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## **1. FORWARD**

With considerable pleasure, we are delighted to publish our Annual Report for 2012. Having received much positive feedback from all sectors on the publishing of our first Report last year, we hope that this issue will be of considerable interest to you, our friends and benefactors.

The past year has seen MLRC grow in a very positive and effective way.

In 2012, MLRC's services improved and extended. We provided free legal advice and court representation to over 603 clients – an increase of 11.5% from 2011. We increased our free weekly Advice Clinics from four to five and now operate three clinics in Homeless Hostels and two walk in clinics. Through this work, we strengthened good working relationships with other agencies dealing with homelessness, including: Focus Ireland, Crosscare, Dublin Simon, Citizens Information Centres, Vincent DePaul, etc.

In 2012, a number of policy papers were published regarding important public issues around homelessness. Among them were papers on the proposed amendment to the Residential Tenancies Act 2004, the Workplace Relations Service and the Limitations of Rent Supplement and the Private Rented Sector.

MLRC also acted in a number of successful cases including the High Court case, *Kinsella v Dun Laoghaire Rathdown Co. Council*. This related to the transparency and accountability of decision-makers and involved ensuring that everyone entitled to social housing assistance under the statutory framework, does in fact have access to it. MLRC welcomes this High Court clarification of the rights of people seeking housing support. It confirms their right to apply, to have an application assessed on its merits, and not to be excluded from eligibility without a legislative basis. This case will be of immense precedential value for other social housing applicants. Further in this report you can read case studies on pages 8-9, testimonials on pages 14-17 and a Befrienders story on page 13.

In April 2012, the housing booklet "Social Housing Rights Explained" was launched by Minister for Housing, Jan O'Sullivan. This was a joint venture with other Law Centres and organisations. The booklet provides information on housing rights to tenants and service providers and outlines the legal responsibilities of local authorities.

A further development was the commencement of specific training for agencies working in the homeless area and which provide referrals to our service. This is with a view to equipping them with the skills to advocate on their client's behalf and to identify appropriate cases for referral to MLRC. We had six of these training sessions in 2012.

An essential and vital part of our service is the role of the Volunteer Befrienders. These are men and women from many walks of life who offer personal support and encouragement to people seeking legal assistance from MLRC. Befrienders receive appropriate training and support and



clients receive friendly encouragement as they deal with hassles and obstacles on their way.

MLRC is engaging in a real way with Social Media, ensuring the website is continuously updated. Our first online E-zine was published in 2012 and we also have a number of Blogs, all highlighting the work of MLRC.

MLRC moved into a larger office within the Sophia Housing complex. Our Staff comprises the Solicitor in Charge, an assistant solicitor, a part-time legal secretary, part-time administrator, and a volunteer manager. We are very fortunate to have the very beneficial and much appreciated service of a number of experienced solicitors volunteering with MLRC throughout the year.

As mentioned before, Mercy Law Resource Centre is a free legal service operating five days per week. The uptake on the service indicates the pressing need there is for such a service in our current environment. There is a huge demand for the continuation and expansion of our service on the model already established.

We are totally dependent on financial donations for the modest salaries and low administrative costs involved.

MLRC is very grateful to all our generous donors, particularly Mason Hayes and Curran, who continue to provide us with financial support and Intern Solicitors. The Sisters of Mercy provided substantial supporting funding during 2012 and we look forward to maintaining these vital relationships. We wish to express our gratitude to all who have contributed by funding and/or other support. It is very much appreciated.

The on-going pro-bono support we receive from Barristers, auditors and other professionals is a huge assistance to us in our work and we are very grateful for the support we receive from all. A special word of thanks is due to the dedicated members of the Board, to our excellent staff, to our Befrienders and to all who have brought MLRC further along the road of valuable service to people under pressure.

To all who read this Report, we say **‘thank you’** for your interest and support and hope it encourages you to continue that support to the future. We invite you to consider donating to the service in any way you can. All donations will be most appreciated.

With every blessing,



***Helena O'Donoghue RSM***  
Chair. Board of Directors.

***Rose Wall***  
Managing Solicitor,  
MLRC





## 2. ABOUT US

Mercy Law Resource Centre (MLRC) was set up in 2009 by the Sisters of Mercy. It is an independent law centre, registered charity and company limited by guarantee which provides free legal advice, representation and befriending services to local authority tenants and people who are homeless or at risk of becoming homeless in the areas of social housing and social welfare law. This includes people who are trying to move away from homelessness or are struggling with issues often linked to homelessness e.g. addiction, leaving prison, mental illness and relationship breakdown. The Centre also seeks to advocate change in laws, policies and attitudes which unduly and adversely impact its client group.

### 2.1. The Need for our Service

“Poor Law” (e.g. housing and social welfare law) is not adequately catered for by either the private sector or the State legal aid system. The legal assistance which is available is frequently limited to advice only and is often fragmented, ignoring the cluster of problems which our client group often experience i.e. other legal and non-legal problems. A further issue is that of accessibility; homeless persons are on the extreme margins of society and have additional hurdles in accessing legal services, rights and entitlements.

### 2.2. Our Mission – purpose and intent

The Centre provides a unique service that is accessible and, as far as possible, shaped to meet the individual needs of each client. Where feasible, we meet clients in their own environment e.g. by providing advice clinics in homeless hostels. We work with other organizations 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 accompany clients through the often daunting process of accessing the legal system.

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 achieve their full potential as human beings. We are committed to the principles of human rights, social justice and equality.

