Mercy Law
Resource Centre

2024 ANNUAL REPORT

Providing free legal advice and representation to people who are homeless or at risk of homelessness.

Locum Managing Solicitor Reflections 2024

Mercy Law Resource Centre (MLRC) is an independent law centre committed to supporting people who are homeless or at risk of homelessness. MLRC works to uphold the rights and dignity of those most at risk of exclusion, ensuring legal support is available where it is most urgently needed.

MLRC is also a vital part of the broader legal and social support system, filling a critical gap where no civil legal aid is available. Year on year, we continue to see a sharp increase in individuals and families facing homelessness and the need for legal support in navigating emergency accommodation systems has grown significantly. We exist to meet that need and to advocate for change.

I joined MLRC in April 2024, stepping in to provide cover during a period of leave for the then Managing Solicitor (who has since moved on to another role). Over the course of the past 14 months, I have had the privilege of working alongside dedicated professionals during an exceptionally demanding time. The housing and homelessness crisis has intensified during this period, with rising pressures on both individuals and frontline services. During this period, we also had a general election and change of government.

It has been a privilege to be part of MLRC through a period of intense activity and transformation. The strength and impact of this organisation is in no small part attributed to the dedicated and expert board of MLRC. This is further complimented by a dedicated team that contribute to the day to day running of the law centre.

This interim role has been, without doubt, a deeply worthwhile and professionally rewarding experience. While my time at MLRC has been relatively short, I am proud to have contributed meaningfully to the work of MLRC. I now hand over the reins to the new Managing Solicitor, Freda Grealy and wish MLRC continued success.

Teresa Kelly, Locum Managing Solicitor

Mercy Law Resource Centre

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01. Chairperson's Welcome

Welcome to the 2024 Annual Report of MLRC. Our annual report is the means by which we render account and benchmark from year to year our delivery upon our purpose and mission.

Our charitable purpose is to protect and vindicate the rights of people who are homeless or at risk of homelessness. There are three pillars to our mission, the first being the provision of free, accessible legal information, advice and representation to those who are homeless, or at risk of homelessness; the second being to drive legal and policy change to address injustices in social housing and homeless law; the third being to build social housing and homeless law expertise across our sector, primarily through legal training.

During the first half of 2024, with the generous assistance of Accenture, and its alumnus, Aodhan Peelo BL, our Board and staff were facilitated through a consultative process to formulate our organisational Strategic Plan for the years 2024 to 2029. This plan sharpens our focus on the identification of systemic changes that are needed in the areas of housing law and aims to ensure that our direct legal and advocacy work not only addresses individual needs but also challenges the structural barriers that produce inequality.

The need for MLRC's existence is driven by failures on the part of local authorities in the discharge of their public administrative duties towards people for whom the pursuit of shelter for the night is their primary daily grind. Failures on the part of local authorities are bound up in failures on the part of the State in its strategic planning and delivery of housing need. Shamefully, the State's Legal Aid Scheme does not afford legal representation in matters exclusively relating to homelessness. We seek to bridge this gap in access to justice, which is adding significantly to the precarious existence of people in homelessness.

Although challenged by some commentators as an understatement of the true position (by reason of how 'homelessness' is defined), Government statistics tell us that in January 2024 there were 9504 adults and 4027 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. Most recently, in June 2025, the number of adults in homelessness had risen to 10,957 and the number of children had risen to 4,958, a 23% rise in the number of homeless children since January 2024. In the space of 18 months an additional 931 children have had to experience life changing homelessness. For illustrative purposes, I note that the number of children currently experiencing homelessness is greater than the entire population of many Irish towns. Published statistics do not inform us of the average duration these children spend in homelessness. It is reported that a significant cohort of families are in emergency housing for periods considerably longer than two years. We believe that the State should be transparent about the lengths of time children are spending in emergency accommodation. The placement of children in emergency accommodation for indefinite periods exposes children to a real risk of long-term developmental harm, such are the resultant obstacles and challenges to a child's need for security, love, family, support, warmth, and food.

Unsurprisingly, given the statistical information, during 2024 our solicitors and administrative staff experienced an increase in excess of 15.5% in demand upon our services. We received requests for assistance from over 855 households related to housing and other issues, a rise of 13% upon 2023. The most significant increase in our workload arose through the unfairness experienced by people who were initially refused recognition of their entitlement to be considered for emergency accommodation. In 2023, there were 128 queries relating to emergency accommodation across the full year. During 2024, we had 178 emergency accommodation queries, a disturbing 40% increase upon 2023. It is of grave concern that the rate of increase in such queries is continuing to rise in 2025. Emergency homeless accommodation is not the solution for homelessness. Households need to be able to access secure, long term, appropriate housing. However, access to basic emergency shelter is the minimum provision that we expect for persons experiencing homelessness. Additionally, the denial of such access further undermines the reliability of statistical information around homelessness.

The demands upon our services during 2024 were such that it was necessary for us to close our helplines and to cease receiving new clients over substantial periods of time. Accordingly, the statistics recording the numbers of people whom we helped do not reveal the true number of people with an unmet need for access to legal advice and information regarding their housing need. We profoundly regret that such curtailment of service was necessary, in order for us to maintain our standard of care towards those whom we were able to help.

Against this challenging backdrop, in November 2024, we engaged Kevin Hoy in a pro bono consultancy role to review and improve the structural and operational effectiveness of our organisational systems. A former Chair of Mason Hayes & Curran, Kevin's skills as a professional coach, allied to his experience of legal practice, have been an invaluable resource to MLRC, for which we are deeply grateful.

During 2024, we continued to provide vital training opportunities in housing law, delivering 7 housing law training sessions. Through such training we increase the capacity of others to understand social housing law and the rights of people facing homelessness, thus enhancing their advocacy skills for their clients. We acknowledge the professional burden that is carried by individuals on the front line in local authorities across our nation, who carry the responsibility of making just and rational decisions when responding to each person or family presenting with acute emergency housing needs. A significant focus of our training programmes is towards such individuals, and we were especially pleased that more than 20 local authority staff attended our most recent training session in July 2025.

In September 2024, with the generous support of IHREC, MLRC published "Excluded and Left Behind", a groundbreaking report authored by Dr. Méabh Savage, interrogating and revealing the lived realities of long-term family homelessness on minority ethnic families, carrying the voices of children and their parents. This report particularly highlighted the long term deprivation that is being experienced by many children through exposure to unsuitable emergency accommodation over very extended periods as their 'home', in place of appropriate long term secure accommodation.

We are pleased with the continued success of our long-established housing law clinics, including our pro bono partnership with A&L Goodbody and Focus Ireland, whose clinic provided legal advice and/or representation to 82 families during 2024. The telephone legal information clinic run by volunteer lawyers in Mason Hayes & Curran continues to grow and has met the needs of over 110 clients during 2024. Our continuing collaboration with Arthur Cox is deeply appreciated, notably their generous provision of paralegal placements. MLRC commenced a domestic violence research project in December 2024 in conjunction with Taylor Wessing Ireland LLP, which will report later this year.

We wish to thank the many organisations working in our sector for their collaboration with us through our daily work. We also thank each of our pro bono allies, barristers, law firms, interns and volunteers for their extraordinary commitment, and without whose skilled and compassionate support our work would not be possible. We continue to benefit from the generosity of several loyal financial donors. We extend particular thanks to the Congregation of the Sisters of Mercy, the Religious Sisters of Education, the Catholic Archdiocese of Dublin, Mason Hayes & Curran, and A&L Goodbody for their continued financial support, which is a vital enabler of our work.

At the time of writing, MLRC employs 7 staff, comprised of our 4 solicitors, Freda Grealy (Managing), Adam Boyle, Kate Heffernan and Erika Hayes; Legal Secretary and Receptionist, Rebecca McKinney; Administrative Assistant, Madailein Watters; and part-time Finance Administrator, Miriam Nally. Our Board extends its thanks to each of our staff for their unstinting dedication of their respective specialist skills in the delivery of our vital and demanding work. We especially value the personal empathy you consistently show in responding to the needs and interests of our clients and of all others to whom we offer advice and guidance.

We extend similar appreciation to our interns and college placements for their extraordinary generosity in working with us in a highly pressured environment throughout 2024 and to the present. At a time when MLRC was particularly stretched in its staffing levels, we were so grateful to Cara O'Donnell, our intern from Arthur Cox, whose work ethic and commitment to the delivery of the legal needs of our highly challenged clientele was truly exemplary. We were also very fortunate in having Clara Dorman in an acting role as Legal Secretary and Receptionist and deeply appreciated her empathetic and skilled approach towards our clients over a period of 8 months.

In the early part of 2025, we said fond farewells to our esteemed Managing Solicitor, Aoife Kelly-Desmond, to our devoted long-serving Legal Secretary, Nuala Monaghan, and valued Communications Lead, Siobhán Tracey. Our Board extends its thanks to each of them for their outstanding service to MLRC and our clients over so many years. We thank Teresa Kelly for her generous commitment and contribution to MLRC whilst acting as Managing Solicitor, in providing maternity cover for Aoife Kelly-Desmond, and also for her excellent work in the preparation of this Annual Report. Each of you carries our very best wishes into the future.

Finally, I wish to thank each of the members of our Board for their generous commitment and service at a demanding time. We thank Turlough O'Donnell SC, who retired from our Board during 2024, for his commitment to MLRC. In November 2024, we were delighted when Sr Helena O'Donoghue agreed to return to our Board. Also, in February 2025, our former Managing Solicitor, Rebecca Keatinge, graciously accepted our invitation to join the Board.

