



NEWS RELEASE

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National community mediation pilot scheme launches in Waitakere

Waitakere Community Law Service today officially launches a pilot community mediation service – a national first – in association with LEADR NZ.

The not-for-profit LEADR NZ is New Zealand's leading dispute resolution organisation that undertakes the training, representation and accreditation of mediation professionals.

Under the pilot scheme, a panel of up to 30 LEADR-accredited mediators will help with the free resolution of disputes arising from the community that are referred by the law centre.

They are likely to be issues that can't be resolved using standard legal processes, the value of the dispute is \$20,000 or less, and no other low-cost mediation service exists to resolve them.

LEADR NZ chair Carol Powell says the types of referred disputes are expected to include: adult siblings disagreeing about the care and financial assets of elderly parents; flatmate disputes; consumer and private sale disputes; and neighbour disagreements over such issues as shared driveways, fences, barking or aggressive dogs, and late-night partying.

The pilot will be reviewed after six months, and then after 12 months.

"We are delighted that a community mediation service is finally underway in New Zealand," says Ms Powell.

"We've tried several times in the past to get one off the ground but this time the Waitakere Community Law Service approached us, identifying the need for mediation. So we are very hopeful of its success because it's come at their request."

Ms Powell, Anet Kate, a LEADR mediation coach and senior mediator, and Cissy Rock, the former manager of the Waitakere Community Law Service (who is now a Community Development Broker at Waitakere City Council) were instrumental in establishing the pilot scheme.

The team at Waitakere Community Law Service are also "very hopeful and very excited" at the scheme's possibilities: "We deal with a lot of people whose problems don't have a clear legal solution to them. Mediation offers a way for people to resolve often difficult issues in their lives and yet preserve important relationships at the same time."

Ms Powell says that the panel of LEADR-accredited mediators who have agreed to be involved in the free service (they will be reimbursed for petrol and parking money only) will gain much from the scheme too.

"This is a great opportunity for relatively newly-qualified mediators to get some mediations under their belts and to build on their skill base, with the support of LEADR.

"They will raise their own personal profile in the community, which may mean other work that is paid comes their way. They will also benefit from the 'feel-good' factor of helping to spread the good word about mediation."

Ms Powell says that a number of very experienced mediators have also committed to the scheme; they will help to debrief, train and co-mediate with the mediators on the panel.

The Waitakere pilot is loosely modeled on community mediation schemes in other parts of the world, including the well-established Community Dispute Resolution Center (CDRC) in New York State in the USA (www.cdrc.org), which has been operating since the early 1980s. Last year, CDRC worked with close to 4,400 people.

Mediation is increasingly recognised as a viable alternative to litigation or arbitration, Ms Powell says. It is a fast, low-cost, confidential process in which the parties to a dispute, with the help of the mediator, together identify disputed issues, develop options, consider alternatives and endeavour to reach an agreement.

“Mediation can potentially save enormous amounts of time, money and emotional stress – and prevent incalculable damage to key relationships such as in family, business or neighbour disputes.

“The great value of mediation is that it offers a peaceful and constructive way of resolving conflict. The people involved know best what’s gone wrong, and they are the ones who are best placed to decide how their dispute is resolved.”

Ms Powell says there is great potential to replicate the Waitakere pilot elsewhere in New Zealand.

“Several other community law centres have already contacted LEADR expressing interest in the pilot, which is great from our point of view. The plan is to get the Waitakere scheme up and running as a prototype and, once we have a process that works well, to roll it out wherever there is interest.”

For more about LEADR NZ, see <http://www.leadr.co.nz>

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