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Report:
Legal Aid NSW
Client Satisfaction Survey 2011
July 2011

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

As part of a series of client experience and satisfaction studies, 502 consenting clients who had received legal advice services from a Legal Aid NSW solicitor at a Legal Aid NSW office, with or without additional minor legal assistance being provided, completed a Computer Assisted Telephone Interview (CATI) averaging around 18 minutes.

Legal Aid NSW recruited a total of 829 clients to participate in the survey. An oversample was obtained to ensure Taverner Research could successfully contact and interview 500 clients as part of the survey. 715 of the 829 clients who gave written consent to their contact details being provided to Taverner Research were called, with 502 clients successfully contacted and interviewed.

Results from the 502 interviewed are summarised in this report.

Interviews were conducted and completed in the period from 2 May to 21 June 2011. The sample included 21 clients who indicated they would need the assistance of an interpreter to complete the survey. Almost no clients indicated that they would need assistance due to a disability, and none required a face to face interview although 11% indicated in the interview that they had special needs due to a disability.

93% of the sample were satisfied (rating 6-10 on a zero to 10 scale) with the service provided by clerical staff with only 3% dissatisfied (ratings of 0-4).

86% were satisfied with the service provided by the solicitor (rating 6-10 on a zero to 10 scale) with only 8% dissatisfied (ratings of 0-4).

58% considered the service from their solicitor was better than expected while 14% considered the service was worse than expected.

It was concluded from the detailed results that:

- Satisfaction with the service is high.
- Satisfaction with services provided by solicitors is not quite as high as satisfaction with the clerical staff, but both are over 85%.
- The main causes for dissatisfaction appear to be:
 - Advice appointments being scheduled too late to meet the client's timeframe, such as a court deadline.
 - Restrictions on the services provided mainly due to service policies about who is eligible to receive a particular service, or restrictions regarding who qualifies for legal aid.

- Informing staff about safety concerns and dissatisfaction with the help provided by Legal Aid NSW in response.
 - For a few, the actual quality of the work done was considered poor. A substantial proportion of these can be attributed to lack of time or poor communication with a few reporting what they considered to be mistakes about the facts of their case.
 - It must be kept in mind here that we have only the client's perspective on these cases. Given a fuller picture including the perspective of the solicitor involved, it might be found that some clients were unrealistic or presented great difficulties for anyone attempting to assist them.
- Clients with special needs are generally having those needs met.
 - A possible gap is in the area of providing assistance for those who plan to represent themselves, where a slightly higher percentage indicated that they had not received the assistance they believed was needed to represent themselves effectively. This could be due to unrealistic expectations about the level of assistance that can be provided before legal aid is granted or if it is not granted.

It is recommended that:

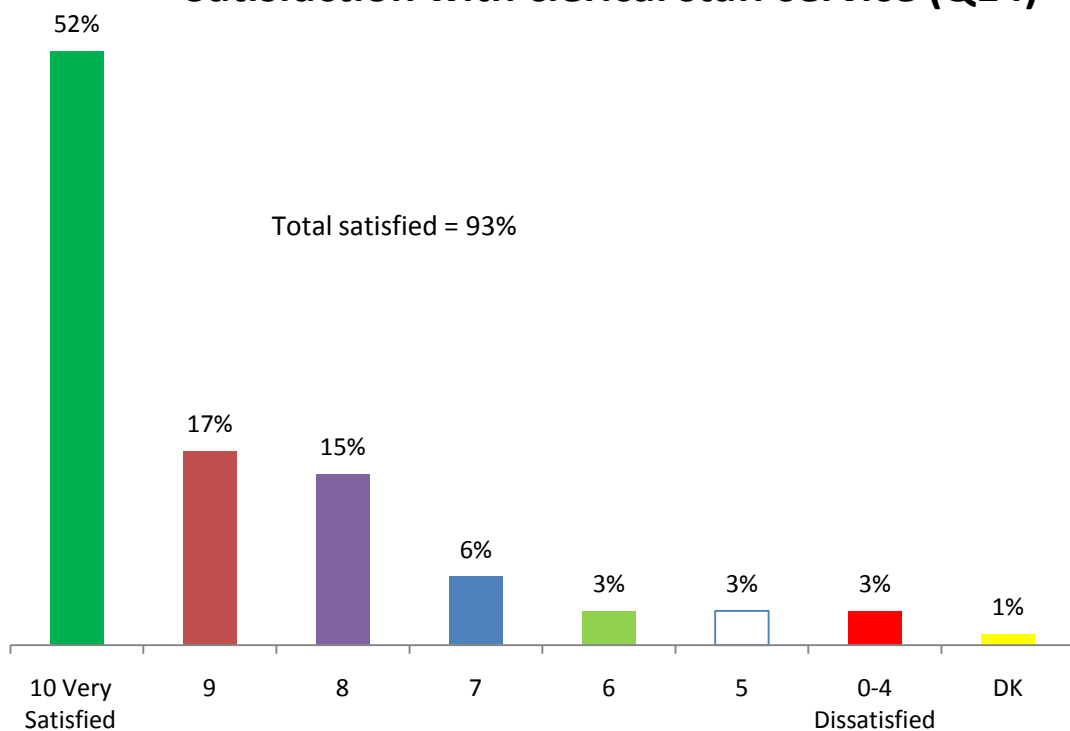
- Legal Aid NSW should sustain the resources currently devoted to maintaining the high level of staff commitment, concern for client needs and respectful treatment of clients revealed by the survey results.
- Further improvement in outcomes might be achieved by focussing particular attention on a range of specific issues identified that arise for client sub-groups. Ensuring so far as possible that appointments fit within the client's time frame and that other specific needs are identified and met could raise the high level of satisfaction even further. More detailed suggestions are made at the end of the Condensed and Full reports which follow.

