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Annual Report 2011





Table of Contents

■ Message from the Chair	2
■ Message from the Managing Solicitor	4
■ About Us	6
■ Services	13
○ Advice Clinics	
○ Casework	
○ Befriending	
○ Legal & Training Resource to other Organisations	
○ Policy Work	
■ Statistics	20
■ Case Studies	23
■ Testimonials	25
■ Future Development	32
■ Funding	33
■ Acknowledgements	35

Message from the Chair

With the publication of this first edition of our *Annual Report*, there is considerable encouragement to be garnered from looking through this 'window' on our Centre, looking back to its beginnings, its goals and its achievements over the past two to three years.



The idea of a free advocacy service for people who might experience or be at risk of homelessness because of legal difficulties is not new. Other excellent Centres provide such a service, so why set up another one?

It became apparent, as the first decade of the twenty-first century went by, that there was a need for a more accessible, fulltime service, not dependent on State aid (since many of the legal difficulties around homeless issues are with State Agencies), which also sought to influence public policy from an advocacy point of view. The current drastic shift from 'boom to bust' only served to exacerbate this need. A key awareness at the back of this idea was that people caught up in homelessness are often extremely disempowered by the human and financial stress involved and are considered of little consequence by the powers and processes of public life. As a result, they often recede to the invisible edges of society where their situation deteriorates further.

In order to be of service to people in these vulnerable circumstances, the *Mercy Law Resource Centre* recognised the need to be in close tangible contact with the places, the environment, the causes and personal pressures which grind people, not only into homelessness, but often into the spiral of hopelessness too. The intention was to enable people to break through their legal log jams, overcome the intimidating nature of legal procedures and to influence the policy makers to take account of the dignity and rights of homeless people. The goal of the activities of the Centre is that individuals and families might find their way back to freedom, security and a wholesome life.



In this context, the Sisters of Mercy made the decision to establish such a service and to support its initial financial needs. Over the past three years, our able and energetic staff (two legal, three administrative) have provided an impressive and extensive service to a large number of clients in a spirit of compassion, dignity and friendly support. Legal services, including Court work and advice clinics (in hostels frequented by homeless people), companion support through volunteer 'friends' and advocacy/policy work in co-operation with other agencies, all seek to bring 'good news' to those who struggle with this most basic of human needs.

Mercy Law Resource Centre is a fully free service and is totally dependent on financial donations and the much appreciated support of others. Funds are necessary for very modest salaries and low administrative costs. Hopefully, an attentive reading of this first *Annual Report* will convince our readers of the value and necessity of this service. We welcome your support to enable it to continue and develop.

I take this opportunity to express appreciation to our excellent staff, to our generous volunteers, to our committed Board of Directors, to our benefactors and to the Sisters of Mercy. With every blessing on *Mercy Law Resource Centre* and all associated with it.

Sr Helena O'Donoghue

Sr. Helena O'Donoghue

Chair, Board of Directors, MLRC

Message from the Managing Solicitor

Welcome to our first annual report.

Mercy Law Resource Centre (MLRC) was established in 2009, following a lengthy set up period where homeless persons were identified as facing additional hurdles in accessing legal services, rights and entitlements and social housing and social welfare law were recognised as being poorly catered for by the State and private legal sector. As a result, MLRC was formed to provide free legal advice and representation to people who are homeless or at risk of homelessness, in an accessible and innovative way, in the areas of social housing and social welfare law. It also aimed to advocate change in laws, policies and attitudes which unduly and adversely impact this client group.



In many cases the people who present to our service are facing homelessness, have become homeless and/or may be without income due to erroneous decisions or inaction of an arm of the State. Already disempowered and marginalised and often grappling with a wide range of other issues such as mental health, addiction and relationship breakdown, our clients are faced with what seems like the Sisyphean task of challenging the decision/inaction which has had such a devastating effect on their lives. They frequently encounter problems such as lack of transparency, lack of accountability and failure to observe basic fair procedures. MLRC seeks to use the law to effectively advocate on behalf of clients who find themselves in this situation.

Since opening our doors, we have continued to hone and develop our service. 2011 saw a 120% increase in the number of advice queries. This is due to the expansion of our weekly advice clinics from two to four, our increased collaboration with other organisations working in this field and the increasing number of people who find themselves pushed to the limits by the economic recession. Our advice work, together with focus groups provided to organisations working in this field, has informed the cases we take on. This, combined with our policy work and training sessions, has resulted in the work of the Centre having a wider impact.



In 2011, our case work involved High Court and Tribunal representation in areas such as equality, evictions and challenging decisions of public bodies on the grounds of fair procedures, the Constitution and the European Convention of Human Rights.

Apart from expanding our caseload and advice clinics, we submitted a number of policy papers on issues affecting our client group e.g. the United Nations Universal Periodic Review, Local Authority Anti Social Behaviour Strategies, Exemption from Legal Aid for Housing Matters, Mental Capacity Bill and a Response to the UN Special Rapporteur on Extreme Poverty and Human Rights. We also continued to recruit and train befrienders and currently have eleven active befrienders who continue to provide emotional and practical support to clients involved in the often difficult and stressful process of asserting their rights.

I cannot conclude without acknowledging the enormous pro bono support received from barristers, solicitors, other Law Centres, medical and engineering experts and befrienders without whom, the Centre's work and impact would be very limited. I would like to also recognise the vision and financial support of our funders and thank the Directors of the Centre for their continued dedication to steering the Centre to where we are today.

I hope this report highlights the effectiveness of and very real need for our service. We appreciate any funding support that is given which will ensure that we continue to deliver a unique and much needed service for which there is only growing demand.

