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Evaluation and review of
Hume Riverina Community Legal Service's
Family Violence Partnership
with the Centre Against Violence

Prepared by Effective Change Pty Ltd
for Hume Riverina Community Legal Service
February 2024

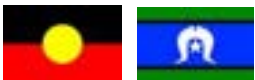
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Effective Change Pty Ltd acknowledges the Traditional Owners of Country throughout Victoria and pays respect to their Elders past, present and future.



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Introduction

This report presents the evaluation of the integrated family violence services provided by Hume Riverina Community Legal Service (HRCLS) in the Ovens Murray region of north east Victoria, with a primary focus on the Family Violence Health Justice Partnership between HRCLS and the Centre Against Violence (CAV).

Background

Based in Albury-Wodonga on the border between Victoria and NSW, HRCLS provides free legal advice and services across the seven Local Government Areas (LGAs) of the Ovens Murray region and across 10 LGAs in the Southern Riverina of NSW. HRCLS is auspiced by Upper Murray Family Care (UMFC) and is accredited by the National Association of Community Legal Centres.

HRCLS is one of the few cross-border community legal centres (CLC) in Australia, covering the two jurisdictions of Victoria and NSW. The organisation receives core funding from Victorian Legal Aid and Legal Aid NSW to provide legal services to the communities living on the border, as well as Commonwealth and philanthropic funding for a range of services and programs.

CAV is a not-for-profit organisation funded to deliver both family violence crisis services and sexual assault support services in the Ovens Murray region. CAV provides family violence crisis care and case management for people who are experiencing family violence. CAV also provides advocacy and counselling support to adults, children and young people who have experienced sexual assault, as well as a range of other specialised programs and projects.

Advancing a comprehensive response to family violence

The majority of HRCLS clients are experiencing or have experienced family violence. In 2022/23, 65.8% of all clients (n=876) reported family violence. In responding to this issue, areas of strategic focus for HRCLS include ‘*Advancing a comprehensive response to family violence*’ and ‘*Improving capacity to target services to those most in need and to create lasting change*’. HRCLS provides family violence legal support through its generalist services, through partnerships with community agencies, including Gateway Health and through outreach clinics.

The Family Violence Health Justice Partnership between HRCLS and CAV is a key plank in the strategy to advance a comprehensive response to family violence in the Ovens Murray region. This work is enhanced by the Duty Lawyer Intervention Order Services provided by HRCLS at three of the four Magistrates’ Courts in the region (Wangaratta, Wodonga and Myrtleford).¹

Health justice partnerships are defined by Health Justice Australia as embedding lawyers in social services settings and teams to improve health and wellbeing for:

- individuals, through direct service provision in places that they access
- people and communities vulnerable to complex need, by integrating service responses around client needs and capability
- vulnerable populations through advocacy for systemic change to policies and practices that affect the social determinants of health.²

About the HRCLS CAV Family Violence Health Justice Partnership

The Family Violence Health Justice Partnership between HRCLS and CAV commenced in 2016, providing a pathway to legal assistance and ongoing casework for victim-survivors or women at risk of experiencing family violence. The service catchment area covers the seven rural and regional local government areas (LGAs) in the Ovens Murray region of north east Victoria.

The central elements of the HRCLS CAV Family Violence Health Justice Partnership are:

- weekly attendance of a HRCLS lawyer at CAV offices to provide legal advice and information by appointment to clients
- secondary consultations provided to CAV practitioners
- delivery of legal education sessions to CAV staff, approximately every six weeks.

In addition, the partners also undertake joint advocacy activities and participate together on regional community initiatives addressing family violence.

About the evaluation and review

Effective Change was engaged by HRCLS to evaluate the Family Violence Health Justice Partnership which had not been evaluated since its commencement. The purpose of the evaluation was to document the work of the partnership and:

- review what, and to what extent, the partnership's objectives are being achieved
- review the effectiveness and appropriateness of the partnership, taking into account the family violence sector reforms, challenges the region has faced (throughout the pandemic, bushfires and floods) and the increasing demand for family violence legal support
- capture learnings around the partnership model targeting family violence, in the context of serving the regional and cross-border communities of Hume Riverina
- identify opportunities for improvement or strengthening approaches.

During the evaluation, it was recognised that the points above raised strategic issues around service improvement best considered by the broader local service system, hence the project was expanded to an evaluation and review.

Project management

The overall project was managed by the HRCLS Managing Lawyer – Family Law, and the HRCLS Manager and Principal Lawyer, with day-to-day management by the Senior Lawyer. For the consultants, the project was managed by Clare Keating, Director, Effective Change.

Methodology

Evaluation framework and key questions

An evaluation framework was designed around the objectives of the Family Violence Health Justice Partnership and the broader purpose of the review. The key evaluation questions explored were:

- Is the partnership achieving its objectives to:
 - provide greater access to legal support for CAV clients?
 - improve health and wellbeing by addressing health-harming legal problems?
 - improve referral processes?
 - build the capacity of practitioners to identify and respond to their clients' legal needs?
 - strengthen ties between providers of legal assistance and family violence and sexual assault services for the benefit of the community?
- How well is the partnership functioning?
- How effective and appropriate is the partnership, considering the family violence sector reforms and challenges the region has faced from the pandemic and natural disasters?
- Does the partnership offer opportunities for advocacy and leadership?
- What are the learnings from the partnership, in particular for regional/cross-border communities?
- What are the opportunities for improvement or strengthening approaches?

Interview schedules were tailored to the roles and organisation of the stakeholders. To provide context for the evaluation, stakeholders were asked about their own role and cross-border or regional issues, relevant to the experience of family violence victim-survivors and the cross-border service system.

Methods

The evaluation was conducted using a mixed methods approach including:

- qualitative information collection through individual and group interviews
- desktop analysis of service delivery data
- review of reports, partnership documents, Bite Sized Law training material and feedback and media articles relevant to the partnership
- analysis of regional family violence data reported by the Crime Statistics Agency
- desktop scan and review of relevant external literature and reports.

Information collection

Key stakeholder consultations

Twenty-four (24) stakeholders from CAV, HRCLS and external organisations were interviewed between July and October 2023. Most interviews were held in person in the Wangaratta offices of the partner organisations. The remaining interviews were held online.

Key stakeholders interviewed, by organisation		#
CAV:		12
CEO	Family Violence Case Managers (2)	
Caring Dads Program	Family Violence Practitioner	
Community Connections Project Coordinator	Intake and Therapeutic Services Manager	
Counsellor Advocates (2)	RAMP Coordinator	
Family Violence Team Leader	Senior Counsellor Advocate	

Key stakeholders interviewed, by organisation		#
HRCLS:		6
Legal Assistant/Administration Officer	Senior Lawyer	
Managing Lawyer – Family Law	Lawyer (2)	
Manager and Principal Lawyer		
The Orange Door:		3
Service System Navigator	Specialist Family Violence Practitioner	
Screening, Assessment & Triage Team Leader		
External Stakeholders:		3
Consultant Barrister, Holding Redlich	Registrar, Wangaratta Magistrates' Court	
Family Violence Liaison Officer, Victoria Police		

In addition, four clients were interviewed by telephone bringing the total number of interviews to 28. Each of the clients had indicated their wish to provide feedback on the support received from HRCLS and provided informed consent to participate in the interview.

Data analysis and reporting

Data from the range of sources has been analysed against the evaluation framework. A draft report was prepared and discussed with HRCLS. The final report, incorporating feedback from HRCLS, was then submitted.

Rural and regional context

Overview

The Family Violence Health Justice Partnership serves the communities of the seven LGAs of the Ovens Murray region. The areas vary from Wodonga, with the largest population (43,253) and the smallest in area (433 square kilometres) to the neighbouring Towong Shire covering 6,675 square kilometres with a population of only 6,223, or more than 1 square kilometre per person. The city of Wodonga is a three-and-a-half-hour drive from Melbourne on the Hume Freeway. However, the drive to Melbourne is closer to five hours from the township of Corryong, reflecting the single carriage country roads and hilly terrain.



The area has experienced natural disasters in the past five years, including the 2019/20 bushfires which impacted over 174,000 hectares of public land in north-east Victoria. There were also two significant floods in the region in 2022. As with most of rural Australia, there is growing concern for communities facing increased frequency and intensity of natural disasters associated with climate change and the ‘increasing burdens’ that will be placed on legal and related services.³

Family violence

The Royal Commission into Family Violence highlighted a range of issues that differentiated the experience of family violence for rural and regional communities from metropolitan areas.⁴ These include:

- geographic and social isolation
- economic vulnerability and dependence
- cultural factors, including more conservative views and a stronger emphasis on traditional gender constructs and cultures of masculinity in rural and regional communities
- reluctance to seek help related to issues such as the position of perpetrator within the community and challenges maintaining privacy in smaller communities
- access to firearms and other weapons
- limited or no public transport
- chronic shortages of housing and alternative accommodation
- increases in family violence in the wake of natural disasters which are more prevalent in rural areas
- intersectional disadvantage experienced by children and young people, older people, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities, culturally and linguistically diverse communities, LGBTIQ communities and people with disabilities in rural and regional communities.

While significant resources have been invested to prevent family violence and reform systems since the Royal Commission report in 2016, many if not most of the issues identified above still apply. In fact, with national and international research clearly confirming that ‘gender-based violence increases in disasters across the world’⁵, combined with predicted increases in climate change induced natural disasters, it is also likely that family violence will escalate in rural and regional communities.

Cross border context

Cross border legal issues can present a challenge for the communities on the Victorian/NSW border region who often work, attend schools and educational institutions, access services or visit family and friends on one side of the border, whilst residing on the other. Border residents often have interrelated Victorian and NSW legal problems which can be extremely complex to resolve. It is not unusual to have multiple agencies on both sides of the border involved in one matter to reach a solution, and this creates its own set of challenges from a legal perspective.

The complexity of family violence and family law matters, for example, can be significantly increased when combined with cross border issues. The Royal Commission into Family Violence noted that the *'the closest police station or other relevant service might in fact be located across the border.'*⁶ The National Domestic Violence Order Scheme introduced in 2017 ensures that intervention orders are nationally recognised and enforceable in all Australian states and territories. This extinguished the requirement for interstate orders to be registered before the orders or breaches of the orders were recognised. However, family violence matters can still have additional challenges when the border is involved. For example, when one or other party lives in or relocates to NSW, or incidents occur across the border but the victim-survivor resides in Victoria and/or when police or other agencies in both states are involved.

While the closure of state borders would have once seemed improbable, the Victorian/NSW border was closed multiple times during the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020 and 2021 for the first time in 100 years. Travel permit arrangements for border communities allowed cross-border travel to continue, however it was disruptive and time consuming and those who could limited travel to essential visits. The border closures highlighted the complexity of cross border legal issues, especially issues involving family violence and family law matters. For example, the Federal Circuit and Family Court servicing most of the north-eastern region of Victoria is located over the NSW border in Albury. At the time of the border closures, HRCLS reported a rise in enquiries relating to parenting arrangements and concerns relating to threats to withhold children and access to children.⁷

Access to justice issues for rural and regional victim-survivors

Access to justice issues also differentiate experiences of family violence for regional and rural communities. The Royal Commission into Family Violence noted:

- the varied experiences of people seeking assistance from police – ranging from supportive and helpful to encountering reluctance to accept anything other than evidence of physical violence or greater empathy for the perpetrator.
- limited police resources and greater geographic distances affecting response times at family violence incidents in rural, regional and remote locations
- limited access to Specialist Family Violence Court divisions for rural and regional communities with only one non-metropolitan division at that time (in Ballarat). More recently Specialist Family Violence Courts have expanded to more rural and regional locations including Geelong, Shepparton and the Latrobe Valley
- limited availability of free legal services for people attending court in regional areas
- greater number of conflicts of interest arising in smaller population areas, which can result in Affected Family Members or Respondents without access to legal advice or representation.⁸

These access to justice issues continue to impact the communities in the Ovens-Murray region.

