

Adelaide Legal Outreach Service:

By final year law students Caitlyn Chiem, Adrian Downie, Naaman Kranz and Tina Meschino, who did a six-week placement with the Adelaide Legal Outreach Service

The Adelaide Legal Outreach Service (ALOS) located at Baptist Care (SA) Westcare in the Adelaide CBD was our professional home for six weeks. We were the four students selected to be placed at the service as part of Clinical Legal Education, a course in experiential learning offered to final year law students at the University of Adelaide Law School.

We quickly learnt that ALOS truly reflects the definition of an "outreach" service. Accessibility is paramount and we worked, under the supervision of qualified practitioners, on-site at its base in Wright Street.

ALOS operates out of the Baptist Care (SA) Westcare office and it was imperative for us to build a strong relationship with their staff. This relationship was mutually beneficial as Westcare supports the service by undertaking general administrative tasks, allowing us to focus more of our time on providing pro bono legal services. In return, ALOS works primarily with Westcare's clients, complementing their services and facilitating an expansion of their community reach. During our placement, we were also responsible for conducting a weekly outreach program at the Salvation Army on Pirie Street, offering an additional location for clients to access the service.

At ALOS we were responsible for providing a free preliminary advice service to assist clients in managing their own cases. As students, we were unable to offer representation but could assist in a number of other areas. We dealt with legal issues such as victims of crime compensation claims, Centrelink matters, complaints against businesses, property/tenancy disputes, family law matters and the granting of probate, to name a few. When the service faces more complex issues, students conduct the necessary groundwork before referring clients to an agency which can assist in finding legal representation or opinions.

"On my second day of placement I worked on a victims of crime compensation application in the morning and sought the status of probate after lunch."

- Adrian Downie, ALOS Student Advisor

Not only did we contribute to helping clients with legal issues, but we also gave up our lunch break to serve the homeless at

the Westcare cafeteria, using skills we had developed in our part-time jobs – indeed something to fall back on if the stress of the legal profession becomes too much! Serving lunch gave us the opportunity to interact with disadvantaged members in the community and, in turn, form a bond and build relationships with potential clients, many of whom felt alienated by the law and the legal profession.

We were at the forefront of breaking down their perception of lawyers being unrelatable and untrustworthy. After our first day of serving lunch we had people approaching us with legal questions, to which we responded by arranging a private appointment.

"It was astounding to meet a middle aged man who was unable to spell his middle name, and satisfying to be able to assist him."

- Naaman Kranz, ALOS Student Advisor

We knew that we would be working with disadvantaged clients who lacked resources, experience and an understanding of the law, but we quickly learnt that these were only a few of the barriers people face in accessing justice. It became common to consult with clients who were without an address, had limited communication skills, or were vague or paranoid as a consequence of mental health or substance abuse issues.

Clients are often scared of legal documentation and emotionally distressed about having to interact with the legal system. By explaining the meaning of documents and drafting letters or contacting organisations on their behalf, we facilitated their engagement with the legal system and gave them the confidence to endeavour to manage their own cases.

"Without the services provided by ALOS, I would have struggled understanding and getting through my directions hearing."

- Mr S, ALOS client

Not only did our clients benefit from the work of ALOS but so too did we. Throughout our placement we were responsible for both verbal and written correspondence with government departments, legal organisations and professionals. We conducted research, negotiated disputes, prepared affidavits,

supported clients in court and undertook all of the necessary legal administrative tasks.

As a result, we enhanced our legal and managerial skills, as well as our professional expertise. Working one-on-one with clients, dealing with real issues and applying what we had learned at university was a philanthropically and personally rewarding experience. Many of us received more practical legal experience in the six-week placement than we had over the course of our entire degree. We now feel significantly more confident about entering the legal profession, whether in this field or in another. It was truly a mutually beneficial experience.

"We were all aware of the personal rewards of this course but only now do we really understand the impact of our personal contribution and the services provided by ALOS to individual members of the community."

