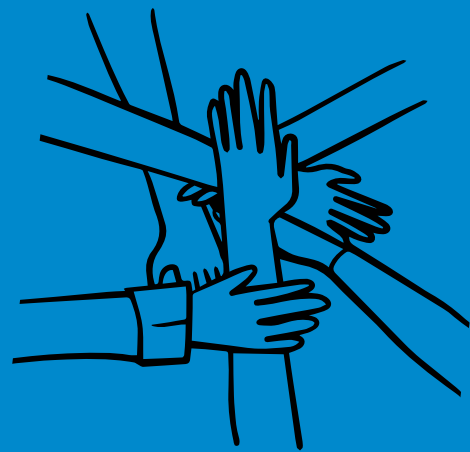
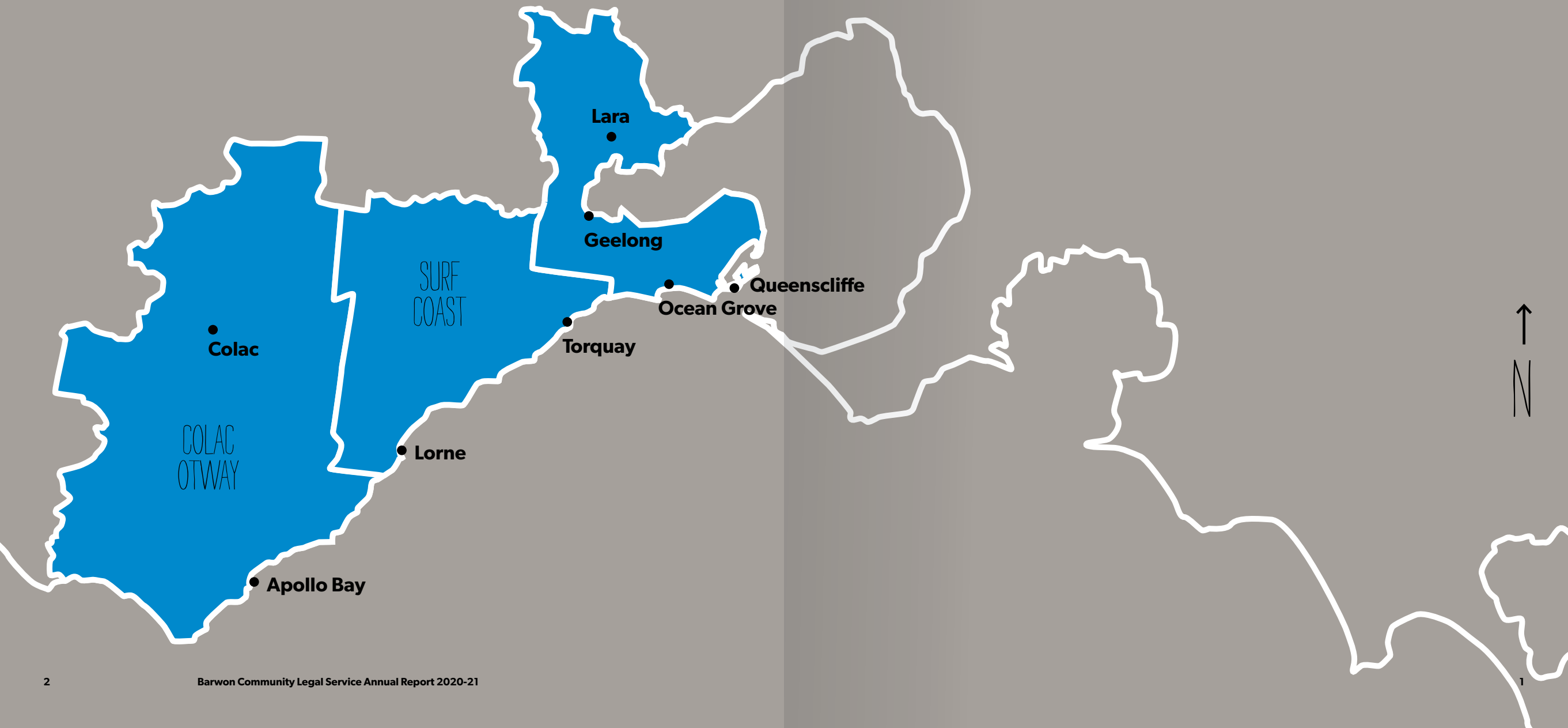


LEGAL HELP CHANGING LIVES



ANNUAL REPORT 2021

OUR REGION



ACKNOWLEDGEMENT OF COUNTRY



// **Bundjil the eagle is the spirit creator of Wadawurrung Country. Bundjil can be seen flying high over Wadawurrung land, as we send thanks to him for continuing to watch over us since his creation. Waa the crow, protector of our waterways, shares a strong connection with Bundjil, as he is our protector. The four outer circles in the artwork symbolise water, wind, fire, and land – with the centre circle depicting the most important element, the sun. Every element flows into the centre circle, as nothing can exist without our greatest source of life.** //

Artwork: Bundjil Karringalabil Murrup (Bundjil Creator Spirit). Artist: Jenna Oldaker.

Barwon Community Legal Service acknowledges the Traditional Owners of the lands on which we work and we pay our respects to elders past, present and emerging. We recognise Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples' deep and ongoing connection and stewardship of Country, and that the land on which we work was stolen and sovereignty has never been ceded.

We aim to challenge the systemic injustices that cause harm, and to listen to and learn from our Aboriginal communities, with full acknowledgement that we have a lot to learn and we will not always get it right.

We acknowledge the sorrow caused by the Stolen Generation and the ongoing impacts that colonisation and the justice system have on our Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples.

We also recognise the resilience, strength, and leadership of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities and the ongoing contribution they bring to our whole community.

VISION AND MISSION

OUR VISION

A just society in which all people have equal access to, and status under, the law; and a legal system which is humane, fair and equitable.

OUR MISSION

To challenge systemic disadvantage and enable our priority communities to access the support they need to understand their legal rights and overcome their legal problems.

Staff at BCLS.



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OUR LEADERSHIP

Legal help changes lives



Tom Lynch
Chair



Alexandria Jones
Acting CEO



Bryanna Connell
CEO

Board and Acting CEO Report

The ripple effects of the COVID pandemic will be felt for years to come. Despite weathering such a challenging year, our team has shown their incredible resilience, adaptability and commitment to getting the best legal and life outcomes for our clients.

And while our service has adapted to working virtually, built our resilience and evolved, there have been some in our community who have felt the impacts of the global pandemic more than others.

// **We are not all in the same boat. We are all in the same storm.**

Some are on super-yachts. Some have just one oar.

— **Damian Barr, April 2020**

Our legal help has thrown a much-needed lifeline to many of our clients adrift in the COVID storm.

As a service, we have seen firsthand the impacts of the pandemic on our community's most vulnerable. Our clients have come to us with just one oar. They have faced unexpected unemployment,

insecure housing, unsafe homes, family violence, unsustainable personal debt, family law issues and other financial distress.

Our legal support and guidance during this difficult time has assisted our clients in weathering the storm.

In this report, you will read about our other exciting new initiatives and projects such as:

- The Health Justice Scoping Project in partnership with Barwon Health which has paved the way for our Health Enhancing Legal Pathways program – the first fully integrated health justice partnership in our region which has been generously supported by the Anthony Costa Foundation; and
- Our new family law practice that we have been building in partnership with Victoria Legal Aid, Women's Legal Service, WEstjustice and Brimbank Melton Community Legal Centre to reach separating families falling through the gaps.

This report will also provide an overview of our Applicant Family Violence Intervention Order duty lawyer service which has experienced unprecedented demand as our committed lawyers navigated lockdowns and changing Court directions to advise and assist our clients.

Our social work program has also worked closely with our legal team to support our family violence clients emotionally and advocate for their non-legal needs to allow them to move on with their lives. Our partnerships with the Sexual Assault and Family Violence Centre (SAFVC), Orange Door, Western Heights College and Deakin University have been strengthened despite virtual service delivery. Working in collaboration with our local community partners has been key in allowing us to reach clients who needed our legal assistance the most.

This year has also been a year of changing leadership. We said farewell to our Chair, Mark Edmonds after more than six years' service, and long-term board member and treasurer McFarlane Pattinson. We welcomed Tom Lynch into the role as new Chair. We also welcomed new board members Natasha Powles and Myra White. CEO Bryanna Connell has been on parental leave from February 2021. A big thank you to co-Acting CEOs Mandi Hyland, Geordie Stapleton and Alexandria Jones for steering a steady ship through a very challenging period.

Our staff have been the shining light during this pandemic. A big thank you to our team, and our Board members for your dedication.

A year of evolution

Principal Lawyer report

This year has been a difficult year for everyone.

// **Our clients and our staff have had to navigate many challenges due to the pandemic and its far-reaching impacts.**

Evolving our service to provide legal assistance via phone and online platforms has been challenging, but despite these challenges, we have maintained high numbers of clients with over 1500 assisted by our service.

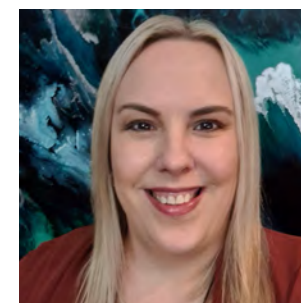
Despite operating a largely virtual legal assistance service during the pandemic, we recognised that our Family Violence Duty Lawyer service was able to achieve much more positive results for our clients if we attended Court in person. We therefore sought permission from the Court to appear in person, with clients attending via phone. This year we assisted 646 clients with representation at Geelong and Colac Magistrates' Courts for Family Violence Intervention Order matters, with this need for family violence assistance significantly increasing in recent months.

While we have seen COVID increase the number of family violence matters we are assisting with, it has also increased legal need in the areas of tenancy and social security. We have also seen our vulnerable clients having multiple issues to deal with that are far more complex. We adapted our services to meet the demands of a changing legal landscape, including building our capacity to provide family law assistance with our Family Law Assistance Project now operating and our family lawyers able to take on family law matters. Social work support has also continued to be a valuable part of our offerings to our family violence clients.

Unfortunately, COVID has reduced our volunteer law student capacity both at Court and within the office. We have missed our volunteers personally, but also felt the burden that this has placed on our staff through a reduction in administration support. Prior to the pandemic, our student volunteers have been invaluable in assisting with client intake and casework. Similarly, we have felt the absence of our Practical Legal Training students (PLTs). The usual contributions we are able to provide to PLTs' legal learning experience is a valuable asset to potential lawyers, and we hope to be able to provide this opportunity to future PLTs next year.



Mandi Hyland
Principal Lawyer



Geordie Stapleton
Acting Principal Lawyer

Our volunteer lawyers, who offer their time for our family and generalist Night Service appointments and during our Criminal Law Clinic, have been able to continue to provide their legal assistance via phone, and we are grateful that they were able to adapt to an online system and continue their support.

Our staff continue to make me proud to be at BCLS with their work ethic during tough times and dedication to trying to assist clients despite administrative hurdles. They have stayed positive and connected with each other and have shown resilience in how they have changed and adapted to new ways of doing things that will no doubt improve our services going forward.

