

hume riverina  
community legal  
service

# ANNUAL REPORT

2024-2025



## ACKNOWLEDGEMENT OF COUNTRY

Hume Riverina Community Legal Service acknowledges the traditional custodians and Elders past and present, who have raised children, taught them about the world around them and gave them the gift of culture and language. We recognise our part in bringing fairness to our Indigenous brothers and sisters and creating a community where all children, Indigenous and non-Indigenous, can 'grow up strong'.

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples are the first owners of this land and we recognise their right to self-determination and justice.

We are committed to walking alongside Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples on this journey.



We support diversity and inclusivity and welcome all people to our service, regardless of race, religion, gender or sexuality.

This Annual Report has been developed on the lands of Aboriginal peoples across North East Victoria and the Southern Riverina of New South Wales.

Hume Riverina Community Legal Service acknowledges funding from the Commonwealth Attorney-General's Department, the Victorian Department of Justice and Community Safety, Victoria Legal Aid, and the Victorian Legal Services Board Grants Program, for the provision of services. We are also funded by the Australian Government, NSW Government and the Public Purpose Fund through the Community Legal Centres Program administered by Legal Aid NSW.

**Cover image:** Goorambat photographed by Erin Quilliam

**This page:** Edward River photographed by Raissa Butkowski

**Back page:** Tumbarumba photographed by Tracey Walker

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**Hume Riverina Community Legal Service (HRCLS) is a service of Upper Murray Family Care (UMFC).**

UMFC is a locally-owned, independent and authentically place-based organisation supporting children, young people, individuals and families across North East Victoria and Southern NSW.

## UMFC Board

Dean Bocquet, *Chair*  
Robyn Gillis, *Deputy Chair*  
Jacqui Vaughan, *Treasurer*  
Meagan Hill  
Marni Jones  
Tracy McCrohan  
Paul Robb  
Cam Saunders

## UMFC Executive

Felicity Williams, *CEO and Company Secretary*  
Narelle Klein, *Executive Director of Operations*  
Kath Kerin, *Executive Director of Children, Families and Communities*  
Melinda Carlyle, *Executive Director of Care and Legal Services*



# Felicity Williams

CEO

I'm pleased to acknowledge the achievements of Hume Riverina Community Legal Service (HRCLS) in delivering on its strategic commitments and creating meaningful change in communities across our region in 2024-25.

**T**HIS year, HRCLS completed the final year of five-year strategic plan, [Our Plan 2020-2025](#), a plan that has guided the service through a period of significant change, complexity and growth.

Throughout this journey, HRCLS has remained focused on expanding reach and impact across North East Victoria and the Southern Riverina of NSW. This has been achieved through integrated and health justice partnerships, that target services to people most in need: people experiencing intersecting legal and non-legal problems including young people, and people experiencing family violence. Targeted legal services, teamed with education and advocacy are improving access to justice, and disrupting the cycle of disadvantage to empower individuals and families to navigate their lives with greater agency and confidence.

As CEO of Upper Murray Family Care, I am proud of the role HRCLS plays within our broader service ecosystem. HRCLS reflects the values we hold as an organisation, promoting the self-worth of clients, fostering hope and cultural safety in communities, supporting the agency of individuals, engaging with communities and stakeholders, and deeply listening to carry out determined advocacy.

Committed to trauma-informed care, HRCLS has now embedded the Sanctuary Model across the service - a significant change process that promotes staff wellbeing, aligns with the Victorian Legal Services Board's wellbeing guidelines for lawyers, and strengthens our capacity to support communities with care, safety, and resilience.

The achievements of this year are a testament to the dedication of the HRCLS team, the strength of its partnerships, and the trust placed in it by the communities it serves. Standout moments for me include:

- the release of the independent evaluation of the Family Violence Integrated Partnership with Centre Against Violence in July 2024 which powerfully centred the voice of a victim-survivor
- deepening collaboration with place-based community partners including NESAY and Gateway Health, strengthening our collective impact
- hearing the incredible resilience and strength of disaster-affected communities at the 2024 HRCLS Report to Community, through the voice of lived experience
- expansion of the Family Violence Integrated Partnership with Centre Against Violence to include Upper Murray Family Care (UMFC), extending legal services to UMFC's Family Services clients'

I celebrate the work undertaken by HRCLS in 2024-25, the strategic provision of legal assistance and the tangible outcomes achieved - particularly for women and young people experiencing and at risk of family violence, disaster affected communities, and people with everyday legal problems that compound to affect health and wellbeing.

I invite you to explore the pages ahead and join us in celebrating HRCLS's impact throughout 2024-2025.



## Sarah Rodgers

Manager And Principal Lawyer  
(Current Director)

### Working strategically to improve access to justice across communities in our region throughout 2024–2025, Hume Riverina Community Legal Service (HRCLS) has delivered targeted assistance, expanded reach, and created meaningful change.

**L**ED by vision and driven by strategy, our work has made a tangible impact in regional communities, particularly among people disproportionately affected by financial pressures, climate change, family violence, and systemic disadvantage.

Throughout the final year of our [strategic plan](#), we remained focused on delivering assistance where it was needed most. We:

- strengthened our ability to target legal assistance to priority communities
- continued to invest in specialist programs for children and young people
- deepened our response to family violence
- increased service capacity in key areas of legal need experienced in our region

Our partnerships across community, education, health, and specialist family violence services were central to this work, enabling us deeper reach into communities, and holistic response to complex legal needs.

This year marked significant progress across key areas of our work. Notable achievements include:

- funding advocacy for the sector, and specific programs, including the Invisible Hurdles Program
- independent evaluations of our Family Violence Integrated Partnership with Centre Against Violence and Health Justice Partnership with Albury Wodonga Aboriginal Health Service known as Bagaraybang Bagaraybang Mayinygalang

- sustained advocacy in family law to address systems weaponisation and in family violence to strengthen women's safety
- elevating climate justice across our organisation and the legal assistances sector
- service structure evaluation and redesign.

It takes a committed and passionate team to embrace the opportunity to make a difference. I'm privileged to work alongside people who bring not only expertise, but deep care and integrity to their roles. The HRCLS team, lawyers, community engagement professionals and incredible operations and administrative personnel, consistently go above and beyond to ensure that people in our region receive the legal help they need, when they need it, and where they need it.

Together, we've built a service that is strategic, responsive, and grounded in justice. I thank each member of the team for their contribution to this final year of our strategic plan, and for their unwavering commitment to our communities.

The commitment and guidance of UMFC under Executive Director of Care and Legal Services Melinda Carlyle and CEO Felicity Williams, is instrumental in the strength of our organisation. Their leadership enables us to pursue a strategic direction that places at its centre, the people of North East Victoria and the Southern Riverina of New South Wales, recognising them as the experts in their own lives despite the barriers they face in accessing justice.

I'm pleased to present the 2024-2025 Annual Report.

**HRCLS is a generalist, place-based, cross-border, community legal centre improving access to justice in the regional communities of 17 local government areas across North East Victoria and the Southern Riverina of New South Wales – an area spanning 8.2 million hectares.**

For more than 25 years HRCLS has been advancing fairness in the legal system through the strategic provision of trauma-informed, client-centred legal assistance, community legal education, and advocacy and law reform to address systemic barriers to justice.



