

LEGAL CENTRES

LEGAL CENTRES ACROSS AUSTRALIA

Stating the differences

During a recent trip visiting the capitals of the mainland States I was struck by the differences between the CLCs in each State. Like most people raised in Queensland, I had always had some idea that 'the southern States' were different, but I think this was just sheer geographic parochialism. Centres have always identified diversity in the development of services as one of the strengths of the legal centres movement. What I had previously failed to recognise is that each State has developed a distinctive model of its own.

I undertook the tour of Sydney, Melbourne, Adelaide and Perth to meet with workers from centres and secretariats to discuss the National Association of Community Legal Centres (NACLC) Review of Commonwealth CLC Funding Guidelines. In addition, I was able to visit almost all centres in South Australia and Western Australia. During these meetings it was discussed whether there were any distinctive features in the State which might have an influence on the proposed guidelines. Some issues highlight the differences between the States visited.

The main areas of difference between States were:

- the mix of types of centres — specialist, metropolitan based generalist, or regional area based generalist centre;
- the extent and organisation of education and reform activities; and
- the style of casework services.

The mix of centres

I was initially reluctant to dwell on the distinction between specialist and generalist centres in this article, principally because of the desire of the Office of Legal Aid and Family Services (OLAFS) to force a rationalisation of the number of specialist centres being funded by the Commonwealth. However, I believe it is better to openly debate the proposal than ignore it and hope it will go away.

As can be seen from Table 1, there are considerable differences between

State	Specialist centres	Generalist centres		No of centres
		Metropolitan	Regional	
Vic	39%	53%	8%	38
NSW	67%	17%	16%	24
Qld	56%	17%	28%	18
SA	14%	86%	0%	7
WA	55%	27%	18%	10
Tas	20%	40%	40%	5
ACT	100%	0%	0%	1
NT	0%	100%	0%	1
National total	48%	37%	15%	104

Note: Does not include CLC Secretariats.

States in the mix of centres. The relative proportions of specialist and generalist centres in New South Wales and Victoria are almost completely reversed. Queensland and Tasmania have a relatively high proportion of regional generalist centres. This is perhaps more significant in Queensland, given the greater physical distance between centres. With the exception of Welfare Rights, South Australia is entirely composed of metropolitan based generalist centres. Western Australia's mix of centres is probably closest to the national average.

Education and reform activities

There are a number of differences between States in the priority given to education and reform. Both New South Wales and Victoria appear to give a higher priority to education and reform than other States, while South Australia undertakes the least.

It is the organisation of reform and education activities between centres that most clearly demonstrates the differences. Victoria undertakes a considerable volume of its education and reform work through the working group structure of the State Federation, and other less formal arrangements. This contrasts with South Australia where most education and reform activities are undertaken by two particular centres and very little work is pursued through the State Association (SACCLS). Western Australia appears to undertake very little joint work. In New South Wales there is an organised community legal education (CLE) workers group that

undertakes some joint work, but it appears that most reform activities are undertaken by individual centres. This is almost reversed in Queensland, where there has been increasing activity in joint reform work, but until recently there has been no organisation for joint CLE activities.

Casework services

Victoria, New South Wales and Queensland seem to have fairly similar approaches to casework, with their major focus on advice and less emphasis on continuing work with individual clients. Both South Australia and Western Australia also have a major focus on advice but appear to take on a much higher proportion of clients as actual cases. South Australia and Western Australia, however, have very different approaches to the relationship between the client and the worker in the centre. Centres in Western Australia exhibit a fairly strong suspicion of lawyers generally and the overall client/worker relationship appears to be modelled on what could be broadly defined as a 'social work' approach, although this description is itself problematic. South Australia, by contrast, seems to have a suspicion of social workers and has adopted a more 'legal work' approach.

Explanations?

The three distinguishing features listed above are in some ways artificial, but the differences between States highlighted by them are undoubtedly real and interrelated. It is my belief that the extent of group work in education and reform, as highlighted in Victoria, is