Thank you to all who take the time to read this report. I hope that you are encouraged to continue with determination our collective fight to prevent homelessness.

Edward Gleeson, Chairperson

Mercy Law Resource Centre

02. About Mercy Law Resource Centre

MLRC is an independent law centre, registered charity and company limited by guarantee. MLRC provides free legal advice and representation for people who are homeless or are at risk of becoming homeless. Our service was designed to be compassionate and accessible, ensuring that people experiencing homelessness can get the legal support they need.

To complement our casework and bring about wider change, we undertake policy work to advocate for changes in laws, policies and attitudes which unduly and adversely impact our client group. MLRC also provides legal training in housing law to people and organisations that work with our client group, including those in support and service-delivery roles in approved housing bodies and local authorities.

Our Purpose

MLRC's purpose is to protect and vindicate the rights of people who are homeless or at risk of homelessness.

Our Ethos

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.

Our Mission

1. To provide free, accessible legal advice and representation to those who are homeless or at risk of homelessness.

2. To drive legal and policy change to address injustices in social housing and homeless law.

3. To build social housing and homeless law expertise across the sector.

Why MLRC is needed

Safe and secure housing is a basic human right, essential not only to individual well-being but also to the health and stability of society as a whole. It underpins the ability to participate fully in daily life and should be readily accessible without the need for legal intervention. However, the current housing crisis in Ireland has rendered this right increasingly out of reach. For many individuals and families experiencing housing insecurity, legal assistance has become a vital, and often the only mechanism for accessing accommodation that should be readily and equitably available. Given the vulnerability of those faced with this challenge of securing a home, the need for accessible, compassionate, user-friendly, expert and free legal advice is essential.

MLRC's service users avail of our expert services regarding housing due to an inability to engage private legal services in circumstances where they do not have the financial means to do so and in circumstances where navigating access to emergency accommodation and housing has become increasingly difficult. Extraordinarily, given the fundamental need for access to housing supports there remains a significant gap in the nation's social welfare and housing infrastructure. There is no state-funded legal aid for social housing or related social welfare issues. This unjust absence of public legal supports creates the need for MLRC's services. Year on year, we see the demand for our services increase, and the housing crisis worsens. We seek to provide a holistic service that is constantly adapting to meet the evolving pressures on individuals and families seeking suitable housing. This need for continued evolution for our service users reinforces the need for our existence.

How MLRC delivers

Our team continues to grow and in 2024 our core services were delivered by a team of 7 permanent staff, including 4 full time solicitors. We are also assisted in providing our services by a growing cohort of passionate, talented and dedicated volunteers. We receive valuable assistance from an increasing number of paralegals and interns throughout the year.

Every client who seeks our support brings a unique set of needs, experiences and circumstances. We are committed to ensuring that our services are genuinely accessible, by treating each person as an individual and responding to them accordingly. Our approach is grounded in flexibility - we meet through various forums whether that is remote or in person through our clinics. We work collaboratively with a wide range of support organisations - including domestic violence refuges, disability support groups, homeless & housing advocacy organisations.

MLRC Highlights of 2024

Aoife Kelly-Desmond speaking at UCD Debate on the Right to Housing, February 2024.

Assumpta O'Connell, Head of Pro Bono at McCann Fitzgerald with Adam Boyle, MLRC solicitor and others, at Pro Bono - Law and B&L Day, University College Dublin.

Adam Boyle at Joint Oireachtas Committee discussing Housing Commission Report on Constitutional Referendum on Right to Housing.

MLRC Team participating in a pre-budget briefing at Buswells Hotel, Dublin with other civil society organisations from the Irish Homeless Policy Working Group.

Dr Méabh Savage and Caoilfhionn Gallagher KC at the launch of MLRC's policy and research report "Excluded and Left Behind", authored by Dr. Savage and launched by Ms Gallagher KC.

MLRC Board members Rebecca Keatinge, Liam Twohig, Sr Helena O'Donoghue and Edward Gleeson with solicitor Paul Dornan (centre), at the launch of MLRC report "Excluded and Left Behind: The Lived Experiences of Long-Term Family Homelessness on Minority Ethnic Families and the Effects on Their Children", (September 2024).

Cara O'Donnell, Arunima Bhattacharjee and Kate Heffernan (MLRC) with Assumpta O'Connell, Head of Pro-Bono from McCann FitzGerald LLP and Jack Gibson, Pro-Bono Lawyer from A&L Goodbody LLP.

Board Chair, Edward Gleeson, leads a panel discussion with MLRC solicitors Adam Boyle, Erika Hayes, and Kate Heffernan at MLRC Annual Report 2023 launch.

President of the High Court, Mr Justice David Barniville, speaking at the launch of MLRC's Annual Report 2023.

Adam Boyle at European Migrants Network and ESRI Report Launch.

MLRC solicitor Adam Boyle leads delivery of housing law training for Focus Ireland.

Zoya Kherani (DU Law Society), Adam Boyle (MLRC) , Christopher Bowes (FLAC), and Maeve Delargy (Philip Lee), at Diversity and Equity Panel at Trinity Law Society.

03. Our Impact

Since beginning operations in 2009, MLRC has made a profound impact on individuals and families. At the heart of our work is a human-centered approach. The absence of a secure home erodes the foundations of dignity, well-being, and belonging. By working directly with those facing housing insecurity, we witness not only the hardship, but also the remarkable strength, resilience and potential of people when given the proper support. Our impact lies in these moments, when access to the right assistance has the potential to change the course of a life or lives.

In 2024 our work reached hundreds of households experiencing homelessness or at risk of homelessness, many of whom were navigating multiple layers of vulnerability, including trauma and domestic violence. Working alongside frontline homeless services, we were able to provide more holistic interventions.

In 2024 we experienced an unprecedented rise in demand for our services, reflecting the growing crisis facing individuals and families across the country. Requests for legal assistance rose by 15.5% compared to 2023. Over the course of 2024, we received a total of 2,973 calls, representing a significant increase from 2023 when we received 2,744 calls.

Each of these cases represented a person or family in need of safety, stability and justice. We worked to ensure that rights were upheld in situations where systems often fail or exclude the most vulnerable. Whether it is through a call, clinic, or collaboration, our impact lies in what these interactions enable: access to shelter, protection from harm, the preservation of family life and the restoration of hope. We measure success not only by the volume of work but by the change it makes to people's lives.

In 2024 MLRC dealt with 155 clients based outside the Dublin area (46%) and 182 clients in the Dublin area (54%). This indicates our national reach which has continued to shift since 2022.

We conducted 18 in person legal clinics in 2024. 14 of these were held in the offices of the Liberties Citizens Information Centre in the Carmelite Community Centre, serving 17 households. We delivered 4 clinics in partnership with Crosscare, serving 7 households from migrant backgrounds.

We opened 351 new client files, of which 263 related to social housing and, within this, 61 related to other issues. Homelessness is the next most common reason for our clients to contact us, and 25% of the social housing enquiries were also about homelessness.

In 2024, there were 142 individuals advised about homelessness, with over 77 of these involving access to emergency accommodation, including refusals or issues with emergency accommodation conditions. Many cases focused on conditions were linked to individuals with health issues, addictions, or disabilities, underscoring the inadequacy of emergency accommodation for those with specific health or disability need.

More concerning is that MLRC received 178 queries via our helpline about emergency accommodation, up from 139 in 2023. Additionally, 38% of these queries were in respect of families who were either at risk of homelessness or were currently experiencing homelessness.

Our impact is further reflected in our Casework and Policy work. In Section 4 we give an insight to some of the cases we have dealt with during 2024, yielding success for our clients. In Section 6, we reflect our policy report launch in 2024 – "Excluded and Left Behind: The Lived Experience of Long-term Family Homelessness on Minority Ethnic Families and the Effects on their Children". The report explores the lived experience of family homelessness for minority ethnic families and the effects on their children. We continue to rely on our direct experience supporting clients and the common issues we frequently encounter to guide our policy work and ongoing efforts to effect meaningful change.

Pro Bono Partnerships

A&L Goodbody and Focus Ireland pro-bono Housing Law Clinic

Since 2018, MLRC has operated a pro bono partnership with A&L Goodbody and Focus Ireland. This partnership is facilitated and supported by the Public Interest Law Alliance (PILA), a project of FLAC (the Free Legal Advice Centre).

A&L Goodbody solicitors staff the clinic, with support and training from MLRC, to serve Focus Ireland customers who need legal assistance in relation to social housing and or emergency accommodation. The clinic makes an enormous contribution to servicing the unmet legal need in this area. A&L Goodbody took a significant number of new referrals through the clinic in 2024 and worked with 82 families on housing files.

While most clients were based in Dublin, there are an increase of referrals coming in from Cork, Louth and Kildare. The overwhelming issue presenting throughout 2024 was access to emergency accommodation, followed by various issues regarding the suitability of local authority housing for example overcrowding and anti-social behaviour.

In conjunction with Focus Ireland and A&L Goodbody, we review how the clinics and referrals are working, to seek to continually improve and evolve the service based on our learnings.

Arthur Cox Paralegal

Arthur Cox solicitors kindly sponsored a full-time paralegal, Cara O'Donnell, to assist MLRC for 6 months. Cara was an exceptionally capable paralegal and a major resource, assisting us on major litigation projects, casework generally and with other duties including answering our phoneline to potential clients. This sponsorship was hugely valued by MLRC and provided essential support to our solicitors, which would otherwise be a challenge to resource.

