

# SMART SELF-HELP TO EMPOWER FAMILIES IN MENTAL HEALTH LAW

VICTORIA LAMBROPOULOS

LUKE PRICE

JACOB DEEM

# SMART SELF-HELP TO EMPOWER FAMILIES IN MENTAL HEALTH LAW

## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

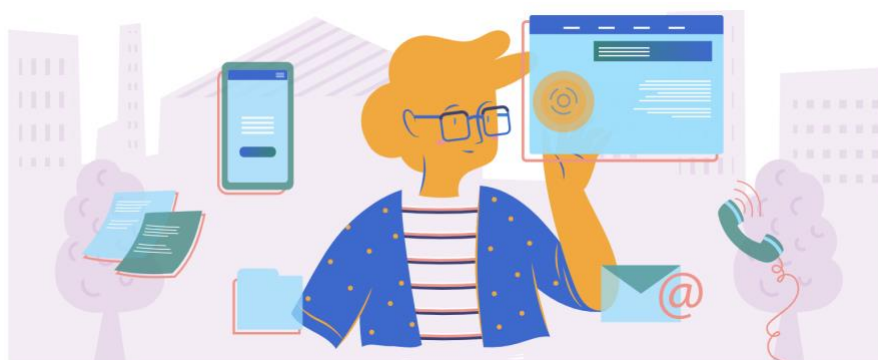
The Victorian Mental Health Legal Centre ('MHLC'), in collaboration with CQUniversity researchers and tech startup Legal Tech Helper, launched an [Online Help web application](#) to provide people with mental health challenges and their families with free, easy to access, tailored legal information.

The application was created as part of a project funded by the Telematics Trust, and uses an innovative guided pathway to help users to find easy-to-understand resources and services that meet users' specific needs.

Designed for family members, carers, and friends of people living with mental health challenges, the public app can also support any member of the public, or assist referring organisations to help their clients.

Online Help is an inclusive and accessible tool designed to work for different users' differing levels of digital ability and confidence. It can be accessed on a range of devices, including mobile phones, and via limited internet connections.

Since its launch in September 2022, Online Help has provided mental health legal information to hundreds of users, and increased MHLC's capacity to assist clients.



Good morning.

We are the Mental Health Legal Centre (MHLC). We give free legal help to people in Victoria with mental health challenges.

Welcome to our **Online Help** service.

Continue

## RATIONALE

Navigating the mental health legal system can be confronting for consumers. Demand for services has grown, and mental health has been recognised as an important issue by government and in society. Mental health challenges do not exist in isolation: they are both informed by, and have flow-on effects, into social, economic, and legal challenges. The intersections between mental illness and law are multi-layered, either directly (e.g., compulsory treatment orders and advance statements), or as an additional component to other legal issues (e.g. interactions between mental health and civil and criminal justice outcomes). Across Australia, legal need in these formal and less formal contexts is not fully met.

One option for addressing community need for mental health support is through the use of digital technologies to deliver resource-efficient legal services. The delivery of information to support self-help can provide assistance with legal problems over distance, and offers advantages in terms of accessibility and anonymity. It can provide efficiencies through economies of scale in the delivery of assistance, aiding a resource-limited environment, and also serve regional communities across Australia that would otherwise be located outside the operating areas of support services.

However, while the self-help model has many benefits, the circumstances of multi-layered disadvantage that impact many mental health consumers present significant barriers to effective utilisation of those resources by consumers themselves. Online resources risk requiring consumers to autonomously resolve legal issues in circumstances where a combination of illness, treatment, and other related factors present substantial obstacles to self-help.

Accordingly, the project team recognised the important role family members, carers and close friends can play in supporting mental health consumers. Families are often the primary source of social support for people with a mental health challenge,<sup>1</sup> and are also important sources of advice when dealing with a legal problem – Buck and colleagues found that 62% of respondents to a Community Legal Advice Centre survey were encouraged to seek help by family and friends.<sup>2</sup> Family members' different circumstances compared to those of consumers may also enable them to better engage with and act on self-help resources.

