



hume riverina  
community legal  
service

# *Community Justice* on the Frontline

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Annual Report 2020-21





NSW Lawyer Diana Bruce presents to the audience at the Cooperative Legal Service Delivery-sponsored Cut It Out Domestic Violence Forum in February 2021 in Albury.



Above: Invisible Hurdles Lawyer Andrea Georgiou gets into the spirit of NAIDOC Week at Invisible Hurdles partner Wodonga Flexible Learning Centre, as part of their acknowledgement to this important celebration, with the theme Heal Country.



Left: Legal Aid NSW CLC Program staff paid a visit to the home of HRCLS in February 2021 (from left) Tanya Finneran, Jennifer Chen, Mia Zahra, HRCLS Manager & Principal Lawyer Sarah Rodgers, HRCLS Senior Generalist Lawyer Debi Fisher, Lila Sullivan, HRCLS Operations Manager Ashlie Barclay, and Julia Cordina.

# Our organisational culture

## 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 develop 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 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.

## 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, 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 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 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 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.

Law Week 2021 Women in Law Breakfast – HRCLS staff (from left) Erin Quilliam, Andrea Georgiou, Tracey Walker, Debi Fisher, Ali Maher, guest Friend Kighoma, Becky Smith and Taylor Smith-Stephens enjoy a celebration of women and their achievements in the legal sector, with about 70 guests at the Mantra Albury Hotel.



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## UMFC Board

President – Dean Bocquet  
Vice President – Robyn Gillis  
Treasurer – Jacqui Vaughan

## Members

Paul Robb  
Liz Heta  
Sunita Rama  
Thomas Crumpton  
Kirsten Genter  
Tracy McCrohan



HRCLS is auspiced by UMFC.

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

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Disclaimer: client stories are a 'snapshot' of a legal issue and do not contain the complete details nor full circumstances. Client stories in this annual report must not be relied upon as legal advice. People should always seek their own legal advice. Names\* used in client stories in this report have been changed to protect identities. Full stories are available on our website.

Front page image: Railway bridge crossing Murray River, Albury. Photographer: Tracey Walker  
Back page image: Paradise Falls, Alpine National Park, Cheshunt. Photographer: Jodie Wells



HRCLS principal lawyer Sarah Rodgers and UMFC CEO Luke Rumbold are incredibly proud with how the legal service performed in trying times to deliver a high-quality service for clients in need of assistance.

# Our UMFC CEO and Principal Lawyer message

Considering the year dominated by COVID-19, the performance of the legal service has been nothing short of extraordinary. The ability of the legal service team to deliver outstanding outcomes for clients in the current environment is to be commended. This achievement is a tribute to individual members and the leadership of the service.

It is no small feat to continue delivering a high quality service in trying times for the whole community. Throughout the 12 months, morale and team spirit within HRCLS has remained high, despite the numerous challenges.

In many instances, clients needing legal advice and ongoing support would have been feeling the weight of the pandemic which only added to their heightened state of anxiety. The comfort of having a calm and assured service helping them deal with stressful problems can't be underestimated. Although the pandemic has caused significant disruption, clients have gained some benefits of the transition that was needed to deliver an external service, rather than in-person. They now have greater control and flexibility, on a case-by-case basis, in how they connect to receive legal assistance, and in a way that may suit their circumstances.

The fact the legal team was able to maintain relationships with their community service partners during this time, when they were not visiting key services in-person, is a measure of how well the service is run. There can be no doubt the strength and depths of these existing relationships with partners

prior to the pandemic held them in good stead during this ongoing period of uncertainty. Without these dynamics working well, the ability to help those clients most in need of legal assistance may miss out.

The place of HRCLS within UMFC has never been more appreciated or stronger than it has been during the pandemic. It is pleasing to know that having access to free legal assistance and support remains a significant positive for our community.

## **Luke Rumbold, UMFC CEO**

It has been another year of significant challenges as a result of the pandemic, which are amplified for cross border services such as ours. The year started with the border closure between NSW and Victoria, which posed enormous difficulties for clients and staff in our region, in addition to the other COVID-19 impacts.

Highlights for the year include:

- continuing to support communities affected by the 2019/20 bushfires, working in partnership with UMFC Financial Counsellors and Gateway Health to reach those still recovering from the impacts of the disaster and recommencing outreach into Victorian communities as a result of the bushfire funding
- maintaining the outreach connection in NSW to help people in communities such as Deniliquin and Corowa
- providing strong support for family violence victim survivors and their families, via our partnerships

