



All the latest in legal news from Northern Community Legal Centre

July 2020

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From the team at NCLC

June has been a challenging month for the Northern Community Legal Centre (NCLC) community. Just as we were celebrating a return to the new normal, our regions, particularly Hume and Moreland, have experienced a sharp increase in COVID-19 infections and lockdowns in many of our catchment suburbs. Accordingly, we will continue to provide our legal services by telephone, until the current situation has improved. Our community engagement work has never been more important in preventing family violence, and we are continuing to support women from newly arrived communities using social media platforms to conduct a range of wellbeing and social engagement activities.

As COVID-19 continues to impact upon legal need in our communities, we are gratified and thank the Attorney General, Jill Hennessy, for recognizing the high level of legal needs in our catchments and providing special COVID funding. This funding boost follows sustained advocacy on behalf of all the people we represent and will ensure that we can continue to respond to COVID related legal issues such as employment, fines, child contact disputes and tenancy issues.

NCLC would also like to acknowledge the strong community stance in support of the "Black lives matter" campaign. We admire the courage and resilience of all Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people in resisting centuries of racist practices. We stand in support of their efforts to shine a light on the issue of policing of Aboriginal people in Australia.

AT NCLC OUR LAWYERS CONTINUE TO PROVIDE LEGAL SERVICES BY
TELEPHONE DURING COVID-19 RESTRICTIONS.

FOR LEGAL ASSISTANCE PLEASE CONTACT US BY TELEPHONE ON:

[\(03\) 9310 4376](tel:(03)93104376)

OR BY EMAIL AT:

admin@northernclc.org.au

Celebrating Refugee Week



Following Refugee week (June 14 – 20), we pay tribute to our refugee community and all those who are fighting for justice for people experiencing and seeking asylum. Refugee week provided an opportunity to reflect upon the challenges that our newly arrived community members have faced, and to celebrate the many unique skills and attributes they bring to our wonderfully diverse community.

My name is Heyam Haddad, I am a lawyer from Syria. All my life my goal was to make a difference. Once I completed my Law degree, I decided to take on further studies to become a judge. However, I was forced to flee the country because of the war in Syria and having bombs affecting our area.

For our safety, we left our homes and headed to Lebanon in the hope of one day returning home to a peaceful Syria. When we realised that home would never be the same we fled to save our lives and have a better future. Australia opened its doors and has given us the life we have always dreamed about and a new place to now call home. I have been living in Australia for over 5 years and could not be happier.

I was offered an amazing opportunity to be part of the great team at NCLC and have worked there for 2 years as a volunteer and 2 years as an employee. I have learned about Australian law and have been able to put all my knowledge into practice and help those in need, translating for our clients in Arabic and Syriac. I've had the opportunity to present on 4 different interviews with SBS Arabic 24 in regard to my life and career, my experience of working with NCLC and also the laws of Australia and Syria and other topics.

Many clients come to us in need of help due to family violence, and other issues such as fines, divorce, and children's arrangements. Many have experienced a lot of troubles living with war, they have had to leave their homes behind in order to be able to live in peace, just like I have. They are unaware of what to expect as they do not really know anyone here or even know the language.

We hope that the struggles people face come to an end as we work our best to address their concerns. Australia has welcomed me and all those who have faced similar struggles. As a Syrian refugee, I am now paying my respect back to Australia and I will continue to do so.

I would like to thank all NCLC staff members for their continuous help, and I hope that we keep helping those in need and supporting fellow local members of our community.

COVID-19 and policing

In response to outbreaks of community transmission of COVID-19, strict 'Stay at Home' restrictions have been re-introduced for the current hotspot postcode areas in Melbourne, many of which are in the Hume and Moreland Areas.

Victoria Police have announced that they will be doing increased patrols of these areas, establishing border checkpoints, and issuing on-the-spot fines of \$1,654 for any breaches of the restrictions.

While NCLC is concerned about the outbreak of COVID-19 in our community, we are also concerned about the potential impact of increased policing and fining of people in our community and the disproportionate impact this could have on people already experiencing disadvantage and financial hardship. Anyone who has experienced unfair treatment from the police should seek legal advice.

Our fact sheet on COVID-19 Fines and Police Powers is available [here](#) in multiple languages.

A summary of the new restrictions is available here: dhhs.vic.gov.au/new-restrictions-melbournes-hot-zones-covid-19

A summary of the existing directions for the rest of Victoria is available here: dhhs.vic.gov.au/victorias-restriction-levels-covid-19

Financial assistance

NCLC regularly assists clients that are experiencing severe financial hardship, and the continuing economic impact of COVID-19 is causing financial hardship for many people in our community.

Anyone needing assistance should speak to a financial counsellor (if their problem relates to overall financial hardship, eg. struggling to keep up with bills or loan repayments), or a community lawyer (if their financial hardship relates to a legal issue, eg. unpaid fines).

Our COVID-19 Financial Assistance fact sheet, available [here](#), explains a range of financial relief options that may be currently available for people, and has the details of services that can assist.

Jessica's story (below) is one example of how legal advocacy can assist people experiencing financial hardship.

Jessica's story

We recently assisted Jessica* to obtain a waiver of outstanding debts:

Jessica is a young person with significant mental health issues who currently lives in supported accommodation.

Jessica sought our assistance with debts totalling approximately \$2,000 for unpaid phone and utility bills. These debts were incurred a few years ago at a time that Jessica lost a close family member, lost her job and experienced a sudden decline in her mental health.

Jessica is now engaged with various support services and is managing her mental health well. We obtained support letters from a number of Jessica's support workers explaining her situation at the time that she incurred the debts.

On the basis of Jessica's personal and financial hardship, the finance company handling Jessica's debts agreed to fully waive them. Jessica told us that this was a massive relief to her, and that these debts hanging over her head had been a constant source of stress for her.

*Name changed

Tenancy law



The Victorian Government has made further updates to the *Residential Tenancies Act* to fix an earlier error which was preventing many tenants from being able to end their tenancies.

Tenants Victoria's website has the latest information here:

tenantsvic.org.au/advice/coronavirus-covid-19/

Our Tenancy Fact sheet, available [here](#), provides further legal information for renters, such as rent relief options and how the current eviction ban works.

Northern Community Legal Centre acknowledges and respects the traditional custodians whose lands we are fortunate to live and work on, and we pay our respects to all Elders past, present, and future.

Northern Community Legal Centre

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