



Family Court Community Connections Program

*Court Network
Four Year Funding Proposal*

“The work that the Court Network team do in court cannot have a price tag on it; they keep women and men informed and help navigate a very confusing court system and mostly are there to support women and men through a very traumatic and emotional experience.”

(Court user, Family Court)

About Us

Court Network (CN) was established in 1980 in Victoria and over the past 40 years, the service has grown significantly with CN volunteers (known as 'Networkers') available in 28 major metropolitan and regional courts and tribunals in Victoria and in a number of Queensland courts, including the Supreme, District and Magistrates' Courts in Brisbane, Ipswich, Beenleigh, Southport, Cairns and Townsville, and QCAT. Recently established Telephone Support Service is available to all court users in Victoria and Queensland statewide.

CN is a frontline community organisation that enables court users to better understand and navigate the court system. The focus of its Mission is to attend to the needs of people at court by providing non-legal support, information and referrals. CN empowers and increases the confidence of court users to manage the requirements of the courts. Its role is complementary to that provided by legal and other services within the courts and tribunals.

CN operational model

CN operates across all jurisdictions. Our free, non-legal court support service is delivered by 500+ Networkers who are trained to provide **support, information and referral** services on an **impartial and non-judgemental basis to all persons, including applicants, respondents, victims, witnesses, defendants, and their families and friends** who attend court with them.

Many court users assisted by CN have no legal representation. CN service provides an important contribution towards court users accessing justice, particularly for more vulnerable and disadvantaged court users. Court users may be attending court for the first time, be unrepresented, be unfamiliar with court rules and processes, lack knowledge about what is expected of them, feel unsafe, not being able to understand and participate effectively in the court processes, and be in need of someone to listen, provide support, and to assist them in navigating the court system. CN's services also provide direct benefit to the administration of justice by reducing the demands on other services inside and outside the courtroom, thus bringing economies to the courts' operations.

Court Network at Family Court

Since 1990, CN has operated in the Federal Circuit Court and Family Court of Australia in the Melbourne and Dandenong registries, and, from 2006 to 2015, in the Brisbane Commonwealth Law Courts. Court Networkers also provide support to court users attending regional family courts. Recently established Telephone Support Service is available to all Family Court users across Victoria and Queensland. Unfortunately, due to ineligibility for funding under the National Legal Assistance Partnership Agreement for Legal Assistance, CN services at Family Courts in Victoria will cease to operate in June 2021.

Networkers connect with court users requiring assistance predominantly through an active outreach style – 'working the floor' – on the day, introducing themselves to court users who are entering the court or waiting for their matter to be heard. They also accept referrals from court staff and service organisations (either on the day or prior to the court matter being heard). Networkers are highly visible and well-known to court staff and other services operating at the courts. Many of the court users supported by CN in the Family Law Courts have no legal representation and would otherwise have faced court with little to no understanding of what was required of them or of other options that may exist in terms of gaining access to legal, community or social assistance.

*"Court Network is such a valuable service; I have seen the relief it brings self-represented persons to ask questions and to be acknowledged as a human being with emotions."
(Criminal Lawyer)*

Volunteer Recruitment, Training and Continuing Education

Extensive and ongoing professional development is provided to Networkers to ensure quality and consistency in their practice ensuring that the wider sector can have confidence in the complementary role that CN can play. Professionally qualified Program Managers are responsible for the overall management of the program, support and supervision of Networkers, and ongoing communication with court personnel and community agencies.