#### **Mission Statement**

*To provide free legal advice and representation, in an accessible way, to people who are homeless or at risk of homelessness in the areas of Social Housing and Social Welfare Law.*

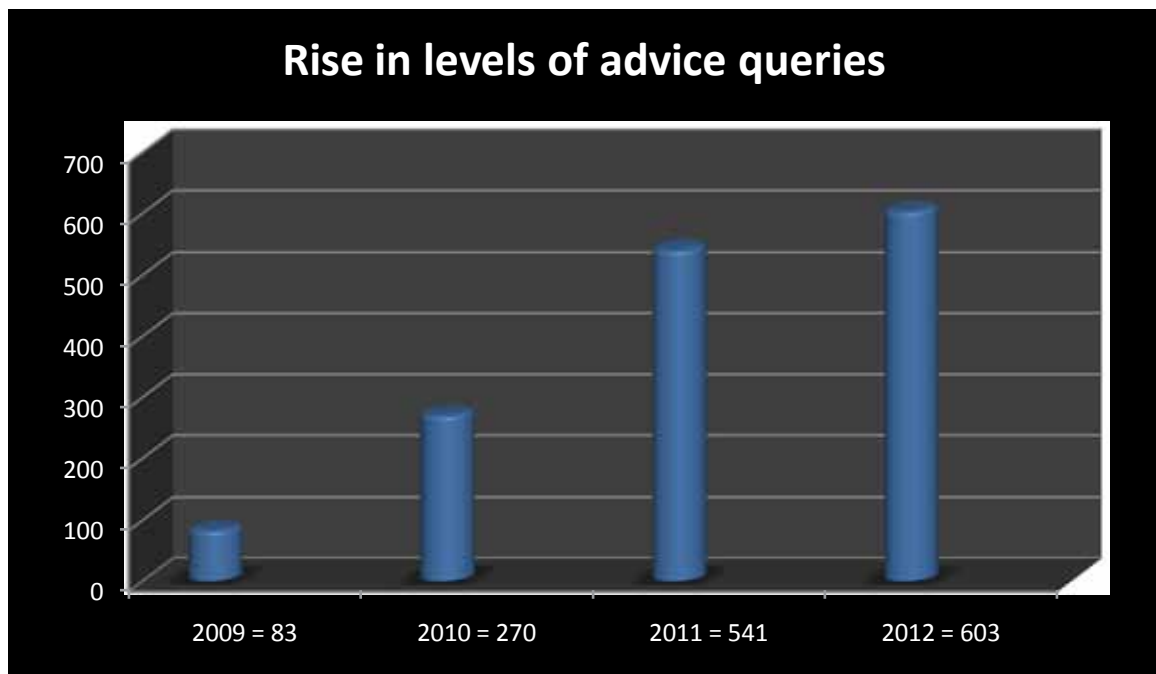


### 3. OUR SERVICES

Mercy Law Resource Centre offers five key services:

1. Free legal advice clinics.
2. Legal representation in the areas of housing and social welfare law.
3. Legal support and training to organisations working in the field of homelessness.
4. Policy Work.
5. Befriending.

In 2010, the Centre provided advice and or court/tribunal representation to approximately **270 clients**. As the Centre grows and becomes more established, the demand for the service it provides has increased. In 2011, we provided advice and or court/tribunal representation to approximately **541 clients**. In 2012, we provided advice and or court/tribunal representation to approximately **603 clients** representing an increase of 11.5% during 2012. This resulted in clients realising rights and entitlements that would otherwise have been denied.





### 3.1. MLRC Free Legal Advice Clinics

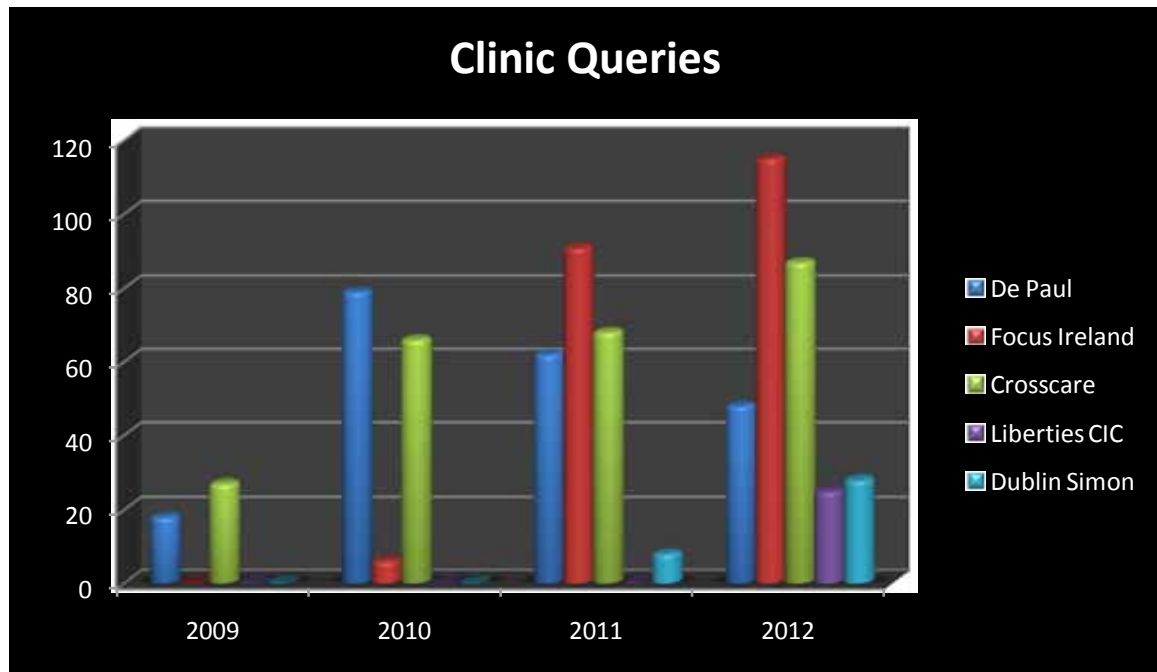
MLRC provide the following free legal advice clinics in hostels and other centres for homeless people:

- Haven House (Crosscare), every 2<sup>nd</sup> Tuesday;
- Backlane Hostel (De Paul) every Tuesday;
- Focus Ireland Coffee Shop, every Wednesday;
- Harcourt Street (Dublin Simon), every 2<sup>nd</sup> Tuesday.