Rose Wall

Rose Wall

Managing Solicitor, MLRC



About Us

Mercy Law Resource Centre (MLRC) is an independent law centre, registered charity and company limited by guarantee which provides free legal advice and representation to people who are homeless or at risk of becoming homeless in the areas of social housing and social welfare law. The Centre also seeks to advocate change in laws, policies and attitudes which unduly and adversely impact its client group.

Our Beginnings

At first sight, 'Law' and 'Mercy' appear to have little to do with each other. Mercy Law Resource Centre was born out of a desire to bring together these two differing worlds in the hope that, as law becomes ever more dominant and influential in our society, it would be illuminated and resourced by the values of compassion and justice for all, including the poor.

An opportunity to do just this arose when a lawyer, Michele O Kelly, joined the Sisters of Mercy. With the encouragement of the Mercy leadership team, first under Sr. Helena O'Donoghue and then under Sr. Peggy Collins, the idea was conceived, not only of using law to advocate on behalf of those who are most marginalized and in need, but also of 'doing law' differently i.e. in a way that was genuinely accessible and of real help to the lives of those on the margins of society.

In preparation for this goal, consultations were held in 2008 by Sr. Michele O'Kelly and Sr. Anne Doyle with a number of interest groups in order to determine where the greatest need was for the type of service the Sisters of Mercy were seeking to provide and how it would best be provided.

Out of these consultations, it emerged that the group most in need were people who are homeless or at risk of homelessness which included those struggling with issues linked to homelessness such as addiction, mental illness, leaving prison and relationship breakdown.



With financial support from the Sisters of Mercy, a Law Centre was set up to provide legal services to this group. It was staffed by one solicitor (Michele O Kelly) and one administrator (Caitriona O'Hara) and it operated out of a room kindly provided by Sophia Housing, appropriately on the grounds of what used to be the old Mercy convent in Cork St. Incorporation as a company took place in May 2009 and charitable status was granted in June 2009.

From the outset, advice clinics were provided in homeless hostels (initially Crosscare, Charlemont Street and St. Vincent De Paul Hostel, Back Lane) and close links were developed with organisations working with those who are homeless. In this way, MLRC sought to make the service accessible and of real help to the people it wanted to serve. In addition, a befriending service was set up whereby volunteers could befriend and accompany clients of the Centre, through their journey through the legal system. A training programme was developed with the help of the Women's Therapy Centre and eight befrienders began in the autumn of 2009.

In these distinctive ways, the aspirations with which the Centre was founded began to take concrete shape- a free, quality and holistic legal service to people most in need.

The Need for our Service

“Poor Law” (e.g. housing and social welfare law) is not catered for by either the private sector or the State legal aid system. The legal assistance which is available is often limited to advice only and is not always accessible to our clients; homeless persons are on the extreme margins of society and have additional hurdles in accessing legal services, rights and entitlements. A further issue is that the services available are often fragmented ignoring the cluster of problems which our client group often experience i.e. other legal and non-legal problems. Our experience has shown that homelessness is not an isolated issue and our client group face a number of other difficulties, including: Marital/ Family Breakdown; Domestic Violence; Mental Health; Drug / Alcohol Addiction; Immigration issues; Leaving Prison and Trafficking/ Prostitution.



Our Mission

MLRC provides a unique service that is accessible and, as far as possible, shaped to meet the individual needs of each client. Where possible, we meet clients in their own environment e.g. by providing advice clinics in homeless hostels. We work with other organisations in the statutory and voluntary sectors e.g. Crosscare, De Paul, Focus Ireland and Dublin Simon, to ensure clients have the appropriate supports they need. We also have a team of volunteer befrienders who provide clients with emotional support as they go through the difficult process of seeking to assert their rights.

MLRC's ethos recognises the dignity of each person. We seek to ensure that all people are treated with respect and compassion and are enabled to access their full potential as human beings. We are committed to the principles of human rights, social justice, equality and community participation.

Our Services

MLRC provides the following services to persons living in Dublin:

- Free Legal Advice Clinics in four hostels/centres for homeless people. In 2011, we provided advice to 476 people;
- Legal Representation;
- Befriending Service;
- Legal Support & Training to Organisations working in the field of Homelessness e.g. Dublin Simon, Focus Ireland, Vincent de Paul, Crosscare;
- Policy Work.



Cases involving people who live outside Dublin may be undertaken on an exceptional basis. The Centre recognises that casework and policy work go hand in hand and one cannot be successful without the other. The advice clinics and focus groups highlight the issues that our client group face which in turn informs the test cases we take and policy issues we tackle.

Our Governance

MLRC is governed by a Board of Directors that meet with the Administrator and Solicitor in Charge every six weeks. The Centre is registered as:

- An Independent Law Centre with the Law Society of Ireland;
- A Charity with the Revenue Commissioners (CHY No: 18698);
- A Company Limited by Guarantee and not having share capital with the Company Registration Office (Co. Reg. No: 471072).

Our Board of Directors

There are eight Directors serving on our Board:-

- Helena O'Donoghue (Chair)-Mercy Sister and Director Sophia Housing;
- Anne Doyle-Mercy Sister and Director of Open Heart House Ltd;
- Jo Kennedy-Mercy Sister, Family Therapist and Director of Women's Therapy Centre;
- George Maloney-Accountant, Baker Tilly Ryan & Glennon;
- Ciara McGrath- Information/Outreach worker, Crosscare;
- Deirdre Quigley-Assistant Project Manager, MCO Mater;
- Patrick Stagg-Director of the National Association of Citizens Information Services and Bluebell & Dublin 8 Citizens Information Centre;
- Gerry Whyte-Law Lecturer, Trinity College and Director of Kenya Orphan Aid.

Mercy Law Resource Centre



Our Office

Apart from outreach work, the Centre works primarily from its offices in the premises of Sophia Housing on 25 Cork Street, Dublin 8. These offices are open Monday to Friday from 9.30 to 5.30.



