**FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS:**

**INVISIBLE HURDLES PROJECT**

**Key findings:**

* The development of trust and relationships takes time. Young people experiencing family violence are unlikely to reveal it, but are likely to disclose other issues first to test out a lawyer before opening-up. In some instances, family violence was only disclosed after three months of contact.
* Young indigenous people with a lived experience of the stolen generations perpetrated by the government of the day are distrustful of the legal system. Many indigenous families see the second round of the stolen generations embodied in child protection.
* Young people will wait and observe how the lawyer interacts with others first, sometimes for up to six months before feeling they can approach a lawyer or their worker about a legal issue.
* Young people will only open up if they feel safe, the lawyer is approachable, non-hierarchical, non-judgemental and speaks simply.
* Word of mouth about the project and that young people felt the lawyer was okay, took time to develop but, in the third year of the project there was evidence in the data that young people were starting to self-present because of the experiences of other young people.
* Many young people relied on family members or friends for legal opinions and often these sources were suspicious of lawyers and the legal system so early intervention was missed. Misinformation supplied complicated matters.
* With a visible lawyer on site, available and approachable, more young people were availing themselves of legal help either directly or through a trusted non-legal professional than would have been the case without the project.
* Secondary consultations are key to the project’s success. These are where a young person, often frightened and distrusting of authority sees a trusted teacher or health and allied health professional. Legal issues are then relayed to the on-site lawyer and legal help is accessed faster and more effectively through the trusted support person as an intermediary.
* Secondary consultations eventually led to one-to-one relationships between young people and lawyers once trust was established between lawyer and case worker and observed by the young person.
* Secondary Consultations also built capacity of non-legal professionals to respond in a timely way, to improve decision-making, and reduce the professionals’ sense of anxiety as their confidence in the lawyer and their advice grew.
* The presence of ‘justice’ service providers advising alongside other disciplines enhanced decision-making, not just of the young person and their worker but also at the agency level through a deeper understanding of legal options.
* Lawyers and community educators have a role in giving young people the power, information, skills and opportunities to engage in decision-making processes that affect them. There are missed opportunities that could be capitalised on.

**Key recommendations:**

1. **Professional development and reciprocity**

Professional development work should continue in both opportunistic ways (lunchroom, staff meetings) and formal planned ways. This should be reciprocal, i.e. not only from the HRCLS lawyer to the other partners, but also from and between all four partners.

1. **Staff retention**

Retention of lawyers was an issue in this project. Attracting and retaining legal staff in rural and regional communities is hard and having trained, recruited and built trust, staff often departed due to insecure funding and opportunities in rural settings.

At a government and systemic level there should be more endeavour to expose law students and early career lawyers to the advantages of such careers in the bush. Supports and strategies for retention need to be put in place if rural and regional communities are not to be placed at a disadvantage in accessing justice.

Poor lawyer stereotypes could inhibit willingness to seek help and so the type of lawyer is critical to engagement

1. **Young people, Aboriginal service delivery and engagement**

Trust and longevity of presence, the delivering on promises, understanding of culture, family and Elder connectedness or disconnectedness need to inform service delivery and engagement. These features were critical for engagement and responsive service delivery to Aboriginal Australians in closing the gap in this project.

1. **University linkages to support good practice and service delivery in the region**

Universities (all) can play a greater role in training lawyers & Legal students in interpersonal and collaboration skills essential in practice, and connecting them with clinical opportunities in regional areas. Linkages with legal centres, community partner agencies, students, the local private profession and philanthropic funders could support collaborations to encourage students to make a long term career in country Australia.

1. **Time, longevity and sustainable funding**

Government policy and funding needs to acknowledge and build in funding components the extended time and intense work required to develop trust and sustain relationships. These difficult-to-reach clients are vulnerable and complex, often traumatised, whose safety is at risk and feel shame, embarrassment or other complex barriers to seeking legal advice.

1. **Young people and family violence and responsiveness**

Services and funders need to accept that to address and support people experiencing family violence takes time and trust. Funding models need to be adjusted to reflect and enable this with resourcing of services to work together and separately as may be required to gain such trust.

1. **Collaboration and multi-disciplinary practice expansion**

Consideration of lawyers as part of such practices should be included in existing models of health, allied health, social service and educational organisations. While multi-disciplinary practice is common, there are rare examples of the consideration of justice as part of such practices and yet it can enhance holistic service provision and agency capacity.

1. **Systemic policy work**

Policy reform involving grass roots input and responses is critical. All partners across the data expressed a wish for opportunities to further identify, explore and work together on policy work to address obstacles to better outcomes for young people. The involvement of young people in policy work that affects them is important.

1. **Further consolidation and funding**

This project needs ongoing, secure further funding to consolidate and explore other opportunities and identified needs emerging to better support and reach young people.

1. **Rural and regional diversity**

Locations in rural settings can have different complexities to life in a regional setting. Cross border issues and different law enforcement which discriminates against Aboriginal young people need to be counteracted by cultural awareness and training. Child protection policies that overlook cultural connection and connections to land in different areas for family members need to be acknowledged in decision making.