CONDENSED REPORT

As part of a series of client satisfaction surveys, Legal Aid NSW commissioned Taverner Research to interview clients who had received an advice service (with or without minor assistance) about their experience of the service. This section of the report summarises the results, conclusions and implications.

1. Outcomes and Satisfaction

Satisfaction with clerical staff service (Q14)



93% were satisfied (rating 6-10 on a zero to 10 scale) with the service provided by clerical staff

52% were very satisfied (rating 10)

3% were dissatisfied (0-4)

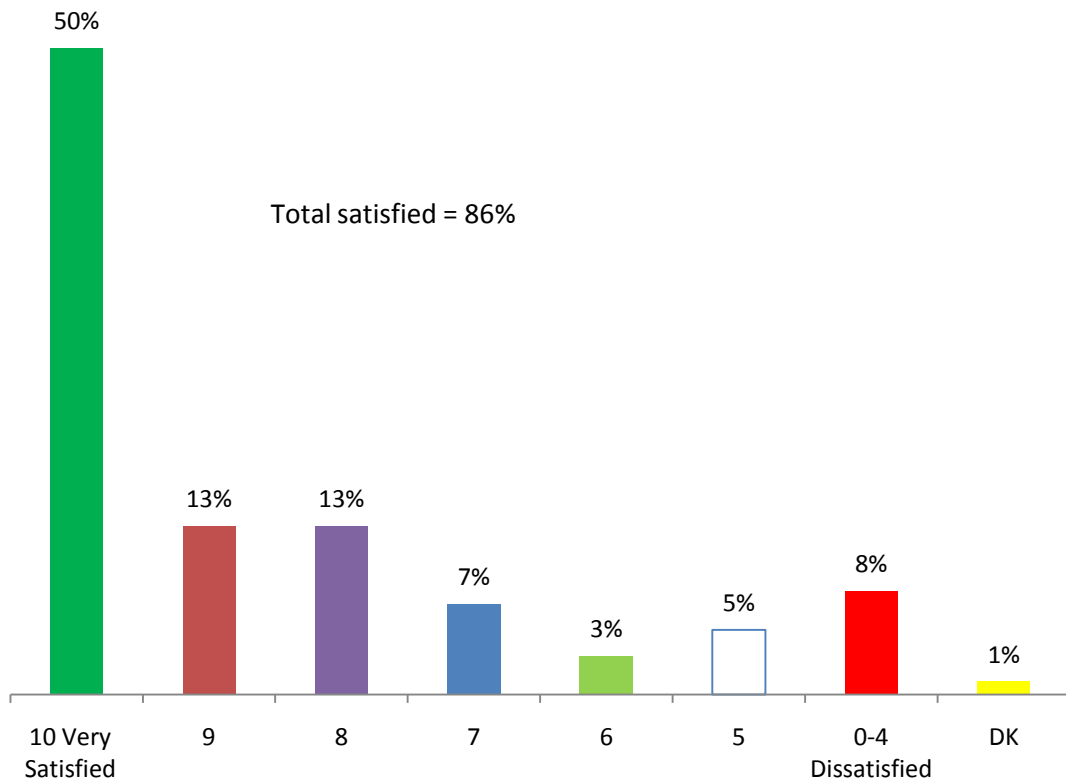
4% gave other replies including ratings of 5 (3%) or being unable to give a rating (1%)

The mean rating was 8.8

The 15 who were dissatisfied gave as reasons that client service was poor or the staff were felt to be unhelpful, that service was slow, or that they were not given good advice, were given no advice, were given incorrect information, or that staff did not answer their questions.

