

Quarterly Highlights Report July to September 2020

This Quarterly Highlights Report provides a summary of the work of the New South Wales Legal Assistance Forum (NLAF) from July to September 2020.

*The NLAF Plenary Group Meeting was held on **2 September 2020**. It was chaired by Brendan Thomas, Chief Executive Officer of Legal Aid NSW and was attended by representatives of the NLAF Plenary Group.*

Guest Speakers at the September 2020 Plenary Group meeting

Attorney General of NSW, The Hon Mark Speakman SC, MP

We welcomed the Honourable Mark Speakman, Attorney General of NSW, as Guest Speaker at the September 2020 Plenary Group meeting. The Attorney discussed the significant change in the landscape since he spoke with Plenary members in September last year. He thanked and acknowledged all in the legal assistance sector for adjusting to the unexpected challenges confronting the sector as we continue to respond to the COVID-19 pandemic. The Attorney spoke about the improvements in efficiency and increased convenience for practitioners and clients, such as remote access to advice and court proceedings, many of which will be maintained after the pandemic.

The Attorney addressed questions from NLAF members canvassing a range of areas, including Raising the age, Closing the Gap targets and Restorative Justice in the areas of Domestic Violence and Sexual Assault.

NSW Chief Psychiatrist, Dr Murray Wright

We were also joined at the September meeting by NSW Chief Psychiatrist Dr Murray Wright, who gave an informative presentation about mental health in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic. Dr Wright spoke about the acute and medium-term health responses to the pandemic, outlined the whole of Government response, and also shared advice and insights on what those in the legal sector can do to mitigate mental health consequences.

Dr Wright characterised the pandemic as a disaster which particularly impacts those legal sector clients who have existing mental health problems and/or are marginalised and face isolation. Dr Wright talked about the crucial role of community cohesion and targeted monitoring of vulnerable persons, which becomes extremely challenging when clients are experiencing isolation due to social distancing measures and restrictions.

In terms of responding to the challenges presented by COVID-19, the health sector has adapted with better use of technology. There have been leaps in progress in the availability of telehealth, increased use of call centres and an increase in online availability of evidence-based information on mental health.

Dr Wright spoke about the significant gate-keeping responsibility of the legal assistance sector, in looking out for vulnerable clients and encouraging referrals to the [Mental Health Line](#), [Beyond Blue](#) and [Lifeline](#).

Snapshot of the work of groups reporting to NLAf

The NLAf quarterly working group reports tabled at the September Plenary Group meeting are posted on our website, so please visit nlaf.org.au and visit the [Our Work](#) page, to read in detail about the work of these groups from July to September 2020. The following is a snapshot of some of the issues raised and work done by the NLAf working groups in this quarter:

- Paul O'Reilly, Executive Director, Youth Justice NSW, attended the quarterly meeting of the [Aboriginal Incarceration Working Group](#) and spoke about the direction of Youth Justice generally, the impact of COVID-19 and the areas of focus within Youth Justice NSW to address the high percentage of young Aboriginal people in detention in NSW.
- The [Doli incapax Working Group](#) is continuing its work on an information hub for defence practitioners on *doli incapax*. The working group also continues to engage with the NSW Police Force to explore opportunities for collaborating on police training and development materials as they relate to *doli incapax*.
- The [Fines & Traffic Law Working Group](#) received an update at its quarterly meeting from Revenue NSW on the Fairer Fines amendments which commenced on 1 July 2020, and which were informed by comments submitted by the group earlier this year. As at mid-August 2020 there had been 223 applications for the 50% fine reduction and there has been an increase in applications to pay by instalment. The working group will continue to receive updates from Revenue NSW.
- The [Prisoners Forum](#) finalised its review of the Terms of Reference for the working group, the Objectives of which now include a broader definition of vulnerable persons to include incarcerated women and young people in detention in NSW. The revised Terms of Reference were tabled at the Plenary meeting and accepted by members. Also, at the quarterly meeting, Kelly-Anne Stewart, Acting Director Corrections Strategy and Executive Services, Corrective Services NSW, presented an overview of a pilot program trialling in-cell technology in NSW prisons. The Prisoners Forum will continue to receive updates on the pilot program.

The [Cooperative Legal Services Delivery Program \(CLSD\) Unit](#) also reports to NLAf and one of its highlights from this quarter is the launch in Nowra in August 2019 of *Cut it Out*, a program of workshops on domestic and family violence, for salon professionals. Cut it Out will support workshops in five CLSD Program regions and will be facilitated by the CLSD Program regional coordinator in partnership with local legal and domestic violence services.

The [NSW Legal Information and Referral Forum \(LIRF\)](#) met online in July 2020. At the meeting there was a presentation by the Justice Advocacy Service, which aims to provide access and support to people with cognitive impairment in their interactions with the criminal justice system. To read about the presentation, follow the link to the [LIRF page](#) on our website.

The next Plenary Group meeting is on **2 December 2020** and remote participation will again be available.

If you have any questions about this Quarterly Highlights Report, or the work of NLAf, please email: nlaf@lawfoundation.net.au

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