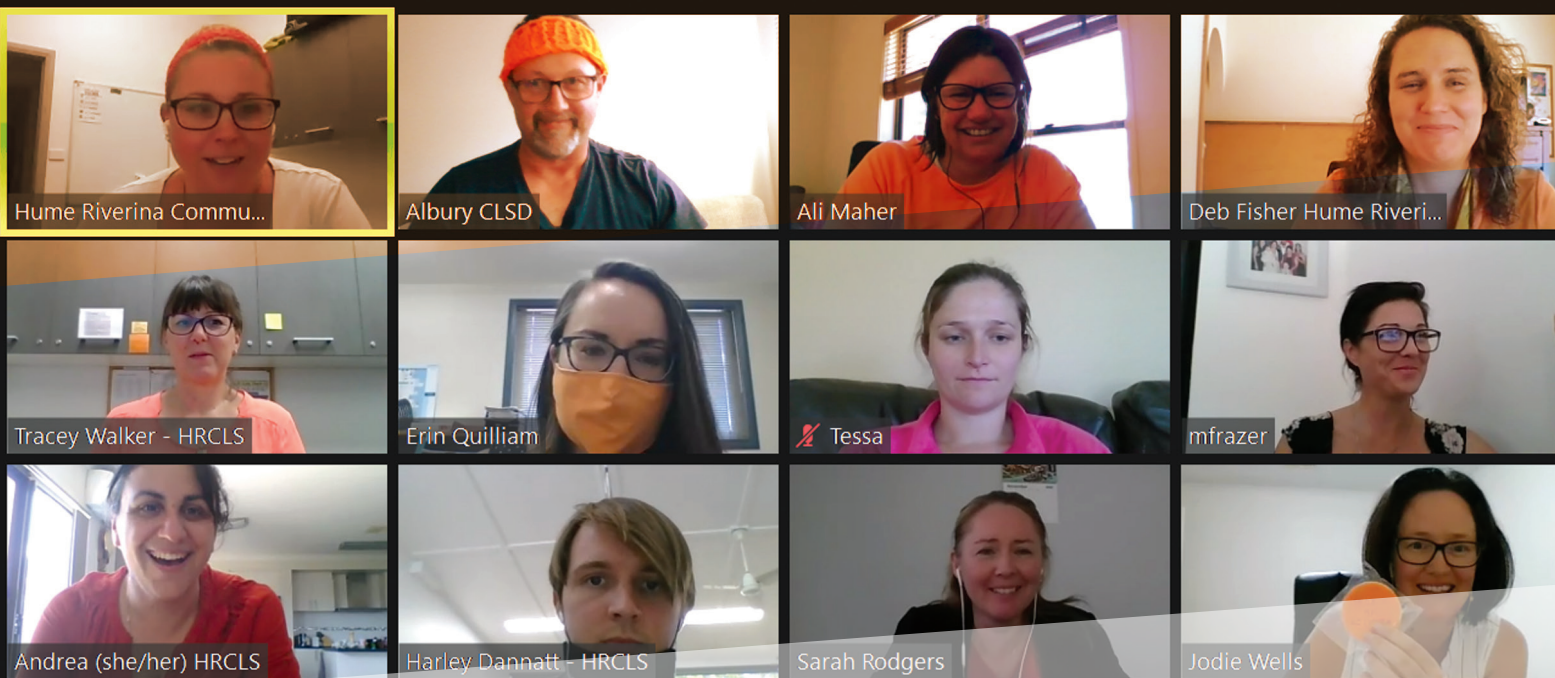
with Centre Against Violence, Yes Unlimited, Southern Women's Domestic Violence Court Advocacy Service and the Women's Centre for Health & Wellbeing, and collaborating with the Magistrates' Courts and private legal practitioners in North East Victoria

- our ongoing commitment to advocate for changes to laws and systems that will lead to improved outcomes for people living in our rural and regional communities
- another strong endorsement through an evaluation conducted by The Australian National University on the successful Invisible Hurdles Project, run in partnership with Albury Wodonga Aboriginal Health Service, Wodonga Flexible Learning Centre and North East Support and Action for Youth Inc.

Our team members are to be commended for their passion and dedication to support those who are most in need within our region. We are also appreciative of our many partners, funders and peak bodies who support this work. Lastly, we remain grateful to be co-located and embedded as a program of UMFC, and acknowledge the work of the UMFC Board and Senior Management Group, which has helped our service to keep going from strength to strength.

**Sarah Rodgers,  
Manager & Principal Lawyer  
Hume Riverina Community  
Legal Service**





Our 2020-21 Operations team of Ashlie Barclay, Tracey Walker, Meaghan Frazer and Hannah Niethe shone once again. Their combined support for our community legal service and lawyers is made even more impressive due to the administration needed across two jurisdictions, NSW and Victoria. They may be a small team, but taking care of the numerous tasks and responsibilities within a cross border community legal service is a huge commitment and everyone is grateful and appreciative of their efforts.

Picture above: Our team connection was maintained through the Zoom room, rather than in-person gatherings for much of 2020-2021. This also allowed us to mark key advocacy days, including the launch of the 16 Days of Activism 2020.