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Our Staff

There are currently five staff members in the Centre, 1 Full Time, 2 Part Time and 2 Part Time Volunteers:



Back Row: Bernie Walsh, Denise Fitzgerald, Caitriona O'Hara
Seated: Rose Wall, Rita Ann Burke

- Rose Wall, Solicitor in Charge. Rose qualified as a solicitor in 2008, having trained with Malcomson Law Solicitors. She volunteered with Ballymun Community Law Centre and FLAC before joining the Mercy Law Resource Centre in 2010. Rose holds a LL.B. and LL.M. from the University of Dublin, Trinity College and is a member of the Law Society Litigation and Human Rights Committees. She also lectures in Griffith College Dublin and is a course contributor to the Law Society Civil Litigation Diploma Programme.
- Bernie Walsh, Part Time Volunteer Solicitor. Bernie qualified as a Solicitor in 1989 and ran a private practice for 15 years specialising in commercial litigation. Prior to this she worked for 2 years in the Law Society Education Department and has a H.Dip in Education. She has more recently completed a Higher Diploma in Psychology at Trinity College Dublin and is a member of the Psychological Society of Ireland. She has been involved in a number of social projects in Ireland and Africa over many years.

Mercy Law Resource Centre



- Caitriona O'Hara, Part Time Volunteer Administrator/Co-ordinator of the Befriender Programme. Caitriona is a Sister of Mercy who worked as a Primary and Secondary school teacher and a School Administrator in three schools. She also has more than twenty years experience in the field of Diocesan and Provincial administration. She is currently a Director of the Women's Therapy Centre and Mercy Family Centre.
- Denise Fitzgerald, Part Time Legal Secretary. Denise worked with O'Hagan, Ward & Co., Solicitors before joining the Centre in 2010. She has previously volunteered in the areas of housing advice and animal rescue.
- Rita Ann Burke, Part Time Administrator/Fundraiser. Rita Ann qualified as an Architect in 1992 and ran a private practice for 15 years. She has completed Diplomas in Media Studies (Radio), Archaeology and Community Development & Rural Enterprise. She has worked as a Support & Development Worker in Community Development and was a voluntary member of her local community council prior to moving to Dublin.



Services

Advice Clinics

We provide free legal advice clinics in four hostels/centres for homeless people. The clinics are held weekly, staffed by qualified lawyers and deal with all legal issues raised by residents e.g. family law, housing law, social welfare law, immigration and criminal law.

In **2011**, we increased the number of weekly advice clinics from two to four and provided advice to **476 clients**:



We hope to extend this service to other hostels and like environments in the future, to ensure that legal services are made available to the most marginalised of our client group.

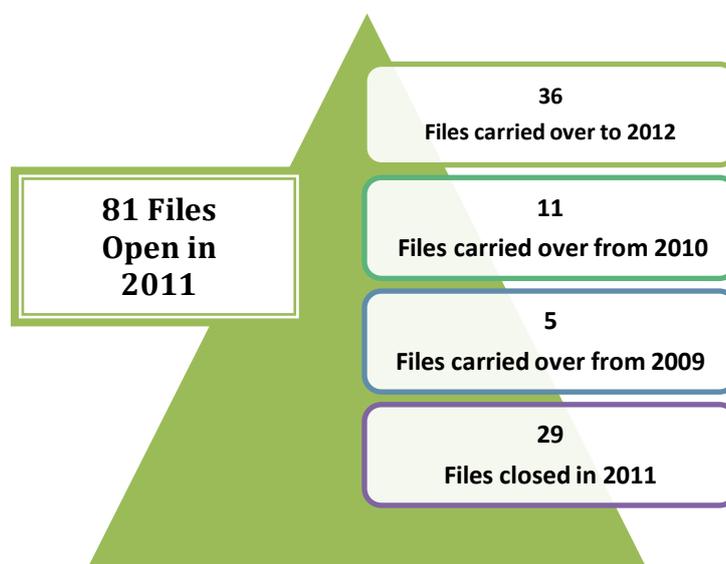


Casework

We provide free legal representation, including High Court and Tribunal representation, to individual clients, in the areas of social housing and social welfare law e.g. access to local authority housing, local authority evictions, standards of local authority housing and equality cases. Cases in other areas such as family law or criminal law are referred to the appropriate services.

The service is limited to people who live in the Dublin area. Cases involving people who live outside Dublin may be undertaken on an exceptional basis if e.g. the case raises issues which would be of strategic benefit to our clientele or if the individual is extremely vulnerable and has difficulties in otherwise accessing legal services.

MLRC had a total of **81 files** open in **2011**.





Befriending

The Befriending programme is an invaluable asset to MLRC as we recognise that the legal system can be alienating and difficult and frustrating to negotiate. As part of this service, volunteers are available to befriend clients in order to accompany them and provide them with emotional and practical support as they go through the difficult process of trying to assert their rights.

The role may entail such activities as helping the individual to fill in forms, accompanying her/him to court, helping her/him to turn up to appointments etc. Training is provided to all volunteers who also have the support of regular group meetings where peer support is provided.

Befrienders Story

“Caitriona O’Hara, Co-ordinator of the Befriending Programme, introduced me in February 2009, to my ‘befriended’, a man in his 50’s from one of the hostels for homeless men in Dublin. We had both met Caitriona separately before and understood what our relationship would be as ‘befriender’ and ‘befriended’. MLRC provide training for people interested in becoming ‘befrienders’ and I was aware of what my duties and role would be.

We had a short meeting that first day and before I left, we agreed a time and place for another meeting and so our relationship began-slowly, with caution, but it developed over time. From our initial tentative meeting, conversations grew and developed and our talks became a regular occurrence. Conversations progressed from reminisces of his past to the very real problems posed by hostel living. He started to take an interest in his personal appearance and his concerns moved to how he would move on from living in the hostel. It seemed that regular contact and a listening ear was what this man needed to get to grips with the reality of his situation.

