

Q3 Meeting Minutes	Hunter CLSD Program. 21st August, 2025. Muswellbrook Theme: Rural and Regional Justice
Attendees	Nissa Phillips, CLSD Hunter Program Coordinator, Remer Edwards, Wanaruah LALC, Nicole Grgas, Hunter Tenants Advice Service, Jenny Walker UHHS, Julia Adamski, Legal Aid, Ashleigh Hamilton, UHHS, Casey Chesworth, Revenue NSW, Kayla Bird, UHCS, Nicole Carter, Carries Place SHS, Adam Checkley, ALS, Shantell Bailey, ALS, Vanessa Harshman UHCS
Apologies	Taylah Gray Legal Aid, Bronwyn Ambrogetti Hunter CLC, Kieran O'Sullivan Legal Aid, Olenka Motyka UON Legal Centre, Robyn Fraser Legal Aid, Rose Roberts Legal Aid, Jordan Collins Muswellbrook Shire Council, Rosslyn Thomson Muswellbrook Shire Council
Agenda Item	Discussion
Acknowledgement of Wanaurah country 10:00	An acknowledgement of country was provided by Nissa Phillips.
Purpose of meeting 10.05	<p>A. CLSD Program Objective: to work collaboratively to identify and address unmet legal and related non-legal needs of people in the Hunter region. We do this by:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - making better referrals/ referral pathways - working on projects and devising new services, and - coordinating our efforts. <p>B. Meeting Objective:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Practice identifying legal issues, amongst a range of issues, to ensure services know about other services' eligibility and referral processes ● Plan collaborative CLSD events ● To gain an understanding of the issues being faced by people in the Newcastle and Hunter regions and seek ways for more effective support from services ● Relationship building; for people to get to know one another and work towards justice partnerships
Introductions: 10.10- 10.20	

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Shantell Bailey – Aboriginal Legal Service (ALS), Civil Law Division. Works in the Employment Law Service within the Specialist General Team, with a focus on supporting women and youth. ● Nicole Carter – Program Manager at the Staying Home Leaving Violence (SHLV) program, based at Carrie's Place SHS. ● Julia Adamski – Solicitor at the Aboriginal Legal Service, with a focus on administrative and civil law. ● Remer Edwards – Representative from the Land Council, supporting Indigenous land rights and community initiatives. ● Adam Checkley – Solicitor at ALS, working in Care and Protection and Family Law. He is involved in the Domestic Violence List and is passionate about expanding services to remote communities. ● Casey Chesworth – Representative from Revenue NSW, helping communities reduce fines through the Work and Development Order (WDO) scheme. She also assists with onboarding sponsors and answering related queries. ● Kayla Bird – Works in the Community Wellbeing Program, organising events and initiatives that support Indigenous communities. ● Vanessa Harshman – Coordinator at Muswellbrook Neighbourhood Services, providing advice and referrals to local residents. ● Ashleigh Hamilton – New team member at the Upper Hunter Homeless Centre, supporting women and children at risk of homelessness. ● Jenny Walker – Member of the Homelessness Team, offering housing support and case management to individuals in need. ● Nicole Grgas – Representative from the Hunter Tenants Advice Service, providing guidance and advocacy for renters.
<p>Guest speaker: Jenny Wallace and Ashleigh Hamilton from Upper Hunter Homeless Support</p> <p>10.20- 10.40</p>	<p>Funded to support women and children, particularly in response to the high rates of deaths resulting from domestic violence (DV).</p> <p>Unmet Legal and Social Needs Identified:</p> <p><i>Barriers to Legal Access and Justice</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Underreporting and Court Avoidance: Many clients avoid legal processes due to trauma, fear, and a belief that their stories are not worth telling. ● Misidentification of DV: Domestic violence is often misunderstood in the region, leading to harsher penalties and misclassification of victims. ● Delays in Legal Resolution: Prolonged legal processes can leave clients in unsafe situations.