Who we helped in 2024

2,973 phone calls received

885 new requests for legal assistance, including:

178 queries concerning emergency accommodation (compared to 139 in 2023)

351 new advice files opened, including:

263 involving social housing*

40 organisations supported

142 involving homelessness

82 Families served through the A&L Goodbody and Focus Ireland pro bono clinic

Mason, Hayes and Curran Telephone Information Clinic

Mason, Hayes and Curran (MHC) have been a consistent and long-time support for MLRC and our work. Our jointly launched pro-bono initiative, establishing a clinic (in the summer of 2023), continues to thrive.

The clinic is a telephone information clinic staffed by volunteer solicitors from MHC. The service focuses on callers to MLRC who are seeking information regarding social housing or homelessness matters but who do not appear from the initial query details to require urgent legal representation. The clinic operates weekly, serving 2-5 callers per session.

At the heart of this initiative are the volunteer solicitors from MHC who generously donate their time and expertise. As the demand for MLRC's services continues to grow with phone calls in 2024 up by almost 7.85% from the preceding year, the telephone clinic continues to be of huge value and assistance, ensuring callers to MLRC can access timely legal information. This also assists in relieving pressure on our solicitor team, as demand for our services continues to increase. In the period from January to December 2024, MHC volunteers called 110 clients – an invaluable contribution to meeting the needs of those in or at risk of homelessness.

"Volunteering with the Mercy Law phone clinic has been one of the most rewarding experiences of my career. It's a great opportunity to offer direct, immediate support to individuals and provide legal information and practical advice, but also to simply listen. I am proud to contribute my time and skills to a cause that truly matters. Through the partnership between Mason Hayes & Curran and MLRC our firm has had the opportunity to provide critical legal support to individuals and families facing housing insecurity. The partnership reflects Mason Hayes & Curran's commitment to using our legal skills to serve the broader community."

Ruth Bannan,
Senior Associate Mason Hayes & Curran LLP

Taylor Wessing LLP Domestic Violence Research Project

In 2024, we were delighted to establish an exciting pro bono partnership with Taylor Wessing Ireland (TWI). The first project under this partnership saw a team of TWI lawyers conduct legal research on pressing issues facing victims of domestic violence when accessing housing.

The high-quality research provided by TWI included an analysis of all local authority anti-social behaviour strategies and all allocation schemes. This analysis assessed the adequacy of protections for survivors of domestic violence under these local authority policies.

Additional research examined various legal definitions of domestic violence and provided comment on the strongest definition. This research has fed directly into the continuing efforts of MLRC in campaigning for improved access to housing for victims of domestic violence. We are very grateful to Jess Thomas and Shannon Buckley Barnes in establishing this partnership and look forward to future projects with Taylor Wessing Ireland.

"Working with Mercy Law Resource Centre on the domestic violence research project highlighted the potential challenges faced by victims of domestic violence in accessing housing and underscored the essential work MLRC does in supporting those who are homeless or at risk of homelessness. Taylor Wessing is proud to support MLRC in the important work they do."

Shannon Buckley Barnes,
Taylor Wessing Ireland LLP

04. Our Casework in 2024

Refusal of access to emergency accommodation

In 2024, MLRC recorded a 30% increase in queries received related to refusal of access to emergency accommodation. This sharp rise reflects a deeply troubling trend that has persisted throughout the year.

These cases are often urgent and high-risk, requiring immediate intervention to prevent further harm or prolonged homelessness. However, the sheer volume of such requests has placed immense pressure on our services. Our intake systems during 2024 became increasingly overwhelmed, making it extremely difficult to immediately assist all those seeking intervention. As a result, we have had to closely monitor the situation and adapt our responses continually throughout 2024. This has included reallocating internal resources, triaging cases based on urgency and strengthening partnerships with frontline services to ensure that those most at risk are prioritised. We have also provided targeted guidance to support workers and advocates in emergency settings, equipping them to identify legal breaches quickly and refer individuals effectively. Where we have been unable to provide legal assistance, we have provided information and referral for individuals seeking assistance.

Despite these efforts, the scale of unmet need remains deeply concerning. While the housing crisis persists, the rights of many individuals and families will continue to be denied at the most critical point of need.

We have seen a growing trend of Local Authorities making unlawful decisions in relation to those trying to access emergency accommodation. Local authorities are legally obliged to provide written reasons for decisions, yet we know that they routinely refuse to do this. Often clients report to us that they have received oral reasons which are not compliant with the Housing Act 1988 or relevant administrative law principles. Clients have provided us with a range of unlawful reasons which have been provided to them orally for refusals to provide emergency accommodation, or even to carry out a 'homeless assessment'. Examples of such reasons include:

- Local Authorities determining, contrary to evidence provided, that households have somewhere else that they can reside or the means to provide for their own accommodation without any clear basis for this position;
- Local Authorities refusing households emergency accommodation on the basis that they have no dedicated emergency accommodation available without considering alternative options such as private emergency accommodation, nor taking into account the vulnerabilities of households seeking assistance;
- Local Authorities applying unlawful 'local connection' criteria to access emergency accommodation or otherwise introducing unwritten, unpublished and unlawful criteria which create insurmountable barriers for families seeking crisis accommodation;
- Local Authorities indicating, without lawful basis and in often illogical manners, that households are not entitled to emergency accommodation because they have 'rendered themselves homeless' such as by falling into private sector arrears or due to fleeing domestic violence in the family home;
- Local Authorities refusing emergency accommodation to households who have not already been approved for social housing supports – a process which takes months and is not a requirement to access emergency accommodation;
- Local Authorities refusing to provide emergency accommodation to households who have refugee or subsidiary protection status and become homeless on the mistaken and incorrect belief that such households can and should return to IPAS Accommodation (Direct Provision) despite having no entitlement to same.

These are only some of the arbitrary and unlawful decisions made by Local Authorities that ultimately have disastrous consequences for people and families. It is unacceptable that when households seek housing support, whether in the form of emergency accommodation or long term social housing, that they face the risk of being denied for unlawful or illogical reasons, often by reference to unwritten or unpublished policies which are not compliant with the underlying legislation.

In many cases it has taken extensive advocacy and correspondence by MLRC on the client's behalf with the Local Authority in order for clearly unreasonable refusals to be overturned.

However, we are also increasingly finding that some local authorities are no longer amenable to resolving such cases through advocacy. In the absence of an independent oversight or appeals mechanism in place, this leaves our clients with few options remaining other than litigation. Where resolution has not been possible through advocacy, it has been necessary for MLRC to take High Court Judicial Review proceedings to vindicate the rights of those affected.

Many of those in these situations are not just vulnerable due to their lack of access to accommodation, but face compounding vulnerabilities such as being victims of domestic violence; their refugee or asylum status; socio-economic hardship; discrimination based on race or ethnicity such as those from the Traveller Community or migrants; being kicked out of their family homes for various reasons including being in the LGBTQI+ community, and more.

Beneath our case work is the heartbeat of a person's story, we hope the following case studies helps to shine light on the humanity behind the legality of these cases. This is merely a snapshot and not the totality of the assistance we have provided throughout 2024.

Case Study 1:

A young mother, with a 7-month-old baby, was the victim of domestic violence and was initially staying in a refuge. As her refuge stay was coming to an end, she faced homelessness and sought emergency accommodation (EA). However, her request was refused by the local authority. We assisted in supporting the domestic violence refuge support workers with a further request for emergency accommodation, which was then provided. While in emergency accommodation, the local authority made the client an offer of social housing for a property that was outside all three of her areas of preference and hours away from vital support. The woman was particularly vulnerable as she suffered from health conditions which caused her to collapse on occasion and resulted in her being rushed to hospital by ambulance numerous times. She declined this offer on the grounds that it was not in any of her areas of preference and was too far from her support network, should she need someone to mind her baby if rushed to hospital. In normal course, refusing an offer for a property outside your areas of preference is considered a 'reasonable' refusal. However, the local authority declared her reasons for refusal 'invalid' and on the same day, wrote to her to say that her EA would be withdrawn within 72 hours because she had declined an offer of alternative accommodation. The local authority claimed that it was a condition of its provision of EA that any refusal of any social housing support would result in withdrawal of homeless supports. MLRC intervened and after lengthy engagement with the local authority by phone and correspondence, the local authority agreed to extend its provision of EA while it considered our written appeal of its decision to deem our client's refusal of the social housing offer invalid. Upon consideration of our appeal, the local authority wrote to MLRC agreeing to reverse its decision to deem this woman's refusal of the social housing offer invalid. In its response letter, the local authority acknowledged the unsuitability of the offer in the circumstances and, significantly, it stated that the property initially offered "may also put her recovery from domestic violence at risk". This young mother and baby later received an offer from the local authority for a property in her area of preference which she was delighted with and very grateful for the assistance of MLRC in this regard.

Case Study 2:

A homeless man was sleeping in his car for several months after a local authority unlawfully withdrew his emergency accommodation. The local authority continued to suggest that he could live with his daughter, which was incorrect. This client was also on the social housing list. Advocacy with the local authority was not yielding any success. MLRC began preparing to issue judicial review proceedings. On foot of receiving further correspondence setting out the unlawful actions of the local authority and the intention to pursue litigation, the local authority informed MLRC that they intended to offer the client an apartment on the main street in his area of choice. The client was thrilled and moved in days before Christmas 2024. He was extremely grateful for the help he had received from MLRC, naming the MLRC solicitor "Mrs. Clause".