Most police stations in smaller towns are single officer stations and not open 24 hours, often closing at 5pm. Many smaller communities in the region do not have a police station. There is no Specialist Family Violence Court in the Ovens-Murray region. People attending the Wangaratta, Wodonga and Myrtleford Magistrates' Courts do not have access to the resources and supports of Specialist Family Violence Courts such as purpose-built safe waiting and interview rooms, remote witness facilities and child friendly spaces, court ordered Men's Behaviour Change programs or specially trained Magistrates, Court Registrars and Family Violence practitioners for applicants and respondents.

There is no Victoria Legal Aid office in the Ovens-Murray region and a lack of panel practitioners in the region. As the only free legal assistance service in the region, HRCLS experiences high demand for its services and a high level of clients unable to be assisted due to conflicts of interest. The limited number of panel practitioners or other private legal practices in the region also experience high rates of conflicts of interest and are frequently unable to assist parties in family violence matters.

The closest Specialist Family Violence Court, the closest Victoria Legal Aid office and the closest Community Legal Centre are all located outside of HRCLS' catchment area, in Shepparton in the Goulburn region. Shepparton is a 3.5 hour drive each-way from towns such as Corryong in Towong Shire or Dinner Plain in Alpine Shire. It is a two-hour drive from Wodonga and one hour from Benalla. Public transport options between these locations are either non-existent or extremely limited.

Service system issues

In addition to cross-border complexities, catchment areas and boundaries vary across service systems. The seven LGAs which comprise the Victorian catchment area for HRCLS are usually referred to as the Ovens Murray region. However, as the table below shows, the police, government departments, the courts and Victoria Legal Aid, differ in the way this region is bounded.

Organisation	Regional structure	Ovens Murray
Victoria Police	4 regions, 21 divisions	Division 3 (Benalla) and Division 4 (Wangaratta and Wodonga) of the Eastern Region
Department of Families, Fairness and Housing (DFFH)	4 divisions, 17 areas	Ovens Murray area of the East Division
Magistrates' Court of Victoria	13 regions	Hume Region
Regional Development Victoria	5 regions (regional Victoria only)	Ovens Murray region of the Hume region (also includes the Goulburn region)
Victoria Legal Aid	Uses local government boundaries	7 LGAs

The different regional boundaries can affect the capacity to obtain data from various authorities and departments. Service catchment and delivery areas can also vary. For example, HRCLS provides Intervention Order Duty Lawyer services at three of the four Magistrates' Courts in the region (Wangaratta, Wodonga and Myrtleford). However, the Goulburn Valley CLC provides the Intervention Order Duty Lawyer service at the fourth regional Magistrates' Court in Benalla.

The opening of the Ovens Murray Orange Door, a program of Family Services Victoria (FSV) in August 2021 is a key service system change. In the Ovens Murray region it brings together five partner agencies (CAV, UMFC, Gateway Health, Mungabareena and the Victorian Aboriginal Child Care Agency (VACCA) as well as FSV staff, to create an integrated team and a consolidated intake and assessment point for people experiencing family violence, perpetrators of family violence and families in need of support with child wellbeing and development.

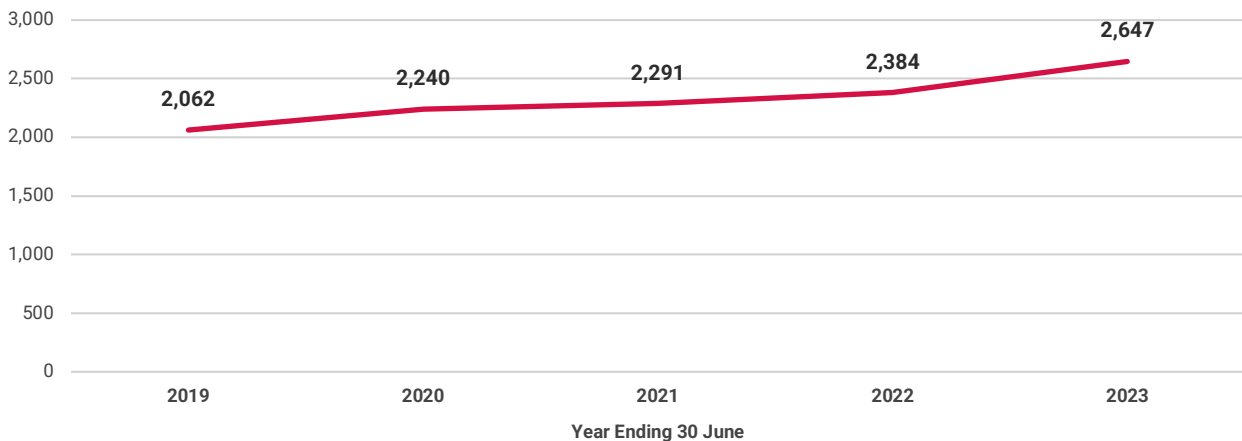
The need for family violence legal assistance

Family violence in the Ovens Murray region

Number of incidents

The number of reported family incidents in the Ovens Murray region has steadily increased over the past five years, as Graph 1 shows. In the financial year ending June 2023, 2,647 family incidents were recorded in the region. While the number of family incidents increased by 2.8% across the state from 2022 to 2023, in the Ovens Murray they increased by 11%.⁹

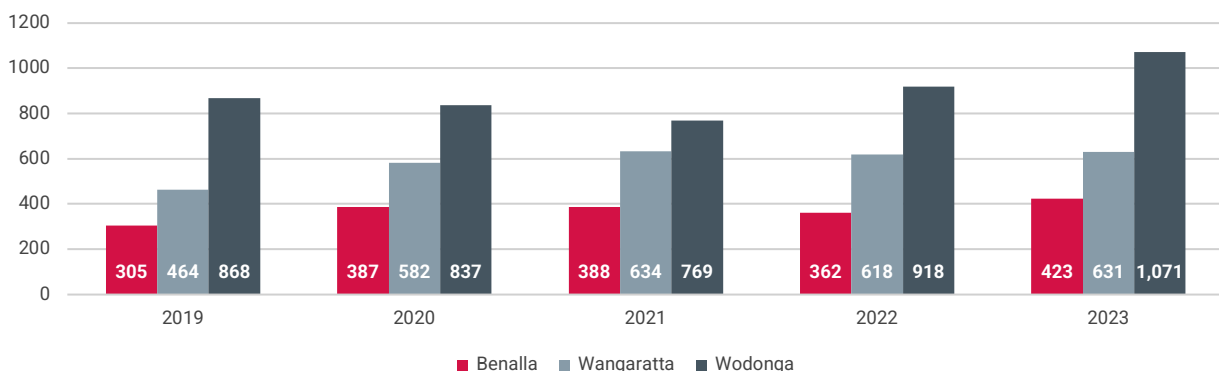
Graph 1: Total number of family incidents - Ovens Murray from 2019 - 2023



Source: Crime Statistics Agency, Data Tables LGA Family Incidents Year Ending June 2023, Table 1: Family Incidents and rate per 100,000 population by police region and local government area, July 2018 to June 2023. <https://www.crimestatistics.vic.gov.au/crime-statistics/latest-victorian-crime-data/download-data>

The greatest number of family incidents in the region occur in the three larger population centres of Benalla, Wangaratta and Wodonga. In 2023, family incidents in Wodonga alone accounted for 40% of all family incidents in the region. Family incidents in the three LGAs combined accounted for 80% of family incidents in the region. Graph 2 below shows the number of family incidents in these three LGAs for the past five years. There were slight decreases in 2022 for Benalla and Wangaratta and in Wodonga in 2021. It is difficult to know if these decreases were related to COVID-19 issues such as lockdowns and restrictions on movement, when, for example, service providers noted a shadow pandemic of unreported family violence. However, comparing the data over the five-year period from 2019 to 2023, there was a 23% increase in family incidents in Wodonga, a 36% increase in family incidents in Wangaratta and a 39% increase in family incidents in Benalla over that five-year period.

Graph 2: Family incidents recorded by police region and local government area, Year ending June 2019 to June 2023



Source: Crime Statistics Agency, Data Tables LGA Family Incidents Year Ending June 2023, Table 1: Family Incidents and rate per 100,000 population by police region and local government area, July 2018 to June 2023. <https://www.crimestatistics.vic.gov.au/crime-statistics/latest-victorian-crime-data/download-data>

Rate of family incidents

The Crime Statistics Agency collates data on the rate of family violence incidents per 100,000 population, which enables comparisons to be made across areas and to statewide data. The family incident rate in the LGAs of Alpine, Indigo and Mansfield have tracked below the statewide rate for the past five years. The following changes to the family incident rate are noted in these LGAs.

- Alpine: – has been relatively consistent at an average rate of 1,070 per year
- Indigo: – steadily increased, from a rate of 730 per annum in 2019 to 1,150 in 2023 - an increase of 76% over 5 years
- Mansfield: – had been steady from 2019 to 2022, with an average rate of 1,155
– in 2023 the rate decreased by 31% compared to the previous year

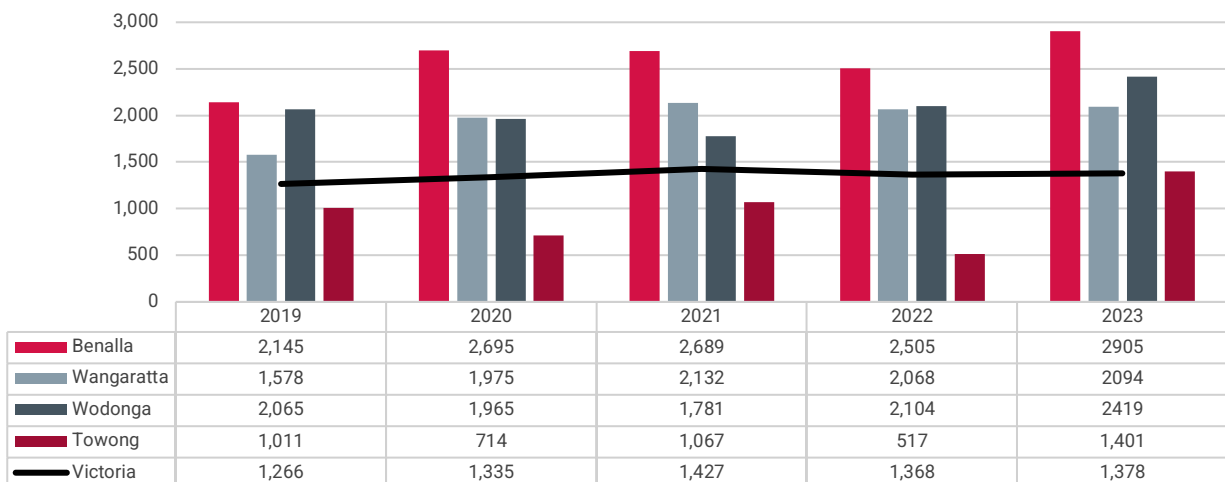
Graph 3 below compares the family incident rate of the four remaining LGAs in the Owen Murray region to the statewide family incident rate. The graph shows that the family incident rate in Benalla, Wangaratta and Wodonga has been consistently and significantly higher than the statewide rate for the past five years. In comparison to the 2023 Victorian family incident rate per 100,000 population, the family incident rate in the LGA of:

- Wangaratta is 52% higher
- Wodonga is 75% higher
- Benalla is 110% higher – that is, more than double the statewide rate.

