

Director's Report 2016-17

This year the Legal Services Commission has demonstrated its value to the State and Federal Governments through its ability to successfully deliver core services whilst introducing new initiatives.

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A client survey commissioned this year was very positive, reporting that the vast majority of those who had accessed legal assistance through the Commission were happy with the ease of contacting the service, the level of service they received, the way they were treated and the conduct of staff.

Our Deputy Director and long term staffer, Karen Lehmann, retired in May 2017. Karen worked at the Commission for 25 years and was instrumental in her role as Manager of Grants and more recently as Deputy Director in the introduction of legal practitioner panels.

As a consequence of changes to the Commission's governance structure, Commissioners Michael Dawson, John Keen and Craig Caldicott retired from the Commission. I wish them all well for the future.

A feature of our services this year has been an emphasis on using technology to benefit clients through innovative initiatives including Legal Chat, 24Legal and online dispute resolution. By putting the client at the centre of service delivery, we are designing services to satisfy our clients' needs and quickly and economically empower users to locate legal information so as to enhance their understanding of rights and responsibilities under the law.

As a consequence of changes to the service provision model applying to community legal centres in South Australia, the Commission is now the first point of contact for people seeking legal assistance. The Commission's telephone legal helpline and online Legal Chat are the 'front doors' through which South Australians are triaged to the most appropriate legal assistance service provider.

Pursuant to the Commonwealth Government's funding packages to reduce family violence, the Commission received specific funding to enhance the provision of duty lawyer services in the Family Law Courts and at other locations. The key components of this project are to integrate social support services and increase the capacity of the existing duty lawyer services to help families affected by family violence. The service commenced on 31 March 2017 and is available at the Adelaide Registry of the Family Courts and on circuit at Mount Gambier.

The legal helpline provided by the Commission is often the first point of contact for people with legal problems. Analysis of calls has demonstrated an increasing need for assistance with issues arising from elder abuse and family violence. The Commission has produced a video explaining the State based assistance services available for the elderly as part of a public awareness

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campaign by the Alliance for the Prevention of Elder Abuse and is developing education and information resources targeted at disabled South Australian women and girls at risk of family violence.

On the three year anniversary of the Commission's Legal Practitioner Panels, the system was reviewed and changes introduced including a requirement that any practitioner acting for a child must hold a DCSI *working with children* clearance. This requirement is in line with the Nyland Royal Commission recommendations. The Commission also introduced a new panel for practitioners who represent children in care and protection matters, requiring five years current experience in family law or care and protection cases. Our panel system continues to ensure that clients of the Commission receive high quality representation on all grants of aid.

There are now over 650 legal practitioners who are members of the Commission panels and provide representation on grants of aid at lower than market rates of remuneration. I express my thanks to all of these practitioners and look forward to their support in acting on grants of aid in future years.

In September 2016 the Commission delivered another successful Conference for staff and private practitioners. The plenary session was presented by Margaret Cunneen SC and Michael Abbott AO QC and there were well attended sessions on DNA evidence by Dr Jeremy Austin, terrorism laws by Bret Walker SC, fresh and compelling evidence by Marie Shaw QC and Adam Kimber SC, to name only a few.

Throughout this year Commission staff have again demonstrated their capacity for hard work and their dedication to providing access to justice. The implementation of minimum standards of legal experience for practitioners, and audit processes to ensure compliance with Commission requirements, has added to the work of the Grants team and the Panels secretariat. I thank those staff, and all staff of the Commission, for their expertise and commitment in delivering legal assistance services as required by the *Legal Services Commission Act 1977*.

I thank the Chairperson of the Commission, Michael Abbott AO QC and Commissioners Alan Herald, Cathy Nelson and Alison Lloyd-Wright for their ongoing support and good governance. I acknowledge the commitment to legal aid of the South Australian Attorney-General, the Hon John Rau SC MP and the Commonwealth Attorney-General, Senator the Hon George Brandis QC.

The coming year presents many new challenges both fiscally and operationally as the Commission continues to provide legal assistance in an environment of constrained funding and evolving technological advances.

Gabrielle Canny

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