Federation of
Community Legal Centres

Needs Assessment

CLCs undertake needs assessment to identify and better understand the unmet legal and associated needs within their communities. Based on this information the centre can determine if, and how, it may respond to the identified needs. Needs assessment and the analysis of the information obtained will inform all aspects of a centre's operations. In the context of community legal education (CLE), analysis of identified legal needs, concerns and issues leads to the questions – Is CLE an appropriate response? And if so, what form should the CLE take?

Essentially, legal needs assessment is a form of social research.

"Research…is, simply, collecting information and thinking systematically about it."
CONNELL, AS QUOTED IN WADSWORTH, 1984, P5.

The needs assessment process has three components:
1. **Deciding** what information to collect.
2. **Collecting** the information.
3. **Analysing** the information.

This process can be undertaken on a range of levels by a CLC, from relatively simple to quite complex, depending on scope, time and resources.

Legal needs assessment is an ongoing process for a CLC. Needs assessment processes should be incorporated into the centre's annual and longer-term strategic planning processes and should inform work plans.

Tip!

Needs assessment should underpin any CLE project. Remember, it does not have to be complex – your needs assessment can fit the size and scope of your endeavour.

For any CLE activity the centre should be able to answer the following questions – What legal need is the activity being designed to address? How does the centre know about this legal need? How does the centre know that addressing this legal need is a priority for its community?

CASE STUDY - SIMPLE NEEDS ANALYSIS

A CLC wanted to see what CLE sessions young people wanted them to run. They didn't have the time or the resources to do a full-blown research project. They decided to simply ask young people what they wanted when they did a general talk at a local school. They now incorporate this simple needs analysis into all talks they do and include the results in their work plan. When they come to do future planning they have all the "needs assessment" information right at their fingertips.

Following the Black Saturday Bushfires, Eastern Community Legal Centre was able to offer

legal information sessions to people from fire-affected areas. Expression of interest forms were left at recovery centres and neighbourhood houses. People could complete these anonymously to indicate the topics they would like covered. Eastern CLC used the responses in determining priority topics for the sessions.

Deciding What Information to Collect

"Research is a process which begins with people asking questions, then setting out to answer them."
WADSWORTH, 1984, P5.

Consideration of the type of questions outlined below will assist a CLC to:
- clarify what type of information is required;
- effectively direct its resources in the information collection process;
- select appropriate information collection methodology; and
- determine whether the required information has been collected.
  The purpose of undertaking the needs assessment and analysis should be carefully considered and clearly articulated by the centre before the process begins.
- What is the centre's purpose in undertaking the needs assessment?
- What question(s) is the centre seeking to answer?
- What is the hypothesis that the centre is testing?
- Who does the centre want to hear from?
- What will the centre do with the information it collects?
- Does the centre want to gain a general overview of the CLE needs within its community?
- Is the centre only concerned with collecting information about the CLE needs of certain groups – perhaps those who are not using its services?
- Does the centre only want information about CLE needs, or is it also interested in suggestions about how these may be addressed?
- Is the centre proposing to implement a new activity and seeking information to support the proposal?

Collecting the Information

Now that the purpose is clear, decisions can be made about:
- The type of information to collect;
- Sources from which to collect the information;
- How to collect the information; and
- Who will collect it?

The following are examples of useful sources of information about a community and its legal needs, issues, concerns – generally and specifically in relation to community legal education - and suggestions for how these may be addressed.
- Demographic data, social indicators, community profiles
  The Australian Bureau of Statistics, local, state and federal government departments and authorities are good sources. The statistics that other organisations keep about their clients, the services they provide or are unable to provide, etc., may also be relevant.
- Consultation and liaison
  Formal and informal consultation with individuals, groups, community organisations, other relevant service providers and stakeholders. Strategies may include, for example, community forums and workshops, surveys and questionnaires, individual and group interviews, case studies and action research.

The consultation may be as simple as just talking to community workers, centre caseworkers and volunteers and relevant people in the community.

Case Study

Each year a CLC sends a letter to all organisations in the catchment area that are run by or deliver services to people from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds. The letter advises that the centre offers CLE services and invites organisations to contact the centre to discuss their legal education needs. This process promotes centre services, helps the centre to make connections with the community and to work collaboratively to develop appropriate responses.

- Research and initiatives undertaken by other organisations.
The research may contain relevant 'facts and figures' that add to the general assessment being made by the centre. Alternatively, the work of others may highlight particular legal needs or identify groups of people who are encountering difficulties with the law. An example is publications based on research undertaken by Jesuit Social Services.
    Often the challenge is in finding out about and accessing this information. Word of mouth, making relevant contacts, the internet, using the research skills and resources of places such as the Victoria Legal Aid Library, reading newsletters and journals, and CLC networks, working groups and peak bodies can be good places to start.

Case Study

The Law and Justice Foundation of New South Wales has undertaken extensive work in researching the legal and access to justice needs of areas across New South Wales. The Foundation is also undertaking research into the programs and initiatives that have been effective in responding to the identified legal needs. A CLC may find consideration of the Foundation's work useful in designing its own legal needs assessment tools. The research is documented on the Foundation's website.

