

Pro bono practice supports vulnerable people during the pandemic

While the COVID-19 pandemic has put pressure on all aspects of Australian society, the elderly, victims of domestic violence, the homeless, and people seeking asylum and refugees have been arguably among the hardest hit. Wotton + Kearney, through its Community Footprint program, has found a range of ways to support vulnerable people affected by the COVID-19 pandemic

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HEIDI NASH-SMITH, pro bono and community partner at insurance specialist firm Wotton + Kearney, comments: "We have all seen the heartbreaking stories coming out of countries with high rates of infection, deaths and overwhelmed health systems. Thankfully, we have not needed to face the same scale of those terrible outcomes in Australia. However, as many of the most vulnerable people in our community have been badly affected by COVID-19, Wotton + Kearney is determined to find meaningful ways to help our long-term community partners in addressing their very real needs during the pandemic."

Older Australians

Older Australians are particularly vulnerable to the devastating effects of COVID-19, not only because they are more susceptible to the virus from a health perspective, but because they also face higher levels of social isolation if they are not digitally connected.

The Seniors Rights Service in NSW (SRS), one of Wotton + Kearney's key pro bono partners, has been strongly advocating for older Australians' right to access healthcare to be maintained during the pandemic.

Since the start of the pandemic, SRS has received 600+ calls about COVID-19 through its telephone advice service – more than double the volume received for the same period last year. SRS has also offered advice, support and information to 60 aged care facilities, including assisting over 90 relatives and representatives of residents in Newmarch House (the second-largest cluster of COVID-19 cases in Australia). It is also implementing a best practice response plan to deal with any further outbreaks in aged care facilities.

Wotton + Kearney lawyers are rostered on the SRS telephone advice service to provide advice and to take on case referrals to protect the rights of older people regarding legal issues such as wills, power of attorney, and elder abuse. The firm also provides a pro bono intern to SRS to provide legal research and support to the advice service.

Domestic violence

An increase in the rates of family and domestic violence during the COVID-19 pandemic has been reported in Australia and across the world with police and domestic violence services recording a surge in

calls for help. The nature of the COVID-19 lockdown creates more opportunities for abuse, as perpetrators of domestic violence can use the resulting environment to control their partner's movement and access to food, medical help and finances.

While online searches have significantly increased, hotlines have seen a decrease in calls – suggesting that victims in self-isolation are unable to access those services safely. The various lockdowns that have been imposed to enforce the social distancing required to reduce the spread of the virus, have unfortunately also created the conditions that have been identified as increasing the risk of domestic violence.

Assisting people escaping domestic violence, and the organisations that support them, is a key priority for Wotton + Kearney's Community Footprint program.

Wotton + Kearney has supported Lou's Place since 2012. Lou's Place is the only daytime refuge for women in Sydney that provides help and support for women in crisis. That often includes experiencing complex trauma, domestic violence and homelessness. In the face of the challenges COVID-19 presents

for service delivery, Lou's Place is continuing to provide essential support to women who need access to a safe refuge.

Teams of Wotton + Kearney volunteers usually cook breakfast for Lou's Place clients once a month. While social distancing means breakfasts are currently on hold, their staff are now making "kindness calls", providing social support by regularly checking in on vulnerable and isolated clients by phone.

Wotton + Kearney also supports Share the Dignity, a national charity that collects and distributes sanitary items to support women going without basic essentials.

Homelessness

On the most recent census night in 2016, more than 116,000 Australians were homeless. This figure is likely to significantly increase with the impact of COVID-19. More people than ever are at risk of homelessness

due to job losses, especially those not eligible for government financial assistance. Even with the generous government coronavirus support measures in place, Anglicare's recent Rental Affordability Snapshot has shown that only 1.5 per cent of available rental properties are affordable to those on JobSeeker payment despite the COVID-19 supplement.

With only 7 per cent of people who are homeless sleeping rough on the streets, the vast majority of people who are homeless are in supported accommodation, staying temporarily with other households, in boarding houses or other temporary lodgings. Concerningly, that means more than 51,000 people are in severely overcrowded dwellings. People experiencing homelessness in insecure and overcrowded living situations are at greater risk of exposure to COVID-19 as they cannot self-isolate.

Wotton + Kearney has a close and longstanding relationship with Launch Housing, an organisation that aims to end homelessness and provides crisis accommodation, as well as support, to those experiencing homelessness. Launch Housing has created a COVID-19 taskforce that aims to address issues that have arisen or been heightened by the virus.

The organisation has kept its crisis centres open and operated the only seven-day a week outreach service to rough sleepers. Launch Housing is currently supporting about 1,000 people in emergency motel and hotel accommodation who have been temporarily housed due to the virus. Of this group, 72 per cent had been sleeping rough, living on trains, in cars or squatting and had high housing needs before the outbreak. Women who left a family violence situation with an immediate risk of injury to themselves or their children, are



W+K's Angela Tan, Leanne Ho, Yen Tan and David Kearney helping to cook breakfast at Lou's Place, the only daytime refuge for women in Sydney.

also among this group. Launch Housing CEO Bevan Warner is now advocating for more permanent housing solutions in an attempt to stop this highly vulnerable group from exiting back into street homelessness.

Refugees and people seeking asylum

There are currently 1.1 million temporary visa holders across Australia, including people seeking asylum and refugees, who are in a precarious situation as COVID-19 unfolds. They have no access to the JobSeeker or JobKeeper payments, limited access to Medicare and visa insecurity. Many of those who were previously supporting themselves through employment have now lost their jobs as a result of the pandemic.

"It is of serious concern that during a health crisis, there are people in Australia who do not have access to free [healthcare] and are in such difficult financial circumstances that they may need to choose between protecting themselves and feeding their families", adds Ms Nash-Smith.

Assisting people seeking asylum and refugees in Australia has been a key area of focus for Wotton + Kearney's pro bono practice. The firm has worked in partnership with organisations including the Refugee Council of Australia, the Human Rights Law Centre, the Refugee Advice and Casework Service

in Sydney, and Refugee Legal in Melbourne to support people going through the process of making claims for protection. This has included taking statements from people to accompany their applications in making claims for protection, judicial review of refugee decisions, and filing High Court applications to prevent deportation to offshore detention centres of people brought to Australia for medical treatment.

These organisations have continued to operate throughout the crisis. They are urgently advocating to expand federal government coronavirus support measures to include people seeking asylum and refugees. ♦

For more information, visit:
www.seniorsrightsservice.org.au
www.lousplace.com.au
www.sharethedignity.com.au
www.launchhousing.org.au
www.action.refugeecouncil.org.au
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