

Impact Report

2023



women's legal
service victoria

About us

**WE HELP WOMEN
EXPERIENCING FAMILY
VIOLENCE TO FIND
SAFETY AND GET
LEGAL ASSISTANCE.**

Our lawyers, social workers and financial counsellors work with you to make sure that you have what you need to make decisions for yourself and your children, gain independence and financial stability.

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Women's Legal Service Victoria is located on the traditional lands of the Wurundjeri people of the Kulin nation. We recognise Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples' continuing connection to land, water and community and pay respect to their Elders past and present. Sovereignty was never ceded.



Women's Legal Service is committed to providing safe and inclusive support.

Chair and CEO Report

This year we significantly revitalised our service delivery model to improve access to legal help in our efforts to create a society free from gender-based violence.

Our new strategy – which draws on our legacy and strengths – comes at a critical time.

Demand for legal assistance and family violence support continues to exceed available services.

Challenges in our community, including the cost-of-living crisis, the enduring effects of the pandemic and lack of affordable housing, are contributing to increasing demand for our services.

In this context, enduring, widespread misconceptions regarding gender-based violence and the experiences of victim-survivors, serve as obstacles that deter women from seeking assistance.

In response, we have expanded our services so more women from across Victoria can access legal, financial and practical support to live free from violence.

Better access

Timely access to legal assistance significantly improves a woman’s ability to get the support they need to find safety and recover. It also eases the burden of dealing with our Family Law and Child Protection systems, which are stressful to navigate.

We received over 300 inquiries in the first few months of our website and phone intake service opening, highlighting the immense demand for help.

We have developed a responsive service delivery model focused on supporting women experiencing family violence to overcome barriers to justice, such as homelessness and visa uncertainty.

And in March, we launched the Victim Legal Service, delivering support to victims of crime in partnership with Victoria Legal Aid and other community legal centres.

Recognising diverse needs

We understand women may need more than legal help. In response, we have doubled our social work team. This work is integral to supporting the safety of our clients and includes family violence risk assessments and safety planning, family violence recovery supports, outreach and court support as well as advocacy with housing and specialist health and wellbeing services.

Our social workers are especially important now that women can contact us directly. We have found we are often the first service contacted by a victim-survivor of family violence, including women who need help to leave violent relationships.

As ever, our financial counselling team has been crucial in supporting clients with their non-legal needs resulting in improved economic security.

Simultaneously and holistically addressing non-legal need results in improved and more sustainable legal outcomes for women.

Partnerships strengthen support

We know that partnership is key to strengthening the system response to family violence and preventing gendered violence.

We’ve improved accessibility to secondary consults, providing 957 services to help workers support the needs and wellbeing of the women they are working with.

Our Education and Engagement team continue to offer high quality training to lawyers, family violence workers and financial counsellors.

Sustaining support

Scaling up our services to improve outcomes for women is made possible by significant investment from the Federal Government as well as the Victorian Government and Victoria Legal Aid.

Ongoing funding is key if we are to sustain the impact of our enhanced service model, which is providing vital free legal to women to navigate complex family violence, family law, migration, victims of crime and child protection systems.

Teamwork

Most importantly, we could not do the work we do, nor achieve meaningful outcomes, without our exceptional team. Whether they’re working in the operations team, policy and communications, education or the legal team, every staff member contributes to the organisation’s positive impact on the lives of women across Victoria.

The past year has been marked by resilience, growth, and unwavering dedication to our purpose. We want to acknowledge that it has been a period of significant change in the organisation and extend our sincere thanks to Marg Hamley and Fran O’Toole for their interim leadership.

New leadership

In March, we welcomed five new board directors through a competitive recruitment process, ensuring a diverse and skilled group of women is guiding our important work. Rochna Banerjee, Tania Farha, Laura John, Trish Mitra-Kahn and Sue Timbs joined existing board directors Jane Welsh, Adrienne Walters and Kathryn Brown to provide strategic governance and oversight.

We are immensely thankful to outgoing Board directors Trish Low and Mia Lloyd for their years of service and generous contributions.

The new leadership team, led by Claudia Fatone who started as CEO in April, and the Board are committed to ensuring our culture is one of inclusivity and collaboration. This was showcased as staff came together to review and renew our shared values.

Looking ahead

This report outlines the many achievements of Women’s Legal in 2023 and celebrates the dedication of our team in championing women’s rights, providing critical legal assistance, and striving for a more just and equitable society for all.

Further service design work and collaboration with sector partners is planned for next year to build on this year’s work and continue to expand access.

In addition to responding to the legal needs of women, the experiences of our clients will inform our advocacy for laws and the legal system to put safety first and better recognise the needs of victim-survivors of family violence.

