



PHILIP LYNCH WITH BIG ISSUE VENDOR, ROB

to legal services when confronted with legal issues. This is especially the case when marginalised people are targeted for the selective enforcement of laws or are subject to the formal application of laws without regard to substantive and contextual inequality.

The lawyers involved in the Clinic also recognise that the provision of pro bono legal services to disadvantaged people is a human responsibility that has its roots in our common humanity. We are all joined, at a deep and fundamental level, by common needs and vulnerabilities that transcend difference. We are all threatened by lack of dignity and respect. We

The Homeless Persons' Legal Clinic

Philip Lynch, Co-ordinator of the Homeless Persons' Legal Clinic, part-time solicitor at Allens Arthur Robinson

The Homeless Persons' Legal Clinic is an innovative joint project of the Public Interest Law Clearing House (PILCH) and the Council to Homeless Persons (CHP). The Clinic was established in October 2001 to provide free legal assistance and empowerment to one of society's most disenfranchised groups.

Legal services are provided at locations already frequented by homeless people such as crisis accommodation centres and welfare agencies. Direct access is vital because, given the range of social, psychological and medical issues which confront many homeless people, their legal problems are likely to remain unaddressed unless legal services are appropriately targeted and delivered.

The Clinic is staffed by pro bono lawyers from participating law firms and legal departments, including Blake Dawson Waldron, Clayton Utz, Hunt & Hunt, Mallesons Stephen Jaques, Minter Ellison and National Australia Bank. Each law firm and legal department is responsible for the provision of services at a welfare

agency or crisis accommodation facility for approximately half a day per week. In addition to providing legal services, the lawyers involved seek to identify the range of legal issues facing homeless people, identify gaps in the delivery of services and examine relevant law and policy reform issues.

To date, more than fifty lawyers have provided assistance to more than one hundred clients. The type of legal assistance has ranged from obtaining social security payments for a Somalian refugee and her children, to defending an elderly disabled man against \$100,000 in fines for offences such as begging and travelling without a valid ticket. The most common problems for which homeless people have required assistance involve debts, fines, social security, housing and tenancy.

The many young lawyers involved in the Clinic recognise that the provision of pro bono legal services to disadvantaged people is a professional obligation. It is axiomatic to any meaningful notion of justice that all people have equal access

are all offended by humiliation and frustration. We are all wounded by poverty, hunger and lack of stable accommodation. These are human wrongs against which human rights are arraigned. The existence of these conditions diminishes any society which measures its civilization by reference to its most vulnerable and disempowered members.

The support and contribution of many young lawyers to the Homeless Persons' Legal Clinic is providing access to justice to people who would not otherwise receive legal help. As one client said to the legal team assembled on his behalf, "no-one has ever helped me like this".

A non-recurrent funding grant from the Department of Human Services will enable the Clinic to operate until August 2002. The continued commitment of law firms, legal departments and young lawyers (and the emergence of a generous sponsor!) will ensure that the Clinic continues to provide legal assistance to homeless people.