

Our Strategy 2015-2020



*"We value a society where all people
enjoy equality of opportunity and
have equal access to the law."*

Contents

Who we are	2
Why we exist	2
What we do	2
Areas of Focus 2015-20	3
Our organisational culture	6

Please note: this document was updated in November 2018 to represent a change to a 2015-20 focus.

Who we are

Hume Riverina Community Legal Service (HRCLS) has been the principal provider of free legal services in North East Victoria and the Southern Riverina of NSW for over 16 years. We deliver legal services from multiple locations over a catchment of 17 local government areas, including Wodonga, Wangaratta and Benalla in Victoria, and Albury, Corowa and Deniliquin in NSW.

HRCLS is a vital part of a broader service network providing integrated support to regional and remote communities. HRCLS works alongside social service partners and private legal practitioners to enhance community access to legal, social, financial and health support. We recognise the strengths and expertise of our numerous partners, and we inform and are informed by the work that they do.

HRCLS is one of the only cross-border community legal services in Australia. People in our region often work, have children in school, or visit family and friends on one side of the border, whilst residing on the other. This can make legal issues even more complicated. We have a unique understanding of and experience in navigating diverse areas of law and legal practice within and across Victorian, NSW and Federal jurisdictions.

HRCLS is auspiced by UMFC. From the end of 2016 we will be co-located with UMFC, facilitating easier access to a range of services for communities in Wodonga and the surrounding region.

Why we exist

We value a society where all people enjoy equality of opportunity and have equal access to the law, wherever they live in Australia.

HRCLS provides a legal safety net for people in regional Victoria and NSW. We help people:

- realise their legal rights and responsibilities
- consider their options for resolving disputes
- navigate legal processes and systems
- achieve fair outcomes.

Some of the long-term benefits we want to see for the communities we serve include:

- equitable resourcing of support services across regional areas
- legal problems managed before they reach crisis point
- people experiencing greater agency over their lives.

What we do

HRCLS provides legal information and advice in family, civil and criminal law to members of the community who cannot otherwise access legal help. People in regional and remote areas, people with a disability or mental illness, Indigenous Australians, older people, children and young people, and people experiencing family violence are key client groups accessing our services. The vast majority of our clients experience long-term financial disadvantage.

HRCLS also represents clients in legally assisted dispute resolution, and provides advocacy services in several local Magistrates courts and at the Federal Circuit Court. We are passionate about community legal education. We enhance community awareness of legal rights and responsibilities, helping community members avoid or appropriately manage legal problems.

HRCLS contributes evidence and expertise developed through our work to inform fairer and more effective law and policy that supports community wellbeing and mitigates costly litigation.

Our funding

HRCLS receives funding from the Commonwealth Attorney-General, Victoria Legal Aid, Legal Aid NSW, Department of Justice (Victoria), the Victorian Legal Services Board + Commissioner.

We acknowledge the traditional owners of the land on which we work and pay our respects to their elders, past & present.

A photograph of a man and a young boy sitting outdoors against a tree trunk. The man, with short brown hair and a beard, is wearing a blue long-sleeved shirt and is smiling. The boy, with short brown hair, is wearing a white tank top and is also smiling. The background is a close-up of the tree bark.

Areas of focus 2015-20

HRCLS's areas of focus for 2015-20 have been informed by research, including a legal need analysis and environmental scan; consultation with stakeholders, including courts, funding bodies and other service providers; and the insights of HRCLS staff and volunteers.

Our research tells us that we are doing a lot of things right. We provide excellent direct client services, including through well-targeted outreach across the region, and we are good at connecting our clients with other support services, both in Victoria and NSW.

Our research also tells us that there are some areas where we could have a greater impact. HRCLS will prioritise these areas until 2020.

FOCUS 1

Improve access to legal services and strengthen service planning in the region



A challenge that communities in regional areas are more likely to face, and that HRCLS and our stakeholders have observed intensifying in recent years, is the limited options available to secure legal advice and representation. HRCLS is the only free legal provider servicing Albury and Wodonga, and the number of private practitioners offering legally aided services to the region is relatively small. A person 'conflicted out' of assistance, because a related party has already accessed that legal provider, too often does not have the option of obtaining assistance elsewhere.