## Our Team

### **Sarah Rodgers**

Manager & Principal Lawyer

### **Ashlie Barclay**

Operations Manager

### **Alison Maher**

Senior Lawyer

### **Deborah Fisher**

Senior Lawyer

### **Karen Keegan**

Lawyer

### **Sarah Caplice**

VLA Seconded Lawyer

### **Jodie Wells**

Lawyer

### **Andrea Georgiou**

Invisible Hurdles Lawyer

### **Diana Bruce**

NSW Lawyer

### **Erin Quilliam**

VLA Seconded Lawyer  
and NSW Lawyer

### **Tessa Mead**

Lawyer

### **Becky Smith**

Invisible Hurdles Project  
Legal Worker/Lawyer

### **Raissa Butkowski**

NSW Lawyer

### **Taylor Smith-Stephens**

NSW COVID-19 Lawyer

### **Helen Tselios**

Victorian COVID-19 Lawyer

### **Harley Dannatt**

Victorian Bushfire Lawyer

### **Rachel Judd**

Lawyer

### **Kristi Pemmelaar**

Lawyer

### **Beth Simpson**

Lawyer

### **Tracey Walker**

Legal Assistant

### **Meaghan Frazer**

Reception/Administration Officer

### **Hannah Niethe**

Reception

### **Simon Crase**

Community Development Manager  
Albury CLSD Regional Coordinator

*"In the midst of these extraordinary times, our staff delivered outstanding outcomes for people in our communities. They adapted to the challenges of remote service delivery, whilst managing the impacts of lockdowns in both states upon their own personal situations, as well as their work. Although the situation has resulted in our volunteers being unable to take part in evening clinics, we appreciated their positive and constructive feedback in a survey to help guide our review of the volunteer program, and their continued connection to our service. And we are grateful to our pro bono partners, including Clayton Utz and Gilbert + Tobin, who remained willing to help out where needed to provide their specialist assistance, in research and legal support."*

Sarah Rodgers,  
Manager & Principal Lawyer



# Our Services

## NSW Family Law/ Family Violence service

Partnering with the Women's Centre for Health & Wellbeing and the Southern Women's Domestic Violence Court Advocacy Service creates direct access for family violence victim-survivors to get free legal assistance. These close working relationships ensure our lawyers Diana Bruce and Erin Quilliam connect with clients as soon as possible. This collaborative work means women receive comprehensive assistance for a range of legal issues.

## Victorian Family Violence Project

The close partnership with the Centre Against Violence (CAV) is a client-focused service providing legal assistance and ongoing casework to family violence victim survivors or women at-risk of experiencing family violence. Lawyers Jodie Wells and Kristi Pemmelaar work closely with the CAV workers to ensure the best outcomes for the services' mutual clients. The collaborative approach to training CAV staff helps them identify legal problems and understand the family violence legal system and processes.

## Duty lawyer and Intervention Order Services

Our lawyers appear weekly and fortnightly in the Magistrates' Courts in Wodonga and Wangaratta and on rotation in Myrtleford Magistrates' Court. Our family law/family violence team can identify multiple complex legal issues. This expertise helps clients appearing at court who are often dealing with many legal problems. HRCLS values the productive relationships it has with the Courts, and other legal practitioners and services connected with the Courts.

## Victoria Legal Aid Family Lawyer Service

Lawyer Sarah Caplice returned to the secondee position after maternity leave for much of 2020-21. While Sarah was away, lawyer Erin Quilliam continued the focus of the practice, which comprises children's matters, property matters and intervention orders. This VLA-funded role has been running for 14 years within HRCLS and is vital for people needing access to this type of legal assistance.

## Bushfire legal assistance

Lawyer Harley Dannatt has been on the legal frontline helping people affected by the 2019-2020 bushfires in North East Victoria. Harley travels to Corryong in the Towong Shire and Bright in the Alpine Shire to give free legal assistance and support. His connections to disaster coordination and community response and recovery groups ensure he is involved in the local recovery effort. Kristi Pemmelaar provides legal advice to family violence victim survivors affected by the 2020 bushfires. She visits Corryong monthly and is connected with services who support victim survivors in fire-affected areas.

## Invisible Hurdles project

Stage II of the project had a major focus on education and empowering young people to make their voice heard on issues important to them. Invisible Hurdles partners, the Wodonga Flexible Learning Centre, Albury Wodonga Aboriginal Health Service and North East Support and Action for Youth Inc., remained engaged with the project, which started in 2015.

Legal project worker and lawyer Becky Smith joined lawyer Andrea Georgiou in delivering community legal education and activities for staff, students and young people. *Pathways to empowerment and justice* The Invisible Hurdles Stage II Research and Evaluation Final Report was released in June 2021. The Invisible Hurdles Project was made possible

through funding from the Victorian Legal Services Board Grant Program, Victorian State Government and the Commonwealth of Australia Attorney-General's Department.

## NSW outreach

Despite COVID-19 putting a halt to physical outreach until February 2021, NSW outreach lawyers Raissa Butkowski and Taylor Smith-Stephens remained available for free legal advice. This important outreach service included Intereach offices in Deniliquin and Corowa, The Hub (Yes Unlimited) in Albury and Lavington Library. Being available to support people in these disadvantaged pockets of the HRCLS catchment was important, as they would not have otherwise been able to get help for their legal problems..