I would also like to thank Geordie Stapleton who stepped into my role as Acting Principal Lawyer for part of the year while I was in the Acting CEO role. Geordie's leadership provided much needed support to the organisation during such a challenging year.

Evolution involves small variations in characteristics leading to an increased ability to compete, survive and improve. Nothing could describe our year better; we continue to compete, have definitely survived and despite the adversity of the year, have improved in ways that will benefit our clients and our organization well into the future.

OUR IMPACT

How we help and where we work

Our services



1486

Legal
advices



1035

Referrals and
information
provided

707

Duty
Lawyer
Services



44

Volunteer
Lawyer Night
service clinics



115

Completed
casework
files



82

CLE sessions
delivered

622

CLE
participants



836

Legal
tasks

7

Community
partnerships



78

Social
Work
referrals
received

72

Clients
receiving
social work
support



3

Community
Development
Projects



Tracking our impact on our clients' lives, our community and the justice system

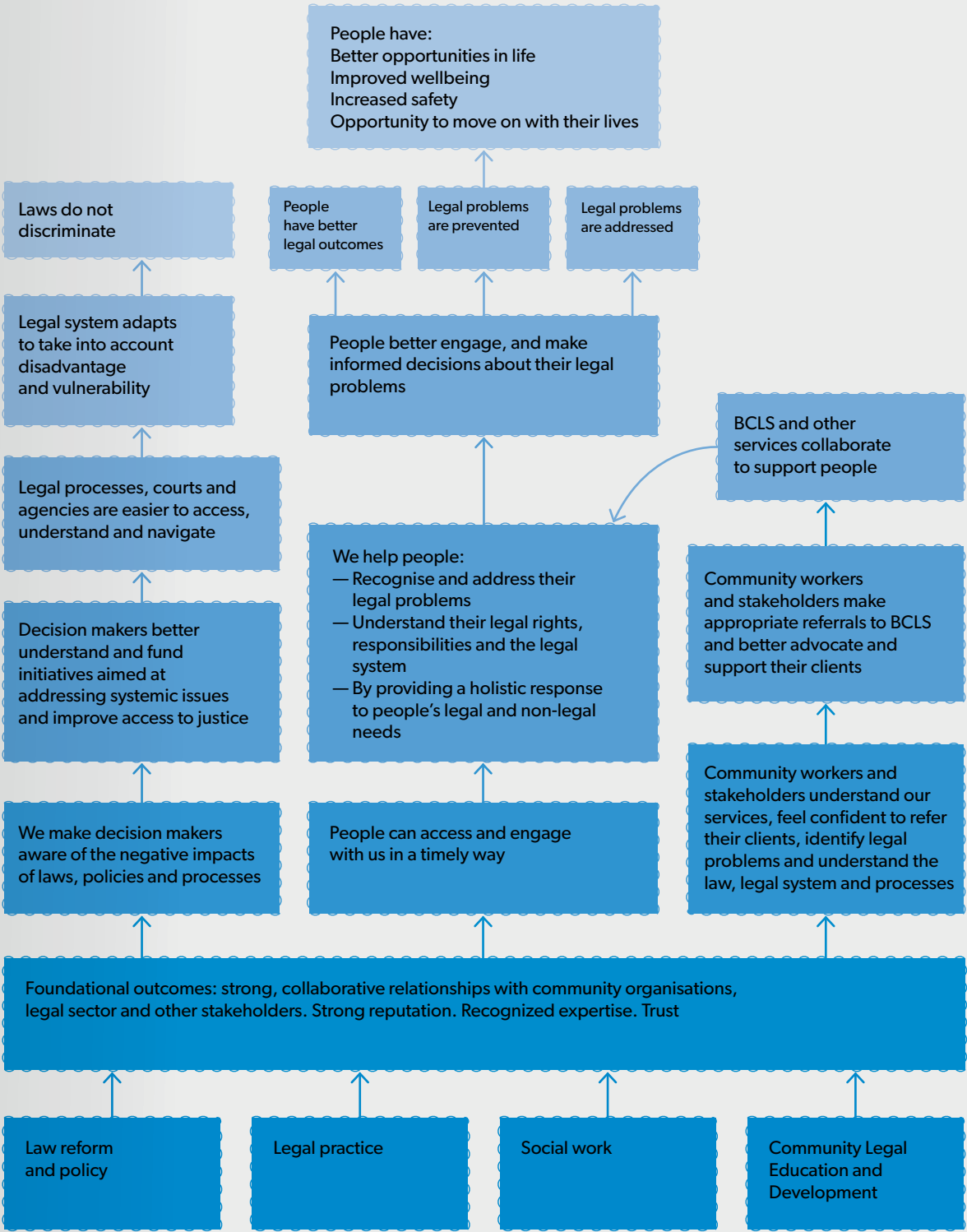


This year we worked with monitoring and evaluation consultants Lirata to develop our first organizational Theory of Change and Monitoring and Evaluation Framework. This project will help us better track our impact on our clients' lives, our community and the justice system.

We engage in a wide range of activities that directly and indirectly assist priority community groups and build strong foundations for contributing to systemic

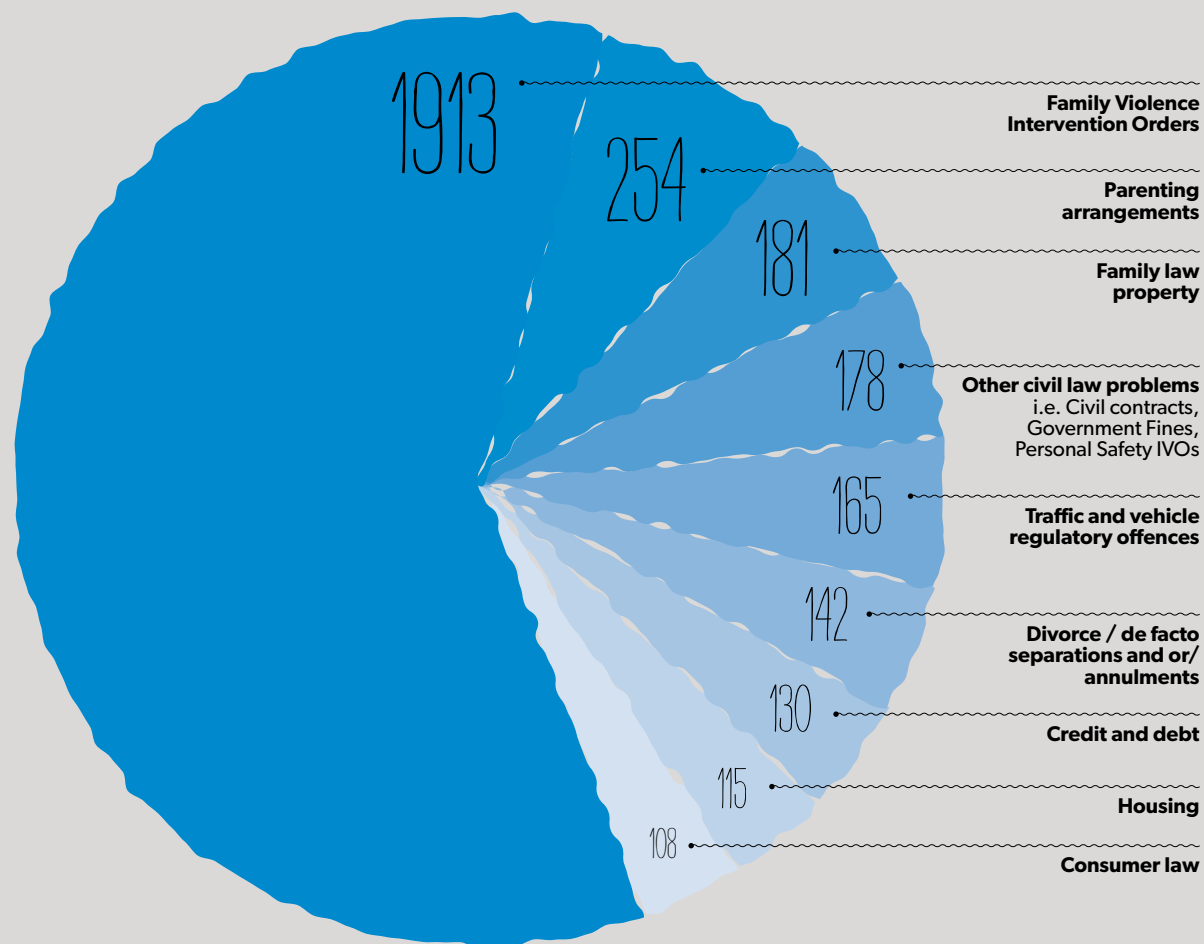
change and better life outcomes for people in the Barwon region. Our Theory of Change provided an opportunity for us to document how our legal service is contributing to the development of better laws, policies, systems and institutions. It also illustrates how the assistance and support we provide to clients allows them to have better opportunities in life, improved wellbeing, improved safety and to move on with their lives.

Summary of first organisational Theory of Change

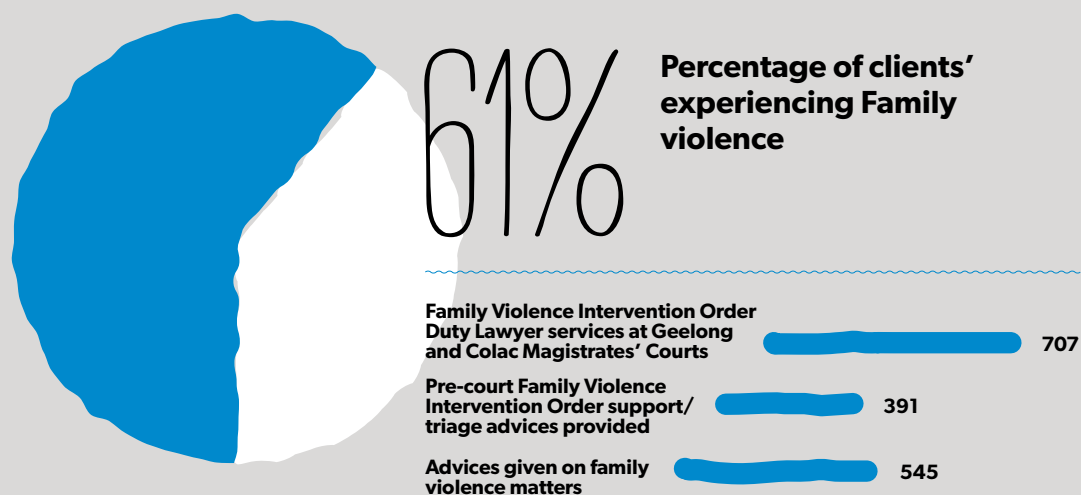


Our most common legal issues

(By services excluding referrals and information)

