

Legal need in mental health services:

A data snapshot

As highlighted through COVID-19, the challenges of everyday life – money issues, housing, employment, family issues and interactions with government systems can affect and be affected by mental health [1]. While effective clinical care is essential to supporting people through diverse challenges, there has been increasing recognition that other disciplines and services can contribute by addressing specific areas of need that interact with mental health [2].

Neami National is a community-based organisation providing services around Australia to improve mental health and wellbeing in local communities. Neami’s employees include peer support workers, clinical staff, and other support worker roles who assist consumers with a range of issues that can impact on mental health.

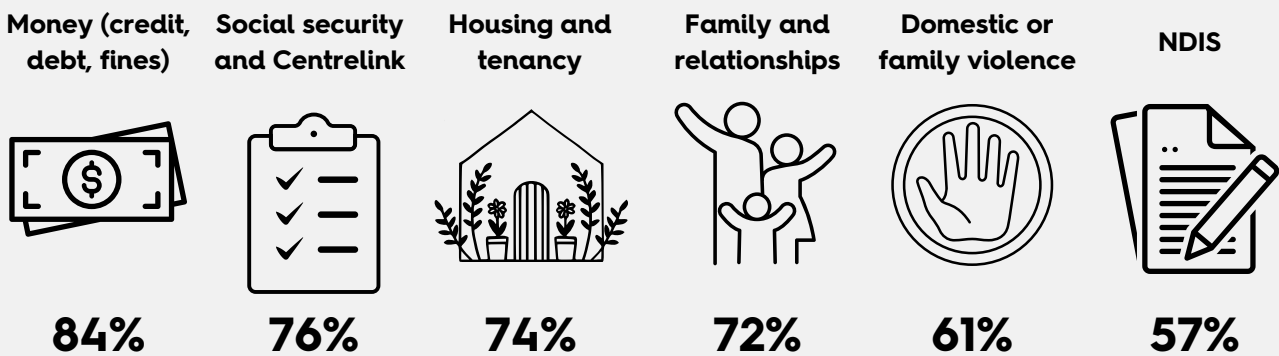
But to what extent do consumer legal issues arise in these services and how equipped do staff feel to respond?

To find out, Neami and Health Justice Australia conducted a survey of all 999 service site staff, with 146 respondents (14.6%) across 70 Neami services. Nearly half of all respondents were peer support workers, 20% were support workers, 17% managers/team leaders and 15% clinical workers. This snapshot presents top level findings about:

- the types of legal issues that staff see their consumers experiencing
- whether staff feel they ‘have enough’ connections, skills, knowledge, confidence, remit and resources to address those issues when they arise.

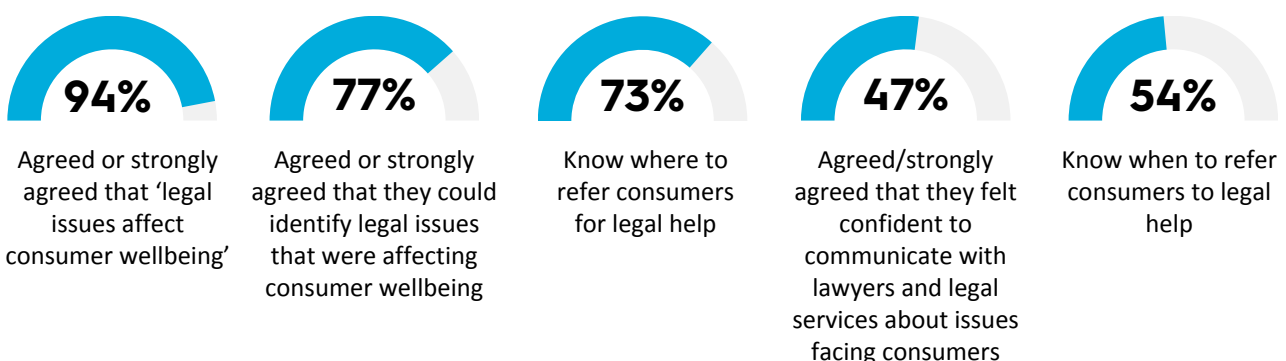
Legal issues experienced by consumers using Neami services

The survey indicates the wide range of legal issues that staff see affecting many parts of consumers’ lives. The top six issues that were seen by workers ‘sometimes’ (for around 50% of consumers) or ‘frequently’ (around 70% of consumers) were:



Criminal law issues, which commonly come to mind when people think ‘legal’ or ‘justice’ were less commonly seen. Just over four in 10 (42%) indicated that consumers sometimes or frequently were victims of crime, while 37% sometimes or frequently supported consumers who were charged or dealing with criminal matters.

Attitudes of Neami staff to legal issues of consumers



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What Neami staff need to respond to legal issues

The survey also explored whether Neami staff feel they 'have enough' or 'need (a bit, some or a lot) more' resources or capabilities to respond to legal issues affecting consumers.

Staff indicated that more connection was needed most.

More than three-quarters of all respondents also indicated they needed more processes, tools and resources to link consumers to other support services (82%) together with trust in those services (76%).

The findings suggest that while staff capability (e.g. knowledge about the types of legal issues (73%), skills (68%) and confidence (63%)) are key to addressing legal issues, so too are contextual factors such as time to spend on these issues (71%) and remit with their role (64%).

Connections with local communities



86%

Connections with other organisations



88%

Knowledge of other services



84%

Three key takeaways

1

Consumers of Neami services experience diverse issues that could be supported with legal help, particularly related to money, housing, family and interactions with government, social security and NDIA/NDIS.

2

Neami staff see the impact of legal issues on consumers' wellbeing but only half know where to refer or have the confidence to speak to lawyers about legal issues facing their consumers.

3

While knowledge, skills and confidence/trust were important, staff felt that they most needed more connections with professionals in other organisations and more connections with the communities that they serve in order to support consumers experiencing legal issues. The remit and time provided by services is also key to staff responding to the socio-legal issues that impact health.

Citation: Health Justice Australia & Neami National (2022) Legal need in mental health services: a data snapshot, Health Justice Australia, Sydney.

1. Balmer, N. and P. Pleasence, Mental health, legal problems and the impact of changes to the legal aid scheme: Secondary analysis of 2014-2015 legal problem resolution survey data. 2018, PPSR (Pascoe Pleasence Ltd.): Cambridge: United Kingdom.
2. Nagy, M. and S. Forell, Legal help as mental healthcare, in Health Justice Insights. 2020, Health Justice Australia: Sydney.

Updated in March 2024.

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