

Building Lawra: A Community Legal Centre Referral System

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Abstract

Community legal centres play a vital role in assisting some of the most vulnerable people in society through the provision of information and advice, as well as advocating for law reform (Alford 2017). However, limited funding has resulted in community legal centres needing to help more people with fewer resources (National Association of Community Legal Centres (NACLC) 2018). Furthermore, community legal centres have also seen an increase in the number of individuals seeking their assistance who fall outside their scope of practice, resulting in more time making referrals to other community legal centres and service providers (Consumer Credit Legal Service WA (CLCAWA) 2018). This is precious time that could be spent helping those people who do fall within their scope. This report provides a solution for this problem through the use of a decision-tree based software program that individual users opt into. Once users finish answering the questions, they are provided with the contact details of the most appropriate centre to tackle their particular legal issue.

1. Introduction

Community Legal Centres (CLCs) are independent not-for-profit organisations who provide free legal services to disadvantaged individuals (NACLC 2018). There are currently 181 CLCs in Australia, 28 of which operate in WA (NACLC 2018). These centres provide a range of services including information, referrals, legal advice, non-legal support, duty lawyer services, and casework including representation services. Whilst CLCs in WA helped around 26,000 individuals in the 2017-2018 period, they turned away 28 342 (Community Legal Centre Association WA (CLCAWA) 2018). This means CLCs turn away more people than they help each year. People are turned away for two reasons: either the CLC does not possess the relevant expertise to help that person, or the person's legal problem is outside the centre's funding, priority area or client group.

Whilst competing in the 2018 Perth Hackathon, we came up with the idea of a pop-up digital assistance named "Lawra" to alleviate this issue. Lawra is intended to help individuals find the right CLC for them. It will appear on either the landing or contact page on each CLCs website and offer to help the individual find the right person to speak to. This will be done through a series of short questions, and, once they are completed, Lawra will provide the name and the contact details of the most appropriate CLC. We have constructed decision trees to define the questions users will be asked and the relevant CLC a user will be directed to. It is our hope that

this project will help CLCs operate more efficiently, as Lawra will help to reduce the number of people who call a CLC that cannot assist them.

2. Scope of Project

Due to the constraints of a 12-week university semester and the fact that only three members were working on the project, we decided to confine the project to five CLCs to maximise efficiency. The five CLCs within the scope of this project are Consumer Credit Community Legal Service WA (CCLSWA), Employment Law Centre (ELC), Mental Health Legal Centre WA (MHLCWA), Northern Suburbs Community Legal Service (NSCLS) and Peel Community Legal Service (Peel CLS). Table 1 details the areas of expertise of the five CLCs within the scope of this project.

CLC	Area of Expertise
CCLSWA	A not-for-profit charitable organisation which provides legal advice and representation to consumers in WA in the areas of banking, finance and consumer law (CCLSWA 2018).
ELC	An independent not-for-profit community legal centre specialising in employment law (ELC 2019).
MHCLWA	A state-wide community legal centre that provides free legal advice and representation to people who experience a mental health illness (MHLC 2019).
NSCLS	A not-for-profit community legal service that helps disadvantaged and low-income earners in the northern suburbs have access to legal services (NSCLS 2019).
Peel CLS	A not-for-profit service that offers free legal advice and advocacy support to people of the Peel region who fit their eligibility criteria (Peel CLS 2019).

Table 1 CLCs and their area of expertise

3. Creating the Decision Trees

3.1.1 Workings with the CLCS

We knew that to undertake this project, we would need input from a number of stakeholders, including the CLCs themselves. This is why we began by contacting Community Legal Centre Association WA (CLCAWA), the peak body organisation representing the 28 CLCs in WA. Our contact at CLCAWA was Catrina Campbell-Fraser, who not only helped spread our project idea by speaking about it at their Quarterlies meeting in March 2019, but also organised for Peel CLS, ELS and NSCLS to become part of the project. She also organised for one of our team members, who had no prior experience at a CLC, to spend a day at CCLSWA so she could gain an insight into how a CLC worked.

At the initial meetings with the CLCs we were able to discuss our project further and gauge each CLC's interest in cooperating. Within these meetings we first discussed each CLC's expectations for the project, what was important for them in creating the Lawra, what they wanted included and how they would like this project to help their CLC. It was also important

to discuss with the CLC whether they would be comfortable with “Lawra” being placed on their website or whether they would prefer for the application to simply be on the CLCAWA website. We then corroborated the information provided by the Citizen Advice Bureau spreadsheet (Citizens Advice Bureau 2019), which informed us of the services each CLC provides, along with what was provided to us by the individual CLC’s website, with each CLC to confirm that the information was correct. Along with this we discussed each CLC’s eligibility criteria, such as income or postcode cut-offs. The information obtained from this meeting enabled us to begin constructing our decision trees. After these initial meetings, we constructed a question template in order to guide our future meetings with other CLCs. Some of the questions included asking the CLCs about their expectations for the project, discussing their eligibility criteria and determining what services they provide.

