

## Legal help for people in need



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Colac people are accessing free legal assistance at a much lower rate than surrounding shires, despite having an increased risk of experiencing legal issues due to high rates of disadvantage and family violence, a legal service says.

Barwon Community Legal Service says many people in Colac might be experiencing problems that have a legal solution, but they might not be aware that there is a free legal service that can help them.

The service's recent legal needs analysis found that the rate of Colac people accessing free legal assistance was much lower than people in Greater Geelong and the Surf Coast.

Data from the 2021 Census showed that Colac was in the top 20 least advantaged postcodes in Victoria and has a higher-than-average rate of family violence compared with the Victorian average.

"We know that many of the problems in our lives can have legal answers and when it comes to lawyers and accessing free legal help many people are often unsure where to turn," Barwon Community Legal Service chief executive Bryanna Connell said.

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"Community legal centres play an important role in helping people solve problems relating to their home, navigating family and relationship issues, standing up for their rights, and managing issues with fines, Centrelink payments or something they have paid for.

"Often people do not realise that their problem is a legal one," she said.

BCLS is hosting Law Week in Colac next week, offering free legal health checks to the community and creating greater awareness of their free legal service available to community members for everyday problems.

"Getting free legal help early is important for people to have confidence and peace of mind in stressful, dangerous and sometimes confusing situations," Ms Connell said.

"We need to do a better job at creating awareness that we are here to help people, especially when they are experiencing financial disadvantage, violence, housing stress, discrimination or job insecurity."

BCLS will host a free community event and lunch at Colac Neighbourhood House on Monday from 12 noon to 3pm, offering free legal health checks and information for community.

People can RSVP to Julie Hallifax at Colac Neighbourhood House.

The legal service will also be hosting a Warm Safe Home information session and craft workshop in partnership with the Colac Community Library and Learning Centre next Tuesday from 1pm to 3pm.

People can register at [events.grlc.vic.gov.au/event/8307995](https://events.grlc.vic.gov.au/event/8307995)

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