

Media Release

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29 October 2024

Life changing legal service for hospital patients celebrates 5-year milestone – but without ongoing funding

Imagine being faced with a sudden health crisis and at the same time having to deal with going to court, losing your job or a landlord who won't do urgent repairs on your home. Unfortunately, this is the reality for thousands of people who often face health and legal crises together.

This is why in 2019, Kingsford Legal Centre UNSW (KLC) collaborated with Prince of Wales Hospital and the Eastern Suburbs Mental Health Service to form a Health Justice Partnership, sending lawyers to hospital wards and patients' bedsides to help relieve the stress and worry of legal problems. The lawyers are able to work with health professionals like social workers, psychiatrists and nurses for patients' overall wellbeing. KLC lawyers can also continue to help patients once they have been discharged. Today the partnership is celebrating 5 years of cost-effective service delivery – no small feat through a pandemic and without ongoing funding.

This type of service known as a Health Justice Partnership (HJP) is an evidence-based approach for supporting people with complex health and legal issues. A recent [independent evaluation](#) of KLC's HJP by NSF Consulting has shown the service to be cost-effective and a time saver for health workers. It also has big benefits for patients who feel less stressed and more confident about working through their legal issues. Natalie Fisher from NSF Consulting says:

"My evaluation found that the HJP has been extremely effective in targeting its resources to people experiencing financial hardship, living with disability and at risk of homelessness. It has also brought huge benefits to the health system with the service saving 1-3 hours of busy hospital workers' time for every patient referred. This shows there are significant cost savings from this way of working."

The legal service has been able to tackle a huge range of issues – such as patients who need their home to be healthy and safe for their recovery, or patients who require end of life planning. Deputy Director of KLC Dianne Anagnos explains:

“Clients we see through the HJP come in a time of crisis in their life. They should be focusing on their health, but they have stressful legal issues to deal with on top of everything else. An example of a client we have helped is a man in his 60s who was undergoing chemotherapy and had lowered immunity. He was renting a property that was cold and mouldy because of inadequate sealing around his windows, making his home dangerous for him. He was getting nowhere raising these issues with his landlord. We represented him at the Tribunal and made sure that the repairs were all done, and he was paid compensation for the distress and delays he had been through.”

Since 2019 the HJP has also developed expertise in assisting vulnerable patients experiencing acute mental illness with their criminal charges, with many successful outcomes relying on the strength of KLC’s relationship with specialist mental health workers. For example:

KLC recently represented a young student whose parents called police for help when their daughter started to behave erratically. They wanted police to help them take their daughter to hospital, but the officers also charged her with a lesser assault offence for acting out while she was unwell and untreated. KLC represented the young student in court and obtained a mental health diversion order for her, meaning that she had to comply with a mental health treatment program instead of getting a criminal conviction. This was a huge relief to the whole family.

The HJP also provides opportunities for teaching law students about working with other professionals and strengthening multidisciplinary approaches to helping vulnerable clients. Professor Andrew Lynch, Dean of UNSW Law & Justice explains:

“UNSW Law & Justice is proud of the tangible contribution the HJP has already made to our local community and some of its most vulnerable people. The HJP gives our students invaluable learning opportunities and first-hand experience of the role lawyers can play when working with other professionals. Participation in the HJP also deepens law students’ understanding of the disadvantage which persists in our community and the responsibilities they will carry as members of the profession to address this, including through alleviating the stress and health-harming consequences of legal problems.”

KLC Director Emma Golledge says the evaluation highlights the success of KLC’s collaboration with local health partners to help the local community and the skills required to do this work:

“This evaluation demonstrates the overall benefits to individuals, health professionals and the health system in providing lawyers to patients. While it is a simple idea, the evaluation data shows life changing results which will have positive impacts on the community in the longer term. We hope that this groundbreaking partnership can continue as we are currently only funded until 30 June 2025.

The evaluation report is available [here](#).

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