3.1.2 Decision Tree Templates

We decided that the simplest and easiest way to present the information obtained from the CLCs would be in the format of a decision tree. In constructing our decision trees, we decided to use the examples of already-existing online referral services pointed out to us by Catrina as a foundation. We then customised our decision trees to meet the more specific requirements of each CLC. For example, we used the categories of the LegalAid WA’s Find Legal Answers (Legal Aid of WA 2019) and Community Legal Centres NSW Recommendation Service (Community Legal Centres NSW 2019) to build a decision tree that covered all areas of law, but made some modifications based on the CLCs that exist in WA. LegalAid’s tool helped us see where our CLCs fit within this bigger picture. A notable consideration that we had to consider was that many CLC clients come from disadvantaged groups (e.g. non-English speaking backgrounds) with complex legal issues, sometimes compounded by alcohol and drug addictions or mental health issues or abuse and/or family violence. CLC clients, like most citizens, have a limited knowledge of the legal system. Consequently, we decided to use plain English language and to keep the questions in Lawra as simple as possible.

Once we had finished our drafts, it was important that each CLC looked at their decision tree in order for them to make any corrections and to finalise the part of the decision tree relevant to their practice. For example, we initially had “elder abuse” in the category of health, however after discussions with our participating CLCs, it was suggested that “elder abuse” was better suited in the categories of family and money. We also showed the CLCs where their portion of the decision tree fit with the whole decision tree. We found a big difference with the approach taken to generalist centres (e.g. Peel CLS and NSCLS) and the specialist centres (e.g. ELS, CCLSWA and MHLC). With the generalist centres, they covered a lot of areas and were spread across the entire decision tree. However, with the specialist centres, they only appeared under specific headings, but with more detailed questioning required to determine if that centre dealt with a particular legal issue.

Figure 1 shows an extract of our final decision tree. This demonstrates a small section of the decision tree relating to money and the outputs that a user would receive, depending on their legal issue. For example, when a user reaches a CLC website, “Lawra” will pop-up and ask the user what their legal problem is. If user selects “Money” and then “Fines or infringements”, they will then receive the contact information for Peel CLS and NSCLS. If the user selects “Other”, “Going to court over money” and “I received a default notice”, they would be directed to a factsheet from CCLSWA and if this did not help the user, they would then be directed to the contact details of CCLSWA for further help.