Case Study 3:

A homeless family (a couple, both with disabilities and their two infant children) had repeatedly been refused access to emergency accommodation by a local authority throughout 2024. The local authority homeless section repeatedly told them that they could instead stay in their parents' family homes. This was despite the local authority's housing section having previously issued tenancy warnings and threatened legal proceedings against one parent as a direct result of the family staying in her (local authority) home. There had also been repeated family breakdowns with both sets of families, leading to the family having to leave both parents' family homes on multiple occasions. In 2023, they had a similar experience with the same local authority when they were homeless. Through extensive MLRC efforts, including the threat of litigation, they were granted emergency accommodation in November 2024 and nominated for a property in November 2024. Due to further MLRC advocacy, including through liaising with a family social worker, the couple also continued to be considered by the Director of Housing for further properties in an area of preference closest to family members, while the couple considered this nominated property.

Case Study 4:

This case involved an EU national with an intellectual disability, who was refused access to social housing due to a misapplication by the local authority of Circular 41/2012. This Circular purports to provide advice to local authorities on access to social housing for non-Irish nationals. However, the Circular does not properly reflect relevant aspects of EU law. The client in this case had a right under EU law to permanently reside in Ireland and as such, ought not have been asked to meet additional eligibility criteria for social housing, beyond the standard criteria which apply to Irish nationals. MLRC put in a lengthy written appeal, challenging the Council's refusal to grant access to social housing to this client. However, the Council refused to reverse its decision, even after pre-litigation correspondence was issued. MLRC issued judicial review proceedings on behalf of our client. When proceedings were issued, the Council wrote to MLRC reversing its decision and reinstating this client on the social housing list.

Case Study 5:

MLRC represented a client in the High Court in judicial review proceedings. The woman fled her former local authority home due to domestic violence. She had been a joint tenant in her former local authority home, where her alleged abuser was the other joint tenant. Our client entered a domestic violence refuge. She then sought social housing supports in her own name, supported by refuge staff, explaining it was unsafe to return to her former home. The local authority required her to surrender her joint tenancy before it would consider her application for housing supports in her own name. She complied with the instruction to surrender her tenancy, but the local authority then excluded her from consideration for an allocation of a social house for one year, on the grounds that it was of the position that she had "voluntarily" surrendered her tenancy. On internal review by the local authority, it upheld its decision and noted that in its decision-making process, it had reviewed other cases where persons left local authority tenancies due to domestic violence and that it considered its decision to be "consistent with those decisions".

Case Study 5 contd.:

MLRC initiated judicial review proceedings, arguing that the surrender in this case was not "voluntary" (given that the client was fleeing domestic violence) and that the local authority's decision breached administrative and human rights law, misapplied its own allocation scheme, and amounted to an unlawful fettering of its discretion through the application of an inflexible policy to victims of domestic violence. Leave for judicial review was granted with the Judge stating during the leave application that the woman appeared to be put in "a Catch-22 situation".

While proceedings were ongoing, the local authority made an offer of a new tenancy to the client. While the offer was not in our client's area of preference, she accepted it.

Case Study 6:

MLRC acted for an eighteen-year-old, who was in a psychiatric hospital following a mental health crisis due to a complete breakdown in relations with her parents. MLRC were instructed that her family had informed the hospital she could not return to live in the family home and that there were no other family members who could accommodate her. After some time, our client was deemed medically fit to be discharged from the psychiatric hospital. However, as her parents refused to allow her to return to the family home, she had nowhere to go. The hospital contacted the local authority requesting that a homeless assessment be conducted in respect of the teenager. Despite the fact that several members of her medical team (including a Consultant Psychiatrist, a Clinical Director and a Principal Social Worker) provided the local authority with letters stating that in their professional opinion, she was not able to return to the family home and that she had no one else in her network that could provide accommodation, the local authority deemed she was not homeless and that it would not be providing emergency accommodation. As such, she could not leave the medical facility despite being deemed ready for discharge.

The local authority stated in writing that it was not its position to provide emergency accommodation in cases of 'family disputes' and suggested that the family could avail of mediation with the Legal Aid Board to resolve their problems. MLRC wrote to the local authority and pointed to

Case Study 6 contd.:

the fact there is no provision in law excluding our client from eligibility for homeless supports, on the basis that her relationship has broken down with her parents. In fact, one of the most common causes of homelessness, cited by those who have newly entered homelessness, as reported in the State's own official statistics is: "Relationship breakdown/ family circumstance". We noted that the remit of the Legal Aid Board is limited by statute and that its mediation services are were not available to our client in respect of her circumstances. We pointed to the Government's Youth Homelessness Strategy and argued the decision was in contravention of it. Following this appeal, the Council agreed to provide emergency accommodation for our client. However, by the time this decision was made, our client had already been occupying a bed in a psychiatric hospital for many months, without any medical need for same. This case highlights how inappropriate practices of local authorities can cause blocks in important psychiatric and other hospital services.

Case Study 7:

Our female client was in emergency accommodation with her young son. The local authority tried to withdraw her emergency accommodation, claiming she had sufficient income to house herself. This was not the case, her income being well below the social housing income threshold. She was also due to enter her third year of studying nursing in university. MLRC intervened several times on our client's behalf and secured multiple extensions to her emergency accommodation, while she continued to meet the definition of homelessness. While in emergency accommodation, during an extension period, our client secured somewhere to house herself and her son utilising HAP. She was very pleased with the result and the service received from MLRC.

Case Study 8:

Our client was an EU national who had been living in Ireland for many years. Many years previously, his parents had transferred their modest apartment in Poland into his name even though they remained living in the property and our client had no intention of returning to Poland. After this occurred, he gifted the apartment back to his mother and had documentation to evidence this. He was wrongly refused access to social housing supports because the Council incorrectly took into account the fact that many years previously, the property in Poland had, for a short period, been in his name. MLRC intervened, writing a lengthy legal letter focusing on the case of Zabiello where Judge Simons stated: "*A property which had previously been owned cannot be said to be "available" to the household […] in order to constitute "alternative accommodation" for the purposes of regulation 22 of the Social Housing Assessment Regulations 2011 the accommodation must be in the current ownership of a member of the household*". The local authority reviewed the file and our client's application was approved and he was placed on the housing list.

Case Study 9:

A family with four young children under the age of 12 were residing in emergency accommodation. The local authority attempted to unlawfully withdraw the family's emergency accommodation on the basis that they did not consider them eligible for social housing.

The family previously rented a family home for over ten years. When the landlord served a valid notice of termination in respect of the family's tenancy, because he wished to sell the property, they sought assistance from their local authority and were placed in emergency accommodation in early 2024. The local authority then re-assessed the family's income for the purposes of social housing supports and found that they were over the social housing income threshold by relatively small amount. The local authority attempted to unlawfully argue that because of this, the family would no longer be provided with emergency accommodation. As is the case with all income assessments for social housing supports, the assessment was based on the household's preceding 12 months' income. The reality for this family, however, was that one earner had been participating in a CE Scheme which came to an end in early 2024, and the income available to the family was in reality much lower than that reflected in the income assessment.

Case Study 9 cont'd.:

Even though the family made best endeavours in their search for either an affordable private tenancy or a cost rental property in their area and beyond, by the time the local authority informed the family that their emergency accommodation would not be extended, the family had not secured any such tenancy.

First intervention: MLRC intervened and submitted legal correspondence to the local authority explaining the distinction between the legislative regimes governing emergency accommodation and social housing and noting that there is no legal basis to refuse access to emergency homeless supports on the basis that the household was considered ineligible for social housing. We noted that the family continued to meet the statutory definition of homelessness and ought to have their emergency accommodation extended. After a number of exchanges with the local authority, this extension to emergency accommodation was agreed by the Council.

Second intervention: The family's financial circumstances unfortunately began to worsen significantly over the following months. The second earner in the family had to undergo serious surgery and was on illness benefit following the surgery. Months later he remained medically unfit to work. His income from his previous full-time employment ceased entirely in autumn 2024. Just prior to this, the family submitted a fresh social housing application which the local authority assessed. The local authority rejected this application on the grounds that the family had allegedly not submitted required documentation. The family did subsequently submit this documentary evidence to the local authority. Notwithstanding this, the local authority informed the family by way of phone call that they would not be extending the family's emergency accommodation, again stating that the reason for removal of the emergency accommodation was that the family did not qualify for social housing supports (despite the fact that it appeared from the subsequent documentation submitted by the family that the family were well below the income threshold for supports).

MLRC intervened again at this point. Legal correspondence was submitted, outlining the family's financial circumstances and reiterating that there was no legal basis to withdraw emergency accommodation on the grounds that a household does not qualify for social housing supports. Three days before the family were due to be removed from emergency accommodation, the local authority contacted MLRC by phone to state they it would not be extending accommodation because the local authority was of the opinion that there was nothing more the local authority could do for the family, given that the local authority did not consider them eligible for social housing supports.

MLRC submitted further lengthy legal correspondence to the local authority that same day, escalating the matter again to more senior figures in the Council and noting that it appeared from the documentary evidence submitted by the family that they were in fact eligible for social housing supports at the time they submitted their most recent social housing application.

The day before the family were due to be removed from the emergency accommodation, the local authority sent a short email to MLRC stating that the family's file had been reviewed, that emergency accommodation would be extended and that their social housing application would be updated.