We began having conversations about what kind of accommodation he would like to live in. He had problems that needed to be sorted out and through our discussions we were able to look at options open to him. We outlined courses of action he could follow and worked out short-term goals.



I was able to assist him by writing letters, helping him with application forms and setting up doctors' appointments. As he saw things changing, he grew in confidence and became more proactive in dealing with his problems.

In 2010, he got the wonderful news that MLRC had, by advocating on his behalf, secured an offer of local authority accommodation. Through donations from friends and colleagues we managed to gather the basic furnishings and household essentials together and with great excitement he moved into his own place. For the first time in my time meetings with him, I heard him singing as he made me a cup of tea in his own kitchen. He has got to know his neighbours and has established relationships with them, which have continued to grow and develop. He developed a more positive attitude to life and he found that there were groups he could join and places he could visit such as the local Civic Centre or the Library.

My involvement in the MLRC Befriending Programme has benefited me as much as it has my 'befriended'. We have taken 'the road less travelled' and that has made all the difference. It has shown me that little things can sometimes make all the difference and having a non-judgemental, listening ear can bring a person to a clarity that may not have otherwise been perceived."

Legal & Training Resource to other Organisations

Since our establishment, MLRC has worked in partnership with many different organisations to advance the cause of access to justice for homeless people. We offer legal support to voluntary organisations working in the field of homelessness and access to housing. This can include legal input and support on policy issues concerning our client group and/or advice and assistance with queries concerning individual cases which fall within our criteria.



Mercy Law Resource Centre

We also conduct legal training and organise focus groups once a month with such organisations. The focus groups are invaluable to the Centre in terms of learning what the issues are “on the ground”. This information informs the cases we take on and the policy issues we tackle. The training provided not only equips such organisations with skills to advocate more effectively on their clients behalves but also assists them to identify the most appropriate cases for referral to the Centre. In training other organisations in this way, the work of our small team has a much wider impact and we are able to broaden our service immensely.

Some of the organisations we work with are as follows:





Policy Work

Arising out of advice and casework, we seek to identify issues which affect our client group and work to bring about changes in areas which would be of benefit to them.

In general, our aim is to use the law to advocate effectively on behalf of our client group in order to change those laws, policies and attitudes which unduly and adversely impact on them and deprive them of the means to improve their lives. Ultimately, we seek to ensure people who are homeless have equal and effective access to justice.

In 2010, papers were produced on the following topics:

- NAMA;
- Criminal Justice (Public Order) Bill 2010;
- Proposed licensing and tenancy agreements under Pathway to Home.

In 2011, papers were produced on the following topics:

- United Nations Universal Periodic Review;
- Local Authority Anti Social Behaviour Strategies;
- Exemption in the Civil Legal Aid legislation in respect of Housing matters;
- Mental Capacity Bill;
- Response to the UN Special Rapporteur on Extreme Poverty and Human Rights.

We recognize the value of working with other persons and organizations in this area and are committed to doing so in pursuit of our aims. We are currently part of an informal Housing Group which meets on a monthly basis to share information and consider matters of policy.

Mercy Law Resource Centre



Other members of the group are Dr Padraic Kenna, NUI Galway and:





