



New tools for lawyers to help clients with trauma and mental ill-health

A new toolkit will build skills in lawyers to support clients with trauma and mental ill-health with consultations finding many seeking free legal help found the system re-traumatising.

The [Trauma Informed Organisational Toolkit](#) will be launched by the Commonwealth Attorney-General, the Hon Mark Dreyfus KC MP, at Parliament House in Canberra on 16 November.

It guides free legal services like legal aid commissions and community legal centers on trauma-informed and rights-based principles across all aspects of service design.

The *With You* project is a response to the prevalence of mental ill-health, suicidality and distress among clients who seek free legal services. National consultations with 534 people found that interactions with the legal system can often be traumatic.

The project, which is led by Legal Aid NSW on behalf of National Legal Aid, will also deliver training for the legal assistance sector across the country - the first of its type designed with the help of those with experience of distressing encounters with the legal system. The training component is due to be delivered early 2024.

Lived experience advocate Lyanne Morel, from Victoria, said that the importance of lawyers that understand mental ill-health, and can support clients nonjudgmentally, cannot be overstated.

“The day that my lawyer read my brief, then heard my story, not just listened, but heard me, that was the day that I felt hope again,” she said. “Trauma informed and empathetic practice should be the absolute bare minimum for services that engage with all clients that might be vulnerable and/or systemically disadvantaged.”

With You Project Manager, Legal Aid NSW, Jennifer Chen said that the toolkit offers practical advice to help guide legal assistance services of all aspects of service design.

“Trauma is an everyday reality for most, if not all, of our clients. If we are to deliver effective services, we need to be able to recognise and respond to clients with trauma histories,” she said.

“This means understanding what a trauma response can look like; how it can impact memory and communication; providing legal advice in a way that can be heard, and building trust with our clients it has been undermined by a trauma history.”

National consultations, in almost every state and territory, spoke with clients who had experienced distress, including people subject to compulsory treatment, carers; family, civil and crime lawyers and other professionals.

Consultations found that many legal assistance clients had trauma histories that led them to need legal assistance, and many found the legal system re-traumatising.



Associate Professor of Law, Dr Chris Maylea noted that the toolkit makes specific recommendations around how free legal services can be safe, effective and preserve dignity.

“This includes putting the voices and views of clients at the centre of how legal services are designed and delivered; working in an integrated way with allied professionals like social workers or financial counsellors; trauma-informed supervision for lawyers to protect against vicarious trauma; and systems change work,” he said.

The *With You* toolkit is based on a co-design approach, which means it has been designed alongside people with lived experience of mental ill-health to ensure they have a say in the services they are receiving.

The training and toolkit is freely available to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Legal Services, Community Legal Centres, Family Violence Prevention Legal Services, and Legal Aid Commissions.

Jen Chen, Lyanne Morel and Dr Chris Maylea are available for interview.

Media contact | Georgia Clark | 0438 606 092