

Effective therapeutic approaches in the justice system

Wednesday, 15 May 2019

The value and principles of effective therapeutic programs and transformative justice outcomes were recognised in a compelling discussion at Victoria Legal Aid (VLA) last week.

We were pleased to welcome Judge Eugene M. Hyman, former Judge of the Superior Court of California, Victorian Magistrate John Hardy and a recent Drug Court graduate to share their reflections on the benefits of therapeutic programs in the justice system and their crucial components.

The discussion highlighted the value that providing access to the right support can have for individuals to address the underlying causes of their offending.

Having set up and presided over the first domestic violence court in the US, Judge Hyman's insights demonstrated the way that court settings can transform a person's life. His experiences from the US highlighted the effectiveness of collaboration and the importance of sharing information for better justice outcomes.



(L-R): Amanda Carter, Managing Lawyer, Therapeutic Courts, VLA; Magistrate John Hardy, Magistrates' Court of Victoria Judge Eugene M. Hardy, Superior Court of California (retired); Leanne Sinclair, Associate Director Family Violence Response, VLA.

Magistrate Hardy, who presides over the Assessment and Referral Court, Koori Court and mainstream Magistrates Court lists, shared his insights on the collaborative approaches that make therapeutic courts unique. Magistrate Hardy said therapeutic courts give participants a real voice and an opportunity to build a relationship of mutual respect and trust with the judicial officer they are dealing with – a powerful therapeutic tool for influencing change.

Magistrate Hardy further reflected that one of the biggest challenges in therapeutic courts is the lack of access for people to safe and secure housing, which is often the most significant indicator of a participant's prospects of success in these programs.

A recent Drug Court graduate spoke of his experience in the justice system from a young age. He reflected on the support of the Drug Court, saying that it 'allowed me to take a deep breath, look at myself and deal with the underlying issues. Jail never taught me to do that.'

For him, another benefit of the therapeutic model was the relationships he built to find his way out of a cycle of offending and history of incarceration that had lasted throughout his life. 'Drug Court changed my life.'

Amanda Carter, Managing Lawyer of Therapeutic Courts at Victoria Legal Aid, said the discussion was a great opportunity to hear different perspectives about how therapeutic programs and approaches can be applied in both mainstream and specialist court settings.

'At VLA we are committed to delivering the best justice outcomes for our clients and the community,' said Amanda.

'We know that an effective justice system needs to be responsive to the individual needs and circumstances of the people involved in it, rather than continuing to act as a revolving door. This is good for individuals involved in the system and for the whole community.'

'This discussion highlighted how therapeutic responses can deliver the right support to people and lead to positive and lasting changes in their lives,' said Amanda.

'Hearing from people who have reassembled their lives with the support of the Drug Court is a powerful demonstration of how therapeutic responses can heal and transform. This is why VLA supports improving access to therapeutic programs and settings across Victoria.'

With five specialist family violence courts to be fully implemented across Victoria later this year, and VLA playing a critical role in this work, the discussion on therapeutic and problem-solving courts was timely and informative.