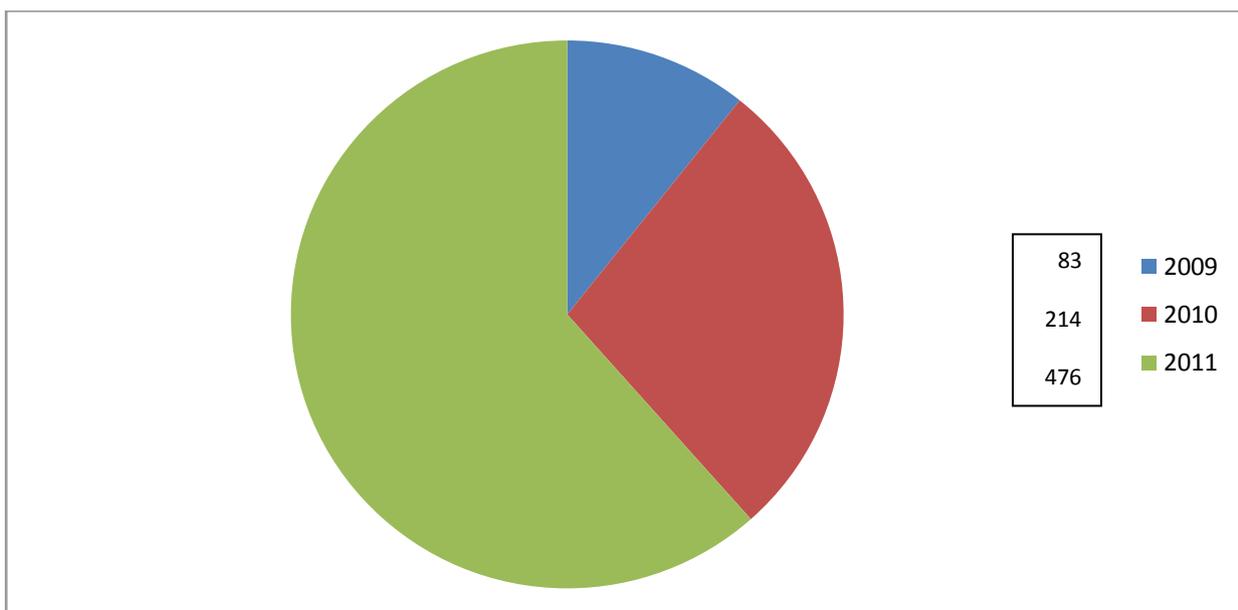
Statistics

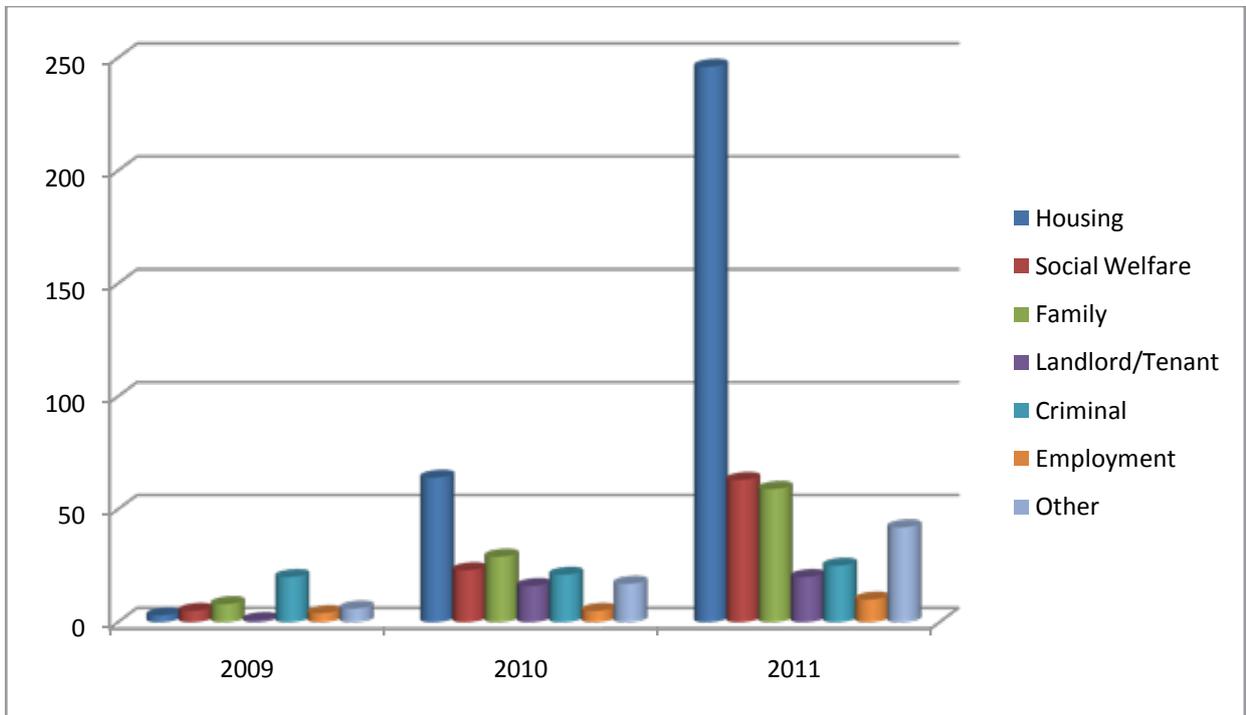
The work of Mercy Law Resource Centre, since our inception in 2009, has resulted in our clients realising rights and entitlements that would otherwise have been denied.

In our first year of operation, Mercy Law Resource Centre provided advice to approximately **80 clients** and representation to approximately **30 clients**. In **2010**, the Centre provided advice to approximately **200 clients** and representation to approximately **60 clients**, including Court and Tribunal representation for 9 clients.

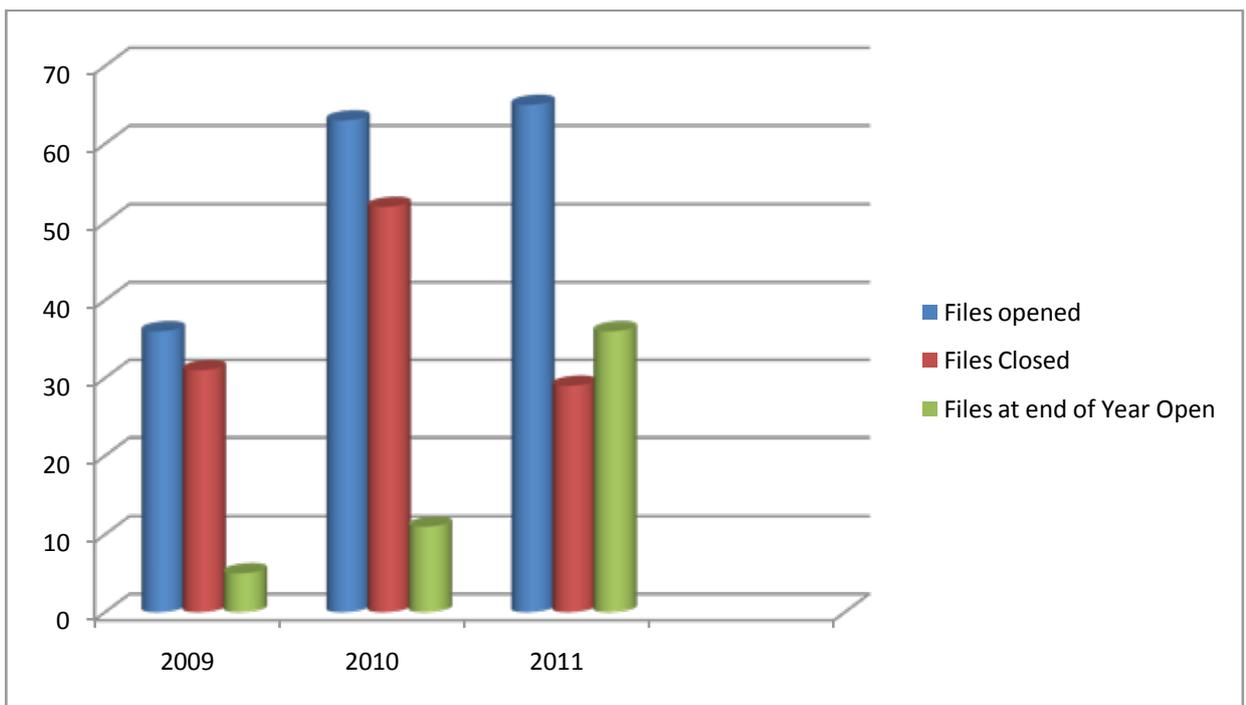
As the Centre grows and becomes more established, the demand for the service it provides has increased. In **2011**, the Centre provided advice to approximately **480 clients**, a **120% increase** in the number of advice queries. The Centre also provided representation to approximately **66 clients**, including Court and Tribunal representation for 11 clients.

