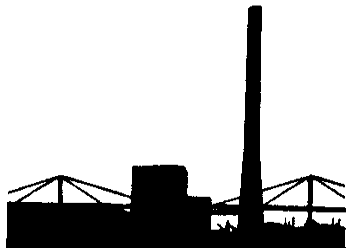
The Western Suburbs Legal Service Inc. is committed to working towards a just and equitable legal system through:

- Providing readily accessible and timely legal advice which assists members of the community to deal with problems early to avoid as far as possible the expense of legal proceedings and private legal representation
- Challenging existing legal structures and processes
- Lobbying and working for progressive legal reform
- The provision of innovative, responsive and challenging legal services to (predominantly) the western suburbs community of Melbourne with an emphasis on those communities who experience continued problems with the justice system for reasons including age, gender, ethnicity, political persuasion etc.
- Inspiring and drawing on the goodwill of private practitioners to provide voluntary and pro bono advice and assistance to disadvantaged members of the community

The legal service will achieve this through services funded by the CLC funding program as well as through other funding sources and related programs.

Specifically, the legal service will achieve its mission through:

- a) CLC funded projects including:
 - Casework
 - Community legal education projects
 - Law reform projects and campaigns
 - Information dissemination
 - Participation in community concerns with an emphasis on social justice principles
 - Utilising best practice models in all aspects of its work
- b) Special purpose projects auspiced or funded by other sources, including voluntary labour and resources, utilising some or all of the strategies listed above.
- c) Clinical legal education for law students



**WESTERN SUBURBS
LEGAL SERVICE Inc**

Registered No A6884
A.B.N. 49 241 011 943

30 HALL ST NEWPORT, 3015
PH: (03) 9391 2244
FAX: (03) 93991686
wsls@vicnet.net.au

HOURS OF SERVICE:

MONDAY, TUESDAY, THURSDAY & FRIDAY 9.30AM TO 5.00PM

ADVICE SESSIONS:

MONDAY EVENINGS: 7.00PM TO 8.30PM – BY APPOINTMENT
THURSDAY EVENINGS: 7.00PM TO 8.30PM – BY APPOINTMENT

THE YEAR IN REVIEW

It's has yet again been a busy year for the Service. We've worked on some excellent projects, done well in our fundraising activities and of course, continued to work hard to meet casework demands and ever-increasing accountability requirements.

The year began with our planning day which enabled us to consider our focus and direction for the 2003/2005 period. We now have a detailed workplan which is reviewed quarterly at our Committee of Management meetings.

We've had some staff changes over the last year. Simon Wood sadly left us to work at legal aid and to pursue a career as a barrister. We welcome Chamindri Kahagalle to her new position at the service.

The service celebrated it's 25th Anniversary in October 2003. We held a function at the Hobsons Bay Yacht Club which was attended by long time supporters and volunteers of the service as well as staff and members of the local community. A great night was had by all and it was an excellent opportunity to look back on the achievements of the service over the last 25 years.

We also held another fundraiser movie night. This year the film was 'Wondrous Oblivion' held at the Sun Theatre in Yarraville. Once again the movie night was enjoyed by a number of WSLS staff, volunteers and supporters.

Our physical space has undergone some improvements again this year with the installation of new heating/cooling units. We were also fortunate to be able to purchase some new computers and office equipment.

We've been working hard at strengthening our links with the local council. We received a grant to commence a project working with young people in the Hobsons Bay area. We've attended many meetings with council workers and are forming strong networks, particularly with those working with young people.

This year also saw the pre-production stages of the Child Protection project completed. Helen and Bec undertook extensive research in the development of the booklet and we hope the production...

The introduction of Service Standards to all community legal centres continues to have a massive impact on our workload. Whilst the service is now close to the final implementation of all policies and procedures in relation to compliance, we foresee and continuance in this project impacting on our ability to provide casework and undertake CLE and Law Reform activities.

Volunteers continue to make invaluable contributions to the service. Without the dedication of those who dedicate their free time the service could not function the way it currently does.

CHAIRPERSON'S REPORT



TREASURER'S REPORT

Government funding for Community Legal Centres reflects the bare minimum financial needs of the Services but makes no provision for any contingencies that may arise. To enable the WSLS to upgrade the office environment and provide additional services to our clients it is necessary to seek funding from other sources.

The WSLS has been very fortunate in receiving the generous support of legal firm Slater & Gordon who provided \$9,000 towards the cost of installing air conditioning at 30 Hall Street and the Hobson's Bay City Council who provided \$8,000 which was used to finance some of our Community Legal Education work in the local area.

The service was also successful in attracting funding of \$20,635 from the Victoria Law Foundation which financed our Child Protection Booklet Project. Funding of this type allows the Service to undertake major project work and provide part time staff with additional hours of employment.