The parents of these four young children were extraordinarily distressed by this ordeal, as they had no alternative accommodation and were facing the prospect of rough sleeping. MLRC was deeply concerned by the local authoritys initial disregard for the legal principles at play in this case and found it deeply regretful that matters were not resolved for this family sooner.

"Over the last twelve months I have worked with MLRC and have seen their housing law expertise, dedication and client-centred drive. The protection of the fundamental rights of marginalised clients is in ever-increasing need; it is a great achievement that under a deluge of demand MLRC's legal team maintain extremely high-quality legal work with a resourceful and creative approach and unwavering commitment to their clients"

Sharon Dillon-Lyons, Barrister-at-Law

Case Study 10:

April 2024 MLRC settled a Judicial Review case it had taken for a homeless woman and her two children. They had been denied access to emergency accommodation on extremely dubious grounds, including that they had historic rent arrears on a council property.

What our Clients say

Client 1

"I would like to first start by give my heartfelt gratitude for not just doing your job but for doing it with such care and empathy. You treated me with positive regard not as just another case and I felt that through your communication with me.

...as of writing this email I am fully vacated with my belongings in the new place. It's a start I have been eager for such a long time and it's finally here! Finally I can give my son the stability he deserves.

…I do not know how best I can relay the appreciation and gratitude for your involvement in my issue but please know it was invaluable.

I wish you all the best Kate in your work and all of your future endeavours"

Client 2

"I just want to thank you on a personal note for all you have done in assisting me. You've been a real support at the worst time of my life. A literal angel."

Client 3

" … I would have never been given this good placement in this good area without all the immense efforts you have put into my case, and all the calls and all the emails you made…on my behalf.

*You've been everything anyone can ask from their solicitor and more…**As I see it, with your effort alone my case went from impossible to possible and accessible. I truly can't put in words how much I am grateful for your role in my case dear Erika."***

Client 4

"You have been most kind and most helpful and I am forever grateful for your support and aid when I had no one to aid me and had no clue what to do to provide a safe place for my children.

Thank you so much for all your time and hard work in helping securing a homeless placement to us, I truly appreciate your help… I am forever grateful to you and to your team at MLRC.

I was facing sleeping in my car with my two children if it wasn't for you. Your kind act will stay with me forever."

05. Legal Training for Organisations Working in the Field of Homelessness

A strategic priority of MLRC is providing training to individuals and organisations across the social housing and homeless law sector. Many of these organisations work on the front-line supporting people with their housing needs.

By providing this training, we can increase the capacity of others to understand social housing law and the rights of people facing homelessness, to better advocate for their clients.

In 2024 we delivered 7 housing law training sessions to professionals, lawyers and frontline homeless services.

"The training was very well delivered, Adam was engaging and confident. He seemed to have tailored the training to what we were looking for." - *Focus Ireland*

"Everything about the training was very good. It was really useful to be able to ask questions and have some discussion together."

"The whole session was very beneficial."
– Open Training Sept.

2024 training events:

- Feb 2024: A & L refresher training
- March 2024: Open Training - Fundamentals of Housing Law
- April 2024: Training to Focus Ireland –
- May 2024: Law Society PPC 1 - Housing Law Lecture
- June 2024: Mason Hayes & Curran – Clinic Volunteer refresher training
- July 2024: CMG Training – Irish Institution of Professional Education
- September 2024: Open Training - Fundamentals of Housing Law

06. Policy and Law Reform Work

MLRC's casework continues to inform our policy and law reform work. We aim to bring about lasting, systemic changes to laws, policies and practices that unjustly impact on our client group. At the time of publishing, 5,145 children in Ireland are homeless. This number is more than a statistic it represents thousands of young lives disrupted, families under strain and fundamental rights being denied. Ultimately, we seek to ensure people who are homeless have equal and effective access to justice.

In September 2024, MLRC launched a landmark policy report: "Excluded and Left Behind the Lived Experience of Long-term Family Homelessness on Minority Ethnic Families and the Effects on Their Children." The report was authored by Dr. Méabh Savage, Lecturer in Department of Social Care and Early Childhood, South East Technological University. On foot of the findings, MLRC made a number of recommendations for Legislative & Policy Change, contained within the report.

The report is not an abstract theory; it is built on the lived experiences of minority ethnic families enduring homelessness and navigating emergency accommodation. We are proud that our policy has been timely in its publication and has garnered much attention, on foot of its launch.

The Launch

The launch event brought together a powerful range of voices and perspectives. The policy was officially launched by Caoilfhionn Gallagher, KC, in her capacity as Commission Member of the Irish Human Rights & Equality Commission (IHREC). In 2023, Ms Gallagher was appointed as Ireland's Special Rapporteur on Child Protection; as such the contents of this report are of particular interest in this context. In her work as a human rights lawyer, with over 20 years' experience, she has acted in many complex and high profile cases, including cases involving children who are street homeless or living in unsuitable accommodation.

She delivered a very powerful speech covering extensive issues relevant to homelessness. Ms Gallagher noted: "Earlier [in 2024], in a report to the UN, IHREC made clear our concerns about the chronic undersupply of housing in the market, the unprecedented levels of homelessness, and the persistent issues in securing the right to culturally appropriate and quality accommodation for structurally vulnerable groups." She further stated: "the rights of the child protected under the UNCRC are severely curtailed when a child and their family experience persistent homelessness."

Following Ms Gallagher's speech, MLRC hosted a moderated panel discussion, made up of an expert panel as follows: Maria Joyce, National Traveller Women's Forum, Dr. Aoibhinn Walsh, Consultant Pediatrician with a special interest in Inclusion Health, Rory Hearne, Senior lecturer in social policy at Maynooth University and Abniled Hernandez, Psychologist, MA, MPSI, Focus Ireland. This was an extremely informative and insightful discussion and proved very engaging for our attendees, including many stakeholders.

Policy Conclusions & Recommendations

The Children who are Left Behind

Several important themes emerged from the findings in the report that build on previous research, to confirm the seriously detrimental effects that living in emergency accommodation long-term has on ethnic minority children. Of significance, is the extent to which children from minority ethnic families are being left behind in all aspects of their lives. This has long-term implications for their well-being and development and gives rise to a number of human rights and equality concerns.

The findings show that children and families face multiple barriers to accessing adequate housing over extended periods of time. This is creating a two-tiered system where the needs and rights of minority ethnic families are not being recognised. As a result of this, children lack access to safety, security, a place to play, to develop a sense of identity, to develop relationships and to have friends, to experience family and community life, to feel like they belong and to access and benefit from education, over extended periods of time.

The findings show how children in minority ethnic families often experience cumulative and intersectional inequalities on their entries into, lived experiences of, and in the barriers the families experience exiting homelessness. These cumulative and intersectional inequalities are experienced mentally, physically, relationally, socially, and emotionally by children and embodied deeply over time. They constitute a form of toxic stress and an adverse childhood experience. Additionally, owing to their loss of social networks and their experiences of stigmatisation and discrimination within emergency accommodation and wider society, these adverse childhood experiences are compounded for them.

Additionally, the effects of living in inadequate housing and homelessness for extended periods diminishes the resources parents need to support caregiving. This can include ethnos/racial cultural socialisation, which can buffer the negative effects of homelessness, including experiences of racism and discrimination. The findings show how the structurally marginalised position occupied by minority ethnic families means they can lack access to the resources to access housing independently. They need support to do this. However, families can experience inequalities in access to different forms of support, which can prolong their experiences of homelessness.

Adequate housing is essential to enabling family life and to having an adequate standard of living. It can provide a secure base for children to flourish and grow up into happy and healthy adults. Adequate housing is much more than a physical space, it has cultural, relational, and affective dimensions also. As the findings reveal, inadequate housing diminishes the resources needed to enable caregiving and for nurturing cultural differences. It prevents the expression of cultural identity and ways of life that shape children and families' identities and give them a sense of safety and security. It hinders inclusion and integration.

The absence of an adequate definition of homelessness for children and families means that the rights and needs of some minority ethnic children are not being taken into consideration in responses to family homelessness contemporarily. Their invisibility from the legal definition of homelessness means that the full continuum of homelessness and housing exclusion experienced by ethnic minority families is not realised. Their lack of access to adequate housing and to an adequate standard of living constitutes to a range of other human rights violations that are recognised as being essential for healthy childhood and future development.

Recommendations

MLRC has prepared recommendations for legislative changes which will better protect the rights of children and their families. These changes focus on the need to eliminate discrimination, promote equality of opportunity, and protect the human rights of families experiencing homelessness throughout their engagements with the State and homeless organisations.