Top: Sarah Rodgers, Asha Jones and Ashlie Barclay

Bottom: Team members at the Wodonga Walk Against Violence

## **VISION**

**A society where all people enjoy equality of opportunity and have equal access to the law.**

## **PURPOSE**

- Improve justice access and outcomes
- Holistically address people's legal and non-legal needs
- Increase people's sense of autonomy and agency
- Make laws and systems fairer

## VALUES

As a service of UMFC we share and uphold the values of:



### Unwavering integrity

Through our commitment to ensuring the child's voice is paramount, we ignite self-worth. We do the right thing, not just the easy thing.



### Passionately optimistic

Ever evolving within our communities, we are visionary, inspiring and future focused, and we support hope and cultural safety.



### Considered empathy

Recognising the importance of the individual and that they are the experts in their own lives, we are honest, compassionate, kind and caring as we listen, and strive to understand.



### Bravely collaborative

We are genuinely engaged and bring our whole self to 'the table', engaging with communities and stakeholders as well as individuals through connected and courageous leadership.



### Determined advocacy

We advocate every day for our children, young people, individuals and families within our communities. To do this, we ensure dignity, deeply listen, and seek to provide individualised, culturally appropriate and adaptive responses.

## TEAM

**Sarah Rodgers**, Manager and Principal Lawyer

**Ashlie Barclay**, Manager Operations

**Debi Fisher**, Managing Lawyer - Generalist Law

**Alison Maher**, Managing Lawyer - Family Law

**Sara Reid**, Senior Lawyer

**Jodie Wells**, Senior Lawyer

**Tracey Walker**, Senior Administration Assistant

**Chloe Bond**, Lawyer

**Raissa Butkowski**, Lawyer

**Meaghan Frazer**, Administration Officer

**Felicity Hartridge**, Law Reform and Communications Coordinator

**Karlee Hirt**, Lawyer

**Debbie Ireland**, Lawyer

**Asha Jones**, Legal Administration Trainee

**Sarah Lefevre**, Lawyer

**Gabby Maginness**, Lawyer

**Tessa Mead**, Lawyer

**Amanda Meagher**, Lawyer

**Shyleen Mkhwananzi**, Lawyer

**Anthony Nguyen**, Community Engagement Worker

**Kristi Pemmelaar**, Lawyer

**Erin Quilliam**, Lawyer

**Colette Quin**, Community Development and CLSD Coordinator

**Becky Smith**, Lawyer

**Taylor Smith-Stephens**, Lawyer

**Amy Warner**, Paralegal

**David Whitehouse**, Lawyer

**Edwina Wyatt**, Lawyer

and law students: **Julieann Exton**, **Isaac Eyalama**, **Isabella O'Hara** and **Lakota Perrone**

*\* All titles reflect positions held during the 2024-2025 financial year.*

## HRCLS ACKNOWLEDGES THE SUPPORT OF:

**Greater Albury Cooperative Legal Service Delivery Partnership**

**Federation of Community Legal Centres**

**Community Legal Centres New South Wales**

**Community Legal Centres Australia**

**Health Justice Australia**

HRCLS thanks local lawyers in North East Victoria and the Southern Riverina of New South Wales, the North East Law Association and the Albury and District Law Society for their support.

We also acknowledge and thank pro bono partners **Clayton Utz**, **Adaptbl** and **Justice Connect**.

# Programs

**HRCLS provides legal assistance in civil law, family law, and family violence to people who face systemic barriers to justice, often compounded by intersecting legal and non-legal challenges.**

HRCLS is intentional in bringing a community development and collaborative approach to service provision to ensure people receive holistic care. This is achieved through integrated partnerships, including health justice partnerships, with community, education, health, and family violence services.

**In 2024-2025 these partnerships provided strategic assistance through unique programs:**

**Overcoming the Invisible Hurdles to Justice for Young People Program (Invisible Hurdles Program)**, a four-way integrated partnership formed in 2015 with Albury Wodonga Aboriginal Health Service (AWAHS), North East Support and Action for Youth (NESAY), and Wodonga Flexible Learning Centre, to assist young people experiencing or at risk of family violence

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**Holistic Assistance and Legal Outreach (HALO)**, health justice partnership with Gateway Health formed in 2015 and adapted in 2023 to reach and support people with poor mental health in North East Victoria

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**Integrated family violence partnership with Centre Against Violence (CAV)** formed in 2015 to provide trauma-informed, holistic legal assistance to people experiencing or at risk of family violence in North East Victoria

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**Disaster Recovery Program** with Gateway Health, CAV, and UMFC Financial Counselling developed to respond to the Black Summer bushfires of 2019-20 with place-based legal assistance, this program was expanded following flood events of 2022-23

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**Bagaraybang bagaraybang mayinygalang (BBM): Empowering and Alleviating: A health justice partnership** with Albury Wodonga Aboriginal Health Service (AWAHS) offering legal support for social and emotional wellbeing with Aboriginal peoples in North East Victoria and the Southern Riverina of New South Wales, launched in 2023

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**Integrated family violence partnership with Women's Centre for Health and Wellbeing** to support women experiencing and at risk of domestic and family violence in Albury

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**Outreach Networking and Empowerment Program (ONE Program)** a partnership with Women's Domestic Violence Court Advocacy Service (WDVCAS), Riverina Foodshare – Finley, Intereach, and Vinnies Deniliquin to support women experiencing and at risk of family violence in Corowa, Deniliquin and Finley

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**Civil law program** providing generalist civil legal assistance across the Southern Riverina of New South Wales in partnership with Yes Unlimited and Intereach

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**Emerging Lawyers Program** led by [Women's Legal Service Victoria](#) placing a new lawyer specialising in family violence and family law at HRCLS

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**Victorian family law family violence lawyer** providing trauma-informed legal assistance to people experiencing or at risk of family violence and family law problems

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**Duty lawyer services** at Victorian Magistrates' Courts in Myrtleford, Wangaratta and Wodonga providing assistance to court users for family violence intervention orders

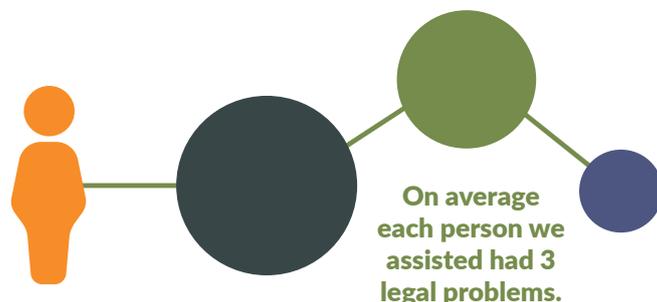
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**H**RCLS thanks all of our service partners for their work in facilitating and supporting the delivery of legal assistance, legal capability building in communities, and advocacy for fairer legal systems.

# From strategy to impact

In 2024-2025 we assisted 1195 people.

We assisted with 3656 legal problems.



While our programs focus on different areas of law, they are not siloed—because our clients' lives aren't. People often seek help for a single legal issue, and in the process, other problems emerge. Where family violence is present, it's common for family law matters to intersect with civil law issues such as debts, fines, housing problems, and Centrelink disputes.

