

THE VIETNAMESE LAWYER PROJECT

BACKGROUND

Melbourne's western suburbs are home to a large Vietnamese-born community. Within the Brimbank local government area, this community represents about 10% of the population. The Vietnamese community is isolated by language and cultural barriers which prevent many from accessing mainstream legal and other services.

Brimbank Melton Community Legal Centre (BMCLC) (a program of **commUnity+**) delivers the Vietnamese Lawyer project in partnership with the Australian Vietnamese Women's Association (AVWA).

This is a two-year pilot project funded by the Department of Justice and Regulation and aims to improve access to justice for the Vietnamese community in the western suburbs by delivering legal services in the Vietnamese language through a bilingual lawyer.

Research shows that a bilingual approach to service delivery is significantly more effective in providing legal advice and information to culturally and linguistically diverse clients. Given the large population of Vietnamese-speakers in the project's catchment area it is a project that is advantageous to the community.

THE VALUE OF HAVING A BILINGUAL LAWYER IN SERVICE DELIVERY

A Vietnamese-speaking lawyer can immediately put a client at ease as the client is assured that they are empowered to provide their account in their own words and know that it is being completely understood. A further benefit includes the rapport that is readily established between lawyer and client without the language barrier and without the need to use an interpreter which can cause a non-English speaking client to feel that they are not directly involved in the conversation.

The objectives of the project are to:

- Improve legal outcomes for the Vietnamese community through targeted legal services in the Vietnamese language;
- Improve understanding of legal rules and processes for the Vietnamese community through tailored community legal education;'
- Strengthen the relationship between BMCLC and Vietnamese community organisations;
- Increase BMCLC's reach in the Vietnamese community, and reach these clients sooner in the cycle of their legal problem; and
- Identify and attempt to address systemic issues and barriers arising for the Vietnamese community in accessing the justice system.

LEGAL ASSISTANCE PROVIDED

The project has assisted a disproportionate number of Vietnamese women.

The most common legal problems relate to family law, specifically, divorce applications and the associated requirement for service. This often involves completing a divorce application as well as Affidavits in support of application for dispensation of service or Affidavit in support of separation under one roof.

There is often related non-legal assistance provided to clients such as checking Centrelink entitlements; applying for Status Resolution Support Services payment from the red cross for those on temporary protection visas; and requests to correct personal details on public records.

There have also been numerous Infringement and motor vehicle accident matters. This has involved drafting legal applications for review, revocations and financial hardship assistance.