Compared to the previous year (2022), in 2023 the family incident rate increased by 2.1% in Wangaratta, 16.7% in Wodonga and 16.9% in Benalla. Across Victoria as a whole, the family incident rate increased by only 0.8%.¹⁰

Graph 3 also shows that for the first time in the past five years, the family incident rate in the LGA of Towong exceeded the statewide family incident rate. Further, family violence incidents in Towong increased by 171.9% - the highest percentage increase, not only in the region, but of any of the 79 LGAs in the state.¹¹ This result should be treated with some caution, given that it is only one year of data and given that, as a low population centre, the number of incidents is low (32 recorded incidents in 2022 compared to 87 recorded incidents in 2023). However, the result does accord with research which clearly links an increase in family violence following a natural disaster event, and it should be noted that Towong was severely affected by the 2019/20 bushfires which swept through the area.

Graph 3: Family incident rate per 100,000 population by police region and selected local government areas, Year ending June 2019 to June 2023

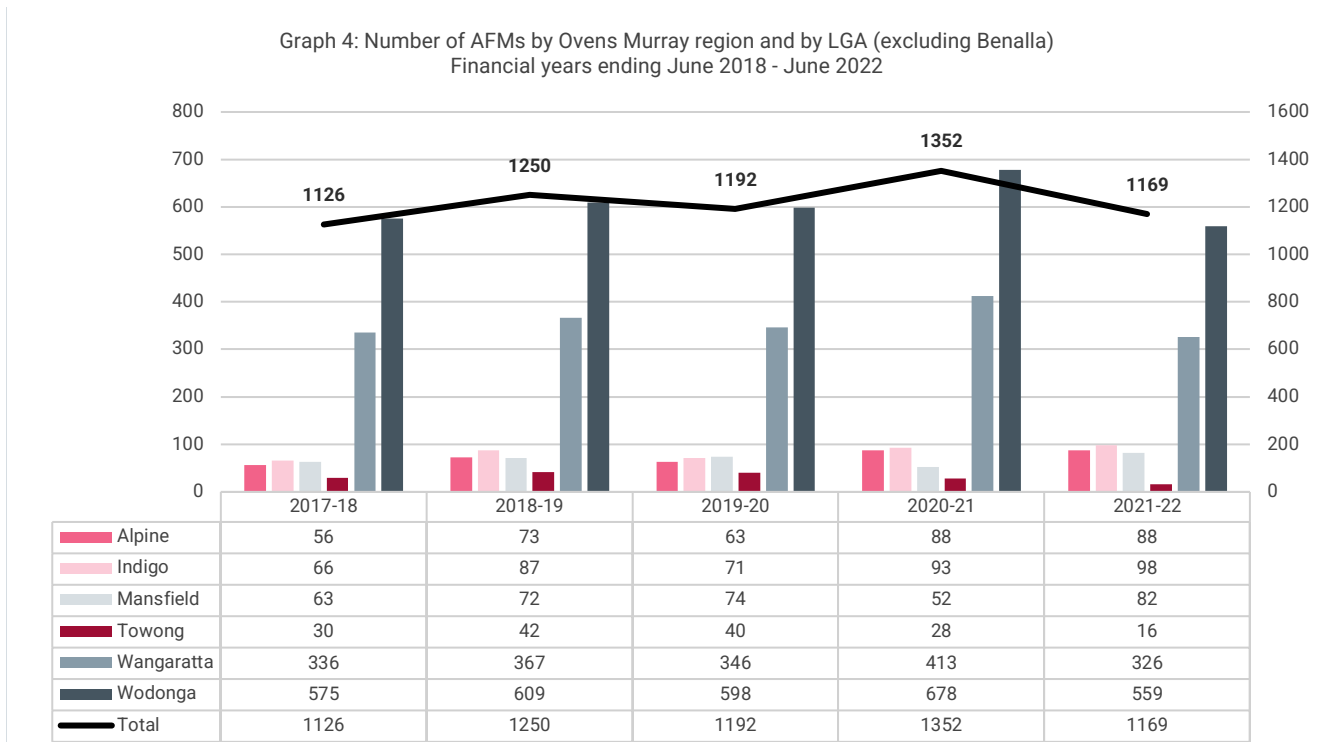


Source: Crime Statistics Agency, Data Tables LGA Family Incidents Year Ending June 2023, Table 1: Family Incidents and rate per 100,000 population by police region and local government area, July 2018 to June 2023. <https://www.crimestatistics.vic.gov.au/crime-statistics/latest-victorian-crime-data/download-data>

Number of Affected Family Members

Data is collected on people affected by family violence by a range of agencies and reported by the Crime Statistics Agency. Victoria Police data, for example, counts all Affected Family Members present at a family incident attended by Victoria Police where a Risk Assessment and Risk Management Report (also known as an L17 form) was completed. Magistrates' Courts report on the number of Affected Family Members based on finalised Family Violence Intervention Order (FVIO) applications heard in the Magistrates' Court. The data includes the Affected Family Member on the original application, but applications may include more than one Affected Family Member. As the police data counts all affected family members present at every incident, and a Family Violence Intervention Order is not pursued following every family incident, the police counts of affected family members are therefore higher than the counts from the Magistrates' Courts.

Graph 4 below shows the number of Affected Family Members in the Ovens Murray region, based on finalised Family Violence Intervention Order (FVIO) applications heard in the Magistrates' Court and excludes the counts for Benalla, as the Benalla Magistrates' Court is not attended by HRCLS.



Source: Magistrates Court Data Tables, Table 19 - Number of AFMs by LGA, July 2017-June 2022 Note: This table only includes AFMs on original applications. Applications may have more than one AFM. <https://www.crimestatistics.vic.gov.au/family-violence-data-portal/family-violence-data-tables>

This data is selected as it is one clear indication of the level of need for family violence legal help in the HRCLS catchment area. It is the most recent data available and does not reflect, for example, the increases associated with the 263 additional family incidents which occurred in the region in 2023. It does not account for the level of need for advice or information, nor the range of legal tasks required to support victim-survivors of family violence. However, it does show the number of finalised FVIOs in the region, with an average of 1,218 per annum over the past five years. In keeping with other data, most orders are for AFMs residing in Wangaratta and Wodonga. Noting that there are fewer private practitioners available in regional areas and that there are higher rates of conflicts of interest which can result in lack of access to legal representation, there is clearly a high level of need for family violence legal help in the Ovens Murray region.

The Family Violence Health Justice Partnership

History

HRCLS' provision of legal services at CAV commenced initially on a trial basis in 2016. Following this initial success, funding was secured in 2017 to employ a Senior Lawyer to provide advice clinics at the CAV Wangaratta and Wodonga offices. The timeline below provides key milestones in the partnership. Other relevant developments are also highlighted in relation to the provision of Family Violence Intervention Order duty lawyer services as well as natural and public health disasters affecting the region.

Year	Key Milestones: Family Violence Health Justice Partnership	Other relevant developments / events
2016	Trial service of HRCLS lawyer providing fortnightly advice clinics at CAV in Wangaratta.	March: Royal Commission into Family Violence report tabled in the Victoria Parliament HRCLS Family Violence Intervention Order duty lawyer service expanded to include Wangaratta and Myrtleford Magistrates' Courts, in addition to Wodonga Magistrates' Court
2017	Senior Lawyer (0.6 EFT) appointed to provide advice clinics at CAV offices in Wangaratta and Wodonga, undertake casework and duty lawyer services	Family Violence to Family Law Continuity of Services Pilot funded by Victoria Legal Aid. Family violence duty lawyer services
2020	Client services are delivered by phone or online and education sessions transition online to comply with 'Working from Home' public health orders. Senior Lawyer hours increased to 0.8 EFT working 2 days: Partnership and 2 days: Duty lawyer	Jan: Black Summer bushfires impact NE Victoria Mar: Covid-19 pandemic declared NSW-Victorian border closures to contain the Covid-19 pandemic occurred at various times throughout 2020 and 2021
2021	Second Senior Lawyer (0.6 EFT) appointed to provide weekly advice clinics at CAV offices in Wodonga and undertake casework. (Black Summer Bushfire Recovery funding)	With the appointment of a second Senior Lawyer, Family Violence Intervention Order duty lawyer services able to be provided fortnightly in Wangaratta, weekly in Wodonga and every 3 weeks in Myrtleford
	Advice clinics at CAV offices in Wangaratta run weekly.	Aug: The Orange Door in the Ovens Murray region opened with an office in Wangaratta and a Hub in Wodonga.
2022	Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) formalised between HRCLS and CAV Additional lawyer appointed	Jan: Major flooding in NE Victoria Oct: Major flooding in NE Victoria
2023	Commencement of administrative assistant (intake and support) for the CAV program	

In 2022, on the strength of the relationships and the successful delivery of services since 2016, CAV and HRCLS formalised their partnership through a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU).

Objectives

The objectives of the Family Violence Health Justice Partnership outlined in the MOU are to:

- address unmet legal need through the provision of legal assistance to people who need it but are otherwise unlikely to access legal help
- improve health and wellbeing by addressing health-harming legal problems
- strengthen ties between providers of legal assistance and family violence and sexual assault services for the benefit of the community
- build the capacity of CAV workers to identify and respond to their clients' legal needs through the

- provision of legal education and training
- build the capacity of lawyers to identify and respond to the health and social impacts of their clients' legal needs through the provision of family violence and sexual assault education and training.

Partner commitments

To achieve the objectives HRCLS committed to:

- deliver short (30-60 minute) Bite-Sized Law training sessions every 6 weeks (as agreed)
- provide a lawyer at the Wangaratta CAV office and Wodonga CAV office on a weekly basis for approximately 40 weeks per year for advice clinics with CAV clients
- provide legal advice on legal matters including family law, family violence, VOCAT, housing, debts, fines and other related matters
- provide referrals if the legal problem is outside HRCLS' advice and casework guidelines, or expertise or capacity.

CAV's commitments include the provision of private space for consultations, encouragement of staff to attend training and promotion of the referral pathway to legal assistance through the HRCLS lawyer. Both partners committed to a set of shared values to support collaborative, professional and ethical conduct through the MOU, as well as open communication, the appointment of coordinating officers, regular partnership meetings at least twice each year and compliance with protocols, procedures and guidelines.