## Gateway Health Partnership

The Holistic Assistance & Legal Outreach (HALO) has taken another step with the Health Justice space Partnership further developing its ties and evaluating the level of success over the six years it has been operating, with additional support from Health Justice Australia, particularly around outcome measurement and evaluation. Clients connected to Gateway Health in Wodonga and Wangaratta have a seamless pathway from the health service to HRCLS lawyers Debi Fisher and Tessa Mead when legal problems have been identified. This ongoing partnership has benefited the bushfire recovery effort locally, with Gateway Health the lead agency for the local response.

## COVID legal assistance

Lawyers Taylor Smith-Stephens and Helen Tselios were on the frontline helping people with legal problems as a result of COVID-19 in NSW and Victoria respectively. Their positions came at a time when the communities continued to deal with lockdowns, border closures and the changing conditions, loss of employment, an increase in mental health issues and legal problems.



# Community Justice on the Frontline

## Top 5 NSW Locations

**115** Albury  
**63** Lavington  
Thurgoona **22**  
**19** Corowa  
Deniliquin **12**

## Top 5 Victoria Locations

**385** Wodonga  
**184** Wangaratta  
Benalla **32**  
**18** Beechworth  
**18** Corryong

## Top 10 Problem Types

**817** Family  
Violence/ IVO/AVO  
Children's **690**  
Issues  
**402** Credit/debt/  
consumer issues  
Property in **335**  
marriage/de facto  
**159** Divorce/  
separation  
Victims of Crime **158**  
**143** Fines  
Housing **115**  
**104** Child Support  
Personal Safety **87**

Debts waived for  
clients through our legal assistance **\$601,480.20**

**13**  
Stakeholder  
Engagement  
activities

**7**  
Law Reform  
activities

**75** Community  
Legal Education  
sessions **193**  
**23** participants  
resources



# Who we help

**74%** female  
male **26%**

**5%** People from non-English speaking backgrounds

Homeless **10%** indicator  
**85%** financial disadvantage - advices

financial disadvantage **99%** - case work

Elderly **8%** 65 & over  
**15%** Children & youth (0-25)

People **61%** experiencing family violence - cases closed

**51%** People with a disability or mental illness

Aboriginal **13%** & Torres Strait Islander peoples

**350** legal tasks

**1442** advices

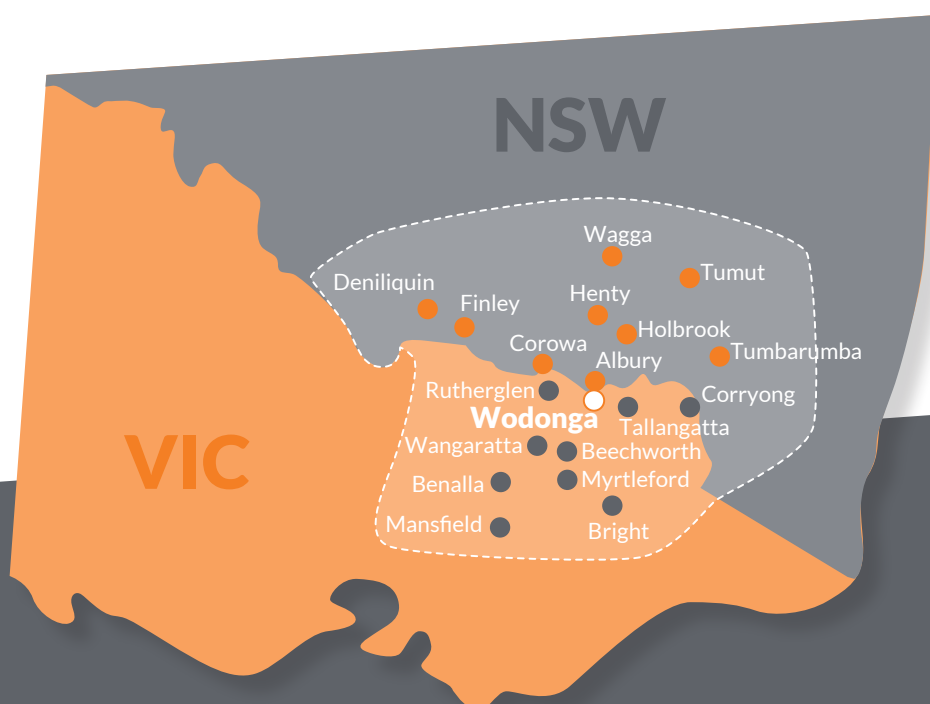
**1310** clients

**228** cases opened

**212** cases closed

**399** duty lawyer services

# Where we go



# Impact of border closure policy on our community

Advocating to government and peak bodies about what's best for our community regarding free legal assistance is part of our ongoing focus. The National Legal Assistance Partnership (NLAP) is the Federal Government's agreement for government-funded legal services. Part of its major focus is keeping the justice system within reach for vulnerable people facing disadvantage.

HRCLS was approached to provide a case study for the NLAP to show the impact of the NSW-Victoria border closure which ran from July through until November 2020. This decision plunged thousands of people in the broad Albury Wodonga region into immediate chaos.