In addition, the research highlights a number of key issues in the provision of homeless services which may be better addressed by the promulgation of policy requirements from central government. These high-level recommendations are set out in the next section

MLRC Recommendations for Legislative Change

a. MLRC recommends that the definition of homelessness in section 2 of the Housing Act 1988 be amended to better capture the lived experiences of families and children experiencing homelessness, centre the best interests of the child, and better capture families experiencing hidden homelessness. Such amendment should be informed by or reflect the European Typology of Homelessness and Housing Exclusion (ETHOS).

b. MLRC recommends amending section 22 of the Housing (Miscellaneous Provisions) Act 2009 to introduce a standardised, legislative "homeless priority" to be included in every local authority's allocation scheme. Families, and in particular children, suffer substantial harms from long stays in emergency accommodation. In addition, it is noted that a large percentage of families experiencing homelessness are spending more than 2 years living in emergency accommodation. An amendment to Section 22 of the 2009 Act, reflecting Section 22(8) of same but with compulsory language, could seek to address this issue. A standardised priority status across all local authorities aimed at transitioning families experiencing long term homelessness into permanent social housing would act to provide clarity and transparency for families, vindicate the rights of their children, and counter discriminatory practices.

c. MLRC recommends the standardisation of social housing waiting lists across local authority areas by way of amendment to the Housing (Miscellaneous Provisions) Act 2009. The report notes that many families, and in particular children, suffer mental health challenges tied to the uncertainty of knowing when they will eventually be housed. Casework from MLRC notes that clients awaiting an allocation in most local authority areas across the country are provided with little to no clarity on their position on the social housing waiting list. The creation of a legislatively backed procedure for recording a family's place on the social housing waiting list, and any priority lists maintained under the relevant allocation scheme, in a manner that allows the families and their advocates to routinely access this information, would provide clarity for families and act to prevent potential discriminatory practices.

d. MLRC recommends the creation of an oversight and reporting responsibility for local authorities to provide clarity on what steps are being taken to assist families to exit homelessness where they have spent in excess of two years in emergency accommodation, modelled on section 22(12) of the Housing (Miscellaneous Provisions) Act 2009. Such an obligation would provide oversight where a family have spent a prolonged period in homelessness, challenging the creation of the 'two-tiered' system noted in the Report and ensuring families with complex needs are identified and prioritised for support. This obligation should reflect that a family having spent such a prolonged period of time in emergency accommodation represents a policy failure, given that the definition of long-term homelessness occurs after six months residing in emergency accommodation.

e. MLRC recommends the creation of a Statutory Instrument, modelled on regulation 12 of the Social Housing Assessment Regulations 2011 (as amended), to codify statutory timelines for the completion of assessments for priority status on social housing waiting lists pursuant to the relevant Allocation Scheme and, separately, for the completion of homeless assessments made under the Housing Act 1988. The report notes substantial risk of families from minority ethnic backgrounds experiencing hidden homelessness and MLRC casework notes the risk of discriminatory practices posed by the absence of a legislative timeline to complete a homeless assessment. In addition, the report notes disparities between local authorities in processing applications for medical or other priorities, with some applications taking up to a year to be processed. This accords with MLRC's experience through casework.

f. MLRC recommends legislating a means and responsibility for local authorities to engage with other Government agencies to confirm and share information on families due to enter the State via family reunification prior to their arrival, potentially modelled on section 15 of the Housing (Miscellaneous Provisions) Act 1997. The report notes substantial issues where families arriving under family reunification face delays in accessing social housing supports or homeless services, often entering hidden homelessness for prolonged periods. A statutory power and duty to coordinate between State agencies to prepare for arrival would provide local authorities with tools to prepare for families' arrivals in advance.

g. MLRC recommends the amendment of section 10 of the Housing Act 1988 to place the existing administrative law responsibility to provide written reasons for decisions on a statutory footing, similar to the duty to provide same contained in regulation 15(2) of the Social Housing Assessment Regulations 2011 (as amended). The report notes that families fear sudden and unexplained eviction from emergency accommodation, difficulties obtaining homeless assessments under section 2 of the 1988 Act, or delays in accessing emergency accommodation under section 10 of the 1988 Act. Local authorities are required by law to provide written reasons for decisions which impact on the rights of individuals. However, MLRC casework indicates that most local authorities routinely refuse to do so, leaving applicants with no clarity on why they have been refused homeless accommodation or evicted from same. A statutory duty to issue and record these reasons would act to increase transparency in decision making, assist families in vindicating their rights, and challenge potentially discriminatory practices.

h. MLRC reiterates their earlier recommendation for Regulations to be issued by the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage under section 10(11)(a) of the Housing Act 1988, specifying and restricting the type of emergency accommodation that individuals and families may be accommodated in, ensuring therefore its suitability and adequacy. This will ensure that the criteria applied to determine what form of emergency accommodation homeless persons receive is clearly regulated and transparent.

MLRC Recommendations for Policy Change

a. MLRC recommends the standardisation of minimum standards across all family emergency accommodation – both public and private – in respect of adequate cooking, washing, and child play facilities, in particular such that they fulfil the cultural and/or religious needs of minority families. The report highlights the absence of such facilities, particularly in private emergency accommodation, and the challenges that this presents for the caregiving and cultural socialisation of children. MLRC believes that this recommendation is essential in ensuring that local authorities are safeguarding the human rights of those in emergency accommodation and fulfilling its public sector duty under Section 42 (1) of the Public Sector Equality and Human Rights Commission Act 2014.

b. MLRC recommends that all staff involved in the provision of social housing supports and emergency accommodation be required to undertake comprehensive cultural competence, trauma-informed, and anti-discrimination training. This should be accompanied by the introduction of clear procedures through which individuals accessing emergency accommodation can report instances of discrimination or hostility. The report highlights the frequency with which the challenges of homelessness are exacerbated for minority families due to a lack of understanding or respect for cultural diversity - as well as instances of prejudice or discrimination – amongst both staff in emergency accommodation and in local authority housing departments. Measures aimed at preventing and redressing this issue are thus crucial so as to protect the human rights of minority families and empower them to exit homelessness. The contents of this report, in addition to previous reports on similar issues, suggests that this recommendation is necessary in order for local authorities to fulfil their public sector duty.

c. MLRC recommends, in the absence of legislative definition, the issuance of a circular or official government guidance stating clearly the criteria to be used by local authorities in determining when particular families should be assigned to NGO operated family hubs. The report highlights the stark 'hierarchy of emergency accommodation' that exists with social care trained staff in NGO operated hubs supporting families in exiting homelessness and offering on-site support tailored to children's needs. MLRC thus recommends that the criteria for assignment to NGO operated family hubs should prioritise families experiencing long-term homelessness, to expedite their exit from homelessness and minimise the trauma associated with long-term homelessness.

d. MLRC recommends for all staff involved in the provision of social housing supports and emergency accommodation to be provided with appropriate training in relation to domestic violence, and for such training to include guidance on how to approach cases of domestic violence within minority families. MLRC has previously recommended training in relation to domestic violence in its 2023 report 'Social Housing, Domestic Violence, and the Public Sector Duty'.

e. MLRC recommends the government prioritise increasing the stock and availability of larger multi-bedroom social housing so as to accommodate larger families in a manner compliant with the overcrowding rules laid out in the Housing Act 1966. The report highlights how the lack of appropriately sized housing represents a key barrier to exiting homelessness for large families.

Annual Report Launch 2023

On 15th October 2024, MLRC's 2023 Annual Report was launched in the Wisdom Centre by Archbishop Dermot Farrell, who gave an address. We were also very grateful to President of the High Court, Mr Justice David Barniville, who provided closing remarks on the day. The launch was followed by a panel discussion of MLRC casework, moderated by the Chairman of MLRC, Edward Gleeson, and facilitated by 3 solicitors from the MLRC team - Adam Boyle, Erika Hayes and Kate Heffernan.

Building on the impactful contributions of the Archbishop Dermot Farrell and the solicitor panel, Mr Justice David Barniville offered a thought-provoking address that brought further insight and emphasis to the issues raised.

The strength and power of these discussions, alongside the urgency of the issues raised, garnered attention from national media, with coverage across radio, television and online platforms. This visibility helped to amplify the key messages on the ongoing crisis in emergency accommodation and housing rights.

We are extremely grateful to both Archbishop Farrell and Mr Justice Barniville for their time and contributions to the launch of our report.

Edward Gleeson, President of the High Court Mr Justice David Barniville, Aoife Kelly-Desmond, Adam Boyle, Kate Heffernan, Erika Hayes, Teresa Kelly and Archbishop Dermot Farrell pictured above.

Further 2024 contributions by MLRC to Publications, PFG and Submissions

• Submission to IHREC on their Consultation on the Irish Human Rights and Equality Commission Strategy Statement 2025-2027.

• Submission to the Joint Oireachtas Committee on Housing on the General Scheme of Housing (Misc Provisions) Bill 2024.

• Submission to the Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage: Zero Tolerance Strategy Implementation (Output 2.3.5) / Domestic Violence in Joint Social Housing Tenancies: Pressing Need for Legislative Reform – 9 December 2024.

• MLRC contributed to the Irish Homeless Policy Group (IHPG) submission on the Programme for Government.

• MLRC submitted its own standalone Programme for Government request, comprising of Three Key Asks.

• MLRC provided inputs to the European Commission Rule of Law Report 2025.

• As part of the Home for Good coalition, MLRC spoke at the Joint Oireachtas Committee on Housing, advocating for a right to housing in the Constitution.

• MLRC contributed a section on Family Homelessness in Ireland, to UNANIMA International's 3rd volume of their published series of works on "The Hidden Faces of Homelessness: Global Insights and Pathways Forward".

Partnership and Collaboration

Working in collaboration with others is at the heart of MLRC's approach. We are an active part of the pro bono network in Ireland. We are a member of the Home for Good coalition; the Legal Aid Board External Consultative Panel; the Irish Homeless Policy Working Group; the Independent Law Centres Network; the Children's Rights Alliance; NGO and Charity Helpline Network, the Wheel and the Charities Institute of Ireland.

Throughout the year we have collaborated on various submissions, briefings and events with our partners, in the pursuit of our common aims.