Rationale

The Family Violence Health Justice Partnership commenced on a trial basis the same year as the release of the final report of the Royal Commission into Family Violence. The report clearly articulated how segregated service systems failed victim survivors of family violence and the case for greater collaboration and information sharing across sectors. The goal of the partnership was consistent with the family violence reform agenda, aiming to deliver more holistic, effective, timely and efficient access to legal support to victim survivors by the only community legal service in the region partnering with the primary specialist family violence service in the region.

The partnership is in keeping with contemporary policy and practice in the legal assistance sector, which increasingly recognises the benefits of integrated models of service provision, such as co-location of a lawyer at an agency; lawyer outreach in a community service; multidisciplinary teams within an organisation; partnerships with health or community services, organisational mergers or health justice partnerships.¹²

A more holistic legal service response through integrated practice 'can often be easier to access, especially for clients experiencing compounding barriers to accessing the service system and facilitate an early intervention response, as individuals are often more likely to seek help outside a traditional legal service delivery setting.'¹³

'The integration of practitioners' skills and expertise across disciplines enables a more holistic service response. This means individuals receive assistance not only with legal issues, but potentially with other social, emotional and financial issues which may be impacting on their life and potentially exacerbating or compounding their legal issues.'

Eastern Community Legal Centre (n.d.) *Integrated Practice – Better Practice Principles*

Targeting family violence is a key priority under the Victorian Legal Assistance Strategy (2022-2025) as it continues to be ‘the number one justice issue in Victoria.’¹⁴ This strategy includes:

- access to appropriate and timely legal assistance ‘available at the right point in time to minimise impact and reduce escalation’, as part of its vision
- the principle of ‘collaborative and integrated approaches’ because they ‘enable problems to be dealt with holistically and as early as possible to avoid escalation and development of other problems’
- recognition that health justice partnership models ‘help address the complex and intersecting issues of clients’ and ‘provide more gateways to access both legal and non-legal support’.¹⁵

Implementation

The central elements of the HRCLS CAV Family Violence Health Justice Partnership are:

- regular attendance of a HRCLS lawyer at CAV offices to provide legal advice and information by appointment to clients,
- secondary consultations provided to CAV workers, and
- delivery of legal education sessions to CAV workers, approximately every six weeks.

Initially, in 2017, all activities were provided by the sole Senior Lawyer, working at both the CAV Wangaratta and Wodonga offices. Wodonga is approximately 70 kilometres from Wangaratta, and a 50-minute drive on the Hume Freeway. While the aspiration was for weekly clinics at each office, this wasn’t always achievable until the appointment of the second Senior Lawyer in 2021, based at the HRCLS Wodonga and attending the CAV Wodonga Office.

Similarly, the six-weekly legal education sessions were disrupted during the periods of Covid lockdown. However, these sessions moved to online formats, enabling staff working from home to participate. With the embrace of online delivery, education sessions have moved to a range of hybrid options, with some online only, some face to face and other sessions run both face to face with participants in other locations joining remotely.

The primary purpose of the partnership is to enhance victim-survivors’ access to legal support through the legal clinics, through the lawyers attending CAV offices. This is a continuing feature of the partnership, but also includes remote access or phone consultations for clients, which is particularly relevant for rural and regional clients.

Both the legal education and the secondary consultations available through the partnership aim to enhance victim-survivors’ access to legal support, by building the capacity of CAV staff to understand the legal issues faced by their clients and most importantly, to identify when clients’ have a legal issue or an issue with legal implications. CAV staff can easily seek a secondary consultation with a lawyer to clarify any issues, and if suitable, then proceed with a referral for their client to consult a lawyer.

As CAV not only provides programs and services for victim-survivors of family violence but also for victims of sexual assault, including child sexual assault and other groups, staff from other program areas can attend education sessions and seek secondary consultations.

Evaluation Findings

This section of the report provides the evaluation findings on the key areas of investigation:

- Providing greater access to legal assistance
- Clients supported
- Facilitation of greater access to justice through the partnership
- Improving health and wellbeing by addressing health harming legal problems
- The client experience of receiving legal support
- Improving referral processes
- Capacity building
- Secondary consultations for CAV staff
- Changes in practice

It is followed by sections discussing the functioning of the partnership, considerations for the future and the evaluation and review conclusions.

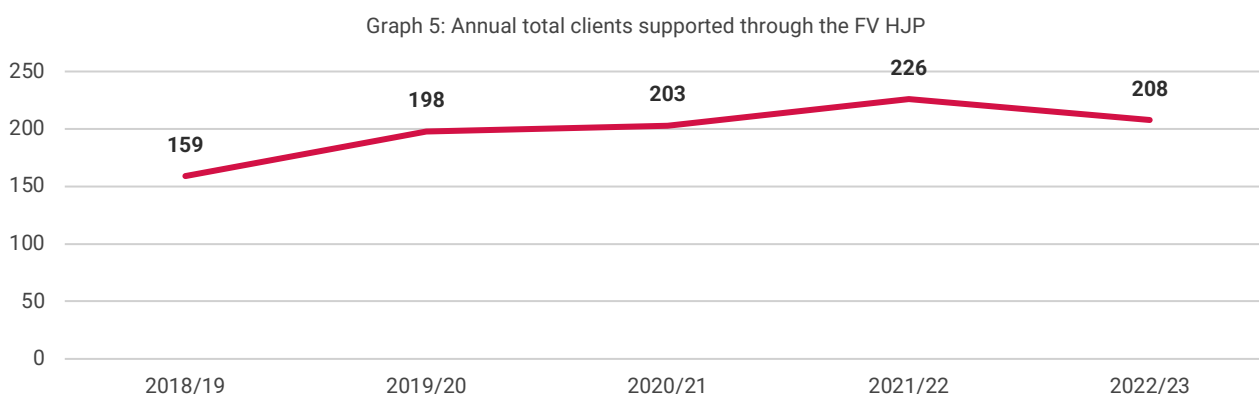
Achieving the partnership objectives

Providing greater access to legal support

The primary objective of the HRCLS CAV Family Violence Health Justice Partnership is to ‘address unmet legal need through the provision of legal assistance to people who need it but are otherwise unlikely to access legal help.’

Clients supported

Over the past five financial years, a total of 994 clients have received legal assistance support through the partnership between CAV and HRCLS, with an average of 199 clients per year. The total number of clients currently sits at over 1,000. Graph 5 presents the number of clients supported each year, showing the increase in the number of clients particularly between 2018/19 and 2021/22.



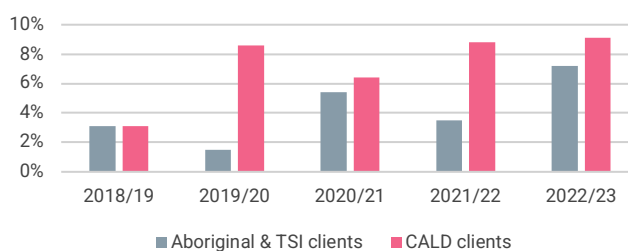
The increase in clients corresponds both to the increase in demand for family violence legal support in the region (as indicated in Graph 1) and the increase in supply, with the appointment of the second Senior Lawyer and the increase in hours of the first Senior Lawyer. The Senior Lawyers have provided **1,438 advices** to clients (this exceeds the number of clients as some people receive more than one advice), undertaken **207 legal tasks** (such as preparing documents for clients to use in their legal proceedings) and completed **129 cases** for clients.

Access for clients with additional vulnerabilities

Demographic data for the past five years shows that most clients experienced family violence (between 91% to 96%) and well over half of all clients had a disability or mental health issue (between 53% to 69%).

Graph 6 shows that over the past five years 1.5% to 7% of clients were Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander and between 3% to 9% of clients were culturally and linguistically diverse (CALD). Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples make up 1.8% of the population in Wangaratta and 3.3% of the population in Wodonga. In 2022/23, 7.2% of clients provided with legal support were Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander, indicating an over-representation in the client base compared to representation in the general population. Aboriginal clients can also access support through local agencies Mungabareena or the Victorian Aboriginal Child Care Agency (VACCA).

Graph 6: Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander clients and CALD clients as % of total clients



How does the partnership facilitate greater access to justice?

‘Access to justice’ typically refers to a person’s ability to access any component of the justice system. However, as the Victorian Legal Services Board notes ‘access to justice as a concept also encompasses social and economic factors that can affect the experience of the legal system such as racism, mental illness, low literacy, poverty, isolation and violence. In addition, actual or perceived barriers such as the cost and/or availability of legal services can result in people who would not be considered disadvantaged, finding themselves unable to access legal help and/or a legal remedy. Others may not access legal services because they do not realise that their problem may have a legal dimension and they could be assisted by a lawyer.’¹⁶

Rural and regional Victorians are disadvantaged in their access to justice with fewer lawyers available. This is particularly acute for financially disadvantaged residents in the Ovens Murray region with only one free legal assistance service available.

One safe location for the client

The legal service provided by HRCLS lawyers through the partnership enhances access to justice as it:

- is a free service for people who meet the eligibility criteria
- enables people to be reached at the office of a service provider they are already attending
- reaches people promptly after the identification of the need for legal support
- reduces the number of agencies a client has to attend
- reduces the number of times a client has to re-tell their story
- enables legal consultations to be held in a setting that is safe, familiar and anonymous
- provides clients the option of support from a counsellor before, during or after a legal consultation.

The following feedback from CAV practitioners highlights the importance of the safe setting, particularly in regional areas and for clients who would otherwise find it challenging to consult a community lawyer or a lawyer in private practice.

‘Going to a law office, even one as friendly as HRCLS, is just more than some of our clients can do at the time. We need to be mindful that we’re seeing clients at the worst time of their life, their world has just fallen apart. They are coming in here (to the CAV office) to do their work with us. They are familiar with the space, their kids are familiar coming in here. It makes a big difference to see the lawyer at the CAV office.’ (CAV practitioner)

‘For clients in Wangaratta, to go to HRCLS in Wodonga – it’s an hour down the road. Lots of clients don’t have cars, and they have young kids. When they see the lawyer in CAV’s Wangaratta office, they can bring the kids with them if they want. It’s easy. For clients further out in Myrtleford, Mansfield, Bright – it’s two hours’ drive to Wangaratta. If they had to go to Wodonga...well, they just wouldn’t.’ (CAV practitioner)

‘Having a safe space is so important, especially for our clients who have additional barriers, like being homeless, having a disability...A lot of our clients are older women. They might have been putting up with abuse and very controlling behaviour for 50 years, and they’ve finally said “I’m not putting up with it anymore.” If she walks into a lawyer’s office on the main street, he’s going to know about it very quickly. Coming in here (to the unmarked CAV office) means she won’t be seen walking into a solicitor’s office. That’s a big thing in a small town.’ (CAV practitioner)

The Senior Lawyers

An essential feature of the partnership, and the way it enhances access to justice, is through the same Senior Lawyers physically attending the CAV offices each week. This achieves two outcomes:

- ease of access to legal support for clients
- relationship-building with CAV staff and ease of access for quick secondary consultations.

The lawyers are experienced legal practitioners, with knowledge and expertise in family violence, family law and relevant areas of the law such as child protection and victims of crime applications.