Women’s Legal will continue to be here for women, with passion, empathy, skill and courage.

Our vision of a society free from gendered violence is not only a matter of ethics and human rights but also vital for societal wellbeing.



Claudia Fatone
CEO



Jane Welsh
Chair

Our Strategic Goals

1



To be a person-centred organisation that recognises and respects women as the experts in their own life.

2



To deliver diverse services and programs to support women’s safety, recovery and economic security.

3



To drive social change to create a safer and gender equal society.

4



To be a strong and flexible organisation with a diverse team.



Our impact in numbers

Of the women we supported last financial year



8 out of 10 → say legal advice informed decisions about their legal issue
 → accessed our assistance when they first needed it



2384
 benefited from our free legal help

370

received ongoing casework for family violence, family law, child protection, migration and victims of crime



93%

understood the legal advice they received

91%

felt listened to and understood

88%

say legal advice helped to understand their legal issue and options available



100 women

supported by our social workers



76 women

supported by our financial counsellors



Barriers to justice faced by the women we support

13% of women we work with are from regional and outer metro regions of Victoria

3% of women we work with are Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander
1% of Victorians are Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander

Xin chào
 hola
 Nǐ hǎo
 Marhaban

4 in 10 women we work with speak a language other than English

- Mandarin 44%
- Vietnamese 19%
- Hindi 14%
- Arabic 12%
- Spanish 11%

41% of women we work with have a migrant, refugee or non-English speaking background
13% of Victorians have a migrant, refugee or non-English speaking background

54%

of women we work with experience financial disadvantage



15%

of women we work with don't have a permanent home or are at risk of experiencing homelessness



4%

of Victorians currently experience homelessness



24%

of women we work with live with a disability

Education and Training Impact

165 lawyers trained in best-practice family violence response

1147 people working with women at risk of or experiencing family violence trained to identify legal issues





Rachel Shulkes

We prioritise support for women who:

- › have no or low income
- › do not have secure housing
- › are Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander
- › do not speak English or speak English as a second language
- › are on a temporary visa or do not have a visa
- › live with disability
- › care for children with disability

Reflections from a social worker

Before opening our intake, the only way that women could access our service was through a referral from another service. However, from experience, we know that there are huge numbers of women who are not linked in with services like this. Moreover, these services are facing huge demand.

Even for those women who are receiving support services, obtaining a referral to Women’s Legal relies on (1) the support practitioner knowing that there are critical legal issues that need referral to a legal professional, and (2) knowing that our organisation provides relevant services.

By allowing clients to seek support directly from our organisation, we are eliminating some of these barriers.

One example of this can be seen in the experience of a vision-impaired client, to whom we provided legal advice. She was not receiving any support services and did not have an intervention order against her partner. Her partner had sought advice from a lawyer and was beginning property proceedings. She was afraid of what she would lose through the process.

Due to her disability and the absence of receiving any support, it would not have been easy for her to access family law advice without our intake service.

A direct line to support

Women can now use our website or call us to directly ask for support.

