Community Legal Centres Australia

Community Legal Centres Australia Statement on artificial intelligence (AI)

This statement sets out the approach of Community Legal Centres Australia (CLCA) to the existing and emerging opportunities and risks of AI in the Community Legal Centre (CLC) sector.

Opportunity and risk

Artificial intelligence is changing the nature of legal work. Across the profession, legal service providers are adopting AI tools at an exponential rate, and the legal sector is clearly susceptible to disruption by this technology. For CLCs, the advent of AI brings both real opportunity and serious risk. CLCs have long worked under sustained capacity constraints, underfunded relative to the legal need of the communities they serve. If these tools are harnessed well, as current evidence suggests is possible, centres could resolve more matters, and people who are currently turned away could be helped. We do not think this is a marginal gain. For a sector defined by resource scarcity, it could be the most significant change to service capacity in decades.

However, the risks are equally substantial. These systems produce confident errors, can encode bias, and history has demonstrated that the people affected by that bias will disproportionately be our clients. They carry immense environmental costs, and may further entrench economic and social inequality. More fundamentally, there are serious concerns that increasingly powerful AI systems could outpace our ability to understand and control them.

Our approach

Individual centres should not each have to solve the same problems alone, and the smallest centres should not be left to solve them without support. We therefore intend to develop and build capacity within the sector to make safe adoption possible and to advocate for the sector's place in this transformation. **The principles that will govern any AI initiative CLCA undertakes are:**

1. **Human first** – AI may support the work of community legal centres, but it should never replace or diminish the human relationships, judgment and care at the heart of CLC work. Our clients come to centres often at the worst moments of their lives, and they come to speak to someone. AI will not be used to diminish the human centred approach to legal

services and support, or to exclude CLC clients on the basis of any choices they make about the use of AI.

2. **Access to justice is the purpose** – We will pursue AI only where it improves outcomes for our clients and communities. Efficiency is a means to serve more people, better. It is never an end in itself, and never a reason to compromise the quality or safety of a service. AI must narrow the justice gap, not build new barriers into it.

3. **Safety above all else** – Our clients have rights of privacy, confidentiality and legal professional privilege, and rights and interests in their data and its sovereignty. They are among those most exposed to algorithmic bias and potential harm. Our sector has spent decades helping people harmed by automated systems. We know how unsafe technology detrimentally effects a person's life, and we will hold this technology to the standard of that knowledge. Safe AI is "non-negotiable".

4. **First Nations Data Sovereignty** – We recognise the rights of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples to exercise control over data, information and knowledge about their peoples, communities and cultures. Our approach to AI will respect First Nations Data Sovereignty and Indigenous Cultural and Intellectual Property. Where AI involves or affects First Nations data, peoples, knowledge or communities, First Nations governance, authority and decision-making must be respected and meaningfully embedded in how decisions are made.

5. **Sector led** – We will take a collective, sector-led approach so that access to safe AI capability does not depend on a centre's size, location or budget. Our approach to AI understands that not every safe AI tool is suited to all CLCs. We will recognise the diversity of the sector, including in size, location and resources. Participation is always voluntary, and centres that choose not to adopt AI will be equally respected and supported.

6. **Support the workforce** – AI should relieve pressure on CLC staff and volunteers, not displace or devalue them. We will invest in the sector's capability and involve our workforce in shaping how these tools are used. AI belongs where it takes work off our people, not where it takes our people out of the work.

7. **AI is not a substitute for funding** – The chronic underfunding of the community legal sector cannot be solved by technology. Efficiency gains must expand what centres can do for their communities. They must never be used to justify reduced investment in community legal services, or to compel CLCs to divert limited resources to AI use or tools.