07. Our Team

MLRC has a dedicated team of legal and professional staff who work tirelessly to promote the rights of those in or at risk of homelessness.

In recent months we also said goodbye to a few dedicated staff members.

Aoife Kelly-Desmond has recently taken up the role of CEO, Community Law & Mediation, after over 3 years in the role of Managing Solicitor in MLRC.

Nuala Monaghan, Legal Secretary, one of our longest serving employees – with over 12 years of dedicated service - retired from her role.

Siobhán Tracey, Fundraising & Communications Lead, who after nearly three years with MLRC has moved on.

We wish Aoife, Nuala and Siobhán well in all their future endeavours and thank them for their valued contributions to MLRC during their time with us.

A special mention goes to Jack Goodman and Clara Dorman, who joined MLRC in a temporary capacity in the autumn of 2024, providing vital professional support at short notice and both hitting the ground running ensuring an uninterrupted delivery of our services.

Our sincere thanks to all MLRC's staff and volunteers for their tremendous dedication and hard work throughout 2024.

Volunteer & Internship Programme

Volunteering has been at the heart of MLRC's work since our foundation. We have a number of administrative and legal volunteers who greatly complement and enhance our work.

Pro-bono Volunteers:

Arthur Cox

We greatly appreciate the generous assistance of Arthur Cox in providing us with legal volunteers throughout 2024. We were grateful to have Áine McCreesh on a full-time basis until April 2024 and Cara O'Donnell on a full-time basis for 6 months, until end of November 2024. Áine and Cara made significant contributions during their time at MLRC. See Cara O'Donnell's reflection on her experience with MLRC below.

Siobhán Tracey, Fundraising & Communications Lead

Nuala Monaghan, Legal Secretary

Aoife Kelly-Desmond, Managing Solicitor

A&L Goodbody

In addition to the invaluable collaborative and pro bono support provided by ALG, they also offered us placements as follows: student Holly Leech, remained with us 1 day per week until April 2024 and trainee solicitor Conall Maher was with us 1 day per week from mid-August 2024 to mid-October 2024. Their contributions were immensely valuable to MLRC.

Interns and College Placements

MLRC strives to support the next generation of lawyers and to impart a spirit of civic activism and professional experience with our internship programme. We are extremely thankful for the professionalism, enthusiasm and energy our interns bring to our office. Interns assist with and learn about legal research, case work, administration and policy development.

We were very grateful to be able to host students and interns as follows during 2024:

- Darcy Saville (NUIG): 16 Jan – 12 April 2024;
- Arunima Bhattacharjee (DCU): 20 May – 16 August 2024;
- Camille Goberyte (UCD) : 3 June – 12 July 2024
- Rhiannon Camarillo (Duke University USA): 19 June – 9 August 2024;
- Madailein Watters (TCD): 15 July – 23 Aug 2024.

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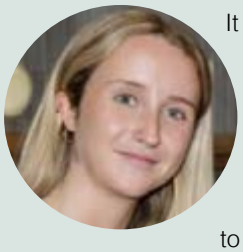
A reflection from Cara O'Donnell

Arthur Cox Pro Bono Paralegal

Cara O'Donnell:
Mercy Law Resource Centre – Impact Statement



It has been a privilege to support the work of the MLRC Resource team over the past six months and I am grateful to Arthur Cox for giving me the opportunity to work as a paralegal secondee and contribute to the Centre's impactful work.

Casework

A significant proportion of MLRC's work involves the provision of legal advice and representation to individuals who are facing an unlawful barrier to accessing social housing supports. In light of the severe housing crisis and rising homelessness figures, there has been an ever-increasing demand on the Centre's essential services. Even within the six months that I worked with the team, it was evident that the number of cases presenting to the Centre, and the severity of the challenges that these individuals faced, was increasing dramatically.

Individuals in need of legal support access MLRC's service through the Centre's phoneline, and in my role, I had experience answering the phones. Taking on this task near the beginning of my secondment was highly valuable as I gained insight into the types of cases that presented to the Centre. This experience greatly improved my critical legal skills, as I needed to ensure that I was asking callers the right questions, in order to relay the relevant information to the solicitors. My experience on the phones also taught me that the compassion and empathy offered by Centres such as MLRC to people at the margins of society is often as valuable as the practical legal support.

Many callers expressed gratitude to me for the opportunity to be listened to and empathised with, even before the provision of legal assistance.

In supporting the solicitors' casework, I was tasked with important and varied legal work, such as drafting briefs to counsel and affidavits, liaising with Local Authorities, and conducting urgent legal research. The collaborative and supportive culture in MLRC meant that I never hesitated to ask questions and received thoughtful, encouraging feedback on my work from the solicitors. During my secondment, MLRC was progressing a number of judicial reviews that were each at different stages. I therefore gained valuable insights into the Centre's litigation work as well as court procedures. I had the opportunity to attend an application for leave, a partial hearing, and a motion before the High Court.

I also gained an appreciation for the value of strategic litigation, as many of the cases that MLRC litigates hold the potential to achieve broader, systemic reform for their client base. For instance, the Centre was recently granted leave to challenge a decision of Tipperary County Council. The applicant's case is that she fled to a domestic violence refuge, and sought social housing supports in her own name. She was the told by the Council that she needed to surrender her interest in the home she had fled before being considered for supports in her own name. When she surrendered, the Council deemed that she had voluntarily surrendered a tenancy and as per an internal policy, she would be excluded from consideration for a social housing allocation for one year. A successful challenge to this policy will not only assist the Centre's individual client but hopefully eliminate this barrier for future victims of domestic violence who require social housing supports from this Council.

Policy Work

Having expressed a keen interest in policy work during my first few days at MLRC, the Centre made a significant effort to involve me in their important policy work. Currently, MLRC are analysing the legal issues that arise for victims of domestic violence residing in joint social housing tenancies. I was tasked with authoring the first draft of this advocacy document, which outlines our clients' experiences, analyses the relevant legislation and regulations, and proposes reform. Drafting this document provided me with invaluable experience in conducting legal analysis for the purpose of influencing government policy and legislative reform. As part of this project, I also led MLRC's communications with the Department of Housing, in respect of submitting the document to the Department once it is finalised by the Centre's solicitors. It was thus very exciting and motivating to know that the work I was undertaking had the potential to shape important legal reforms and hopefully redress some of the severe challenges facing victims of domestic violence in accessing housing supports.

"I consider myself to be lucky that I got an opportunity to work with MLRC. I was so pleased with how I was included in the projects. I am truly grateful that I got a chance to see what a healthy working environment looks like"

Arunima Bhattacharjee, Intern

"I absolutely loved my time at MLRC. It was incredibly rewarding to see the solicitors provide legal solutions for people in devastating situations. And, to watch people be properly listened to, sometimes for the first time."

Madailein Watters, Intern

"My six weeks at MLRC has given me a valuable insight into the difficulties that arise in public interest areas of the law, as well as how rewarding it can be to be able to make a positive change for somebody facing homelessness."

Camille Goberyte, Intern

Conclusion

Having entered this role immediately after finishing up my undergraduate studies, I don't believe that I could have found a better place to learn and develop my professional and legal skills. I am very grateful to everyone in the office for creating such an encouraging and welcoming environment within which to work and learn. The rigour and dedication with which every member of the team approaches their work, and their sincere commitment to improving the lives of their clients, has been inspiring. I am very grateful to the Centre, and to Arthur Cox, for providing me with the opportunity to contribute to the essential and meaningful work of MLRC.

08. Communications

MLRC embraces social media with a view to raising awareness and driving change through media and communications.

In 2024, we significantly expanded our public engagement and communications to raise awareness of homelessness and advocate for systemic change. Central to this effort was the launch of our policy report, "Excluded and Left Behind" and Annual Report in Autumn 2024. These garnered media attention due to the high-profile attendees that facilitated these events and the core messages that emerged from these events. In December 2024 MLRC published its 2024 newsletter.

Central to our communications efforts was the redevelopment of our website, made possible through a dedicated grant from ESB. The new website provides clear access to our services, policy reports, legal information and serves as a vital platform for public information and policy engagement.

We have actively used social media – Facebook, X (formerly twitter) and LinkedIn to amplify our message, share key insights and build a broader base of pubic and professional engagement. These forums allow us to highlight individual and systemic issues in real time, promote our events, publications and engage directly with the public, stakeholders and decision makers.

This year also marked an exciting appearance on national television and radio, This included a feature on MLRC's work on RTÉ's 6 o'clock and 9 o'clock news (Kate Heffernan, MLRC solicitor and Clara Dorman, MLRC Legal Secretary), a discussion on family homelessness on RTE's Drivetime radio (MLRC solicitor, Adam Boyle). Adam Boyle was also interviewed about government comments on homelessness on the Reboot Republic podcast.

These opportunities were instrumental in drawing attention to the worsening crisis in emergency accommodation access. By sharing frontline insights and human stories, we have helped to bring public focus to the urgency of these failures and the lived reality behind them.

Cara O'Donnell, Teresa Kelly and Kate Heffernan preparing for MLRC RTÉ TV news coverage.

In addition, we have contributed to panel discussions, using these forums to deepen public understanding of the legal, social and human rights dimensions of homelessness.

Through the media channels of digital, broadcast and print our core aim remains the same. We strive to highlight the experiences of homeless people or at risk of homelessness and to press for policy and legislative change that upholds the dignity, rights and justice of all.