RECRUITMENT	SELECTION	INTAKE TRAINING	SUPERVISED PRACTICE	CONTINUOUS EDUCATION	VOLUNTEER REVIEWS
<p>People interested in volunteering with Court Network:</p> <p>Submit an Expression of Interest Form via Court Network website</p> <p>Attend an Information Session or request an Information Pack</p> <p>Visit a court for an observation session</p> <p>Submit an application</p>	<p>Assessment and selection are conducted based on:</p> <p>Application</p> <p>Applicants participation in an orientation session</p> <p>Referee checks</p> <p>Compliance – Working with Children and Police checks</p> <p>Matching applicant preferences to vacancies</p>	<p>Intake Training is delivered face to face or as a virtual program and includes:</p> <p>Facilitated training (5 days):</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Building foundational knowledge and skills • Reflective practice • Micro-skill development • CN practice framework and boundaries <p>Self-Directed learning via eLearning Modules:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Intro to Court Network • Self-Care • Compliance, • Family Violence 	<p>On-the-job learning (5+ days):</p> <p>Court induction</p> <p>Observations</p> <p>Outreach development</p> <p>Reflective Practice</p> <p>Integration with existing team</p>	<p>Refresh foundational and develop new skills and knowledge</p> <p>Ensure consistent practice</p> <p>Build communities of practice at the team level</p> <p>Annual Conference</p>	<p>Ensure quality of practice</p> <p>Recognise skills and practice achievements</p> <p>Ongoing practice support</p> <p>Identify areas for skill development</p> <p>Address practice or other concerns</p>
			<p>PROVISIONAL NETWORKING</p> <p>3 months</p>	<p>TEAM MEETINGS</p> <p>Stay informed, share practice, understand new requirements</p> <p>Connect with court and community-based stakeholders</p>	<p>RECOGNITION</p> <p>Celebrate individual volunteering milestones</p> <p>Recognition events</p> <p>Highlight value of volunteering contribution to court users and to the organization</p>

Diversity & Inclusion

Court Network is committed to improving access to justice for all court users and in particular for those from diverse and marginalised groups and actively strives towards:

- ensuring that our paid and volunteer workforce is diverse in age, culture, life experience and ability,
- building our capacity to better support all court users

Court Network has begun its journey to identify how to build the core values of diversity, equity, and inclusion into all our operations and services, as well as model those values as we advance our mission. We endeavour to demonstrate those values in our actions to ensure genuine inclusion and sense of belonging for employees, volunteers, all court users, stakeholders, and partners.

In the last twelve months, Court Network staff and volunteers has been engaged in the following training programs:

- Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Cultural Competence online course
- “Engaging, recruiting and retaining volunteers from culturally, linguistically and religiously diverse backgrounds”, delivered by Australian Multicultural Foundation
- Lunch & Learn session with Muslim Legal Network
- Private Screening of “The Australian Dream” documentary
- “A Snapshot of Issues in Elder Abuse” webinar
- SBS Online Inclusion Training including modules on Core Inclusion, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander, LGBTIQ+, Gender, Disability, Culture and Age

Cultural Support Pilot Program - Supporting Australian Sudanese and South Sudanese Families at the Children’s Court of Victoria

Court Network established this innovative project to support Australian Sudanese and South Sudanese families to better support and protect their children to reduce the likelihood of reoffending through the creation of strong social supports.

Australian Sudanese and South Sudanese community members were recruited and trained as ‘Cultural Guides’ to partner with Court Networkers. Together they improve a court user’s understanding of court processes.

Culturally appropriate support services for Australian Sudanese and South Sudanese families attending the Court have been developed. These improve the capacity of the Court and Court Network to meet the needs of culturally and linguistically diverse young people and their families and are also instrumental in raising awareness and community education.

During the initial four-month pilot period, twelve community members were trained as Cultural Guides and 487 Sudanese and South Sudanese court users engaged directly with the Cultural Guides. The program continues to operate at the Children’s Court in Melbourne and will expand to the new Children’s Court in Dandenong in 2022.

“I want to use this to raise awareness, bridge the gap between the community and the justice system and prevent miscommunication. There are assumptions on both sides, and this project will help to address these barriers in the middle. I have personal experience of family going through the court system, and I can see both sides. That both sides brought assumptions and misconceptions about the other. I want to help clarify the misconceptions that people have so they understand the system. I, as an individual, can make change.” (Aluat, Sudanese Cultural Guide, Children’s Court)

Proposal

From the court user's perspective, CN has identified a number of gaps in the interface between Family Relationships Services Programme (FRSP), Family Law Services and attending Family Court. These gaps impact on the capacity of all parts of the system to support families to develop and sustain safe and nurturing family relationships. Whilst court users may have been provided with a range of FRSP services before coming to court, there is often a considerable time lapse between receiving these services and having their court matters heard.

Coming to court is a critical time for potential family disruption and stress. Yet, many Family Court users come to court without informal and professional support. They may have other vulnerabilities such as poor health, addiction and a history of experiencing trauma. Families are consumed by their lengthy court case and resources that they put into it. Lack of support, the experience of these vulnerabilities and the heightened emotional stress associated with resolving often protracted family court matters increase a risk to family disruption. These factors also negatively impact on the stable caring relationships children need whilst increasing the emotional, social and economic costs associated with family disruption and separation. Overwhelmed by the complexity of the court process and the emotional and financial stress, families with children, who are at risk of separating, or who have separated fail to engage with support services and miss on critical assistance that can lead to their improved wellbeing.

