

Youthlaw Case Study - Integrated Legal and Social Work Practice

Overview

Youthlaw is Victoria's statewide specialist community legal centre for young people under 25 impacted by laws, policies, and systemic barriers to justice. Youthlaw focuses on providing holistic support for young people experiencing homelessness, family violence, over-policing, discrimination, poverty, mental health issues, drug and alcohol issues, and more. This includes legal information, advice, court representation, and community legal education alongside our social work and outreach supports.

Youthlaw's integrated practice has expanded significantly over the past two years. We operate a closely integrated practice, in which social workers are embedded in a number of programs and at all levels of the organisation. Our family violence team is led by legal and social work co-managers, and involves social workers and lawyers working collaboratively to support young people with a range of presenting legal and related non-legal needs.

Youthlaw has engaged in consultation with the Federation of Community Legal Centres and contributed to their submission to Victoria Law Reform Commission's Inquiry into Legal Privilege. This case study is intended to be considered in the context of this submission. It is an example of how legal and social work supports can help to meet the unique needs of young people in the context of legal systems. The case study demonstrates how legal and social work support came together for a young person involved in connected criminal and personal safety matters before the Children's Court. Identifying details have been changed, including age, school, work, family details, locations, and some circumstances, while keeping the main practice themes and learnings from the matter.

Young Person's Circumstances

The young person, referred to here as "D", was a 15-year-old student living with a parent and younger sibling in metropolitan Melbourne. D had experienced significant family challenges, including exposure to family violence, disrupted relationship with a parent, and complex trauma within the broader family system. D had experienced disrupted education after peer conflict and safety concerns at a previous school. D had previously received psychological support and was described by family and psychologist as guarded with adults and slow to trust new workers.

At the time of the legal matter, D had recently returned to mainstream schooling and was also working casually in a local hospitality business. These were important strengths, showing motivation, routine, responsibility, and connection to positive supports.

Presenting Issues

D was referred for legal advice about two connected matters: theft and a personal safety intervention order. The alleged offending occurred in the context of group dynamics, peer pressure, and an incident that had escalated from school and community spaces into the legal system.

The legal team identified early that D's role appeared limited and that the matter needed a response that balanced safety, diversion from the justice system, and support for the underlying issues influencing the behaviour. The social work team identified that D's presentation was shaped by trauma, distrust of adults, low confidence, and a strong reliance on peers for belonging.

Integrated Practice Response

A key strength of the response was that the lawyer and social worker worked closely together from the start. Rather than treating the legal matter and D's wellbeing as separate issues, the team built a shared understanding of risk, needs, strengths, family context, and the practical steps needed to support D.

- The lawyer focused on diversionary options, D's limited alleged involvement, and avoiding unnecessary escalation through the court system.
- The social worker engaged with D and a parent (with consent) to better understand trauma history, education, peer relationships, mental health needs, and existing strengths and supports. Through this process, the social worker came to understand the family's complex history with services, including Child Protection. As they developed trust in Youthlaw, D and his parent shared difficult experiences with Child Protection, including their lack of appropriate response to violence perpetrated by the other parent, feeling judged by workers, and interventions which were experienced as punitive and deficit-focused rather than supportive. They also identified experiences where they felt that other services' interactions with Child Protection had created further difficulties for the family. The social worker was able to recognise how this had contributed to D's distrust of adults and the family's anxiety about engaging with supports and sharing information with services.
- Together, the team developed a practical safety and support plan that considered emotional regulation, peer influence, school engagement, family communication, and referral pathways.
- The social work assessment informed the legal advocacy by providing context about D's vulnerabilities, while the legal strategy created space for therapeutic and practical supports to be put in place.

Advocacy and Support Provided

The legal representative sought an adjournment so both the criminal and intervention order matters could be considered together, and so D's support needs could be properly assessed. Submissions highlighted D's developmental needs, trauma background, school and work engagement, and willingness to engage with support.

At the same time, the social worker obtained consent to speak with D's parent, gathered psychosocial information, assessed risks and strengths, and made a referral to a specialist youth disability and court support service. The referral was accepted and the initial assessment began. This helped show that D was engaging with support aimed at reducing future risk.

Outcome and Practice Impact

The integrated approach strengthened the advocacy by giving the court and other decision-makers a fuller picture of D's circumstances. The comprehensive psychosocial assessment completed by the social worker centred the voice and needs of the young person, while also involving collaboration with the parent and external services (with consent). The young person and parent reported feeling able to fully engage in this process and share their experiences openly as they were confident that their information wouldn't be shared with external services such as Child Protection. This assessment not only enabled the social worker to link the family in with relevant supports, but also helped the lawyer to better understand the young person's needs and circumstances which informed the legal response. The legal arguments were supported by practical evidence of engagement, and the social work response was shaped by the legal risks and timeframes. This helped keep the focus on safety, accountability, and early intervention. Together, the Youthlaw team advocated for a response that was client-led, developmentally appropriate, trauma-informed, and focused on long-term stability for D and his family.