As the Victoria Law Foundation's Public Understanding of Law Survey Volume 1 states:

*"the more problems you have the more likely you are to have further problems. And the links to disadvantage grow stronger still."*<sup>1</sup>

## Our clients received assistance in the following areas of law



46.2%  
family violence



70.5%  
family law



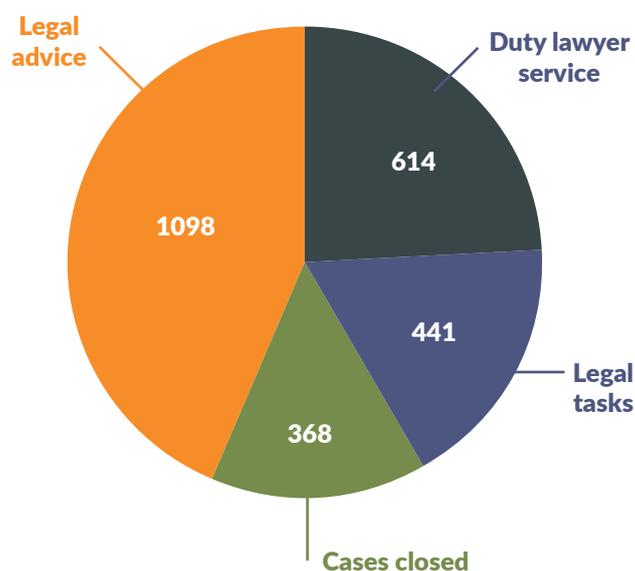
74.1%  
generalist civil law

## The people we assist experience multiple barriers to accessing justice, these look like:

- 100% regional
- 88.3% experiencing financial disadvantage
- 77.9% identify as female
- 74.6% experiencing or at risk of family violence
- 49.5% experiencing poor mental health and/or living with disability
- 22.8% experiencing or at risk of homelessness
- 16.9% Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander peoples
- 12.2% young people under 25
- 10.1% older people over 65
- 8.6% culturally and linguistically diverse

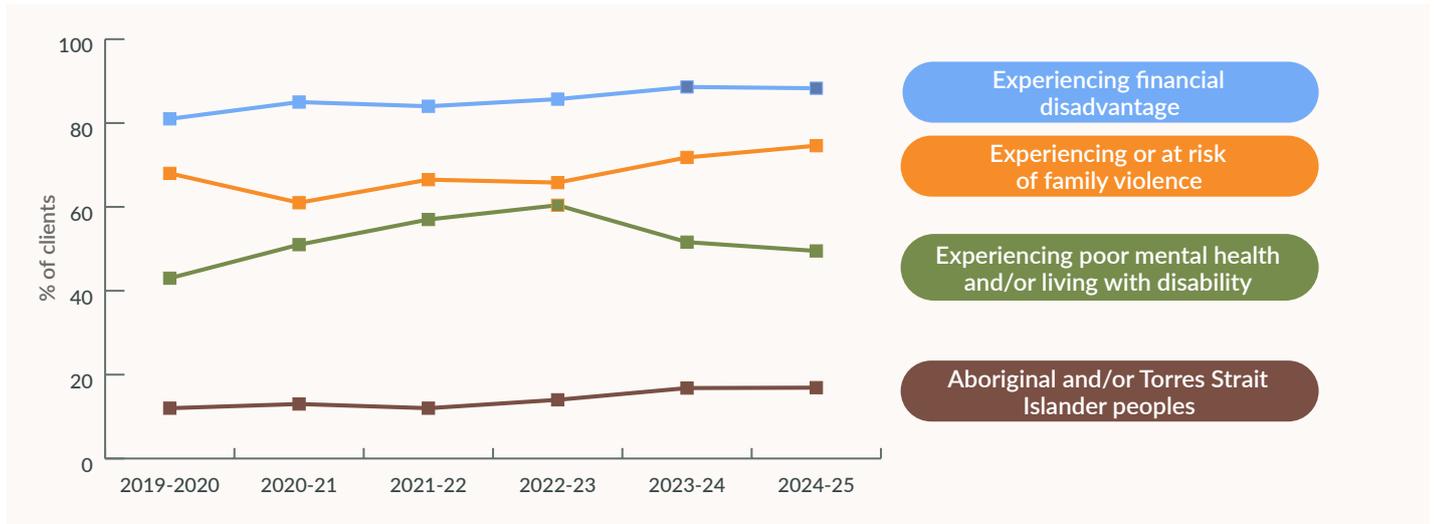
IN ADDITION to the people we assisted, we provided referrals for 1017 people due to service capacity and eligibility constraints, including conflicts. This number highlights community demand for place-based assistance, and drives our advocacy for adequate and secure funding.

## In 2024-2025 we provided 2521 legal services:



<sup>1</sup>Victoria Law Foundation, "PULS Volume 1: Everyday Problems and Legal Need Report Summary", [PULS Volume 1: Everyday Problems and Legal Need - Report summary | The Public Understanding of Law Survey \(PULS\) | Victoria Law Foundation](#), p.4, accessed 10/10/2025