In 2012, we also added the following additional clinic:

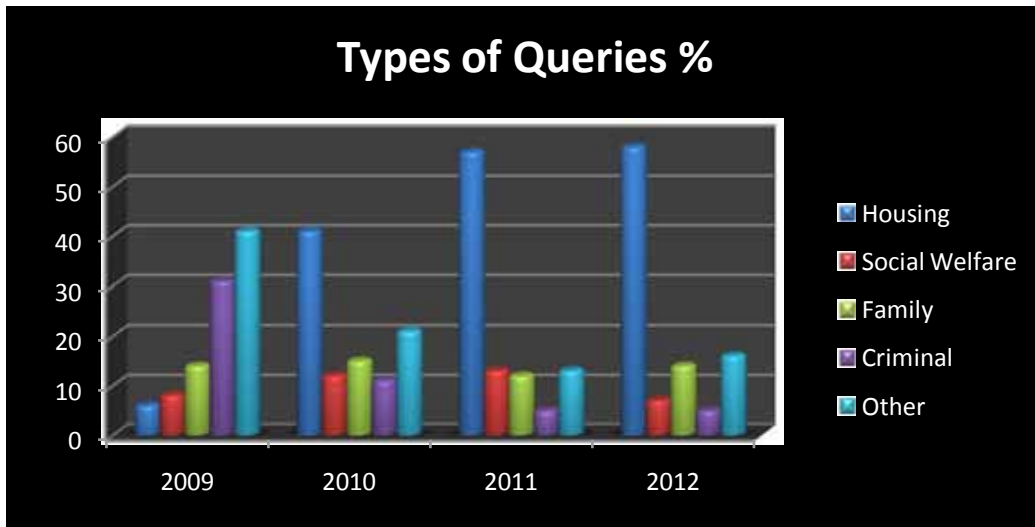
- Liberties Citizen's Information Centre, every Wednesday.

Our clinics are staffed by qualified solicitors and deal with all legal issues raised, predominantly housing law, family law and social welfare law.



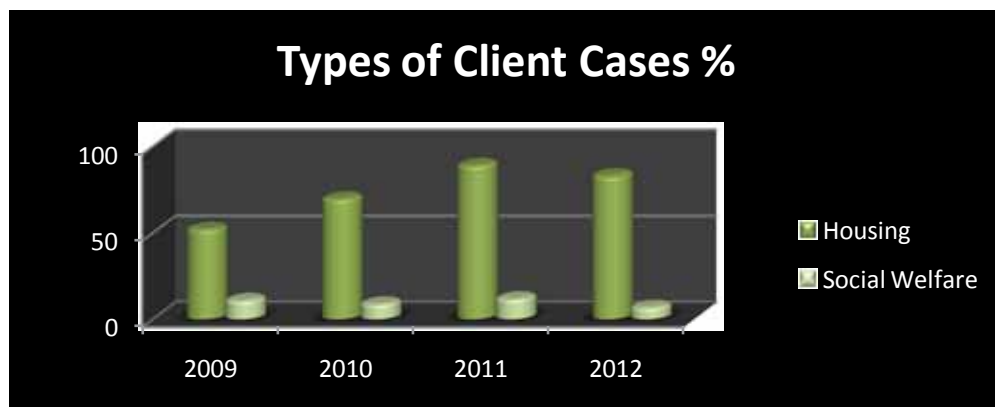
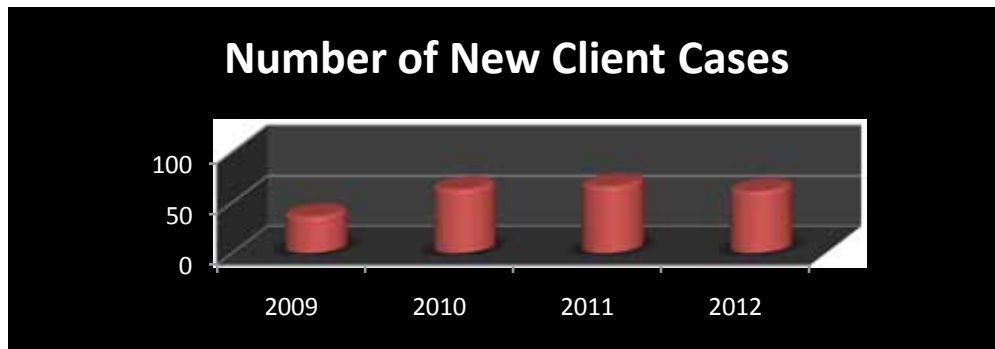
Apart from clinics, queries came from the following organisations:

- |                            |                          |                             |
|----------------------------|--------------------------|-----------------------------|
| • Amnesty International    | • Focus Ireland          | • Sophia                    |
| • Anna Liffey Drug Project | • Hail Housing           | • St. Catherine's Foyer     |
| • Balbriggan Garda         | • Iveagh Hostel          | • St. James's Hospital      |
| • Beech House              | • Law Gazette            | • St. Michael's F.R.C.      |
| • Bridge Project           | • Legal Aid Board        | • Tallaght Women's Refuge   |
| • Cairde Balbriggan        | • Merchant's Quay        | • Tenant's First            |
| • CAN                      | • Mercy Family Centre    | • Threshold                 |
| • CIC                      | • Oisín House            | • Tolka Area Partnership    |
| • Crosscare                | • PILA                   | • Vincential Refugee Centre |
| • DIT                      | • Ruhama                 | • Wheatfield Prison         |
| • Dublin Simon             | • Saoirse Women's Refuge | • Women's Therapy Centre    |
| • Dundalk Simon            | • Shine                  | • Word of Mouth             |
| • FLAC                     | • Sonas Housing          |                             |



### 3.2. Legal representation

In 2012, MLRC had a total of 68 open client files (61 new files and 7 carried over from previous years). This involved more intensive advocacy on behalf of the client and in some situations court/tribunal representation.







### 3.2.1. Case Studies

#### Case Study 1

MLRC successfully represented Lisa Kinsella in her High Court case against Dun Laoghaire/Rathdown County Council (Kinsella – v – Dun Laoghaire/Rathdown County Council 2012 IEHC 344). This case related to the transparency and accountability of decision-makers, with a view to ensuring that everyone entitled to social housing assistance under the statutory framework does in fact have access to it.