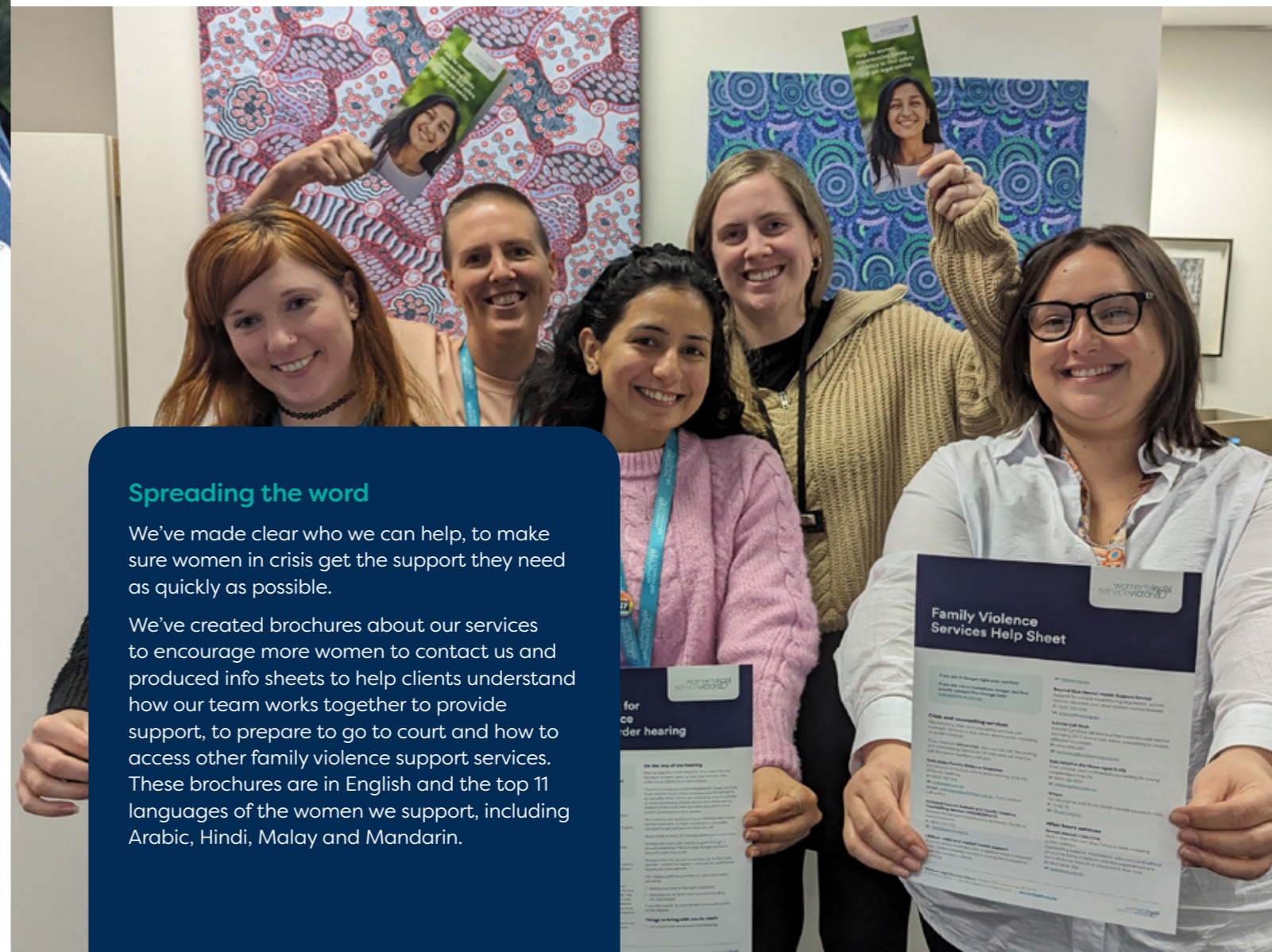
We know that providing someone with legal assistance as they are considering leaving an abusive relationship significantly improves their ability to get what they need to live free from violence.

There are many legal issues that come from family violence, like agreeing to safely look after children, splitting up cars or bank accounts, organising a new visa or living arrangement and making sure the bills are paid.

In addition to receiving referrals from organisations working with women at risk of or experiencing family violence, women can directly seek legal help through our website and phone intake service.

Since being directly accessible to the public in March 2023, 300 women (aged from 21 to 66 years old) contacted us directly, demonstrating the huge demand for our service.

Where we are not able to assist, we help women navigate the legal sector through referrals.



Spreading the word

We’ve made clear who we can help, to make sure women in crisis get the support they need as quickly as possible.

We’ve created brochures about our services to encourage more women to contact us and produced info sheets to help clients understand how our team works together to provide support, to prepare to go to court and how to access other family violence support services. These brochures are in English and the top 11 languages of the women we support, including Arabic, Hindi, Malay and Mandarin.



Flexible, tailored support for legal and non-legal needs

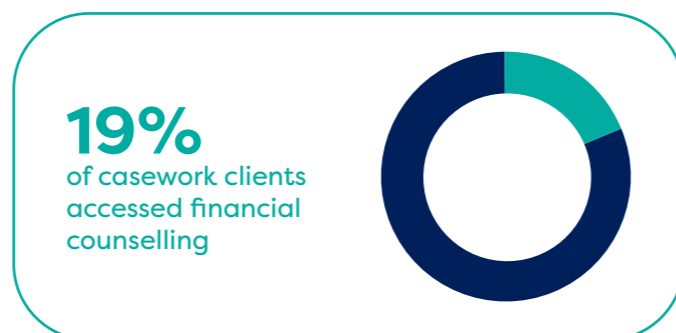
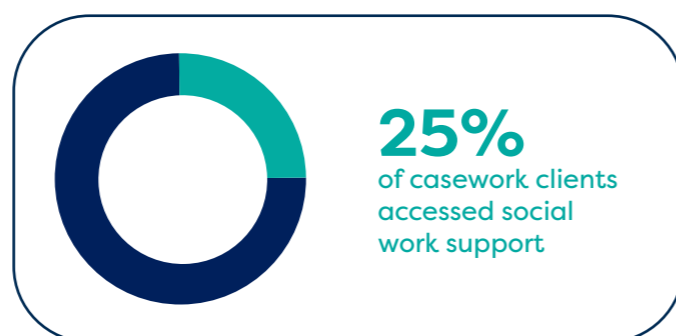
Our lawyers work together with social workers and financial counsellors to make sure that women have what they need to make decisions for themselves and their family, gain independence financial stability and security.