# Who we are helping



# What problems we are helping with



**Community legal education presentations** 57

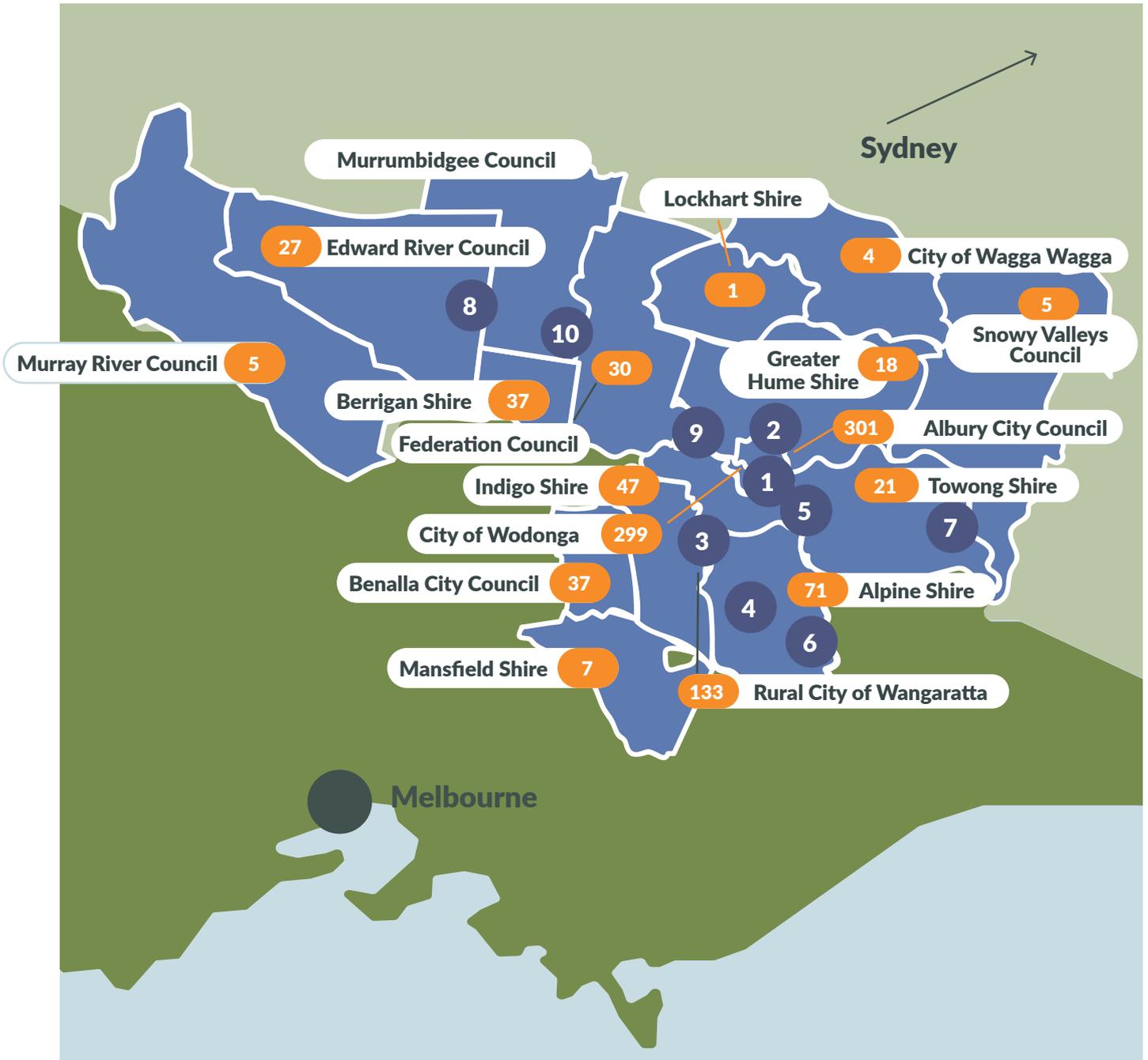
**Law reform activities** 58

**Compensation gained** \$197,095

**Fines withdrawn** \$100,976

**Debts reviewed, waived or withdrawn** \$546,527

# Where we are helping



## LEGAL CLINIC LOCATIONS

- |               |                |
|---------------|----------------|
| 1 Wodonga     | 6 Mount Beauty |
| 2 Albury      | 7 Corryong     |
| 3 Wangaratta  | 8 Deniliquin   |
| 4 Myrtleford  | 9 Corowa       |
| 5 Tallangatta | 10 Finley      |

## LEGEND

299

Client Numbers

City of Wodonga

Local Government Area

# Targeting services to create lasting change

In the final year of our 2020–2025 strategic plan, HRCLS delivered on its commitment to improve access to legal help, strengthen outreach through partnerships, and drive systemic change.

**T**HROUGH ongoing refinement of intake and triage processes, expanded services in communities experiencing persistent disadvantage, and a growing role in law reform, we translated strategy into impact - creating lasting change for individuals and communities across our region.

Refinements to our systems and workflows, from intake and triage to ActionStep, we have increased service capacity and improved efficiency, enabling us to better respond to growing legal need in our region.

In 2024-2025 HRCLS undertook a significant body of work to support the future provision of efficient and effective legal assistance:

- **Service redesign:** an eight-month review and structural redesign to support growth, respond to evolving community needs, and ensure our service is equipped to meet increasing demand. The redesign includes investment in paralegal support to grow the capacity of lawyers to assist clients
- **Outcomes Measurement Framework:** developed to demonstrate the real impact of our work, guide strategic decisions, and strengthen our advocacy for fairer systems and better support for the communities we serve:
- **Theory of Change:** to illustrate how our work can achieve outcomes, ensuring our efforts are aligned with our communities
- **New Strategic Plan:** designed to target services more effectively and generate multiplier effects, creating change beyond the individual clients we support

This work undertaken in 2024-2025 was implemented at the completion of the financial year, providing foundations for future service provision.

**W**E HAVE strengthened collaboration and reach in NSW through the **Outreach Networking and Empowerment Program** (ONE Program). In its third year of operation the ONE Program has developed new partnerships and connections in Corowa, Deniliquin and Finley, communities identified as experiencing unmet legal need due to high rates of domestic violence. Supporting women experiencing and at risk of family violence in partnership with WDVCS, Riverina Foodshare – Finley, Intereach, and Vinnies Deniliquin the ONE Program has provided legal assistance, legal education to build community capability, and supported advocacy for change.

The presence of the program lawyer and community engagement coordinator in these communities has enabled access to justice for women who may not have otherwise sought help, at a time and in a place that is right for them.

In 2024-2025 HRCLS service delivery through the ONE Program reached more communities through expanded partnerships, seeing growing numbers of people and providing direct legal assistance:

- **2022-2023** – 33 people and 68 legal services (program establishment)
- **2023-2024** – 95 people and 180 legal services
- **2024-2025** – 98 people and 159 legal services

These people are from locations of up to 500kms from Albury that are otherwise not serviced by community legal centres, have few private lawyers, and no Legal Aid office.

Improving capacity to target services to those most in need and to create lasting change meant that through the ONE Program, Elizabeth\* (not her real name) received legal assistance:

## ELIZABETH'S STORY



Elizabeth is a mum of two, living in a geographically isolated area in the Southern Riverina of NSW.

Following an incident of domestic violence, police referred Elizabeth to WDVCS for support during proceedings for an Apprehended Domestic Violence Order.

She experienced domestic violence perpetrated by her partner, the father of her children.

As a result of the domestic violence she fled the family home – coupled with financial disadvantage, Elizabeth was forced into homelessness.

She was then referred to Vinnies for ongoing support. Elizabeth's Vinnies case manager identified further legal problems stemming from family violence and supported her with a referral to HRCLS for legal assistance through the ONE Program.

Elizabeth's preferred methods of communication varied from email, phone and in person depending on her circumstances, the ONE Program Lawyer had flexibility to provide this.

### Elizabeth received legal assistance for:



#### Family law - parenting matters

Including guidance on children's arrangements, school-related issues, medical needs, and representation for mediation



#### Recovery of property

Assistance in lodging court documents to retrieve personal belongings from a co-owned property



#### Financial challenges

Although she was not living in the family home and was navigating homelessness, she was co-owner and borrower and found it difficult to pay the mortgage. She was assisted with advocating for an extension of her mortgage moratorium which was successful



#### Small debts

Advice on legal options to reduce financial strains following numerous debts accrued through hardship



#### Family law – property

It was important that Elizabeth's financial arrangements with her ex-partner were severed to enable her to move forward with independence. She was assisted with negotiating through mediation and ultimately finalising a property settlement with Consent Orders.

### Elizabeth reported that having a local legal support team was particularly beneficial:

*"It did make a big difference. I wasn't referred to someone in the city who might not understand what it's like to live rurally."*

*"It really helps, you know, the background of the people assisting you. Not only are they in the local area but you really know where they are coming from...these wpeople are passionate about protecting and helping women. It was very comforting when it was so hectic and it helped make sense of so many pieces of the puzzle."*

### She was also reassured by the ONE Program lawyer's commitment and knowledge of the system:

*"It made me feel a lot more positive that the person was active in the anti-domestic violence space, not just a lawyer – someone who had seen what goes on in the space against women and was active ensuring women were looked after, cared for, heard. So for me that was a really comforting feeling."*

**H**RCLS has achieved greater depth of service in the Southern Riverina of New South Wales, strengthening our capacity to reach people with complex legal needs through integrated and targeted service delivery.

The ONE Program complements our existing integrated family law and family violence partnership with Women's Centre for Health and Wellbeing, and our NSW civil law program. Together, lawyers in these programs support people with matters spanning multiple legal practice areas, ensuring a holistic response to intersecting legal and non-legal problems. This assistance reached over 200 people in 2024-2025.

### The impact of this integrated approach can be illustrated by Lil's\* (not her real name) story:

Lil is over 65 years of age and lives in a women's refuge in a regional town. She has been receiving support from the Women's Centre as a victim-survivor of long-term domestic violence.

