

Your reference:

Our reference: KH:



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12 February 2013

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Dear Claudia

Mental Health Legal Centre

I refer to your letter of 11 February 2013 regarding the Mental Health Legal Centre (MHLC), in which you asked VLA to reconsider our decision to not renew the service agreement of the MHLC.

This decision was made in light of the significant governance, administrative and financial problems that MHLC has experienced in recent years. VLA has worked with MHLC and other stakeholders throughout this period to attempt to address these issues, and while the appointment of the new MHLC board represents progress on this front, it will take substantial effort, time and resources to reinvigorate the centre.

The delivery of high quality legal services to clients living with mental illnesses is a core VLA priority and this decision will not mean a diminution of those services. Rather, the decision means that VLA funding that is currently provided to MHLC will be redirected into the VLA Mental Health and Disability Advocacy program to enable enhanced state wide coverage and a focus on providing a more holistic approach designed to better address the legal and legally related needs of clients experiencing a mental illness.

As you know, VLA is already the largest provider of mental health legal services in Victoria. We also provide legal services to clients with a mental illness in relation to other commonly occurring legal problems such as housing issues, social security, discrimination and criminal and family law matters. In our view, there is no longer sufficient justification for public expenditure on two programs that service the same client group in similar ways. In this instance, we consider that VLA is best placed to deliver a comprehensive and quality service to mental health consumers.

We appreciate that this is a difficult situation for MHLC and a decision that may disappoint some in the CLC sector. We have received a range of feedback since the decision was made public. This is a decision that VLA has not taken lightly. However, after careful consideration we believe this approach will best deliver an effective, innovative and efficient service to particularly vulnerable Victorians. As such, we are not reconsidering the decision.

We also wish to reinforce that the decision does not indicate a lack of support to the CLC sector more broadly. Rather, the decision responds to unique and specific problems with the centre and considerations about the best way to deliver services to people with mental illness.

VLA is firmly committed to strengthening the CLC sector and the mixed model of service delivery in Victoria. Our commitment to the sector is demonstrated by decisions such as: increased indexation to centres in 2012-2013, exceeding the level of indexation provided by either branch of government to legal aid; funding new projects relating to family violence, homelessness and RRR communities (in relation to which further announcements will be made shortly); and the decision to not reduce CLC funding at the end of 2012, when significant changes to VLA funding and guidelines were made in response to VLA budget pressures.

Please do not hesitate to contact me if you wish to discuss this further.

Yours faithfully

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Kristen Hilton", with a long horizontal flourish extending to the right.

KRISTEN HILTON

Director, Civil Justice, Access & Equity
Civil Justice Program