

Justice Connect: connecting the community to amazing lawyers

By The Honourable Ruth McColl AO SC

It is 'the strongly held view of the Bar that a person's rights and access to justice should not be diminished because they have little or no money.'¹ Consistently with that view, which reflects longstanding precepts of social justice, the Bar engages extensively and enthusiastically in providing pro bono services through multiple schemes and organisations such as Justice Connect.

Justice Connect is a not-for-profit organisation which is also registered as a charity. It provides its services through lawyers, advocates and social workers working for the organisation, as well as through the use of pro bono assistance from the private profession. In the 2018–2019 financial year, across New South Wales and Victoria, 40% of its pro bono referrals were to barristers.² It provides significant assistance in judicial review for asylum seekers, in property matters (for example involving elder abuse), in credit and debt, unfair dismissal claims, and coronial inquests and in broad practice areas such as torts.³ It also provides extensive assistance to not-for-profit organisations in addition to its work with individuals.

Justice Connect was established in July 2013 when the Public Interest Law Clearing House NSW (PILCH NSW) and PILCH Victoria merged to create a new pro bono organisation with the intention of providing unified services across both states.



The President of PILCH Victoria, Mitzi Gilligan observed at the time that '[t]he purpose of the 'new' PILCH remains the same – to respond to the unmet legal need of people experiencing marginalisation and disadvantage by strategically using the pro bono resources of the private legal profession and by supporting the expansion of quality pro bono work.⁴

The establishment of Justice Connect continues the original aim of the founders of PILCH (NSW). It was established in July 1992 by the Public Interest Advocacy Centre (PIAC), the NSW Law Society and private law firms. Its objective was to build a culture of pro bono work in Australia.⁵ 1992 was very early in the history of the

provision of pro bono legal assistance in Australia. It was only in that year that the Law Council of Australia published its first definition of pro bono.⁶

PILCH NSW helped people access pro bono legal assistance, in particular, in cases involving the public interest. It was a not-for-profit legal referral service. It linked people and not-for-profit organisations with lawyers engaged in public interest work. One of the principles which underpinned its work was that poverty should not be a bar to accessing justice, including the ability to litigate,⁷ a view entirely consistent with the ethos of the Bar to which I have referred.

Consistent with that view, NSW barristers had a long association with PILCH NSW. Both floors and individual barristers became members of PILCH NSW and contributed greatly to its pro bono work, including by way of membership fees and donations. I was President of PILCH NSW from 1999–2002.

That support has continued since the establishment of Justice Connect. It has a list of 80 barristers and a number of barristers' chambers in New South Wales which have expressed interest in undertaking its pro bono work and who it approaches for assistance. In the 2018–2019 financial year, Justice Connect accessed this network on 77 occasions. Close to 50 pro bono matters were accepted by members of the NSW Bar – from readers to senior counsel.

The success of Justice Connect's work depends on the depth of the engaged legal community it can access. There can never be too many barristers, whether individuals, or floors as a whole, prepared to take on its pro bono work. You, or your floor, can also make a donation via its website.

Recently, for example, New Chambers, through the good offices of Geoffrey Watson SC, has made clear to Justice Connect its interest in offering the services of its members to undertake pro bono work on its behalf. Geoffrey's view is that some of his most satisfying and interesting work has come through such work, a view he has urged upon his colleagues.

The NSW Barristers' Clerks Association also strongly supports Justice Connect. It is going to conduct its free CPD seminar, 'Barristers' clerks



Jacqui Siebel, a Justice Connect Project Officer.



help you get more out of the barristers you brief' for the lawyers at Justice Connect. In addition, clerks are a point of first contact where Justice Connect does not have an existing barrister contact with expertise in the relevant field.

Justice Connect's fundamental purpose is to create a fair and strong community by closing the justice gap in which every year millions of people and not-for-profits need legal help, but only a fraction of them get it.⁸ I encourage you to help them achieve that purpose. You can make your, or your floor's interest known by contacting Tori Edwards, Head of ProBono Partnerships, (Ph: (02) 8599 2116; email: Tori.Edwards@justiceconnect.org.au). **BN**

ENDNOTES

- 1 New South Wales Bar Association submission regarding the Productivity Commission's issues paper, *Access to Justice Arrangements: Productivity Commission Issues Paper*, September 2013 at [116].
- 2 Justice Connect Annual Report, 2018-2019 at 7.
- 3 Justice Connect Annual Report, 2013-2014 at 6.
- 4 Pro Bono Australia, <https://probonoaustralia.com.au/news/2012/11/pilch-vic-nsw-merge/> (accessed 24 February 2020).
- 5 <https://justiceconnect.org.au/about/our-approach/the-power-of-pro-bono/> (accessed 26 February 2020.)
- 6 Australian Pro Bono Centre, History of Pro Bono In Australia: <https://www.probonocentre.org.au/information-on-pro-bono/history-of-pro-bono/> (accessed 26 February 2020).
- 7 Letter PILCH to the Hon James Woods AD QC, Chairperson, New South Wales law Reform Commission re New South Wales Law Reform Commission: Consultation paper 13 (Security for costs and associated costs orders).
- 8 Justice Connect Annual Report, 2018-19 at 4.



Emma Buckley Lennox, a Justice Connect Lawyer



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