Ms Kinsella applied to Dun Laoghaire Rathdown County Council (DLRCC) for social housing assistance. She argued that her current accommodation (which was provided by Dublin City Council) was entirely unsuitable because of her severe epilepsy. She argued that she required family support (her family lived in the DLRCC area) to assist with the care of her young daughter. DLRCC refused to accept Ms Kinsella’s application for social housing support. The reason given was that she was ineligible on the basis that she was currently housed by another local authority. The governing legislation was the Housing (Miscellaneous Provisions) Act 2009 and the Social Housing Assessment Regulations 2011. These did include some eligibility criteria, which Ms Kinsella argued she satisfied. However, the legislation did not include any eligibility requirement which disqualified a person who was already housed by another local authority from even having their level of need considered.

The case was described by Mr Justice Hogan as raising an “*an important question arising from the Housing (Miscellaneous Provisions) Act 2009*”. Mr Justice Hogan found that it was not open to a local authority to impose an eligibility requirement on an applicant for social housing assistance unless there was a clear statutory basis for that eligibility requirement. He stated that if he were to imply additional criteria into the Housing (Miscellaneous Provisions) Act 2009 ‘*it would be tantamount to adding a further ex ante limitation on who could apply for housing support over and above those limitations stipulated by the Oireachtas*’. Having found that there was no such statutory basis for the ‘*already housed by another local authority*’ eligibility requirement, Mr Justice Hogan quashed the DLRCC’s refusal to accept Ms Kinsella’s application and sent the matter to DLRCC to reconsider her eligibility. Ms Kinsella is now housed by DLRCC.

This judgment is particularly significant because it reiterates the law on the exclusive power of the Oireachtas to legislate. In particular, the judgment clarifies the limitations on the power of executive bodies to change or extend the law through regulations which could restrict or alter the rights of applicants. In reaching his conclusions, the learned judge acknowledged that ‘*the issue presented here goes straight to the policy choices confronting the legislative and executive branches with regard to the allocation of scarce resources in the area of social housing.*’



However, it is the 2009 Act that reflects the choice of the legislature in relation to who should be excluded from applying for social housing support.

MLRC welcomes this High Court clarification of the rights of people seeking housing support. It confirms their right to apply, to have an application assessed on its merits and not to be excluded from eligibility without a legislative basis. The case will be of immense precedential value to other social housing applicants.

### **Case Study 2**

MLRC represented a client in her claim in the Employment Appeals Tribunal for unfair dismissal against her former employer. The client had been employed as a childcare worker in a crèche since 2005 and was dismissed for gross misconduct in 2010 without any fair procedures. As a result, the client was unable to pay her rent and was at risk of becoming homeless.

The EAT found that the dismissal was procedurally unfair and lacked proportionality. They found that the claim under the Unfair Dismissals Acts, 1977 - 2007, succeeded and awarded the Claimant compensation, equivalent to a year's pay.

### **Case Study 3**

One of our clients, a mother of two young children was homeless when she attended MLRC. The Local Authority would not accept her on the Homeless List as her name was on a mortgage with her parents and she was perceived to have an interest in her parents' property even though she had never contributed to the mortgage repayments. The bank would not release her from the mortgage and she and her children could not live in the property with her parents as her father is a registered sex offender.

MLRC advocated with the Council on our client's behalf who issued a Housing Needs Assessment letter confirming that she had a housing need. This client is now in private rented accommodation with her two young children. The client has been assigned a befriender who will provide non legal support.

### **Case Study 4**

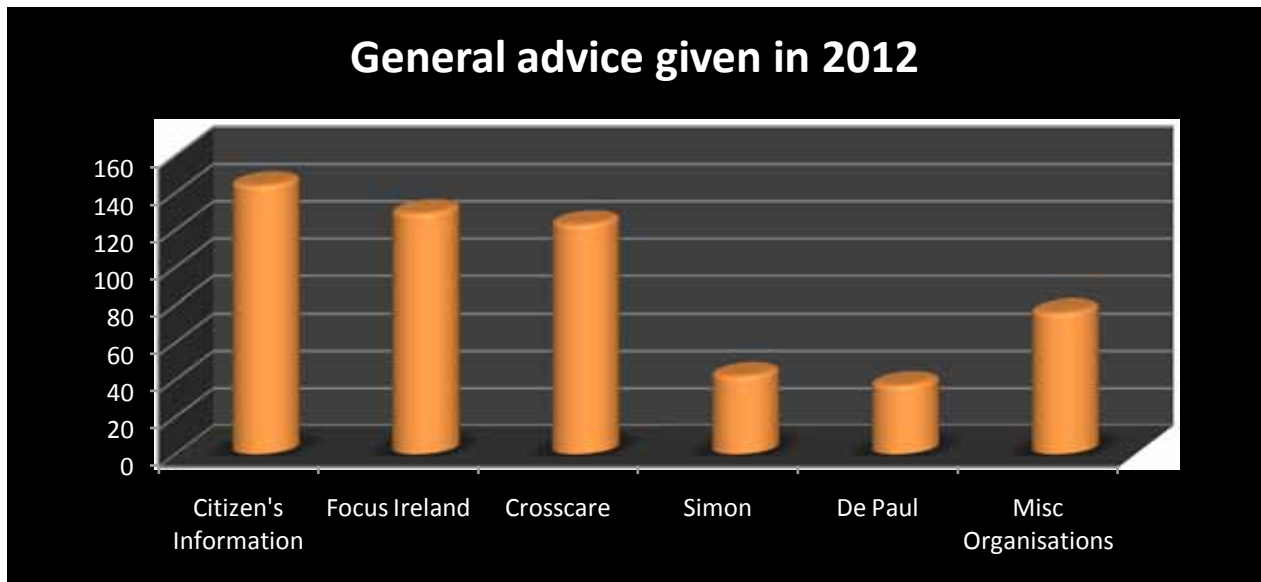
In early 2010, MLRC met with an asylum seeker who had been in Ireland since 2006. He had no family in Ireland and was quite disabled as a result of torture. He came to us with regard to his application for medically suitable accommodation. MLRC liaised with the relevant agencies and accommodation was secured for him in Dublin which allowed him to access essential medical services. In early 2012, the gentleman contacted MLRC again as he was informed that he was being moved out of his accommodation to another county despite the fact that his medical team were situated in Dublin. MLRC advocated on his behalf and a successful agreement was reached with regard to our client's medical and accommodation needs.