Where to find us:

Website: https://mercylaw.ie/

Email: info@mercylaw.ie

Facebook: @MercyLawResourceCentre

LinkedIn: @mercy-law-resource-centre/

Instagram: @mercylawcentre

09. Governance

In 2024, MLRC was delighted to be a finalist in the "Small Charity, Big Impact" award category, in the Charities Institute of Ireland's Charity Excellence Awards 2024. The awards ceremony was held in the Mansion House in October 2024. Erika Hayes and Kate Heffernan attended on behalf of MLRC.

We were proud to obtain the 'Triple Lock' status from the Charities Institute of Ireland, signifying our commitment to good governance, best practice in fundraising and transparent financial reporting.

MLRC continues to be in full compliance with the requirements of the Q Standard for Independent Law Centres. We are appreciative of the support we get, through audit and recommendations from LQSI.

MLRC solicitors, Kate Heffernan and Erika Hayes at the Charities Institute of Ireland Charities Excellence Awards

CHARITIES INSTITUTE IRELAND
2024 TRIPLE LOCK MEMBER
Promoting Trust

LQSI
The Legal Quality Standard of Ireland
INDEPENDENT LAW CENTRE

Mercy Law Resource Centre CLG is registered as:

- An independent law centre with the Law Society of Ireland.
- A charity with the Revenue Commissioners (CHY No: 18698) and with the Charities Registration Authority (Charity Registration No: 20072254).
- A company limited by guarantee and not having share capital with the Companies Registration Office (Co. Reg. No: 471072).

MLRC is governed by a voluntary Board of Directors. The Board of Directors meets with the Managing Solicitor every six to eight weeks. In 2024, MLRC held 6 Board meetings. MLRC has two specialist Board sub-committees that meet between Board meetings; the Finance & Risk Committee and the Policy & Communications Committee. The Finance & Risk Committee comprises at least 2 Board members with expertise in finance and risk matters and is attended by the Managing Solicitor, Finance Administrator and Communications & Fundraising Lead. The Finance & Risk Committee met 6 times in 2024. The Policy & Communications Committee comprises 3 Board members and is attended by the MLRC Managing Solicitor and solicitor team.

Strategic Plan

In 2024 MLRC introduced its new 2024 – 2029 Strategic Plan. Our new Strategic Plan sets a clear and ambitious direction for the next five years. It is grounded in our commitment to human rights, dignity and equal access to justice-particularly for those most affected by homelessness, poverty and exclusion.

The plan sharpens our focus on systemic change, ensuring that our direct legal and advocacy work not only addresses individual needs but also challenges the structural barriers that produce inequality. Over the next five years we aim to further strengthen our impact in tackling homelessness.

The 2024-2029 Strategic Plan resulted from extensive consultation with our staff, Board and other stakeholders. The Board is regularly appraised of the progress towards achieving the goals as set out in the plan at each meeting.

Charities Governance Code

MLRC is registered with the Charities Regulator and is listed on the Public Register of Charities. The Charities Governance Code is the standard that a community, voluntary or charitable organisation is expected to maintain in order to effectively manage and control its affairs. MLRC is committed to meet the core standard as outlined in the Governance Code. MLRC operates in compliance with the Governance Code and is committed to continuing and further improving policies and procedures on an ongoing basis.

The Directors of the MLRC Board in 2024 were:

- Edward Gleeson, Chairperson since May 2022
- Dr Sarah Hamill, Director since September 2023
- Eamonn Casey – Retired April 2024
- Ciara McGrath – Director since 2009
- Tom O'Brien – Director since June 2023
- Annette O'Donnell - Director since June 2023
- Turlough O'Donnell S.C. – Retired September 2024
- Liam Twohig – Director since 2011
- Jill Farrelly – Director since July 2024
- Helena O'Donoghue – Director since September 2024
- Rebecca Keatinge – Director since February 2025

10. Finance

MLRC's financial year runs from 1st January to 31st December. The accounts are prepared in accordance with FRS 102 "The Financial Reporting Standard applicable in the UK and Republic of Ireland" and "Accounting and Reporting by Charities: Statement of Recommended Practice" (the Charities SORP) and is consistent with MLRC's commitment to best practice in financial reporting and accountability.

MLRC are committed to best fundraising practices, promoting high levels of accountability and transparency, and providing clarity and assurances to donors and prospective donors. MLRC adheres to the Charities Regulator's Guidelines for Charitable Organisations and on Fundraising from the Public. MLRC also complies with the Charities Institute Standards.

This annual report incorporates the Balance Sheet as an extract from the audited accounts for the years ended 31st December 2024 and 2023 respectively.

Cost of our service

The cost of running MLRC for the financial year 2024 amounted to €461,815 seeing an increase of approx 22% on the running cost from the previous financial year. MLRC's total income for 2024 was €379,969 which was down by approximately 7% on the comparable period for 2023.

MLRC's 2024 income comprised of donations €200,395 grants €99,558 legal cost settlement €69,511 and the remainder derived from delivering training on housing and social welfare law and general fundraising.

The value of our service far exceeds the cost as a result of a large number of in-kind donations we receive for example:

- Reduced rent & utilities
- Free conference and reception facilities
- Pro bono legal services by Barristers
- Pro bono expert reports from Doctors/ Engineers etc.
- Volunteers & Interns

Our Main costs include:

- Payroll and associated employer cost for Legal & Administration staff
- Office Expenses to include: Rent incorporating light & heat; Telephone & Broadband; Postage & Courier; Stationery & Office supplies; Photocopying & Printing; Cleaning & Maintenance.
- Insurance (Professional Indemnity, Employer & Public Liability)
- ICT Expenditure
- Project costs to include:

- Client outlay
- Volunteer & Intern Expenses
- Training
- Casework Research
- Policy Research
- Publication and launch of Reports & Information
- Training materials

Appendix: Finance Report

	1st January to 31st December 2024	1st January to 31st December 2023
Fixed Assets		
Tangible Assets	1,708	1,314
	1,708	**1,314**
Current Assets		
Debtors	19,403	5,912
Cash at bank and in hand	454,715	475,098
	474,118	**481,010**
Creditors: Amounts falling due within one year	(108,691)	(33,343)
Net Current Assets	**365,427**	**447,667**
Total Assets less Current Liabilities	**367,135**	**448,981**
Funds		
Restricted Trust Funds	0	0
General Fund (Unrestricted)	**367,135**	**448,981**
Total Funds	**367,135**	**448,981**

*The 2024 & 2023 financial statements have been prepared in accordance with the Companies Act 2014, FRS 102 "The Financial Reporting Standard applicable in the UK and Republic of Ireland" and Accounting and Reporting by Charities: Statement of Recommended Practice applicable to charities preparing their financial statements in accordance with the Financial Reporting Standard applicable in the UK and Republic of Ireland (FRS 102).

Signed on the Board's behalf by:

Edward Gleeson, Trustee and Chairperson

Liam Twohig,Trustee

Funders

MLRC would like to acknowledge and thank our funders for their generous support in 2024. MLRC's funders are a combination of corporations, philanthropic organisations and individuals.

In particular, we would like to extend our sincere gratitude to the Sisters of Mercy who have substantially supported our legal service from inception, and to our other major donors in 2024, Religious of Christian Education Archdiocese of Dublin, POBAL, Mason Hayes & Curran and A&L Goodbody.

We are extremely grateful to every organisation and individual who supported our work in 2024, whether through financial or in-kind donations, pro-bono services or volunteering.

Our main funders in 2024 include:

The Sisters of Mercy
Religious of Christian Education
Archdiocese of Dublin
Pobal – SSNO
Mason Hayes & Curran
A&L Goodbody
IHREC
ESB Energy for Generation Fund
Christian Brothers – Edmund Rice Fund

Administered by The Community Foundation Ireland:

- RTE Toy Show Appeal
- Donor Opportunity Fund

Acknowledgements

The value of our services far exceeds the cost as a result of the large number of donations and pro-bono support that we receive. MLRC would like to acknowledge and thank all those who provide services to us.

Sophia Housing
We are particularly grateful to Sophia housing, who support our service in a number of ways, including provision of free conference and reception facilities.

Barristers and Pro Bono support
We would like to extend our sincere gratitude to the following barristers who provided us with pro-bono opinions, drafting and advocacy before the courts and tribunals:

Helen Callanan SC
Nuala Egan SC
Sunniva McDonagh SC
Colin Smith SC
Alan DP Brady SC
Eoin Coffey BL
Marie Flynn BL
Lewis Mooney BL
Deirdre Moore BL
Sharon Dillon-Lyons BL
Cillian Bracken BL
James Rooney BL
Céile Varley BL
Hilary Hogan BL
Deirdre Lynch BL
Sean Beatty BL
Rachael O'Byrne BL

Auditor
Thank you to RBK Chartered Accountant's & Business Advisors, who audited our Financial Reports.

Volunteers
Volunteer Katie Northridge from Sophia for ad hoc help with administrative work.

2024 Interns and work experience:
- Cara O'Donnell (Arthur Cox)
- Holly Leech (ALG)
- Conall Maher (ALG)
- Darcy Saville (NUIG)
- Arunima Bhattacharjee (DCU)
- Rhiannon Camarillo (The CIEE Global Internship program)
- Madailein Watters (TCD)
- Camille Goberyte (UCD)

Annual Report Designer:
Whitespacedesign.ie

Providing free legal advice and representation to people who are homeless or at risk of homelessness.

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Twitter: @MLRCLaw
Linkedin: @mercy-law-resource-centre/

Mercy Law
Resource Centre