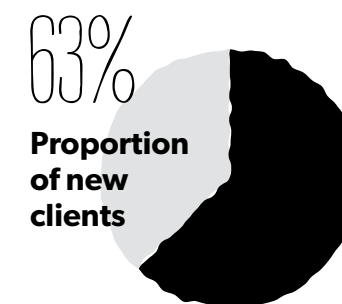


Our family violence legal assistance

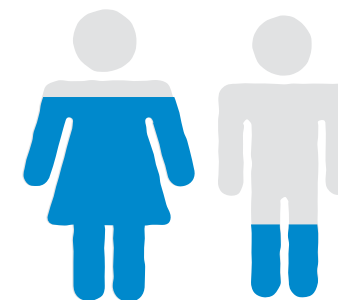


Our clients

1501
Clients
assisted



70%
Identify
as Female
28%
Identify
as male



13%
Under
25



34%
35-49
years



9%
65 years
and over



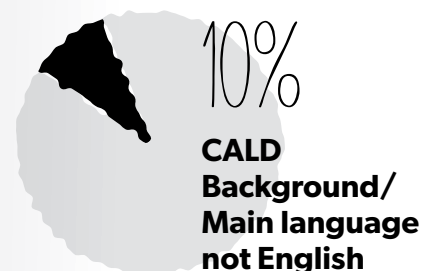
81%
Experiencing
financial
disadvantage



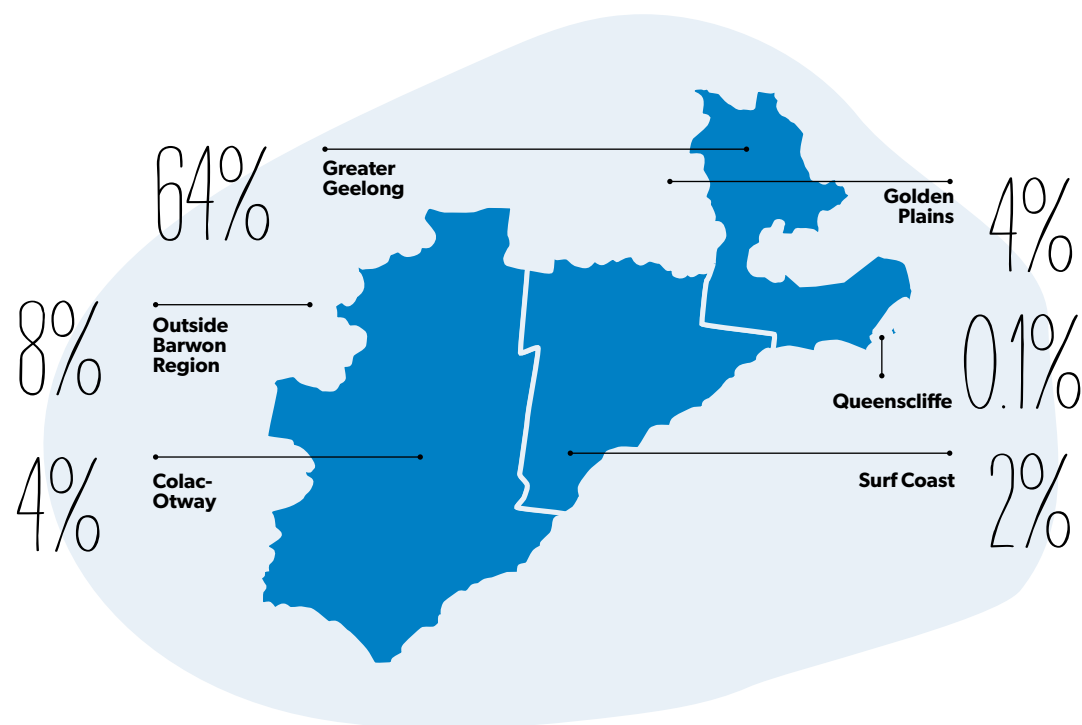
61%
Experiencing
family violence



63%
In receipt of
government
assistance



Clients by location



Working in partnerships to reach clients earlier

We collaborate with community organisations to co-locate a lawyer within services to reach clients earlier.



How we work in partnership

- We develop enhanced service models and take integrated and collaborative approaches that provide legal services and education to people in places that they are already connected.
- We provide holistic assistance to empower people to make their own decisions, address their legal and interconnected/underlying issues and more confidently move on with their lives.
- We build the capacity of community workers and stakeholders to identify legal problems, make appropriate referrals and better understand and support people with their legal problems.
- We partner with others to contribute to law reform to address systemic issues and improve access to justice.

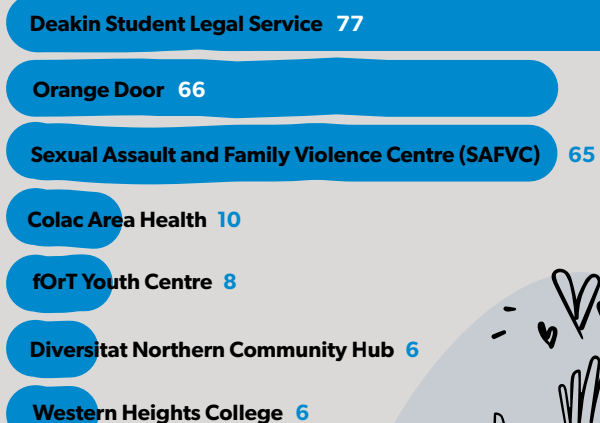
- We engage volunteers (including lawyers, students, community development workers, social workers and researchers), who gain opportunities and experience, and contribute to our capacity to deliver services and engage in law reform.

While COVID has impacted our in-person service delivery model, we have still maintained our community partnerships during the pandemic.

All outreach and co-located programs have been provided virtually via phone and online during COVID lockdowns from March 2020, except for Geelong Magistrates' Court where some duty lawyers have been attending in person. Western Heights College, Diversitat and fOrT Youth Centre have been able to operate in person to some extent within COVID restrictions during the 20/21 financial year. Orange Door, SAFVC, Deakin Student Legal Service and all Colac services have predominantly been provided virtually or via phone.

239

Outreach services delivered as part of our community partnerships



OUR WORK

Reaching family violence clients earlier and helping them move on with their lives



Georgie Stapleton
Supervising Lawyer at
BCLS and Karen Todd
Manager of Social Work
and Strengthening
Health-Hospital Response
to Family Violence at
Barwon Health.



Scoping and planning our region's first integrated Health Justice Partnership with Barwon Health

This year we seconded a member of Barwon Health's Strengthening Health Services Response to Family Violence team to help plan our region's first integrated Health Justice Partnership. This project was vital in our successful securing of philanthropic funds, thanks to the generous support of the Anthony Costa Foundation. Our scoping project laid the groundwork and engagement with key project stakeholders, and has led to the commencement of our Health Enhancing Legal Pathways Program.

The 12 month pilot program aims to engage with family violence clients earlier by providing on-site legal support within the University Hospital Geelong to connect patients to legal help. Initially, the program will be offered to women coming through Barwon Health's Maternity and Paediatric Services, with the intention to scale up to other services as well as other public health services in the Barwon region in the future.

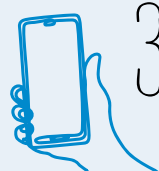
OUR FAMILY VIOLENCE LEGAL ASSISTANCE STATISTICS

61% Percentage of clients experiencing family violence

707 Family Violence Intervention Order Duty lawyer services at Geelong and Colac Magistrates' Courts



391 Pre-court Family Violence Intervention Order support/triage advices provided



545 Advices given on family violence matters

Our Family Violence Duty Lawyer service is a lifeline for many people who cannot afford private lawyers

We have continued to see unprecedented demand in our duty lawyer service. This includes our pre-court Family Violence Triage service, advice and representation at Court, as well as follow up and support post hearing.

COVID-19 continues to present many challenges, including an adjustment to the way our service operates to be COVID safe. Fleeing family violence has always been an exception to any of the restrictions throughout the pandemic, however, the Courts have discouraged clients from attending in person where possible. At the commencement of the pandemic, this led to lengthy delays and frequent adjournments.

We recognised that when we appear at Court in person, our clients have been getting a better service and outcome. Accordingly, when permitted by public health guidelines, we have been prioritising appearing at Court in person throughout this year. The structure of our pre-Court engagement, triage and Court service has enabled us to continue to provide our clients with an excellent, client-focused, COVID safe family violence service.

Voices of our clients assisted by our Family Violence Duty Lawyer Service

// You have been brilliant throughout this horrendous ordeal. I think your service is a life saver for many people who would never be able afford the legal service you give at Barwon Community Legal Service. There would be a lot of people, myself included, suffering in silence if they couldn't access your service, they would stay in situations enduring the agony and continue to live sad lives. We are so blessed as a community to have such highly skilled professionals looking after us. Again, I will never be able to thank you enough for being there for me.

// Many thanks for following up on this matter, much appreciated. I would like to express my sincere thanks to you for your advice and professionalism on this matter. I was very impressed by your efforts.

// Just a quick note to thank you from the bottom of my heart for your incredible professional care on my IVO case. We had an amazing outcome yesterday, the IVO is now for a further 12 months. I greatly appreciate the wonderful support of your lawyers.

// Thank you so much for your help today and for organising this for me. As discussed it is very important information for our safety planning so I am so grateful.



Our Orange Door outreach connects clients experiencing family violence to legal advice earlier



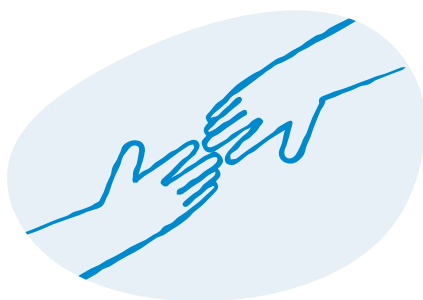
While COVID-19 restrictions prevented our co-located lawyer from attending the Orange Door in person this financial year, our partnership continued with the Orange Door staff providing referrals for victims of family violence to receive critical legal advice and intervention.

By receiving early legal advice and intervention, where appropriate, we empower clients by assisting them to identify the legal issues they are experiencing, giving them confidence to make better and more informed decisions and helping them to understand how to enforce their legal rights.

Anecdotally, the majority of the referrals relate to clients experiencing family violence and a recent separation, or who are intending to separate, and are seeking information and advice about family law property and parenting matters. Many of these clients have never previously spoken to lawyers, have not attended Court and as a consequence can be overwhelmed by the decisions they need to make during an incredibly stressful time in their lives.

The family law system can be complex and early advice is important to dispel common family law myths, challenge clients own preconceived ideas of the legal system, assist clients to understand critical legal timeframes and to support clients in understanding what the law expects of them when separating.

Our legal assistance to victim survivors in partnership with Sexual Assault and Family Violence Centre allows complex and interrelated legal and non-legal issues to be addressed



Our integrated partnership embeds a lawyer within the SAFVC team and continues to provide timely advice and in-depth casework to our joint clients. Our service also provides secondary consultations and legal information to SAFVC staff which helps build their capacity to spot legal issues and better support their clients experiencing legal problems. These sessions were provided remotely using online platforms during COVID-19.

While the pandemic has reportedly increased the rates of family violence, we saw our client numbers at the SAFVC reduce as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic. Many victims were forced to spend more time in their homes with perpetrators which may have limited their opportunities to report violence or contact assistance services. One of the more positive elements of the pandemic was that we saw debt becoming less of an issue for our SAFVC clients as a result of the more generous social security payments in response to the pandemic. This allowed many clients to effectively budget and retire some of their long outstanding debts. However, there is a risk that early access of superannuation may create difficulties in the future in family law property settlement matters.