### 3.3. Legal support and training to organisations in the field of homelessness.

This can include legal input and support on policy issues, advice on individual cases and/or staff training. In 2012 we commenced training for organisations that provide referrals to our service so as to equip them with skills to advocate on their client’s behalf and identify appropriate cases for referral. Training workshops were organised for the following organisations in 2012:

- Dundalk Simon
- Dublin Simon
- Finglas Citizens Information Centre
- Focus Ireland
- Meath Citizens Information Centre
- Ruhama



### 3.4. Policy Work

The Centre recognises that casework and policy work go hand in hand and one cannot be successful without the other. The advice clinics and casework highlight the issues that our client group faces. This informs the test cases we take and policy issues we tackle.

MLRC advocates change in laws, policies and attitudes which unduly and adversely impact on the Centre’s client group. The Centre is a member of a housing group which meets on a monthly basis to consider matters of policy e.g. liaising with Local Authorities in respect of their housing policies. The Centre has also set up focus groups with organisations working in the field of homelessness. This is invaluable not only in terms of learning what the issues are “on the



ground” but also in terms of providing advice, information and education to such organisations on the issues which they come across.

The following policy papers were submitted in 2012:

1. Submission re Proposed Amendment to the Residential Tenancies Act 2004.

In a recent policy submission relating to the proposed amendment to the Tenancies Act 2004, MLRC welcomed the proposed extension of the Residential Tenancies Act to include Voluntary Housing Association tenancies, but submit that such an extension should also incorporate all tenancies and licenses. Primarily this discrepancy results in the position of a tenant of a local authority being far less favourable than that of a private tenant and as a result access to justice is therefore a serious problem for Local Authority tenants. The policy submitted further examines issues relating to emergency accommodation and rent supplement.

2. Submission on the Limitations of Rent Supplement and the Private Rented Sector.

In June 2011, the Department of Environment, Community and Local Government published its Housing Policy Statement in which it stated that “*a balanced housing sector requires a strong, vibrant and well regulated private rented sector*”. In response to this publication, MLRC, in conjunction with the Ballymun Community Law Centre and the Northside Community Law Centre, made a submission to the Government, identifying nine distinct difficulties with the private rented sector and rent supplement as they currently operate. For example, the sub-standard quality of the majority of private rented accommodation is highlighted in the submission, as well as the problems caused by the current rent caps on rent supplement and the fact that a significant number of landlords simply will not accept rent supplement.

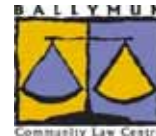
3. Submission to Minister Bruton on ‘Blueprint to Deliver a World-Class Workplace Relations Service’.

The clients of MLRC are amongst the most vulnerable sections of society and therefore most in need of effective and accessible dispute resolution. As such MLRC has expressed concern in a submission to the office of Minister Bruton demonstrating the danger of further marginalisation of such individuals if the proposed structure for resolution of workplace and equality disputes is made inaccessible because of charges to be imposed on users.



MLRC is a part of an informal Housing Group which meets on a monthly basis to share information and consider matters of policy. Other members of the group include:

- Dr. Padraic Kenna NUI Galway,
- Community Action Network (CAN),
- Focus Ireland,
- Public Interest Law Alliance (PILA),
- Barnardos,
- Northside Community Law Centre (NCLC),
- Ballymun Community Law Centre (BCLC),
- Irish Traveller Movement (ITM).



### Housing Booklet Launch

With the support of the Citizens Information Board, the housing group launched the booklet “Social Housing Rights Explained”. The booklet provides information to tenants, prospective tenants and supporting service providers on housing rights and law and on where they can get further support. It also outlines the legal responsibilities of local authorities.



Carol Ann Woulfe, Bernie Walsh, Sr. Peggy Collins, Anne Doyle, Rose Wall, Ger Hynes, Patrick Stagg

### 3.5. Befriending service



The Centre recognises that the legal system can be alienating and difficult and frustrating to negotiate. MLRC aim to provide our clients with a service that is friendly and easy to access. 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. In 2012 Mercy Law Resource Centre organised 13 Befrienders who were each assigned a client who they assisted throughout the year.





## Befriender's Story

*'It is almost two years ago since Caitriona arranged that we would both meet the young woman who had been assigned to me for befriending. This was my initiation into the practicalities which had already been clearly explained and explored in a day's training workshop in MLRC. Initially I was quite nervous about this undertaking but was assured of help and support all along the way. And in this I was not disappointed.*

*My "befriended" had fallen on hard times, had lost her mother in her home country and needed emotional support as she waded through many problems and disappointments. To say that she was falling apart would not be an exaggeration. In financial straits, she was unable to pay rent for her apartment outside Dublin and was subsequently evicted. This was a period of high anxiety when she felt very much alone in the world with no family back-up and in general she felt quite abandoned. At this time, what was needed was very practical help to move as well as to find alternative accommodation. There were forms to be filled in, lots of careful packing to get done as well as accompanying her to welfare offices to listen to her plead her cause as she tried every possibility, but without success.*

*Eventually, rent-assisted accommodation was found in a rural seaside town where she is now settled but continues to have many problems and worries. There is also great loneliness at having left a part of the country she had begun to think of as home. But my "befriended" is resilient and has begun to work on possibilities that will hopefully lead to easier, financially secure living. In fact, she is very pro-active and somehow finds new energy when it comes to exploring possible ways of improving her life. However, it is an uphill struggle. I sometimes visit her in her new home, meet her in the city and keep in touch constantly by phone. On one occasion, I accompanied her to the Employment Appeals Tribunal where she would otherwise have been on her own on a very difficult day.*

*This latter was one of the many times when I was utterly embarrassed by the thanks and appreciation expressed for just being there for this lovely lady. It has been a privilege for me to accompany her, to listen to her story, to stand in her shoes and to try to imagine what life is like for her.*

