

## Shoalcoast Community Legal Centre Inc.

Justine O'Reilly, Principal Solicitor (February 2018- 30 September 2022)

Service areas: Shoalhaven, Eurobodalla, Bega Valley, Snowy Monaro & Queanbeyan/Palerang  
LGAs: Nowra, Shoalhaven

Mission: to provide an accessible professional legal service, responsive to the needs of the most disadvantaged and which promotes just and lasting solutions to legal and social issues in our community.

Shoalcoast Community Legal Centre provides:

- Free legal advice – face-to-face, outreach, phone
- Law reform
- Community Legal Education
- Information and referral
- Cooperative Legal Service Delivery Program (CLSD) addresses unmet legal need in our area and aims to achieve better outcomes for vulnerable and disadvantaged people through the collaboration of legal and non-legal services

Funders: State and Federal Government - Funded by the Community Legal Centres Program administered by Legal Aid NSW

Staff: 13

FTE: 11.25

Volunteers: 25 prior to Covid, this Volunteer program has not yet resumed since Covid 2020-2022.

Disasters the region has recently experienced: Black Summer Bushfires in 2020, COVID, floods.



**Community legal centres**  
Change takes community.

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**Shoalcoast CLC visits bushfire-ravaged communities**

*Justine O'Reilly, Principal Solicitor, Shoalcoast Community Legal Centre, writes about her experience of visiting bushfire-ravaged communities on the South Coast in January 2020.*

17 January 2020

<https://www.clcnsw.org.au/shoalcoast-clc-visits-bushfire-ravaged-communities>

## Responding

Communities in this region are very disparate - connected, but distant from each other. Many people are living off the grid and don't want to connect with government or services. Some people were so traumatised they took six months or more to ask for help. Regularly connecting with these communities and being a known and trusted face makes connecting easier.

After the bushfires, Justine visited recovery centres to see what was needed (see article, 'Shoalcoast CLC visits bushfire-ravaged communities'). Legal Aid had a disaster recovery unit which provided fly-in/fly-out staff to disaster impacted areas. Legal Aid asked Shoalcoast Community Legal Centre (Shoalcoast CLC) for help in recovery centres, which Shoalcoast CLC managed to provide while maintaining delivery of regular outreach services. One of their solicitors temporarily relocated to Bega and did recovery outreach from there. Shoalcoast CLC received funding from Legal Aid to cover this additional work.

As Shoalcoast CLC is part of the community, they are involved in longer-term recovery. There was an increase in the provision of family law support as a result family breakdown due to trauma of fires. During COVID, the service saw a reduction in requests for support from their usual cohorts as they were better supported by extra government funding and did not experience common issues such as fines. One worker did note that much of the collaboration built after the fires was lost due to the disconnection during COVID.

## Funding & service delivery

The model of Legal Aid coordinating disaster legal support meant that legal issues were met effectively in the early stages after the fires. The partnership between Legal Aid and CLCs worked well but was ad hoc. There is no agreed framework for Legal Aid and CLC working together in disaster recovery in the future. The fly-in/fly-out model is costly and lacks local connection to community. Justine notes that it was valuable to have the support from Legal Aid straight after the fires, but many issues only surfaced quite some time later, for example, understanding insurance, tenancy issues and building requirement.

Shoalcoast CLC received bushfire grant funding after the fires which allowed them to take on an extra full-time solicitor and a paralegal part-time. The funding also helped with the delivery of community education session. The disaster recovery workers in local councils would assist in identifying education session topics and referring residents to the CLC. 'Law Check-up' sessions were also held to teach service providers what CLCs can and can't assist with.

However, many of the issues people encountered, such as the impacts of construction companies going bust and new fire building standards, are outside the scope of CLCs. Many law firms offered support and were a valuable source of law knowledge for areas outside CLC expertise. For example, a barrister gave a Community Legal Education session on construction law, contracts, home builder's warranties, etc.

## Advocacy

Shoalcoast CLC advocated on a number of issues through their ongoing law reform work, including:

- An extension to emergency accommodation provided through insurance – at 6-12 months, this was not enough time as clean-up and rebuilt took so long and the need was so high.
- Access to grants for primary producers who could not get some grants because their main income was off-property.

Through submissions to a number of inquiries, Shoalcoast CLC has advocated for a number of changes, including:

- Community Legal Centre's to be funded for specialist training on conveyancing and home building disputes in preparation for future natural disasters.
- A grant be established for bushfire affected clients to access legal advice from private legal practitioners with expertise in conveyancing and home building disputes.

Justine notes that there were many great solicitors who were willing to give extra, unpaid hours to support the community. However, she fears that, if disasters happen more regularly, legal staff will not be able to contribute to the same levels and goodwill may peter out. She suggests services consider how workers are supported to do extra work and cover distances to meet clients. Legal support needs to be provided to communities over time and it needs to address the legal issues that arise from disasters, which often differ from business-as-usual matters.