The border closure permit system implemented was complex and changed frequently, sometimes daily. Between July and October, 18 Border Control Public Health Orders were made that had to be read and understood in the context of the broader NSW Public Health Orders, as were the 78 Victorian Directions/Orders made between March and November. This created multiple challenges for vulnerable people who relied on this system to access essential services in Albury. HRCLS contributed to government advocacy on behalf of clients who relied on crossing the border to get the help they needed, as well as connect with their crucial support networks, including family.

## Border closure causes chaos

Judy found the border closure permit system and application process overwhelming. HRCLS worked with Judy to ensure she understood the border closure rules and the exemptions available to her in order to access essential services. As part of advocacy at the time, HRCLS raised the impact of the border closure, including Judy's story, which gave her a voice at a time when she felt disempowered.

## Desperate time worsens with border slammed shut

At the time of the pandemic, Judy was struggling with significant debts stemming from her desperate circumstances. A single mother of two children with disabilities, Judy had a long history of family violence, experienced poor mental health and had cognitive issues. She relied on support from the NDIS and the disability support pension.

## Complex legal issues

Due to her challenging life circumstances, Judy was engaged with HRCLS for some years. HRCLS initially assisted Judy to obtain an Intervention Order against her ex-partner's girlfriend after being subjected to physical and verbal abuse for several years. HRCLS had also helped Judy with her family law matter, a parenting dispute. Overwhelming debts and loans arising out of unfair and irresponsible lending occurred at a time when Judy was experiencing high levels of vulnerability, and HRCLS stepped in to help get these resolved.

*"The people I am closest to are across the border, so I became very isolated and had no one. I became depressed, felt devastated and couldn't cope."*

## Impact on mental health

Judy became isolated from her support networks in Albury. This included the close-knit family support, given by her grandmothers. The border closure also prevented her from caring for her elderly mother who had mental health issues, due to her capacity to understand and deal with the process. Judy's ability to fully parent her children also diminished, as she struggled on her own. Judy ended up seeing a psychiatrist and her medication was increased to a high dose to keep her from needing to be hospitalised as she struggled to deal with the isolation.

## Collaboration working

Judy was also linked into UMFC financial counselling to assist her to set up payment plans for some of her remaining debts. This not only demonstrated the critical impact of legal representation for victim survivors, but also the agility of the legal service to adapt to remote delivery in the context of the pandemic.

## Getting debt and stress down

Despite the COVID-19 restricting face-to-face contact, HRCLS continued to provide legal representation to Judy, and got her debts reduced by \$10,300. This made a significant difference to Judy's financial situation, and substantially reduced her stress levels associated with the debts. Her improved financial state also reduced her worry. *"You have been an amazing support with talking through all my legal issues as well as mental health ones. I've felt a sense of real caring and compassion with you one that isn't just got a job to do but real care"*

## Problems compound as life

While Judy's eldest son was struggling with severe mental health issues, her debts piled up. Her son had made numerous trips to hospital locally and in Melbourne. Judy desperately needed a new car, after a car accident, so she could look after her children and provide the care they required. She was unable to buy a new car due to her existing loan repayments. Judy had also left her relationship due to the ongoing family violence. *"This was the worst year of my life with so much trauma,"* she said.

To read Judy's full story visit our [website](#).



# Working together in pandemic keeps family home

Anne\* and David\* were in their mid-60s and carers of an adult son with significant disability. They decided it was time to downsize and set themselves and their son up for the future. Neither of them were working full time and their main source of income was Centrelink, although David was working casually. Anne and David also had significant debt which they planned to payout through the sale of their home.

Once this was done, this family of three who were all facing health challenges, were effectively homeless and living out of suitcases, desperate to obtain a loan for their new home. After speaking to the bank about their requirements, Anne and David felt they were convinced to sign documents they didn't really understand. The end result of which was a mortgage based on the assumption that David would continue working until he was 75 years old and their severely disabled son was a signatory to the loan. Unbeknownst to them, their 25-year mortgage had been reduced to 12 years, effectively doubling their repayments and bringing them to the edge of disaster.

As part of the collaborative effort, HRCLS worked with a UMFC financial counsellor (FC) and specialist community legal centre Consumer Action Law Centre (CALC) to achieve the result below.

*"It was a great experience working with HRCLS lawyer Raissa Butkowski to achieve such a good outcome for Anne. Throughout the matter, Raissa showed perseverance, tenacity, and compassion. This is an excellent example to show the direct impact of collaborative work between specialist and generalist legal services."* Katelyn Jones, Solicitor, CALC

## Border closure adds to trauma

In early 2020, David was forced to give up working due to poor health. Not long after, COVID-19 hit. Anne and David sought the mortgage moratorium for well over six months due to significant financial hardship. The NSW border closure with Victoria forced the family to split residences, while David and his son spent time in hospital getting operations. *"That was a really difficult time and financially it was a big stress,"* Anne said

## Biggest relief

When Anne received the phone call from Raissa, she was gobsmacked to learn the family home had been saved. The outcome was beyond anything Anne imagined. *"Words aren't good enough to describe how I felt and how I still feel. I wasn't expecting anything like Raissa got us. Thanks to her, the sun was shining again."* Anne said the legal service was professional and praised Raissa for her level of care, and willingness to seek a positive outcome. *"She was honest with me from the beginning, although I had doubt she could help us. She was passionate about what was happening to us and fought really hard."*

*"There was a lot of stress, and I couldn't cope with the thought of losing our house."*

## Struggle becomes overwhelming

With repayments double what they could afford, Anne and David were sinking. David's physical and mental health was deteriorating and Anne was dreading what might happen next. *"There was a lot of stress and I couldn't cope with the thought of losing our house."* UMFC FCs were working with Anne and David but realised legal help was needed and connected them with Raissa.