*I am grateful to MLRC for opening up this window of opportunity for me. And I appreciate the invaluable back-up help and support that is always readily given by those in MLRC and in our meetings with the other Befrienders.'*



## 4 TESTIMONIALS

### 4.1 Organisation Testimonials



*"I work in the Open Access Case Management in Focus Ireland. I have used the Mercy Law Centre to assist one of my clients with a Rent Allowance issue. The solicitor strongly advocated on this client's behalf and supported him to deal with the Social Welfare Services.*

*The Mercy Law Centre has been an invaluable resource for both our clients and project workers. Their expertise has provided support to those in need of legal advice on Housing rights and Social Welfare laws. They have a great understanding of our clients' difficulties and struggles and have always endeavoured to address their issues in a client-centred way. While they have worked with our customers they have also advised and supported our team members, which has strengthened their advocacy work.*

*They are a very dedicated team and have offered so much of their time to our clients, free of charge. I would recommend the Mercy Law Centre to anyone who is in difficulties, at risk of becoming homeless or struggling to move on from homelessness."*



*"Crosscare Housing and Welfare Information (CHWI) provides an information and advocacy service to people in the areas of homelessness, housing, social welfare and related matters. Over the recent years our clients are presenting with increasingly complex and legalistic cases and can experience serious difficulties in accessing their entitlements with regard to social protection, housing and homeless supports. It is a challenge for us to address these cases adequately both at an individual, strategic and policy level.*

*It is therefore extremely fortunate that we have been able to access the excellent support and knowledge base of Mercy Law Resource Centre. As a direct result we have been able to tackle many of the above issues more effectively. Consequently, not only individual positive results but also wider changes in the behaviour of arms of the State have been achieved. These outcomes achieved will benefit many other people whom our services may never interact with. It is clear to us that the close collaboration with Mercy Law Resource Centre has been of great benefit to our clients and ourselves as practitioners.*

*We are a better service at many levels directly due to the relationship we have with your service and would like to thank Mercy Law Resource Centre on behalf of not only our clients but of all of us here at CHWI.*

*Finally, may I wish you all the very best for the coming year."*



*“The Liberties Citizens Information Centre works closely with the Mercy Law Centre in dealing primarily, but not exclusively, with social housing issues on behalf of our clients. We wish to express our gratitude to all the staff, in particular Rose and Sabrina, for their advice and assistance throughout the last year, which proved invaluable in resolving a significant number of our cases. Despite having their own considerable case load, Rose and Sabrina are always available to answer our queries, and to offer comprehensive legal advice and support as required. We have learned a great deal from our collaboration with the Mercy Law Centre, and we look forward to continuing that work in the future.”*



*“I have always found Mercy Law Centre to be extremely professional and dedicated in their approach. They regularly ring and check in to see if there are any clients who would like to avail of the service and have always being flexible in meeting with clients. They offer invaluable knowledge and assistance to people who use Dublin Simon Community services and I would recommend them to anyone in need of this type of assistance. They provide an expertise that complements the services we provide and is extremely beneficial to people who use our services.”*



*“Backlane Hostel (DePaul Ireland) is proud of our long term relationship with the Mercy Law Resource Centre and their legal team who assist our clients to ensure a swift effective resolution in pursuing their housing needs.*

*The Mercy law Resource centre remain committed to continuing the high level of support for which they are renowned. They motivate our clients with housing issues to identify their housing needs and rights. Our residents and staff have benefited from supports of their highly experienced professionals who are skilled in the resolutions of disputes in relations to housing issues.*

*Many of our clients with the support of practical and pragmatic advice from Mercy Law have moved from short term accommodation / homelessness to independent living.”*





## 4.2 Client Testimonials

### Testimonial 1

*“From the day I walked into Focus Ireland in Temple Bar and put in touch with Mercy Law Resource Centre, Cork Street, I was reassured to my surprise that they would help and fight my case regarding a housing situation, which was very serious. Trying to move from Dublin City Council to Dun Laoghaire-Rathdown County Council on serious medical grounds. It was a very stressful procedure but, the solicitors and staff at Mercy Law Resource Centre made it much easier as they were very helpful and professional and may I add very compassionate. I was updated on everything, I never had to chase anything up, they were so professional even down to telephone conversations. It was sent to me in letters so I myself could keep track of what was going on. In my dealings with solicitors and staff I never came across any communication problems, they made everything very clear and in simple terms. The staff were very welcoming to myself and my young daughter, who was five years of age, which made it a very relaxing atmosphere for both of us, especially my daughter.*

*Only for hard working dedicated people in Mercy Law Resource Centre I would not have been able to get myself and my daughter to a safe secure home on serious medical grounds, near my family to care for myself and my daughter. May I add just to say a big thank you to all the staff and solicitors at Mercy Law for making this possible.”*

### Testimonial 2

*“I had nowhere to live, I was in a transitional house, down on my luck after getting sacked unfairly (as it came out in the end). No job, nowhere to live and I was put in touch with Mercy Law, who were just brilliant. I didn't think anything could be done with what was after happening and because I was sacked unfairly I felt I couldn't go looking for work in a crèche again. But Mercy Law took on my case no problem, they came with me to the Tribunal otherwise I wouldn't have got what I got without Mercy Law because I don't know how to talk in court, they [the crèche] had me over a barrel. I wouldn't have won the case, I would have had to represent myself because I had no money and nobody to help me, but Mercy Law did, they were great. They kept in great contact with me and helped me with the aftermath of the court case with letters because the crèche came back saying they had no money and if I had been on my own I wouldn't have got anything. I owe Mercy Law a lot, their service is great and they kept on top of everything.”*



### Testimonial 3

*“It happened in 2009, my marriage started to deteriorate and my husband was borrowing money in my name without me knowing it. I had nowhere to go and went to the Women’s Refuge in Rathmines, who referred me to Sonas Housing. The trouble started to begin then because my name was on a property with my husband and the Council didn’t want to know.*

*The Women’s Refuge helped me apply to the Council for housing, but the Council refused my application because my name was on a property, so I applied to a different Council. I thought everything was going to be ok because the Council stamped my application, but after a number of months the supervisor said they could not take me because of my private property. I felt so humiliated.*

*I was at the end of my tether and wanted to end it all. I didn’t know what to do, then I saw Rose at Mercy Law a few times. Rose got me a new housing form and I filled it up and got all the letters I needed, but I was so terrified at the thought of having to go back to the Council, I was delighted because Rose brought the application for me.... I’m on the housing list now, I get rent allowance and I’m delighted.*

*Mercy Law saved my life because I was going to end it all. Rose had the time and the patience, she understood and took it all on board, I was crying all the time. I had told two other solicitors my problem, but they didn’t understand, it was like chalk and cheese, Rose and all the staff at Mercy Law understood the whole situation.”*



## 5. ORGANISATION

### 5.1 Our Structure

#### 5.1.1 Office

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



#### 5.1.2 Staff

In 2012 the Mercy Law Centre had four staff members.



