



OFFICE OF THE CHIEF JUSTICE

Launch of Annual Report of the Mercy Law Resource Centre 2024

24th November 2025

Good morning,

I am pleased to be here to launch the 2024 Annual Report of the Mercy Law Resource Centre and I thank Chairperson Edward Gleeson for the invitation. The report is an impressive account of the important work undertaken by the Mercy Law Resource Centre in collaboration with a broad array of people and organisations throughout an exceptionally demanding year.

Increase in demand for services

The Mercy Law Resource Centre has, since 2009, played an instrumental role in providing free legal advice and representation for people who are homeless or are at risk of becoming homeless. The 2024 report paints a stark picture of the increasing requirement of the services of the Centre influenced by a deteriorating homeless crisis in Ireland. As Chairman Edward Gleeson notes in his welcome in the report, Government statistics suggest that in January 2024 there were 9,504 adults and 4,027 children in homelessness. By December 2024, the number of adults in homelessness had risen to 10,354, and the number of children had risen to 4,510. As of September of

this year, official Government statistics inform us that the figure has risen even further to 11, 376 adults and 5,238 children in homelessness.¹

It is clear from the report that these figures have led to a surge in the demand for the services of the Mercy Law Resource Centre which, in 2024, experienced a 15.5% increase in requests for legal assistance. The number of households requesting its assistance in relation to housing and other issues rose by 13% in 2024. The report notes a worrying 40% increase compared to 2023 in cases involving the experience of people who were initially refused recognition of their entitlement to be considered for emergency accommodation, and a continuing increase in such queries in 2025. It also refers to a significant increase in calls it received last year. Such was the pressure on its services, that it was necessary for the Centre to close its helplines and to stop taking new clients over substantial periods of time.

Impact

The report itself notes that the measure of success is not only in the volume of work but by the change it makes to people's lives. In spite of the challenges in dealing with a significant rise in demand, the Mercy Law Resource Centre succeeded in ensuring that hundreds of individuals and families received legal advice and assistance when they may not otherwise have done so, and with a growing national reach. The Centre and all of those with whom it works are to be commended for showing resilience and flexibility in adapting to urgent, pressing and unmet needs of so many.

¹ Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage Monthly Homelessness Report September 2025.

At the core of the Mercy Law Resource Centre's ethos and mission is a desire to provide its services in a compassionate, respectful and accessible way, recognising the dignity of each person, and enabling them to achieve their full potential as human beings. Behind the statistics are the stories of people in, at best, difficult situations and, at worst, crisis, and the report outlines some examples of the case work in which the Centre was involved in 2024, and which will be discussed shortly.

The report notes, and the case studies illustrate, that many users of the Centre's services grapple with multiple forms of vulnerability. In addition to a lack of access to accommodation, their situations are exacerbated by for example, domestic violence, addiction, immigration issues, socioeconomic hardship, marital breakdown, various forms of discrimination, and disability. This is a practical illustration of a point that several speakers highlighted in two conferences hosted by a Working Group on Access to Justice. The Working Group, which was set up by my predecessor Frank Clarke and which I have continued, is drawn from the Judiciary, both branches of the legal profession, the Legal Aid Board and the Free Legal Advice Centres.

In the first of our conferences in 2021, Professor Luke Clements, Emeritus Professor of Law & Social Justice, spoke about the topic of his book 'Clustered Injustice and the level green' which focuses on the legal problems experienced by people living with disadvantage, which not only includes people living in poverty or who are socially excluded, but also people who have an unmet need of a level of support from the State. For example, many people with disabilities encounter a myriad of legal issues in relation to access to education, healthcare and other issues. Similarly, Professor Pascoe Peasance, Professor of Empirical Legal Studies and co-director of the Centre for Empirical Legal Studies in the UCL Faculty of Laws, spoke of the fact that justiciable

problems occur in clusters and that a person experiencing one justiciable problem is mathematically more likely to experience another, and consequently, social disadvantage.

Mercy Law Resource Centre's report emphasises the human aspect of the legal issues it has and continues to deal with. The philosopher Thomas Aquinas said that "*Justice without mercy is cruelty, mercy without justice is dissolution.*" The Mercy Law Resource Centre was founded based on a desire to bring together the differing fields of mercy and law in the hope that the law would be illuminated and resourced by the values of compassion and justice for all.² The compassion with which those who provide services with the Centre approach their work deserves recognition.

Bridging a gap

I have, on previous occasions, quoted Mr. Justice Matthew, an Irish man, who was a distinguished judge in England, who reportedly observed in the late 19th century that "*in England, justice is open to all, like the Ritz Hotel*". His comment suggests that the issue of access to justice is not a modern problem. It echoes Anatole France's famous observation which is perhaps particularly apposite in the present context that "*the law in all its majestic equality forbids the rich as well as the poor to sleep under the bridges of Paris*". . The Mercy Law Resource Centre, along with other independent law centres play a vital role in the legal and social support system, often bridging a gap where civil legal aid is not available in particular circumstances. The Access to Justice conferences I mentioned earlier highlighted the need for the increased availability of legal aid, the value of community-based services, early intervention, and a continuum of access, from the giving of information and advice to legal representation and accessibility of courts and the law.

² Website of Mercy Law Resource Centre.