Ratings of five specific aspects of the service given by clerical staff revealed very high satisfaction (90% to 96% satisfied) with all aspects for those who felt able to give a rating.

Satisfaction with solicitor's service (Q18)



86% were satisfied with the service provided by the solicitor (rating 6-10 on a zero to 10 scale)

50% were Very satisfied (rating 10)

8% were dissatisfied (rating 0-4)

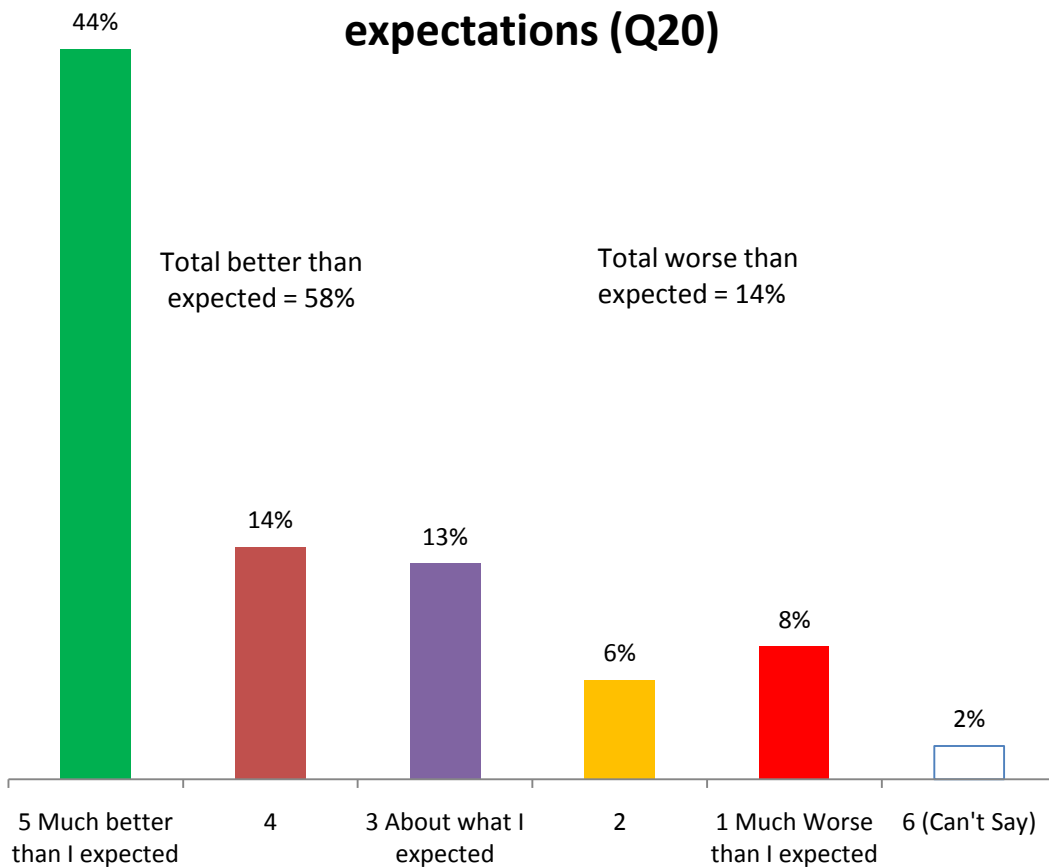
6% gave other replies including ratings of 5 (5%) or being unable to give a rating (1%)

The mean rating was 8.4

The more common reasons for dissatisfaction among the 40 who were dissatisfied were feeling the solicitor did not listen (48%), did not treat the client with respect (30%), did not give assistance to understand their legal problem (28%), did not give enough assistance or refused to assist as desired (25%). A few reported that the solicitor did not answer questions (18%), the advice was incorrect or based on an inaccurate understanding of the facts (13%), that the solicitor did not help with special needs (13%), was too rushed (10%) or was insensitive to the client's background or culture (8%). Other points were each mentioned by only one or two dissatisfied clients.

