



Refugee Civil Law Clinic Launch **Multicultural Development Association, South Brisbane** **Wednesday 12 September 2007, 4.30pm**

The Hon Paul de Jersey AC **Chief Justice of Queensland**

I appreciate the opportunity to launch this prospectively very beneficial initiative, the Refugee Civil Law Clinic. I have been patron and supporter of QPILCH since its inception, and it is good to see the organisation extending into what will be another extremely worthwhile service for those in our community in need of legal assistance.

I need not speak of the many difficulties faced by refugees – these issues would be familiar to all of you here this afternoon. Individually, we may be able to do little to improve circumstances in refugees' native countries, but I am heartened that services such as the one launched here this afternoon will assist families and individuals settle into their new community.

An understanding of the legal system and familiarity with administrative processes is often easy to take for granted, especially for lawyers, who work daily within these systems. Members of the wider community are also usually aware, in a general sense, of services and procedures that can assist them if they are experiencing difficulties in various aspects of their lives.

Most would know, for example, that if they are having problems paying a phone or electricity bill on time, they may approach the service provider and request a deferred or structured payment of the account; or if a landlord has failed to carry out repairs to a rental property, the tenant may contact the Residential Tenancy Authority for assistance.



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Matters of relatively common knowledge such as these are likely to be completely unknown to people who have only recently settled in the community.

Once the appropriate service or organisation has been located, there may be further difficulties for refugees and migrants in understanding the processes that must be undertaken, and the information that is required to achieve the desired result. I do not of course intend to cast aspersions on any organisation or government department, but I imagine that those who deal with unfamiliar structures may feel at times like Joseph K in Kafka's *The Trial*, endlessly waiting outside the door for unknown and impenetrable processes to be completed, processes in which the person most invested is able to take no meaningful part.

Assistance in navigating legal and administrative processes, such as this service aims to provide, will be of great benefit to refugees and migrants, and the educative function of this Clinic is to be commended. Knowledge of basic legal rights is likely to assist refugees and migrants to feel more settled in their new community. For example, an understanding of fundamental consumer rights, such as simply knowing, that a person may take a product back to a store if it does not match its description, or do what it is supposed to do, may help refugees and migrants feel more independent, and better able to take an active role in their new communities.

Education about basic legal rights and services available will also help prevent disputes escalating, or even arising, which is the best outcome for all concerned. Much as lawyers might enjoy deploying their legal skills, acting to prevent a problem arising and not needing to use that hard-won combative expertise will often be the greater success.

Refugees and migrants will frequently be in a position of particular vulnerability in everyday transactions, with English perhaps a very new second, or perhaps even third or fourth, language. Some may not appreciate the legal implications of agreements they have made, or contracts they have signed. Even those with English as a first language can find



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fine print hard to understand at times, so we can imagine the difficulty multiplied for those not fluent in English. A clinic which can provide legal support and assist with this will be of great benefit.

I was pleased to note that the Refugee Civil Law Clinic is to be modelled on the Homeless Persons' Legal Clinic which has been run successfully by QPILCH for some years. It seems to me that one of the reasons for the success of the Homeless Persons' Legal Clinic is the way in which its services are delivered; that is, the Clinics are held in places already attended by its clients.

The hosting of the Refugee Civil Law Clinic by the Multicultural Development Association Inc, an organisation which has assisted approximately 900 families over the past year, will make it easy for clients to access the new service. I was also pleased to note that news of the new Clinic was well received by other organisations supporting refugee communities in Brisbane, and that those organisations will refer clients to the Clinic.

I commend the organisations driving this initiative – QPILCH, Corrs Chambers Westgarth and the Multicultural Development Association Inc. I also commend the individuals involved, who will give of their time and skills to assist others, and I note with particular pleasure that approximately 20 lawyers from Corrs Chambers Westgarth have put their names forward as volunteer lawyers for the Clinic.

As many of you may know, I speak regularly about the importance of pro-bono work, and its value both to the legal profession and to the community generally. Providing legal services and support for little or no financial reward is an expression of the public service which distinguishes the legal profession, and a credit to those undertaking it.

It gives me great pleasure to launch the Refugee Civil Law Clinic today, and to congratulate all who have been, and will be, involved in this valuable service.