PAULA'S STORY



Paula's partner was imprisoned for criminal breaches of an Intervention Order which had been implemented to protect her and her children. The emotional toll of her experience caused Paula to become anxious about what would happen in the future if her ex-partner found out where they had moved to.

Paula faced a multifaceted set of issues and we collaborated with several other community organisations and agencies to help her manage significant fines, obtaining birth certificates for her three children and advice on the Centrelink Robodebts class action settlement she was entitled to.

We have helped Paula gain control of her life which was causing her stress and anxiety. With the fog lifting in these areas she has felt empowered

to focus on other aspects of her life which need her attention and we are currently assisting her with further Personal Safety Intervention Orders and a VOCAT application.

It has been inspiring to see Paula's growth in the time we have been working together. It is testament to holistic service provision that she has been so well supported to address so many issues.

Our social work program assists clients experiencing family violence with emotional and practical support

Our social work program provides our clients experiencing family violence with emotional support and practical assistance including advocacy, information and further referrals where and when required.

Like many services, our social work program has been delivered remotely throughout the COVID-19 pandemic via a telehealth model. Interestingly, this has resulted in an increased level of client engagement and attendance at appointments, as there were fewer barriers to attending. However, clients presented with more complex non-legal issues because of increased effect on mental health and finances during the trying lockdown periods.

// I cannot thank BCLS Social work enough; I doubt I would have a new home or Police take me seriously without this support. Social worker was very kind and made me feel very safe and supported, not on my own anymore, I appreciate more than words can express.

— BCLS social work program client

DATA SNAPSHOT

3

Clients
obtained
housing



78

Referrals
received

72

Clients pro-
vided with
social work
support



// The level of knowledge that social worker has about law and support and funding out there in community was so helpful, to be able to speak to her whilst working through legal matters made it all so much easier, I felt like I was not alone and could share the load with someone, so important as I'm tired of fighting all the time.

— BCLS social work program client



WAN'S STORY

Wan, a 39-year-old woman from Thailand, sought our legal advice regarding debts owing to Centrelink and the Department of Home Affairs.

It became evident that Wan required emotional and practical support due to the family violence she was experiencing. Wan was subsequently referred to our social work program. With the assistance of a Thai interpreter, Wan was able to report breaches of the Family Violence Intervention Order to Victoria Police – something she had struggled to do previously. We helped Wan find a rental property and fill out funding applications to obtain rent, bond and material aid. We then connected her to allied health services and outreach supports closer to her new home.

Wan had experienced psychological, financial and physical abuse and her new living arrangements and counselling created a space where Wan could acknowledge the trauma and begin to heal. Through our social work program Wan was provided with resources and strategies to help manage her anxiety and depression and was further supported to undertake FV risk assessment and safety planning. Wan has reported she feels well supported and safe in her new home and she is due to commence longer term trauma counselling with a psychologist.

Building our family law practice to help separating families falling through the gaps



DATA SNAPSHOT

5

Clients provided with family law representation through our Family Law Access Project



548 Family law legal services provided to...

479

family law clients



Many people miss out on family law legal assistance – especially people who are financially disadvantaged and cannot afford a private lawyer, and those who also face additional barriers to accessing justice.

While we have continued our family law advice service for clients during the pandemic, we have also embarked on an exciting new project that will build our capacity to provide free casework, advocacy and Court representation to clients who need it most. Our Family Law Access Program is an exciting joint project with Women's Legal Service, WEstjustice, Brimbank Melton Community Legal Centre and Victoria Legal Aid which began in early 2021, and is designed to prevent separating couples from falling through the gaps and aims to achieve safer outcomes for families.

The program provides free comprehensive, ongoing legal assistance and services to eligible people who have family law parenting and/or property disputes, providing holistic family law legal help to help clients move on with their lives after family breakdown.

Our co-design of the evaluation framework, competency guidelines, and learning and development program, have been vital in skilling up our organisation to represent clients in often complex family law matters. Our lawyers have received fantastic mentoring from Women's Legal Service to help meet the needs of our clients who would otherwise not receive legal help for their family law problem.

Responding to urgent tenancy legal need in our region

DATA SNAPSHOT

112

Legal services provided related to tenancy



106

Tenancy law clients assisted

Expanding our civil law practice to respond to urgent requests for tenancy help in our region

During the COVID-19 pandemic we experienced a high demand from community members seeking assistance for issues surrounding their housing arrangements. Although we are not funded to provide specific legal assistance for tenancy, we responded to these requests by offering a limited tenancy law service for our most vulnerable clients.

We helped clients seek rent reductions, exit rental agreements due to pressures imposed on them by the pandemic and deal with housing insecurity.

Throughout COVID-19 there were over 130 amendments to the Residential Tenancy Act 1997 and other transitional regulations imposed. To assist community members and community workers grasp these changes we conducted workshops and webinars online. We also created physical and digital resources and guides to inform people of their rights regarding the COVID-19 changes and impacts on their tenancy.



Addressing housing stress for Deakin international students during COVID-19 pandemic

Our Deakin Student Legal Service provides free legal advice, casework and education to Deakin Students at all campuses and online. The project is a partnership with the Deakin University Student Association and Eastern Community Legal Service (who service the Burwood Campus).

The tenancy matters students faced during COVID-19 were complex and mainly based around unexpected financial hardship due to loss or heavy reduction in income, resulting in the inability to pay rent. There were also many co-tenant disputes with tenants not getting along with other tenants due to the pressure of lockdowns, stay at home orders and a deterioration of mental health. We provided advice and advocacy to assist with rent reductions with referrals made to the DUSA financial counsellor and Deakin's various financial support services for students.

International students continue to be the highest client demographic. They generally seek advice immediately because of a fear of any matter that may affect their student visa status. Tenancy, fines and consumer law continue to be the most common legal issues we assist students with. Migration Law appointments are always very popular and delivered by the Migration Agent employed by Eastern CLC.

Geelong Advertiser article highlighting the increase in demand for tenancy assistance during the pandemic.

Student renters seeking legal help

OLIVIA SHYING

GEELONG residents struggling to pay rents amid the coronavirus pandemic have sought help from Barwon Community Legal Service.

The service's lawyers helped 267 tenants in Geelong and provided advice to 87 clients and services, such as a letter writing, to 187 people.

Of these, 148 clients were Deakin University students with many struggling to pay their rent or facing termination of their contract.

Acting chief executive officer Gordie Stapleton said the service did not receive specific funding for tenancy matters, but continued to offer advice to those in dire need.

"Due to the obvious problems faced by community members in our region during Covid, we have offered tenancy advice to clients who were at risk of homelessness, and continue to assist clients who have tenancy issues related to family violence," Ms Stapleton said.

"We assist Deakin students with tenancy issues, and definitely saw an increase in tenancy issues since the start of the pandemic, mostly related to an inability to pay rent."

Ms Stapleton said safeguards protecting tenancy – like the moratorium on evictions – had ended, which would likely contribute to more people needing help. "We don't see this situation improving in the short term," she said.

A Deakin University spokesman said the student emergency assistance fund was available to students facing financial difficulty.

"It's designed to support students with lifeline emergency grants in their time of need – whether that's helping to keep a roof over their head or keeping their internet connection to access study materials," he said.

SAMANTHA'S STORY

Samantha was an international student who rented a property close to Uni.

One of Samantha's housemates, before moving back to her home country, gave Samantha a number of her belongings that she was unable to take home with her. Samantha had kept these items packed up in her room while she headed away on a month long holiday. During this time away, Samantha continued to pay the rent and stayed in touch with the landlord. She planned to move out when she returned home and talked to the landlord about this, giving notice of her intention to move.

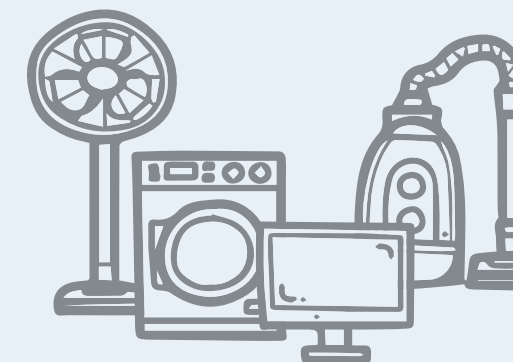
The day Samantha got back from her trip away she received a text message from her landlord saying she was coming to inspect the property that afternoon. Samantha felt like she didn't have a choice in the matter so agreed to meet the landlord. The landlord let herself in and inspected the property with her husband. Seeing the belongings of the former tenant packed up in Samantha's room the landlord became angry and accused Samantha of storing the items for someone, and breaching the house rules. Samantha explained the belongings were a gift and she was not storing them. The landlord's husband became aggressive and threatened to throw the belongings on the street. They told Samantha

she would have to pay a penalty for storing the belongings calculated at \$1 for each item, for each day totalling \$600.00. Samantha was intimidated and transferred the money.

The following day Samantha found a local storage facility that could store her belongings at a much cheaper rate, and asked the landlord for a refund of her money. The landlord refused to return any of the \$600.00 or the bond. Feeling bereft, Samantha contacted Deakin Student Legal Service for assistance.

DSLS wrote to the landlord requesting a refund of the money paid for storage and that the bond be returned. The landlord refused, citing the house rules and instead referred the matter to VCAT. DSLS was able to assist Samantha in preparing an application to VCAT and helped her understand the process she needed to follow. Due to COVID, the hearing was conducted by phone 6 weeks after the application was lodged.

VCAT found the landlord was not allowed to charge a penalty and ordered the \$600.00 be returned to Samantha and also that the bond be returned in full.



Self-help guides assist reluctant international students facing urgent tenancy issues

In mid-2020, we received an urgent request from a Deakin University worker who had identified about 50 international students who were suffering severe hardship and many issues with their landlords. The students were looking to break leases in order to move to cheaper accommodation or to head back to their home countries. While our legal service details had been given to the students, they were reluctant to engage with support services, including our service, out of fear of repercussions.

We collaborated with our partners to produce self-help guides which outlined the new tenancy laws, informed students of their rights and provided step-by-step instructions on how they could seek rent reductions or end their lease. These guides and facts sheets were also presented to students as part of interactive tenancy webinars.



Reaching priority communities with legal need during the pandemic



This year we utilised the short-term COVID response funding from both state and federal governments to reach priority client groups who were disproportionately impacted by the pandemic and as a result experienced an increase in legal need.

Our Diversitat partnership connecting our CALD communities to legal assistance and our partnership with fOrT Youth Centre were vital in allowing us to reach clients who needed us most during the health crisis.

Partnering with Diversitat to reach CALD clients with increased legal need during the pandemic

This year we partnered with Diversitat, Geelong's Multicultural Council, to reach our local culturally and linguistically diverse (CALD) communities in the Barwon Region, who were especially vulnerable to legal problems during the health crisis. Our lawyer works alongside the financial counselling team and provides face-to-face legal assistance on site at the Diversitat Northern Hub when restrictions allow.

We received strong engagement from CALD communities, with most clients seeking our support multiple times. We also were able to support Diversitat staff with secondary consultations to help them identify their clients' legal issues, and make appropriate referrals. With lockdowns, we saw the importance of delivering our

DATA SNAPSHOT

139 CALD clients assisted through our Diversitat partnership and general legal practice

services to CALD communities face-to-face, as we experienced a drop in appointments when we were unable to attend in person and had to provide our legal assistance via phone. We saw a marked increase in clients engaging with our service when restrictions eased and we were able to provide our services on site.