Trusting professional relationships

CAV staff reported that the lawyers were always approachable, accessible and consistently responded quickly to questions or enquiries, often within hours and not more than a day or two later. They also emphasised how personable and friendly the lawyers were, and noted their efforts to maintain good personal and professional relationships such as:

- *'(She) always makes the effort to do a walk around the office to say hello to whoever is around'*
- *'Her door is always open – anyone can go in to have a chat'*
- introducing new HRCLS staff to the CAV team
- attending CAV team meetings when possible and/or appropriate.

'The lawyers know all the practitioners by name, they maintain really good relationships with all the pracs which gives them the confidence they are going to be treated with respect. Our team talked about how amazing it is to have (the lawyer) in here, to have the relationship with them, to sit with them' (CAV Team Leader)

'Increased trust between practitioners' is an anticipated outcome of health justice partnerships. It is significant because, in turn, this leads to and supports stronger referral pathways, increased capacity of the partners to respond to complex needs and increased capability and capacity for collaboration.¹⁷ Strong, trusting professional relationships between staff and lawyers provides the foundation for client referrals from CAV. Multiple CAV counsellors and case managers explained how they work with clients to *'create a relationship of trust and respect'*. Then, as a trusted practitioner, when they offer the option of speaking to a lawyer *'it's easy (for the client) to make the decision.'* Having the service on-site just makes it easier still for the client. CAV staff reported that they often reassure clients that they know the lawyers personally – *'(The lawyer) is great, you'll like her.'* *'(The lawyer) is amazing. All the people who work there really know their stuff.'* For people who are less trusting, more vulnerable or have no previous experience with lawyers or have had negative experiences with lawyers, being able to provide the reassurance that *'It's going to be okay'* was seen as so important in encouraging the client to accept the referral. In addition, being able to refer clients to lawyers who live and work in rural Victoria and understand rural life in the context of a victim-survivor's experience of family violence, further helps to create a supported and client-focussed space.

'When we're dealing with family violence – safety for the client can be quite time sensitive. So, having a partnership with a legal service who are so responsive and knowledgeable is really valuable.' (CAV practitioner)

Trauma-informed legal support

The CAV practitioners' trust and confidence in the lawyers and in referring clients to the lawyers is not only founded on their respectful professional relationships. More substantially, this derives from their observation of how the lawyers work with clients. Beyond identifying their professionalism and legal

expertise, CAV stakeholders emphasised the Senior Lawyers’:

- trauma-informed practice and relational skills in engaging with trauma-affected clients
- deep understanding of family violence impacts on individuals and families and their efforts to assist with legal responses that support clients
- clear communication of legal information in everyday language
- passion and commitment to helping clients
- understanding of rural life in the context of a victim-survivor’s experience of family violence.

The Senior Lawyers explained that ‘a lot of the time we’re simply saying to the person what you’ve told me today is family violence. It’s not ok for this reason. It can be almost like a counselling role sometimes. Sometimes we don’t have to speak – we need to just let the person sit with that information and just acknowledge what they’ve been feeling.’

‘I observed the lawyer with an older woman who struggled cognitively...the lawyer was just beautiful with her - slow, not rushed, kind, talking at a really comfortable pace so that she understood, sentence by sentence because what seemed very small to me for legal advice, was huge for the client.’ (CAV practitioner)

‘Many of our clients...carry trauma when it comes to the justice system. If we can keep it as nice and warm and friendly as we can, then clients are actually getting the right legal advice from the right people, which is so important.’

‘The lawyers meet the clients, human to human. Being lawyers, in the legal system – there’s so much jargon and things that are hard to explain. But they really make the effort to make it as simple and easy to understand as possible, especially when clients are quite heightened and in crisis. Being able to communicate some really big topics and issues in a way that’s easy to understand – including for us as practitioners – that’s so helpful.’ (CAV practitioner)

Regional service issues

Stakeholders emphasised that ‘access to justice’ for rural and regional clients is greatly enhanced by receiving legal advice and support from lawyers who are local, know the services in the area, understand how rural life can influence the clients’ experiences and can tailor their legal advice and responses to the client’s circumstances. Examples of rural and regional issues not understood by metropolitan legal services (unless the client went to great lengths to explain) included:

<p>Small town, big region issues</p>	<p>‘This town is very small. People know each other. People can be reluctant to go to the police, they worry about how other people will view them, worry about accessing family violence, sexual assault or legal services.’</p> <p>‘Metropolitan services don’t understand the vastness of our region.’</p> <p>‘A metropolitan service will say, for example, “Just go and do this at your local police station.” They won’t know that that town only has two coppers and they don’t believe in family violence.’</p>
<p>Conflicts of interest</p>	<p>With fewer legal practitioners, it is easier for perpetrators to use the system to continue the abuse. ‘They will boast (to the client) about ringing every legal practice in town, so they won’t be able to get legal advice. It’s not that hard, to be honest.’</p>
<p>Safety</p>	<p>‘When assessing risks for a MARAM assessment, I invariably tick yes to the question ‘Does the perpetrator have access to guns?’ because if you live here, you have access to guns - legally or otherwise. It’s a farming community. It’s not unusual to walk through the supermarket carpark and see a shotgun sitting on the back seat of a ute.’</p> <p>‘If an FVIO condition requires the perpetrator to stay 50 metres away from the protected person, it can be tricky in a small town with only one bank, one supermarket, one post office. Managing safety and responding to breaches can be very difficult in a small town.’</p>

Housing shortages	Housing waitlists are 'off the charts.'
Isolation	With limited or no public transport, and/or no access to private transport, people can be very isolated. Victim-survivors living in isolated towns without access to a car are extremely vulnerable. Examples were provided of abusers withholding access to a car, and/or clients unable to drive, sometimes through physical injuries inflicted.
Access to services	'If you're not living in Wodonga, Benalla or Wangaratta, your town won't have a police station after – well some close at 5:00 pm, some at 7:00 pm. That's covering a region of 5-600 square kilometres.' 'There are only two hospitals able to undertake forensic medicals after a sexual assault. This must occur within 72 hours of the assault to collect the DNA sample. If the service is not available due to staff shortages, the victim has to travel to Melbourne to attend another service. That might be a trip by themselves on the train.'

Legal referrals

CAV staff noted the efforts that Senior Lawyers would go to, to facilitate the client's access to justice when direct support was not possible. These instances could include:

- the Senior Lawyers were at capacity
- through a conflict of interest
- the person did not meet eligibility criteria, and/or
- the legal issue required specialist legal expertise.

The Senior Lawyers offer referral options when they are unable to support the client. Often they will be constrained when statewide services, such as the Women's Legal Service are at capacity or similarly, where there are few localised referral options such as limited private lawyers on the VLA panel. They will nevertheless explore other opportunities so that clients are provided with some options.

'Their willingness to go above and beyond to find the right support for the clients and find someone who understands the complexities of family violence and how intertwined a lot of this is, can be a massive benefit for our clients. If it wasn't there, a lot of people would give up and just think "This is the way life is and I don't have a lot of choice."

Duty lawyer service at Wangaratta Magistrates' Court

The Wangaratta-based lawyer also provides regular Family Violence Duty Lawyer service fortnightly at the Wangaratta Magistrates' Court. While outside the bounds of the partnership, there is overlap with:

- clients who have met with the Senior Lawyer at CAV and then attend court
- Affected Family Members, applying for a Family Violence Intervention Order who are referred to CAV for support and then also require legal support.

Both scenarios above occur, and these clients are afforded a level of continuity of free legal support which would not be available to many people in any location in the state. The Wangaratta Magistrates' Court also deals with some family law matters, including parenting arrangements and property settlements as well as VOCAT matters. Some clients are represented by the Senior Lawyer for intervention order matters, family law matters and VOCAT applications. These clients are spared from the retelling their story from scratch and briefing new lawyers for each matter. They are also represented by a lawyer with a comprehensive understanding of their situation who can present a robust picture of the situation to the magistrate. The Court Registrar reported that the Magistrates 'have a lot of respect for the HRCLS lawyers' and are confident that the legal proceedings are clearly explained to clients. This not only saves court time, it also assures the Magistrates that the people represented understand the orders that they are, or are not, consenting to. Ultimately, the Duty Lawyer service and the crossover with CAV clients was seen to contribute to court efficiency, enhance access to justice for clients and contribute to the quality of the local justice system.

Improving health and wellbeing by addressing health harming legal problems

‘The two biggest things that our clients fear coming into see us are “How can I keep myself safe?” and “Am I going to lose my children?” Getting confident, accurate advice and support can make all the difference. We’re literally talking about people’s lives.’

CAV CEO

Family and domestic violence is as much a health issue as it is a justice issue. The Australian Institute of Health and Welfare (AIHW) states that ‘Family, domestic and sexual violence is a major health and welfare issue in Australia, occurring across all socioeconomic and demographic groups, but predominantly affecting women and children. These types of violence can have a serious impact on individuals, families and communities and can inflict physical injury, psychological trauma and emotional suffering. These effects can be long-lasting and can affect future generations.’¹⁸ The health outcomes can ‘affect an individual’s physical and mental health, which in turn can affect a person’s employment and education, relationships, and financial and housing stability.’¹⁹ The economic and financial impacts can also be substantial, with both direct and indirect costs to individuals, families and broader society.²⁰

The Senior Lawyers provide legal assistance with the following determinants of health:

Determinant of health	Legal advice and support
Safety:	Safety planning Family violence Family Violence Intervention Orders (FVIOs) <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Advice - Applications - Breaches - Liaison with police Family law Referrals to specialist legal services and lawyers
Safety of children:	FVIO Family law assistance in relation to safety of children, parenting orders Assistance with child protection matters Referrals to child wellbeing services
Financial security:	Assistance with VOCAT applications Assistance with fines and infringements Assistance with property settlements Advice on rights and options in relation to financial abuse Advice relating to Centrelink payments Advice relating to Redress Scheme and civil options for victims of historical institutional child sexual abuse Referrals to financial counsellors
Secure housing:	Assistance with family violence and tenancy issues Referrals to housing services

Practitioners’ perspectives

Through the health justice partnership professionals provide a wrap-around service to clients, working together to address the client’s legal, safety and recovery needs. The areas requiring specific legal assistance often provided concrete, practical outcomes – such as finalising a divorce and parenting orders, overturning debts, securing tenancy agreements, property settlements or a successful VOCAT application.

CAV practitioners observed the impacts on clients' health and wellbeing by addressing health harming legal problems included:

- alleviating the psychological stress of living in hypervigilance and fear for their own safety and the safety and wellbeing of their children
- empowering clients with an understanding of their rights and knowledge and assurance that they will be supported in the choices they take
- returning a sense of control and agency to victim-survivors, especially if they have been subjected to coercive controlling behaviour
- re/gaining financial control
- returning a sense of hope for the future.

'We've had cases with women who have been overwhelmed – between family law orders, intervention orders, what child protection is telling them, what the perpetrator is telling them...And we've said, we need to stop and get some proper advice from the proper people. What that does is give the client a sense of having control over what is going on in their lives. It becomes one thing that they're actually confident they have control over. It makes a massive difference. Being clear headed stops them from feeling like victims and gives them some control of what's going on around them. That's part of the 'overwhelmingness' of family violence – all this stuff is impacting their lives, their ability to mother their children, everything goes on hold, they don't see a future and they have no control over it. If we can stop some of that, it goes a long way to them being able to move from being a victim to recovering from family violence.'