However, it is important consider the resource cost and focus of mental health services for families. Due to the nature of mental health law services and the client privilege of mental health consumers, legal service providers can only offer general information to family members. While providing this information can be useful, it nevertheless takes valuable time and resources away from legal centres, but also family members in support roles. Targeted information is therefore essential. If the targeting of information can be achieved via automation, as in a web application, then the resource cost of that information is lowered even further.

Developing online self-help resources with family members, carers and friends in mind therefore offers two unique innovations. First, it recognises that these audiences will in some cases be ideally placed to engage with self-help information and processes to assist mental health consumers who would otherwise be unable to make use of such resources by themselves. Second, offering an alternate avenue for family members to access information frees up legal centre staff to spend more time on vulnerable clients.

---

<sup>1</sup> Francesca Pernice-Duca, 'Family Network Support and Mental Health Recovery' (2010) 36(1) *Journal of Marital and Family Therapy* 13-27, 21.

<sup>2</sup> Alexy Buck, Marisol Smith, Judith Sidaway and Nigel Balmer, *Community Legal Advice Centres: A Survey of Clients in Reception Areas* (2011, London: Legal Services Commission)

## WHAT WAS CREATED?

The MHLC Online Help web application guides users to targeted legal information, while simultaneously enabling them to stay anonymous. Users are asked a series of questions to help identify their needs so that the application can provide tailored information, resources and links to other services to maximise the likelihood that users will be able to access the information or assistance they need.

The web application enables users to find information about:

- » (Non-legal) Support for family and carers
- » (Non-legal) Support for people with mental health challenges
- » Mental Health Tribunal hearing, Treatment Order, Advance Statement, Making a complaint (Health care, NDIS, Police, Prison)
- » Money, bills or debts, Fines, Work, Housing
- » Wills and estates, Power of Attorney, Advanced Care Directive, Guardianship and Administration
- » Disability discrimination, NDIS, Disability Support Pension (DSP)
- » Family Law, Intervention orders (information only provided to people with mental health challenges), Criminal matters (victims of crime, summary offences, indictable offences)

I and/ or my family member need help with:-

<input type="checkbox"/>	Support
<input type="checkbox"/>	Mental Health System
<input type="checkbox"/>	Money, fines, work or housing
<input type="checkbox"/>	Wills, Power of Attorney, Advance Care Directive or Guardianship and Administration
<input type="checkbox"/>	Disability
<input type="checkbox"/>	Other problems

Continue

The web application allows people to quickly find out if the Mental Health Legal Centre can help them or not, and guides them to other relevant services (external to MHLC) that may be able to help if MHLC cannot (or in addition to MHLC). Users can also download their session summary as a PDF to print, email or save and refer to when they are ready. A key advantage of the application is that users are able to obtain information tailored to their needs without having to identify themselves beyond nominating what their role is (family member, carer, referring organisation, etc). Providing anonymity helps users feel comfortable to answer questions that help target legal information to their situation.

## HOW WAS IT CREATED?

The project team set out to design a web application emphasising usability and accessibility. While the primary target audience was families, carers and referring organisations, the application was also designed for use by mental health consumers themselves, following the principle "nothing about us without us". Accordingly, the application focused on presenting legal information as simply as possible without compromising its accuracy. Illustrations were also used to convey key themes.

Initial planning of the application included a detailed consultation phase with MHLC staff and other stakeholders, such as personnel from referring organisations and peak bodies. This initial consultation was essential to ensuring that the application was fit for purpose and met the needs and expectations of users. Additionally, call logs from MHLC were analysed to identify high volume topics that would be of most benefit to users.

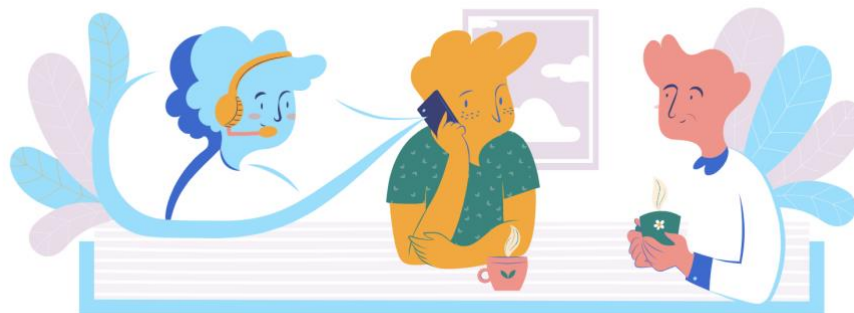
Legal Tech Helper, an innovative legal tech company, co-designed the web application in consultation with CQU and MHLC.