- Analysis of changes to the law and legal processes that may impact upon the community. Contact the Federation as a starting point.
- Requests from and issues raised by individuals, groups and organisations.
- Centre generated information
This may include statistical data regarding service provision (Community Legal Service Information System (CLSIS) data), file reviews, anecdotal information, work plan reviews, feedback from and evaluation of previous CLE activities. Some CLCs structure regular reviews of casework to identify trends and issues that may highlight the need for CLE or law reform activities.
    It is important to compare centre service provision data and demographic information. Is the centre reaching the relevant sections of the community?
- Monitoring issues and events
In addition to regular planned legal needs assessment, CLCs must have in place mechanisms to monitor new issues and needs as they arise.

Case Study

In response to a number of reported physical assaults on international students studying in Melbourne, the Western Suburbs Legal Service wrote to about seventy private training colleges offering to deliver CLE sessions to their students regarding their rights and responsibilities. The Service also established a specialist legal clinic for international students.

Centres must also consider the question of who will collect the information. Often centre's staff undertake the research as part of their ongoing role. At times centres may engage specialist researchers to assist in the design of, and/or to conduct the needs assessment and analysis. This approach may be taken when the centre is concerned to ensure authoritative and independent outcomes.

Consideration should also be given to the role that the 'community' could have, not just in being consulted, but also in designing and undertaking the research and analysis.

> "The community's participation in the needs analysis is a vital part of community development and real empowerment, and is the key to the process[ing] being relevant to, and used by, the community."
> GOLDIE, 1997, P16.

Goldie encourages us to "[R]emember that ultimately, the people who have the problems are the only ones who can really understand their situation and tell you how community legal education may help."

Tip!

Legal needs assessment is a form of research. Remember, there may be ethical considerations (such as those around privacy and informed consent) and research protocols to be taken into account in the design, implementation, and analysis and reporting of the assessment.

Analysing the Information

> "When you analyse your information and ideas, what you are trying to do is 'take it to pieces' and try and see what kind of categories, trends, themes, patterns or repeated relationships can be constructed."
> WADSWORTH,1984, P63.

Following the collection of information, the next stage is to collate and then analyse it. In the analysis the centre may look for answers to questions such as:
• What is the information telling us?
• What trends or patterns are emerging?
• Does the data support previous knowledge and assumptions?
• Are there surprises and unexpected findings?
• Have the questions that were posed been answered?
• Have the objectives of the research been achieved?
• Does the data highlight the need for further research into particular areas?
• Who? What? When? Why? and How? type of questions are helpful at this stage.

Importantly,
• What does the information tell the centre about the legal needs, issues and concerns of the community?
• What does the information tell the centre about the community's priorities in addressing the legal needs?
• What does the information tell the centre about the services/activities that are needed and appropriate ways to provide these?
• Is CLE a relevant response?
• If so, what might a CLE activity designed to meet the need look like?

Other considerations:
• Who should be involved in analysing the information?

- The way the information is interpreted and understood will be influenced by the experience, knowledge and values of those who are involved in doing this.
- How will the collected, collated and interpreted information be used?
    » centre priority setting, planning and review processes;
    » design and delivery of services and activities;
    » funding submissions;
    » broader lobbying and campaign work; or
    » as a basis for future community legal needs assessment.
- What did the centre learn about the process of legal needs assessment?
    » Were there techniques that worked well, people who were very helpful, information sources or resources that were useful?
    » Did the methodology used support and achieve the research objectives?
    » What could have been done differently or better?

Take the time to review the process and to document your reflections. This learning will assist the centre to improve the process next time around. The centre may also consider sharing the insights with other CLCs.

Case Study

Youthlaw was concerned that the centre consistently saw thirty percent more young men than young women. The centre wanted to know why. It also wanted to find out about the legal issues faced by young women and how these may vary between different groups of young women.

With funding from the Victorian Women's Trust, Youthlaw conducted a research project. The project involved running eight focus groups with different groups of young women, and conducting an on-line and hard copy survey with young women and people who work with them. A report, "Visible and Vocal: The Legal Needs And Issues Facing Young Women In Victoria", was produced.

Youthlaw planned to use the results to inform its service delivery and to inform other legal service providers.

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FURTHER READING & RESOURCES

- Combined Community Legal Centres Group NSW, (2004), *Your Guide to Community Legal Education*, Second Edition, NSW. (Step By Step CLE: Needs Analysis pp 61-77)
- Federation of Community Legal Centres (Vic) Inc (2009) Website www.communitylaw.org.au - Intranet - Federation Toolkit – Managing The Organisation – Legal Needs Studies
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- Judith Stubbs & Associates (2009) *Planning for Legal Needs: Legal Needs Assessment Framework, Report One of the Legal Needs Strategic Planning Toolkit: An Evidence Based Approach*, Community Legal Centres NSW (Ph: 02 9212 7333)