Rose Wall, full time Solicitor in Charge, who is primarily responsible for the casework, policy work and management of the Centre. In April, Rose went on maternity leave and her locum was Bernie Walsh.



Sabrina Comerford, part-time solicitor from October.



Rita-Ann Burke,  
part-time administrator.



Denise Fitzgerald, part-time secretary,  
who was replaced by Nuala Monaghan from October.





### 5.1.3 Volunteers

We have a number of administrative, legal and befriending volunteers working in the Centre, without whom, our service would be very limited.

#### Administration:

Sr. Caitriona O'Hara



Sr. Nuala Kennedy



#### Legal:

Bernie Walsh



Carol Ann Woulfe



Ger Hynes



#### Befrienders:

Luarena McCormick  
Colette Kelly  
Mary Connaughton  
Mary O'Farrell  
Brid Sheehan  
Mary Mahon  
Keri Goodliffe

Michael Liddy  
Orla O'Connell  
Trish Harte  
Anne Hickey  
Rosaleen Hogan  
Rosaleen Moore  
Caitriona O'Hara



### 5.1.4 Internship Programme

Mercy Law Resource Centre is delighted to have teamed up with Mason Hayes & Curran to begin an Internship programme, which we hope to develop further. During 2012 MLRC were kindly provided the services of apprentice solicitors Brian Barry, a graduate of the TCD Law School, who was completing a PhD thesis “Reforming the Framework for Employment Litigation and Dispute Responsibility in Ireland”; and Louise McQuaid, a graduate of the UCD Law School. Brian was with us for three months June-August and Louise was with us September-December.

#### What Brian Barry had to say about his time with MLRC:



*“I spent three months over the summer of 2012 working with Mercy Law Resource Centre as part of my training contract with Mason Hayes & Curran Solicitors. The experience I gained from working with the Mercy Law team will continue to serve me throughout the starting years of my legal career on a number of levels. For a trainee employed by a large corporate law firm, it was a unique opportunity to work hands-on in a legal service whose sole purpose is to target and assist those who face particular hurdles in accessing basic social services, rights and entitlements. In this respect I was very grateful to Mason Hayes & Curran and Mercy Law Resource Centre for giving me the opportunity.*

*In a relatively short time, I worked on a number of client matters, mainly in the area of social housing law. I assisted on a High Court judicial review application made by the Centre on a social housing legislation issue, and worked on developing a range of policy documents.*

*Without a doubt, the lifeblood of Mercy Law’s work, and the element that left the biggest impression on me, are the legal clinics which the Centre runs. Although I was aware that an important aspect of providing a legal service is to fully understand clients’ needs, I learned so much in such a short space of time from working with the two solicitors, Bernie Walsh and Geraldine Hynes, at these clinics. I learned from watching Bernie and Geraldine as they compassionately and incisively interviewed clients to develop a full understanding of the issues that the clients face, and also from their ability to steer conversations with clients to describe to them how the law can be used to solve their problems. I also learned a great deal about the importance of managing client’s expectations, often in extremely difficult circumstances. I came to understand the power of good negotiation, in particular with core service providers such as the housing units in local county councils.*

*I was struck by how fundamental the consequences of legal assistance from Mercy Law were for clients. I saw many clients improve their housing situation, or gain access to other basic services for themselves and their families.*



*From a personal perspective, I gained important, tangible experience on the workings of a legal office. I received fantastic support from all involved with Mercy Law; in particular from Bernie, Caitriona, Helena, Geraldine, Denise, Rita-Anne and Rose who all made me feel welcome (and put me to good use!) from my first day. The work that the Mercy Law team do is vital and inspirational and has a lasting impact on so many people in the city of Dublin. My three months at Mercy Law offered an outstanding grounding to me starting out in a legal career and gave me a sense of perspective on how the law can be used in a positive and meaningful way."*

What Louise McQuaid has to say about her time at MLRC:



*"I am a University College Dublin graduate and trainee in Mason Hayes & Curran Solicitors. As part of Mason Hayes & Curran Solicitors' Corporate Social Responsibility Programme, I spent time in Mercy Law Resource Centre, where I assisted MLRC advocate change to the Criminal Justice (Spent Conviction) Bill 2012. The submission outlining our proposed changes, which was sent to various TD's and Senators, was actively endorsed during the various Oireachtas Debates. Through publishing an article in the Law Society Gazette and the Law School News entitled "Forgiven, not forgotten?" I also assisted MLRC raise awareness to the discrimination suffered by its clients in trying to obtain social funded housing.*

*Overall my involvement with MLRC was very rewarding. Knowing that I was actively involved in advocating change to Bills and policies which affect homeless people or people at risk of becoming homeless was satisfying and fulfilling. The experience has taught me how important it is to have an open and non-judgemental attitude toward others."*

## 5.2 Governance

Mercy Law Resource Centre is registered as:

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

The Centre is governed by a Board of Directors who meet with the administrator and solicitor in charge every six weeks. The administrator presents the accounts and a report on the befriending service. The solicitor in charge presents a report on case work, policy work, compliance matters, employment matters and future development of the Centre.

It is the intention of MLRC to sign up to the Governance Code, which is a code of practice for good governance of community, voluntary and charitable organisations.