Co-founder Samantha Lovrich explained: "The web application has been informed by the legal centre's experiences with mental health consumers and their family, carers and other stakeholders.

"Our goals in building the web application were to make it user-friendly and accessible, and to protect the anonymity of users."

Websites designed to assist with legal information are often too complex, with an overwhelming amount of information to absorb.

These guided pathways effectively balance giving targeted legal information with user anonymity, and present useful information in an easy-to-understand way.



## WHAT WAS THE IMPACT?

The project has three groups of beneficiaries.

First and most directly beneficiaries of this project are users of the Online Help Web Application. Site analytics indicate that in the three months since launching, the website has had over 500 unique visitors. These users are concentrated in Victoria, Australia as the primary target audience for the web application, but the site has also been visited by users from around Australia (primarily NSW), New Zealand, the UK, the US, the Philippines and Vietnam. To protect the privacy of vulnerable users, demographic data such as age and gender is not collected. Of users who stayed on the site for at least 30 seconds (n= 164), the average time spent on the application is almost 5 minutes, indicating that many users found the site valuable and worth spending time on. However, it is important to note that conversely, the number of users who spent only a short time on the site (< 30 seconds) does not necessarily indicate a shortcoming of the application. In many instances, the site may have quickly and efficiently helped users identify that the MHLC is not an appropriate resource for dealing with their problem (e.g. because the user is located outside Victoria) - in those cases, the site can still be said to have served its purpose and benefitted the user.

The second group of beneficiaries are mental health consumers whose family members or other contacts use the application. About 1 in 3 users indicated that they are a person living with mental health challenges. This means that approximately two-thirds of users are accessing the information contained in the Online Help website for the benefit of someone else, highlighting the far-reaching benefit of this tool.

The third group of beneficiaries are clients of MHLC, even if they or their close contacts do not make use of the website. MHLC call log data from the three months before and after the website launch date (3 September 2022) indicated that volume of inbound calls decreased following the launch of Online Help, but outbound calls correspondingly increased. In other words, MHLC staff were able to take advantage of the reduced call volume to engage in further outreach to clients, ensuring that MHLC time and resources were dedicated to vulnerable community members. Additionally, MHLC staff have started using Online Help when answering phone calls to help ensure consistent information is provided across all services.



## LESSONS MOVING FORWARD

The Online Help application highlights the utility and value of self-help resources in the mental health law space. Our analysis reveals benefits to mental health consumers and their families and other support networks. The success of the Online Help platform therefore raises the possibility of expansion in two directions. First, the Online Help application currently only offers information on targeted subject areas, but these could be expanded to facilitate self-help in other topics. Second, the concept is ripe for expansion to other vulnerable communities who typically have difficulty accessing traditional mental health legal services. Culturally and linguistically diverse groups stand out as particularly relevant in this regard. The online nature of the application makes it especially suitable for modification and adaptation to meet the needs of new target audiences.

Analysis of the data also highlights important lessons for the way online self-help resources are developed and made available to consumers. For example, 71.6 per cent of users access Online Help from a computer, as opposed to smartphone (26.9 per cent), or tablet (1.2 per cent). This has significant implications for understanding the way users access self-help resources. While it remains important to ensure self-help resources are designed to be accessible from any device, the fact that a majority of users accessed Online Help from a computer raises important implications for access — one of the advantages of mobile-friendly web pages is that they can be accessed by people who may not have ready or easy use of a computer. In this instance only a minority of users from their phones, and further research may delineate further the barriers beyond device type to accessing legal help online, and how accessibility can be upheld for digitally disadvantaged users.