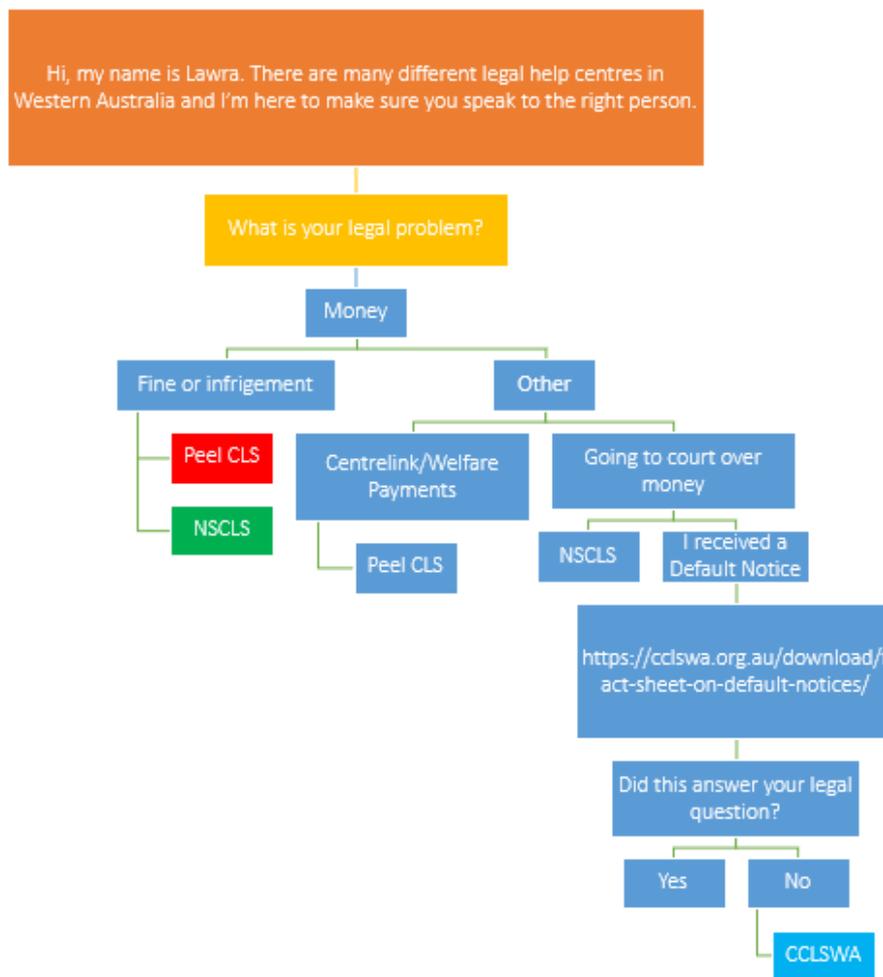


Figure 1 An extract of the final decision tree relating to money

3.1.3 Creating the Survey

Whilst the process was relatively successful, repeating it for potentially another 23 CLCs would be incredibly time consuming. Funding changes often mean that CLCs adjust the areas of law they cover, meaning we would need frequent contact with each CLC to ensure the decision tree was up to date. Catrina from CLCAWA suggested a survey that could be emailed to each CLC containing all of the categories within the blank decision tree template so that they could spend just a few minutes ticking the boxes corresponding to the services they still provide or have started providing. This survey also contained questions asking whether there were any eligibility criteria for individuals getting advice from that particular CLC, or if the CLC had any factsheets users could be referred to before the digital assistant provided a user with their contact details. We used this method to create decision trees ELC and NSCLS, which were then confirmed by a meeting with each CLC. However, as CLCs are usually quite time-poor, getting them to fill out and send us back the surveys proved difficult. We will need to reevaluate our method of data collection heading into the future.

3.1.4 Coders for Causes

Implementation of our idea requires a program to be coded in accordance with our decision trees. As none of our team members had coding experience, we employed the help of Coders for Causes, a non-profit Coding Club at UWA. During the Hackathon, Coders for Causes played a key role in advising all the competing groups on how feasible their ideas were. It is during this time that we formed a working relationship with them. After the Hackathon, Kate Offer set up a number of meetings with Coders for Causes with the aim of facilitating discussion as to how we can move our idea forward. In speaking to Coders for Causes about this, they informed us that they could design our digital assistant in a way that we wanted. Coders for Causes began working on our project in early July. Once the decision trees are finished and have been refined, we will work with Coders for Causes to begin implementing them on the CLCs' website.

3.1.5 Technology Used

As cost was a major barrier due to the resourcing of many CLCs, we decided to use Microsoft Excel to construct our decision trees. Excel is free with a student subscription from UWA. During the initial stages of constructing our decision tree, we had issues with Excel crashing, as our devices could not handle the size of our decision tree. As a result, we decided to separate our individual decision trees into separate Excel sheets and keep a separate copy of the current decision tree with all of the different categories. We also used Zoom to hold meetings with Peel CLS, as travelling to meet them in person would take up a lot of time seeing as they are located in Mandurah. Other technology used was Google Forms, which was used to create the validation survey that we sent out to the CLCs; Adobe Photoshop and Illustrator, which were used to create our "Lawra" character; and DropBox, which was used to store and share all our files.

4. Conclusion and Future Work

We hope that Lawra will increase the efficiency of CLCs by reducing the amount of time spent referring individuals. We also hope that Lawra will make the process of figuring out which CLC to contact easier and less stressful for potential clients. We understand that Lawra does have some limitations, such as reaching those with language, visual and audio barriers and those with a lack of access to a computer or internet. However, we believe this is a step in the right direction in aiding CLCs continue to help some of the most disadvantaged and vulnerable members of society. CLCAWA has indicated that they ideally want to extend Lawra to all 28 CLCs in WA, and this is an initiative that we are eager to take on. We have already distributed our decision tree survey to all the CLCs in WA, and we are in the process of constructing each of their individualised decision trees. Other future work includes integrating eligibility criteria into our decision tree, and human testing to ensure the coded version of Lawra is user-friendly and directs users to the correct CLC for their legal issue.

5. Acknowledgements

We have been overwhelmed by the support we have received from numerous people and organisations. Without their support, this project would have remained just an idea.

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decision tree. In particular, we would like to acknowledge Gemma Mitchell and Allison Sampson at CCLSWA, Sara Kane at ELC, Sarah Jones at the MHLcWA, Kathy Blitz-Cokis at NSCLS and Kathy Johnson at Peel CLS.

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