'There is a strong link between healing post-traumatic stress disorder and traumatic experiences with having your rights recognised and accessing legal support to access the practical things that you need to continue your healing journey of the traumatic experiences... If I can access counselling with an amazing social worker or psychologist, but if I'm living on the streets, there's no amount of counselling that is going to support this healing process. If I am constantly harassed by my ex-partner, if I don't have the money to apply to VOCAT for specific services for my type of trauma, the job is not completely done. Even if the counsellor is a great support, there's a piece missing, a big piece.'

'It's about getting the right advice, from the right people, right away.'

The client experience of receiving legal support

Four women who received legal support in the past were interviewed for the evaluation. Three clients were supported by one of the Senior Lawyers, and one client by the other Senior Lawyer. Due to the length of the clients' engagement with the legal service, clients had had some contact with both lawyers. Legal support had closed for all these clients, all were in safe situations and had separated from the partners who had used violence. All of the clients had indicated to HRCLS that they would like to provide feedback about the service they received and provided informed consent for the interviews.

The following table compiles summary details about the clients and their legal support. While many clients receiving legal support from the Senior Lawyers only require one or two consultations, the outline of these clients' experiences demonstrates that when the cases are complex, they can be very complex, involve matters of life and death, personal safety and the safety of children and clusters of legal problems that span multiple areas of the law.

	Summary details	
The clients	<p>All female Ages ranged from mid-20s to late 60's Three with children (ages ranging from primary school to teenagers) Two clients are from culturally diverse backgrounds Two clients are Australian born Two clients had lived in the region all their lives Two clients moved to the region as adults</p>	
First contact with the lawyer	<p>Two clients had their first contact with the lawyer when they were assisted with duty lawyer services when applying for a FVIO at the Magistrate's Court and then re-connected with the lawyer through the CAV Family Violence Support Worker Two clients were referred by CAV Family Violence Support Worker</p>	
Length of engagement	<p>Varied from one year to four years Multiple contacts with the lawyer over this period of time for all clients</p>	
Family violence experiences	<p>All clients experienced multiple forms of family violence and had experienced abuse for five years, up to more than 10 years. Experiences of family violence from their partner/ex-partner included:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Coercive control, isolation - Emotional abuse - Financial abuse - Manipulation and abuse of children - Physical abuse - Stalking and monitoring of movement - Threats to kill (from an ex-partner with a gun) - Visa abuse 	
Ex-partners	<p>Were all uncooperative and non-compliant on legal matters including:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Contesting FVIOs - Delaying tactics - Refusal to comply with court orders - Actively avoiding property settlements with significant harm to the victim-survivor - Non-compliance with parenting orders to address risk, in particular drug taking - Refusal to settle debts, delaying family law proceedings and property settlements 	
Types of legal assistance provided	<p>FVIOs:</p>	<p>Appearances and assistance for</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Interim and final applications - Mentions - Variations, including variations to include children on the FVIO - Contested hearings

Summary details	
Family law:	Divorce application and appearance Property matters Parenting matters, applications for: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - parenting orders - sole parental responsibility - relocation to safety Breaches of orders
Assistance and support:	At mediation sessions for parenting matters Court litigations
Assistance for clients with court matters:	Applications for a grant in aid for Court appearances Briefing counsels Supporting clients at court Seeking referrals for pro-bono support
Child support:	Advocacy around child support payments Assistance with child support liability
Police matters:	Assistance with making police reports Assistance with complaints regarding police conduct
Referrals to other support:	CAV family violence support Victim Assistance Program Family Violence supports and police in new safe location Specialist CLC services
Negotiations:	Many and various including third parties in relation to family violence transmitted debts such as superannuation funds
VOCAT:	Advice Applications for VOCAT award

While the experiences and situations of the clients differed, a common thread in their experiences is how complex legal matters become when an ex-partner ignores or fails to comply with, or contests orders, or chooses to frustrate legal processes. It is in these situations, when legal proceedings are drawn out, complex, and start to span across jurisdictions, that clients really need a consistent lawyer to support them.

Client perspectives of the support they received

Clients were asked about specific aspects of receiving legal support and the experience in general. Their collective responses are outlined below.

Meeting in the CAV offices

All clients reported that meeting in the CAV offices felt ‘safe, comfortable and familiar’ and was convenient as they were also receiving counselling support.

Would you have found legal support on your own?

Two clients ‘had no idea where to go or what to do.’

One client felt she would have been able to find a lawyer, but ‘if not for the legal service, I would have had to borrow money from my family to pay for a lawyer. I’m only on the minimum wage. I was already so stressed out, so to have to worry about money too would have been too much. Financially it was massive to get free legal help.’

Another client had engaged a private lawyer ‘and had a \$50,000 legal bill, but none of my issues were solved. I had to move out of my house and rent a place. I wish someone had said to me “Don’t see a solicitor.” For this service to be free, oh my God what a difference that made.’

Communication with the lawyer

All clients reported that communication with their lawyer was excellent. They had all met with the lawyer in face-to-face meetings and many phone calls. All felt that assured that they could contact the lawyer whenever they needed and reported that their questions were always answered. 'Communication' was not just the information they were receiving, but also the information the client was providing to the lawyer.

'She explained things so clearly.'

'It was much easier talking to a country person.'

'It was so good to have someone close by.'

'They listened to my story.'

'The counsellor and the lawyer were calling me every second day to check on me.'

Challenges

During the conversations, the clients raised some of the challenges they had been facing during their time seeking legal support, such as:

'When reporting breaches of the FVIO to local police, I was treated as being 'emotional', they used words like 'the sisterhood' in belittling ways. They did not treat the breaches I was reporting seriously, and they actually said, "If he'd punched you in the face...it might have been a breach." I ended up making a complaint to the police, with the help of the lawyer.'

'My ex was stalking me every day. I couldn't sleep at night.'

'The process went on for four years – it was always one step forward and ten steps back. The tax issues I was left with were so complex, when they were looking for pro bono support, lots of lawyers knocked it back. It took 12 months for them to find someone who could help with such a complex liability.'

'My ex put a tracker on my car.'

Two clients indicated that they also felt like they were also fighting against their ex-partners' families, as well their ex-partner. This made them feel even more unsafe and isolated at the time.

Support from the lawyer

All clients found their lawyer to be knowledgeable, capable and competent, but also extremely helpful and supportive.

'She went above and beyond – no matter what I asked, she helped me every step of the way.'

'I could always get the lawyer's advice on anything I asked. She always had the answer and reassured me I was doing things the right way. She was so supportive, almost like a legal counsellor.'

'When there are so many emotions and you're dealing with so much, you need a safe place. Every time I rang for advice, it was so simple, so easy.'

'The lawyer gave me a lot of confidence.'

'I had support from the same lawyer (and CAV counsellor). It was really helpful to be talking to the same people all the time, who understood all the details.'

'I can't say enough about how patient and how thorough she was, and how persistent. She just kept going to get the best result. She stayed with me for so long, she saw the frustration. Compared to my experience with a private lawyer, she was so much more patient, understanding, and she had the family violence knowledge.'

‘The lawyer had all the knowledge – family violence, family law, property, business – she could deal with everything. And when she couldn’t, she found me pro bono legal support for the tax problems.’

‘The lawyer was so thorough, so professional, so considerate, so knowledgeable and so persistent. I don’t know how she does it.’

Outcomes for clients

The outcomes for clients included:

- financial outcomes, which were two-fold – not having an enormous legal bill and financial settlements which provided them with independence
- finalisation of legal proceedings
- safe housing in a safe location, which they were either able to purchase or rent.

What difference did the support of the lawyer and the legal service make for you?

In the words of the clients, the lawyer and legal service made a profound difference to all the clients.

‘If not for the lawyer, I wouldn’t be where I am today. It made such a huge difference having someone to support me. I wouldn’t have been able to afford a private lawyer, and there aren’t many here anyway.

I can see a future now. Before, I couldn’t.’

‘I’m settled now and living in another town. My ex-partner doesn’t know where I am. It was a big thing to move towns, my home, my child.

But now, I feel safe at home.’

‘When I first met CAV and the lawyer, I was so isolated and so scared. I feel settled now, and I’m far away from the toxic people.

My daughter is so happy. She’s not scared anymore. She doesn’t have nightmares every night.’

‘I went from having a business and a beautiful home and a car to suddenly having nothing. If not for HRCLS legal support, I would have gone bankrupt.

I came out from the court case with a settlement. They helped me to set up my own life and buy a house. It was life-saving. They did save my life. I couldn’t have done it without them.

When I sat in the court to get the final decision (after four years), the lawyer turned to me with tears in her eyes. She had been through the whole ordeal with me. Having someone in your corner who genuinely cared – that was life changing for me, and for my kids.’

The Special Counsel who assisted with the complex case involving a tax liability of \$1,000,000 was also interviewed for the evaluation. He explained that in many ways ‘the stars aligned’, as the case involved his niche areas of expertise and experience, he found the story compelling and he happened to be available. He indicated that the client’s ‘options were pretty bad. No law firm would take on this work. The likely outcome would have been that the client would go bankrupt and the ATO wouldn’t get the money.’ The case took 12 months to run and involved huge stakes for the client. With the successful resolution of the case and the waiving of the debt, he described it as ‘the highlight of my career. It was deeply personal, very gratifying and it was my privilege to be able to assist.’

Improving referral processes

'Fortifying established referral pathways and procedures between HRCLS and CAV' is one of the partnership's objectives. All CAV staff interviewed reported that referrals are 'easy and straightforward'. Staff may first send an email to check if the matter would be appropriate for referral, and 'always receive a quick response' from the lawyer or administrative/intake officer. After confirmation to refer, a referral email is sent with an outline of agreed details (date of birth, name, summary of the situation, client's consent to share information) to HRCLS. The intake officer contacts the client and schedules a consultation with the lawyer at Wangaratta or Wodonga.

As outlined previously, clients are assured that meeting with the lawyer will not be intimidating, and that they can consult the lawyer in person, or by phone or online if preferred. Clients rarely choose not to attend.

Interestingly, none of the CAV staff were able to compare the referral processes to what happened before the partnership started on a trial basis in 2016. While the Senior Lawyer has been providing services at CAV since 2017, most CAV staff had between one to three years' experience, reflecting significant turnover that occurred in the sector during the pandemic years.

Changes to intake, assessment and referral processes

The opening of The Orange Door in the region in 2021 has been a major change to referral processes. The Orange Door is the central intake and assessment point for all family violence and child wellbeing matters, and its introduction was a key recommendation from the Royal Commission into Family Violence. There are now 18 Orange Doors located across all regions of Victoria. The Orange Door is not an independent agency – it is a state government program comprising staff from the Department of Families, Fairness and Housing (DFFH) and Family Safety Victoria (FSV) working collaboratively with local partner agencies. Together the partners deliver the Orange Door program.