FARAH'S STORY

After our client was referred from Diversitat, we successfully managed to have 50% of the quarantine fee waived.

Azadeh travelled from Iran to Australia on a Woman at Risk Visa. With support from Refugee Legal, she was able to bring her daughter Farah to Australia on a Cared Visa Subclass 116. However, Azadeh was not aware that her daughter would have to go into quarantine after her arrival or that there would be a cost associated with it. Farah and Azadeh lived

together in a single bedroom unit in Norlane, with no income, no English and only a basic education. There was no way she could afford the \$3,000 quarantine charge. After our client was referred from Diversitat, we successfully managed to have 50% of the quarantine fees waived with the remainder to be paid off on an affordable payment plan.



Reaching young people with legal need during the pandemic in partnership with fOrT Youth Centre

DATA SNAPSHOT OF OUR WORK AT THE FORT YOUTH CENTRE

27

Legal services provided to young people



8

Legal services provided to CoGG staff

4

Legal education sessions



3

Hour Law for Youth Workers training for CoGG staff on common legal issues for young people and how to be a legal issue spotter



We established our fOrT Youth Law Program in response to the disproportionate impact the COVID-19 pandemic was having on the lives and future opportunities of young people.

In partnership with City of Greater Geelong, we provide under 25 year olds engaged at the fOrT Youth Centre with free legal advice, information and referrals on a range of civil law problems including: housing, employment, consumer law and debt issues, unpaid fines, family relationships and safety, as well as advice on the impact of criminal charges and criminal records.

Often the young people seeking advice would visit numerous times until they had developed trust in our lawyer and understood that our services were free and confidential. We saw the COVID-19 restrictions have an impact on our client numbers, with young people responding much more to face-to-face services, rather than virtual or phone appointments. Our program also provided much needed assistance to fOrT and CoGG staff, including three hour online training to assist with increasing referrals into our program.



PHIL'S STORY

Phil approached us at the fOrT for assistance regarding a loan. He had previously obtained legal advice from us about a bullying incident and therefore knew that he could use our service and it would be free and confidential.

Phil lost work during the pandemic and was in need of some extra funds to pay rent and bills. He had heard of an online loan service that provided immediate payday loans to people in need of money. He made an application online for the sum of \$1200. Phil was not informed of the terms of the loan or fees and charges. Immediately after applying for the loan, Phil realized that he could not afford the loan and wanted to have it cancelled before any money was advanced.

Phil approached us at the fOrT the very same day he made the loan application and sought advice on how to have the loan cancelled. We wrote to the Loan Service advising them that Phil was not properly informed of the terms

of the loan and that he could not afford to repay the loan. On those grounds, he should never have been approved under the relevant responsible lending legislation. The loan service cancelled the loan and confirmed that Phil would not be liable for any money and his credit rating would not be affected.

Because our legal service offers an outreach program at the fOrT, a place Phil comes to regularly, we were able to help him on the day the problem arose and have the payday loan immediately cancelled. Our lawyer was also able to educate Phil on the consequences of entering into these type of loans, and the high fees they generally charge.

ANNIE'S STORY

Because our service was at the fOrT, a place she comes to regularly, we could assist Annie with many legal issues during a time of crisis. This was a huge relief for Annie who could finally grieve the loss of her uncle without the constant stress of multiple legal issues.

Our client Annie is 17 years old and was residing with her uncle Cameron. She approached our fOrT Lawyer seeking help for a range of legal issues relating to tenancy, Personal Safety Intervention Orders and privacy.

Annie was living in a demountable unit in the back of her uncle Cameron's home, which was managed by the Department of Families, Fairness and Housing (DFFH). Suddenly, Cameron passed away and Annie's living arrangements became uncertain. We conducted research and made numerous enquiries to DFFH before presenting the options to Annie: she could apply with her brother to take over the tenancy of her uncle's house or she could apply to DFFH for a new house. Annie decided that she would make a fresh start in a new home. We were able to inform her of her best available options so she could make the right decision.

Annie was also having issues with her next-door neighbour, Greg. She had applied for a Personal Safety Intervention Order (PSIO) against Greg, and he had applied for one against her. We were able to give Annie advice on how to follow the conditions of the PSIVO and what to do if Greg breaches the Order. We then assisted Annie in court and again when she decided to withdraw the Application. Annie and Greg had resolved their issues and there was no longer a need for the Orders against each other.

After the death of her uncle Cameron, Annie had discovered that a news program had published an online video of her uncle. Annie was distressed by the content and out of respect for her deceased uncle, wanted the content removed. She approached us again at the fOrT and requested our assistance. After sending a letter of demand, we were able to get the news program to remove all online content on all platforms and ensure that the footage would not be used again in future.

Because our service was at the fOrT, a place she comes to regularly, we could assist Annie with many legal issues during a time of crisis. This was a huge relief for Annie who could finally grieve the loss of her uncle without the constant stress of multiple legal issues.



CIELA'S STORY

Ciela spoke to us at the fOrT about a criminal offence and its consequences on her ability to practice as a Conveyancer. Ciela is 25 years old and migrated from the Philippines in 2004.

Ciela was working as a Conveyancing Clerk for a number of years and was looking forward to applying for her full Conveyancer's license.

A few years ago, a friend lent her a credit card to pay for some groceries. Later on, her friend claimed that Ciela had bought things that they hadn't agreed about and reported it to the Police. Ciela was subsequently charged with obtaining financial gain by deception. Ciela pleaded guilty and was sentenced in the Magistrates Court. Ciela did not know that she was required to report this to the Business Licensing Authority ('BLA').

Ciela later completed a course to obtain her Conveyancer's license but was rejected on the grounds of possessing a criminal conviction. According to the BLA, Ciela was required to report the conviction and request permission to continue her employment within 30 days, however, she was not aware of this until we advised her. We also

advised her that according to law she was no longer permitted to practice as a Conveyancing Clerk as her lack of reporting meant she was disqualified from the profession.

After approaching us at the fOrT seeking assistance, we were able to provide her with advice on how to request that BLA re-consider their decision. Under the guidance of our lawyer, Ciela was able to complete a response to BLA's rejection and submit a statutory declaration and character reference for their consideration and provide detailed answers to the BLA's concerns.

As a result of the dedication of Ciela and our lawyer, the BLA decided that Ciela would be granted her Conveyancer's License, subject to financial limitations. This was a great relief for Ciela, who could keep her employment and practice as a Conveyancer into the future.

Our School Lawyer providing life changing assistance for students at Western Heights College



DATA SNAPSHOT

24

CLE sessions
delivered
to students



Our School Lawyer Program (SLP) embeds a community lawyer on campus two days a week at Western Heights College (WHC), providing free and confidential legal advice and casework to students, as well as legal education information sessions. Our school lawyer is part of the wellbeing team and aims to overcome the barriers students face in accessing legal services and helps to build a better understanding of legal rights and responsibilities, and the legal system.

Key achievements this year include our adaptation to virtual learning, delivering CLE online and building strong connections with wellbeing staff to ensure students' wellbeing concerns, including legal needs, were addressed.

Top left and bottom left: Our Western Heights School Lawyer Emma Cvitak.



Some of the benefits of the School Lawyer Program identified by Western Heights staff include:

// Valuable information for our students and families. In class presentations on many issues. Our families knowing they have this support. So valuable.
— Leadership team member

// I know it's your job and all but your work and help was life changing for my daughter and now she can concentrate on just being a kid again and finally enjoying her life. So thank you so much again.
— Parent of WHC Student assisted by our school lawyer at Western Heights College

// Having the great resource and support on hand for our students' legal and educational requirements.
— Teacher

// The school lawyer has made presentations to classes of students and made videos during our remote learning period for students on issues relating to COVID-19. She interacts with staff and students in various activities throughout the school and is available for face-to-face sessions with students. She has also been able to engage with parents as needed. Wellbeing staff and school administration frequently consult with her.
— Wellbeing team member

// The ability for kids to speak to a lawyer – one that would not even be an option for many of our students otherwise.
— Wellbeing team member





Providing much needed legal assistance to regional and rural communities in the Colac Otway region

DATA SNAPSHOT

125

Legal services provided to the Colac Otway region



The Barwon Region is large and includes harder to reach regional and rural communities in the Colac-Otway region. For many people living in this region who cannot afford a private lawyer, accessing our service is the only way they are able to address civil law problems affecting their lives.

We provide one-on-one legal advice in Colac in partnership with Colac Area Health on a weekly basis including representation in Family Violence Intervention Order matters at the Colac Magistrates' Court. We also provide a limited outreach to Apollo Bay approximately three times a year.

COVID has impacted our face-to-face legal services in the Colac Otway region, with most legal assistance provided remotely via phone during the pandemic. We have seen the importance of providing a face-to-face service in Colac, with client numbers lower than usual, compared to some of our other virtual legal services. In-person legal services in Colac are vital to build trust with the local community, build rapport and increase engagement by clients in the legal process and in resolving their issues. We hope to be able to provide our legal assistance in person in the Colac Otway region in the coming months as restrictions allow.

Providing legal assistance to help clients reduce financial stress

The pandemic has created greater financial hardship in our community and we have seen consumer law, credit and debt issues experienced by our clients become much more complex. Many of our consumer law matters also involve clients who are experiencing family violence.

DATA SNAPSHOT



110

Number of clients assisted with fines



\$60,728

Amount of fines cancelled, revoked or withdrawn for clients



\$212,194

Money saved for clients



Helping family violence clients deal with their consumer law problems

Our legal assistance has been vital in relieving financial stress from outstanding fines, unfair loans, or mounting debts. We have also provided much needed guidance to clients navigating a changing social security system. We have assisted clients with determining the validity of their Centrelink debt, understanding their eligibility for payments, deciding whether to embark upon a decision review and educating clients impacted by 'Robodebt' decisions.

EBONY'S STORY

Ebony and Brad have been married for many years and they have four children together. There was considerable family violence involved in the relationship which ultimately led to its end.



During the marriage, Ebony and Brad had opened a bank account together and Brad had added an overdraft facility to it. Brad's wage went into that account and he would use it for the majority of his spending. Ebony was aware of the account but she did not obtain any benefit from it. She also never received any bank statements for the account. When Ebony applied for a divorce from Brad, he had moved back to his home country of Africa. She was granted dispensation of service and the divorce was finalised.

Family Law Orders were also made requiring Brad to indemnify Ebony for the debt he incurred during the relationship. However, after moving back to Africa, he had failed to repay the debt or respond to any contact. By that stage, the debt was at \$4000. Brad had also failed to make the mortgage repayments and as a result, Ebony's house was repossessed and sold. Ebony continued to send the Family Law Orders demonstrating the debt indemnity orders, however,

debt recovery companies continued getting into contact with her. Ebony had attempted to use an afterpay service but was rejected due to her poor credit rating.

After Ebony contacted BCLS, we contacted the bank on her behalf to inform them that not only did the Family Law Orders indicate that Ebony was not to be held responsible for the debt her husband had incurred, but the time frame for which they were allowed to seek resolution of the debt had lapsed. The lawyer also stressed to the bank that Ebony had faced considerable family violence at the hands of her husband and was wanting the debt cleared to achieve financial independence.

