



Specialist Social Security  
Community Legal  
Services in Australia



OUR IMPACT



**NATIONAL  
SOCIAL SECURITY**  
RIGHTS NETWORK

# SOCIAL SECURITY IS A LIFE RAFT FOR INDIVIDUALS AND FAMILIES IN TIMES WHEN THEY ARE UNABLE TO SUPPORT THEMSELVES.

Social security legal issues impact members of our community when they are at their most vulnerable. Yet these legal issues and the laws surrounding them can be so complex that individuals often find themselves lost and without support. Specialist social security community legal centres assist vulnerable members of the community to navigate the social security system, protect their rights and regain their dignity.

We believe that to combat inequality and poverty within our community social security must be:

*Fair, efficient, easy to access, transparent and as simple as possible.*



## WHO WE ARE

The National Social Security Rights Network is a national group of community legal centres which for nearly 30 years has provided specialist advice to individuals on their social security issues and rights.



## WHAT WE DO

We make significant contributions to social security policy and law reform and work towards educating the wider community about these important issues. We **strengthen** the social security system, **educate** the community and **improve** people's lives.

Our most recent research into the relationship between social security and domestic violence made practical recommendations on how to improve the social security system for victims of family and domestic violence, which led to changes in policy made by the Department of Social Services.

# OUR MEMBERS

## ACT:

Canberra Community Law

## NSW:

Illawarra Legal Centre  
Welfare Rights Centre

## NT:

Darwin Community Legal Service  
Northern Australian Aboriginal Justice Agency

## QLD:

Basic Rights Queensland  
Townsville Community Legal Service

## SA:

Uniting Communities Law Centre  
Welfare Rights Centre

## TAS:

Hobart Community Legal Service Inc  
Launceston Community Legal Centre

## VIC:

Barwon Community Legal Service  
Social Security Rights Victoria

## WA:

Fremantle Community Legal Centre  
Sussex Street Community Law Services  
Welfare Rights and Advocacy Service



Welfare Rights Centre



Basic Rights Queensland Inc.  
SOCIAL SECURITY & DISABILITY  
DISCRIMINATION SERVICES



Townsville Community  
LEGAL SERVICE INC



Hobart Community  
Legal Service Inc.  
providing legal direction



WELFARE RIGHTS &  
ADVOCACY SERVICE



**OUR MEMBERS PROVIDE FREE, INDEPENDENT, EXPERT LEGAL SERVICES FOR INDIVIDUALS FACING SOCIAL SECURITY ISSUES.**



## Our holistic approach to providing social security services is vital to the community

Our clients face complex, interrelated legal and non-legal problems which cannot be addressed in isolation. People experiencing financial hardship also tend to face other disadvantages in life, which means they need the holistic support our services provide. They may be homeless, have a disability or mental illness, be at risk of family and domestic violence or English may not be their first language. Navigating the notoriously complex social security system while managing these issues is difficult without additional support.

**Our research in 2014 found that in nearly half the cases studied, clients had considered suicide during their dispute with Centrelink.**

# OUR IMPACT

## OUR MUCH-NEEDED SPECIALIST EXPERTISE IS DIFFICULT TO FIND ANYWHERE ELSE

Social security expertise is necessary for individuals to properly exercise their rights and navigate the social security system. Social security law is second largest in size only to taxation law, yet few legal service providers are able to offer this specialised assistance.

The lawyers and caseworkers at our member centres are experts in social security law. They understand that the law is complex and Centrelink bureaucracy can be difficult to navigate. By keeping up to date with changes to laws, technology and processes, they are able to offer high-quality, clear and accurate advice to their clients.

The services provided by our member centres go above and beyond what is provided by generalist community legal centres and the private sector. Without our expertise, thousands of people would go without much needed legal support.



## OUR SERVICES ARE IN HIGH DEMAND

With the large amount of people receiving social security payments and constant changes to laws and practices, our member centres are under a lot of pressure to help as many people as possible. Rapidly changing technology and the rise of automated systems has only increased demand for our services.



# 4,900,000

People receive a primary social security payment



# 1,400,000

Families receive Family Tax Benefit payments



# 34,000

DHS staff make millions of decisions each day



# 15,500

Centrelink decisions were reviewed by the Administrative Appeals Tribunal in 2017-18



The Law Council of Australia's Justice Project found that *when social security needs are not dealt with properly, individuals' rights, safety and entitlements are compromised*. It recognised that constant changes to practices and technology, such as those causing 'robodebts', place extraordinary pressure on our member centres to meet this exponentially growing demand. The Justice Report recommended that significant additional resources be invested to address critical civil and criminal legal assistance service gaps.



# OUR IMPACT

## WE MAKE A REAL DIFFERENCE TO OUR CLIENTS' LIVES

Our members fill a large gap in the legal services sector and create real change for some of the most vulnerable members of our community. We conducted independent research to find out just how significant the impact of specialist social security legal services is on clients. Following specialist social security legal services' intervention:

- **20%** were now able to provide for their children
- **20%** had reduced family tension
- **20%** either kept their home or were no longer homeless
- **20%** had returned to work or study
- **30%** or more were no longer considering suicide
- **10%** became volunteers

Importantly, 60% of clients had previously approached other organisations for assistance, such as Centrelink and other legal services, but did not receive the help they needed until they visited one of our member centres.

## OUR WORK RESULTS IN:

- *Better outcomes for clients*
- *A more efficient justice system*
- *Positive changes to social security law and policy*
- *Better services for social security clients at other organisations*



*Our members require long-term sources of funding so they can support more **clients like Lisa** and continue to obtain positive outcomes for individual clients, the social security system and the wider community.*



## LISA'S STORY

*Lisa was seriously injured in a car accident and was awarded a lump sum compensation payment. When she married several years later, her violent, abusive partner forced her to give him access to the payment, which he said he would use to support the family. He never did so. When Lisa was able to separate from her husband and take out an Apprehended Violence Order against him five years later, he provided no financial support for Lisa or her children.*

*Lisa had difficulties finding work because of her injuries and her experiences of trauma. She was left to support herself and her children using only her Family Tax Benefit payment, food vouchers, free meals from charities and other charity payments subsidising bills. When Lisa finally applied for a Centrelink payment, she was rejected because of the compensation payment she had received, despite the fact that her husband had forced her to give him access to it.*

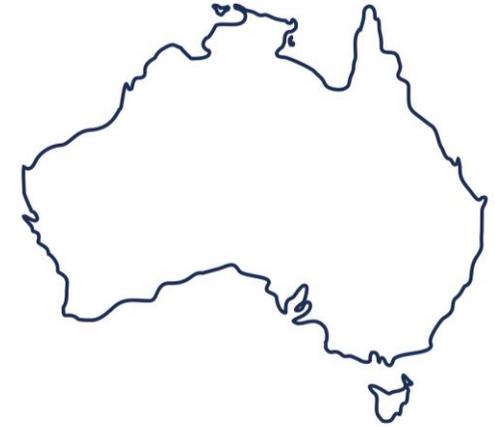
*She was finally able to obtain assistance when she approached the Welfare Rights Centre (NSW), who helped her to successfully appeal the decision – but only after fifteen months of stress and anxiety.*

# TALK TO US

Tel: +61 448 007 201

Email: [eo@nssrn.org.au](mailto:eo@nssrn.org.au)

[www.nssrn.org.au](http://www.nssrn.org.au)



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