

International Legal Aid Group 2013 Conference – The Hague, Amsterdam

Session - New Paradigms and the Internet

Topic - LawAccess NSW and its legacy

Background

LawAccess NSW is a government contact centre providing a first point of contact for anyone dealing with a legal problem in New South Wales, Australia for the cost of a local phone call. It provides legal information, referral and in some cases legal advice.

Its history goes back to 1999 when there were a number of different agencies providing pro bono legal services to the community such as Legal Aid, the Law Society, Courts, Community Legal Centres and the Bar Association. The Department of Attorney General and Justice realised that there was considerable duplication between existing services resulting in inefficient allocation of resources and some confusion for customers.

The Department recognised the need to consult with the organisations providing the current services and facilitated the formation of an Executive Committee representative of each of those key stakeholders. It was clear to that committee that demand for legal information and assistance services in NSW out-stripped the capacity of the existing services. The Executive Committee recommended the development of a single contact centre service to be funded by the money being allocated by the Public Purpose Fund (PPF) to the various existing options. LawAccess NSW commenced operations on 3 September 2001 and was officially launched in June 2002.

LawAccess NSW is governed by a Board. The Chair is the Director General of the NSW Department of Attorney General & Justice, as Director I am the Secretary and the rest of the members are the CEOs of the Law Society, the Bar Association, Legal Aid, the Chair of the NSW Combined Community Legal Centres as well as a community representative, currently the Executive Officer of Shelter NSW.

One of the key purposes of LawAccess NSW was to ensure an integrated, coordinated and collaborative approach to legal service delivery in NSW as well as expand access to legal and related information services in remote and rural areas and other groups that were disadvantaged in access to legal services. In NSW that includes Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, people from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds, people who have a disability or people at risk of harm.

LawAccess NSW works closely with the key stakeholders as well as Aboriginal Legal Services and other business centres of the Department of Attorney General and Justice such as Courts and Tribunal Services, Victims Services, Trustee and Guardian and Community Justice Centres. We are also part of the NSW Legal Assistance Forum which is an interagency forum of legal service providers across government, non government and the private sector.

At this point I think it is important to put NSW in perspective. In NSW the main challenge is the sheer size of the state and the fact that most of its population (64%) reside in the Greater Sydney area. I am sure your challenges will vary greatly from our population numbers and geographic area but the LawAccess triage model is easily replicated and I will explain the elements that make LawAccess a world leader, shortly.

NSW covers an area of more than 800,000 sq km or more than 309,000 sq miles, you can see by this screen how that compares to Europe. Compared to most countries in the world Australia's population density is quite low. NSW has the highest population of all the states with just under 7.3 million. Of that, 4.6 million live in Greater Sydney, the main red area on the map. Our main challenge is to provide appropriate services for the disadvantaged groups given the size of NSW and population dispersal, or lack of dispersal.

The lowest population density is represented by dark green and the figures on the map show the number of people per square kilometre. Some of the areas have as little as 0.04 people per square kilometre. In most of those places face to face legal services are few and far between. We are able to provide telephone legal advice in some cases straight away or the same day and at the very worst within 48 hours.

We are very successful in what we do but to give you an idea, some key facts for 2012 include:

- Assisted 198,566 customers
- Provided 19,159 legal advice sessions
- 57% of the legal advice sessions were provided to people living outside Greater Sydney
- 94.5% of customers were highly satisfied by LawAccess NSW according to our independent customer satisfaction survey, and
- that same survey revealed that of callers who spoke to a legal officer, 100% said they would recommend LawAccess NSW

Elements to Success

There are three key elements that have enabled LawAccess NSW to deliver a successful legal triage service in NSW. These elements are our people, our knowledge base and our database. These elements have allowed us to ensure consistency, to manage our risk and deliver services to the highest standard.

The first and main element is our people, and that means not only finding the right people but also supporting them once we have found them. We receive upwards of 200 applications for every vacancy and undertake a rigorous recruitment process which we constantly strive to improve.

Once we have the right staff it's important to train them and continue to support them. We have a thorough induction program and an ongoing commitment to training. In a constantly changing environment, training is a necessity. We recently introduced call recording for quality and coaching purposes as part of our risk management strategy and our commitment to training. Team leaders have always undertaken regular monitoring of calls for every staff member, we just have a much

more sophisticated way to do that now. We are very supportive of our staff's career dreams and expectations and encourage ideas and creativity.

Our next key element is in being able to replicate our service while managing our legal risk. We are able to manage our risk and ensure the consistency of the information we provide with our next element, our knowledge base – LawPrompt. LawPrompt is the responsibility of one senior legal officer under the supervision of the Manager, Legal Advice. There are currently over 40 topics covered on LawPrompt across family, civil and criminal practice areas. To ensure unqualified staff are not providing legal advice customer service staff are only able to provide information to a customer which they can source. We have built into LawPrompt answers to customer's frequently asked questions to assist staff in providing consistent responses.

Over the years we have attracted many visitors to LawAccess NSW and when they saw LawPrompt they wanted access. We didn't have the capacity or the technology to provide that until a couple of years ago when we were able to secure specific funding to deliver LawPrompt to Legal Aid and Community Legal Centres. Since July 2012 LawPrompt has been available via a secure internet log in to Community Legal Centres and Legal Aid staff. That's certainly not the only resource that our staff use but LawPrompt forms the basis for our consistent, accurate, quality information.

