


# *Our Strategy* 2020-2025

A close-up photograph of a family. A man with a gentle expression looks down at a newborn baby. A woman with blonde hair is holding the baby, her face partially visible in profile. The baby is sleeping peacefully, wrapped in a white blanket. The woman is wearing a thick, mustard-yellow knitted sweater. The lighting is soft and warm, creating a tender atmosphere.

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

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*We acknowledge the Traditional Owners of the land on which we work and pay our respects to their Elders, past & present.*

## Who we are

Hume Riverina Community Legal Service (HRCLS) has been providing free legal services in North East Victoria and the Southern Riverina of NSW for more than 20 years. We deliver legal services from multiple locations over a catchment of 17 local government areas, including Wodonga and Wangaratta in Victoria, and Albury, Corowa and Deniliquin in New South Wales.

HRCLS is an integral part of a community service network committed to 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 strength and expertise of our numerous partners, and we inform and are informed by the work that they do.

HRCLS is one of the few cross border community legal services in Australia. Cross border legal issues present a challenge for people living in our region who often work, have children in school, access services or visit family and friends on one side of the border, whilst residing on the other. 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 Upper Murray Family Care (UMFC). Our co-location and professional integration ensures that we are able to provide strong joint services to our local community.

## Why we exist

We value a society where all people enjoy equality of opportunity and equal access to the law, regardless of where they live in Australia. HRCLS provides a legal safety net for people in regional Victoria and NSW.

We help people:

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

We want to create long-term benefits for our communities, including:

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


## What we do

HRCLS provides legal information, advice and casework with a focus on family, civil and criminal law to people who cannot otherwise access legal help. Our key priority clients are those who need help the most, including people in regional and remote areas, people with a disability or mental illness, youth, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders, older people and people experiencing family violence. The people we help also struggle financially, making our service crucial for them achieving fair and just outcomes.

HRCLS represents clients in Intervention Order matters in the Magistrates' Courts in Wodonga, Wangaratta and Myrtleford.

Community legal education and community development are key aspects of our work. We enhance community awareness of legal rights and responsibilities, helping people avoid or appropriately manage legal problems.

The experience of our clients informs our understanding of systemic issues. We contribute evidence and expertise developed through our work to inform more fair and effective law and policy that supports community wellbeing and mitigates costly litigation. We will continue to grow our capacity in this area and aim to take the lead in at least one law reform project relevant to our community and experience during the period of the plan.

A photograph of a woman with long brown hair holding a young child with dark hair. The woman is looking down at the child with a gentle smile, and the child is looking up at her. The child is wearing a red shirt and brown overalls. The background is slightly blurred, showing a wooden shelf with some items on it.

# Areas of focus 2020-25

HRCLS's areas of focus for 2020-2025 have been informed by research, including problem types and demographic analysis, as well as the review of our intake processes; consultation with stakeholders, including funding bodies and other service providers; an understanding of legal need in our region, and the insights and experience of HRCLS staff and volunteers. A number of initiatives build on or continue work identified in our 2015-20 plan.

Our research tells us we are doing many things right and achieving positive and significant outcomes. We provide excellent direct client services, including through well-targeted service provision at key locations across the region, and we pride ourselves on working in partnership to ensure people access other support services vital for their wellbeing, both in Victoria and NSW.

We have also identified areas where we could have a greater impact. HRCLS will prioritise these areas over the next five years.

## FOCUS 1

# Improve our capacity to target our services to those most in need and to create lasting change



We recognise that community demand for our service is increasing and goes beyond our capacity to meet the need. We know the most vulnerable people in our community may not have the capacity to find us without assistance and may require more intensive support to address their legal and other needs. This means we must be prepared to review our methods of service provision, including how we best target people in need, and also find the right balance between provision of advice and more intensive casework services.

### With the support of our funders, we will:

- Undertake a pilot of a new triage process designed to better target our services to vulnerable clients and also to make our clinic appointments more efficient and effective;
- Following the pilot, review outcomes and further review our service model, including length of appointment times, and casework capacity;
- Review our service eligibility criteria, and advice and casework targets
- Review our outreach approach in Victoria and NSW with a particular focus on:
  - Reach in Victoria
  - Depth in NSW, including establishing or growing effective partnerships
- Continue to grow our policy and law reform planning and execution capacity, including by taking the lead in at least one law reform project during the period
- Undertake a review of how our service is leveraging technology to deliver its services

### We will deliver outcomes that include:

- Greater access to legal help and casework for people who meet our service priorities
- Outreach that is more consistently delivered through partnerships and reaches into our catchment on both sides of the border
- Enhanced capacity to leverage our experience to effect law reform and assist Government to identify and remove barriers to justice



## FOCUS 2

# Invest in legal services for children and young people, and 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 service partners have reported that there is significant unmet legal need amongst children and young people in our region.

We aim to continue to increase access to our services for this priority group. 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, and also empower them to address legal problems when they arise.