Analysis of the time of day at which users accessed the application is also revealing. Comparing access by morning (8 a.m. – 12 p.m.), afternoon (12 p.m. – 5 p.m.), evening (5 p.m. – 8 p.m.) and night (8 p.m. – 8 a.m.) provides some insight into usage patterns. Forty-two per cent of users accessed Online Help in the afternoon, while 23% and 24% accessed in the morning and at night respectively. This means that 45% of users were able to access mental health legal information outside MHLC hours — in other words, at a time when they would otherwise have been unable to access information. Conversely, 55% of users accessed Online Help during regular office hours, highlighting the platform's value as a complement to existing MHLC services. As discussed above, one of the key advantages of the application has been providing general information to family members clients of the MHLC and thereby freeing staff to dedicate more time to clients who they can directly assist.

Online Help represents a promising early foray into developing self-help resources in the mental health law space. It highlights a fresh role for families in supporting mental health consumers, and demonstrates the ongoing importance of consumer-focused approaches to mental health services.



## ABOUT THE AUTHORS

### Dr Victoria Lambropoulos

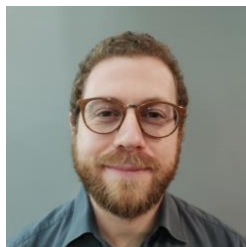


Victoria is a Senior Lecturer at the College of Law, Criminology & Justice at CQUniversity located at their Melbourne Campus. She teaches employment law, legal ethics and property law. Victoria is also practicing lawyer and a Fellow of the Higher Education Academy. She has been a long time supporter of those suffering from mental illness having volunteered for the Mental Health Legal Center. She has a proven record in bringing teams together to work on research projects relating to digitization of legal information including mental health information for disadvantaged groups.

She is one of the founding authors and editors of the premier annotated annual volume of the *Fair Work Act 2009* (Cth) published by Thomson Reuters which is now in its 15<sup>th</sup> edition.

Victoria has been a visiting scholar at King's College London, Bristol Law School, (U.K.), Cagliari University, Italy.

### Dr Luke Price



Luke is the Head of Clinical Legal Education in the College of Law, Criminology and Justice. Luke's research looks at how technology affects legal liability, access to justice, and corporate responsibility. His work has been awarded grants totalling over \$400,000 from the Queensland Department of Justice and Attorney-General, Queensland Department of Environment and Science, Victorian Department of Health, Telematics Trust and UK Economic and Social Research Council. Luke co-founded the University of Exeter Legal Assistance Programme, Community Law Clinic and Access to Justice Clinic. He has experience of clinical legal education and pro bono legal practice in the United States, United Kingdom, and Australia.

### Dr Jacob Deem



Jacob is a Lecturer in the College of Law, Criminology and Justice at CQUniversity. He specialises in public law research, focusing particularly on federalism, constitutional law and the principle of subsidiarity. His forthcoming book, *Rethinking Decentralization* (published by McGill Queen's University Press) uncovers the link between citizens' political values and the allocation of power in federal countries, and his other published works on these topics include lead authorship of 'Federal Reform: The Case for Supportive Subsidiarity' (in *UNSW Law Journal*) and 'Beyond the Canberra Bubble' (in *From Turnbull to Morrison*), and co-authorship of 'A Tale of Two Regionalisms' (in *Regional Studies*). He has also contributed chapters on placemaking, local governance and constitutional reform to volumes such as the *Oxford Handbook of Australian Politics* (Oxford University Press, 2021) and *A People's Federation* (Federation Press, 2017). Dr Deem has provided consultancy advice to the Commonwealth and Queensland governments, the Fair Work Commission, and has conducted research with the Victorian Mental Health Legal Centre and the Central Queensland Community Legal Centre.



## **ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS**

The authors gratefully acknowledge the contribution of their partners – the Victorian Mental Health Legal Centre and Legal Tech Helper – on the ‘Smart Self-Help’ project. We also note the research assistance of Darin Ferguson and Emily Lawson. Illustrations for the Online Help application and as used in this report were created by Simona De Leo.

This project was funded by a Telematics Trust grant.