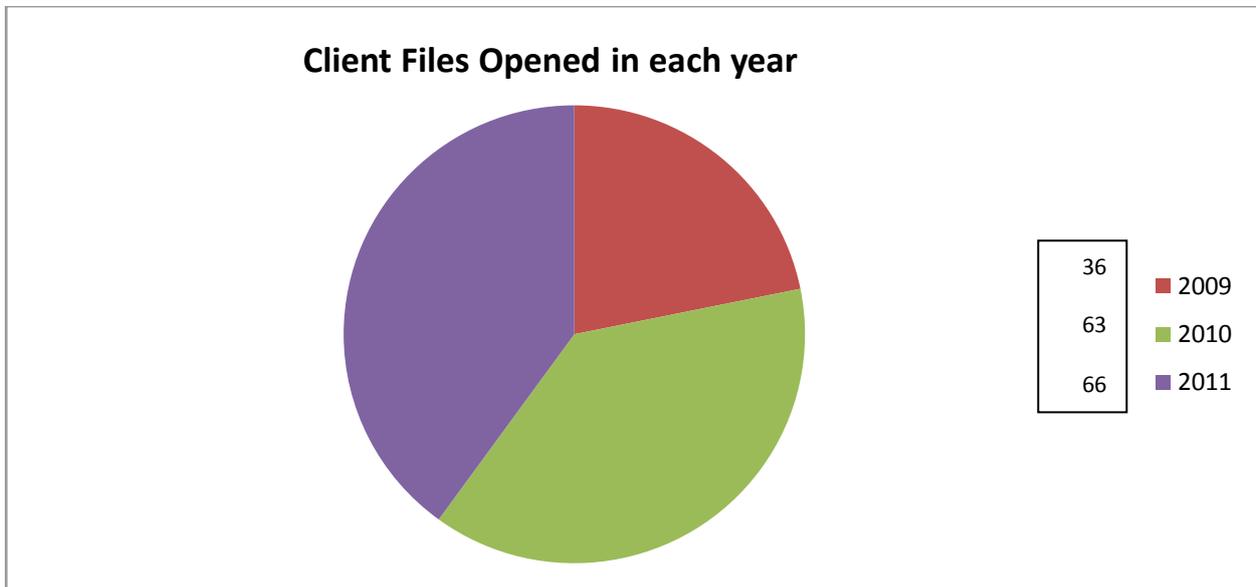
MLRC Advice Queries





MLRC Casework





These statistics highlight the remarkable work of a small team of one full time solicitor and one part-time solicitor working one day a week. It also underlines the enormous pro-bono support from barristers and volunteers which allows for this volume of work to be undertaken.



Case Studies

Case Study 1

A mother of five children was facing eviction from a local authority due to rent arrears. Four of her children had died and part of the arrears were due to funeral expenses incurred. One of her children, who has a physical and mental disability, lived with her and was also facing homelessness. After reviewing the client's tenancy documentation, it became apparent that the level of rent charged and arrears had been over estimated. The rent and arrears were significantly reduced, a payment plan was put in place in respect of the remainder of the arrears and the eviction was not pursued. The client was also assigned a befriender who provided non-legal support.

Case Study 2

A programme refugee, who had been working and studying in the country for over thirty years, lost his job and was subsequently refused social welfare. This resulted in him sleeping rough for a number of years, during which time his refugee documentation and passport were stolen. His mental health had deteriorated significantly by the time he was referred to MLRC by a Health Service. The Centre took on the case and assigned the client a befriender. We obtained clarification on his residency status and advocated on his behalf with the Department of Social Welfare and the Local Authority. The client is now housed and participating in a FAS course.



Case Study 3

A separated father with joint custody, access and guardianship rights in respect of his two teenage daughters was refused eligibility for 2 bedroom accommodation by a Local Authority as it was their policy to only award separated fathers bedsit accommodation. Proceedings were instituted before the Equality Tribunal alleging discrimination on the grounds of gender, civil status and marital status. The matter was fully resolved before hearing and the Tribunal investigation did not then proceed.

Case Study 4

A Romanian client who had been resident in Ireland since 2002 could not gain access to a Local Authority housing list due to the retrospective application of a rule regarding work permits and eligibility. As a result of this, the client and his family did not qualify for Rent Supplement and were facing eviction. MLRC contacted the local authority and, with the prospect of judicial review proceedings, the client was placed on the housing list with priority backdated to the date of his application.