The bank agreed to remove the outstanding debt and clear it from her credit rating. Ebony was now on her way to emotional and financial recovery and could take care of her children.

SALLY'S STORY

Sally was experiencing family violence at the hands of her partner, Chris. She contacted our service and we provided her with family violence advice including assisting her to obtain an Intervention Order.



Shortly after, she disclosed to our lawyer that she had taken out a car loan for Chris as he was unable to obtain a loan himself. Sally advised that the car was intended to be registered in her name, but Chris ignored her and registered it in his name. Her partner was also using Sally's credit card to finance the car insurance.

The loan amount was considerable. The arrangement was that Chris would send Sally the repayment amount each fortnight. However, once the Intervention Order was made against him, Chris stopped making the repayments and Sally was soon in \$8000 debt.

Sally was in possession of a hand-written letter that was signed by Chris acknowledging that he would repay the loan. However, Chris adamantly denied that he signed the document. To make things worse, the car was involved in an accident and was a write-off. Sally had to rely on her family to lend her money to pay for the repairs. Our lawyer first attempted to contact

our client's partner to arrange for repayment of the loan in full. However, after numerous unanswered emails he eventually indicated he was not prepared to repay the loan.

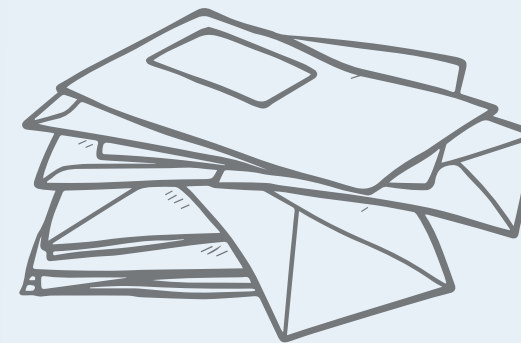
Our lawyer contacted the bank to advise them that Sally was experiencing family violence and would not be able to repay the loan. The lawyer had requested that the bank consider a lump sum payment of \$2000 to waive the debt. After numerous communications with the bank, they agreed to accept the payment amount and her credit rating was not affected.

As a result of our assistance, Sally was able to increase her safety and free herself from her partner's debt.



Helping clients with fines move on with their life

CATHERINE'S STORY



Catherine was referred to our Deakin Student Legal Service by the Deakin University Student Association (DUSA) financial counsellor after disclosing that she had approximately \$15,000 of unpaid fines, all at warrant stage, some dating back to 2005.

The fines were for parking and low level driving offences which Catherine had not originally received due to not updating her address with Vic Roads.

Although Catherine had placed the fines on a payment plan with Fines Victoria, due to COVID-19, she had lost her job and was unable to maintain the repayments. After we advised Catherine of her options, we identified that the best legal option for her was to register for a Work Development

Program via DUSA to pay off her fines due to her acute financial hardship.

Catherine is now completing a number of activities, including attending counselling and completing courses via DUSA to work off her fines. Catherine was grateful for our assistance, and without legal help she may have continued to ignore her fines as she didn't understand her options and feared the unknown.

OUR ADVOCACY

How we work to change unfair laws and create a fairer system

Sharing our client voices as part of the Save Safe Lending Campaign

We joined diverse voices from across the community sector, as well as economic experts and financial counsellors, on the Save Safe Lending Campaign, which aimed to ensure key decision makers in Federal Parliament were accurately informed of the important protection that responsible lending laws provide to our community, especially during a time of economic hardship for many Australians.

Quotes from Libby Coker MP, Member for Corangamite, in the House of Representatives 15 March 2021:

// I'd like to take this opportunity to pay tribute to the hugely committed team at Barwon Community Legal Service. The work they've done for Ahmed and Sally and thousands of others across my electorate is beyond commendable. They witness and fight the harm brought about by inappropriate lending practices and other social ills on a daily basis. In the last financial year, Barwon Community Legal Service saved clients over \$350,000 in waived, renegotiated or revoked debts arising from breaches of the very legislation this government is rushing to water down. This service runs a tanker ship on the smell of an oily rag and makes our country a better, fairer and more compassionate place. So, my heartfelt thanks go to the Barwon Community Legal Service. The Barwon Community Legal Service bears witness to the harm caused by irresponsible lending.



Libby Coker MP Member for Corangamite speaking in the House of Representatives March 2021.

Advocating for fairer systems for marginalised groups impacted by fines

Fines disproportionately impact the most marginalised in our community. While we help many of our clients navigate the infringement system on an individual level, we also work to advocate for a fairer system to influence systemic change in this area of law.



We are an active member of the Infringement Working Group, working alongside other Victorian community centres and organisations to advocate for fairer conditions for marginalised groups who are affected by fines.



This year we advocated for reform of the infringement system, including providing submissions to the Fines Reform Advisory Board through the Department of Justice to allow for broader and less onerous prerequisites when reviewing a fine.



We initiated discussions with Fines Victoria to address the issue of young people receiving COVID-19 fines that were not being registered with the Children's Court.



We provided a submission to the Chief Health Officer of Victoria outlining the need for a health response to the pandemic rather than a police response with fines issued to the most marginalised in our community.



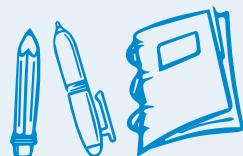
OUR COMMUNITY

Engaging with CALD young people online to develop SAFESTreets legal education resources providing much needed legal information to young people during the pandemic

DATA SNAPSHOT

46

SAFESTreets workshop attendances across...



7 co-design workshops with CALD young people

Our community legal education and development practice has evolved and adapted with the pandemic. Our SAFESTreets community legal education project was a partnership with our service, young people from the fOrT Youth Centre, Pillowfort Animation Studio and the City of Greater Geelong.

Funded by the Department of Justice and Community Safety's Community Safety Fund, we worked alongside the young

people delivering virtual workshops to co-design a legal education campaign focused on increasing young people's understanding of their rights and responsibilities with Police and Protective Service Officers. This was an especially important project at a time when young people have received a large proportion of fines for breaching health directions. Engaging with CALD young people was a key success of this project, allowing us to reach those particularly at risk of experiencing legal issues and barriers to accessing legal help.

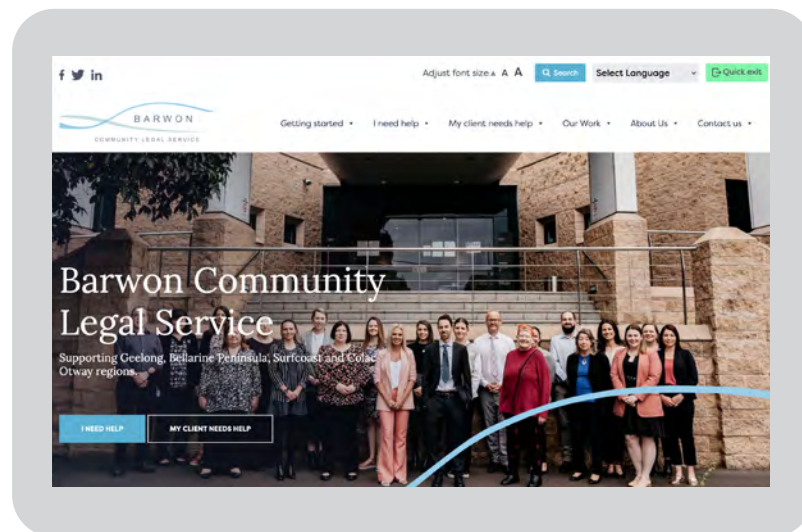
Our project was guided by our project reference group and we would like to thank our local stakeholders from City of Greater Geelong, Victoria Legal Aid, BATForce Youth and Adolescent Taskforce, Barwon Child Youth and Family, and Victoria Police for their contribution to this important project.



Screenshots of animations from our SAFESTreets community legal education project.



Our digital transformation during the pandemic



While we have been operating virtually, our website and Facebook page have become our front door and a vital way of connecting with our community. Our new client centered website, funded by Ecstra Foundation and launched in December 2020, has been an important source of legal information for both community members and front line workers. Key features, including a virtual legal health check, online bookings for appointments and plain English legal information on key civil law

practice areas, have increased the number of online referrals we have received for legal assistance. Our regular blog posts are also shared across our local stakeholders' social media on a regular basis.

Our new website will also soon be used to provide an online training program for community workers, which is currently in development and aims to assist front line workers to better identify their clients' legal issues and increase referrals to our service.

Developing virtual connections with our community to combat ageism and prevent elder abuse

We continued our work convening the Barwon Elder Abuse Primary Prevention (BEAPP) Network, a project aimed at preventing elder abuse before it happens, funded by Department of Families, Fairness and Housing (DFFS).

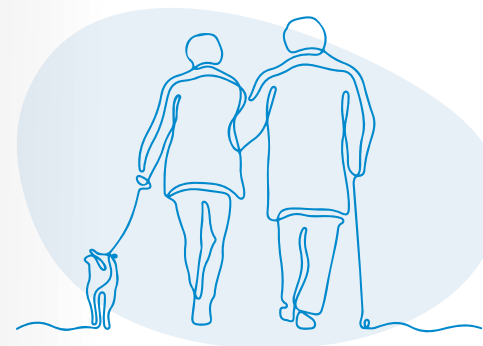


A highlight was our Barwon Warm Safe Home community art project, aimed at celebrating the rights and respect and prevention of abuse against older people. Close to 1,000 people connected with this community art project through a network of neighbourhood houses, local schools, early childhood centres, aged care facilities, libraries and the organisations that make up the BEAPP Network.

Community members were invited to decorate paper houses exploring the theme of safety and how we can increase the dignity and respect of older people in our lives. The project aimed to educate and raise awareness about elder abuse and family violence, something that unfortunately increased through the COVID-19 lockdown period.



// **2020 has been a difficult year for so many in the community and we have seen an increase in older people impacted by family violence. This project provided an opportunity to raise awareness about the issue of family violence against older people, by flipping the script and encouraging people to explore what a warm safe home means to them.**



// **We really wanted a project to bring the community together during lockdown using arts and crafts to start a pretty hard conversation about elder abuse and family violence against older people," Ms Jones said. "We have been blown away by the community participation and the intergenerational conversations that this project has started. We were also very excited that we are able to publicly display the warm safe home creations at the Geelong Library and Heritage Centre during the Christmas period, a particularly high risk time for family violence."**

— **Alexandria Jones, Community Development Manager and convenor of the Barwon Elder Abuse Primary Prevention Network**

Feedback from Barwon Warm Safe Home project participants and stakeholders

I already had a very good understanding of Elder Abuse but wanted to participate in the project to help create awareness and educate others on the topic. A lot of people aren't even aware that their behaviour is abusive. It's a sad situation.

— Barwon Warm Safe Home Project participant

Thank you for such an amazing project, lots of our clients and staff member really enjoy decorating the houses! There are still more to come.

