

# Brimbank Community Legal Centre

A program of the Brimbank Community Centre

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Legal and Constitutional  
References Committee  
Legislation Committee  
Parliament House  
Canberra. ACT. 2600.



Dear Committee,

**Re: Inquiry into Current Legal Aid Justice**

I would like to make a very brief submission to you on a single point, as my peak body, the Federation of Community Legal Centres will be making a more detailed submission.

My submission is on the impact that university fees and HECS debts will have in a trickle down effect on:

- (i) the ability of Community Legal Centres ('CLCs') to attract lawyers to work in them
- (ii) the ability of CLCs to keep lawyers working in them
- (iii) the access to justice implication for people who go to CLCs because they can't afford private lawyers, don't qualify for legal aid or are members of marginal communities who prefer the culture of community legal centres as their point of access to justice.
- (iv) The people who are in our local communities have the right to access community legal centres and expect that the only people they will see are junior members of the profession.
- (v) CLCs are actually a specialist area of law. Unlike other lawyers we work with people who the legal system often disregards – prisoners, family violence victims, homeless people, young people. Certainly lawyers often disregard their interest because they are not fee paying. Thus CLCs have people working in them who are specialists, specialists which don't exist elsewhere.

The Federation of CLCs recently did a survey of its lawyers. This came about as a direct consequence of concerns we had about the impact that leaving university with a \$50,000 plus debt, will have on a legal sector where no lawyer ever earns more than \$45,000.

It became clear that in many ways we draw people to work as lawyers who do not fit the 'top of the town' stereotype.

Here are a selection of the survey results:

1. 93% volunteered in a CLC before working in one
2. 40% were part time workers
3. 40% thought they would stay less than 4 years
4. 56% attended state primary schools  
17% attended low fee catholic
5. % attend state secondary schools  
% low fee catholic secondary schools
6. 98% had neither parent as a lawyer
7. 65% are women.

Reasons given for working in a CLC were:


- Increased job satisfaction,
- wanting to assist people not just send out bills,
- assisting people getting access to justice who can't afford it,
- ability to do policy and community legal education,
- the work is interesting and disagreed with the culture of private practice,
- loved it as a volunteer so wanted it for my real job.

It is clear that CLCs can not be replaced by the increasing reliance on pro bono work. If the wholistic community based approach of CLCs is allowed to wither away, due to students leaving university burdened with enormous debts, a whole client group will be disadvantaged and may well lose the only avenue to justice available to them.

Furthermore, the demise of CLCs as specialist centres of legal practice will greatly diminish the capacity of the Legal Aid system to provide unique legal services to particularly disadvantaged and marginalised groups, many of whom do not trust the more 'institutional' forms of legal service delivery.

I would be happy to give oral evidence to your Inquiry.

Yours faithfully,



Amanda George  
Community Lawyer