When all parties do not have the benefit of legal advice and representation, there is greater risk of unfair outcomes, a disproportionate resource burden on the courts, and protracted disputes. HRCLS's policy for determining whether a party is conflicted out of receiving a service may be unnecessarily limiting access for people who would otherwise meet our service priorities.

Another challenge for HRCLS is ensuring that our focus goes beyond just reacting to demand for services, and considers smarter ways to address legal need in our catchment. Legal assistance providers operating in different regional areas confront similar challenges to HRCLS. Exchanging information and ideas and planning services collaboratively with other regional experts avoids re-inventing the wheel, and increases the knowledge and resource base from which we can leverage solutions to common problems for the benefit of regional communities.

We will:

- Review our conflict of interest principles and investigate a new eligibility framework that continues to meet legal ethical requirements but does not needlessly restrict access to our Service.
- Collaborate with legal assistance partners in the broader region to respond to legal need.
- Enhance our use of technologies to facilitate community access to independent legal advice from service providers outside the region.

The outcomes we aim to deliver include:

- Greater access to legal help for people who meet our service priorities in North East Victoria and the Southern Riverina of NSW.
- Enhanced service planning between HRCLS and other community legal centres across the region.



FOCUS 2

Invest in legal services for children and young people, & their families

Children and young people who experience socio-economic disadvantage have a greater likelihood of coming into contact with the legal system. Many frequent users of legal services experience their first contact with the legal system before the age of 16 years. Our recent legal need analysis indicates that there is significant unmet legal need amongst children and young people in our region.

We know that youth crime matters are increasing at Wodonga Magistrates Court, and that young people make up a growing cohort of both applicants and respondents in Family Violence Intervention and Apprehended Violence Order matters.

Our service partners are also observing an increase in young parents in the region. It is not uncommon for the regional Family Relationship Centre to assist parents who are under 18 years of age. Non-parent carers, including grandparents, who are taking a more direct role in caring for the children of young parents, are also seeking legal support in relation to child protection and family law processes. We know that sole parents with dependent children are more likely than the general population to experience multiple legal problems.

Timely intervention in legal problems that affect children, young people and their families can minimise the risk of children and young people coming into contact with the law as adults. HRCLS does not currently target its services to children and young people. We aim to increase access to our services for this priority client group.

We will:

- Further investigate and map key areas and jurisdictions of unmet legal need for children and young people in our region.
- Strengthen our links with other legal practitioners and social services that assist children and young people.
- Develop our expertise in jurisdictions where children and young people, and their families and carers, most need legal support.
- Provide services at locations where children and young people with legal need are most likely to access help.
- Prioritise community legal education for children and young people, including in relation to family violence.

An outcome we aim to deliver is:

- Greater access to legal help for children and young people across the region.



FOCUS 3

Advance a comprehensive response to family violence

Family violence incidents are up to two and a half times higher in regional North East Victoria and the Upper Murray than in Victoria and NSW overall. In many of the areas where HRCLS delivers legal services, family violence incidents are continuing to trend up. Family Violence Intervention and Apprehended Violence Order applications have significantly increased over the last two years. In 2014/15, one in three new legal cases opened by Victorian community legal centres was a family violence case.

In addition to the acute and ongoing trauma of violence experienced by the individuals involved, family violence often exists within, or creates a cluster of, other social and legal problems, including family law and child protection issues, financial hardship and debt, and housing stress. The trauma of family violence extends to next generations and the broader community.

Barriers to obtaining assistance for family violence can be heightened in regional and rural areas due to geographic and social isolation. In State-border regions, such as Albury/Wodonga, evidence of family violence that occurred in one region is not always admissible when seeking a Family Violence Intervention or Apprehended Violence Order in another State, and orders issued in one State are not automatically enforceable in another. Further, although providing individual legal advice and representation in this area is essential, this alone will not address the social problem of family violence. A systemic, multi-faceted response to this issue is required.