Ratings of specific aspects of the service provided by the solicitor showed quite similar distributions to overall satisfaction. The only aspect that had a mean rating below 8.5 was the solicitor's ability to help clients who had special needs due to disability. Even for this aspect, among the 16% who gave a rating on this item (with 84% saying it was not applicable to them or that they could not give a rating) only one in eight were actually dissatisfied.

How well solicitor's service met expectations (Q20)



When asked to assess how well the service from the solicitor met their expectations, 58% considered the service better than expected and 14% considered the service was worse than expected.

The most common reason for disappointment (saying the service was worse than expected) included receiving less assistance or not receiving the type of assistance wanted (13% of the total sample, 49% of the disappointed) and/or that they were not eligible for the assistance sought (3% overall, 11% of the disappointed); some felt the solicitor did not listen or understand, was unhelpful or appeared not interested (3% overall, but 20% of the disappointed) and some that the consultation was too rushed (2% overall and 9% of the disappointed). Other reasons were given by under 10 respondents.

For the 58% who were pleasantly surprised (i.e., felt the service was better than expected), the most common reasons given were being well treated (including treated with respect, that the solicitor cared about them, or did not judge them – 34%) given advice that was more useful than expected (25%) was clear or easy to understand (23%) or explained their options or what they needed to do (13%). Achieving a successful or good outcome was also mentioned (14%) as was being given practical help including a detailed referral (10%) and not being rushed (9%).

Most (71%) reported that the interview improved their understanding of their legal problem and situation and 61% felt more confident in dealing with the problem. Almost half (48%) reported it reduced their level of stress or anxiety (although 15% did say it made this worse). Other areas were reported to be improved by 21-29%.

- 95% would recommend the service to another person.
- The overwhelming reason for not recommending the service among the 5% that would not do so was that they were dissatisfied with the service, with several of these 24 clients being dissatisfied with the limitations on the service that they were eligible to receive.

2. Other Results

2.1. Pathways to the service

56% obtained service without being referred

24% were referred without any explanation of the services offered

17% were referred with some explanation of the services offered

A wide variety of sources were consulted by clients prior to approaching Legal Aid. Of the 51% who said they had consulted other sources before contacting Legal Aid NSW, the more common sources consulted about the legal issue were:

Law Society or lawyers in private practice	27%
Community organisations	22%
Government departments	19%
Family or friends	16%
Law Access NSW	14%

More details of these sources are provided in the full report.

Some (19%) had consulted more than one source.

2.2. Accessibility and barriers

Legal Aid NSW is committed to ensuring that any clients with a disability that might create barriers to receiving service and any other barriers to gaining access to services (such as distance) do not prevent service of

the same quality being provided to all clients. The interview thus asked all respondents about perceived barriers to access, disability and whether this affected the service received, and other possible indicators of disadvantage (ethnic background, preferred language, and concerns about personal safety).

Only 8% reported they had problems gaining access to the service, and some of these were talking about difficulties in obtaining the service they had sought, rather than barriers to making contact and attending. The time spent waiting for an appointment and difficulty in finding out how to make contact were the most common specific difficulties.

- While 22% reported they had been frightened as a result of threatened or actual violence in a relationship, only 11% reported they were worried about their safety at home when they attended their Legal Aid NSW advice session.
- 6% reported they were of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander background.
- 27% reported they spoke a language other than English at home.
- 4% of those interviewed (15% of those who spoke a language other than English at home) were interviewed by a bi-lingual interviewer fluent in their preferred language.
- 14% reported they had special needs due to a disability. Most of these 70 clients reported either a physical (45% of the 70) or psychiatric (41%) disability; few reported other types as shown below:

Type of disability reported	n=70
Physical disability	45%
Psychiatric disorder	41%
Intellectual disability	14%
Hearing	1%
Other	3%

- One in four of the 70 (25%, a total of 17 respondents) reported they had experienced some difficulty with Legal Aid NSW services as a result of their disability.

2.3. Legal Aid NSW waiting times

- 58% had not applied for a grant of legal aid or had not yet made up their mind whether to do so (4% of the sample); 18% had already applied, and 24% intended to do so.
- 30% of the 88 who had already applied for legal aid reported they did get the help they needed in filling the application, 64% reported that they did not need help; and 7% reported they did not receive help that they needed.

- Time spent waiting for an appointment varied widely:

Same day	21%
Same week	35%
1-2 weeks	23%
2-3 weeks	11%
A month or more	9%
Could not say	1%

- 81% of clients said “Yes” but 19% said “No” when asked: “*Did you get advice in the time frame that you needed it, such as before a court deadline?*” Further analysis showed this to be a leading cause of dissatisfaction for the small number (8%) who were dissatisfied overall.