Prior to The Orange Door, CAV would receive family violence referrals directly, for example, from police, community and health services and would undertake intake and assessment. Clients could be engaged with CAV services very soon after their referral, and from that point, if required could be quickly referred for legal support. With the intake and assessment process now undertaken through The Orange Door, clients are referred to CAV or other family violence specialist support services in the region after their assessment. HRCLS now receive referrals from The Orange Door when legal needs have been identified during the assessment process, and they continue to receive referrals from CAV. When referring to HRCLS, The Orange Door reported that the lawyers and reception staff were 'really responsive, really positive. Turnaround from referral to contact with the client is incredible. And they're always so helpful.'

While a range of key service providers are partners in delivering The Orange Door program (including CAV), legal services are not. The impact of the transition to The Orange Door managing intake and assessments has seen delays in clients accessing legal support. This has been noted across the state, with the Family Violence Reform Monitor noting frustration from Victoria Legal Aid and community legal services that 'legal support is not yet an integrated part of the family violence service system' and 'the importance of victim survivors receiving early legal advice'.²¹

Similar concerns apply in the Ovens Murray region and they are discussed later in this report.

Capacity Building

Bite Sized Law

The partnership agreement includes the delivery of 'Bite Sized Law' legal education sessions to CAV staff by the Senior Lawyer approximately every six weeks, or around 8 -10 sessions per year. These sessions are designed to meet the needs of client-facing CAV practitioners and are therefore intentionally short – around a maximum of one hour. To encourage attendance, the 'Bite Sized Law' name reinforces the message that the sessions are not overwhelming and deal with a single topic, in a manageable 'chunk'.

Topics for the sessions are developed collaboratively between the partners. CAV staff are asked what topics they would like explored through an end of year survey. A draft schedule for the year is developed and confirmed with CAV and the sessions are then designed and delivered according to the agreement. Over the past three years, Bite Sized Law sessions have included the following:

- All About Legal Aid
- Child Protection Overview
- Child Relocation and Family Law
- Family Violence
- Family Violence Intervention Orders
- Family Violence and Tenancy
- Family Law / Family Violence
- Family Law & Contraventions
- Family Law / Property Law
- Family Law & Property Settlements
- Family Law & Parenting
- Fines / Infringements
- Victims of Crime Assistance Tribunal Overview
- Working With Police

Sessions are generally structured to include presentation time, which will include an overview of the topic, key concepts and definitions, explanations of key terms, the difference between various terms, such as an interim order vs a final order, and highlight important information for practitioners. The presentation component is relaxed and interactive, and questions can be raised during this time. Participants are given copies of the presentation for their reference.

The presentation typically finishes with a case study or hypothetical, such as *Should Lisa go to Court?* from a *Family Violence and Family Law Bite Sized Law* session. (See: Figure 1) This generates discussion, allows participants to understand how the issues may arise in their day-to-day practice and to explore the options for the hypothetical client. It is also an opportunity to reinforce the options for practitioners to seek a secondary consultation or to make a referral to HRCLS.

Should Lisa go to Court?

Lisa and her ex have been separated for the past 12 months.

Lisa's two children live with her and her ex hasn't asked to see or speak to them since she ended the relationship. She has a 5 year IVO against him. Child protection were involved initially, but they're happy with Lisa's care of the children so they've closed their file.

They have told her though that she needs to go to court and 'get custody' of the kids. A friend of hers also told her she needs custody.

She's been told it's a simple process, but she is unsure if she should just do it herself or see a lawyer.

What suggestions would you have for Lisa?



Information correct as of 06.04.2021

Linking the community with the law

In addition to the general sessions, there are also:

- 'Bite sized' presentations for new staff to introduce the lawyer(s) and the partnership between HRCLS and CAV, HRCLS services and referral processes. This may happen once or twice a year and has been particularly important over the past few years when there has been significant staff movement and turnover across the community services sector.
- Sessions tailored for specific teams, such as a session on the *Victims of Crime Assistance Tribunal* tailored for the Sexual Assault practitioners.

With the opening of The Orange Door and changes to the service system, the lawyers have:

- delivered sessions for The Orange Door staff such as ‘How to Apply for an Intervention Order’
- invited The Orange Door staff to attend Bite Sized Law sessions at CAV when suitable
- presented on family violence matters to regional network meetings.

Reaction feedback collected after each session consistently shows that:

- participants’ knowledge about the topic improved
- participants intended to apply the knowledge in their day-to-day practice
- participants respected the knowledge of the lawyers and the clarity of the presentation
- participants enjoyed activities applying the knowledge, such as role plays or case scenarios
- very few suggestions for improvement were made other than having more sessions, longer sessions or to record and share the sessions.

The table below provides a snapshot of participant feedback from three Bite Sized law sessions.

Topic	Indicative feedback from participants
How to assist with preparing a family violence intervention order application (Orange Door)	I learnt what was needed to create weight to an IVO application and to draw out evidence needed to improve the chances of an interim order. More confident about what magistrates need. I have a client going through the process now, I will be able to support her with better knowledge. I will have this sheet with me when clients want to apply for an IVO. It was great having the case scenario and role playing to tease the information out as a group.
VOCAT (CAV, Sexual Assault team)	Greater depth of knowledge and confidence. Several areas of VOCAT I did not understand until today. I will write more concise and comprehensive applications. Greater insight into how to link and justify items sought on a VOCAT report. Knowledge has doubled.
Family Law and Parenting (CAV – open to all staff)	Case scenarios helped to apply the knowledge with practical examples. Going through individual cases and pulling apart the ‘what ifs?’ Will be able to support clients to understand processes and access legal advice at critical times. More confident on when to advise clients to get legal advice. Share information with my team members.

Stakeholders’ feedback during the evaluation interviews elaborated on the positive responses outlined above. They particularly valued:

- short, sharp sessions that they could fit in around their client and other duties,
- regular, informative sessions on relevant topics
- clear explanations and everyday language
- the application of adult learning principles, recognising participants’ knowledge and providing the information in meaningful ways.

‘The little training sessions are amazing – everybody loves them. They’re practical, they’re well prepared, well researched, always relevant. They always generate lots of discussion during the session and after the session – to me, that’s an indicator that the session has been on point.’

(CAV Team Leader)

Secondary consultations for CAV staff

'They're available whenever we need them. The advice is clear, concise and relevant. Everything is in our language. No improvements to suggest – honestly can't fault them.'

CAV and The Orange Door staff reported that they could always seek a secondary consultation whenever needed, again emphasising how approachable the lawyers were in person or by email, their regular presence onsite and their prompt responses.

Practitioners can often draw from the information they learnt in the Bite Sized Law training to form their questions, and the training sessions themselves often prompt questions which they can put directly to the lawyer after the session. Staff will email the lawyers and say "You said this in Bite Sized Law and we've got a client that's said this. What does this mean?" She's very accommodating.'

If the Senior Lawyers were not available, logical options for advice might be a local practitioner or a free, statewide legal service. CAV stakeholders pointed out that such services are 'large, very different, city-based, telephone services with lots of staff. We can't just ring up and say, "Can I run something by you?" It's a completely different professional relationship. They also don't have the appreciation of regional issues.'

'There's no way that our practitioners would cold-call a lawyer for advice, and they probably wouldn't get assistance anyway.'

Changes in practice

CAV staff were asked about change in their practice as a result of the partnership's capacity-building. The universal feedback was that through the combination of training, secondary consultations and regular on-site contact with the lawyers, staff were attuned to thinking about the need for legal support, confident and able to recognise legal issues, know when to seek legal advice, know when to refer clients and 'to give good lawful advice to our clients all the time.' This is a significant outcome as this is the consistent aim of legal education for non-legal practitioners supporting clients.

'The partnership, and having the lawyer on-site means that as staff we have better education, resources and ability to identify legal issues or areas that might require legal support, so that we can offer that earlier. We can offer that within the first contact with our service. The lawyers are so accessible and responsive. We can reach out straight away and the client will be contacted and an appointment booked.'

Stakeholders were able to provide concrete examples of practice changes such as:

- having the knowledge and confidence to challenge myths and misinformation in group work with perpetrators of family violence around contact with children, the rights of children, property law, why women seek intervention orders and how 'easy' it is to obtain an intervention order
- when subpoenaed and needing to produce files – 'I've been taught just to redact, redact, redact. But thinking of it through a different lens with her support has been great - how we can actually use those files as a positive for victim survivors rather than it always being a negative. Also making sure I don't find myself in the witness stand as a hostile witness or someone withholding information.'
- outside the training session, we do a team reflective session using the case study out and discuss What we would do differently now that we have had that advice from the lawyer? Or pull it apart as a practical exercise, and explore what does it mean for us as practitioners?

How well is the partnership functioning?

“I don’t think the impact of not having access to the legal service could be underestimated, not just for our clients, but for our staff as well.” (CAV CEO)

Partnership strengths

The Family Violence Health Justice Partnership functions extremely well for the benefit of:

- CAV clients, staff and the organisation as a whole
- The Orange Door and The Orange Door clients
- the local/regional service system
- the Magistrates’ Courts and tribunals
- Victoria Police
- the community.

CAV staff were asked to consider what would happen if the partnership did not exist. In response, they could only imagine dire impacts for clients, particularly the most vulnerable clients and a reduction in the quality of service outcomes. CAV staff also thought that it would have a huge impact on practitioners’ workloads and work-related stress, as they would have to take on the responsibility for finding other referral sources. Without the easy access to secondary consultations with the lawyer, they would not be able to provide the same accuracy of information to clients. Without the supported referral pathway to legal help available through the partnership, they felt most clients would find a general referral to HRCLS too difficult, nor would they have the financial resources to access private legal assistance. Telephone assistance from a metropolitan service would not only be too difficult for clients but would lack the nuance and understanding that comes from a local lawyer. The consequence for clients is that legal problems, along with social and health issues, would snowball. Clients, and their children, would likely end up in crisis services. The human cost would be enormous, as well as the costs for service providers and local service systems.

‘They’re just so valuable, I don’t know what I’d do without them. I think our work would look very different. If they weren’t here, we wouldn’t have outcomes we do. Clients wouldn’t get the support that they get. We wouldn’t have the quality of service that we do. They are so essential to the way that we work.’

The partnership provides a smooth and effective referral pathway for clients to reach HRCLS. The regular legal education for practitioners ensures that they know how to identify when clients need legal assistance and can refer clients promptly. The partner organisations share values around supporting and making a difference to the lives of people affected by family violence. Operationally – day to day, the partnership functions well and staff relationships are excellent.

The partnership assists in strengthening the relationship between HRCLS and CAV. The partners have undertaken joint initiatives, such as collaborating on community events for the 16 Days of Activism Against Gender Based Violence (25 November – 10 December) and joint advocacy calling for a Victoria Legal Aid office and a Specialist Family Violence Court in the region.



Partnership gaps

While the partnership works well on a day-to-day level, there are some critical gaps. If these gaps were addressed, the partnership itself would be strengthened and its operation would improve. The following table sets out the features that are missing from the partnership, and the function of each element. It is acknowledged that there would be costs involved, particularly in investing more time and resources into the governance and management of the partnership and its activities.

