

SHAPING AUSTRALIA AWARDS
COMMUNITY CHAMPION AWARD
THE MONASH CLINICAL LEGAL EDUCATION PROGRAM

Title: 50 Years of Meeting Diverse Community Legal Needs: A Voice for the Voiceless

Overview

The Monash clinical legal education program enables students to learn and develop as professionals through serving our communities. Monash Law Clinics and South-East Monash Legal Service are two of the largest providers of free legal aid in Victoria, assisting thousands of clients each year. In 2023, these clinics have provided a range of services to 2831 clients. The Monash Clinical Legal Education Program is the largest and most diverse in Australia, serving a broad range of communities through partnerships with leading local, national and global organisations. We specialise in family law, working with victims of family violence. Our Health Justice Partnership tackles the challenges (often long term) faced by people with complex medicolegal issues that require holistic assistance. In our increasingly globalised world, we also harness technology to support international communities in matters involving fundamental human rights, climate change and fair trade.

Community Law and Systemic Advocacy

A strong commitment to social justice drove Monash Law students and academics to establish the Springvale Legal Service in 1973 and the Monash Legal Service in 1978. Social justice continues to drive the work of those community legal centres, now named South-East Monash Legal Service (SMLS) and Monash Law Clinics (MLC). Monash practitioner scholars closely supervise all student work using collaborative frameworks that enable students to develop as skilled, ethical professionals, while meeting the immediate legal needs of local community members as well as engaging in systemic advocacy to extend the benefits of our work.

Across four key sites (Clayton, Springvale, Narre Warren and the Melbourne CBD), we serve clients through legal advice, assistance and advocacy. Family law and addressing family violence are key areas where the Monash Clinical Program makes distinctive contributions. We can draw on more than 20 years of experience of our Family Law Assistance Program providing litigants with information and support to run their own cases before the Courts.

Our Lawyer Assisted Family Dispute Resolution Clinic (LAFDR) involves a distinctive service, delivered in partnership with the Sunshine Family Relationship Centre and the Brimbank Melton Community Legal Centre in Melbourne's western suburbs. The LAFDR Clinic conducts virtual mediation sessions between separating parties to work out parenting plans and further arrangements, assisting hundreds of clients. We also offer a specialist clinic in conjunction with Integrated Services for Survivor Advocacy at SMLS, providing legal services to victims of sexual assault and sexual abuse.

cohealth Monash Legal Assistance Service is a health justice partnership (HJP) with cohealth, a community health service network across Melbourne. This partnership provides a wraparound, interdisciplinary set of services including initial assessments, legal advice appointments, secondary consultations, ongoing casework and case conference meetings.

We provide a range of services in other areas of client need including employment law, consumer credit and debt, traffic matters and tenancy.

We also engage in systemic advocacy, designed to protect and advance the interests of the client groups we serve. This is best exemplified by the collaborative work of Monash Law Clinics staff in early-2023 on a submission to the Royal Commission into the Robodebt Scheme. The submission brought together scholarly analysis of the use of automated decision-making systems, with experience in working directly with social security recipients. It is referred to multiple times in the Royal Commission's Final Report.

The Clinics We Run

We serve a range of communities through more than 20 innovative clinics and volunteer programs addressing a wide range of legal needs. Beyond those services referred to above, these include:

ATO Tax Clinic and Social Security Rights Clinic assist vulnerable clients with tax and social security issues. We partner with Social Security Rights Victoria to ensure that our work is effectively targeted. The Tax Clinic assists low-income people with tax debts, often the victims of tax scam arrangements.

Climate Justice Clinic (CJC), another Australian first, provides legal help to climate activists, climate-focused NGOs and concerned citizens. The CJC recently collaborated with the Gippsland Community Legal Service to develop the 'Guidebook to Public Land Management' (published March 2023), building the capacity of the community legal sector to play an effective role in mitigating climate change.

National Justice Project Clinic, assisting cases and court proceedings supporting First Nations People and the Refugee Community located on Nauru.

Afghanistan Support Clinic - The Afghanistan Support Clinic started in direct response to the Taliban's violent return to power in August 2021. The clinic supports the 'Ham Diley Campaign' (ham diley means solidarity or empathy in Farsi) which initially provided emergency response (through direct and indirect support of 86 evacuations). The Clinic developed a Handbook on Accountability for International Crimes Committed by the Taliban under the Principles of Universal Jurisdiction, attracting support from Afghanistan's embassies in Canberra and the United Nations, and Amnesty International ahead of publication due in March 2024.

Monash Street Law Program, developed in partnership with the Monash Law Students Society in 2019. In 2023, this volunteer program harnessed the energy of more than 50 students to deliver interactive community presentations on important human rights and legal issues.

We established the Open Justice Project in 2021 in collaboration with the Victorian Bar. Student volunteers engage directly with barristers to work on important cases referred from the Courts or other referral partners.

Our Partnership Model

We partner with leading organisations involved in tackling cutting-edge social and legal issues in areas including community law, family law, criminal justice, human rights, client advocacy and law reform. Our Anti-Death Penalty Clinic was established in 2018 as a partnership with the Capital Punishment Justice Project (CPJP). Students engage in

casework, research projects and the development of advocacy briefs. The Clinic has now established partnerships with leading NGOs and lawyers across Asia.

The Monash Clinical Legal Education Program is deeply connected to a wide range of community networks and partners. Our strong links to many of Victoria's community legal centres enables us to serve our clients more effectively. We also foster a strong commitment to social justice in our students, the lawyers and leaders of the future.