

RECENT HIGHLIGHTS

of our law reform and policy work

2010

Regional Homelessness Action Plans

The *NSW Homelessness Action Plan* sets out the direction for state-wide reform of the homelessness service system to achieve better outcomes for people who are homeless or at risk of homelessness. The plan is based around three strategic directions: preventing homelessness, responding effectively to homelessness and breaking the cycle.

In February, Housing NSW organised a series of consultation meetings throughout the state to discuss the plan and hear suggestions about ways in which the objectives can be met. The Tenants Service was not invited to participate in the consultation meeting but did put in a submission via the Housing NSW website. The main focus of the submission was homelessness prevention for tenants living with a mental illness.

Young People and Fines

The Illawarra Legal Centre has developed educational resources on Fines and Work and Development Orders (WDO's) outlining legislative and policy changes that reduce or eliminate fines debt. The Frequently Asked Questions (FAQ) sheet and wallet card for young people are the basis of educational sessions with workers and young people in local community and youth services.

Even with the State Government's recent policy and legislative reforms to the Fines Act, which included more flexible payment options, guidelines for issuing official cautions, a restructured review process and new Work and Development Orders allowing those who live with the greatest disadvantage to work off their fines, more reform is needed.

To promote the changes the Centre produced a Frequently Asked Questions sheet and wallet card on the new Work and Development Orders that are a key aspect of these reforms.

WDO's require a young person to do work, or training, or undertake counselling with an approved person or organisation.

The young person with fines debt will need to contact an organisation or health care profession to support them seek a WDO. Together they make a plan that is submitted to the State Debt Recovery Office (SDRO).

If the organisation or health care professional where the young person wants to work or do training is not already "approved" by the SDRO they will need to apply for this status.

Recent activities have included:

- "Phone Out" afternoons to let people know about WDO's. This has resulted in several face-to-face information sessions at staff meetings and ongoing mail outs.
- Summaries of the issue were distributed to several local targeted newsletters
- A TAFE workshop was developed, including SDRO website navigation with merged groups of students aiming to feel confident enough to talk about fines and WDO's.
- Mainstream media, print and radio, reached local residents.

2009

Housing NSW rent arrears policy

The Centre commissioned an independent report into Housing NSW rent arrears policy after it became clear that tenants who fell into even a small amount of arrears were being asked to pay three weeks rent every two weeks to catch up. This approach placed a great number of tenants in severe financial hardship.

Tenants were being told that '3 in 2' was policy and they were threatened with eviction in order to gain compliance. The independent report confirmed that the practice was widespread in southern NSW and many tenants came forward and told the researchers their stories.

The report was used to make a complaint to the NSW Ombudsman and it has been sent to the Housing Minister.

Ombudsman's Investigation Into Gaps in Centrelink Guidelines

The Illawarra Legal Centre's Welfare Rights Service supported a client in making a complaint to the NSW Ombudsman about mistreatment by Centrelink investigators who came to her home. During the course of the Ombudsman's investigations into this complaint, the Ombudsman discovered that Centrelink did not have any guidelines on how to interview or work with clients living with a psychological disability.

The Ombudsman launched a further inquiry into this gap in Centrelink guidelines with a view to prompting Centrelink to immediately develop procedures for working with this particularly vulnerable group.

Please call the Illawarra Legal Centre on 42761939 if you have enquiries regarding Centrelink.