Through the integrated family law family violence partnership, the Women's Centre referred Lil to HRCLS. The partnership lawyer met with Lil and her case worker, and recognising the complexity of her legal problems, made an internal referral to our NSW civil law lawyer.

Lil received coordinated support from her specialist family violence case worker and HRCLS lawyers. Her lawyer successfully sought waivers for loans that

had been incurred in her name by the perpetrator without her knowledge or consent and resolved Centrelink issues that had similarly formed part of the ongoing abuse.

Because of this assistance, Lil was able to move forward without the strain of lingering debt and stifling financial pressure.

*"I am so relieved and I really didn't know services like HRCLS could change people's lives the way that you've changed mine."*

**I**N THE final year of our strategic plan, HRCLS has expanded its policy and law reform capacity – supporting, contributing to, and driving advocacy for systemic change. In 2024–2025, HRCLS was involved in 58 policy and law reform activities aligned with the focus areas of [Our Strategy 2020–2025](#), and informed by client stories, casework, and data.

Our advocacy has spanned local, state and national issues, including:

- supporting the [Police Ombudsman Now](#) campaign
- contributing to **sector funding advocacy**
- providing **client stories** to government investigations into traffic fine nominations and car registrations
- briefing government departments on **cross-border complexities**

- planning **local events** calling for an end to family violence
- making **regulatory complaints**
- informing government on **supports and services needed for victims of crime**
- consulting with government on the **systems abuse audit**
- informing **research into justice issues for regional communities**
- endorsing **rental standards campaigns**
- promoting justice for all Australians through a **National Human Rights Act**

Two examples illustrate the depth and impact of this work:

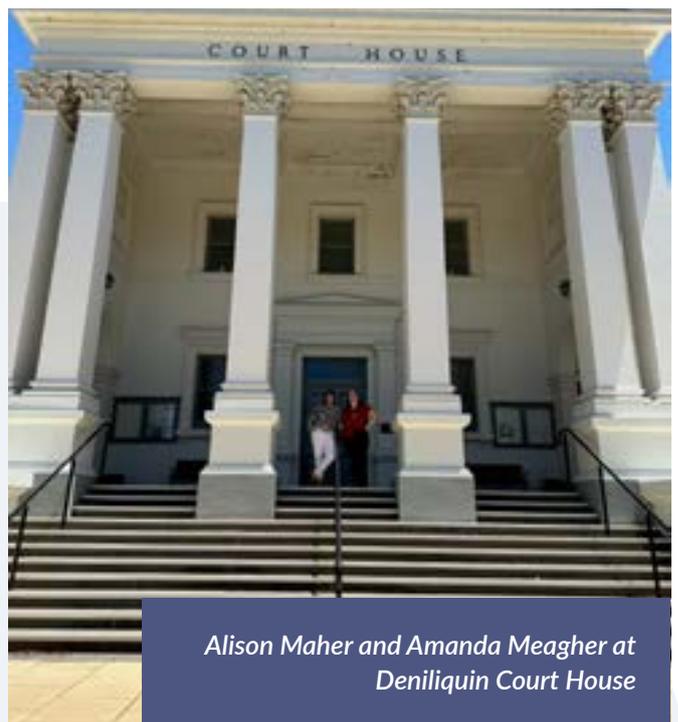
### Family Violence Orders Inquiry

**H**RCLS made a submission to the federal inquiry into family violence orders undertaken by the House of Representatives Standing Committee on Social Policy and Legal Affairs. Our submission contained 18 recommendations to reform access to family violence orders for victim-survivors in the family law system. This led to our Family Law, Family Violence Manager, Senior Lawyer and Lawyer appearing as witnesses at a public hearing to further inform the Committee. The [Final Report](#) tabled in Federal Parliament made 11 recommendations to Government, of which the [Government agrees](#) in principle to 7, in part to 3 and has noted one recommendation. We are pleased the Government agrees in principle to the harmonisation of definitions, laws, application processes, enforcement, and order messaging across Australian states and territories – a critical issue in our cross-border region.

### Solar Panel Law Reform Project

**A**FTER identifying a pattern of legal problems among clients affected by unsolicited solar panel sales, HRCLS initiating a law reform project. Through case work, we lodged complaints with regulatory authorities and industry licencing bodies. We then shared our concerns and client stories with other centres, revealing similar issues across regions. Consumer Action Law Centre built a national law reform campaign to which we contributed data, client stories and insights. Consumer Action Law Centre then lodged its first [designated complaint](#) to the ACCC, accompanied by a [national media campaign](#). The ACCC response was to commence a review into unsolicited selling and lead generation. HRCLS made a formal submission to the review informed by our client work, and we now await the [ACCC's report](#).

Our whole-of-organisation approach to advocacy seeks to address barriers to accessing justice and promote greater fairness in the legal system for communities we serve. It builds on the impact of our direct legal assistance to create change for whole communities.



*Alison Maher and Amanda Meagher at Deniliquin Court House*

# Legal support for children and young people, and their families

In the final year of our 2020–2025 strategic plan, HRCLS has continued to invest in legal services for children and young people, and their families – recognising that early legal intervention can disrupt cycles of disadvantage and create lasting change.

OUR strategic focus has been on increasing access to justice for young people through targeted, trauma-informed services delivered in partnership with education, health, and homelessness organisations through the Invisible Hurdles Program.

The Invisible Hurdles Program creates better legal outcomes for young people experiencing, or at risk of, family violence and has enabled us to not only respond to unmet legal need but to empower young people to navigate complex systems with confidence and support.

This year, HRCLS has provided legal assistance to **146 young people – 54 within the Invisible Hurdles Program**, and across our service the people we assisted had a total of **1926 dependent children**.

Through the Invisible Hurdles Program, **more than 20 community legal education sessions** have been held for young people. Secondary consults and professional development training have also been provided to professionals working with young people.

The Invisible Hurdles Program aims to:

- Reach and engage more young people
- Build connection and trust
- Increase the capacity of young people and professionals to identify legal problems
- Empower young people and their support networks to take next steps
- Ensure young people's voices are heard on issues that matter to them
- Support collaboration to better address the needs of young people in our community

Reflecting on these proxy indicators of success, the Invisible Hurdles Lawyer said:

*“Helping young people obtain their birth certificate is important, but this reach does more, it builds capacity and empowerment. I’ve had three separate matters recently where birth certificates were obtained for clients who have then identified legal problems and sort further assistance. Each of these matters was complex, from medical privacy and mandatory reporting issues, to family violence and victims’ compensation, to child support debt.”*

## Delivery of a dedicated program for young people through the Invisible Hurdles Project has also helped Kikki\* (not her real name):

Kikki is a student who loves learning. She lives in a regional town, is Aboriginal, a victim-survivor of family violence, and was orphaned at a young age after her mum passed away. Now in her late teens, she continues to have the support of her foster carer but has very little financial security.

Kikki reached out to HRCLS after hearing from friends there were local lawyers who could help young people.

Her lawyer helped her to make a claim on her mum's life insurance policy. To do this, her lawyer helped to:

- obtain her mum's death certificate with a fee waiver
- resolve an outstanding Centrelink problem
- access ABSTUDY support
- seek pro bono support for Letters of Administration

The legal processes were complicated by name changes, lost documents, insurance company changes, and the Centrelink problem which affected processes with Births, Deaths and Marriages.

Without this assistance Kikki may never have been able to navigate these systems or received the intended benefit.

