

# OUTER SIGHT OUT OF JUSTICE

A new model of integrated justice precincts is needed to deliver services in outer urban areas.

**H**undreds of thousands of ordinary residents communicate with the justice system every day without entering a court or police station. It would be a mistake to think that simply building more prisons and expanding a court complex and police station will provide a better justice system for Victorians. This will not help prevent our young people from taking drugs or address offenders' mental health issues.

A broader definition of a justice precinct must be defined and adopted by the state government. A justice precinct must be an integrated one and have mechanisms to tackle the interconnected issues of mental health, drug and alcohol abuse, family violence, gambling, housing concerns, financial hardship and unemployment. Access to ancillary support services, such as health and financial counselling, are now an integral part of the justice system and need to be incorporated into the traditional court model.

In April 2014, The Wyndham Legal Service released the Outer Sight Out Of Justice report launched by LIV president Geoff Bowyer. The report argues that justice infrastructure has failed to keep up with population growth in the outer urban areas and that disadvantaged people should not be forced to travel to inner city Melbourne to access services that are an essential feature of a justice system in more established communities.

Those participating in court hearings within smaller outer urban centres, such as Wyndham and Whittlesea, or rapidly expanding regional centres, such as Bendigo and Ballarat, should not be disadvantaged compared to those who live in inner-city areas. It is a commonly held view that the Werribee Magistrates' Court has outgrown its original purpose and a security risk for the public. The court was built to service a population of 40,000 residents. The current population is nearly 200,000 residents and the court has not grown since it was first established. On a busy day when the court is full, it's common to see people sitting on the brick floors of the building or waiting outside in the open.

Considering the demographics of those living in outer urban areas (i.e. low average

incomes, poorer educational and health outcomes, high unemployment rates and high levels of youth disengagement), there is even more of a need to make sure that access to justice is obtainable. These indicators of disadvantage should not be compounded by relatively lower levels of justice infrastructure including courts, legal services, alternative dispute resolution services, ancillary support services and access to legal information and other early interventions. In order to provide justice for all people in Victoria, whether a person lives in an inner-city, outer-suburban or rural area, each municipality must have access to a viable integrated justice precinct.

The Outer Sight Out of Justice report calls for the development of integrated justice precincts in outer urban areas such as Wyndham and Whittlesea. These precincts must feature a new Magistrates' Court with specialist courts and services (Special Circumstances List and Drug and Koori Courts); a Victoria Legal Aid Office and other Department of Justice services; a police station; and a Community Justice Centre (one-stop-shop) in close vicinity to each other. The integrated precinct model should also encompass the facilities required to assist local residents to engage with the civil and administrative justice system, such as regulators.

Considering some clients battle short-term memory problems from mental illness or years of drug and alcohol abuse, the convenience of a one-stop shop is unmatched and clients are more likely to attend appointments with their drug counsellor or financial counsellor if they are already committed to meet with their legal aid lawyer or corrections officer at an integrated precinct.

A major outcome from the Outer Sight Out Of Justice report has been the establishment of the Wyndham Integrated Justice Precinct Advisory Group. Within the advisory group are the four key stakeholders responsible for the development of the precinct - Department of Justice (and Court Services), Victoria Police, Metropolitan Planning Authority and Wyndham City Council - as well as the Wyndham Legal Service. Other members include the Committee for Wyndham (chair),

Salvation Army and Wyndham Community and Education Centre. The state government has since confirmed that land directly behind the Werribee police station had been set aside for a justice precinct.

According to Mr Bowyer: "The LIV has long advocated for much more effective justice centres to replace outmoded and ineffective courts in high growth suburban and regional centres - 21st century society needs combined legal, social and economic solutions which can be readily available to many disadvantaged people in a centrally based facility, be it access to family crisis counselling, drug rehabilitation services or housing accommodation advisers. The model proposed in the Outer Sight Out Of Justice report not only represents an excellent template but the innovative funding model of a private public partnership model should be attractive to increasingly capital strapped governments. It may encourage a much more rapid rollout than the traditional totally government funded model. We have been encouraged that both the government and opposition parties have shown significant interest in the development of this model which has attracted a wide range of support from participating government, justice and statutory authorities, local council and local government private sector groups in the Wyndham Integrated Justice Precinct Advisory Group."

There are many examples of bricks and mortar developments that do things that have little to do with servicing the actual needs of a community, however the advisory group will ensure that the Wyndham Legal Service, Committee for Wyndham and the broader community will have a voice and a say in determining what the integrated justice precinct should look like.

The advisory group has been identified as an innovative, thought-leadership based project that can substantially change government thinking and processes around access to justice, not just for the west but in other outer suburbs of Melbourne as well. ●

**SHORNA MOORE** is senior policy lawyer, Wyndham Legal Service Inc.