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The Secretary  
House of Representatives Standing Committee  
on Legal And constitutional Affairs  
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RECEIVED  
11 DEC 2006  
BY: LACA

30 November 2006

Submission No. .... 69 .....
Date Received .....

### Older People and the Law

*This submission addresses the term of reference "barriers to older Australians accessing legal services"*

#### About Redfern Legal Centre

Redfern Legal Centre (RLC) is an independent non-profit community-based organization with a prominent profile in the Redfern area of over 25 years' standing. We provide free, confidential legal advice and assistance, a Women's Domestic Violence Court Assistance Scheme, a credit and debt service, a service for students at Sydney University and a tenants' advice service. We represent individuals and community groups in civil liberties and discrimination matters. Redfern Legal Centre also provides community legal education programmes and advocacy in law and policy reform.

Our clients come from a wide range of backgrounds including the large Aboriginal community of the Redfern area and people from over 80 different countries.

In the last financial year, the main issues our clients who were over 65 years of age presented with were:

- Debts, especially arising from inappropriate marketing of credit cards
- Dementia-related matters
- Wills and estates and
- Motor vehicle accidents.

73 Pitt St	Phone (02) 9698 7277	General enquiries	Interviews by
Redfern	Fax (02) 9310 3586	Monday to Thursday	appointment
NSW	email <a href="mailto:info@rlc.org.au">info@rlc.org.au</a>	9 am-9 pm	Monday to Thursday
2016	<a href="http://www.rlc.org.au">http://www.rlc.org.au</a>	Friday 9 am-6 pm	6:30pm-8:00pm

We also run a community safety program which has identified areas of unmet need among older residents of public housing in Waterloo who are from a non-English speaking background. Many of these residents are deterred by fear of crime from leaving their homes to access support services.

Specific barriers to access are discussed below.

### **Physical barriers**

Older people are more likely to have mobility impediments/disabilities which can prevent or impede access to services. For example, residents of high rise public housing can be severely disadvantaged in the event of breakdown of the lifts because they lack the stamina or physical ability to use the stairs (e.g. wheelchair users).

Services available by telephone are not accessible to those with hearing impairment.

Written material is not readily accessible for those with vision impairment. Also NESB older people do not readily understand written material that is in English or at all etc.

Information available on the internet is not accessible to those who have little familiarity with or access to this information technology or have a vision impairment.

**To ensure services are accessible, services must be provided in a variety of formats and be adaptable to meet the needs of people over 65 years of age.**

### **Comprehension issues**

Older people who are suffering from dementia types of illness and/or have some other form of mental illness face particular barriers to access to legal services. We have observed that for many of our older clients, their queries are not listened to or taken seriously by the staff of agencies they have to deal with. Family members may be well-meaning but patronising and in

the guise of helping may be restricting the older person's independence and rights.

In some circumstances family members are not well-meaning and the older person can face severe difficulty in seeking help because the abuser is able to present a plausible denial.

The effects of depression caused by loneliness and isolation also impede access in circumstances where the older person lacks the confidence or motivation to seek assistance.

RLC also finds that many people do not take the time not effort to give older people with mental illness the time they need to outline their needs etc etc.

**Service providers need to train staff to guard against discrimination, to listen and respect rights even if information is presented in an incoherent manner. Service providers should not overly rely on assistance offered by friends or relatives and this may mask or prevent the older person from gaining access to the services they choose.**

Older people are also more vulnerable to experiencing the effects of poverty, financial vulnerability and to becoming the victim of a crime. Improved welfare consumer and victims compensation rights would also benefit older people.

Yours sincerely,  
REDFERN LEGAL CENTRE

Helen Campbell,  
Executive Officer