**P**RIORITISING legal services for children and young people, and their families has informed advocacy and law reform submissions. This year HRCLS made a submission to the Victorian Law Reform Commission on aspects of family violence intervention orders for children and young adults sharing client stories from duty lawyers and the Invisible Hurdles Program.

We are committed to not only continuation, but expansion of the Invisible Hurdles Program. It is a model of early intervention - a blueprint for reaching young people affected by family violence and interrupting the cycle of disadvantage.



*Community legal education on intervention orders for community workers*

# Responding to family violence

Family violence was identified as a key priority in our 2020-2025 strategic plan, and over the past five years, HRCLS has significantly deepened its response. This work remains a priority for our service and our community as the rates of family violence across our region continues to rise, barriers to accessing help persist due to geographic and social isolation, and cross-border complexities affect service accessibility and safety.

**I**N 2024-2025, 74.6% of our clients were experiencing or at risk of family violence, and one in three services were provided to specifically address family violence.

HRCLS provides legal assistance to address family violence through:

- the integrated family violence partnership with Centre Against Violence
- the Emerging Lawyers Program led by Women's Legal Service Victoria
- the Victorian family law family violence lawyer
- HRCLS's duty lawyer service

and our:

- Integrated family violence partnership with Women's Centre for Health and Wellbeing
- ONE Program
- Invisible Hurdles Program
- Disaster Recovery Program

as highlighted under focus areas 1, 2 and 4 of this report.

HRCLS has worked with intention through these partnership programs, to provide a pathway for victim-survivors and people at risk of family violence, to holistic, effective, timely, legal assistance, improving and supporting the determinants of health: safety, safety of children, financial security and secure housing.



*Alison Maher, Member for Indi Helen Haines MP, Felicity Williams*

Over 100 victim-survivors and people at risk of family violence were assisted in 2024-2025 through the integrated family violence partnership with Centre Against Violence. Silvana\* (not her real name) was one of these people:



**Silvana is over 65 and lives with mental illness and disability.**

She lives in a small regional community and is a victim-survivor of family violence that was perpetrated by her husband over the course of a forty year marriage.

She was referred for assistance by her Centre Against Violence case worker for advice on a Family Violence Intervention Order that police had taken out for her.

Silvana didn't identify her husband's actions as acts of family violence, she had lived with his abuse for so long, that she thought that was just how it was.



**Over 2 years, HRCLS and CAV assisted Silvana to separate safely from her husband.**



**Silvana's disability meant she had raised a family and run the family home but was financially reliant on her husband.**

**Legal assistance included:**

- **advice on court process for FVIO**

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- **legally returning to her home (CAV supported this with safety supports)**

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- **advice on breaches of FVIO (CAV supported this with counselling)**

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- **property settlement; negotiation, mediation, final consent orders – this enabled Silvana to purchase a unit without a mortgage, where she felt safe and secure**

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- **divorce – the online process was inaccessible to Silvana**

Silvana said she was so happy and thankful for the hard work that had been done by her HRCLS lawyer and administration officer. She was deeply grateful for their time and kindness saying she now felt:

| **“warm, happy and secure.”**

Silvana's lawyer reflected:



*“Working as a lawyer in our CAV partnership is emotionally demanding but deeply rewarding. Knowing that CAV supports our clients' wellbeing and safety allows us to focus on navigating complex legal issues. I'm proud to have contributed to this partnership and am continually moved by the resilience of victim-survivors.”*

IN JULY 2024 an independent evaluation of the integrated family violence partnership with Centre Against Violence, '[Creating lasting change](#)' was released. Researched and written by Clare Keating of Effective Change Pty Ltd, the report found:

*"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."*<sup>2</sup>

THE Emerging Lawyers Program led by Women's Legal Service Victoria, has supported a young lawyer specialising in family violence and family law to join HRCLS. In 2024-2025 this lawyer worked with over 110 clients, providing family violence and family law advice, case work, and duty lawyer representation.

This program aimed to address a shortage of experienced lawyers able to assist with the growing demand for family law and family violence services across Victoria.

### It enabled legal assistance for Jane\* (not her real name):

Jane was married to Peter for over 20 years, they have 2 children. Their eldest son Sam struggles with poor mental health, and their young daughter Maddy lives with disability. Peter had been abusive towards both Jane and Sam.

Sam made a report to DFFH that Peter was abusive, reporting that on one occasion Peter punched him causing a split lip. Sam also reported Jane had been verbally abusive towards him, blaming him for the problems the family was having.

DFFH investigated Sam's disclosures. This led to Jane disclosing the significant history of family violence perpetrated by Peter. An FVIO was taken out excluding Peter from the family home.

Jane relinquished care of Sam resulting in an interim accommodation order being made for Sam to live with carers.

Jane was referred to HRCLS by a family support service that identified she was experiencing legal problems. This service also referred Jane to specialist family violence counselling.

Jane received legal assistance to:

- communicate with DFFH regarding Sam's arrangements, leading to a reunification order
- negotiate arrangements for Maddy to spend time with Peter, and developing a parenting plan
- reach a property settlement with Peter, including drafting consent orders
- access child support payments through advocacy with Services Australia
- lodge a divorce application

Jane has counselling support, and a safe and secure home to raise her children in. Sam has returned home to live with his mother.

<sup>2</sup> Clare Keating, Evaluation Report: [Creating Lasting Change](#), Effective Change Pty Ltd, February 2024, p38



Roshan Bhandary Women's Legal Service Victoria, Alison Maher, Shyleen Mkhwananzi, Sarah Rodgers, Ashlie Barclay Emerging Lawyers Program

**H**RCLS's Victorian family law family violence lawyer supported 86 people in 2024-2025 through the targeted provision of legal advice, case work and duty lawyer services.

HRCLS provides duty lawyer services on intervention order days at the Magistrates' Court of Victoria at Myrtleford, Wangaratta and Wodonga, assisting court users with legal representation.

In 2024-2025 HRCLS represented 338 people, with over 600 duty lawyer services.

The complexity of this work was described by a HRCLS duty lawyer:

*"Many of the people I assist in the Magistrates' Court with a family violence intervention order matter are also navigating the family law system. Whilst they are legally two separate and distinct areas of law and jurisdictions, they often deal with overlapping issues. I see people experiencing frustration and feeling disheartened at being told 'no, that's a family law matter- you can't raise that here' or 'that's a family violence matter, you need to apply for an IVO' only for that loop to continue around. These people only want to keep their family safe.*

*I consider it an extremely important part of my role to be able to sit down with someone and explain the different systems to them in a way that they can understand. It's rewarding to see the change in someone's demeanour - almost like a weight physically lifting - when the pieces start to fit together and, bit by bit, it starts to make sense."*

**D**ELIVERING a comprehensive response to family violence meant going beyond the provision of legal assistance to individuals. It included delivering legal education sessions to build capability in partner organisations, strengthening cross-sector collaboration to ensure holistic support, and pursuing advocacy and law reform to amplify the experiences of regional women in cross-border communities.

HRCLS remains committed to a trauma-informed, community-led approach that recognises the complexity of family violence, and the need for systemic change.

# Expanding legal help in key areas of need

In the final year of [Our Strategy 2020-2025](#), HRCLS continued to grow capacity to respond to the complex and intersecting legal needs across our catchment.

