

INNOVATION IN FREE ACCESS TO SCHOLARSHIP AND ITS BENEFITS TO COMMUNITIES: THE LAW HANDBOOK ONLINE AND THE PLAIN LANGUAGE LAW PORTAL FOR NORTHERN TERRITORIANS

**Stephanie Booker, Project Officer, Community Legal Education
Northern Territory Legal Aid Commission
And
NT Community Legal Education Network**



OVERVIEW

- ▶ Context
- ▶ The NT Law Handbook Online
- ▶ The Plain Language Law Online Portal for Northern Territorians

CONTEXT

- ▶ The Northern Territory of Australia is a particular, unique part of Australia, with particular, unique legal issues.
- ▶ The average age of Northern Territorians is about 33;
- ▶ Our population consists of at least 25% of Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander origin;
- ▶ 40% of our population live in rural or remote areas of the Northern Territory.



CONTEXT (CONTINUED)...

- ▶ Research conducted by the Law and Justice Foundation NSW through their Legal Australia-Wide Survey in 2012 highlighted that in a period of 1 year:
 - ▶ 55% of respondents from the Northern Territory experienced a legal problem - significantly higher than the country's average;
 - ▶ The four most prevalent legal problems were crime (23%), consumer problems (21%), housing problems (12%) and government problems (11%);
 - ▶ 26% of respondents noted three or more legal problems, with the majority of legal problems concentrated among a minority of respondents (indeed, 10% of respondents accounted for 68% of the legal problems reported);



CONTEXT (CONTINUED)

- ▶ Disadvantaged or socially excluded groups particularly vulnerable to legal problems included: people with a disability; Indigenous respondents; The unemployed; Single parents; People living in disadvantaged housing; People's whose main income was government payments.
- ▶ There were gaps in the awareness of not-for-profit legal services;
- ▶ To respond to legal problems, people only sought the advice of legal or non-legal professionals for 50% of problems, handled 29% of legal problems without advice and took no action for 21% of legal problems. The percentage for taking no action was significantly higher than average.

- ▶ Where people sought advice for legal problems, they did not limit themselves to lawyers or traditional legal services for advice. In the NT, a legal advisor was consulted for only 24% of legal problems. Legal help was also provided by non-legal main advisers, dispute/complaint-handling advisers, government advisers, financial advisers (44–65%) and health or welfare advisers (36–53%).
- ▶ Barriers to obtaining advice from legal professionals included cost and geographical distance.

LEGAL AID COMMISSION AND COMMUNITY LEGAL EDUCATION:

- ▶ **Legal Aid's Act:** *...initiate & carry out educational programs designed to promote an understanding by the public...of their rights, powers, privileges & duties under the laws in force in the NT (11 8 n)*
- ▶ **Legal Aid's Charter:** *To ensure people in the NT – especially disadvantaged - understand & have access to help protect & enforce their legal rights & interests.*
- ▶ **National Partnership Agreement:** *increasing preventative legal services that inform and build individual & community resilience - community legal education, legal information & referral.*

TWO EXCITING PROJECTS

- ▶ Legal Aid Commission, with Darwin Community Legal Service and AustLII, are working collaboratively to update and put online the NT Law Handbook;
- ▶ The NT Community Legal Education Network, which is an informal peer support Network comprising CLE workers from across the Northern Territory, are working collaboratively to develop a plain language law online “portal” or web resource.

WHY ARE THESE PROJECTS IMPORTANT?



Information

Addresses lack of **knowledge**:
a prime source of powerlessness

Education

develop **critical understanding** of legal system;
raise consciousness of justice & rights.

Empowerment tools for systemic change

- learn processes
- link people with common issues
- to knowledge, skills, attitudes and connections
- to participate in improving their lives / reshaping their worlds.

THE LAW HANDBOOK ONLINE



WHAT IS THE LAW HANDBOOK?

- ▶ The Northern Territory Law Handbook is an institution. Like the law handbooks in all jurisdictions around Australia, the Northern Territory Law Handbook is a practical guide to legal issues affecting people living in the Northern Territory, and includes chapters on legal issues affecting families, children, crime, land and the environment, health, credit and debt and discrimination.



WHO?

- ▶ In practice, the Law Handbook is most often used by generalist lawyers, and those working at the coal-face with disadvantaged clients that need quick access to summaries of how the law works in practice.
- ▶ For instance, the NT Legal Aid Commission has a helpline that offers legal information and referrals to anyone who uses this service. The Law Handbook is a resource often used by those working at the helpline.
- ▶ The Law Handbook is also used by literate members of the community who are in a position to deal with legal issues on their own or with some minor assistance.

THE HISTORY

- ▶ Since its inception in 1993, Law Handbooks have been produced in the Northern Territory in a joint partnership between the Darwin Community Legal Service and the NT Legal Aid Commission. Hard copy books were published in 1993, 1997, 2002 and 2008. All were produced with the financial assistance of the Public Purposes Trust with the Law Society NT.
- ▶ Over the years, all Law Handbook content was generated by volunteer lawyers and other specialists in related fields. Publishing each edition was a huge undertaking given the volunteer contributor recruitment process, and the peer review process that followed.

- ▶ The final hard copy Handbook produced in 2008 was 1294 pages, almost double the size of the first Handbook. The costs involved in printing such a large book and the inevitable issue of information becoming dated and irrelevant when material is printed in hardcopy, determined that the 2008 edition was to be the last Handbook printed.