As more and more clients come to us who are not yet linked with, or supported by, family violence or case management services, we have doubled the size of our social work team and now have a social worker on-call each day to respond to women in crisis situations and support the staff working with them.

Our financial counselling team have been crucial in supporting clients with their non-legal needs as high inflation, the housing crisis and financial stress, exacerbated by the pandemic, continue to entrench the disadvantage faced by our clients.

In the final months of the financial year, we introduced an emergency brokerage fund allowing us to help clients in immediate crisis with necessities such as groceries, nappies, phone and Myki credit.

Seven women have so far accessed this support, using it to buy food and pay for transport to court. More than half of the women who accessed these funds spoke a language other than English at home and most were unemployed with little to no income.



Margaret's story

A woman takes steps to live independently with her son after years of abuse.

Margaret* had been in a relationship with Paul, the father of her son, for 10 years. She experienced significant physical violence and financial abuse throughout the relationship. Paul had been engaged in criminal activity and the pair had a significant drug history.

Due to the violence, Margaret disengaged from the community and her son stopped going to school. This led to the removal of Margaret's son from her care. When this happened, Margaret relapsed, after not using drugs for a year.

As Margaret took steps to live independently with her son, Women's Legal provided legal support. Alongside Margaret's lawyer, our senior financial counsellor worked to manage fines and debts in Margaret's name, liaising with Centrelink, accessing insurance entitlements and applying for grants. Margaret said that for the first time in years she was not afraid to answer the phone because of this help.

One of our social workers ensured that specialist services were engaged to help support Margaret, on top of weekly safety planning.

"Every Friday Brianna would call and make sure I had a plan for the weekend to keep me safe, nobody else did that".*

The social worker partnered with Margaret's lawyer to prepare evidence-based submissions to address the concerns of Victoria's Department of Families, Fairness and Housing which had removed Margaret's son from her care. This submission set Margaret and her son on a path to reunification.

After six months, the Department withdrew from Margaret's case. The initial position of the Department had been to keep Margaret's son in care for a minimum of 12 months.

Our financial counsellors, social workers and lawyers working together - greatly improved the legal outcome of Margaret's matter.

Margaret is now living independently, with a non-contact Family Violence Intervention Order in place to protect her and her son, and is well supported to continue this positive path.

* Names and image changed to protect our client and staff identity



Emma O'Neill

Reflections from a Women's Legal lawyer

My team works with women to access financial assistance for expenses incurred, or likely to be incurred, because of a violent crime.

It is up to the Victims of Crime Assistance Tribunal (VOCAT) to decide what the compensation could be – a lump sum payment, or reimbursement for medical or other supports a woman has had to pay for because of the crime.

We have found that the current system throws up many challenges for victim-survivors of family violence. For instance, to access compensation, the crime must have been reported to the police within a reasonable time, and an application for assistance should be made within two years of the crime being committed.

Due to the complex and traumatic nature of family violence and sexual assault, many of our clients may not have reported the crime to police within what is usually considered a reasonable time, or at all. There may also be a delay between when the crime was committed and when the client is applying to VOCAT.

My team and I advocate to VOCAT on behalf of women in these circumstances, particularly in cases where women may not have the skills or systems knowledge to do so themselves.

The Victims Legal Service not only helps victims of violent crime access assistance from VOCAT; we also refer clients to other programs or services that they may be eligible for, such as the National Redress Scheme for victims of childhood sexual abuse.