## Combined effort saves house

After working with the FCs, and reaching out to CALC for further support, Raissa filed a complaint with the Australian Financial Complaints Authority. This outlined concerns about irresponsible lending and unconscionable conduct. Negotiations saw an offer being made to cut the amount Anne and David owed in half, drastically reducing the monthly repayments. This meant the loan was now affordable and the family no longer feared having to sell the home.

To read Anne & David's full story visit our [website](#).

# Bushfire Lawyer: a small but important part in disaster recovery

Disaster recovery is complex and drawn out. The challenges people face are varied and require wide-ranging and collaborative supports.

John\* and Catrina\* were referred to HRCLS Bushfire Lawyer Harley Dannatt by Gateway Health's Bushfire Recovery Case Management team in December 2020. Twelve months earlier bushfires roared across the Upper Murray, destroying dozens of homes and farms, including John and Catrina's home and newly planted orchards, permaculture and conservation farm business.

This issue was only one of many for John and Catrina, but shows the hurdles and timelines involved.

*"Working with severely traumatised individuals who are facing multiple complex issues is not easy. My team have often reflected on how grateful they are to have*

*Harley's advice and support, and how thankful their clients are for his ability to clearly and carefully walk them through the often intricate technicalities of the law, using language they can understand."*

Gateway Health Jarryd Williams,  
Bushfire Recovery Program Manager

*"In some ways,  
the recovery has been  
harder than the actual fires.  
The fires were traumatic,  
but they came and went.  
The recovery feels like it  
is never-ending."*

## Collaborative approach to community care

HRCLS continues to work closely with Gateway Health, Bushfire Recoveries Victoria, AgBiz and the many other services supporting fire-affected communities. Gateway Health was assigned to case management and their focus was on ensuring John and Catrina got all the financial assistance being offered.

## Huge task recovering post bushfires

John and Catrina lost everything on their farm apart from a small timber shed and a garden shed when the 2020 bushfire tore through their area. In the 11 months before they were connected by the Gateway Health Bushfire Recovery Case Management team with Harley, the couple had been working through the massive job of disaster recovery: claiming insurance, re-planting, planning and seeking permission to re-build. This was all while being homeless, with no source of income and trying to arrange temporary accommodation as well as looking after their own personal recovery.

## Another hurdle to overcome

After Harley made inquiries, it became apparent there was no real appeal process in regards to the grant application; the decision appeared final. Nevertheless, armed with a recent Administrative Appeals Tribunal (AAT) decision regarding the backdating of an ABN, and John and Catrina's now-active ABN, Harley wrote compelling submissions to the grant panel who agreed to overturn the previous decision and issue the grant.

## Help hard to access

Grants of \$75,000 were available from the Victorian Government for primary producers affected by the fires. Despite the losses, Rural Finance, who were administering the grants, denied John and Catrina's application because they did not have an active ABN. Trying to get phone or internet reception in this part of regional Victoria is difficult in the best of times. John was making phone calls and sending emails and being placed on hold for long periods of time while his reception kept dropping out. He was grateful to be able to see Harley and talk in person at one of the local recovery hubs.

## Moving forward

With \$75,000 now in their bank, six months after first seeing Harley and 15 months after the fires, John and Catrina were finally in a position to start re-building their life and their business. Without Gateway Health's support and referral through to Harley, and without HRCLS being able to speak to people in their local communities and take on matters outside of their normal casework, it is likely that John and Catrina would never have received the grant money that was intended to help people like them start over.

To read Catrina & John's  
full story visit our [website](#).



# Partnerships support helps migrants experiencing family violence

The ongoing support a community legal centre offers people from Culturally and Linguistically Diverse backgrounds can be a major benefit for those who have been through terrible ordeals. Additionally, working in partnership with a service like Centre Against Violence that understands all the needs of victim-survivors also helps create a strong support net.

Having moved to Australia five years earlier, Chanda\* was separating from her abusive husband, Ishaan\*. *"Without the support of CAV, my lawyer Jodie and Gateway Health, I would not be standing where I am today. There would have been no chance of me moving ahead if no one was there to support me."* Chanda

## Arranged marriage, new home, foreign country

Chanda met her husband Ishaan for the first time on their wedding day. Married in India in 2012, Chanda had no say in choosing her husband. Within days of getting married, Chanda fell pregnant. In May 2013, Chanda moved to Australia with her newborn baby to join her husband, who had been living here since 2005.

