

Legal service tag team tackles Tina's numerous legal problems on the Border

Tina's* experience is all too familiar: living with the trauma from severe domestic violence, homelessness as a result of the violence, financial hardship, fines piled up in her name, all while raising young children. And like many people living on the Border, Tina's life spreads across two states.

Through our cross border legal expertise - understanding NSW and Victoria systems and laws - our family lawyer Erin Quilliam and generalist lawyer Raissa Butkowski unravelled the complexities Tina was facing. This helped Tina deal with some of the urgent issues she was facing, not the least, the loss of licence through offences her ex-partner committed.

After the terrifying experience, and with close to \$30,000 of debt hanging over her head, Tina is grateful for the legal help she received, while she tries to get her life together.

**“I probably would've given up. I've copped everything else in my life, so I would've copped this on the chin. When I talked to them (lawyers) about the process, I thought, 'there's so much to it, I can't do it'.
“But I didn't have to do anything, they did everything for me.”**

Partner link a quick path

Through our partnership with the Murray Women's Domestic Violence Court Advocacy Service, Tina, an Indigenous woman, was linked with Erin in late 2021 for help with her legal problems. This relationship ensures victim survivors have easy access to free legal assistance when they need it the most.

Advice for domestic violence crucial

During the appointment with Erin, Tina outlined the serious physical assaults she experienced at the hands of her ex-partner. After the latest assault, the police had applied for an Apprehended Domestic Violence Order (ADVO). After six months' evading arrest, Tina's ex-partner ended up in custody to face criminal charges. Along with the advice on family law, Victims Services and the ADVO, Tina was seeking to have her children full-time because she feared for their safety.

Fleeing home to family

After her ex-partner committed the serious assault, Tina escaped the house with her kids on the night the violence occurred. She can't remember escaping but somehow made it to her mother's house. "I left without my shoes on and never looked back." Tina moved in with her mother, with her kids sharing rooms and sleeping on a mattress in the lounge room. But even if she could get her own place, which is extremely difficult in a competitive rental market, there are multiple factors holding her back. "I can't do it on my own at the moment, I'm just trying to get by, and the rent is way above what I could pay, too."

Fines a burden lifted

Tina returned for more legal advice in 2022. In talking to Erin, it became clear other legal problems needed fixing. These included traffic fines in Victoria totalling \$22,000. The sheer weight of the fines was something Tina didn't want to think about. "I didn't even know where to start, so I wasn't going to worry about it and just cop it on the chin." Tina had no energy to deal with the process but after speaking with Erin and the generalist lawyer, Raissa, she understood the legal options available to her. Tina soon received some positive news when

Raissa told her she would make a Family Violence Scheme application to have the fines waived.

“When she rang me I thought, ‘My God is, that real?’ I couldn’t believe it.”

Licence loss hurts living on the Border

Tina’s licence was suspended twice due to two high-range speeding fines her ex-partner committed. Without a licence, Tina was cut her off from support and family in Victoria. This was the most pressing issue for Raissa, and for Tina, the loss of independence had a huge impact. “I have a lot of things I need to do for my children in Victoria and I couldn’t do them. Relying on other people like my mum to help, that’s just not me.” Swift intervention from Raissa saw the licence fully restored within days, after the domestic violence situation was explained. Tina could hardly believe it happened, expecting a delay.

“They lifted it straight away, it all happened really quickly.”

Tolls lifted, electricity debt

After Raissa contacted two toll companies, one waived \$2,583 and another nominated Tina’s ex-partner for the toll fines, taking Tina’s name off all toll fines accrued through their system. An unpaid electricity debt of almost \$5000 had progressed to a debt collector. Raissa wrote a letter requesting a full waiver of the debt, confident the debt could be waived after speaking with the debt collector. The debt collector agreed and cleared this full amount for Tina.

An abridged version of this story appears in the HRCLS Annual Report 2021-22

*not real name