New partnership delivers support to victims of crime

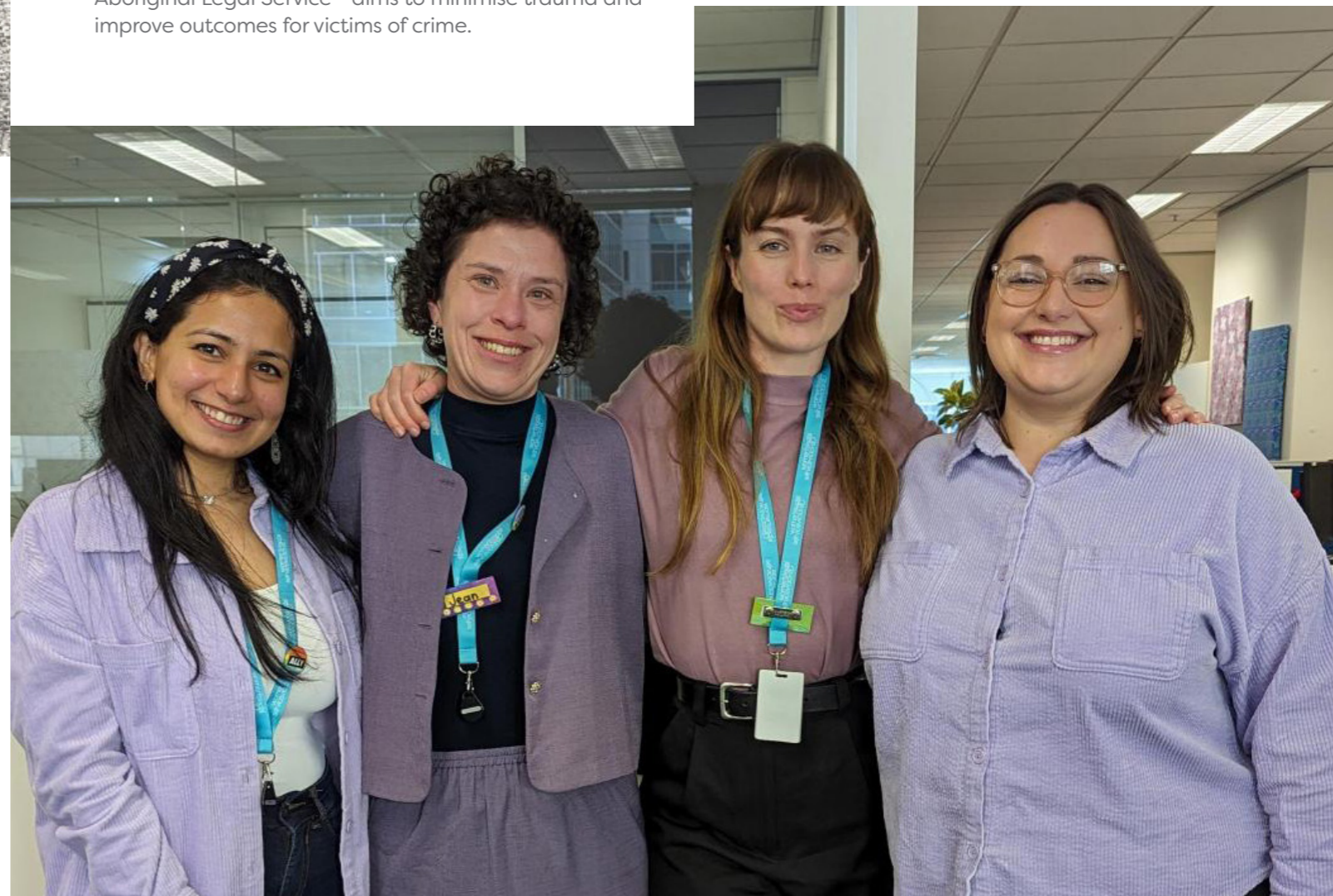
Our new Victims Legal Service delivers free legal advice and support to women who have suffered injury or loss because of a violent crime.

In its first few months of operation, the Service provided 44 women with information services and 24 women with legal advice appointments.

The new service - a collaboration between Victoria Legal Aid, Community Legal Centres and the Victorian Aboriginal Legal Service - aims to minimise trauma and improve outcomes for victims of crime.

We take a 'no wrong door approach', which means that victims of crime can access this service through the organisation they are in touch with. A range of services can also make direct referrals, including:

- > victim support services
- > family violence and sexual assault providers
- > Aboriginal community-controlled organisations
- > other community organisations.



Partnering to expand legal assistance in Melbourne's West

Over the past two years, our team worked with Brimbank Melton, Barwon and WEstJustice community legal centres to support, train and mentor their lawyers to provide best-practice family law services to their communities.

The project – which was independently evaluated – successfully increased access to local family law assistance. Now, more people experiencing disadvantage in Melbourne's west and Greater Geelong are able to receive comprehensive legal assistance to establish a safe and secure future for themselves and their families. Without the project, many women experiencing family violence and separation would have otherwise missed out.



The results were far-reaching, with all three community legal centres establishing and running sustainable family law practices by the end of the project. This success illustrates the benefits of Women's Legal (a specialist community legal centre) collaborating to build the collective capacity of the sector to respond to a known area of high unmet legal need.

The project has also provided new and rewarding professional development pathways for lawyers, with the participating community legal centres reflecting on how the project supported transformation of their legal practices.

Given persistent unmet family law legal need in Victoria, in the coming year, Women's Legal will scale up the project. We will work with five new community legal centres to establish family law litigation and casework services. This pilot provides a successful blueprint for collaboration in the sector to expand access to legal help for people experiencing family violence and family law legal problems.