We need lawyers to challenge the laws that forbid the sleeping under bridges. We need lawyers who can ensure that accommodation is provided to those who have to sleep under bridges. We need lawyers to persuade the authorities to improve the legal protections against homelessness and to provide more resources for those making accommodation available: in short we need the Mercy Law Resource Centre .

The second of our Access to Justice conferences in February 2023 focused entirely on the civil legal aid system and coincided with the establishment by the then Minister for Justice of an independent Civil Legal Aid Review Group. The Review is something which I warmly welcomed. It is important that we should carry out a comprehensive analysis of the need for legal aid and assistance, the forums in which it should be available, and the manner in which it should be delivered. The Review was chaired by my predecessor Frank Clarke, and I think draws upon the work of the work of the Chief Justice's Access to Justice Working and the discussions at our 2023 conference. The report of the Review Group highlights the value of independent community law centres in providing the type of support and meeting legal needs which the current legal aid Scheme does not cater for, in addition to covering areas which it does.³ I hope that the consideration of the report will lead to a development of the legal aid system which builds upon the foundations of the Legal Aid Board, which maximises the potential of independent community law centres, and ensures the provision of legal advice and assistance to those who cannot afford it when they find they must navigate an increasingly complex legal world.

³ Majority report of the Civil Law Review Group at p. 41. Available at chrome-extension://efaidnbmnnnibpcajpcglclefindmkaj/https://assets.gov.ie/static/documents/09fe3ad4/DOJ_Civil_Legal_Aid_Review_Majority_Report.pdf.

Role of the law and access to justice

In many cases, Mercy Law Centre provides early, information, assistance and representation so that a solution can be found without the need for it to reach court. In other cases, judicial review proceedings have been brought where it has been considered necessary. Either way, the law acts as an essential shield against unfairness and a tool for the protection of rights. American jurist, Lon Fuller, in his 1969 book, *Anatomy of the Law*, wrote about the state of the law as it was then perceived in the Soviet Union, saying that:-

“For the man in the street or in the field the most common response to the law was a gesture of helplessness and indifference. The law was like the weather. It is there, you adjust to it but there is nothing you can do about it except to get under cover when its special kind of lightning strikes”.

The law we have is not the will of distant rulers imposed upon the people. It is, by and large, law which tends to protect the weak from the strong, which seeks to maintain order and prevent chaos. But law can be complex. And the interpretation and application of law requires lawyers. In my experience navigating the Social Welfare code is as difficult as interpreting the Companies Acts, if not more so. Company law attracts lawyers because it is an area where the legal problems requiring resolution can justify the costs involved. Social welfare law does not pay for itself in this way and that is why the service that charities like the MLRC provides play a vital role and so that the law is not something that is done *to* vulnerable people to something that does things *for* vulnerable people.

But access to justice is critical and should be a matter of concern to anyone interested in making society fairer, more humane, more considerate and ultimately more secure. I have said before that removing obstacles to access to justice is not a single issue with a single

solution but a multi-faceted concept that requires many changes, large and small, in many areas, and the input of many actors.

Indeed, one of the key takeaways from our Access to Justice conferences was that access to justice does not equate to access to courts. It involves at a more basic and fundamental level access to information about legal rights and the law and a court system to which citizens can have recourse as a basic component in modern civilized society.

Nowhere is that multi-faceted, collaborative approach more evident than in the work of Mercy Law Resource Centre. It is clear from the report that it takes many hands and many forms of expertise to deliver this service. The Centre's backbone is a committed expert board and a small team of dedicated staff. I would like to wish Paul Dornan, the new managing solicitor who I understand will start his role today. Key to the success of the Centre is its collaboration with other organisations, and the pro bono work carried out by many law firms, barristers, interns and volunteers who provide their time and skill to ensure that people using the service have the benefit of their experience and competence and that deserves to be recognised.

Training and advocating for change

In addition to providing legal assistance and representation, Mercy Law Resource Centre has important broader roles in driving legal and policy change to address injustices in social housing and homeless law and enhancing social housing and homeless law expertise across its sector, particularly through legal training.

Some impressive initiatives in 2024 were a series of training sessions on housing law to frontline workers and local authorities, and the publication, with the support of IHREC,

of “Excluded and Left Behind”, by Dr. Méabh Savage on the reality of long term family homelessness on minority ethnic families.

I have no doubt that the organisational Strategic Plan for the years 2024 to 2029 will form the basis of an even greater focus by the Centre on using its experience from case work to inform systemic change in the area of housing law.

Conclusion

When confronted with the scale and persistence of rising homelessness, the challenge can appear insurmountable. Yet the work of the Mercy Law Resource Centre reminds us that change does not always come in sweeping gestures, but in determined, meticulous, human-centred effort.

Seamus Heaney wrote of the need to “believe that the further shore is reachable from here”. The Mercy Law Resource Centre embodies that belief in the practical, by through its sustained and compassionate approach, navigating steadily towards that further shore, even as much of its daily work is necessarily fast-paced, urgent and responsive. Navigating towards a society in which social injustice is not accepted, and where access to justice is genuine and effective for those who need it most.

I regard it as both an honour and privilege to have the opportunity to formally launch the 2024 Annual Report of the Mercy Law Resource Centre and I commend all involved for their unwavering commitment to justice, dignity and meaningful change.