Overall the financial performance of the WSLS in 2003/2004 was most satisfactory with a healthy overall surplus. This was due to the diligence of your Committee and Staff. Strict budgetary controls were adhered to and the 2004/2005 budget has been framed with a similar objective of providing a small surplus.

The Committee is pleased that significant improvements to our office environment could be made during the financial year whilst maintaining our overall financial position. The fully audited accounts which are in accordance with the Committee's expectations are attached for your consideration.

COMMITTEE OF MANAGEMENT

Chairperson	Andrew Saunders
Treasurer	Andrew Antipas
Committee Members	Emma Bastock Paul Cassar Robyn McLeod Andrew Papadimitropoulos Shirley Winton



STAFF MEMBERS

Community Legal Education

Helen Yandell

Community Lawyers

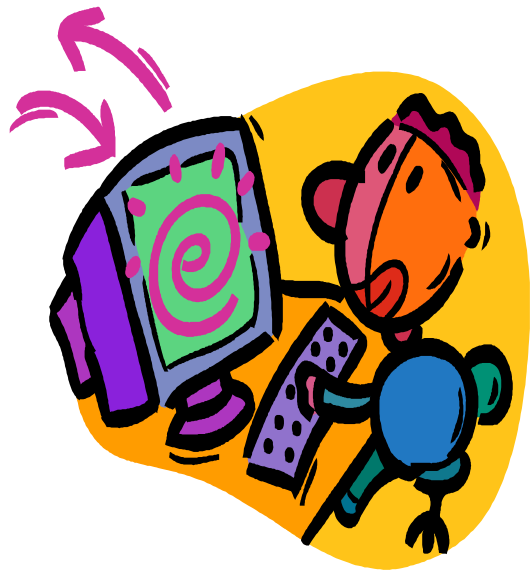
Annie Grant & Chamindri Kahagalle

Administration

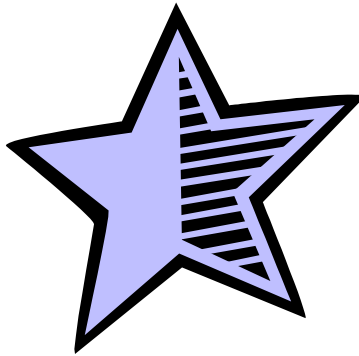
Rebecca Smith

Finances

Bruce Dolphin



VOLUNTEER STAFF AND SUPPORTERS



COMMUNITY LEGAL EDUCATION & LAW REFORM



DEAKIN LAW CLINIC PROGRAM



CASEWORK



PRINCIPAL SOLICITOR'S REPORT

2004 has presented the usual challenges involving needs and resources. Simon left us during this reporting year to go to Victoria Legal Aid in Ringwood to do duty lawyer work. He has since decided to join the bar and will shortly commence reading with Peter Pickering (who you will know as one of our long serving volunteers here at WSLS.) We wish Simon well in his endeavours. His departure has (we hope temporarily) put a halt to our ability to conduct Migration Law casework as we have no registered migration agents. This has been a shame as there is a definite need for that type of work within our region.

The replacement process was fraught with the usual difficulties, but finally in March this year, Chamindri Kahagalle joined us after we poached her from Broadmeadows Legal Service. Happily for us, Chamindri has fitted in easily at the service and we are lucky to have found such a capable solicitor to replace Simon. She is also currently studying to become a Migration Agent so we should shortly be back in a position to resume Migration Law casework.

Simon's departure also caused us difficulties in filling the Co-ordinator's position. None of the existing staff were able to take on the Co-ordinator's role due to the particular demands each of us faced, and the days we were able to work. We ultimately resolved this by allocating the duties amongst us so that effectively, the Co-ordinator's role has been carved up amongst staff. As part of that, we each took on some extra hours and we introduced a shared roster for night services.

CASEWORK

The demand for ongoing casework and advice has continued unabated. Currently we have three of us performing casework duties. I have three days, Chamindri has three days and Helen one day allocated to Casework.

The largest demand areas are largely unchanged from previous years: Motor Vehicle Accidents, Family Law (including Intervention Orders and Domestic Violence), Criminal Law, Neighbour disputes, Disputes with Centrelink and Perin Court matters. We have scaled back the legal aid work (mostly Magistrates' Court Criminal Law matters) we do because at the last planning day we resolved that it was effectively providing a service which could be met by local solicitors.

Without a doubt our largest area of unmet need is in Family Law. We carry an ongoing waiting list of approximately 3 weeks. Recent recruiting of Volunteers has led to our adding at least one local Family Lawyer to our volunteer list and we hope to locate others who can assist us in the current year. Sadly, without the injection of a considerable funding boost to cover a dedicated Family Lawyer, the service is unlikely ever to make any inroads into the need for Family Law casework in the western suburbs.