Training puts legal support front of mind for family violence workers

This year, we trained 1,147 social workers, financial counsellors and family violence support workers to:

- > identify legal issues and provide legal information
- > provide legal information
- > support their clients to navigate the legal system
- > connect with legal assistance

On average, 9 out of 10 people who undertook this training told us it was relevant and useful because it improved their ability to:

- > Distinguish between legal advice and legal information
- > Provide appropriate legal information
- > Provide appropriate and targeted referrals
- > Prepare clients for court and meeting with their lawyer

"I feel I have more knowledge and will be able to support clients to get legal advice"

Training participant

"I will feel more confident in referring clients for legal advice"

Training participant



Participants saw improvements in their ability to identify legal issues relating to:

89%

Family violence intervention laws

94%

Family law, property

96%

Family law, parenting and children

86%

Child protection

A decade training for Safer Families

This year marks the tenth year Women’s Legal has delivered Safer Families - training for lawyers across the state that contributes to better support for victim-survivors of family violence.

There is continuing high demand for this training as well as positive results of the impact of this training.



Safer Families intensive builds knowledge, confidence

Trained: 88 duty lawyers across four sessions

Over three days, lawyers gain in-depth understanding of the legislation, build skills in negotiation, advocacy, submissions, and court appearances. The third day includes a moot court day where participants practice their skills.

On average, more than 9 out of 10 of the lawyers trained told us the training improved key legal skills including:

- › explaining the family violence intervention order court process to clients.
- › confidence in their role as an advocate in court.
- › knowledge of the intersection of family law and family violence intervention orders.
- › confidence in advising and representing clients as a whole.

Safer Families for community lawyers

Trained: 77 community sector lawyers practicing in areas other than Family Law

This training provides lawyers with the tools to identify family law issues (including urgent issues) and make appropriate legal referrals.

On average, more than 9 out of 10 of the lawyers trained told us the training improved key legal skills including:

- › identifying family law parenting principles and providing general advice
- › identifying urgent parenting matters
- › explaining to clients how to vary a family law order and what to do when there has been a contraventions of a family law order
- › explaining the intersection of family law orders with family violence intervention orders

“I have learnt so much and I was so grateful to take this opportunity before I started practising and acting as a duty lawyer. It has been invaluable to do this in a supportive environment and I feel the advice was given in a really supportive way.”

Safer Families Intensive Training participant

“I hope to deliver more comprehensive family law advice to my clients and pick up the big issues earlier on!”

Safer Families Intensive Training participant

“The facilitators were so knowledgeable and generous with their time. I felt like I really learned a lot over the two days.”

Safer Families Intensive Training participant



Strength in numbers

We work with twelve other women’s legal services from across the country to promote a legal system that is safe, supportive, non-discriminatory and responsive to the needs of women.

This national network, Women’s Legal Services Australia, has focused on improving Family Law legislation for women and children and extending support to women who experience family violence while on a temporary visa.

Federal Parliament poised to improve Family Law System

Reforms to the family law system are critical to improving our responses to domestic and family violence.

We led Women’s Legal Services Australia’s response to family law system changes, contributing expertise and practice-based knowledge to submissions on two critical amendments to the Family Law Act: the Family Law Amendment (Information Sharing) Bill and the Family Law Amendment Bill. The submissions were endorsed by numerous organisations in a show of support for our calls to improve safety and outcomes for victim-survivors of family violence through these legislative changes.

Alongside legislative reform, we also called on the the legal assistance sector to be properly resourced to ensure people are able to access legal advice and representation when they need it.

Taking solutions to decision-makers

Our migration team’s work informed a new campaign to immediately introduce a temporary visa for family violence victim-survivors so that they can access social security (including Medicare) and social and public housing.

Submissions to several government inquiries have been impactful, with our recommendations adopted in some cases.

Acting Legal Director Lisa Fowler presented evidence to decision-makers of how Australia’s migration system creates power structures that make women vulnerable to abuse.

“Introducing a temporary visa for family violence victims will just give (a victim-survivor) that time and space to make decisions about their lives and safety,” she said.

“They want to enter the workforce; they just need time. But we often find that when they disengage from work or disengage from their studies the universities (and employers) are reporting that to Home Affairs ... (who then) questions their commitment to the visa and eligibility for their visa.”

Currently, only a small portion of the women we assist can still be granted their visa without their sponsor if they experience family violence. This opens a possibility to get a permanent visa and access to support such as Centrelink, child support and Medicare. Women on a student, tourist, carer or skilled visa are not extended the same rights.

In Victoria, just 25 out of 150 people supported by Women’s Legal’s migration team were partner visa applicants who were eligible to be granted a permanent visa after they had experienced family violence.



