



Media Release

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Financial abuse service creates lasting change in first year of operation

- In the last year, Redfern Legal Centre's (RLC) Financial Abuse Service NSW has supported victim-survivors of financial abuse waive over \$600,000 in debt
- Supported by the Commonwealth Bank, Ecstra Foundation, American Express, PwC Australia, Ashurst, Telstra and Commonwealth Government funding administered by Legal Aid NSW under the Community Legal Services Program

18 December 2020, Sydney – A state-wide legal service that offers free support to people experiencing financial abuse in New South Wales is commemorating its first year of service, and is teaming up with other financial and legal organisations to create change within the finance industry.

Since opening its doors, Redfern Legal Centre's (RLC) Financial Abuse Service NSW has supported victim-survivors of financial abuse to waive over \$600,000 in debt and facilitated the recovery of over \$260,000, enabling victim-survivors to achieve financial independence.

"Financial abuse is a hidden epidemic, which often goes unreported," RLC's Financial Abuse Team Leader Laura Bianchi said. "It is important for people to recognise the warning signs and to know that help is available."

Since launch, RLC's Financial Abuse Service NSW has collaborated with government, philanthropic and corporate supporters, including the Commonwealth Bank (CBA), Ecstra Foundation, American Express, PwC Australia, Ashurst, Telstra and Commonwealth Government funding administered by Legal Aid NSW under the Community Legal Services Program.

These supporters have allowed RLC's Financial Abuse Service NSW to further expand its offering, contributing to the evidence base to enhance a best-practice model. This model will bring together legal and non-legal assistance to support people who have experienced financial abuse, providing a pathway to achieve financial empowerment and independence.

RLC CEO Joanna Shulman said, "Many victim-survivors don't even recognise that financial abuse is occurring until the relationship breaks down and they find themselves left destitute and thousands of dollars in debt. This is why working with government, industry and corporate Australia to raise awareness and build capacity to address this form of domestic violence is so crucial."

Over the last year, RLC's Financial Abuse Service NSW has increased its staff, enabling it to more than double the number of clients they represent. In addition, the service has been able to provide more in-depth support and hire a dedicated family law solicitor to join the team.

Victim-survivor story

Helen* came to the Financial Abuse Service NSW for help after being trapped in a financially abusive relationship for seven years. "Although I didn't see any problems at first, looking back on the relationship, there were things that occurred that didn't seem right," she said.

"[My partner] wasn't working at the time so I was the primary provider. He suggested that we open a business and I thought that was a great idea, but the business, all the accounts and the directorship had to be in my name. Then he suggested that he'd become a signatory on my account. He insisted that the lease be in my name. All of the utilities were in my name.

"He would say that he had paid bills and I'd find out that the bills hadn't been paid," Sandra said. "When I would ask him for details about where the money had gone, he would twist my thoughts, or deflect my questioning. I was a fly caught in a web. And he was the spider expertly manipulating me."

Helen says the experience left her feeling "mentally broken" and like there was no way out.

"What the financial abuse service taught me is that change and empowerment is possible. Although we may feel lost and alone, and like no one can help us, there is a way forward, and there is hope," Helen said.

This is a story that resonates with CBA Group Executive Sian Lewis, who said, "People often disclose the impacts of financial abuse to their financial institution. It's why as a bank we are committed to addressing financial abuse and supporting people impacted by domestic and family violence.

"As part of the bank's [Next Chapter](#) program, we are incredibly proud to partner with leading domestic and family violence experts and community organisations like Redfern Legal Centre so they can continue the important work they do supporting victim-survivors to reach financial independence, as well as working together to end domestic and financial abuse," she said.

Common issues Redfern Legal Centre's Financial Abuse Service NSW advised on in its first year included:

- Coercion or fraud to obtain credit in the victim-survivor's name
- Consumer contracts, such as mobile phones or utilities, being taken out in victim-survivor's name
- Debt management/negotiation, where the victim is being chased by creditors for debts accrued by the perpetrator, or where creditors have commenced court proceedings to recover debt from the victim, or the victim is seeking to recover money loaned to their ex-partner
- A victim-survivor being made the 'puppet director' of a company, and/or being made personally liable for company/business debts
- Credit reporting, where the victim's credit report has been damaged by the perpetrator's credit enquiries/defaults
- Fines, where the perpetrator has accrued fines and/or tolls in the partner's name, sometimes leading to the victim-survivor's driver license being suspended.

Of the clients assisted by the service in its first year:

- 18% of clients did not speak English as their first language at home
- 4% were homeless
- Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander people represented 7% of client base, despite comprising just 3.3% of the Australian population. This statistic aligns with research which shows that First Nations people are over-represented in the population of people who experience family and domestic violence.

People in NSW experiencing financial abuse can contact Redfern Legal Centre's Financial Abuse Service NSW for free, confidential advice at www.rlc.org.au/fals or by calling [0481 730 344](tel:0481730344).

To interview Helen* and arrange media comment contact RLC Communications Manager Finn O'Keefe: finn@rlc.org.au, 02 9698 7277, 0424 548 019.