**WE** RECOGNISED that everyday legal problems – including issues with debts, fines, consumer contracts, government systems and housing - are often connected to family violence and financial disadvantage. These issues are frequently misunderstood and difficult to identify. In response, we strategically invested in growing our capacity and expertise in generalist civil legal services.

We are now better equipped to identify and address these issues using strong legal arguments and a person-centred, trauma-informed approach. We negotiate resolutions in individual cases and make detailed complaints that hold businesses, organisations and government bodies accountable. In some instances, it has driven advocacy for law reform.

Growing our generalist civil law services reflects our understanding that civil law problems are the most common legal issues experienced in our communities, and a major source of unmet legal need.

In 2024–2025, HRCLS delivered **1498 generalist civil law legal services**, representing **41% of all legal services provided**.

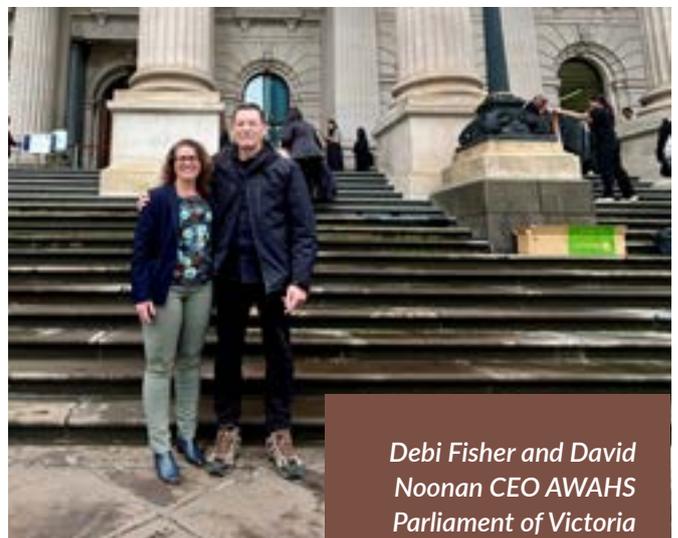
Generalist civil law services were delivered through:

- Holistic Assistance and Legal Outreach (HALO) Program
- Disaster Recovery Program
- Bagaraybang bagaraybang mayinygalang (BBM) Health Justice Partnership
- NSW Generalist Civil Law Outreach

**L**AUNCHED ten years ago the **Holistic Assistance and Legal Outreach (HALO) Program** brings together HRCLS lawyers and Gateway Health professionals to support people most in need: those experiencing multiple intersecting legal and non-legal problems that impact the social determinants of health and especially those experiencing poor mental health.

Clinics are held at Gateway Health in Wodonga, Myrtleford, Wangaratta, and at Wangaratta Therapeutic Community to meet people where they are at and address legal barriers to recovery and wellbeing.

In 2024-2025, HALO assisted 210 clients with 413 legal services – up from 74 clients and 130 legal services in 2015.



*Debi Fisher and David Noonan CEO AWAHS Parliament of Victoria*

## The integration of skills and services is shown to support clients like Shiv\* (not her real name):

Shiv is a 42-year-old mum of four children who experiences poor mental health. She is a victim-survivor of family violence. Her experience with government agencies in the past has influenced her distrust of services.

Shiv was referred to HRCLS by her Gateway Health case worker through the HALO program, meeting the HALO lawyer at Gateway Health in familiar surrounds. Shiv shared her concerns about a personal loan and some outstanding fines, however shortly after, disengaged from both services.

Almost 12 months later she reengaged with Gateway Health and through the HALO program was referred once again to HRCLS. Her matters had escalated, and she had been notified that due to outstanding fines her licence would be suspended.

The HALO lawyer advised on the legal processes to address these issues and began collecting the information required for an application to Fines Victoria under the Family Violence Scheme. Before this was complete, Shiv again disconnected from services.

Her HALO lawyer was successful in placing her fines on hold and continued to reach out to her. After a number of weeks of intermittent communication and without all supporting documentation her lawyer submitted a family violence application with Fines Victoria, outlining the issues and particular vulnerabilities Shiv experienced and the difficulties faced in obtaining supporting evidence.

Fines Victoria responded and confirmed the application had been successful - over \$2000 of fines were withdrawn.

The HALO Program enabled holistic, client-centred support for Shiv, who was able to continue her journey without the threat of losing her licence or the added financial burden of outstanding fines.

*“This is such an amazing weight off my shoulders. I appreciate the work and effort you have put into this. Thank you so much.*

*... Thank you again for this. It truly is so great to have this happen for me to move forward.”*

**T**HE Disaster Recovery Program, established in response to the Black Summer Bushfires and later expanded following the 2022–23 flood event, concluded this year with the end of dedicated disaster funding. Throughout its operation, the program delivered place-based legal assistance to individuals navigating the complex challenges that follow natural disasters.

**In 2024–2025 the Disaster Recovery Program assisted 214 clients with 400 legal services.**

The top three legal issues were:

- family violence intervention orders
- credit and debt issues
- consumer complaints

Community legal education sessions were held at Corryong Foodshare, Mount Beauty Neighbourhood House, and Tallangatta Neighbourhood House. HRCLS lawyers and community engagement workers also attended local events including the Mount Beauty

Picnic, and spoke on Alpine Community Radio to raise awareness and connect with affected communities. In conjunction with Consumer Action Law Centre, community “cuppa & chat” sessions were held in Mount Beauty and Corryong to hear local experiences of insurance to inform policy and advocacy work of both organisations.

In November 2024 an [independent evaluation](#) of an earlier iteration of the program, the Bushfire Recovery Outreach Legal Information (BROLI) Project, was released. Researched and written by Clare Keating of Effective Change Pty Ltd, the report found people affected by disasters experience more legal problems, with greater complexity, that compound without timely assistance. The report emphasised the importance of wrap-around, trauma informed, place-based services in supporting recovery, and the need to build community trust to reach those most in need:

*“Local networks and partnerships facilitate delivery of more coordinated and holistic services to people affected by disasters.”*

The Program also shaped HRCLS's advocacy and law reform efforts, informing funding representations to government, amplifying regional voices, and contributing to national conversations about climate justice. HRCLS contributed to the [Climate Justice Field Guide for Community Legal Centres](#) published by the Federation of Community Legal Centres in April 2025. This guide is a resource for future disaster response that seeks to embed climate justice across legal practice. Our Managing Lawyer, Deborah Fisher, spoke at the launch of the Field Guide. HRCLS also participated in the Disasters and the Law National Symposium and the Climate Conscious Lawyering training day, helping to facilitate sector-wide conversations on climate justice.

**T**HE growth of HRCLS's service capacity in a key area of legal need is exemplified by **Bagaraybang bagaraybang mayinygalang** (BBM), a health justice partnership supporting the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community of North East Victoria and the Southern Riverina of New South Wales, particularly those experiencing poor mental health.

**One of these people is Molly\* (not her real name):**

Molly attended a Birth Certificate Day held by HRCLS at AWAHS. During discussions with the community engagement worker about what HRCLS does at AWAHS through their dedicated partnership it was identified that Molly was experiencing some legal problems. She attended an appointment and disclosed two instances of violence. Her lawyer advised she would be eligible for victims of crime payments, one in NSW the other in Victoria, and supported her through the two processes.

Being present in community has been critical to reaching people like Molly, and to the success of the partnership.