Migration practice wins Justice Award

Our wrap-around support for women on temporary visas experiencing family violence was recognised for increasing access to the justice system by the Victorian Multicultural Commission. The award also recognised the advocacy impact our migration team has had and continues to achieve.



Starts with Us

Our Starts with Us Project culminated this year with the development and launch of a Framework for Justice and Legal Organisations to take action on gendered violence.

Working with partners from across the sector, we delivered this evidence-based resource alongside a call to action for workplaces to be proactive and ensure everyone is free from discrimination and harassment, no matter their gender.

Efforts to prevent gender-based violence are a long-term commitment. For prevention work to take root and succeed, we know organisations need mentoring, practical guidance and support to undertake the necessary transformations to create gender equal workplaces.

We look forward to ongoing collaboration with our sector partners to support take up and implementation of the Framework and resources.



Jin's story

A woman fights for access to medical and financial support for her baby after father uses system to continue abuse.

Jin* was referred to Women's Legal by one of our partner agencies. She was on a temporary visa, experiencing family violence and had recently had a baby with an Australian citizen.

The father of the child was perpetrating systems abuse by refusing to be named as the father on the child's birth certificate. Doing this caused Jin and her child further hardship - without a birth certificate to show the child is an Australian citizenship Jin could not access Centrelink, Medicare and other supports.

Jin spoke with one of our family lawyers, who gave her advice about family violence, separation and parenting. Our migration lawyer advised Jin about proving her baby's Australian citizenship as well as Jin's visa options.

With our help, Jin successfully applied for spousal maintenance payments to be paid by the father, and the father agreed to be named on the child's birth certificate, confirming his Australian citizenship and allowing Jin to access important services on behalf of their child.

Our migration team is continuing to assist Jin with her visa process.

** Name and image changed to protect our client's identity*



A team committed to wellbeing

We are a team of about 60 people who are lawyers, paralegals, social workers, financial counsellors, trainers, administrative, data, finance, policy and communications specialists.

We are continually building on our culture of inclusivity, collaboration and safety.

To support our team's wellbeing and professional skills working with clients, regular reflective practice sessions are offered.

As well as regular supervision, training is provided relating to suicide prevention and vicarious trauma. And every three months we survey the team to find out what is working well, and where we need to improve. Importantly, we act on this feedback.

The team identified improved communication and more opportunities to connect, so we've built a brand-new intranet and set up a social committee that holds regular events. We mark days of significance, such as IDAHOBIT and Reconciliation Week, with group activities and learning opportunities.

Accredited by Community Legal Centres Australia

This year Women's Legal undertook re-accreditation under the National Accreditation Scheme for Community Legal Centres.

We were assessed against 17 Standards to ensure we are well governed to provide sustainable, quality, efficient, accessible and culturally appropriate services for clients and communities, and support for staff.

Following the reaccreditation, we have an agreed plan to continually improve how we perform against these standards.



