

# A Pro Bono Referral Service is nearly here!

*Jason Newman*

## **The gap is almost bridged**

After many years of hard work and red tape-cutting the Law Institute's Legal Assistance Scheme is about to begin! The Young Lawyers' idea to have a pro bono referral service to connect solicitors who are willing to do free legal work with the people in the community who really need it is almost a reality. After obtaining funding from the Victoria Law Foundation the Implementation Committee recently employed a solicitor, Di Ward Robinson, to run the scheme. The official launch of the scheme will happen early next year when the many details have been finalised.

Di Ward Robinson has both the commitment and the skills to make the referral scheme a viable and useful addition to the other pro bono services that already exist. Di previously worked at the Ringwood office of Legal Aid for some years doing just about everything imaginable from duty lawyer to assignments to running criminal files. At the time she was also a supervising solicitor at the Eastern Suburban Community Legal Centre for two of the volunteer evenings. Before Legal Aid Di had worked in private practice and as an Associate to a Senior Member of the Commonwealth AAT. Di has always had a commitment to the disadvantaged in the community and sees her role at the Law Institute as a further opportunity to enhance access to the law for disadvantaged persons.

When the Young Lawyers' Journal spoke to Di she said she was "incredibly enthusiastic" about the scheme and was eagerly awaiting next year's launch even though there was "still a lot of work to be done to have the scheme ready to meet the enormous response that is anticipated from the community." A priority for Di is making sure there are enough solicitors willing and able to contribute their time to the scheme. Some 400 solicitors have already agreed to place their names on the register. Di believes that most solicitors recognise the profession's higher duty to assist the community and many more solicitors will be willing to join the scheme between now and its commencement. Di pointed out that "a large number of solicitors already do pro bono work which until now has gone largely

unrecognised by the community because the profession has never formally organised it in a way envisaged by the Legal Assistance Scheme. Apart from the assistance that clients will receive the scheme will also demonstrate to the wider community (including government) the valuable time that is spent by lawyers "for the public good".

Anyone wanting to offer their assistance should contact Di at the Law Institute.

The Legal Assistance Scheme began as a report on 'Bridging the Gap' from the Community Issues Committee of the Young Lawyers and has grown into a scheme which, it is hoped, will provide real benefits to the community. The Young Lawyers gratefully acknowledge the funding of the Victoria Law Foundation which has made possible the fulfilment of the vision, the work of the many people who have served as midwives at the protracted birth of the scheme via their involvement with the Committee, and Victoria University of Technology which contributed furniture and a computer to the scheme.

## **What You Can Do To Help**

There will shortly be a circular sent to the firms and individuals who expressed interest in participating in the scheme to confirm their interest. Other law firms and individuals will be sent a letter asking them to consider registering. Obviously the more solicitors involved the more people can be assisted. Solicitors will be under no obligation to take a particular case and there will be a limit on the number of referrals. When the circulars come around we urge you to register and to encourage as many solicitors in your firms as possible to register to make the scheme a success.

Congratulations to all those Young Lawyers who worked to make the idea a reality.

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Community Issues Committee  
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