### 5.2.1 The Directors of our Board are:

- Helena O'Donoghue (Chair) - Mercy Sister and Director Sophia Housing;
- Anne Doyle - Mercy Sister and Director of Open Heart House Ltd;
- Niall Farrell - Solicitor, PJF Solicitors, Newbridge, Co. Kildare;
- Jo Kennedy - Mercy Sister, Family Therapist and Director of Women's Therapy Centre;
- Ciara McGrath - Information/Outreach worker, Crosscare;
- Deirdre Quigley - Deputy Project Director, Mater Campus Hospital Development - Senior Project Manager, MCO Projects;
- Patrick Stagg - Director of the National Association of Citizens Information Services and Bluebell & Dublin 8 Citizens Information Centre;
- Liam Twohig - Accountant, Baker Tilly Ryan & Glennon;
- Gerry Whyte - Professor of Constitutional Law, Trinity College and Director of Kenya Orphan Aid.



Liam Twohig, Ciara McGrath, Patrick Stagg, Helena O'Donoghue, Gerry Whyte, Deirdre Quigley, Jo Kennedy, Anne Doyle, Niall Farrell

### 5.3 Communications

In the coming year, MLRC intends to make more of an effort to ensure the centre becomes more widely known. In 2012 MLRC began to use Social Media, including information on our website, e-zines, blogs, Facebook and Twitter, to keep subscribers and friends informed on the MLRC's work on homelessness, social housing and social related welfare law. MLRC posted a total of 19 blogs and published its first e-zine in August, with a further two e-zines sent in 2012. As this has been a great way promoting MLRC we will continue to build on our social media presence into the future. To subscribe to our quarterly e-zine please visit [www.mercylaw.ie](http://www.mercylaw.ie). Social Media supporters:

- Facebook - 117 Friends.
- Twitter - 134 Followers.
- E-zine - 700 Subscribers.



## 6 FINANCE

### 6.1 Cost of our service

The cost of running MLRC in 2012 amounted to approximately €160,000.

The service is totally dependent on fundraising and does not receive any public grants or state monies. In 2012, we received some €70,000 in donations and the remainder of our costs was covered by the Sisters of Mercy.

The value of our service far exceeds the cost as a result of the large number of in kind donations we receive e.g.:

1. Reduced rent and utilities;
2. Free conference and reception facilities;
3. Pro bono legal services by barristers;
4. Pro bono expert reports from doctors/engineers etc.;
5. Pro bono auditing and accounts service;
6. Volunteer befrienders;
7. Volunteer administrator;
8. Volunteer part time solicitors.

We estimate the value of these donations to be approximately **€150,000**, for which we are exceedingly grateful.

Our main costs include:

- Office, such as: telephone, postage, stationery/printing and equipment/maintenance;
- Core salaries and employer costs of administration staff and solicitors;
- Travel;
- Advertising/explanation booklets/leaflets;
- Project costs, i.e.;
  - Outreach clinics;
  - Befriender programme;
  - Internships;
  - Volunteer expenses;
  - Training.

MLRC has to work towards becoming self-financing. We aim to do this by expanding our fundraising and donor programme. We will continue to apply for appropriate grant aid and encourage contributions from corporate and private avenues, as well as expanding our internal fundraising activities.

In order to ensure that our current funders, and possible future funders, feel confident that MLRC is a responsible not-for-profit organisation that will deal with all finances carefully and appropriately, it is planned that in 2013 MLRC will sign up to the ICTR's Guidelines of Principles of Fundraising, ensuring all necessary measures are in place to comply with the Guidelines.





## 6.2 Contributions and donations

We happily received funds ranging from €100 up to €20,000 plus. Among those who contributed were:

- Mason, Hayes and Curran
- St. Stephen's Green Trust
- ESB Electric Aid Ireland
- The Community Foundation of Ireland
- CIC Meath Street
- Don Mulhall
- Contributions via the Poor Box
- Donations via 'My Charity'
- St. Anne's Convent Booterstown

## 6.3 Friends of MLRC

To continue to provide our much needed service, we urgently need support.

There are four levels of annual friendship:

- Sponsor a Befriender,
- Sponsor an advice client,
- Sponsor legal representation for a client,
- Sponsor a clinic.

There are three ways that individuals or organisations can donate:

1. **Online:** To donate online just click on the "Donate" button on our website at [www.mercylaw.ie](http://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.
3. **Bank Transfer:** Donations can be made by sending money directly to our bank account by either bank transfer or standing order, further details are on our website, [www.mercylaw.ie](http://www.mercylaw.ie)

### Tax relief on donations:

If you donate over €250 to MLRC in a tax year it is worth a great deal more than that to us. Donations of €250 (or €21 per month) and upwards allow us to benefit from tax relief which increases the value of your donation hugely and there is no limit on how much you can give! Simply send us your name and address with your donation and we will send you a form to sign, which allows us to claim the tax back on the donation. Self-employed individuals and companies who donate to MLRC can themselves avail of tax relief on their donation.

For more information on becoming a Friend of MLRC please contact [shauna@mercylaw.ie](mailto:shauna@mercylaw.ie), or call the MLRC office on 01 4537459, or visit [www.mercylaw.ie](http://www.mercylaw.ie).



## 7 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.
  - Alan DP Brady B.L.
  - Brian Barrington B.L.
  - Brian Foley B.L.
  - David Leonard B.L.
  - Derek Shortall B.L.
  - Eilis Barry B.L.
  - Eugene Hill B.L.
  - Michael Dillon B.L.
  - Michael P. O’Higgins S.C.
  - Neil Maddox B.L.
  - Olwyn Bennett B.L.
  - Siobhan Phelan B.L.
  
- **Auditor** - Martin J Kelly
  
- **Volunteers:**
  - Volunteer Befrienders.
  - Volunteer Solicitors - Bernie Walsh and Ger Hynes.
  - Volunteer Administrator - Sr. Caitriona O’Hara and Sr. Nuala Kennedy.
  - Volunteer Interns - Brian Barry and Louise McQuaid.
  
- **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



Electricity Supply Board  
Ireland's premier electricity utility

ESB Electric Ireland



St. Stephen's Green Trust