Feature	Functions
An overarching governance structure	<ul style="list-style-type: none">Maintain oversight and accountability of the partnershipMaintain a record of the partnership work and key decisionsJoint problem-solving and continuous improvementJoint advocacy at regional level and to governmentPursue joint funding opportunitiesSafety and risk management
A practice level group	<ul style="list-style-type: none">Allow practitioners to reflect and debrief togetherBring practitioners together to maintain recordsReport to the governance group (on partnership work, issues, risks, opportunities)Ensure systems are working wellIdentify opportunities to improveIdentify any potential issues arising from professional obligationsConsider and plan training sessions
Key partnership contacts	<ul style="list-style-type: none">Partnership contacts at each organisation should be the first contact for issues and planningShould be a member of either practice level group or governance groupIdeally should be someone in a coordination role who can relieve the lawyers of the administrative burdens and potentially undertake activities such as delivering legal education sessions
Data management	<p>As a partnership, there should be collaboration around data management and discussions about:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">– what data each organisation would like to collect– what data each organisation collects– how can the partners together collect the data that would best inform the work of the partnership, and also enable reporting to government on the value of the work
Care and wellbeing of lawyers	<p>Given that the success of the partnership relies so significantly on the lawyers and their role in supporting people who have experienced trauma, attention on staff self-care and providing best practice support needs to be monitored and maintained. Current practices include training around vicarious trauma and trauma-informed practice, internal supervision, access to the Employee Assistance Program and, since 2023, the availability of one-to-one external supervision with a registered counsellor.</p> <p>As well as supporting staff, care and wellbeing of lawyers is important as a risk management issue for HRCLS to avoid the risk of exposing staff to psychological injury.</p>

There are also system gaps, for example:

- While HRCLS manage bookings for client appointments, this is not reviewed with CAV. Consequently, there is not a day to day, shared understanding of the demand for legal appointments, although CAV is notified when there is a high demand for appointments
- Currently, the lawyer in Wangaratta is fully booked months in advance.
- Given the ease of the collegial relationships, lawyers can often be approached directly to take client appointments without channeling these through the HRCLS office.
- There is no waitlist maintained, nor are ‘turnaways’ counted.

Therefore, with these gaps, there is not a clear record of the overall demand for legal support. Similarly, legal services and secondary consultations are likely to be under-counts of the true picture.

‘You know, the question is, are we better off building more refuge properties or are we actually better off funding more legal professionals sitting in our organisation so that we can stop people requiring crisis accommodation? We don't collect the data in a way that would give us that insight, but that would be really useful for us to understand.’ (CAV CEO)

Why these gaps have arisen

It is understandable that the partnership has to some extent ‘flown under the radar’ – primarily, because it works so well, clients are so well-supported, staff communicate well and there are good opportunities for secondary consultations.

In addition, the oversight of the partnership has also been impacted by:

- significant staff turnover in CAV and in the specialist family violence sector more generally
- service disruptions caused by COVID
- the increasing demand for family violence support in the region, affecting both CAV and HRCLS – which has deflected attention from strategic issues to simply keeping up with demand
- the increasing demands on managers managing other HRCLS programs, including post-disaster recovery programs, with limited funding and resources.

Of all the CAV staff consulted for the evaluation, none had been with the organisation for more than three years. In contrast, the Senior Lawyer has been with the partnership for seven years and is the only person on the ground who knows the history and evolution of the partnership. This in itself is a risk to the partnership if only one or two people have the full understanding of the operation and history.

Considerations for the future

The original purpose of the CAV / HRCLS Family Violence Partnership was to provide early intervention legal support – ie. provide legal support to victim-survivors at the earliest point to support them and, as far as possible, to prevent the frequent cluster of legal issues escalating.

Given that the partnership was designed before the entry of The Orange Door as the region's intake and assessment service, it is an opportune time to reconsider the design of the partnership and review whether it is still best placed to meet current and future needs in the region.

At the same time, it should be noted that the partnership works well for clients, partners and the service system (including the courts and police) in the region – but this is largely reliant on the self-management, dedication and hard work of the lawyers. With the rising incidence of family incidents and appointments booked months in advance, there is a genuine risk of overloading the lawyers.

It should also be noted that embedding legal services within The Orange Door is an issue of increasing advocacy across the community legal sector, as the Women's Legal Service recent social media post during the 16 Days of Activism indicates.

Careful consideration and discussion between the partners and key stakeholders would be required to review the options. Some strategic questions to guide those discussions would include:

- Is the partnership with CAV still the most appropriate setting for the partnership, given the entry of the Orange Door?
- If, as advised, the Orange Door cannot currently enter into a formal partnership with HRCLS, but would welcome 'in-reach' HRCLS services - would that be a better arrangement for supporting clients at an earlier point in their need for legal support?
- With the current staffing, what capacity does HRCLS have:
 - to provide in-reach services at the Orange Door? and/or
 - to maintain the partnership with CAV?
- What structure and setting for integrated legal services is in the best interests of victim-survivors?
- What structure and setting for integrated legal services is best placed to meet current and future demand for legal support?
- If legal services were to be integrated with the Orange Door rather than CAV – what are the pros and cons? What are the risks and benefits:
 - for clients?
 - for professional and organisational relationships?
 - for the functioning of the local service system?
- If partners want to maintain the CAV partnership, **and** provide in-reach services at The Orange Door, realistically what level of additional staffing would be required?
- Can the functions and tasks of the Senior Lawyers be re-organised to be more manageable and create more sustainable roles?
- What additional resources are required to better meet the demand for legal support in the region?
- Given the health benefits, are there funding opportunities available through the health portfolio?
- Are there other opportunities for funding or collective advocacy?
- Are there some low-cost or no cost improvements which could be explored?



Conclusion

The CAV / HRCLS Family Violence Partnership commenced as a pilot in 2016 and in 2017, a dedicated Senior Lawyer was employed, working across the Wangaratta and Wodonga offices. A second Senior Lawyer (0.6 EFT) was employed in 2021 for the Wodonga office, under Bushfire Recovery funding.

Both lawyers attend CAV offices weekly to run in-house legal clinics providing clients with advice and information. They consult clients in face to face, on-site meetings or by telephone or online. Since COVID, there has been an increasing acceptance of remote consultations. Complex cases, which meet HRCLS eligibility criteria, are taken on which may involve a range of legal tasks, referrals and/or legal representation.

The lawyers also provide secondary consultations to staff, either when they are onsite at CAV offices, or by email or phone at other times.

The senior lawyer in Wangaratta also provides Duty Lawyer services at the Family Violence Intervention Order sessions at the Wangaratta Magistrates' Court.

In addition, the lawyers run short education sessions called 'Bite Sized Law' around every six weeks for CAV staff.

The Orange Door opened in Wangaratta, with a hub office in Wodonga, in 2021. Consequently, the HRCLS lawyers also:

- receive referrals from the Orange Door for clients requiring legal support for family violence
- provide secondary consultations to Orange Door staff
- invite Orange Door staff to attend the Bite Sized Law education sessions and
- have delivered tailored Bite Sized Law sessions for The Orange Door staff.

The review has found that:

- CAV staff highly value the presence of HRCLS lawyers onsite, the legal support provided to clients and the easy access to lawyers for secondary consultations
- CAV and Orange Door stakeholders highlighted how quickly HRCLS responds to referrals and queries and the quality of support provided to clients
- HRCLS lawyers were noted for their sensitivity to client stories, their trauma-informed approaches when responding to clients, their local knowledge and their deep understanding of how this may impact a client's situation (eg. isolation, reluctance to report, 'everybody knowing everybody', a perpetrator's standing in the community) and the required legal response
- HRCLS lawyers are also noted for the capability in providing advice and representing clients on the wide range of other legal issues that are often clustered with family violence – ie. family law, child protection, housing, Victims of Crime applications, fines.
- The provision of legal consultations and duty lawyer services is frequently very beneficial for clients and for the court.

The partnership could be strengthened by jointly addressing structural and system gaps outlined in this report. It currently lacks a full picture of the level of demand it is operating under, in part because of the busy nature of the work, and the lack of time and resources to invest in more strategic tasks.

The qualitative data collected through this evaluation demonstrates that through the partnership, people experiencing family violence have greater access to justice and addressing their health-harming legal problems and CAV, as the key partner is strengthened through the partnership.

However, in a region with increasing rates of family violence, increasing vulnerability to natural disasters and no options for free legal support other than through HRCLS, it is increasingly challenging to meet demand for legal support.

There are valid arguments for maintaining and strengthening the existing partnership with CAV. There are equally valid arguments for focusing on in-reach legal services at The Orange Door.

Ultimately, the solution which would be more robust, equitable and create lasting change would be for both options to be funded so that victim-survivors of family violence in the Ovens Murray region have fair access to high quality legal support.

Endnotes

- ¹ The Duty Lawyer service at the Benalla Magistrates' Court is provided by the Goulburn Valley CLC, Arc Justice
- ² Health Justice Australia (2018) *Health justice partnership*
- ³ Balmer, N.J., Pleasence, P., McDonald, H.M. & Sandefur, R.L. (2023). The Public Understanding of Law Survey (PULS) Volume 1: Everyday Problems and Legal Need. Melbourne: Victoria Law Foundation.
- ⁴ State of Victoria, Royal Commission into Family Violence: Report and recommendations, Vol V, Parl Paper No 132 (2014–16). See: Chapter 33
- ⁵ Parkinson, D. Gender-Based Violence and Disaster (Published online: 24 February 2022) <https://doi.org/10.1093/acrefore/9780199389407.013.390>
- ⁶ State of Victoria, Royal Commission into Family Violence: Report and recommendations, Vol V, Parl Paper No 132 (2014–16). p.219
- ⁷ https://www.fclc.org.au/clcs_on_the_frontline_hume_riverina
- ⁸ State of Victoria, Royal Commission into Family Violence: Report and recommendations, Vol V, Parl Paper No 132 (2014–16). See: Chapter 33
- ⁹ <https://www.crimestatistics.vic.gov.au/crime-statistics/latest-victorian-crime-data/family-incidents-2>
- ¹⁰ <https://www.crimestatistics.vic.gov.au/crime-statistics/latest-victorian-crime-data/family-incidents-2>
- ¹¹ <https://www.crimestatistics.vic.gov.au/crime-statistics/latest-crime-data-by-area>
- ¹² Eastern Community Legal Centre *Integrated Practice – Better Practice Principles* (n.d.)
- ¹³ Eastern Community Legal Centre *Integrated Practice – Better Practice Principles* (n.d.)
- ¹⁴ *ibid*
- ¹⁵ Department of Justice and Community Safety (June, 2022) *Legal Assistance Strategy Victoria 2022-2025 – Building the Foundations*
- ¹⁶ Victorian Legal Services Board + Commissioner (n.d.) *Policy Statement: Access to Justice*
- ¹⁷ <https://healthjustice.org.au/app/uploads/downloads/Health-Justice-Australia-Theory-of-change-for-HJPs-Dec-2020.pdf>
- ¹⁸ <https://www.aihw.gov.au/family-domestic-and-sexual-violence/resources/fdsv-summary>
- ¹⁹ <https://www.aihw.gov.au/family-domestic-and-sexual-violence/responses-and-outcomes/health-outcomes>
- ²⁰ <https://www.aihw.gov.au/family-domestic-and-sexual-violence/responses-and-outcomes/economic-financial-impacts#economic>
- ²¹ Family Violence Reform Implementation Monitor (December 2022) *Monitoring Victoria's family violence reforms - Crisis response to recovery model for victim survivors* Office of the Family Violence Reform Implementation Monitor