The final element is our database. We currently have a Siebel database and we collect demographic data from all our callers. When someone rings we collect details such as their town or suburb, the type of legal matter and their year of birth and gender. We also ask how they heard about us as that helps with our marketing strategies.

Our database is also a repository for the assistance services we refer to. The database has every Legal Aid office, every Legal Aid Outreach program, every community legal centre, every specialist legal service, every court house plus relevant government and community organisations. The database lists the catchment area as well as the legal matters, the hours of operation, contact details and any specific relevant information. Once the customer service staff member enters the customer's location and the legal matter type into the database they will be provided appropriate referral options. We pride ourselves on providing appropriate referrals and therefore spend a lot of time and staff hours in ensuring its accuracy and in maintaining our stakeholder relationships. The staff member then links the "referred to" location and we have the final piece of our information puzzle. We have demographic data to build a picture of a customer plus who referred them to us, their legal issue and how we helped them.

The other advantage of our database is the large number of calls we receive every year, up to 200,000. Since 2002 we have been providing the NSW Law and Justice Foundation with our data. Our data combined with data from Legal Aid and Community Legal Centres is able to be mined by their Data Digest project to provide a comprehensive map of expressed legal need across NSW which in turn leads to policy and program direction for all of us. LawAccess NSW also provides statistical information to Legal Aid via an overnight data dump. Again that information is mined by Legal Aid to assess legal need.

Integrated Approach

So are we on the leading edge, are we creating the new paradigm of legal information or advice via the internet. Well I'm here today because Roger Smith in the latest ILAG newsletter has recognised LawAccess NSW as "a world leader" with our "integrated approach". So what is that integrated approach.

Well first and foremost we run a call centre. We do not pretend to be the total answer. However in many cases the legal information or advice we have provided has changed people's lives for the better. Statistics have shown that about 40% of our enquiries can be completed or resolved with the provision of the right legal information. We get at least one customer every couple of days ringing back to pass on their thanks for the information or advice they received as it resolved their problem. We recognise that in order to provide the best triage service we have to know all we can about the places we refer to and the legal sector in general and we have processes in place to ensure that is the case. We work hard on gaining people's respect and keeping it. But in order to reach more people we have moved into the field of providing online assistance. We are certainly in an age where people expect to find everything on line. I know I do.

LawAccess online provides our main online service. It is an aggregator for the best legal information covering NSW law. It also provides 24 hour access to our information including fact sheets and links, plus provides further contact details for us if someone needs advice. This is provided in 36 languages. It also provides access to our other online service which we set up for self-represented litigants – LawAssist.

LawAssist is our main answer to provide more services with less money and in the current global financial crisis this is something we all strive to achieve. Our answer was to build a website to appeal to our more techno-savvy visitors which freed up our call takers to assist the more disadvantaged customer groups.

In researching the tools that were already in existence the then director came across software developed by the Centre for Access to Justice and Technology from the Chicago-Kent College of Law in the United States. It proved invaluable and the fact that it was provided free of charge enabled us to deliver a great resource on a shoe-string budget. We used the A2J software to develop LawZone initially which we hosted on the LawAccess website and then moved that into LawAssist to develop our interactive guides. The interactive guides walk someone through their problem by asking closed question responses leading them to make decisions which eventually point them in the right direction out of their dilemma.

LawAssist was launched in July 2010. In 2011, the first full year of operation, over 180,000 unique visitors accessed the site. In 2012 the site experienced an increase of 134% with over 423,000 unique visitors. LawAssist is delivered by a team of less than half a dozen, which includes the legal officers as well as staff providing technical support.

New topics have been planned around the greatest need. LawAssist includes practical tools including:

- Step by step guides to running a case;
- Instructions for filling out court forms;
- checklists and answers to frequently asked questions; as well as

- information on alternatives to court as we recognise that a reduction in matters ending up in court would serve to reduce costs across the sector.

Legal topics are constantly monitored for change. The senior legal officer responsible for LawPrompt also provides content or legislative changes where necessary to LawAssist and the policies and procedures that keep our knowledge base up to date feed into the LawAssist quality assurance process.

What's next for LawAccess NSW

We are in the process of developing some short films to assist self-represented litigants appear in court. They will be available on LawAssist and in DVD form for distribution and will be closed captioned and some will also be translated into popular languages.

A new topic for LawAssist, Recovery of Goods, is due for release by 30 June 2013.

We will continue to assist our key stakeholders and staff by ensuring LawPrompt is always up to date and expand or create more topics where relevant.

We are currently working with Courts and Tribunal services to assist them with their roll out of online court forms by ensuring they are in plain language with helpful links to LawAssist.

We are in the process of finalising our social media strategy. We are planning a three-pronged approach. We will:

- tweet legislative changes and media alerts;
- monitor legal assistance need and provide referrals to our services; and
- publicise legal advice events around the state.

We are also working on ensuring our documents are accessible by people with disability. This includes providing resources in Auslan (sign language) and closed captioning on videos.

LawAccess' success is due in the most part to the aspirations and dreams of its previous Directors and Board members. My legacy is to continue their good work which means to set the trend, to lead the way and to innovate in order to deliver more with less.