## Daily abuse takes toll

Over the years, Ishaan beat Chanda regularly. She was forced to cook, clean and attend to all his needs. She also fed his extended family every night. Chanda wasn't allowed a bank account and Ishaan refused to let her leave the home most days. In time, Ishaan's sister also started abusing Chanda. In 2018, she gave birth to their second child. Constantly abused and told she was dumb and stupid, Chanda felt trapped.

## Finding strength

In 2020, Chanda signed Consent Orders for a property settlement. She received \$62,000 cash and \$45,000 in a super split. This meant Chanda had some security and the potential for a stable future. *"It was a huge relief, and I can now buy a home for my kids. After I separated, I had no money at all, and one time I had to borrow from my best friend to buy food for my kids."*

*"Because of my Indian background, it was very hard to get out of the situation. There was so much pressure not to leave from family and friends. Speaking with CAV made me realise it was okay to leave. They were there for me and... didn't judge me for something I was doing that was not in my culture."*

## Ongoing legal advice makes difference

Along with the Intervention Order and property matters, Jodie helped Chanda with a child support review, and also an Administrative Appeals Tribunal hearing to prevent Ishaan from claiming his living expenses as child support. Chanda was grateful for Jodie's advice. *"If I was a bit concerned about something, Jodie advised me clearly and would tell me everything I needed to know. She also told me what she was doing was free, and I didn't have to pay for it. She was really helpful with getting child support for me, and fully explained things."*

## Knowledge on rights helps in tough situation

As part of more than two years' negotiation, the family home was put on the market and sold. With Chanda fearful of becoming homeless, it was Jodie's advice that gave her some comfort. *"She told me to talk to the real estate and tell them I would not be moving out until I found somewhere else to go. I thought because there was a 30-day settlement in place that I would just have to leave. It was little tips and advice like that which really helped me stand up in those situations."*

To read Chanda's full story visit our [website](#).

# Giving youth confidence to speak up, share ideas and help shape the future

Empowering young people to raise their voice in policy and decision-making was one of the successes of an expanded Invisible Hurdles Project. Stage II involved legal advice and representation as well as a comprehensive legal education program for young people from the three project partners, including Wodonga Flexible Learning Centre (WFLC), Albury Wodonga Aboriginal Health Service (AWAHS) and North East Support and Action for Youth Inc. This approach turned out to be even more beneficial with COVID-19 causing significant disruptions to the students.

The *Pathways to empowerment and justice* The Invisible Hurdles Stage II Research and Evaluation Final Report was released in June 2021. Authors from The Australian National University, Pamela Taylor-Barnett, Hon. Lecturer, and Dr Liz Curran, Hon. Associate Professor, evaluated the project and noted the work had been "effective and outstanding". The Project Evaluators observed: *"young people are some of the most disenfranchised young people in the nation, and therefore are often too stressed by their own daily concerns and too disempowered to engage politically."*

*"The voice of youth has to be heard to close the gap. Without hearing the voices of young people, decisions are made that will be ignored or done in a way that aren't applicable to those young people. They are our future."* AWAHS staff member

## Local voice in youth strategy

A major achievement was having young people get involved in the public consultation process for a new, whole-of-government youth strategy. The Project team were involved in a community forum initially, and then engaged young people through a survey. The survey taught them about the process of law-making and what it means to be a democracy. Survey results were submitted to the government, and also used as part of an extensive collaborative submission.

## Road to change

WFLC students raised concerns about being unable to do driving practice during Stage 3 COVID-19 restrictions in Victoria. This would stop them getting the 120 hours they needed to get their P plates. They were worried this delay would stop them getting a job after they finished school. The Project team proposed writing a letter to the government ministers urging them to change the rules. The young people wanted to have their voices included in the letter. Shortly after the letter was sent, the rules were changed. While there is no way to measure how much impact the letter had, the young people were proud they had taken action.

## Building bridge with local police

The Project team worked with more than 20 young people to complete a Wodonga Police community survey. When a high level of distrust of police was recorded, the Project team helped the young people work out ways this could be improved. The young people decided to invite a police officer to the school. To remove any anxiety among the group the visit was structured like an episode of the program, "You Can't Ask That". The visit was such a success the police officer visits the school twice a term to chat to young people, answer questions and deliver education sessions.

## Idea leads to new project

One suggestion made by the young people was that *"teachers and wellbeing teams [in schools] receive training in identifying family violence and be aware of local family violence services so this information can be made available to young people"*. This suggestion fed directly into a successful funding application by HRCLS to the Helen Macpherson Smith Trust to run a new project, titled AMPLIFY, to work with four local schools.

## Standing up on issues

The encouragement led to students fuelling individual advocacy. One young person rang Australian Parliament House to speak to the Prime Minister after the ban on mobile phones in schools was introduced, while another wrote a letter to their local council about long grass attracting snakes at a playground near her house. Of the latter student, her teacher commented: *"She was made to feel that she had a voice...It's something that will probably make her more politically active in the future...that her say is important."* This empowerment was one of the main goals of the Project.

To read the Stage II Invisible Hurdles Project full story visit our [website](#).