- ▶ There were other challenges faced with final hard copy of book:
 - ▶ Negotiating with and juggling the needs of so many parties – eg contributors, readers, proof readers, editor, designer, printer and steering committee
 - ▶ Time blow outs meant the first editor pulled out of the project part way through
 - ▶ There was a great level of initial commitment from people but getting the amended sections from them was difficult. Some provided them on time but a lot of time was spent emailing, calling and in some instances having to get steering committee members to put the pressure on people to get contributions.
 - ▶ Some people just sent amendments to the coordinator to do herself.....
 - ▶ Some contributors were very disappointed they weren't given personal recognition for their work

WHAT NEXT?

- ▶ Resources, or a lack of them, prevented any further development of the Law Handbook in the NT. In mid 2014 AustLII approached the NT Legal Aid Commission and DCLS with a proposal to develop the Law Handbook Online, using the AustLII platform to do so. AustLII, in partnership with DCLS and NTLAC made a submission to the NT Law Society Public Purposes Trust in August 2014 for funding to support the project. The application was successful and work on developing the project began.
- ▶ Numerous meetings took place to develop and finalise the project plan, and once that was settled, a project coordinator was hired.

TO DATE

- ▶ We have recruited at least 30 contributors to update the Law Handbook Online. The 2008 content is presently online, ready to be updated.
- ▶ We have engaged in training of some users of the wiki;
- ▶ We are finalising “Contributor Guidelines”, terms and conditions/rules of engagement to engage in the portal.

OPPORTUNITIES AND CHALLENGES

▶ Opportunities:

- ▶ Learning in innovation;
- ▶ Wiki platform is incredibly simple to update;
- ▶ Given the delay in updating, there is energy and enthusiasm around the new version;
- ▶ New impetus to engage and collaborate with lawyers, government and industry in the NT – the building of an online community;
- ▶ Now even more accessible to more NTers.

▶ Challenges:

- ▶ How do we ensure that people are only editing their own sections? And respectful engagements between contributors;
- ▶ How do we deal with acknowledgements where people don't want to be acknowledged, or are part of a team?
- ▶ How to ensure quality?
- ▶ How to ensure sections are updated regularly, where there are sometimes high turnovers of staff?

THE PLAIN LANGUAGE LAW ONLINE PORTAL





WHAT IS THE PORTAL AND WHAT WILL IT CONTAIN?

- ▶ The Portal will be an **easy-to-use** website that helps people **find plain language legal information** they need simply.
- ▶ The Portal will also **connect people with legal services** that will be able to assist them with their legal problems.
- ▶ The Portal will use a **variety of tools** to communicate information, including audio, pictures and text.

The material will be, in first instance, plain Language, guided by plain language texts



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WHAT IS PLAIN LANGUAGE?

- ▶ Plain language is communication the audience can understand the first time they read or hear it.
- ▶ There are many techniques that can help achieve this goal, including:
 - ▶ Logical organization
 - ▶ "You" and other pronouns
 - ▶ Active voice
 - ▶ Short sentences
 - ▶ Common, everyday words
 - ▶ Easy-to-read design features

WHY AN ONLINE PORTAL?



- ▶ There is a great need for plain language legal information for the general public;
- ▶ Access to plain language legal information online is poor;
- ▶ There are a number of resources that exist on numerous websites, that aren't accessed – too many sites, sites not user friendly, etc.
- ▶ There is now better access to internet for Territorians given increased use of smart phones;

IT'S AS MUCH ABOUT THE PROCESS AS IT IS ABOUT THE DESTINATION

- ▶ The project is supported by a Steering Committee from a number of NT-based legal and other services;
- ▶ We are going through a comprehension, collaborative phase, surveying and interviewing legal services, NGOs, government agencies, and communities, to identify, from each of their perspectives:
 - ▶ The sorts of issues people are facing (not only legal need, but also how these issues are framed);
 - ▶ The sorts of plain legal information used, or would be useful to have online;
 - ▶ What an accessible online resource might look like;
 - ▶ Partners that might be interested in contributing to this work.

WHO IS INVOLVED?



- ▶ The Portal's focus is improving access to plain language information to vulnerable populations including:
 - ▶ Indigenous;
 - ▶ Those with disabilities;
 - ▶ Culturally And Linguistically Diverse people;
 - ▶ Less literate;
 - ▶ Remote;
 - ▶ Younger/older;
 - ▶ Those at risk.



HOW?



- First step: Consultations with organisations and community groups, looking at the need for plain language resources, existing resources, and possible formats for the Portal.
- Second step: Outcomes of research will be incorporated into the design of the Portal.
- Final step: Further consultations with organisations and community groups on the Portal before it is completed by September 2016.

WHAT WE ARE LEARNING

- ▶ There is wealth of information that exists, some plain language, others not;
- ▶ There is a real need for better (or any!) plain language information on certain topics, including domestic violence
- ▶ Service directories! What do we all do? Ever changing
- ▶ What does sustainability look like vs making the resource as user friendly as possible

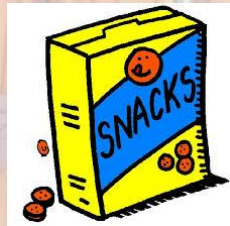
HOW THESE PROJECTS INTERSECT

▶ Taking a:

▶ BITE



▶ SNACK



▶ MEAL



approach to information on the Portal, the Law Handbook nicely fits in to the “meal” category. So, if users want more information, they will be linked to relevant sections of the NT Law Handbook Online

FOR MORE INFORMATION



- Contact Steph Booker, Project Officer, at stephanie.booker@ntlac.nt.gov.au or 08 8999 3000.
- The NT Community Legal Education Network is grateful for the support of the Law Society Public Purposes Trust.