- **Complexity in Family Law:**
Confusion around whether to allow contact with perpetrators; mixed messages from services.
 - **Debt and Financial Abuse:**
Difficulty in proving financial abuse, especially in DV contexts.
 - **Immigration Issues:**
Clients may not be eligible for legal aid, citizenship, or Centrelink support.
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Mental Health and Service Access

- **Mental Health Barriers:**
Clients often face challenges accessing services, especially when they are newly diagnosed or beginning treatment.
 - **NDIS Disruption:**
Clients lose NDIS packages due to trauma or displacement from accommodation.
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Housing and Tenancy Challenges

- **Tenancy Discrimination:**
Real estate agents often reject applications with Start Safely attached.
- **Temporary Accommodation (TA) Issues:**
 - Limited availability of TA.
 - Clients relocated to areas like Cessnock without transport options.
 - Daily reporting requirements are burdensome and inaccessible.
 - Applications are often not assessed until late in the day, resulting in referrals to Link2Home.
 - Clients miss out on TA due to transport barriers.
- **Home in Place Referrals:**
Condemned homes are being referred to homelessness services instead of placing clients in TA.
- **Maintenance Debts:**
Clients are burdened with housing debts after leaving properties, even when the debts are unproven.
- **Hoarding:**
A significant issue impacting housing stability and service access.
- **Young People:**
Lack of affordable rentals and inability to sign leases without a guarantor.

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Privacy Concerns in TA Applications: Clients must disclose extensive personal information to be considered for priority housing. <hr/> <p><i>Other Legal Process Concerns</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Signing of SPOs (Specific Performance Orders): Clients are signing SPOs before conciliation and often do not attend the conciliation process.
<p>Guest speaker: Adam Checkley and Shantell Bailey from the Aboriginal Legal Service.</p> <p>10.40-11.00</p>	<p>Service Area: Hunter, Lake Macquarie, and Newcastle regions, with outreach to Muswellbrook, Singleton, Windale, and Toronto on a monthly basis.</p> <p>Commitment to Community:</p> <p>Adam and the ALS team are focused on maintaining consistent service delivery and honouring commitments to the communities they serve.</p> <hr/> <p>Key Issues and Observations:</p> <p><i>Early Intervention and Misidentification</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Early Legal Support: Emphasis on addressing legal needs early to prevent escalation. • Misidentification of Victims: A recurring issue in the region, contributing to hesitation in reporting incidents to police due to poor outcomes and fear of retraumatization. <p><i>Overrepresentation and Systemic Barriers</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Disproportionate Custody Rates: A high number of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people in custody, often linked to increased enforcement of domestic violence matters. • Trauma in Legal Processes: Police and court involvement is often traumatic for clients, discouraging engagement with the justice system. <hr/> <p><i>Client-Centered Approach</i></p>

- **Holistic Support:**
Adam works closely with clients, community members, and social workers to understand the full scope of their circumstances—often uncovering more complex issues than initially presented.
- **Empowering Clients:**
Supporting clients to take action against perpetrators, including pursuing private applications when police are unwilling to act (though police-led applications are preferred).
- **Late Reporting Misconceptions:**
A common misconception is that reporting older incidents of sexual or domestic violence weakens the credibility of newer reports. In reality, late reporting does not diminish the likelihood of a successful outcome.

Insights from SHLV (Nicole Carter)

- **Groundwork with DV Clients:**
Nicole from the Staying Home Leaving Violence (SHLV) program noted that much of the foundational work—such as building a long-term DV timeline—is done before clients feel ready to report. Safety planning often precedes formal legal action.

Civil Law Team – Opportunities and Challenges (Shantell Bailey)

- The Civil Law team is new and growing, with a focus on expanding services and securing funding through tenders.
- Despite strong potential, funding limitations restrict the ability to fully address civil law needs.
- The team operates in a data-driven environment, which can sometimes overlook the importance of client stories and lived experiences.
- While constrained by resources, ALS has strong referral capacity to connect clients with appropriate services.