Building on our existing experience and expertise in providing support to all court users in Family Courts in particular to those experiencing family violence and to unrepresented litigants, CN has a role in helping court users by building connections and pathways of timely support both in the community and court system, ensuring better court outcomes for families, more efficient justice system and improved access and more efficient use of existing community services, in particular those available under the FRSP.

Court Network's Unique Value Proposition

Court Network has demonstrated experience of working at Family Courts

Based on **KPMG's cost benefit analysis** of CN's Family Court services in 2013, the organisation returned benefits of \$3.40 for every \$1 funded in Queensland and \$3.20 for every \$1 funded in Victoria. The report highlighted key benefits of CN operational model:

- **Networkers are of greatest value to unrepresented litigants** who do not have the information or support that they would otherwise receive from a lawyer. It can be bewildering and daunting for court users to enter a courtroom with its formalities and understand what is expected of them resulting in poor engagement in the court process.
- **Networkers improve the court experience for people in an environment that can cause fear, anxiety and frustration.** Networkers are familiar with the environment and can explain the court landscape, processes, system and language in terms that a court user will understand, making them feel more confident.
- **Networkers play a key role in alleviating tensions and distress in cases involving family violence.** They work sensitively with court users involved in these cases, provide a secure waiting room and assist with their appearance in court.
- **Networkers improve people's perception of the court system.** Making the court process easier to navigate and more manageable for court users and providing information on how the justice system operates, is likely to leave court users with a more positive view of the court. Their perception of the justice system is also improved when they understand the rules and can anticipate the formality and processes ahead.
- **Networkers enable court staff and duty lawyers to be more efficient and focus on their core roles and responsibilities.** A number of people working at court are unable to step outside their roles to assist court users. Instead, they rely on Networkers to provide flexible support and work closely with them. Networkers also assist court users to find correct locations and facilitate access to the registry and duty lawyers in a timely manner, which assists court staff to manage their workloads.

Court Network has developed an Enhanced Family Violence Support Model

In 2015/2016 CN conducted a Family Violence Pilot Project which led to the development of CN's **enhanced family violence support model** that has since been expanded to all Specialist Family Violence Courts in Victoria. The Pilot identified that court users trusted trained community members in court and were more open with telling their story and identifying their concerns. This trust enabled networkers to support court users to get help both in the court and the community to address the family violence in their lives. 77% helped by Networkers in the pilot had no existing links to family violence services prior to a Networker's connections and over 60% were able to be linked to court and community support by Networkers during their day attending court.

The Enhanced Family Violence Support Model includes a tailored Family Violence training package for Networkers that can be delivered both in person and online and includes the following modules:

1. Introduction to family violence
2. Recognise family violence
3. Family violence legal protection and processes
4. Respond to identified family violence risk indicators
5. Support court users who use family violence

Court Network has developed Enhanced Model of Support to Unrepresented Litigants

CN provides a significant amount of support to litigants who are not represented. In 2014, CN piloted and evaluated **an enhanced model of support to unrepresented litigants appearing at Final Hearings in the Family and Federal Circuit Courts in Australia**. The project also developed a highly-valued Resource Booklet specifically designed for unrepresented litigants that detailed in plain language the processes and terminology of the Family Law Courts in relation to final hearings, including translations into Vietnamese and Dinka.

Court Network has experience in working with and supporting FASS

CN works closely with the Family Advocacy and Support Service (FASS) in Family Courts in Victoria. While FASS service has made a huge difference by increasing the availability of representation and recognising that there are needs beyond those dealt in courts, it cannot possibly address needs of all court users - CN fills these gaps. In the period January to December 2019 CN supported **2,484** court users in Melbourne and Dandenong Family Courts and **referred 354 court users to FASS**.

Court Network provides impartial, non-judgmental support

Unlike most family violence services in court, our model ensures that both parties can have access to a different Networker to receive information, referral and support. This ensures that our impartiality is maintained during service delivery and ultimately supports safety and risk planning for all. CN provides a daily team of a minimum of three Networkers at Family Courts to meet our commitment to impartiality and to enable service coverage requirements at court.