- Tina Meschino, ALOS Student Advisor

ALOS's vision is to bridge the community justice gap by enabling students to provide free preliminary legal services, under the supervision of qualified practitioners, to those in our community who lack access to the legal system. During our placement at ALOS, this vision was cemented within us.

It is amazing to reflect upon that in just six weeks, the four of us contributed more than 300 hours of pro bono legal service. We provided assistance with various legal issues to more than 20 clients. It quickly became apparent that without our contribution, many of them would not have found assistance and would have forgone their legal entitlements, or continued to live with the stress of unresolved or continuing legal issues.

The inherent barriers faced by members of the community when dealing with the legal system are compounded when people cannot afford legal advice. What might seem to be a simple task can quickly be complicated by legal jargon and procedures. We saw first-hand how difficult these procedures and the bureaucratic system can make it for people to access their legal entitlements.

For example, it took three years for a client and a chain of legally-minded students

a workplace of mutual benefit

to successfully submit a victims of crime compensation application for assessment of merit. The collection of adequate witness statements and authorities required by the Crown Solicitor, as well as packaging it into an acceptable form, involved an incredibly long task list. If it took this long for a group of legal minds to complete all the necessary groundwork to successfully reach the first stage of a relatively straightforward claim, we had to ask: what chance does an average person without access to legal advice have?

With the solid groundwork of former students, we finally had the victim of crime compensation application accepted for assessment. While this was one small step in our client's long road to accessing justice, we knew it would not have been taken without our help.

The need for pro bono legal services has increased over the past decade, made evident by the organisation's inundation with not only the traditionally disadvantaged, but also the middle-class, who have been hit hard by global economic conditions. More than ever, ALOS plays an important role as it does not implement a means or merits test to determine eligibility. Without the help of ALOS, the costs of preliminary services alone would prevent many people from even considering their legal entitlements.

"Working at ALOS has been an eye-opening experience from day one. I am glad to have been involved with ALOS and made a difference in our community."

- Caitlyn Chiem, ALOS Student Advisor



Students from the Adelaide University Law School continue to provide a valuable service at ALOS. Pictured recently were the Semester 1 group, from left, Ganesh Krishnan, Liz Beltrame, Claire Humphries and Faith Lu.

ALOS is a major contributor to pro bono legal services in South Australia, but there remains an increasingly significant gap between the amount of free legal advice available and with those who need it. ALOS' long-term aim is to continue to operate in conjunction with Westcare and expand the reach of its services.

In our six weeks at ALOS, we may not have changed the law or the nature of bureaucracy, but we did offer legal assistance to disadvantaged people who would otherwise have struggled with the financial and temporal costs of resolving their issues. By making small contributions

such as serving lunch, we were helping to break down the stereotype commonly afforded to lawyers by the community. While developing our practical legal skills, we came to understand the importance of organisations such as ALOS in removing the barriers people face when accessing justice. It instilled within us a commitment to provide equal access to justice for all, which we will take with us wherever we find ourselves in the legal profession.

ALOS is open on Fridays for free legal advice, and appointments can be made by phoning 8118 5200, or emailing alos@adelaide.edu.au. B

FH FERRIER HODGSON

Forensic Accounting

Ferrier Hodgson provides a comprehensive range of specialist forensic accounting, financial investigation and business-valuation services, including:

- Assessment of economic loss
- Assistance on discovery issues
- Share and business valuations
- Expert witness evidence
- Business interruption claims
- Fraud investigations

■ Clarity and objectivity ■ Expertise and experience
■ Attention to detail ■ Local and national resources

Contact: **Peter Holmes** or **Lachlan Johns**

Level 6, 81 Flinders St Adelaide SA 5000

T: +61 8 8100 7600 F: +61 8 8232 4487 W: ferrierhodgson.com

CORPORATE ADVISORY

FORENSICS

CORPORATE RECOVERY