Community Feedback and Service Impact

- Positive feedback from Ash and others in the community highlights ALS's availability, cultural sensitivity, and client-centered approach.
- ALS's Employment Law Service and Women's and Children's Service operate statewide, providing targeted support across NSW.

Guest speaker: Casey Chesworth
from Revenue NSW. 11.00-11.20

Service Area:

Based on the Central Coast, with outreach officers operating across NSW, including Tamworth and other regional areas.

Community Engagement:

Casey's role focuses on being present in the community to offer face-to-face support, helping individuals understand and navigate Revenue NSW processes, especially when they're unsure or overwhelmed.

Support for Victims of Domestic Violence (DV):

- Victims can be nominated for offences, allowing fines to be waived and demerit points protected.
 - Revenue NSW conducts internal reviews to assess these cases.
 - This approach helps ensure victims aren't penalized for offences committed by perpetrators.
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Fine Resolution and Enforcement Relief:

- Officers can lift restrictions on the spot or assist with entering a Work and Development Order (WDO).
 - Fines of up to \$5,000 can be written off under certain circumstances.
 - For inmates, fines are often incorrectly issued for offences they physically could not have committed.
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Accessibility and Practical Support:

- Navigating the Revenue NSW website to dispute fines is challenging for many; officers use iPads on the spot to assist.
 - Officers can issue cautions immediately for less serious matters.
 - A holistic approach is taken—exploring whether fines can be waived, or if clients can be supported through a WDO.
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Client-Centered Process:

- No enforcement action is taken while a case is under review.

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Officers must meet clients in person, often by appointment, to ensure tailored and effective support.
<p>Discussion: Improving Access to Justice in the Upper Hunter. 11.20-11.50</p>	<p>Vanessa – Muswellbrook Neighbourhood Services</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>Emphasised the need for clear, accessible community information that brings all services together.</i> • <i>Suggested hosting a “Housing and Debt” community event to connect clients with services and provide direct support.</i> <p>Nicole – Hunter Tenants Advice Service</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>Noted that interagency meetings are often too broad to address specific local needs effectively.</i> • <i>Advocated for more targeted collaboration and practical engagement.</i> <p>Shantell – Aboriginal Legal Service (ALS)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>Highlighted the use of Teams chat with CLSD coordinators across the state to share questions and updates.</i> • <i>Mentioned pro bono support for bulk NCAT matters, which could be leveraged locally.</i> • <i>Called for better communication about existing community and legal services.</i> <hr/> <p>Proposed Collaborative Event</p> <p>Event Name: <i>Housing and Debt Community Day, suggested “Community Support Day: Housing, Fines & Legal Help”</i></p> <p>Date: <i>Thursday, 6 November 2025</i></p> <p>Time: <i>10:00 AM – 2:00 PM</i></p> <p>Location: <i>Out the front of the Muswellbrook Neighbourhood Services building</i></p> <p>Setup: <i>Includes a private room for legal advice</i></p> <p>Partners and Services Involved:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>Financial Counsellors</i> • <i>Legal Aid / ALS</i> • <i>CLSD Hunter</i> • <i>Revenue NSW</i> • <i>UHHS</i> • <i>UHCS</i>

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>Hunter Tenants Advice Service</i> <hr/> <p>Goals of the Event:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Provide face-to-face support for housing and debt-related issues. • Improve awareness of available services and how to access them. • Strengthen referral pathways between legal, housing, financial, and community services. • Foster collaboration and trust among service providers and the community.
Upcoming events 11:50- 11.55	Local upcoming events were shared, it was highlighted that services can share relevant events with the CLSD Hunter Program via our monthly newsletter.
Next CLSD Hunter meeting 11: 55	The next Hunter CLSD Program Q4 meeting will be held on Thursday Nov 20th at Nikinpa in Toronto, Lake Macquarie from 10am-12pm (Legal Services Only).