More recently, as a result of my role as President of the Victorian Bar, I have come to understand the pressures on our justice system better than most. Our legal aid system is chronically underfunded. There are increasing numbers of unrepresented litigants appearing in all courts. Accused persons, other litigants and witnesses often arrive at court without having had the benefit of independent advice or assistance.

Into that foreign and intimidating environment steps Court Network: quietly, supportively and empathetically assisting members of the community to navigate the court system. I am conscious, of course, of the work that Court Network does throughout the justice system, but it has a particularly important role to play in the family law jurisdiction. Family law cases involve unique pressures, because of the dreadful combination of the breakdown of a relationship, the financial complications that that brings with it, and often the need to manage custody of and access to children, and questions of domestic violence. Court Network's role in providing support in that context is, in my view, simply indispensable." (Dr Matthew Collins AM QC)

Overview of the proposed model

	Face to Face in Courts	Telephone Support
Location	Family Courts in Victoria, Queensland, South Australia and Tasmania	National – all Family Courts in Australia
Hours	Mon-Fri 9-5	
Concierge Role	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Proactive outreach practice – approach court users as they arrive to the court - Provide warm & efficient welcome experience - Provide directions and practical information - Provide a moment of empathy, to make the court user feel recognised and dignified 	
Wayfinder / Navigator Role	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Provide support and information about going to court - Help people understand where they are in the process - Explain how the courts and legal systems operate - Show court users around the court beforehand, so they can become familiar with where they have to go on the day of their court case - Provide court users with a safe place in court - Facilitate access to an interpreter if required - Give court users opportunities to be involved in decisions about the services they access, and support them to have a say - Help explain decisions that affect court users 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Provide support and information about what happens before, during or after court - Explain how the courts and legal systems operate - Assist court users to get the help they need to address their safety issues - Help to arrange access to a secure room if required - Provide court users with up to date information on new arrangements for court since the COVID-19 - Talk to court users on their day of court either before or after their matter has been heard
Companion Role	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Be with court users in person on their day in court, provide emotional support and sit with them in court during appearance - Standing alongside court users to empower and give confidence 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Support court users over the phone on their day in court to empower and give confidence
Connector Role	Provide education and referrals to: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - FASS and other in-court support - the Commonwealth Government’s Family Relationships Services Programme and to the wide set of information and service offers including: <ol style="list-style-type: none"> a. Family relationship centres b. Family relationship advice c. Family dispute resolution d. Family counselling e. Children's contact services f. Parenting Orders Programme g. Post Separation Cooperative Parenting Programme h. Supporting Children After Separation Programme - other community services that can help with legal questions, health, housing and family violence issues, including services for men 	
Minimum Training Requirements	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> a. 10-week Intake Training including Supervised Practice at Courts b. Family Violence Training (5 modules) c. Custom built training developed in partnership with the AGD and particularly the Family Relationships Services Programme staff on the wider policy and program framework. d. Inclusion & Diversity Training 6 modules 	
Volunteer Management	Volunteer management, support and supervision provided by skilled and experienced Program Coordinators (paid staff)	

Project Timeline

WHEN	WHAT	WHERE
Year 1	<ul style="list-style-type: none">- Face to Face Service model developed and implemented in Victoria- Complementing Telephone Support Service developed and implemented in Victoria- Evaluation framework developed- At the end of Year 1, service model to be reviewed, refined and finalised	<ul style="list-style-type: none">- Family Court registries in Melbourne and Dandenong- regional Federal Court Circuit locations in Bendigo, Ballarat, Geelong Mildura, Morwell, Shepparton and Warrnambool.
Year 2	<ul style="list-style-type: none">- Face to Face Service model established and implemented in Queensland together with the complementing Telephone Support	<ul style="list-style-type: none">- Family Court registries in Brisbane, Cairns, Townsville and Rockhampton
Year 3	<ul style="list-style-type: none">- Service model established and implemented in South Australia and Tasmania together with the complementing Telephone Support	<ul style="list-style-type: none">- Family Court registry in Adelaide- Family Court registries in Hobart and Launceston
Year 4	<ul style="list-style-type: none">- Evaluation finalised- Proposal for national coverage developed (expansion of model to New South Wales and Northern Territory)	<ul style="list-style-type: none">- Face to Face and Telephone Support Service fully operational in 4 states

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