The Invisible Hurdles Project launched in 2017 has enabled us to partner with local services to reach young people and respond to the significant legal need in our region. We will continue to build on the learnings from the Invisible Hurdles Project to ensure youth have access to justice through targeted services delivered in partnership with non-legal services for young people.

### We will:

- Continue to develop expertise in areas of identified legal need by:
  - Identifying gaps in expertise
  - Developing a plan to address these gaps
- Continue to deliver a dedicated program for young people through the Invisible Hurdles Project
- 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.
- Keep providing services at targeted locations and investing in partnerships with services where children and young people with legal need are most likely to access help.
- Continue to prioritise legal assistance and education for young people in our region.
- Ensure all staff are trained to deliver services for young people in a trauma informed way

### We will deliver outcomes that include:

- Ongoing access to legal help for children and young people across the region.
- Delivery of a dedicated program for young people through the continuation of the Invisible Hurdles Project



## FOCUS 3

# Advance a comprehensive response to family violence

Family violence was identified as a key priority in our 2015-20 plan. In that time, we have made a great deal of progress. This work remains a priority for our service and our community.

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 in recent years. 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 border regions such as Albury-Wodonga, there can be additional complexities. The National Domestic Violence Order Recognition Scheme has led to some improvements, however reform and change is still needed to ensure family violence problems are addressed. Our service is well placed to identify and recommend improvements to the system due to our in-depth work with family violence victims in a cross border context. We recognise that whilst providing individual legal advice and representation is essential, a systemic, multi-faceted response is required.

### We will:

- Continue to provide legal services at locations where people experiencing or at risk of family violence are most likely to access help.
- Continue to grow and facilitate links between family law and family violence services on both sides of the border.
- Continue to work with our partners to ensure holistic support to those experiencing or at risk of family violence, including financial and housing support
- Continue to advocate for solutions to reduce cross border problems impacting upon family violence victim survivors
- Continue to prioritise community legal education relevant to family violence and associated legal problems

- Ensure all staff are trained to deliver services for those affected by family violence in a trauma informed way
- 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.

### We will deliver outcomes that include:

- Ongoing access to a range of services for people experiencing or at risk of family violence.
- More people understanding their rights and responsibilities in relation to family violence.
- Improved cross border systems which more adequately protect those affected by family violence and ensure their safety.



#### FOCUS 4

## Grow our service capacity in key areas of legal need experienced in our catchment

Well over 50% of our present service capacity is directed to family law or family violence-related work. This is crucial work. However we recognise that family violence often exists within, or creates, a cluster of other social and legal problems including financial hardship, credit and debt and housing stress. A Law and Justice Foundation Report released in June 2019 revealed that family violence victims faced 20 legal problems compared to two for the rest of the population.

We know the challenges of low income and housing stress disproportionately affect people in our catchment when compared to Australians generally. In our experience, the trend of people experiencing multiple and more complex problems is rising.

#### We will:

- Continue to develop our generalist expertise with particular focus on credit and debt, consumer and housing matters, including through partnerships with specialist CLCs
- Seek funding for additional generalist lawyer positions to supplement our capacity
- Enhance our capacity to undertake generalist casework.

#### We will deliver outcomes that include:

- An increased proportion of generalist work performed by our service.
- Growth of the generalist team of lawyers at HRCLS

# Our culture and values

As a community legal centre, HRCLS shares the universal values that drive the work done by the community legal sector, while maintaining its own identity and unique character. To ensure our sustainability and success in delivering this Strategy, we will adhere to the following values and approaches:

## We care for our community

Everyone deserves access to legal assistance, regardless of their life's circumstances. We empower and walk alongside our clients to address legal problems and remedy injustices. We advocate for the interests and wellbeing of rural, regional and remote communities.

## We are resourceful

We make efficient and wise use of limited funds, including through sharing administrative resources with UMFC, our auspice organisation, and nurturing a dedicated volunteer workforce.

## 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 explore new approaches to legal service delivery and are open to piloting new approaches to legal service delivery. We can act quickly and efficiently to address emerging needs and solve problems.

## We share our skills

We pride ourselves on being a teaching practice and regularly host placements for law students, which nurtures their passion for social justice in their future careers.

## We support our team

Our staff and volunteers are our greatest asset. We value their expertise, ideas and commitment to helping people get access to justice. We are committed to creating the best environment in which they can thrive and further developing their knowledge and skills. As we continue to focus on working with clients with multiple and complex needs, we will actively manage the impact of this work through professional development programs and wellbeing frameworks which support the wellbeing of staff and volunteers.

## We value our partners and stakeholders

We consult regularly with our partners about client care, emerging issues, new learning, and opportunities for shared ventures and new initiatives. Our strong links with service providers, partners and stakeholders are vital for us to deliver the greatest benefits for our clients and community.

*"We help people."*





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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 receives funding from the Commonwealth Attorney-General's Department, Victoria Legal Aid, Legal Aid NSW, Department of Justice & Community Safety (Victoria) and the Victorian Legal Services Board Grants Program. ABN 99 081 624 768 Reg No: A5357 ARBN 081 624 768