# Our voice for positive change

## Standing up for our community

COVID-19 might have closed our borders but it opened plenty of doors for us to advocate to government and funders. Alongside the free legal assistance our lawyers delivered, law reform and advocacy to improve the system was a focus. We pride ourselves on the high quality support we give our clients to help them get through their legal issues. Our position as a cross border service gives us an opportunity to see the rural and regional challenges and identify how the legal system can be improved.

Among the many areas we advocated on, our expertise was sought to highlight the impact of the NSW-Victoria border closure from July to November 2020. The experience of a HRCLS client was submitted towards the National Legal Assistance Plan (NLAP) to help demonstrate the effect a government decision has on the vulnerable members of our community.

Photo above: Professor Marcia Langton (5th from left) gives an update to local services on the University of Melbourne report, Improving family violence legal and support services for Indigenous women, released in December 2020. HRCLS staff Alison Maher, Becky Smith and Tessa Mead (2nd onwards from right) represent the legal service, which provided information and local knowledge and expertise to the report.

## 2020-21 law reform and advocacy

**NLAP case study** – provided on invitation by the Federation of CLCs. Used as a case study to demonstrate to the Federal Government how a vulnerable client was severely affected by the NSW-Victoria border closure.

**Remote Justice Stories Project** – story submission and interview with senior family lawyer Alison Maher to the joint Monash University's Australian Centre for Justice Innovation–University of Otago Legal Issues Centre project being led by Associate Professor Genevieve Grant.

**NSW Government Coercive Control Inquiry** – submission made to inquiry outlining the pros and cons from the legal service's perspective on the potential criminalisation of coercive control.

**Police relationship building project** – a project to identify ways to improve the understanding of how police operate when family violence is reported, and how they approach family violence matters in regard to investigations and breaches and applying for orders.

**Stop the Debt Alliance member** – as part of the Consumer Action Law Centre-led advocacy to create better responsible lending laws, HRCLS continued to engage with local MPs about this issue.

**Education providers and payday lenders** – advocacy to Member for Indi Dr Helen Haines about non-registered training providers

and 'buy now, pay later' providers should not be exempt from existing responsible lending obligations.

**Victorian Government Youth strategy** – joint submission made as part of Invisible Hurdles project, involving feedback from Wodonga Flexible Learning Centre, North East Support and Action for Youth Inc. and the Albury Wodonga Aboriginal Health Service, and youth engaged with these organisations. Call for integrated justice partnerships to be included in the Victorian Youth Strategy.

**Improving family violence legal and support services for Indigenous women on the NSW-Victoria border** – interviews provided to University of Melbourne report investigators using client and service experiences of the cross border environment and processes in place to help family violence victim survivors.

**Infringements Working Group** – organised research on the nomination process in the Victorian Fines System.

**Federation of CLCs 10-year-plan** – feedback provided as part of 10-year Plan discussion paper.

**Meeting with Member for Farrer Sussan Ley** – support sought for project to assist young people experiencing family violence.

# Financial Statement

HRCLS is grateful for the significant funding received in 2020-21 and thanks all funders. These vital contributions allow HRCLS to give much-needed legal assistance to vulnerable and disadvantaged people in North East Victoria and the Southern Riverina of NSW. The table below details the sources, purpose and funding for the 2020-21 financial year.

Source	Source	Purpose	Breakdown	Total
Victoria Legal Aid	Attorney-General's Department (Commonwealth)	Generalist Commonwealth	\$ 447,564	\$850,899
		Family Law and/or Family Violence	\$ 100,854	
		COVID-19	\$ 87,500	
		Bushfire Support	\$ 135,000	
		SACS ERO – Cth	\$ 79,981	
	Victorian State Government	Generalist State	\$227,816	\$765,389
		Family Violence - State	\$67,725	
		Community Legal Centres Family Violence & Assistance [CLCFVA]	\$155,616	
		Bushfire Recovery Victoria [BRV]	\$150,000	
		COVID-19	\$87,500	
		SACS ERO - State	\$76,732	
Legal Aid NSW	Attorney-General's Department (Commonwealth)	Family Law/Family Violence (NSW)	\$ 186,260	\$603,343
		COVID-19	\$ 187,500	
		COVID-19 (ICT)	\$ 18,000	
	NSW State Government	Cooperative Legal Service Delivery	\$28,000	
	NSW State Government & Public Purpose Fund (PPF)	NSW Outreach (Pool 1)	\$183,583	
Victorian Legal Services Board + Commissioner		Invisible Hurdles	\$85,000	\$85,000
Department of Justice & Community Safety		Legal Assistance Funding – Invisible Hurdles	\$98,007	\$98,007
TOTAL FUNDING				\$2,402,638

This is a summarised statement of income which is consistent with externally audited financial statements that are available (along with UMFC's Annual Report) by contacting UMFC on 02 6055 8000.





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

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 the people who are disadvantaged or vulnerable and would not otherwise be able to get legal help.



This service is auspiced by UMFC and in 2020-21 received funding from the Commonwealth of Australia Attorney-General's Department, Victorian State Government, NSW State Government, and the Victorian Legal Services Board Grants Program.  
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