

November 2021

Impact of border closure policy on our community

Advocating to government and peak bodies about what's best for our community regarding free legal assistance is part of our ongoing focus. The National Legal Assistance Partnership (NLAP) is the Federal Government's agreement for government-funded legal services. Part of its major focus is keeping the justice system within reach for vulnerable people facing disadvantage.

Hume Riverina Community Legal Service (HRCLS) was approached to provide a case study for the NLAP to show the impact of the NSW-Victoria border closure which ran from July through until November 2020. This decision plunged thousands of people in the broad Albury Wodonga region into immediate chaos.

The border closure permit system implemented was complex and changed frequently, sometimes daily. **Between July and October, 18 Border Control Public Health Orders were made that had to be read and understood in the context of the broader NSW Public Health Orders, as were the 78 Victorian Directions/Orders made between March and November.** This created multiple challenges for vulnerable people who relied on this system to access essential services in Albury.

HRCLS's contribution to government advocacy was on behalf of clients who relied on crossing the border to get the help they needed, as well as connect with their crucial support networks, including family.

Day-to-day struggles compounded

The profound impacts of the pandemic and border closures are illustrated by Judy's experiences. Judy is a single mother of two children with disabilities. Judy had a long history of family violence, experienced poor mental health and cognitive issues. Judy was experiencing financial hardship and relied on the NDIS and disability support pension. Judy had complex and multiple legal issues due to her challenging life circumstances and had been engaged with HRCLS for some years. HRCLS initially assisted Judy to obtain an FVIO against her ex-partner's girlfriend after being subjected to physical and verbal abuse for several years. HRCLS had also assisted Judy with her family law matter parenting dispute.

Desperate times worsen with border slammed shut

HRCLS played a key role supporting Judy with the NSW-Victoria border closure in July 2020 which had a major impact on Judy's mental health. Judy was isolated from her support networks which were on the other side of the border. This included the close-knit family support given by her grandmothers. The closure also prevented her from caring for her elderly mother who had mental health issues.

"The people I am closest to are across the border, so I became very isolated and had no one."

Judy's ability to fully parent her child also diminished, as she struggled on her own. She ended up seeing a psychiatrist and her medication was increased to a high dose to keep her from needing to be hospitalised. **Judy reflected, "I became depressed, felt devastated and couldn't cope."**

Border closure adds to chaos of life

Judy found the permit system and application process overwhelming. HRCLS worked with Judy to ensure that she understood the border closure rules and the exemptions that were available to her in order to access essential services. HRCLS raised the impact of the border closure and the constant rule changes on clients as part of their advocacy, including Judy's story, and in doing so gave her a voice at a time when she felt disempowered.

Dealing with debt to remove stress

At the time of the pandemic, Judy was struggling with significant debts stemming from her desperate circumstances. The debts arose while Judy's eldest son was struggling with severe mental health issues. He had made numerous trips to hospital locally and in Melbourne, involving numerous admissions. Judy had recently had a car accident and desperately needed a new car to continue to look after her children and provide the medical care they required. Judy was unable to buy a new car due to her loan repayments. Judy had also left her relationship due to the ongoing family violence.

Some of the loans arose out of unfair and irresponsible lending at a time when Judy was experiencing high levels of vulnerability. **Judy described the year she had taken out the loans as "the worst year of [her] life with so much trauma" that continues to affect her today.**

Despite the COVID restrictions, HRCLS continued to provide legal representation to Judy resulting in her debts being reduced by \$10,300 and Judy being able to retain ownership of her car. This not only made a significant difference to Judy's financial situation, but also substantially reduced her stress levels associated with the debts. Her improved financial state had a positive overall impact.

"You have been an amazing support with talking through all my legal issues as well as mental health ones. I've felt a sense of real caring and compassion with you one that isn't just got a job to do but real care."

Collaboration working

Judy was also linked into UMFC financial counselling to assist her to set up payment plans for some of her remaining debts. This not only demonstrated the critical impact of legal representation for victim survivors, but also the agility of the legal service to adapt to remote delivery in the context of the pandemic.

**not client's real name*