

TLA Client Engagement Strategy Launch Speech
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[How did you become a client advisor at TLA?]

Good morning, I would first like to say that I am only one voice among countless, and that I represent a demographic which doesn't speak for various others and for that I feel privileged. Because I am only one person, I would like to encourage other TLA clients and any and all victim-survivors, to consider speaking up about your experiences whether that's within the legal system or otherwise. We all have important things to say, we all deserve to be heard, and together we can make a difference.

I became a client advisor with TLA after providing feedback, twice, about both of the Family Dispute Resolution conferences I was involved with as a client.

The FDR process was the first time I had ever had anything to do with lawyers, and I had no idea what to expect, especially as a terrified, vulnerable, victim-survivor trying to navigate the world of Family Law. Because of my naivety of the legal system and a lack of understanding at the time about my personal experience of family violence, I wasn't able to articulate the negative impacts that the FDR experience caused. I only knew that it didn't feel right and I wished I could help make it better for others.

Engender Equality (a family violence specialist service) helped me to understand what I had experienced, so that I could actually name what happened to me and what I was going through. That was incredibly empowering. With language and greater understanding, I was able to tell my story and identify abusive behaviour. I eventually went on to become an Advocate for Change with Engender Equality where I engage in media advocacy, public speaking and lobbying for change to prevent family and sexual violence.

After providing feedback of my experience, TLA's response was overwhelmingly positive. Rather than try to deny or shift blame, TLA took accountability and really listened to what I had to say. They made me feel heard and validated. And more than that, they made me feel like my lived-experience was valuable too.

I was invited by TLA to provide feedback on their ICL guidelines review. After that, the opportunity to join an advisory board as a client of the FDR conference process arose. More recently, through Engender Equality's Advocacy program, I was able to provide substantial feedback on the Amendments Bill for the Family Law Act which aims to centre more on the best interests of children and protecting victim-survivors.

[What do you have to do as a client advisor?]

As a client advisor, I am part of TLA's Family Violence Reform Group, all of whom have experienced various challenges with TLA's services, specifically the FDR process, and we are all victim-survivors of family violence. As such, we were all given the opportunity to share our experiences and speak freely about the areas we felt we were let down by TLA and the legal system more broadly. It was very emotional but also incredibly validating. I feel we are united by our shared experiences, and

respected and listened to by TLA. Our stories are taken very seriously and we were asked what changes we would like to see.

Our expert opinions have been sought about a range of specific functions within the FDR process including, initial screening and questionnaires; how much time clients have with their lawyers; improved shuttle safety; clearer guidelines around support people; and specialist services being utilised to train and educate TLA staff about the intricacies and subtleties around family violence.

This is a really important factor, as many victim-survivors aren't even aware that they have been experiencing family violence until behaviour escalates at the point of separation or shortly after. FDR conferences are usually recommended to clients whom a standard mediation is deemed unsuitable or ineffective. Therefore, it is even more critical that any TLA staff supporting victim-survivors are on the lookout for abusive behaviour and system-manipulation by perpetrators. Collaboration with family violence specialist services is also important to ensure victim-survivors are supported in a safe environment and to avoid re-traumatisation.

[What are the benefits of client engagement for you individually and for TLA?]

My experience as a client advisor to TLA has been incredibly rewarding, even healing. TLA have been very responsive since embarking on their Strategic Plan in 2020. I have felt heard and valued for my unique lived-experience which has been empowering. Conversely, I feel grateful to think that my involvement may help bring powerful change for other victim-survivors navigating the system.

For TLA, I feel they are blazing the way for real change. And that takes real courage. It's important that Tasmanian's who don't have access to resources have services like TLA who will listen to and advocate for them and their children, and also embed voices like mine.

TLA are in a particularly privileged position to serve and defend some of the most vulnerable Tasmanian's who wouldn't otherwise be able to access legal support due to their financial situation. When considering the intersectionality often faced by victim-survivors, such as financial dependence on their perpetrator, this means that family violence victim-survivors are especially reliant on services such as TLA, and without them many people simply wouldn't have access to legal support.

I never imagined that through speaking up about my own experience with TLA, I would be able to effectively help to change the outcomes of countless victim-survivors who come after me. Because I am not the last victim-survivor, and it's critical that the most influential powers in our society really take the time to learn exactly what family violence looks like, so that everyone can identify it and prevent further abuse and finally break the cycle.

Additionally, we need family violence specialist services, like Engender Equality, to be supported and fully-funded by the government to provide education and training to sectors, like justice, who play an important role in combatting family violence in Tasmania. We can't advocate for change if we don't understand the problem and fixing the problem means taking steps like TLA have done with their strategy to listen to the voices of victim-survivors and embed their feedback in their work. I am hopeful that this leads the way for greater change.

Thank you.