2.4. Representation and assistance

- 9% of the sample reported they had represented themselves in court or at a tribunal; most of these clients had apparently already had at least a first hearing by the time they were contacted to complete the survey.
- Excluding those who had not yet been to court (40%) or did not expect they would go to a hearing (11%), 19% had represented themselves.
- 69% of those who either had represented themselves or were expecting to have a hearing (n=238) reported they had received assistance in representing themselves,
- 14% reported they had needed assistance that they did not receive, while 17% reported they did not need any assistance; 4% said they had not received assistance but did not indicate whether it had been needed or not.
- The types of assistance reported were:

Detailed referral	11%
Explained what to do	8%
General advice/information only	8%
Made phone call on client's behalf	6%
Letter written for client to send	2%
Letter sent on behalf of client	5%
Given something to use in court	3%
Situation under review, waiting	15%
- Of those given assistance, 50% considered it helpful, with 30% believing it was too soon to say and 19% saying it was unhelpful.
- More detail about how the assistance failed to help is given in the main report.

2.5. Information from Legal Aid NSW

- 37% received or picked up a Legal Aid NSW publication
- 15% were referred to the Legal Aid NSW website for information
- 55% received neither a Legal Aid NSW publication or information from the Legal Aid NSW website

2.6. Referrals from Legal Aid NSW

- 37% reported they were referred to other services by Legal Aid NSW.
- The more common services reported by the 187 clients who were referred were:

Law Society or lawyers in private practice	36%
Government departments	12%
Community organisations	11%
Another Legal Aid NSW office	7%
Court/tribunal	6%
Dispute resolution/mediation	6%
Community Legal Centre	5%
- Other categories were endorsed by under 5% of those referred.
- Of those referred to other services by Legal Aid NSW, 14% reported that someone at Legal Aid NSW made contact with the service to explain their situation or ask for assistance.
- 32% of the 187 referred clients reported that they had made contact with a service they were referred to, and 29% noted that they intended to do so; 13% said they did not intend to make contact and 11% were unsure whether they would do so.

2.7. Internet use

- 73% reported they had access to the internet at home, with another 8% having access away from home.
- 23% of those with internet access had used the Legal Aid NSW website to obtain information before making contact with Legal Aid.
- Most of those who used the site found it easy to use and helpful.

3. Conclusions

- Satisfaction with the service is high.
- The clerical staff achieved remarkably high levels of satisfaction.
- The level of satisfaction with legal services was also very high, especially considering the potential complexity of the required services and the limitations placed on the range of services that can be provided by solicitors.
- The main causes for dissatisfaction appear to be the limitations on the services that can be provided by Legal Aid NSW to clients.
- Clients with special needs are generally having those needs met, but there is room for improvement in this area.
- Unrealistic expectations about the level of assistance that can be provided before legal aid is granted or can be provided if aid is not granted seem to contribute to the levels of dissatisfaction reported.
- The specific sub-groups that account for most of those who were dissatisfied appear to be those who:
 - received a service after a hearing date or other critical deadline
 - reported safety concerns and found the response unhelpful
 - had special needs related to a disability and felt these needs were not met
 - found the scope of assistance offered to be too limited
 - were dissatisfied with the actual response of the solicitor to the issue they sought advice about due to communication breakdowns, unmet expectations, perceived inaccuracy in facts the solicitor relied on or mistakes about the information provided.

4. Recommendations

- Legal Aid NSW should sustain the resources currently devoted to maintaining the high level of staff commitment, concern for client needs and respectful treatment of clients revealed by the survey results.
- Further improvement in outcomes might be achieved by focussing particular attention on:
 - identifying hearing dates or other critical deadlines and ensuring appointments are scheduled if possible before these dates
 - further clarifying in all public information about Legal Aid NSW services what guidelines or policies might limit the range of assistance that can be given to clients seeking legal aid, such as the allocation of time for advice sessions
 - monitoring workloads and providing additional resources for sessions with heavy bookings for the number of solicitors available
 - meeting the special requirements of those with physical, intellectual and psychiatric disabilities where these can be identified, with particular attention to establishing what assistance these clients need from Legal Aid
 - checking with any client who mentions personal safety concerns that the response given was helpful, and following through until the client reports that they have received appropriate help or do not require any further assistance
 - identifying cases where it appears that the client and the allocated solicitor are not communicating effectively and develop avenues to address these concerns to ensure enhanced client service
- Some issues that need to be considered when assessing these recommendations are discussed in more detail in the relevant section of the full report.

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