We will:

- Advocate for a more holistic legal response to Family Violence Intervention and Apprehended Violence Orders across the region, and support more efficient registration of orders between States.
- Facilitate links between family relationship and family violence services on both sides of the border.
- Work with our partners to ensure holistic support to those experiencing or at risk of family violence, including financial and housing support, and behavioural support for perpetrators.
- Provide legal services at locations where people experiencing or at risk of family violence are most likely to access help.
- Prioritise community legal education relevant to family violence, especially for young people.

The outcomes we aim to deliver include:

- Easier access to a range of services for people experiencing or at risk of family violence.
- More young people understanding their rights and responsibilities in relation to family violence.
- Better cross-border practices in enforcing FVIOs and AVOs.



FOCUS 4

Match services to the capacity of our clients and coordinate case management for clients with complex needs

HRCLS recognises that demand for legal services often exceeds service capacity. In this context, it is easy to default to service provision that is reactive and concentrated on a 'first-come, first-served' basis.

Offering a standard level of service to everyone who accesses HRCLS is not viable. It misses the opportunity to build client capacity and community resilience by helping people to help themselves, and risks people with complex legal and personal issues, who require greater assistance, falling through the gaps. A service approach that supports the capacity of clients to self-manage their legal issues, and provides more intensive legal assistance to clients with less capacity and more complex needs, helps empower the community and is a more targeted use of limited resources.

HRCLS recognises that addressing legal problems is not always sufficient for some clients to get their lives back on track, particularly people who are at high risk of further contact with the law. HRCLS has built an extensive network of service partners to facilitate direct referrals for clients with a diversity of service needs. We are well-placed to take this collaborative approach to the next level by strengthening coordinated support for priority clients across our service network.

We will:

- Develop and regularly review guidelines for service delivery that direct our service capacity to priority clients.
- Develop and implement a framework for supporting capable clients to self-manage their legal issues.
- Develop and implement case-management practices, in collaboration with our service partners, to facilitate more holistic support for acutely disadvantaged clients

An outcome we aim to deliver is:

- A greater proportion of our clients effectively self-managing their legal issues.
- The majority of our efforts directed to priority clients with complex needs.

Our organisational culture

To ensure the impact and sustainability of HRCLS and to set ourselves up for success in delivering this Strategy, we adhere to the following values and approaches:

We care for our community

As well as empowering and working alongside our clients to address legal problems and remedy injustices, we advocate for the interests and wellbeing of regional and remote communities.

We are responsive and innovative

Our services are evidence-based and targeted to community need. We undertake regular legal need analyses to identify and address unmet legal need. We evaluate our programs to check that they are delivering the necessary benefits to our community and to inform improvements where required. We are open to piloting new approaches to legal service delivery.

We are resourceful

We make smart use of limited funds, including sharing administrative resources with our auspice organisation to minimise our overheads and nurturing a dedicated volunteer workforce.

We share our skills

HRCLS is proud of being a teaching practice by hosting law student volunteers, training new lawyers and nurturing their passion for social justice.

We support our staff and volunteers

HRCLS recognises that our staff and volunteers are our greatest asset. We value their experience and ideas, and we are committed to further developing their legal, community engagement and leadership skills.

Our Strategy includes a greater focus on working with young clients and clients with complex needs. This will require us to review our professional development programs and to actively manage the impacts of this work in support of staff and volunteer wellbeing.

We communicate with our stakeholders

To ensure the greatest benefits for our clients and community, and to avoid duplicating resources, we consult regularly with our stakeholders about client care, emerging issues, new initiatives and opportunities for shared ventures.

"We help people."





27-29 Stanley Street, WODONGA VIC 3690
PO Box 31, WODONGA 3689
P: 1800 918 377 or (02) 6055 8090 F: (02) 6055 8079

 www.hrcls.org.au

Monday – Friday: 9am-5pm (closed between 1pm-1:45pm)

We provide free legal advice to people living in North East Victoria and the Southern Riverina of NSW over a catchment of 17 local government areas. We aim to help people who are disadvantaged or vulnerable and would not otherwise be able to get legal help.



This service is auspiced by UMFC and in 2017-18 received funding from the Commonwealth Attorney-General's Department, Victoria Legal Aid, Legal Aid NSW, Department of Justice (Victoria) and the Victorian Legal Services Board Grants Program.
ABN 99 081 624 768 Reg No: A5357 ARBN 081 624 768