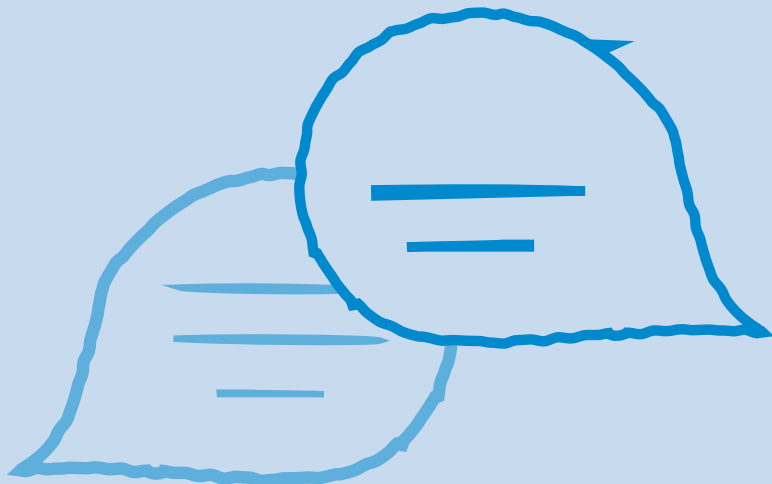
— Diversitat Aged Support client coordinator

This was a soul searching project that brought back happy memories, thank you.

— Barwon Warm Safe Home Project participant

We are loving how creative our communities are and how much support they are showing for this campaign.

— Bellarine Community Health social support program coordinator



Barwon Warm Safe Home Virtual Forum for 16 Days of Activism



Top: Community Development Manager Alexandria Jones with Karen Crockford from Bellarine Community Health and students from Point Lonsdale Primary School. Bottom: Barwon Warm Safe Home media coverage in the Geelong Advertiser.

It was great to have information about prevention and risk factors

The Case study was really interesting, seeing how all the varying services address this issue differently.

Our forum engaged community members across the Barwon region. Guest speakers included the Commissioner for Senior Victorians Gerard Mansour, Gary Ferguson from Seniors Rights Victoria and a panel of local experts to discuss local supports in community.

The forum explored the key ingredients needed for a warm safe home and also featured results from the Commissioner's Ageing Well Report. This forum was run in partnership with BEAPP Network member organisation Bellarine Community Health who assisted with the promotion and planning of the event.

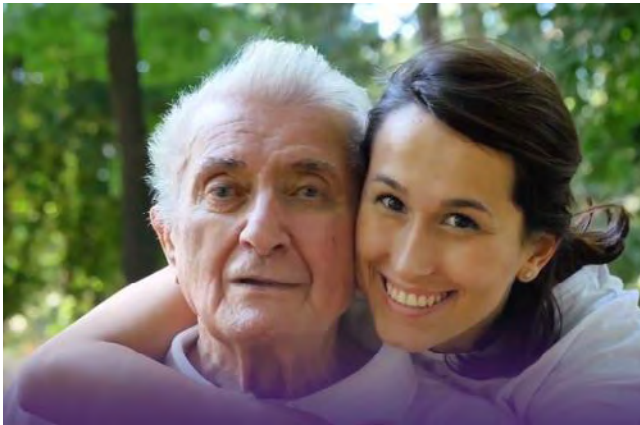
Feedback from Barwon Warm Safe Home Forum participants:

I am now aware of more services to pass on to related cases within the Retirement Village

I have always been very passionate about Elder Abuse, and being able to hear about services in the community will assist me with my clients and organisation

Inheritance Not an Entitlement campaign shines a light on financial elder abuse for World Elder Abuse Awareness Day

This campaign was a collaborative social media campaign led by Frankston Mornington Peninsula Primary Care Partnership and our BEAPP Network, which shared short films designed to challenge commonly held misconceptions or “myths” about inheritance and how this can lead to financial elder abuse. We engaged our online audience in promoting and sharing this campaign in partnership with City of Greater Geelong for WEAAD 2021.



Screenshots from the Inheritance Not An Entitlement social media campaign for World Elder Abuse Awareness Day 2021.

Law Week 2021

Partnering with Dispute Settlement Centre of Victoria and Rosewall Neighbourhood Centre to prevent problems between neighbours before they start.

// Rosewall were so pleased to partner with Barwon Community Legal Service and the Dispute Settlement Centre to provide the ‘Love your neighbour?’ legal information session as part of Victorian Law Week 2021... What worked well from Rosewall’s perspective was that none of the attendees were regular users of the Centre and we were therefore able to offer public information to a new cohort of residents. Neighbourhood Houses often find themselves as a ‘first port of call’ for a whole range of social, financial, education, health and legal information queries – when people aren’t sure where else to turn they will come to a Neighbourhood House for help.

Offering this type of activity strengthens the capacity of Neighbourhood House staff and volunteers so that we are better equipped to respond and refer at that initial point of enquiry to the right services.

— Rosewall Neighbourhood House Manager



Law Week 2021 event. Left to Right: Kerri-Anne Williams, Regional Manager, Dispute Settlement Centre of Victoria; Alexandria Jones, Community Development Manager, BCLS community lawyers Caleb Leitmanis and Peter Dickinson, Jodie Flood, Manager, Rosewall Neighbourhood House Manager.

OUR PEOPLE & CULTURE

Thank you to our Board and all of our staff who have made an incredible contribution to our work and our community in 2020-2021

OUR BOARD

Tom Lynch, [Chair](#)

Natasha Powles,
[Deputy Chair](#)

Dominique Saunders,
[Secretary](#)

Charles Agar, [Treasurer](#)

Ian Parsons

Jude Hunter

Myra White

OUR STAFF

Bryanna Connell,
[Chief Executive Officer](#)
(on parental leave from
February 2021)

Mandi Hyland,
[Principal Solicitor/Acting
Chief Executive Officer](#)
(February to April 2021)

Geordie Stapleton,
[Supervising Lawyer/
Principal Lawyer](#) (February
to April 2021), [Acting
Chief Executive Officer](#)
(May to July 2021)

Alexandria Jones,
[Community Development
Manager/Acting Chief
Executive Officer](#) (from
August 2021)

Emma Kennedy,
[Principal Social Worker](#)

Elsie Stokie, [Lawyer](#)

Sam Hawkins, [Lawyer,
Acting Supervising Lawyer](#)
(January to September 2021)

Victor Galaz, [Lawyer](#)

Megan Alford, [Lawyer](#)

Marijana Hawkins, [Lawyer](#)

Lauren Hutson, [Lawyer](#)
(left February 2021)

Louise Thorsen, [Lawyer](#)

Emma Cvitak, [Lawyer](#)

Shane Foyster, [Lawyer](#)

Tamara Kotowicz,
[Family Lawyer](#) (joined
November 2020)

Peter Dickinson, [Lawyer](#)
(joined February 2021)

Caleb Leitmanis, [Lawyer](#)
(joined September 2020)

Sharon Kerlin,
[Community Development
Project Worker](#)
(left April 2021)

Jack Parsons,
[Community Legal Education
and Development Officer](#)
(joined March 2021)

Charmaine Floyd,
[Administration Manager](#)

Grace Forrest,
[Administration Officer](#)

Melisa Veljan,
[Administration Assistant](#)

Liz Flynn,
[Administration Officer](#)

OUR VOLUNTEERS

We rely on volunteers, both students and lawyers, to assist with the delivery of our services. We would like to acknowledge and thank all of our valued volunteers for their ongoing commitment

and contribution to our organisation. Your dedication to advancing access to justice cannot be understated and we are extremely grateful for all the work you do.

Our Community Lawyer Elsie celebrates 35 years of service

Our community lawyer Elsie Stoke has helped thousands of disadvantaged people living in the Barwon region in her 35 years since setting up Barwon Community Legal Service.



Elsie's community law legacy

Elsie Stoke has helped thousands of disadvantaged locals in 35 years since setting up Barwon Community Legal Service. As Victorian Law Week approaches, she shares her story with Luke Voogt.

Barwon Community Legal Service began with a humble typewriter, a photocopier, six reference books and donated furniture in a single-room central Geelong office.

But before the service even opened its doors, founding lawyer Elsie Stoke was already helping about 40 locals caught up in a roofing scam that began with an elderly woman's complaint.

A business had approached the woman claiming her roof urgently needed \$2000 of work.

"Which was a lot of money back then, and she was on an aged pension," remembered Elsie who, 35 years on, still works at the service.

After getting a second opinion, the woman discovered the amount of work needed was closer to \$200.

"She came to tell us this story, and we thought, 'this is outrageous'," Elsie said.

"We actually went to the [Geelong] Independent and they put it on the front page with a photo of her."

The article resulted in about 80 people phoning the service, about half of which Elsie represented.

"We realised most of them had similar situations," she said.

"you get a sense of satisfaction helping"

- Elsie Stoke

"They were all told, 'if you don't get this work done, you're going to have your roof collapse.' They were targeting older people because they can't get on their roof to have a look themselves."

At one stage the company threatened to sue the legal service, but eventually Consumer Affairs prosecuted them for misrepresentation.

"Before we even opened, we were threatened with being sued!" Elsie said.

"A senior lawyer who I would ring for advice said, 'you know you're doing something right when they're threatening to sue.'"

Elsie reckons Geelong had only a handful of female lawyers when she started.

She chose the profession after growing up in Leopold and studying at the former Morongo Girls College in Bell Post Hill.

"They weren't doing a whole heap of career guidance in those days and I didn't want to be a teacher," she said.

"It wasn't very common for women to be lawyers. A lot of girls from our school became nurses and teachers, only a few became doctors or lawyers."

"But a few of my friends were doing law and I thought, 'that sounds interesting.'"

After studying in Melbourne, Elsie worked for a law firm in Sale dealing mostly with vehicle accidents, family law and debt.

"In those days you had to get your articles of clerkship," she said.

"It was a bit like an apprenticeship; they would train you for a year and your pay was quite low."

Elsie moved back to Geelong after her father died, and about the same time the state government had allocated new funding to set up Barwon Community Legal Service.

"I wanted to get a job and I was not really rapt in all this sitting around at a desk doing paperwork," she said.

But when she discovered she could deal directly with those in need, educate others and be involved in law reform at the newly-funded service, she applied for a job.

"I thought wow, 'this sounds really exciting,'" she said. "Where we found things that weren't working, we could write submissions to get the laws changed."

With just a part-time administrator helping her, and only months after becoming a lawyer, she set up the organisation and recruited other lawyers to volunteer for its after-hours service.



Elsie Stoke and, inset, Elsie with then Victorian Attorney General Jim Kennan at the opening of Barwon Community Legal Service in 1986. © *Anna Jones and supplied* 236284_01

"It was a pretty exciting learning curve. We had a ball setting it up," Elsie said.

"We didn't actually have a premises at the time, but Legal Aid let us use an office and their interview and meeting rooms."

"We were doing everything as cheaply as we could because there wasn't a great deal of money."

The service's office officially opened a few months later in a single room alongside other businesses in a converted former warehouse in central Geelong.

"When we started we only had a typewriter - they were just bringing in computers," Elsie said. "After our first year we got our first Apple Mac, which was magic."

The service took on 202 clients in its first year, 228 the next and 283 in the third, stretching Elsie and her colleague to capacity.

Elsie looked after the service's finances and often took home cases to work on them, or travelled to Melbourne to research legislation due to Geelong's limited legal libraries at the time.

"We got busier and busier - I worked to all hours for years," she said.

They also put together an "easy-to-read" family law booklet for locals.

