STRATEGIC PLAN

2020–23

eastern community legal centre

For 45 years, Eastern Community Legal Centre (ECLC) has been working with communities across the eastern suburbs of Melbourne to resolve legal problems, advocate for rights, improve the justice system and alleviate socio-economic disadvantage.

ECLC recognises that legal problems often result when members of our community are living with social and economic injustice. We have learned that addressing this injustice requires both applying expertise to the resolution of legal issues and working with community members to manage other circumstances that adversely impact on their lives.

ECLC understands that providing a legal service that is responsive to the broad needs of its community requires a skilled multidisciplinary workforce. Centre staff and volunteers include advocates, community lawyers, financial counsellors, intake specialists, paralegals, social workers and program, management and policy professionals.

ECLC further understands that there is greater economy and benefit to communities when support services work together. It collaborates with health, community and government services to ensure an integrated response to community members. ECLC also develops and delivers innovative projects with diverse partners to educate and empower communities so that legal problems can be prevented.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT OF COUNTRY

(ECLC) acknowledges the Wurundjeri peoples of the Kulin Nation, the Traditional Owners of the land on which the Centre community lives and works and pays deep respect to Elders past, present and emerging.

ECLC also acknowledges those Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, including Elders, who came to live on Wurundjeri land as a result of dispossession from their homelands and in more recent times through choice.

ECLC deeply appreciates and celebrates the people, stories, traditions, culture and strength of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples and is honoured when they work together with the Centre.

ECLC recognises that colonisation is the significant cause of disadvantage experienced by Aboriginal peoples, and that justice cannot be realised without ensuring the human rights of all Aboriginal peoples.*

* ECLC acknowledges the Healesville Indigenous Community Services Association (HICSA) as the basis for key elements of this statement, used with permission.

VISION

Human Rights | Fairness | Justice

ECLC is a multidisciplinary legal service that works to prevent problems, progress fair outcomes and support the wellbeing and resilience of communities and community members in Melbourne's East.

REACH

ECLC works with communities and community members living in Boroondara, Knox, Manningham, Maroondah, Whitehorse and Yarra Ranges.

Making the most of its abilities and the resources available, ECLC provides:

» information, advice and assistance across a range of legal and related issues

» advocacy to resolve problems at the earliest opportunity

» referrals to community agency partners

» integrated legal services, including through Health Justice Partnerships

» community development and education programs with a focus on rights, responsibilities and options

» primary prevention activities, using broad partnership approaches

» strategic advocacy to change unfair laws and improve systems and practices.

PRIORITY COMMUNITIES

Independent research and Centre experience identifies that some groups within the community are more likely to confront persistent barriers to accessing help and managing legal problems.

ECLC prioritises delivering comprehensive advice and advocacy services to these community members, whilst also working to address the causes of the disadvantage they experience.

These priority communities are:

Children and Young People

The legal needs and issues children and young people face are acknowledged by ECLC and addressed through specific initiatives, both as part of families and individually.

People Experiencing or At Risk of Family Violence

Tragically this remains one of the biggest justice issues facing the Australian community. The Centre has a longstanding commitment to addressing family violence and helping those that it affects in a number of innovative service responses that focus the attention on the safety and wellbeing of the victim/survivor. ECLC also develops and supports community prevention and education initiatives, seeking to stop family violence before it occurs.

Indigenous Australians

The Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities are one of the most profoundly disadvantaged groups in Australian society. ECLC is committed to ongoing engagement and consultation, providing high quality and culturally appropriate legal services and implementing programs to prioritise community need.

Older People experiencing or at risk of elder abuse

While most older people have vibrant lives and continue to make a strong contribution to the community, some seniors are particularly vulnerable. Over the past ten years, ECLC has focused on the emerging issue and impact of elder abuse – through prevention, awareness and response.

Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Intersex and Queer peoples

The LGBTIQ community is strongly represented in ECLC's local communities, volunteers and staff. The Centre recognises that despite being across all spectrums of society, the LGBTIQ community experience marginalisation and discrimination on a regular basis. It is committed to ensuring that its policies and culture are safe and appropriate for the LGBTIQ community.

People who Experience Language or Cultural Barriers

Community members with culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds can face a number of barriers understanding the law and accessing legal assistance. ECLC recognises additional steps are needed to ensure these communities are fully included in the work of the Centre and to ensure just outcomes.

People Experiencing or At Risk of Homelessness

Homelessness is an ever-increasing problem within the community and may either play a causal role or be the unfortunate result of a number of legal problems. ECLC engages with community members both experiencing and being at risk of homelessness through its direct legal services to address underlying legal problems and through agency referral.

People with a Disability or Mental Illness

Disability and mental illness are significant barriers to social inclusion and the full and free participation in the community. ECLC recognises the need to deliver accessible, high quality and appropriate legal assistance despite the sometimes significant social and financial barriers facing these community members.

VALUES

ECLC approaches its work with community members colleagues and service partners with a commitment to:

Respect
Appreciating diversity and treating all people with dignity

Compassion
Understanding the underlying causes of disadvantage and offering support without judgment

Advocacy
Providing a voice for those who cannot advocate for themselves and joining voices with those addressing injustice

Safety
Assuring confidentiality for clients and being responsive to their own assessment of safety and wellbeing

Justice & human rights
Showing courage in encounters with injustice, promoting equitable access to legal help and working to empower communities

Strong governance & assurance
Practising proactive and transparent leadership and striving for continuous improvement

Resourcefulness & practicality
Finding solutions through working collaboratively and generously sharing expertise

Innovation & entrepreneurship
Encouraging new ideas, taking calculated risks to increase impact, and leading by example

Quality & evaluation
Building evidence-based practice through a robust monitoring and evaluation culture

IMPACT

Central to all ECLC's efforts, including this Strategic Plan, is removing barriers to justice for communities in Melbourne's East and effectively responding to the needs of those in the community who need help the most.

As the population grows, a prevailing challenge is managing service demand whilst maintaining service quality. Key to meeting this challenge is embedding and extending multiple multidisciplinary and integrated service models to enable efficient work with partners and as teams in a changing service environment.

Over the next four years, ECLC will continue to meet the legal needs of its communities and support community members in their journey through the justice and services system by prioritising:

- **Person-centred practice -** further improving services and practices, both at the interface with clients and in relation to in-house systems that support service delivery
- **Partnerships -** taking partnerships from strength to strength, with ECLC well-placed within multidisciplinary and integrated services networks to effect system improvements
- **People -** supporting the growing and diverse workforce to do their jobs well.

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PERSON-CENTRED

Improving services & practices

ECLC will align service practices so that community members can access and navigate holistic legal help more easily.

Strategy 1:
Making service pathways easier to find and use

ECLC recognises that it is unviable to effectively deliver services in a dynamic funding environment and with a growing demographic if the same level of service is offered to every member of the community seeking legal assistance.

Under the previous Strategic Plan, ECLC developed and implemented a new client intake and triage framework – Assessment, Intake, Referral and Response (AIRR) – which provides a continuum of response from a gateway into tailored services for clients with less capacity to supporting clients with more ability to self-manage. their legal problems.

The evaluation of the Enhanced Entry Project – including the Triage Framework confirms that ECLC is better connecting services to the needs of clients. It also noted that ongoing attention is required to ensure that other services work in concert with AIRR processes, and that the model is adaptable to the ongoing pressures of service demand.

ECLC will prioritise aligning all its services with the Triage Framework so that service pathways are more transparent and easier to navigate for clients, staff and external service providers. It will also consider and plan for adjustments to the intake approach so that access to services remains reliable into the future.

Indicators that ECLC is achieving this Strategy include:

» points in service pathways that are creating obstacles for clients, staff, volunteers and/or external service providers are identified and resolved

» a plan, which facilitates alignment between the Triage Framework, AIRR team and broader ECLC services, including volunteer services, is developed and implemented

» expansion of resources, templates and systems to further enable volunteer lawyers and paralegals to assist clients more efficiently.

PRACTICE

Strategy 2:
Evaluating services

Under the previous Strategic Plan, ECLC identified the need to formally evaluate services and projects so that they can be improved and replicated for the benefit of more community members. ECLC has evaluated several key projects, in turn attracting additional funding to deliver innovative programs across multiples sites and with new partners.

Under this Strategic Plan, ECLC will leverage the evaluation knowledge gained in the recent years to evaluate more services and projects. Monitoring and evaluation will be geared towards improving the client experience, understanding and predicting client need, and providing an evidence-base from which to prioritise future service reforms and strategic advocacy campaigns.

This Strategy is in addition to the formal monitoring and evaluation indicators relevant to other strategies articulated throughout this Plan.

Indicators that ECLC is achieving this Strategy include:

» an outcomes measurement framework is developed, implemented and connected to sector frameworks

» the framework is adapted and applied to multiple services and projects

» regular client, community, staff, volunteer and partnership surveys are undertaken to inform continuous improvement

» service data is analysed to distinguish patterns of community and client disadvantage and trajectories of service need

» monitoring and evaluation data is used to determine funding allocations, improve services and initiate law reform.

ECLC will evaluate more of its services and programs to understand what is working well and change what could work better, for the benefit of its community and community members.

ECLC will plan to remain a financially viable and vital force for human rights, justice and fairness into the future.

Strategy 3:
A strong financial strategy

ECLC is adept at taking calculated risks to attract funding and optimise the reach of its services. In the context of steady resource growth over the last five years, the Board has enhanced its financial governance past through the establishment of a Finance, Audit and Risk Committee.

To manage what is now a large community legal service with a substantial resource base, ECLC requires a comprehensive, proactive and co-ordinated financial strategy.

In readiness for further anticipated growth over the life of this Strategic Plan, the Board will develop and administer a financial strategy that guides ECLC in leveraging existing funds, duly resources the delivery of this Strategy, and devises safeguards to ensure nimbleness and sustainability in response to funding fluctuations.

Indicators that ECLC is achieving this Strategy include:

» a financial framework is developed which benchmarks a healthy surplus, directs this to personnel and infrastructure needs, and forecasts for both funding growth and downturn

» the framework is applied, monitored and adjusted in response to the changing conditions that impact ECLC's operating environment

» the framework is formally evaluated.

ECLC will organise its spaces, systems and structures to deliver services and programs across its communities more efficiently.

Strategy 4:
Fit-for-purpose facilities and technology

ECLC has reached its current offices' capacity, which is impacting on operational effectiveness. The imperative for space presents an opportunity to appraise what infrastructure is the most conducive to providing multidisciplinary and integrated legal programs that are accessible to priority communities.

Further, in today's world, plans and programs require technologies which enable staff to remain connected and feel supported across different offices and outreach locations, with a workforce that is increasingly mobile and reaching community members where they live and access services.

Finding the right balance between centralising and distributing service locations and staff; localising and standardising service offerings and expertise; and consolidating already substantial growth and further growing our service reach, requires dedicated planning and risk assessment. Considering the costs and benefits of new technologies that may better facilitate case management, information sharing and options for remote service delivery, is an important part of this planning.

ECLC will determine how it can best provision operating spaces to accommodate current and anticipated growth, whilst securing optimal service conditions for clients and working conditions for staff. ECLC will transition its workforce into new or improved facilities and upgrade technologies over the period of this Strategic Plan.

Indicators that ECLC is achieving this Strategy include:

» options for upgrading facilities and technology are considered with staff and volunteer input

» a facilities plan, which takes ongoing organisational growth into account, is developed and implemented

» new technologies, including communications software and hardware, mobility resources and options for the provision of digital legal services, are scoped and adopted as required

PARTNERSHIPS

Taking partnerships from strength to strength

ECLC will work with its service partners in the region and legal assistance organisations more broadly to extend the benefits of multidisciplinary and integrated service models to more members of the community.

Strategy 5:
Promoting multidisciplinary and integrated practice

Under the previous Strategic Plan, ECLC committed to increasing the community's access to support services. To achieve this objective, it has actively partnered with health, housing, community service and government providers to develop and deliver a range of assistance to community members within new locations and models.

ECLC has been a pioneer of multidisciplinary and integrated approaches within the legal sector, and has demonstrated that collaborative service provision better addresses clients' intersecting legal and social support needs. The Health Justice Partnerships, in particular, are leading a transformation in the provision of community legal services.

ECLC will build on this success, both by taking up opportunities to expand both multidisciplinary and integrated service approaches and by addressing the obstacles that may hinder other service providers from adopting these models.

Indicators that ECLC is achieving this Strategy include:

» new additional Health Justice Partnerships are strongly established and deliver key outcomes

» multidisciplinary and integrated service projects are championed across the legal and social services sector

» obstacles to multidisciplinary and integrated practice across the legal and social services sector are identified and changes advocated

» new Health Justice Partnerships are formally evaluated

» a monitoring framework to track the progress and outcomes of efforts to promote multidisciplinary practice is developed, maintained and informs continuous improvement.

Strategy 6:
Uniting with others who advocate for justice

Under the previous Strategic Plan, ECLC was actively engaged in key social, economic and legal decision-making forums tasked with addressing systems' inefficiencies that adversely impact disadvantaged communities. ECLC is now a trusted expert in relation to preventative and early intervention assistance for family violence and elder abuse.

ECLC will scale up its advocacy ambitions by joining with its partners to secure rights for members of the priority communities. It will contribute ideas and endeavours to the development and organisation of systemic advocacy campaigns, as well as contributing relevant data on the lived experience of community members.

Realising this Strategy is supported by other strategies under this Plan, including monitoring and evaluating services to better understand the needs of community members and equipping managers and leaders to co-ordinate advocacy efforts.

Indicators that ECLC is achieving this Strategy include:

» momentum for campaigns relevant to priority communities is identified amongst community members, partners and broader networks

» campaigns are devised, coordinated and put into action with advocacy partners

» advocacy and campaign training opportunities are offered to staff

» a monitoring framework to track the progress and outcomes of advocacy efforts is developed, maintained, and informs continuous improvement

» evaluation reports on advocacy progress are published

ECLC will campaign with community members, communities and partners to secure rights for priority groups.

PEOPLE

Supporting people to do their jobs well

ECLC will develop the skills of its workforce to deliver holistic legal help within multidisciplinary teams with communities in Melbourne's East.

Strategy 7:
Investing in staff and volunteers

To ensure that members of our community have access to services that address their needs holistically, ECLC is committed to continuously improving its capacity to work collaboratively as a team, beyond the traditional boundaries of a legal service.

Recruiting staff and volunteers solely on the basis of their technical skills and experience can lead to 'siloed' work practices within the organisation and across partnerships, with the burden often borne by clients to navigate multiple service pathways. ECLC wants to grow and support a workforce that values and enables the multidisciplinary and integrated service models. This requires identifying, seeking and developing versatile skillsets.

ECLC will adjust the focus of its recruitment frameworks and processes to attract employees and volunteers with synergetic as well as technical competencies. ECLC will also equip staff and volunteers to develop, learn from and better integrate the diversity of roles and skills within the team and to work more collaboratively with its partners.

ECLC will further invest in the professional development of staff and volunteers and make opportunities available for their career progression, whether within or external to ECLC, and across the breadth of roles.

Indicators that ECLC is achieving this Strategy include:

- a recruitment framework that preferences qualified applicants with experience of and aptitude for working within multidisciplinary and integrated teams is developed and implemented
- whole-of-workforce training that embeds a shared foundational understanding of ECLC's multidisciplinary service model and how best to integrate existing practice disciplines, is developed and delivered
- the Integrated Practice Framework is further developed and implemented
- professional development and mentoring opportunities are identified with staff and volunteers, and made available for their benefit

ECLC will empower managers and leaders to marshal the expertise of employed staff, volunteers and partners so that people and communities receive timely support and key programs are developed and implemented well.

Strategy 8:
Investing in leadership

Under our previous Strategic Plan, ECLC developed and implemented a new leadership structure to increase oversight of the expanding services. As this structure has consolidated, it has become apparent that managers and leaders are best placed to align the work of staff with ECLC's vision, direction and goals.

ECLC is committed to better facilitating the role of managers and leaders in building staff capability, contributing to the strategic direction of ECLC and co-ordinating implementation of this strategy across the workforce. Equipping managers with a clear mandate and affording them opportunities to develop their skills by working interdependently with other managers facilitates nimble decision-making that is essential to operational efficacy.

As the Centre continues to grow, its capacity to maintain high standards of service and project delivery requires an ongoing investment in management systems and proficiencies. Under this Strategic Plan, we will review managerial functions and dedicate resources to developing leadership capabilities in managers and leaders across teams.

Indicators that ECLC is achieving this Strategy include:

» a protocol that identifies and clarifies the scope of management authority, including decision-making delegation, management of volunteers and co ordinating social justice campaigns, is developed and implemented

» ongoing training targeted to equipping managers and emerging leaders with the skills and confidence required to excel in their role, is developed and delivered

» a regular forum that supports managers to share information and collectively make decisions that impact ECLC as a whole, is established and maintained.

Picture credits with thanks to: City of Boroondara, Knox City Council, Manningham City Council, Maroondah City Council, Yarra Ranges Tourism

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