

## **DV and housing issues drive demand for legal aid in Port Macquarie**

Legal issues relating to domestic violence, drugs and housing have dominated demand for free legal help in the Port Macquarie region over the past decade, according to new data.

The data comes as the Port Macquarie office of Legal Aid NSW marks its tenth anniversary.

The Solicitor in Charge at that office, Cody Baxter, said high rates of socio-economic disadvantage in the region meant demand for free legal help was high.

“We know many people in the region can’t afford a lawyer, so having access to legal aid is critical,” she said.

Over the past ten years, Legal Aid has provided 75,000 services to people in the Port Macquarie region. Ms Baxter said this included more than 4,000 support services for victims of domestic violence.

“A lot of our work relates to victims applying for, or amending, Apprehended Domestic Violence Orders,” she said. “We know that having access to a lawyer is critical to keep women in the region safe and to stop violence continuing.”

In the past ten years, more than 3,600 people from the Port Macquarie region sought legal advice from us about driving under the influence of alcohol or drugs. More than 3,000 sought advice about drug possession.

Around 3,400 people sought advice from us about spending time with their children after a parental separation or in situations where a child was placed in state care.

Legal advice about managing rent or mortgage difficulties, or securing social housing, was also common - reflecting a 34 per cent rise in homelessness in the Port Macquarie region in recent years.

Ms. Baxter said supporting First Nations people in the region remains a key priority, as 53 per cent of them are on low incomes.

“As a proud Dharug woman, I am committed to ensuring that Port Macquarie Legal Aid delivers access to justice and helps to close the gap in our community,” she said.

Legal Aid NSW CEO Monique Hitter said early access to legal assistance is crucial, in country and metropolitan areas, because it can stop small problems turning into large ones.



“A third of our clients live in regional areas, and we want to ensure all people across NSW have access to high quality legal support,” Ms Hitter said.

“That assistance is good for them and their families, and good for the wider community.”

**Cody Baxter is available for interview.**

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