This does not mean that we do not provide an invaluable service to all clients we see. Each year we tell you how the work we do impacts on people's lives and often has a profound result for our clients. We tell you this because it is true!

This year has been no exception. We've negotiated settlements in child contact matters, car accident cases, we've represented hundreds of clients in the minor Criminal Law and the Administrative Law jurisdictions, convinced many Police officers to withdraw inappropriate charges or refer clients to a diversionary program so they can avoid a criminal record, taken Centrelink to task on many occasions where they have penalized clients wrongly or made poor decisions, assisted clients in intervention orders, both as applicants and respondents, we've written letters making pleas about debts, about fines and about crimes, and have advised many neighbours of their rights and obligations.

As a result of our work, many hundred of clients have been assisted in their difficulties within the various legal areas where we can help. The extent of our assistance ranges from full representation, negotiation and resolution to advice and referral. For example, during the year we assisted a client who suffered from mental health issues with resolving outstanding fines of around \$3000 by applying to a Magistrate to have the fines waived. We have appeared at the Guardianship List to assist clients in revoking administration orders, and at the Social Security Appeals Tribunal and the Administrative Appeals Tribunal to assist clients to successfully challenge Centrelink decisions. We have written submissions to courts, tribunals and other bodies on behalf of clients, and assisted many clients who are representing themselves in proceedings to prepare their cases. We have briefed counsel on a great many occasions to

present pleas or cases on behalf of our clients at a cost much less than they could obtain elsewhere.

Additionally, even where we have not acted for clients, we have given advice on many hundreds of occasions which will have helped clients to understand and act on their rights and obligations in a broad range of legal areas, making the system within which we work a little less intimidating to them.

As always, it is both challenging and rewarding working at Western Suburbs Legal Service. I am proud to tell you that in my view the service has continued to provide a highly professional legal practice which far surpasses the requisite service provision standards. The circumstances under which we work, with limited hours, stretched resources and often with difficult and marginalized clients who have high expectations and demands, make our achievement quite remarkable. Our goal is to provide an accessible and high quality service to members of our community and as usual we have achieved that goal this year.

Our high standards could only be met as a direct result of the continued support of our magnificent team of volunteers both at the night services and during the day time. On behalf of everyone, thank you all for another great year of community spirited volunteering.

PHYSICAL OFFICE:

Plans are underway to repaint the building. As with most things, it is taking longer than we would have liked.

There have been ongoing issues with computer resources. However at the time of writing, we have 7 networked computers, all of which have access to broadband internet and our extensive precedents. This means our Deakin Students and office Volunteers should always have a computer available from which to work. Keeping the computers running has been a challenge, but it is nice to be able to say we have a relatively effective system in place. Our needs for the coming year should be minimal. (Touch wood.)

During the year we received a donation of 8 copies of Windows XP and 8 copies of Microsoft Office 2003 from Microsoft. They expressly authorized us to use the donation for fundraising if we so desired, which you will no doubt have ascertained that we have – a raffle is currently underway.

DEAKIN CLINIC

We continue to offer a law clinic program to students studying law at Deakin University. The service regards this program as an extension of our volunteer and community legal education program and other students and interested

volunteers also attend the legal seminars we run. Approximately 6 students per semester attend the service and are expected to:

- Attend night service and assist solicitors in client interviews
- Attend the service for follow up work on client files, including general casework and research duties
- Attend a series of seminars related to legal service priorities
- Prepare a court report on case they have worked on, or, a research project on an area of law that is of interest to the legal service.

The students who have participated in this program have generally been extremely dedicated, competent and enthusiastic. This program provides students with social and cultural experiences and this is of long term benefit to our sector. It also provides them with a wide range of practical legal skills.

The feedback we receive from our students has been that they feel this subject has been of terrific value to them in giving them practical exposure to lawyering that no other subject does. Frequently the students say that they believe it should be compulsory.

The seminars we have conducted for students and other volunteers include interviewing techniques, criminal law, family law, civil law, community legal education, issues with Centrelink.

Again this year we are pleased that some of our former students have returned as volunteers once qualified. The Law Clinic is an excellent resource for getting the lawyers of the future involved in Community Law.

Annie Grant
Principal Solicitor.

COORDINATION & ADMINISTRATION



STATISTICAL REPORT

	2003/2004
Clients	1098
Solicitor/Client contacts	
Reception/Information enquiries (estimate)	

Gender	2003/2004
Male	51%
Female	48%

Age	
<18	1%
18-34	34%
35-49	38%
50-64	16%
65&over	8%