Modernising our work practices

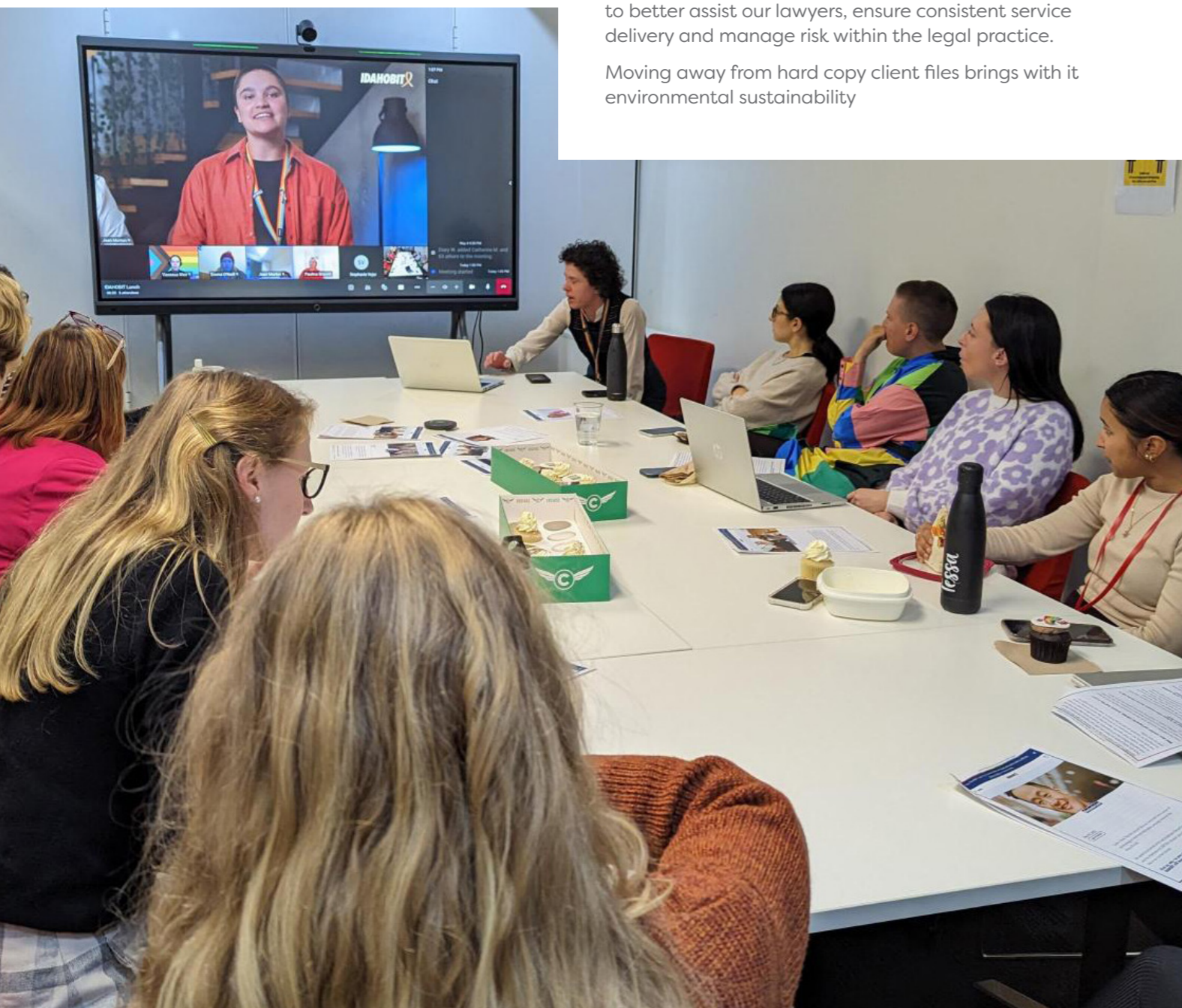
We have transitioned to using an online file management system (Actionstep) for our direct client service delivery, including client intake.

Centralising our file management systems and policies allows us to improve efficiency and better manage risk. Environmental benefits will also flow as a result of moving away from hard copy client files.

We have a built-in review process on Actionstep to track the progress of files and record case strategies. We also use the system to track limitation dates, assign tasks and ensure effective oversight of all matters.

We are also developing a comprehensive precedent bank to better assist our lawyers, ensure consistent service delivery and manage risk within the legal practice.

Moving away from hard copy client files brings with it environmental sustainability



Our values are actions not just words

All staff came together to review and reinvigorate our shared values. These values are what we want people to see, hear and feel when they work with us.

Authentic

We are reliable, trustworthy and transparent about how we work. We reflect on our work and take responsibility for our actions.

Collaborative

We are stronger when we work together. By sharing power and privilege with diverse voices, we achieve better outcomes. We respond to requests for help with generosity.

Courageous

We are brave, resilient and face challenges with integrity. We unapologetically advocate for our goals and back one another to take considered risks to increase our impact.

Inclusive

We believe respect, equality and opportunity must be afforded equitably and to everyone. We understand this will require critical reflection on where power lies and how it functions, and active effort to disrupt it.

Purposeful

Our services respond to the community, laws and people we work with. We value curiosity and relish opportunities to improve our work.

A thank you to our partners

Funders

Women's Legal receives funding from the Commonwealth and Victorian Governments and Victoria Legal Aid.

We acknowledge their support, in particular:

- > the Commonwealth Attorney General's Department
- > the Commonwealth Department of Social Services
- > Consumer Affairs Victoria
- > the Department of Justice and Community Safety (Vic)
- > the Department of Families, Fairness & Housing (Vic)

Probono Partners and Funders

We rely on pro bono lawyers, donations and in-kind support to extend and enhance our services. Thank you to the following people and organisations who have supported us and our clients this year:

Baker MacKenzie
 Barry Nilsson
 Colin Biggers Paisley
 Gagens
 Herbert Smith Freehills
 Holding Redlich
 IDP Lawyers
 Lander & Rogers
 Mills Oakley
 Norton Rose Fulbright

Public donations

We also acknowledge the generosity of the many individuals who made donations to Women's Legal in the 2023 financial year.

How to get help

Call us: 03 8622 0600 or 1800 133 302

Fill out the online enquiry form:

womenslegal.org.au/get-help/

If you need an interpreter, you can call the Translating and Interpreting Service on **131 450** and ask them to call **1800 133 302**

We welcome feedback. See our website to share your feedback or complaint:

womenslegal.org.au

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