

Ryan Gallagher - Two days per month with the Personal Support Unit

Approximately one day every two weeks, I volunteer in Family Court for the Personal Support Unit. The PSU exists to offer practical and emotional support for unrepresented litigants in the court system. The vast majority of litigants in Family Court do not qualify for legal aid and many cannot afford legal representation.

PSU volunteers cannot give legal advice but we can signpost clients to law centres, CABx and organisations such as the Bar Pro Bono Unit who may do so. However we can help in other ways. Prior to a court hearing I might help a client to structure their bundle, or help write a position statement.

Family Court hearings are generally not open to the public, but PSU volunteers are afforded special access. We regularly accompany clients in their hearings and clients feel that our presence makes it less of an ordeal.

When I attend a hearing as a PSU volunteer, I am not permitted to speak for the client. What I can do is to be a reassuring presence and help them to stay calm. This means they are more able to articulate their viewpoint to the judge or magistrate. At the end of the hearing the judge or magistrate will issue their directions to the parties and I may need to explain these in 'lay terms' for the client.

Every placement day I have at least one hearing and sometimes up to three. PSU clients range from the eloquent to those with limited literacy and language ability. Every day is different and it is never boring. It is not for the faint-hearted, as you will hear serious and disturbing allegations being made by the parties.

Apart from PSU clients, there is another section of society who will appreciate you, and that is the judiciary. Judges in Family Court go out of their way to acknowledge the presence of a PSU volunteer. This is because we make judges' professional lives easier and may prevent unnecessary delay. Judges increasingly face unrepresented litigants behaving unreasonably, not following judicial directions, causing delay and even verbally abusing court staff. Judges find that the presence of PSU volunteers means that clients enter the court room calmer, with an idea of what will happen and with an idea of the issues the judge is interested in.

What have I gained from this experience as a law student? The concept of supporting clients through legal proceedings has never seemed less intimidating than now. I feel confident in understanding the procedure of court hearings. I have also gained insights from observing how legal professionals negotiate in the corridor, as well as how judges skilfully question unrepresented litigants to test their evidence. The fascinating experience of seeing how judges interact with counsel in hearings cannot be substituted by reading about it in a textbook.

The PSU is no replacement for legal advice and legal representation. An unrepresented litigant with a PSU volunteer has no equality of arms with a litigant instructing counsel. However, as a PSU volunteer you can make our unfair civil justice system less unfair.