Testimonials

Client Testimonials

- *“My life has been with more downs than ups, and eventually I ended up abroad, homeless and with a deep depression. One day I took the step to come back to Ireland and try for a new beginning. However, when I arrived in Dublin back in 2008 my [Refugee] status was not recognised and I was left to live homeless and penniless. For around 3 years I barely survived, getting my meals in places like the Cappuchin Centre and sleeping on the streets. One fortunate day, a staff member at the Iveagh Trust put me in contact with the Mercy Law Centre. It was the day my life started turning around as I began to get legal aid from Rose who wrote to the Department of Justice on an ongoing and untiring basis, producing the necessary documentation to prove that I was entitled to live and work in Ireland. She was a great helper and motivator for me. Equally productive was getting me to see a type of counsellor, what they call "a friendship service" which was of enormous help to me as it gave me the opportunity to explore my depression and eventually get over it. I want to state that I am no longer living on the streets or suffer from depression thanks to the all-encompassing service that was provided to me by the Mercy Centre. They are doing an enormously valuable job and I have absolutely no hesitation in saying what wonderful people they are. And to the staff: Please accept my most sincere thankfulness. You changed my life.”*
- *“I first met Rose and Mercy Law Resource Centre in August 2010 after been told about the Centre through a friend of mine as I had just been told by DCC that they would not be placing me on the housing list. After one and years of hard work and mediation by Rose and Mercy Law my case with DCC was successful.”*



- *“I am writing to thank you for all of your fine work in helping me with my Dublin City Council and Rent Supplement problem. I am most grateful for the way you have intelligently handled my matter. You respectfully gave me all the information I needed to make a decision and then you have acted on it. I could not be any more satisfied with the results which without you and Mercy Law it wouldn't be possible. I will highly recommend you and Mercy Law to anybody I think that they may need you, as the service you provide is at its best.”*
- *“Thank you very much for your assistance in my case. I find Mercy Law Resource Centre and its solicitors very professional and helpful. The services they provide are of excellence and highest standard. It makes a difference in people's life.”*

Organisation Testimonials



“Our clients often achieve positive outcomes and in many cases the results gained are either directly attributable or greatly contributed to by the support we obtain from you through Mercy Law Resource Centre. It must be said that your advice and assistance as well as the interventions made by you have made a critical difference in some of our most serious cases. Ciara, Anne, Irena and myself have also benefited significantly in terms of our own practice and knowledge. We believe that we have done better work thanks to your support. Consequently, all of us would like to take this opportunity to thank you on behalf of both our clients and ourselves for the very positive impact you have had on their lives and our service.”



can

"While we have extensive knowledge and experience of participative methods of working on housing issues, we are not legally trained and have required additional support and guidance on how best to work around the legal complexities of various campaigns. The Mercy Law Centre has given us invaluable advice, support and direction whenever we have needed it. They have played a pivotal role in our work with the Rialto Rights in Action campaign in Dolphin House, helping us to tease out campaign strategies from a legal perspective and putting us in contact with Bill Scott, who continues to offer high quality technical advice to the ongoing campaign. We have appreciated the manner in which they have worked with us, given that we do not fit the traditional profile of a "client". They have always responded to our support needs while at the same time allowing us to make decisions about how best to use their advice."



"I work on the National Family Case Management Service, Focus Ireland. I have used the support of the Mercy Law Centre, to assist my client regarding his council housing application. The solicitor strongly advocated on behalf of my client with the council and fortunately the case was successfully won. The Mercy Law Centre offered so much of their time and support to my client, free of charge. The solicitor attended meetings both at Focus Ireland and at the Mercy Law Centre. The solicitor regularly contacted my client with updates. I found The Mercy Law Centre to be very thorough gathering their information in order to pursue appropriate legal action. I would recommend the Mercy Law Centre to anyone who is having difficulties with their housing rights, for advice and legal support. This service offers invaluable opportunity to support people to move on from homelessness".



"I thought [the training session] was really interesting, I didn't know much about the DCC housing points system before about who had priority over someone else, the issues that non nationals have being housed/ getting payments. TBH I could go on and on as I actually didn't know much walking in but a lot walking out."

"I'm not normally a good one to ask about this type of feedback as normally my feedback would be highly negative. However, I found this particular session highly informative and quite helpful. She covered a lot of ground, answered all question thoroughly, and gave us informative handouts along with numbers and e-mails should we have any questions later on. I found it very helpful and it definitely pertained to our residents!!! Two thumbs up for sure!!"

"I thought [the Training Session] was brilliant. Rose was really prepared for it and had a good grasp of the legal issues we come across in our services."

"Found the session great. The handout was very good and the issues discussed were really relevant to what comes up with our service users."



"I would like to commend the work of Rose Wall at the Mercy Law Centre, Cork Street, Dublin 8. As a participant on a training session delivered by Rose last February, to the staff of the Citizens Information Service, I can testify that her in-depth legal knowledge and experience of the housing sector in Ireland proved invaluable to our understanding of this complex area. The session served to deepen our knowledge of the legal framework for housing policy in Ireland, as well as providing clear and appropriate guidelines in pursuing a case on behalf of a client. Rose delivered the training clearly and concisely and dealt with all queries comprehensively and effectively. Undoubtedly, our ability to advocate on housing issues, on behalf of our clients, has been greatly enhanced following participation in this training."



Finally, Rose makes herself available to answer housing queries from our service on a regular basis. Despite a very busy schedule, Rose always makes time to return our calls and treats all queries, no matter how small, with utmost professionalism and clarity.” **Liberties CIS**

“As the caseload at Clondalkin/Lucan CIS has become increasingly complex, being able to access the expertise of the MLRC on housing matters and social welfare problems which could lead to homelessness has been invaluable. We have worked with the MLRC in a number of tricky cases and have found the service prompt, professional and of a high standard.” **Clondalkin/Lucan CIS**

“We regularly use the services of Rose Wall and the Mercy Law Centre for our clients when faced with problems in their social housing accommodation. The staff are always responsive, helpful and well-informed and the existence of the Mercy Law Centre makes our work a lot easier. As a result, we value their assistance immensely.” **Crumlin CIS**



“Rose delivered a very clear and relevant training session based upon what we had asked for. She provided us with documentation that will assist us enormously with our advocacy work. I can highly recommend the work of MLRC, especially as a support for implementing a human rights approach to our work. Thank you!”

