

Central Australian Women's Legal Service

Central Australian Women's Legal Service (CAWLS) was incorporated in April 1996. This was the culmination of many years of hard work by a dedicated group of women legal practitioners who had been providing free legal advice on a voluntary basis to women in Central Australia. The women seeking assistance were primarily victims of domestic violence who had no other access to legal service due to issues of conflict.

In July 2000 CAWLS commenced auspicing the Domestic Violence Legal Service (DVLS) funded by the NT Government Department of Justice. At this time CAWLS and DVLS were separate entities, informally integrated and co-located. These two services later merged and with the introduction of funding under the Commonwealth Government Women's Safety Package in 2016 and 2017 and Indigenous Advancement Strategy CAWLS has grown into an essential and dynamic legal service that delivers services for all women in the Central and Barkly regions.

As a trauma informed and accredited community legal service for all women a large component of CAWLS' service delivery is related to women at risk of or experiencing domestic and family violence and the interconnected legal issues that accompany this including family law, child protection, tenancy, discrimination matters and victims of crime compensation. CAWLS provides community legal education to the wider community and regularly contributes to law and policy reform and advocacy campaigns to raise awareness of legal issues affecting women both on a local and national level.

CAWLS service coverage includes two of the five NT regions. The Central Australia region which covers an area of 546 046 km² (40% of the NT) and the Barkly Tablelands which covers an area 283 648 km (21% of the NT). Given the enormity of both regions CAWLS targets towns and communities that people from other remote communities frequent to maximise our service reach. Additionally CAWLS provides services in some remote communities

where there is limited access to other legal services and levels of domestic violence are high.

In 2015 the Australian Federal Government introduced the 'Women's Safety Package' which incorporated an integrated health justice model and specialised domestic violence units. The package was initially funded for three years to assist all women and children experiencing domestic violence access appropriate legal assistance and also other social services. It is a collaborative legal practice model where the client has both legal and non-legal needs addressed and acts as a 'wrap around service'. This nation-wide pilot program targeted at risk women and children via the new Specialist Domestic Violence Units and Health Justice Partnerships. The locations of the Domestic Violence Units and the Health Justice Partnerships were unilaterally selected by the Federal Government, based on nationally recognised higher rates of domestic violence. The Women's Safety Package aims to ensure that women and children in each state and territory benefited from improved access to holistic health and legal front-line services.

Due to extremely high rates of domestic and family violence in the NT and taking into account the expertise of the Service; CAWLS was selected to deliver the above service model in Central Australia. In 2017 additional funding under this package was granted to CAWLS to expand service delivery for a Specialist Domestic Violence Unit (SDVU) for women in the Barkly region. This was both welcome and timely. In 2018, CAWLS partnered and signed off on an MOU with Anyinginyi Health Aboriginal Corporation in Tennant Creek to ensure that those women and their children most at risk are targeted. The SDVU provides an integrated wrap around service delivery to increase women's access to legal assistance, information, education and referral where domestic or family violence is a factor. The SDVU consists of one lawyer and social support workers who operate with a high intensity caseload to support women with complex and challenging



needs. The SDVU has already achieved positive outcomes for clients.

With the introduction of the Health Justice Model (HJP) CAWLS delivers a flexible and responsive service and ensures lawyers are available to assist clients onsite at the health services at short notice given the need to respond rapidly in domestic violence situations. CAWLS works collaboratively with health professionals to optimise a client's ability to provide instructions, improve outcomes and to deliver a more holistic service.

Since 2016 CAWLS has provided onsite legal assistance at the Alice Springs Hospital and Central Australia Aboriginal Congress health services (Congress) to women affected by domestic violence in a range of legal areas, including domestic violence orders, victim's compensation, child protection, family law and housing. CAWLS' lawyers are available on-call as needed both at the hospital and Congress. CAWLS' has also set up weekly legal clinics at the hospital and Alukura Women's Health Service.

CAWLS regularly delivers a number of training sessions to staff at the Alice Springs Hospital and at Congress' health services and clinics. CAWLS began the free all-day training in 2016 and has run the training three or four times each year since then. Due to the high demand, training is now held at the Centre for Remote Health. At the training, there are multiple sessions from a range of services, including NPY Women's Council, CAWLS, the Sexual Assault Referral Centre, Alice Springs Women's Shelter, the NT Police Domestic Violence Prevention Group and the Aboriginal Interpreter Service. The topics included identifying when domestic violence is occurring (or is likely to occur), mandatory reporting, patient warning signs, how to respond to disclosures of domestic violence, Q&A with the NT Police's Domestic Violence Unit and scenario/problem-solving group discussions.



L-R: Women's Safety Package lawyers Rachael Pliner and Rashini Fernando

As part of the Women's Safety Package, CAWLS has developed a number of resources on identifying and responding to domestic violence which is specifically tailored to professionals. CAWLS partnered with the Alice Springs Family Law Pathways Network (FLPN) to develop an online Service Directory for separating families, including for women affected by domestic violence. CAWLS in collaboration with the FLPN have also produced a pocket resource containing key services in Alice Springs and Tennant Creek for separating families.

During 2017/18 CAWLS provided over 2000 services for women. Of these women, 93% experienced financial disadvantage and 76% of CAWLS clients overall identified as either Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander.