Effective Change

PROJECT REPORT

Review of the Yarra Ranges Community Legal Centre

Prepared by Effective Change Pty Ltd
for Eastern Community Legal Centre

December 2016

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Executive Summary

Yarra Ranges Community Legal Centre (YRCLC) located in Healesville, in outer metropolitan Melbourne was launched in February 2014 initially with three part-time staff - an intake worker, community development worker and a lawyer. In just over 2 years, YRCLC has supported over 500 clients, provided approximately 600 advices and reached a further 530 people through community legal education.

Geographically, Yarra Ranges is the largest of metropolitan Melbourne's 31 local government areas, comprising 80% of Melbourne's total land area. At its eastern boundary it is 80 kilometres to the city centre. It is home to a population of 144,500, including a growing Aboriginal population. Seventy per cent (70%) of the community live in the urban hubs centred around Belgrave and Lilydale. The balance of the community is spread across 40 townships and suburbs in semi-rural communities, in the hills and valley, separated by large areas of national parks and public land, mountain ranges and reservoirs, serviced by single lane country roads. Half of the population does not have access to public transport. One in two residents leaves the Yarra Ranges to go to work. There are high levels of economic and health disadvantage. The trauma of the 2009 Black Saturday bushfires continues to affect the community.

Before YRCLC opened, by public transport the closest access to free legal advice for those living in the rural townships could be a four-hour round trip.

In addition to providing legal advice and services, the Centre has invested in a community development approach, focusing on building relationships and referral pathways with health and community services. Strong connections have been established with the local Aboriginal community and community organisations. The Centre has contributed to significant community projects, including a publicly available shower for homeless people in the redevelopment of the Healesville & District Hospital and Yarra Valley Community Health and a trial of pharmacotherapy services at the local chemist, saving clients and community agency staff time and money. Both projects were identified through the community development work of the Centre and were successfully negotiated through the consortium of partnerships.

Service providers report the legal needs of their most vulnerable clients are many and complex, compounded by geographical isolation, limited to non-existent public transport, low service literacy and low incomes. Key issues include family violence, family law and multiple housing and homelessness issues. Some service providers report clients having no option but to walk for kilometres to attend appointments.

Local service providers were unequivocal that without the YRCLC:

- the most vulnerable and disadvantaged clients would simply not seek legal advice, inevitably resulting in the escalation of relatively minor legal matters
- women living in rural isolation escaping family violence from partners often with access to guns would not have access to legal advice
- Aboriginal clients with complex legal needs including family violence and child protection issues would not have access to legal advice.

Further, providers agreed that the single most significant impact of YRCLC was that it enabled vulnerable and disadvantaged clients in the region access to legal information and advice. The review has highlighted the time and effort invested by YRCLC in successfully establishing relationships with local services, community groups and community members. It has had outstanding success in building strong and trusting relationships with the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities and community organisations.

The review strongly demonstrates that YRCLC is a critical service that requires continued ongoing funding to enable the Centre to continue to service the most vulnerable, marginalised and under-serviced members of the community and make a significant difference to the broader community.

Introduction

The Yarra Ranges Community Legal Centre (YRCLC) based in Healesville is a branch of the Eastern Community Legal Centre (ECLC). The service commenced in February 2014, with funding provided by the Commonwealth Attorney-General's Department (AGD) and Victoria Legal Aid (VLA).

This review, conducted as the service approaches its third anniversary, reflects on the work and achievements of the YRCLC to date.

Yarra Ranges CLC overview

The YRCLC is based in the Yarra Ranges Council Community Link building in Healesville. A range of council services are available at this community hub including a public library and public internet access. Community meeting rooms are available and agencies are co-located in the building.

Staffing and operation

The YRCLC staff team comprises a Coordinator/Community Development Officer, a Community Lawyer, an Intake and Administrative Officer and the Managing Lawyer. All staff are part-time. In 2016, additional funding enabled another part-time lawyer to provide services.

The Healesville office is open from Tuesday to Thursday. Outreach services are also provided fortnightly in Yarra Junction and monthly in Lilydale.

Catchment area

The catchment area for the YRCLC is the Yarra Ranges council area, covering 2,470 square kilometres. Yarra Ranges, on the fringe of the metropolitan boundary of Melbourne, covers 55 suburbs and townships.

Objectives

Operating as a branch of ECLC, the specific objectives of the YRCLC are to:

- provide quality targeted and integrated legal advice and casework services
- develop and undertake a range of community development activities, with three key priorities: addressing family violence, building relationships with the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community and improving access to services for people who are homeless or at risk of homelessness
- encourage the involvement of the community with an emphasis on volunteer engagement
- develop partnerships of agencies to meet the objectives of the Centre.

Review of the Yarra Ranges CLC

The review of the YRCLC was factored into the establishment of the Centre. The aims of the review are to document the service history, provision and service impact in particular from the perspective of partnership agencies and local service providers, as well as reflecting on the challenges and future opportunities for the service. Effective Change Pty Ltd was commissioned to conduct the review.

Methodology

The methodology for the review involved the following tasks.

Desktop review

Desktop review and document analysis of a range of ECLC reports including:

- progress reports
- annual reports
- project reports
- background documents, including legal needs analyses

Additional literature of relevance was reviewed focusing on the needs of the Yarra Ranges, such as Yarra Ranges Council community health and wellbeing profiles.

Client and service data was reviewed, as well as client feedback surveys and interviews undertaken by YRCLC.

Stakeholder interviews

Interviews were conducted with internal and external stakeholders to explore and reflect on topics such as the legal needs of client cohorts, organisational relationships and the impact of the YRCLC for clients, organisations, local services and the community. Fourteen (14) stakeholders were interviewed.

Internal ECLC stakeholders interviewed included:

- YRCLC Community Development Officer
- Past community lawyer
- Managing Lawyer (Yarra Ranges)
- Intake worker
- Director, Partnerships and Community Development
- Principal Lawyer
- Chief Executive Officer

External stakeholders interviewed included representatives from:

- Anchor, an independent, not-for-profit organisation that assists vulnerable people in the community through services including homeless support, foster care, kinship care, community education and family reconciliation
- Boorndawan Willam Aboriginal Healing Service (BWAHS), a culturally safe service that assists Aboriginal people in their healing journey from the impacts of family violence
- Eastern Health, Ambulatory & Community Services
- Healesville Indigenous Community Services Association (HICSA), established in December 2009 to provide a welcoming and culturally affirming place in Healesville that provides a central point of contact for community members, both Indigenous and non-Indigenous, for information, services and programs
- Healesville Interchurch Community Care Inc (HICCI), a network of Christian churches in the Healesville and Yarra Glen areas providing practical services and friendship to local community members
- Redwood Community Centre, a community-based organisation providing wholistic services enhancing mental and interpersonal wellbeing, health and lifestyle improvement, training skills, and self-development
- Yarra Ranges Council

Data collation and analysis

Data from all sources was collated and analysed.

Report preparation

The draft and final reports were prepared.

Background

The establishment of the YRCLC service was as a result of significant campaigning, research into legal needs and responding to the impacts of the disastrous bushfires of Black Saturday in 2009. This section provides a short overview of the history behind the YRCLC.

History of the Yarra Ranges CLC

The YRCLC in Healesville opened its doors for services to clients in February 2014. Predating this was at least a decade of advocacy work that identified the extent of legal needs in the community, the dearth of available and accessible legal services, and the need for a locally-based legal centre in the Yarra Ranges as shown in the timeline.

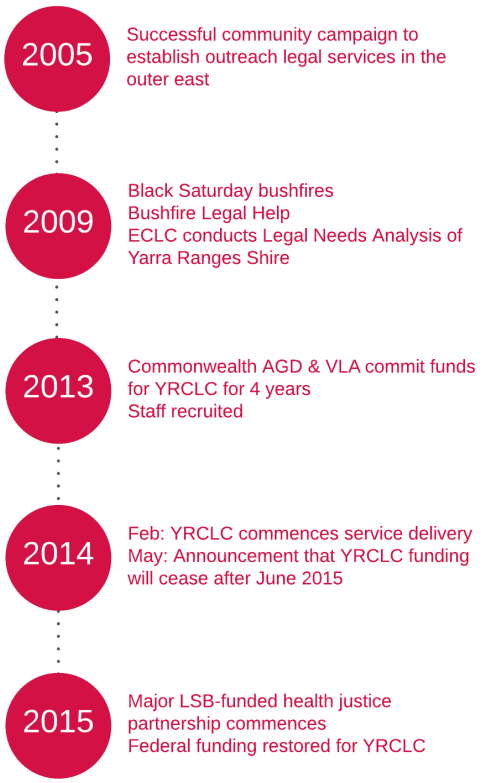
A community campaign led by ECLC resulted in the provision of outreach legal services in the outer east region in 2005. However, outreach services were found to be insufficient and inadequate to meet the needs in the community.

The devastating Black Saturday fires of 2009 had a massive impact in the Yarra Ranges and surrounding areas. The immediate response and recovery period saw a massive collaboration of community services. Among the community's many needs were multiple legal needs, exacerbated by loss of life, the widespread impact of psychological trauma, loss of property and legal documents and the need to triage immediate priorities.

The Bushfire Legal Help service was created in response within days of the disaster.[i] ECLC, along with other CLCs in bushfire affected areas and VLA, provided assistance to residents in affected areas through the Bushfire Legal Help for almost 12 months.

In 2009, ECLC undertook a major legal needs analysis of the Yarra Ranges shire, which highlighted the priorities of family violence and tenancy issues leading to homelessness.

Following an extensive advocacy campaign involving a wide coalition of community organisations, local government and ECLC, funding for the YRCLC was committed by VLA and the Commonwealth AGD in 2013.



The first 12 months

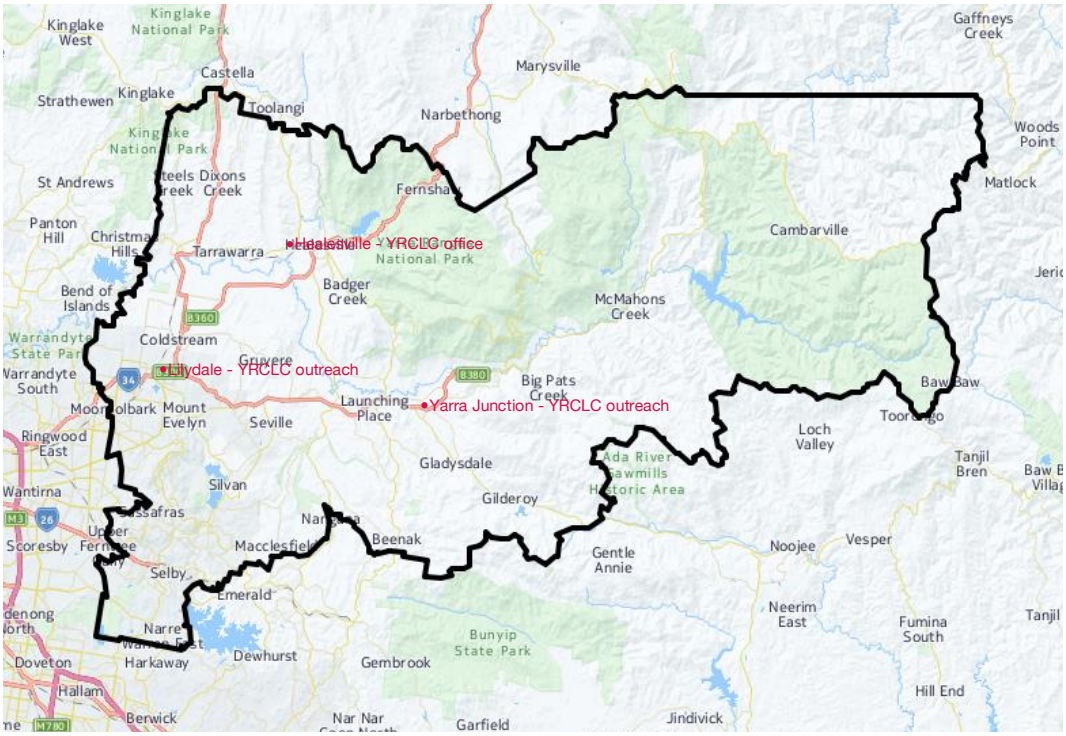
A community lawyer and coordinator for the Centre were recruited in late 2013. For the first month or so, the initial work focus was on consulting and meeting with local community stakeholders and service providers, as well as promoting the work of the Centre.

The Centre opened to the public in February 2014 in the Yarra Ranges Community Link centre in Healesville. Outreach services are provided fortnightly in Yarra Junction and monthly in Lilydale. These locations are marked on the map below.

After three months of operation, the withdrawal of legal assistance service funding announced through the December 2013 Mid-Year Economic Financial Outlook (MYEFO) effectively made the YRCLC unsustainable in the longer term.

Further campaigning by the community led to re-instatement of funding through Commonwealth support, with further funding provided by VLA. ECLC's receipt of Legal Services Board funding in 2014 to undertake a health-justice partnership focusing on family violence, provided further support for legal work in the Yarra Ranges.

Figure 1: Location of Yarra Ranges CLC office and outreach



Context

The Yarra Ranges is located on Melbourne's metropolitan fringe, at the interface between the urban edges and rural Victoria. This section provides an overview of the Yarra Ranges, the demographics and the documented and specific legal needs that provide the context for the YRCLC.

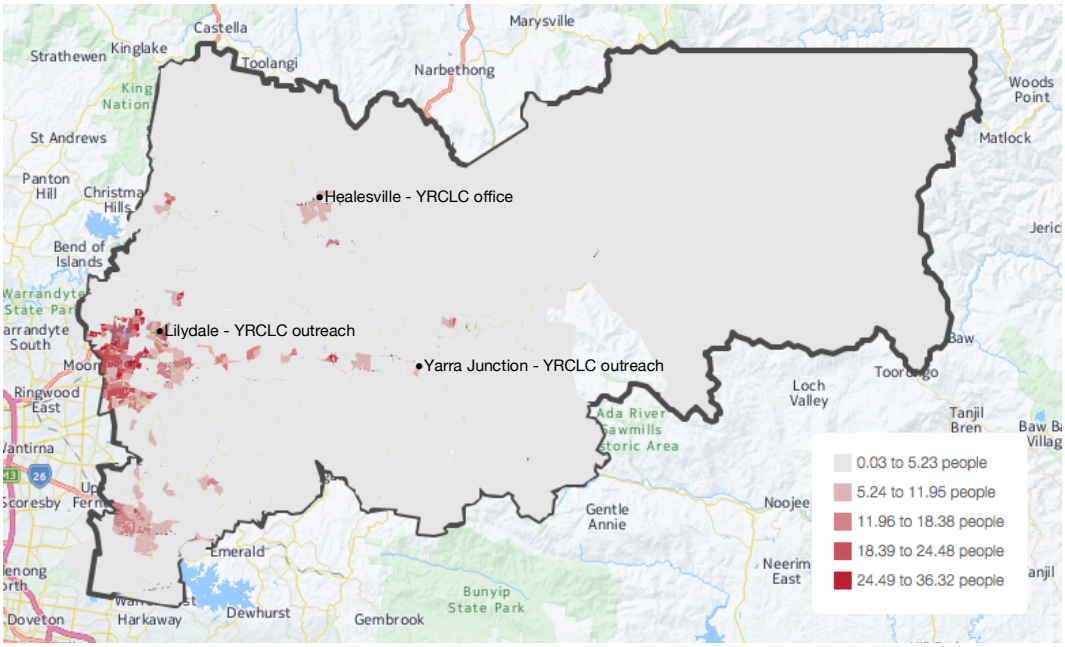
About the Yarra Ranges

Yarra Ranges covers more than 80% of the area of metropolitan Melbourne and has a population of 144,500 according to the 2011 Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) Census of Population and Housing.[ii] Around 70% of the population lives in 3% of the landmass, in the urban hubs around Belgrave and Lilydale on the western boundary of the local government area.[iii] The Dandenong Ranges separates these two areas, making links between them difficult due to the terrain.

The balance of the community is spread across the 40 townships and suburbs in the hills and the valley. Figure 2 below shows the population density of the area.

The region is urban and rural, with a significant amount of land mass dedicated to national parks, state forests and reserves and four significant reservoirs. Rural land is used mainly for agriculture, horticulture and viticulture.

Figure 2: Yarra Ranges Council, Population density, 2011, Enumerated, Persons, Persons per hectare



Source: Australian Bureau of Statistics, Census of Population and Housing, 2011 (Enumerated data)

Transport

The Yarra Ranges is served by a number of rural highways, and due to the terrain, small single carriageway, rural roads. Public transport is limited to public buses and rail lines which terminate at Lilydale and Belgrave. Half of the population does not have access to public transport and one in two residents leaves the Yarra Ranges to go to work. Yarra Ranges ranks second across metropolitan Melbourne for its rate of transport deaths, with 13.3 per 100,000 residents, compared to 9.3 across metropolitan Melbourne.[iv]

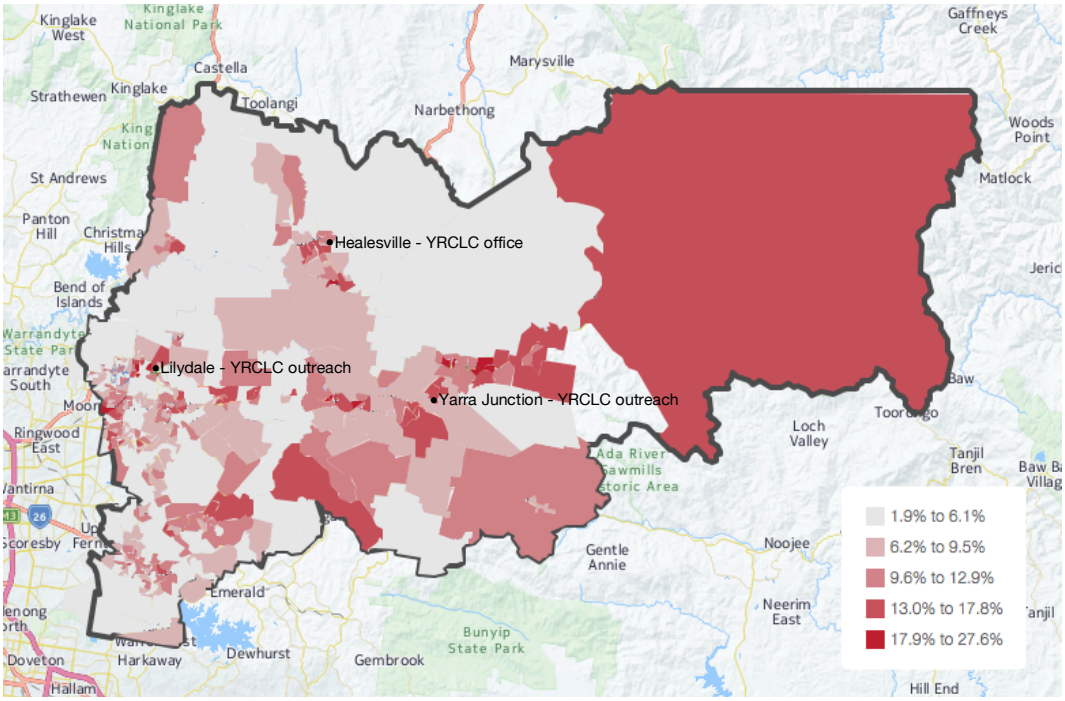
Demographics

The Yarra Ranges population is predominantly Anglo-Celtic. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander residents represent 0.7% of the total population compared to 0.5% for Greater Melbourne. The population is currently young, but the aged population is forecast to increase significantly over the next decade.

Levels of disadvantage

Yarra Ranges council area has a SEIFA index of disadvantage of 1,037.1 ranking the LGA relatively highly, however, there are distinct pockets of disadvantage. Figure 3 shows the areas under housing stress, and in contrast to the population density, this map indicates that levels of disadvantage increase with remoteness from urban areas. There are also clear pockets of disadvantage running along the townships located along the Warburton Highway. Similar patterns of pockets of disadvantage are evident when examining characteristics such as public housing, income or educational levels. This concentration of disadvantage, often combined with relative social isolation and rurality has been recognized in the region for a number of years.[v]

Figure 3: Yarra Ranges Council, Housing stress, 2011, Enumerated



Source: Australian Bureau of Statistics, Census of Population and Housing, 2011 (Enumerated data)

Health and wellbeing data for the Yarra Ranges identifies a range of issues associated with levels of disadvantage including:

- rapidly increasing incidence of diabetes
- high levels of mental health issues, particularly for younger people
- high rates of suicide
- forecast increases in the rate of dementia
- high levels of alcohol use.[vi]

Service providers also reported increasing levels of ice and heroin use, but anecdotally indicated that alcohol remains of greatest concern, particularly for young people.

Legal issues in Yarra Ranges

Research undertaken in 2009[vii] and updated regularly by ECLC has highlighted that the key legal issues facing the Yarra Ranges community are:

- isolation and lack of awareness of legal services
- locations with high levels of disadvantage that are particularly remote from community services, especially legal services.

These themes still resonate in 2016. Service providers consulted for this review reiterated that within the Yarra Ranges the following factors combine to create substantial barriers to residents accessing legal services:

- financial stress
- lack of access to public transport
- poor access via road networks
- lack of services within region, including health and community, as well as private and public legal services.

Poor internet connectivity is a further isolating factor.

In addition to poor public transport and the costs in time and money of travel, the lack of social connection with urban centres were also seen to also contribute to a reluctance to access services.

Stakeholders reported examples of clients requiring fuel vouchers to enable them to attend a service, or of clients walking great distances to attend services.

> *People are unlikely to travel to Ringwood. One in two people in the Yarra Ranges do not live near public transport. The road networks are a barrier – when you don't have a car, it is a long trip. From Healesville to Lilydale, the closest train station is 25 kilometres, so it's a big round trip and you can't just pop in and out.*
>
> ECLC lawyer

The legal needs identified in 2009 endure in 2016 in relation to:

- tenancy and housing related issues
- high levels of family violence.

Most service providers identified housing issues as a significant legal need in the area. There were concerns expressed about growing rates of homelessness, mortgage and rental stress. Rates of reported family violence in the area are increasing. Transport-related legal needs were also identified as significant and growing legal needs in relation to public transport fines and/or motor vehicle related offences, such as driving without a licence. All service providers identified concerns about the legal needs associated with entrenched levels of poverty and disadvantage for pockets of the population. One community service agency reported responding to 4000 calls for emergency relief in 2016, and distributing nearly 2000 food hampers and around 1500 supermarket vouchers.

> *Service access works through both physical location and accessibility and through service literacy and knowledge of how to navigate systems and understanding your rights. But how can people get to services if they can't get there on public transport or don't have a car? If something like the YRCLC makes services more accessible by being in the right physical location, it helps reduce multiple barriers.*
>
> Yarra Ranges council

Service provision and client reach

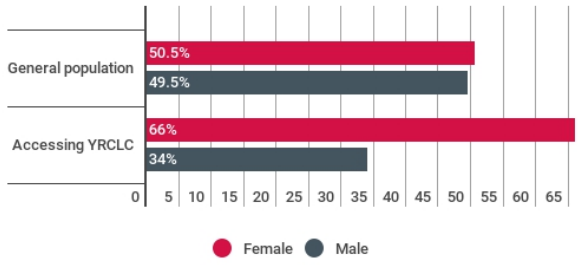
This section profiles the clients and services provided by the YRCLC.

Client demographics

Gender

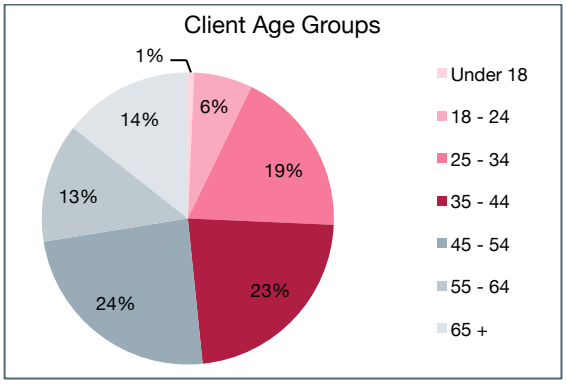
Since February 2014 when client services commenced 440 people have been assisted by the YRCLC, and a further 68 clients from the Yarra Ranges through MABELS. A further 438 Yarra Ranges clients have been assisted through the Intervention Order Support Service at Ringwood Magistrates' Court.

Whilst men and women make up approximately half of the population of the Yarra Ranges council area, clients of the YRCLC are more likely to be female (66%) than male (34%) as shown in the graph below.



Age

Approximately one quarter of clients are aged below 35 years of age, around half of the clients are aged between 35 to 54 years of age, and one quarter are aged 55 years or over. The graph below shows the age distribution of clients.



Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander clients

Whilst Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders make up 0.7% of the Yarra Ranges population, 5% of total clients seen by YRCLC are Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander.

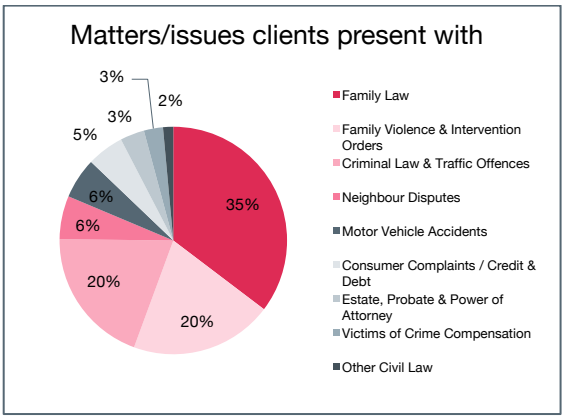
Reasons for seeking legal advice

The number of matters for which advice was sought exceeds the number of clients, as clients will often require advice for more than one matter. More than half of the matters clients presented with related to family law and family violence.

One in three clients seen by the YRCLC has disclosed an indicator of domestic violence.

Current Victoria Police data shows that the 2016 rate of family incidents per 100,000 is 1,081 in the Yarra Ranges Council area, an increase of 18%. In 2011, the rate of family incidents per 100,000 population was 705.[viii]

The third most frequent reason clients seek legal advice relates to traffic offences and criminal law. The graph below sets out the reasons clients sought information and advice.



Lawyers report their time is spent on advice and case work, mainly for vulnerable clients. Case work includes minor criminal, victims of crime, family violence and debt-related matters. Clients are predominantly Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, people with disabilities, elderly clients and women escaping family violence.

Referrals sources

The majority of YRCLC clients (33%) are self-referred or referred by a friend or family. One in five clients was referred by a community support service or a counselling or mediation service.

Referrals out

Most clients who are referred out are referred to private legal services (39%) or to a counselling or mediation service (17%). Complex family violence matters are referred to the ECLC Family Violence team. Warm referrals are made to VLA for matters relating to crime and infringements. The balance of referrals are made to police, courts, health and community services and government agencies, such as Centrelink.

Community Legal Education

In addition to providing legal information and advice to individual clients, the YRCLC provides a range of community legal education (CLE) sessions in the community, providing information about specific legal topics of interest to the community, or generalist information to specific groups. Since the Centre opened, 28 CLE sessions have been provided, reaching a total of 530 participants. Sessions have ranged from:

- a presentation on family violence to the Yarra Ranges Youth Network meeting (15 participants)
- a general community session on 'Finding Your Voice' on wills, power of attorney and Advance Care Plans to 100 people
- an introduction to ECLC and a legal health check for a senior citizen's club with 25 participants
- 'Legal Lingo Bingo' for 10 council and community-based groups for aged clients, each with eight to ten participants, including one Italian group.

Community development work

The YRCLC participates in a wide range of local community networks including:

- Eastern Disability Action Group
- Eastern Homelessness Network
- Hazel Hams House Network
- Healesville Alcohol and Other Drugs Working Group
- Healesville Connections
- Healesville & District Service Providers Network
- Healesville Family Violence (Healesville! Change the Story) Working Group
- Healesville Homelessness Working Group
- Healesville Hospital Redevelopment Liaison Group
- Kilsyth Community Planning Group
- Lilydale Community Workers Network
- Migrant Settlement Committee
- Sherbrooke Community Workers Network
- Upper Yarra Services Network
- Yarra Ranges Emergency Relief Network
- Yarra Ranges Youth Service Provider Network (also Knox, Maroondah).

The Community Development Officer also participates in a range national and state CLC networks convened by the FCLC and the NACLC, focusing on community development and rural, regional and remote (RRR) interests.

Building relationships with the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community

ECLC has been working with the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community in the eastern region over many years. In addition to general community development work YRCLC has identified the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community are one of three priority populations.

Given the significance of Healesville to the Aboriginal community, and the strong community presence, YRCLC has focused on further strengthening relationships with the key organisations of BWAHS, HICSA and Mullum Mullum Indigenous Gathering Place. ECLC Family Violence team attends the BWAHS each week to meet with the community and provide advice in relation to family violence, family law, child protection or other legal issues. Staff frequently attend HICSA to provide advice or to meet with clients. A Pro bono wills support workshop has been held at HICSA for clients, and a further workshop is scheduled for next year and is currently fully booked. ECLC also has a range of formal links with the Aboriginal Community Controlled Organisations, including:

- YRCLC staff member on the Board of HICSA
- participation in the Indigenous Family Violence Regional Action Group (IFVRAG)
- membership of the Regional Aboriginal Justice Advisory Committee (RAJAC)

In addition to the formal relationships, there are multiple informal links made:

- regular attendance at community lunches
- attending community legal help days at Mullum Mullum Indigenous Gathering Place
- participating in NAIDOC and Reconciliation Action week celebrations.

Improving access to services for people who are homeless or at risk

Through participation in local networks and other advocacy related work, the YRCLC had a significant impact on a range of initiatives relating to people who are homeless or may become homeless.

Through membership of the Healesville Hospital Redevelopment Liaison Group, the YRCLC has contributed to the successful collaborative advocacy for the inclusion of a publicly available shower in the redeveloped Healesville Hospital and Yarra Valley Health Centre, scheduled to open in 2017. This will be available for people who are homeless and was included as a result of YRCLC's successful advocacy. Currently people who are homeless and sleeping rough can access public showers at local swimming pools, but these are closed in winter. There is no other publicly available shower in the region.

The Liaison Group has also developed protocols for people accessing the community shower. A booking system has been established and the person will need to be accompanied by a worker. As part of their visit, the client will have the opportunity to consult a range of health practitioners in nearby consultation rooms with the aim of increasing vulnerable clients' access to primary health care.

The YRCLC has also successfully advocated strongly for the establishment of local pharmacotherapy services in Healesville through the Alcohol and Other Drugs Working Group. A 12-month trial is now in place to provide these services for five clients. Previously, this service had to be accessed through a round trip to Lilydale, and clients required a worker to accompany them. This new approach demonstrates that significant savings can be achieved for community services as well as improving the quality of life for clients.

Service impact

This section of the report addresses the impact the YRCLC has had on clients of the service, service providers, the service system and the local community. It also addresses the impact of not having the Centre in the Yarra Ranges.

The impact of Yarra Ranges CLC for clients

Key challenges for clients

Service providers itemised a range of challenges faced by people with legal needs in the Yarra Ranges. These included:

- tenancy matters
- transport issues
- employment / unemployment
- financial problems
- physical and mental health issues
- literacy and service literacy challenges.

The experience of family violence was highlighted by all service providers, made more challenging when combined with rural isolation, access to guns, few local services and limited public transport.

Service providers and the YRCLC report that the impacts of the 2009 Black Saturday bushfires endure in the region. For some, the after-effects of the experience include issues relating to housing, unemployment, financial issues and family relationships, often complicated by mental health and drug and alcohol issues. There is a sense that many clients are experiencing undiagnosed post-traumatic stress disorder. Legal processes for compensation for some affected residents are still in train, with settlements expected in 2017 and those involved reporting that the protracted process has extended the trauma experienced. One community service provider reported that '*The long term impact of the Black Saturday bushfires continues, and Healesville has really borne a lot of the brunt of that.*'

Numerous stakeholders identified problems in the region with ice and heroin addiction, while also stating that alcohol use is also a significant issue, particularly when combined with high reliance on cars in the absence of public transport, particularly at night or on the weekend. High levels of unemployment and casualised employment were also reported as key challenges for people with legal needs in the area. With reliance on private cars for transport combined with tenuous employment opportunities, service providers often found that legal needs included matters such as fines for unlicensed driving and may be in addition to a range of other legal needs arising from financial and housing stress.

Mental health issues were also seen as a key challenge for clients, either drug-induced and/or arising from social and health issues of poverty and social isolation. Others highlighted the issues of homelessness, 'a lot of rough sleepers', transient population and entrenched and generational poverty.

> *People think of 'the east' as suburbs like Kew. In the outer east, there are real pockets of poverty and disadvantage, and they don't get listened to.*
>
> Anchor

Main legal needs of clients

Service providers reported that the main legal needs of clients referred to the YRCLC included:

- family violence matters
- family law matters
- child protection issues
- housing, tenancy and homelessness
- traffic infringements
- VCAT matters
- responding to fines or unpaid fines
- financial matters
- Centrelink issues.

These needs are reinforced by the Yarra Ranges service data.

Assistance provided to clients

The Centre responds to clients who are experiencing multiple and interlinked issues, with legal issues and a broad range of health and welfare issues. The experience of poverty and isolation were often described as compounding factors. For example, the experience for some women escaping family violence in the Yarra Ranges was heightened by the combination of physical and geographic isolation, and for some, by the added danger of their partner's gun ownership or access to a gun.

Lawyers reported an example of a client experiencing family violence who lived on a remote property and did not have a drivers' licence. The client was not aware of the YRCLC, but was referred by friends who knew about the Centre. The YRCLC assisted the client with a warm referral for housing support. The housing agency provided a prompt response, while the Centre assisted the client with a Family Violence Intervention Order application, which was dealt with expeditiously. The client was able to remove herself from her partner's property, relocate to a safe house and gain the support of a Family Violence Intervention Order. She has since safely separated and divided assets with her former partner.

> *We routinely see clients who are not linked into any services. They are often experiencing isolation from friends and family. They say that their partners have moved them further out and they are without support networks.*
>
> YRCLC lawyer

Service providers reported examples of assistance provided to their clients to assist in housing matters and neighbourhood disputes, made more complex by the clients' significant disability. Other examples included advocating for clients in relation to fines, infringements, and neighbourhood disputes.

For a small cohort of clients with complex needs, support has been provided by the Centre for long periods of time of up to 12 months.

The impact of the service for clients

Stakeholders and clients were asked about the impact the service had on their situation. Of the 44 clients responding to a YRCLC client survey:

- 91% reported that the advice they received was '*good, just what I wanted*' (59%) or '*great, better than I expected*' (32%)
- 89% reported that they now knew how to move forward with their legal problem

Feedback from clients indicated that they felt '*more confident*' '*relieved*' and '*reassured*' after receiving their legal advice, reinforcing the levels of psychological distress that can be associated with a legal problem.

> *(The consultation) has taken a load off my mind. I was really concerned.*
>
> Client

Through the combined services provided by ECLC including the Family Violence duty lawyer at Ringwood Court, and professional networks with the Family Relationship Centre based in Ringwood, and providing outreach services in the Yarra Ranges, the Centre's lawyer reported that '*we can see family violence and family law matters before the client's attendance at court. Our advice can*

help unpack issues and lay the foundation for successful mediation or dealing with an FVIO. We help alleviate the client's burden at court.'

BWAHS reported that clients could have highly complex needs, particularly when child protection issues were raised. Having access to advice from the YRCLC, as a local and trusted legal service was invaluable and assisted families who may otherwise make agreements without advice, due to the pressures of a family crisis. HICSA reinforced that '*the community are comfortable going to YRCLC'* and therefore clients who would otherwise not seek advice, received legal information and advice.

Across the board, service providers consistently reported that without the YRCLC, some clients would simply not access legal advice. While others would find ways to seek legal advice, be it through telephone access, potentially a private lawyer or attending the ECLC's Boronia office, the most vulnerable clients – those without private transport, without a substantial income or home, or with a disability, drug and alcohol issue, mental or physical health issue or experiencing multiple layers of disadvantage – **would be unlikely to address their legal issues.**

Service providers who could recall the situation before the establishment of the YRCLC (before 2014) reported that:

- *Clients would turn up at court, get a VLA lawyer or be unrepresented. If it is not court-related, our clients leave it until the last minute because a lawyer is too expensive.*
- *Without YRCLC, there is no access to legal services. Public transport is limited. We recently had a promotion around oral health, but people had not been to the dentist for years. People would not go to Boronia. It is bad enough getting to Lilydale. People don't have the money to get on the train. We can refer to the Victorian Aboriginal Legal Services, but it's in Fitzroy.*

This corresponded with a YRCLC lawyer's perceptions who reported that *'I was a night service lawyer at the Boronia office for five years before the YRCLC opened, and never saw a client from the Yarra Ranges area in that time. I don't know where clients would have gone as there are limited options to see a private lawyer in the region.'*

Clients interviewed for the review who had extensive contact with the Centre felt that their personal situations would have been significantly different if they had not received support, with one reporting that he would be *'Dead, either by suicide or shot by police. I come across very frustrated to the police.'* Another client who had experienced years of domestic violence and was assisted by the YRCLC to safely leave after previous unsuccessful attempts believed that '*I could not have done it. I tried several times to leave my husband, but there was no safe place to go to until the CLC was involved.'*

From the Centre's perspective *'if the YRCLC was not there, there would be nothing – that's the reality. Some clients just wouldn't be seen, and all the issues associated with that would occur – clients would leave fines unpaid, not deal with issues, their legal matters would escalate to criminal charges, warrants, custody for some…'*

Other services agreed that without the YRCLC in the area, their client's legal problems would spiral out of control. *'It makes a big difference to have a face-to-face appointment with a lawyer, especially for a young homeless person, without an income. They tend to have problems like racking up transport fines. If they get access to legal advice, they can get on top of it, before it bleeds them dry.'*

> *If there was no YRCLC, the client probably would not get help. They wouldn't travel without a car. It helps to have a face. Things get too much for people in crisis. It helps to be able to walk in the door and talk to a person.*
>
> HICCI

Impacts for services

Service providers were consulted about their views on their working relationship with the YRCLC.

Referral processes

Service providers were satisfied with the process for referring a client to the YRCLC. All providers consulted had direct working relationships with the Centre, and would usually phone through a direct referral. Services located in Healesville reported that they may drop in to the Centre to discuss a referral, or call ahead with client details, and send the client to walk over.

The ECLC Family Violence team attends BWAHS each week to foster two-way relationships between staff, the organisations and community members, whether or not client appointments occur. This simplifies the referral process, and allows for BWAHS staff and clients to have an initial face-to-face discussion with the lawyer. Matters raised have included family violence and child protection issues. Indigenous specific agencies reported that community members are comfortable consulting the YRCLC, because of the level of trust built through the personal relationships.

> *We're happy with the referral process. It works, we are lucky they are there.*
>
> HICCI

Some examples were provided of clients who had been referred to the YRCLC but could not be assisted due to legal conflicts. In each of these cases, there was a clear explanation for the conflict, and the information was accepted and understood. Some clients reported being disappointed, but accepted the reasons and would have preferred to have known earlier.

Service providers also reported that the warm referrals made or accepted by the YRCLC, were also very helpful, particularly for vulnerable clients, or those feeling overwhelmed by a range of problems.

Secondary consultations

A number of agencies were particularly pleased to have access to secondary consultations with the YRCLC. They felt this was possible because the Centre is local and the organisations have established professional relationships. Having access to secondary consultations was considered 'invaluable' and strengthened the general service network. Service providers also felt that the access to information and advice from the CLC made a significant difference to their client and the quality of service they could provide to their clients.

Aboriginal agency representatives also reported that it was beneficial to be able to seek advice informally, for example, on a referral pathway, because they are in regular contact with lawyers from ECLC, through their participation in various community events and community networks.

> *Their knowledge is huge in terms of other agencies and support available.*
>
> Redwood Community Centre

Efficiency and effectiveness of working relationship

The working relationship with YRCLC was perceived to be efficient and effective. Some agencies reported that with more staff, or longer opening hours, more clients could be supported. However, there was a general appreciation that having the service available for three to four days per week was far preferable to having no service.

The YRCLC was deemed to be responsive and reliable in their professional relationships with other service providers.

Impact on the local service system

Service providers were unequivocal in stating that the YRCLC had made a positive difference to their clients, to the community and to the local service system.

In addition to the provision of legal services, the Centre's broader work on community development activities, participation in service networks and local advocacy was seen as a great contribution to the local community.

HICSA reported that it was '*a big relief when the YRCLC was set up here in 2014.'* A service provider located outside of Healesville felt that '*the only downside is that they are not here in Warburton. By car, it's 30 minutes to Healesville. Otherwise it is two hours by bus into Lilydale and then out to Healesville.'* Others reported that '*transport is the big issue... If services are not in the valley, they are located in Ringwood. Whilst it costs for services to be in the valley, it is a benefit, even if they are only there for a couple of days a week, it helps.'*

> *The YRCLC Community Development Officer has reinvigorated the local service provider network…*
>
> Eastern Health

For the local community

General

Stakeholders believed that the YRCLC had made an enormous difference to the region through their community development work and had led a number of community initiatives in Healesville. They noted that they frequently encounter ECLC staff as members of various committees, and that they are '*always there, advocating for the Centre and the benefits of visiting there. I encounter ECLC staff on local committees relating to housing and they are there contributing, and advocating…'*

> *It makes an immense difference that the YRCLC is available and is a local service. The legal service fits into the community – it is service neutral…it can gather agencies to work together. They can broker the work on legal issues that fall out of issues like homelessness, schooling. The Centre is a pivotal community glue, local and friendly.*
>
> Anchor

Addressing family violence issues

With the YRCLC based in a council-owned Community Link building with other services such as a public library, it is a safe and de-identified space, which provides privacy for family violence clients. There are parking facilities, and clients report through the lawyers, that they have found the Centre easy to access. Service providers indicated that many victims of family violence in the Yarra Ranges would not feel comfortable travelling distances to access legal or support services, because their partner may become aware of this. It is much safer for a client to travel to a local service where they can walk in and gain information and advice, without raising questions.

The ECLC MABELS pilot project is located in the Yarra Ranges (and Maroondah) local government areas, providing specific support to women experiencing family violence. These additional outreach locations provide another safe, and deidentified space for women to have access to legal information and advice at a critical time in their life, and the life of their children.

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community members make up five per cent of the YRCLC client base. This is considerably higher than the community's 0.7% representation in the general population.

Service providers reported a range of challenges facing the community including '*a disproportionate number of Aboriginal women experiencing family violence, but who do not report their experience, the over-representation of women impacted by family violence, over-representation of Aboriginal children in out of home care and a number of people who do not identify as Indigenous.'*

Community organisations reported that YRCLC has '*helped us to respond to these issues. Access to YRCLC is very viable for families in distress, whereas accessing Aboriginal specific legal services is hard, especially for families in Healesville.'*

Partnerships and working relationships

ECLC has strategically and consciously worked over the past five or six years to develop strong relationships with the Aboriginal community.

Key to YRCLC's success in building relationships with the Aboriginal community has been taking the time to meet and get to know the community, and listen to their issues. BWAHS reported that the '*relationship with the YRCLC has been built over a number of years, and has developed strong levels of trust, which means we can consult* each *other.'* HICSA reported strengthening their relationship with ECLC *'as a service that understands our issues.'*

The ECLC also highlighted the '*time required to build relationships and trust, be welcomed into the community and talk to people who haven't had contact with lawyers or received legal services previously*', noting that the CLC has helped clients who no other services have been able to assist. However, staff also noted that '*once you have a relationship and trust and respect, all else flows.'*

BWAHS reported that there are strong relationships at the organisational and community levels. YRCLC staff report that regularly attending informal events has been important for building trust and local knowledge and familiarity and that '*the partnership has grown.*'

The ECLC observed that the benefits of the strong community development role are strong relationships and referrrals, such as those from HICSA, Mullum Mullum Indigenous Gathering Place, BWAHS and other agencies. It also results in referrals for legal and non-legal matters, such as financial counseling to EACH and to EDVOS for family violence support, and for support at court, particularly in relation to family violence intervention orders.

The YRCLC has also facilitated the attendance of the VLA at community gatherings and lunches.

> *ECLC are outstanding…They really involve themselves in the community. The lawyers regularly come to our service, they attend community lunches and help community organisations. Lots of organisations have a nice Reconciliation Action Plan on paper – but ECLC actually live it and do it.'*
>
> BWAHS

Staff reflections

Staff of the YRCLC felt that some of the reasons for their successes included *'starting small in the beginning, and then growing. We weren't too ambitious, and we did a lot of work before we opened the doors to clients.'*

Staff also noted the importance of *'getting out there and making partnerships work. The service is now seen as trustworthy, and that therefore supports good referral pathways.'*

The Centre's community development approach has also been important and was attributed to the close connections to the community, and strong understanding of the experience of disadvantage. The work on advocating for the community shower, for example, can seem to be out of scope, however, when it is understood that there is no other alternative for some people in the middle of winter in the Yarra Ranges, there is a clear link to health, wellbeing, social participation and employment opportunities, all of which have a legal dimension.

Staff also noted that extended leave or staff turnover can be challenging for a small service, but as part of ECLC, the YRCLC has access to a larger staff team and has the capability to back-fill.

The issues relating to funding were seen as disillusioning and enervating. However there was a passionate commitment to the work of the Centre.

Opportunities and challenges

Opportunities

Stakeholders felt that there are multiple opportunities for the Centre, with most concentrating on ways in which more specialised services could be provided and noted that '*any limitations to the service are really funding based.*'

Suggestions and opportunities to enhance service delivery included:

- providing more hours of service to reduce waiting times and allow more clients to be seen - *have something available every day of the week, building on what is there now*
- more information sessions
- a night-time service to improve access for people unable to attend day time appointments (as the Community Link building closes at 5pm) and to improve access to areas of law covered
- increase partnerships with other townships that are a focal point for disadvantage, such as Yarra Junction
- expand service delivery to neighbouring areas, in particular the Murrindindi Shire which experiences even higher levels of disadvantage and lack of access to legal services by providing outreach support to centres such as Marysville, Eildon or Alexandria
- increase partnerships and expand service delivery around elder abuse, assistance with wills and powers of attorney, advanced care directives and working with clients of the aged care facility in Healesville
- create a specialist Aboriginal team of the legal service as there is high need to deal with complex legal issues, in particular assisting in cases of Aboriginal children on protective orders
- increase engagement and work with young people and schools around respectful relationships and keeping safe

Stakeholders also felt that there were opportunities to:

- develop and pilot partnership models with multiple community and government services across the catchment, addressing family violence and other legal issues impacting on health and wellbeing
- develop ECLC's knowledge and professional practice around working at the intersection of legal and health services in the context of semi-rural communities, particularly in relation to specialist topics such as addressing family violence and building relationships with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities, and share that knowledge through evaluations and conference presentations
- provide training to local professionals, particularly in family violence and related legal issues

Challenges

The challenges associated with establishing the Centre are clearly manifold, as the ten years or so of advocacy contributed by ECLC and many of the stakeholders attests. Providing services through a small out-posted office in a semi-rural area with difficult geographic access and road networks, sparsely populated townships, limited to non-

existent public transport, infrastructure deficits, including limited internet access whilst experiencing professional isolation and responding to communities experiencing concentrated disadvantage is in itself sufficiently challenging.

Across all of the stakeholders however, despite the challenges of the work they had invested to open and maintain the service, all were highly cognisant of the value of the service to their clients, organisations and communities, highly appreciative that it existed and profoundly determined to maintain the Centre.

The challenge that most stakeholders found too *'heartbreaking'* or *'devastating'* to contemplate was any further threat to the viability of the Centre through funding cutbacks, having already responded to funding uncertainty in 2014 after the first few months of operation.

When we thought funding would be reduced, we were devastated. The community's expectations were set up with the Centre. If funding was withdrawn, we would be devastated. What would the community do?

HICSA

Yarra Ranges Council is a strong advocate for the YRCLC to stay.

Yarra Ranges Council

If funding was not continued, it would be a devastating loss to the community. There are huge risks… Valuable information would be lost from a research perspective, but the priority is the hands-on service delivery accessible in the Yarra Ranges and staffed by passionate, knowledgable professionals.

Anchor

Conclusions

With a staff of only 3 EFT, and part-time operation between Tuesday to Thursday, in less than three years, the YRCLC has provided legal advice and information to over 500 clients, provided almost 600 advices, and reached a further 530 people through community legal education sessions. The Centre is meeting its key performance targets in relation to:

- providing quality targeted and integrated legal advice and casework services
- developing and undertaking a range of community development activities
- developing partnerships of agencies to meet the objectives of the Centre.

Recruitment of volunteers is only partially met at this time.

The Centre has successfully met its community development and partnership priorities to:

- address family violence issues
- build relationships with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities
- improve access to services for people who are homeless or at risk of homelessness

The focus of the review has been to reflect on and examine the impact of the Centre from a community perspective. The key themes that emerge from the review are:

- the challenges facing a community legal service in establishing relationships and a profile in a semi-rural outer metropolitan area
- the time and effort that has been invested by the YRCLC in successfully establishing relationships with services, community groups and the community in the outer east and the history and local knowledge that has been generated through this process
- the success of the YRCLC in slowly building strong and trusting relationships with the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities and community organisations
- the positive impact that the YRCLC is having on vulnerable clients, in particular:
  - isolated rural women experiencing family violence
  - Aboriginal clients with complex legal needs, including family violence and child protection matters
  - people experiencing homelessness
  - young people
  - people with disabilities.

The single, most significant impact of the Centre, agreed by all service providers, was that it enabled vulnerable and disadvantaged clients in the region to have access to legal information and advice. Service providers also all agreed that if the YRCLC was not operating in the region, a majority of vulnerable and disadvantaged clients would simply not seek legal information, advice or support for their legal issues because they would not have a local legal service option. There was further agreement that this would inevitably result in the escalation of relatively minor legal matters to more serious issues, including criminal charges with all the associated flow-on affects to individuals and families.

The review of the YRCLC has provided an important opportunity for a stocktake and to reflect on the impact of a maturing CLC service on the vulnerable and under-serviced communities in the Yarra Ranges, and on the service system that supports these communities.

With more funds, it is clear that there are multiple opportunities for the YRCLC to deliver more services and reach more people. However, the single most important support required by the Centre and by the community is that of certainty of funding, which will enable further consolidation and growth.

The review strongly demonstrates that the YRCLC is a critical service that should receive continued, on-going funding to enable the Centre to continue to service the most vulnerable and marginalised members of the community and make a significant different to the broader community.

Endnotes

[i] The Bushfire Legal Help was a collaboration of the Victorian legal profession's peak bodies - Victoria Legal Aid, the Public Interest Law Clearing House, the Victorian Bar, the Victoria Law Foundation, the Law Institute of Victoria and the Federation of Community Legal Centres.

[ii] http://profile.id.com.au/yarra-ranges/population

[iii] http://www.yarraranges.vic.gov.au/About-Council/About-the-region/Demographic-profile

[iv] Yarra Ranges Community Safety Background Paper, 2013-2018

[v] Smith, M., Wilson, S and Budge, D *A Community Centre for the Yarra Ranges – Legal Needs Study and Proposal,* ECLC (2010)

[vi] Yarra Ranges Health and Wellbeing Profile 2012/2013

[vii] ibid

[viii] https://www.crimestatistics.vic.gov.au/crime-statistics/latest-crime-data/family-incidents-0