“The training we had with Rose helped me to understand ways in which we can now legally challenge decisions made by external agencies about people we work with that we are unhappy with or unsure about. This is extremely useful from an advocacy point of view.”

Mercy Law Resource Centre



"Having access to the Legal services of the Mercy Law Resource Centre has been very beneficial to the Clients of the Bridge Project. Our clients are primarily men between the ages of 24 and 40 who are under Intensive supervision from the Probation service. Most of them will be on post release supervision orders and a number will have housing issues. Being able to lift the phone and get information regarding rights and responsibilities with regard to local authority Housing has been very useful in informing our clients."



"Like many other voluntary bodies we are in the position of supporting our tenants whilst at the same time being in the position of a Landlord. This can be a delicate situation at times and we always appreciate the opportunity to "sound-out" particular scenarios with MLRC. We also find it very useful to exchange information and viewpoints when there are proposed changes in legislation or in Tenancy Agreements etc. We are also aware of the invaluable work and advice that MLRC provides on behalf of so many tenants who do not have resources or "knowhow" to resolve their own particular issues."



"The Mercy Law Centre is an invaluable resource to our project. Some of our staff has received training in legal rights and entitlements in relation to housing for residents. We have received individual support for residents in enabling them to build and to make their case for their rights in relation to housing and adequate maintenance. It is so important to be able to contact someone when you have a legal query and the centre is always available to support us."

Mercy Law Resource Centre



"The legal advice the Vincentian Refugee Centre has received from the Mercy Law Resource Centre has proved invaluable. It has assisted us in securing successful outcomes for our clients. Particularly, in relation to issues arising around residency rights and access to housing."



"Clients of the WTC who are homeless or in danger of becoming homeless are referred to the MLRC. We have just referred a client and the response from the MLRC was immediate, efficient and experienced by our client as very supportive from the first moment of contact with the MLRC. Specifically, this client received the necessary legal advice and the practical guidance to find further accommodation. Valuable emotional support was, and continues to be provided through this painful process – support that is described by this client as essential".



"The legal information, advice and support we received from the MLRC was invaluable. We found them to be well informed, efficient and a great support. We will definitely be recommending the MLRC to clients in the future."



Future Development

The likely continuance of the economic recession will further marginalise already vulnerable groups. This, together with our experience over the last two to three years, demonstrates the huge need for the continuation and expansion of our service on the model already established. We have highlighted earlier in our report the impact our small team is having on this sector and we hope to continue to effect change within this marginalised section of our community.

We would like to expand our services:

- To respond to the needs of our client group by taking on a higher caseload
- To focus on policy issues and test cases so that issues encountered by our client group can be tackled systemically and most effectively
- The Centre provides advice in all areas of law but only provides representation in housing and social welfare law as these are the areas in which we have identified the greatest need. We aim to carry out a regular evaluation of the service we provide and respond to the legal needs of our client group. Over time, this may involve expanding into other areas of law.

This proposed expansion of the Centre would be assisted by hiring a second full time solicitor so that the caseload could be expanded and additional time could be devoted to policy work.



Funding

Cost of our service

The value of our service far exceeds the cost as we receive enormous pro-bono support from barristers, solicitors, auditors and many other professionals and volunteers. The current annual cost of running the Centre is approximately €160,000. If we were to develop the Centre as outlined above, we estimate that the annual budget would be approximately €200,000. We urgently need help to achieve this target.

Current Funding

MLRC is non-profit and entirely dependent on donations for our continued operation. We receive no State funding. We have received funding from the Sisters of Mercy to bring us until the end of 2012. Given that we need to supplement this funding going forward, we have recently commenced fundraising.

Donations

To continue our work with people who are homeless or at risk of becoming homeless and bridge the gap that we have found in services available to those who have become marginalised in our community, we urgently need support.

There are two ways you can donate:

1. **Online:** To donate online just click on the "Donate" button on our website at www.mercylaw.ie and enter your details. Donations are made through Pay Pal.
2. **Post:** You can post cheques, bank drafts or postal orders, made payable to the "Mercy Law Resource Centre", to our office at 25 Cork Street, Dublin 8.



Tax Relief on Donations

MLRC is a company limited by guarantee (Co. No.: 471072) and has Charitable Status (CHY 18698). Annual donations of €250 (or €21 per month) and upwards allow us to benefit from tax relief which increases the value of the donation hugely and there is no limit on how much can be given!

Those who wish to donate can simply send their name and address with their donation to our office and we will send out a form to be signed. Self employed individuals and companies who donate to MLRC can themselves avail of tax relief on their donation.



Acknowledgements

The value of our service far exceeds the cost as a result of the large number of in kind donations we receive, MLRC would like to acknowledge and thank all those who provide services to us:

- **Sophia Housing Association**-Free conference and reception facilities.

- **Barristers**-Pro bono opinions, drafting and advocacy.
 - Brian Barrington
 - Eilis Barry
 - Olwyn Bennett
 - Alan DP Brady
 - Michael Dillon
 - Brian Foley
 - David Leonard
 - Siobhan Phelan
 - Conor Power
 - Neil Maddox
 - Derek Shortall

- **Auditor**-Martin J Kelly.

- **Architect**- Bill Scott who provides assistance on the Rialto Rights in Action Group in Dolphin House.

- **Volunteers:**
 - Volunteer Befrienders;
 - Volunteer Solicitor, Bernie Walsh;
 - Volunteer Administrator, Caitriona O'Hara.

Mercy Law Resource Centre



- **Funders-** MLRC would like to acknowledge and thank our funders who have generously supported our work since our inception in 2009. They are a combination of corporate, philanthropic and individuals acting in their private capacity.



Mercy Sisters



Mason Hayes & Curran Law Firm



St. Stephen's Green Trust



ESB Electric Ireland



Community Foundation for Ireland