Through a dedicated partnership lawyer and community engagement worker, BBM provided integrated, culturally safe legal services in-place at Albury Wodonga Aboriginal Health Service (AWAHS) building trust and reaching community members who face barriers to justice. In 2024-2025, 106 people received legal assistance through this program.

**T**HE second annual research and impact evaluation report by Dr Liz Curren, "[Strength and Uniqueness -The ripple effect of the BBM Health Justice Partnership sharing of knowledge and increasing empowerment](#)" and released in September 2024, found:

*"To a legal outsider such work of a legal support team might seem peripheral, but as this community development approach... it is critical, in order for cultural safety. This is needed for problem disclosure and sufficient information to best support Aboriginal clients with legal issues who might not identify issues of having a legal dimension and thus limiting their options for resolution."*<sup>3</sup>

HRCLS' BBM lawyer reflected similarly that:

*"Community engagement and development is an important aspect of breaking down barriers for accessing legal supports. A yarn in a non-threatening environment can open up the opportunity for someone to get their legal issues addressed."*

In 2024-2025 the BBM team released a [Report to the Aboriginal Community of Albury Wodonga](#), a celebration of the impact of the BBM health justice partnership, and a report back to the community of the findings and recommendations of the evaluation. This was presented to community at the AWAHS Men's Shed, Women's group, Waluwin Festival, and an AWAHS all staff meeting and was an important step in recognising and respecting the community-led approach of the BBM program.

**Reaching community members through trusted intermediaries via secondary consultations has been another achievement of BBM this year:**

Contending with a vexatious Apprehended Domestic Violence Order, Kaz\* (not her real name), a victim-survivor of family violence, Aboriginal, living with disability and poor mental health, found she was unable to access legal aid court support due to being slightly over the financial merit test. Kaz spoke to her AWAHS case worker who then sought a secondary consultation with the HRCLS lawyer who was able to provide more specific information on processes and types of evidence required. Advocacy saw Kaz linked with legal aid court advice support enabling her to successfully self-represent.

Kaz's ability to self-represent and achieve a positive outcome is a powerful indicator of the partnership's success, demonstrating how culturally safe, holistic legal support can empower people, removing barriers to justice.

<sup>3</sup> Dr Liz Curren, Associate Professor Clinical Legal Education & School Research Lead, Nottingham Law School, Nottingham Trent University, "Second Annual Research and Impact Evaluation Report", [Strength and Uniqueness-The-ripple-effect-of-the-BBM-hip-sharing-of-knowledge-and-increasing-empowerment-August-2024.pdf](#), p.66, accessed 10/10/2025

# Financial Statement

Administrator	Source	Purpose	Breakdown	Total
<i>Victoria Legal Aid</i>	Attorney-General's Department (Commonwealth)	Generalist	\$ 481,102	<b>\$ 1,642,976</b>
		Family Law and/or Family Violence	\$ 188,607	
		Mental Health Support	\$ 234,521	
		Family Law Services Direct Funding	\$ 171,897	
	Victorian State Government	Generalist	\$ 247,200	
		Family Violence	\$ 73,487	
		CLCFVA	\$ 162,901	
		SACS ERO - State	\$ 83,261	
<i>Legal Aid NSW</i>	Attorney-General's Department (Commonwealth)	Baseline	\$ 238,605	<b>\$ 1,125,738</b>
		NLAP Mental Health	\$ 319,777	
		NLAP Woman	\$ 319,000	
	NSW State Government	Cooperative Legal Service Delivery	\$ 37,210	
	NSW State Government & Public Purpose Fund (PPF)	NSW Outreach (Pool 1)	\$ 211,146	
<i>Department of Justice &amp; Community Safety</i>		ISF/HJP - Invisible Hurdles	\$ 219,517	<b>\$ 348,517</b>
		EIIF	\$ 129,000	
<i>Women's Legal Service Victoria</i>		Emerging Lawyers Program	\$ 108,402	<b>\$ 108,402</b>
<b>TOTAL FUNDING</b>				<b>\$ 3,225,633</b>

# Voices

*"Thanks to HRCLS for the all the support you've given my team and I. You've 100% saved lives, and I hope you find time to celebrate that internally. We had clients completely at the end of their tether, but with your support of them and of us, you helped change those clients' stories for the better."*

*"I am so grateful to you and your wonderful team for helping me out...Thank you for your beautiful, kind, and supportive nature, you make people feel calm and less stressed with these types of issues, your smile gives people hope! I can't thank you enough for your efforts and making me feel supported."*

*"Thank you so much for the extra time and sending that off, and help. I do hope this will bring much needed closure and peace to our home. I am very grateful for everything you have done for me and the children. Have a lovely Thursday."*

*"You all helped me and guided me through a very difficult situation I wished I was never in. But thank you for your help support and helping me to achieve a home for my children. I didn't think I would make it."*

*"HRCLS needs to be applauded and appreciated for all the wonderful work they do because people like me - no-one listens - HRCLS gives people like me a voice, a voice that people not only hear, but listen to... The work you do matters and it makes a significant difference in people's lives. Thank you for all of the assistance."*

*"I rang earlier today to thank you for your ongoing support over the past ten months. I would have been completely overwhelmed if you hadn't have stood by me during this stressful time. I really don't know what to say to show you my appreciation for your time and efforts."*

*"I could not be more grateful and appreciative. You have truly been wonderful and you have already made such a difference in the intensity of overwhelming stress and upset that I have been struggling with for such a very long time."*

*"I wanted to let you know that the sound advice you gave and the understanding way you dealt with the client resulted in an observed changed attitude where he was ready to make changes that he had previously not envisaged a possibility."*

# Gallery



Karlee Hirt, Jodie Wells, Kristi Pemmelaar, Meaghan Frazer  
Wodonga Vigil



Adam Awty and Jess Date  
from Law Institute of Victoria  
in Wodonga



Debi Fisher, Felicity Hartridge,  
Member for Ovens Valley  
Tim McCurdy MP Parliament of  
Victoria



Isaac Eyalama, Debi Fisher,  
David Whitehouse with  
Consumer Action Law Centre's  
Taylor Alanis, Sarah Newman,  
Louisa di Censo



Anthony Nguyen, Karlee  
Hirt, Debi Fisher and Gabby  
Maginness Paying It Forward



Alison Maher and  
Amanda Meagher



Felicity Hartridge, Debi Fisher,  
Michael O'Brien Shadow Attorney-  
General and friends from Knowmore  
at Parliament of Victoria



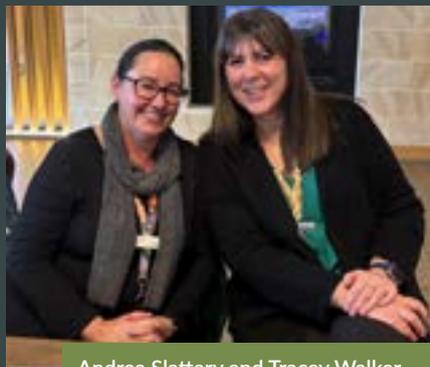
Debi Fisher and Trent Dean  
CEO Gateway Health



Sheree Limbrick CEO Health  
Justice Australia, Sarah  
Rodgers and Joshua Collings  
at 2024 Report to Community



Alison Maher and Colette Quin at Yes  
Unlimited's 40th Birthday



Andrea Slattery and Tracey Walker  
discussing the achievements of the  
Operations Team



Karlee Hirt and Taylor Smith-  
Stephens at the Grit and Resilience  
Festival celebrating headspace day



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