"Now all you have to do is Google search and there are pages and pages of information about everything, but in those days there was

nothing," Elsie said. "We distributed about 10,000 in a few months - they went like hot cakes."

After receiving funding for more lawyers in 1989, the service began to take on more child support cases.

Elsie remembered helping a man at risk of losing his home in the late '90s.

"The man had initially agreed to pay a certain amount of child support while on a good salary, but fell ill and lost his job, relying on Centrelink for income."

"The man threw letters from child support authorities in the rubbish and even refused to see Elsie, at first."

"I owed \$100,000 in child support and late payment penalties, and he really shouldn't have owed anything at all," Elsie said.

"They will come after people's assets if they're owed money."

"But he just couldn't cope with it - every time he thought about it, it was making him ill."

"Through persistence Elsie got in touch with the man and eventually obtained a court order, which ultimately allowed him to keep his home."

"I basically paid all the money that he had, about \$10,000, to have the debt set aside," she said.

On the flip side, Elsie also helped clients owed child support, including one woman whose partner was under-reporting his pay.



"She had to take out small loans or credit cards to pay for her son's school supplies and fees, some of which she was still paying off," she said.

"He would just make up all these things, even in court, that were untrue. It confused magistrates to no end and we had to go higher."

The matter reached the Federal Circuit Court, where Elsie helped the woman recover about \$3500 she was owed.

Over the past decade Elsie has focused primarily on elder abuse, while also obtaining family violence intervention orders to help protect women, children and occasionally men.

"We're at Geelong court three days of the week," she said.

The family violence cases range from verbal abuse, to drug and alcohol-related violence and threats to harm family members or kill pets.

Her elder abuse cases, on the other hand, tend to follow common patterns.

"There will be an ageing parent, and an adult child comes back to live with them and seems to take over," she explained. "They will be controlling and won't let the family member see their friends, family or go out for activities."

"The next thing you know they're getting them to sign their power of attorney over, or their house, or getting them to make the will more favourable to them. And obviously other family members get really concerned."

"It's difficult enough if they're of sound mind, and even more complex when they're not."

Barwon Community Legal Service now has 22 staff, including 11 lawyers. The organisation has since expanded its services into other areas such as Centrelink, fines, disability support and neighbourhood disputes.

The last of these will be the topic for the service's upcoming Victorian Law Week seminar at Rosewall Community Centre, Corio, on May 18, beginning 6pm.

Residents can meet Elsie's lawyer colleagues from the service, Caleb Leitmanis and Peter Dickinson, and learn about the most common neighbourhood disputes, tips to resolve them and how to access free legal assistance.

In June, Elsie is set to present another seminar on elder abuse, drawing on her 35 years' experience as a lawyer.

"I've really enjoyed it," she said of her career. "Generally, it's a pleasure to meet the clients and you get a sense of satisfaction helping them out. You may not always be able to assist them, but you can at least explain why not."

"They appreciate that, and can move on with their lives."

For details on the upcoming seminar, phone 5275 7409, email admin@rosewallinc.org.au or visit barwoncommunitylegal.org.au.

21 GEELONG INDEPENDENT Friday 7 May 2021

OUR ENABLERS & SUSTAINABILITY

Acknowledgements

Barwon Area Integrated
Family Violence Committee

Barwon Child Youth
and Family

Barwon Health

BATForce

Bellarine Community Health

Better Place Australia

Brimbank Melton
Community Legal Centre

Corina Eccles,
Wadawurrung Traditional
Owner

Cahill & Rowe Family Law

Chris Oldham: (Barrister)

Christine Couzens MP

City of Greater Geelong

Colac Area Health

Colac Otway Shire

Community Legal Centres
Australia

Cornish Lawyers –
Family Law

Criminal Lawyers Geelong

Hon Dan Tehan MP

Deakin University

Deakin University Student
Association

Dementia Australia

Diversitat

Dr Ian Warren

Eastern Community
Legal Centre

Economic Justice Australia

Ecstra Foundation

Family Relationship
Centre Geelong

Federation of Community
Legal Centres (Victoria)

Fitzroy Community
Legal Centre

Foley's List

Geelong Law Association

Geelong Law Courts

Geelong Regional Library
Corporation

Gerard Mansour –
Commissioner for Senior
Victorians

Gippsland Community
Legal Centre

Give Where You Live

Goulburn Valley
Community Legal Centre

Hume Riverina
Community Legal Centre

Inner Melbourne
Community Legal

Jenna Oldaker,
Wadawurrung artist

JobWatch

KC Law Group

KG Lawyers

Leo Cussen Centre for Law

Libby Coker MP

Loddon Campaspe
Community Legal Centre

Marrar Woon
Neighbourhood House,
Apollo Bay

Martin Ching

Outline Print Design

Peninsula Community
Legal Centre

Pillowfort Creative

Perisic Lawyers

Pixled

Prestige In Home Care

Reclaim the Night
Collective Geelong

Refugee Legal

Regional Information
and Advocacy Centre

Hon Richard Marles MP

Roger O'Halloran & Co

SalvoConnect

Senator Hon Sarah
Henderson

Senior Rights Victoria

Sexual Assault and Family
Violence Centre

Social Security
Rights Victoria

Stary Norton Halphen

St Kilda Community
Legal Service

Surf Coast Shire

Tenants Victoria

The fORt

The Orange Door, Barwon

Trapski Family Law

Victoria Legal Aid

Victoria Police

Victorian Aboriginal Legal
Service Co-operative

Victorian Law Foundation

Wathaurong Aboriginal
Co-Operative

Western Heights College

WEstjustice

Whyte Just & Moore
Lawyers

Women's Legal Service

Worksafe

FINANCIALS



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INDEPENDENT AUDITOR'S REPORT TO THE MEMBERS OF BARWON COMMUNITY LEGAL SERVICES INC

Report on the Concise Financial Report

Opinion

The concise financial report, which comprises the statement of financial position as at 30 June 2021, statement of comprehensive income, statement of changes in equity and statement of cash flows for the year then ended, and related notes, are derived from the audited financial reports of Barwon Community Legal Services Inc for the year ended 30 June 2021.

In our opinion, the accompanying concise financial report, is consistent in all material respects, with the audited financial report, in accordance with AASB 1039: Concise Financial Reports.

Concise Financial Report

The concise financial report does not contain all the disclosures required by Australian Accounting Standards applied in the preparation of the audited financial reports of Barwon Community Legal Services Inc. Reading the concise financial report and the auditor's report thereon, therefore, is not a substitute for reading the audited financial reports and the auditor's reports thereon. The concise financial report and the audited financial reports do not reflect the effects of events that occurred subsequent to the date of our report on the audited financial reports.

Basis of Accounting and Restriction on Distribution

Without modifying our opinion, we draw attention to Note 1 to the financial reports, which describe the basis of accounting. The financial reports have been prepared for the entities for the purpose of fulfilling the directors' financial reporting responsibilities under the *ACNC Act*. As a result, the financial reports may not be suitable for another purpose.

The Audited Financial Report and Our Report Thereon

We expressed an unmodified audit opinion on the audited financial reports in our report dated 29th October, 2021.

Directors' Responsibility for the Concise Financial Report

The directors are responsible for the preparation of the concise financial report in accordance with AASB 1039: Concise Financial Reports.

Auditor's Responsibility

Our responsibility is to express an opinion on whether the concise financial report is consistent, in all material respects, with the audited financial report based on our procedures, which were conducted in accordance with Auditing Standard ASA 810: Engagements to Report on Summary Financial Statements.

Stephen Kirtley
Director

Dated this 1st day of November, 2021

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Statement of comprehensive income for year ended 30 June 2021

| | 2021 \$ | 2020 \$ |
|---|------------------|------------------|
| Revenue from ordinary activities | 2,397,977 | 1,873,202 |
| Expenses from ordinary activities | | |
| Employee benefits expense | 1,741,868 | 1,432,063 |
| Depreciation | 54,346 | 32,947 |
| Administration expenses | 313,490 | 264,184 |
| Total expenditure from ordinary activities | 2,109,704 | 1,729,194 |
| Net result from ordinary activities | 288,273 | 144,008 |
| Other comprehensive income | - | - |
| Total comprehensive income for the year | 288,273 | 144,008 |

Statement of changes in equity for the year ended 30 June 2021

| | Retained profits \$ | Reserves \$ | Total \$ |
|---|---------------------|--------------|----------------|
| Balance at 1 July 2019 | 284,695 | 9,040 | 293,735 |
| Total comprehensive income for the year | (144,008) | - | (144,008) |
| Balance at 30 June 2020 | 428,703 | 9,040 | 437,743 |
| Total comprehensive income for the year | 288,273 | - | 288,273 |
| Balance at 30 June 2021 | 716,976 | 9,040 | 726,016 |

Note:
(a) The concise financial report cannot be expected to provide as full an understanding of the financial performance, financial position and financing and investing activities of the entity as the financial reports of Barwon Community Legal Service Inc; and
(b) further financial information can be obtained from the financial reports of Barwon Community Legal Services Inc and these reports are available, free of charge, on request to Barwon Community Legal Service and from its website barwoncls.org.au



Statement of financial position as at 30 June 2021

| | 2021 \$ | 2020 \$ |
|--------------------------------------|------------------|------------------|
| Current assets | | |
| Cash | 1,319,533 | 785,331 |
| Receivables | 35,199 | 238,674 |
| Total current assets | 1,354,732 | 1,024,005 |
| Non-current assets | | |
| Fixed assets | 99,587 | 103,009 |
| Intangible assets | 2,355 | - |
| Total non-current assets | 101,942 | 103,009 |
| Total assets | 1,456,674 | 1,127,014 |
| Current liabilities | | |
| Payables | 415,204 | 425,855 |
| Provisions | 293,820 | 244,816 |
| Total current liabilities | 709,024 | 670,671 |
| Non-current liabilities | | |
| Provisions | 21,634 | 18,600 |
| Total non-current liabilities | 21,634 | 18,600 |
| Total liabilities | 730,658 | 689,271 |
| Net assets | 726,016 | 437,743 |
| Equity | | |
| Reserves | 9,040 | 9,040 |
| Retained profits | 716,976 | 428,703 |
| Total equity | 726,016 | 437,743 |

Cash flows from operating activities for the year ended 30 June 2021

| | 2021 \$ | 2020 \$ |
|--|------------------|-----------------|
| Payments | | |
| Payments to employees | (1,689,830) | (1,380,357) |
| Other operating expenses | (327,476) | (188,021) |
| Receipts | | |
| Government grants | 2,474,340 | 1,642,393 |
| Interest received | 2,489 | 8,156 |
| Other operating income | 127,957 | 117,716 |
| Net cash provided by operating activities | 587,480 | 199,887 |
| Cash flow from investing activities | | |
| Payments for purchase of fixed assets | (53,278) | (21,547) |
| Net cash provided by investing activities | (53,278) | (21,547) |
| Net increase in cash held | 534,202 | 178,340 |
| Cash at the beginning of the reporting period | 785,331 | 606,991 |
| Cash at the end of the reporting period | 1,319,533 | 785,331 |

SUPPORTING OUR COMMUNITY DURING CHALLENGING TIMES.



Supporting Geelong, Bellarine
Peninsula, Surf Coast and Colac
Otway regions.

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