

Acknowledgement of country

This plan was written on the land of the Wurundjeri and Boon Wurrung people of the Kulin Nation. We acknowledge and pay our respects to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples and Traditional Custodians throughout Victoria, including Elders past and present. We also acknowledge the strength and resilience of all First Nations people who today are still arrested and imprisoned at rates far higher than other Australians.

# Victoria Legal Aid corporate plan 2024–25

## Message from Chairperson and CEO

Our purpose is to make a difference for clients and the community, by helping to effectively address legal problems, supporting the coordination of a strong and dynamic legal assistance sector, and working with partners to create fairer laws and systems. Our priorities for the coming 12 months ensure that we continue to deliver on this purpose.

Early intervention and early resolution services are key in ensuring clients effectively address their legal problems. The Independent Family Advocacy and Support service and Help Before Court service provide clients with early engagement and support, and early resolution of legal problems, before they reach court. Thanks to funding received from the State Government and Victorian Legal Services Board and Commissioner (VLSBC), we will invest in these services to further develop and expand their reach across the state. Throughout the year we will also enhance our Legal Help service through the implementation of key reforms that ensure we can continue to provide accessible client centred services.

We welcome the release of the final report of the Independent Review of the National Legal Assistance Partnership (NLAP). VLA supports the recommendation for increased funding for legal assistance in the civil and family law space in 2025–26. It is pleasing to see recognition of the importance of legal assistance work in domestic and family violence through the identification of a dedicated women’s funding stream. VLA is looking forward to working with National Legal Aid, the Attorney-General and the legal assistance sector to deliver on the recommendations.

The lack of safety for women is back in the media and political discourse following a spate of gender-based homicides. Much more needs to be done within the justice system to improve outcomes for those experiencing family violence. Over the next 12 months, VLA will prioritise advocacy for system reforms that aim to reduce and rectify misidentification of the primary aggressor in family violence matters, promote the safety of women who are complainants in sexual offences and embed a safer, more inclusive, and accessible family law system that is responsive to the needs of victim-survivors.

First Nations people continue to experience systemic racism and disadvantage that has lasting impacts, and often devastating consequences for families and communities. The work of the Yoorrook Justice Commission is creating a public record of this disadvantage. We recognise the role our organisation plays in improving outcomes for First Nations people in the legal system and will work with our partners at the Victorian Aboriginal Legal Service (VALS) and Djirra to advocate for, and work toward, meaningful change. Led by the expertise of VALS and Djirra, we will co-design a First Nations Helpline for community, and work in partnership to launch a First Nations Cultural Capability Framework for practitioners. We will also further expand our Aboriginal Community Engagement Officer program to assist more First Nations clients across the state.

Through our daily interactions, we understand the powerlessness and confusion felt by people facing remand. The recent review of our remand services by the Centre for Innovative Justice illustrated this impact. As recommended in the review, VLA will pilot an integrated service model with non-legal support roles established to work with our remand lawyers in the Bail and Remand Court. This will better enable us to assist people facing remand with their legal and non-legal needs.

VLA, along with our practice partners, support clients across the state and we recognise that the needs of some clients are not currently being met. To assist in addressing this, we are committed to expanding our services to Wodonga in Victora’s North-East to help meet unmet demand and to strengthen the ‘mixed model’ service delivery that operates within the region—ensuring these clients are not missing out on access to services that are available elsewhere in the state. We will also undertake a targeted review of our private practitioner fees to help attract and retain private practitioners doing legal aid work.

Ensuring the wellbeing and safety of our staff remains a high priority for VLA. Over the coming 12 months we will implement a Psychosocial Wellbeing Framework and a staff support model to ensure staff are supported and psychosocial risks are identified, assessed, and managed. As an organisation, we have achieved positive change in understanding, promoting, and addressing diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) for our staff and client services. This year, we will develop a DEI strategy that takes an intersectional approach to improving how our staff and our clients experience VLA and the broader sector. We will also develop our new cultural diversity and anti-racism plan. While we continue to learn and implement changes within VLA, delivering culturally safe services also means working with all parts of the justice sector to combat racism.

Cyber security remains an ongoing threat to organisations across the country, with the occurrence and sophistication of cyber-attacks continuing to increase. The use of Artificial Intelligence (AI) is also growing and will have an impact on VLA, and both the public and justice sectors— bringing with it its own risks. We will continue to focus on strengthening our cyber and data security practices, develop foundational AI capabilities and look at establishing pilot programs that allow us to understand our obligations and the best ways AI can assist us in delivering services to our clients.

## Our 2024–25 budget

As in previous financial years, the projected demand for our services will continue to exceed the level of funding we receive, resulting in a projected financial deficit of $22.7 million. In addition, the timing of fixed-term initiative funding (reported as a surplus in previous financial years) contributes to the reported deficit and higher than normal cash balances. In the short term, we will continue to use these funds to meet demand and deliver our initiatives aligned with court activity. However, these cash reserves need to be carefully managed to ensure we can continue to meet our ongoing grant commitments.

In 2024–25 we have budgeted $369.8 million in revenue, an increase of $36.3 million (11 per cent) on the 2023–24 budget. Our short-term revenue outlook has improved primarily due to additional initiative funding announced in the recent State Budget, including expansion of our Help Before Court and Independent Family Advocacy and Support services. These are essential early intervention and pre-court engagement programs changing the way the justice system works. In addition, one-off additional project investment from the Public Purpose Fund (PPF) to support our corporate plan priorities. Whilst this funding is welcome it supports specific programs and does not increase our core funding.

Table 1: 2024–25 revenue by source ($m)

| **Source of revenue** | **2023–24 Budget $ million** | **2024–25 Budget $ million** | **Growth %** |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
| State Government – VLA | 148.7 | 157.7 | 6 |
| State Government – Community Legal Centre | 31.1 | 37.3 | 20 |
| Commonwealth Government | 71.2 | 75.3 | 6 |
| Commonwealth Government – Community Legal Centre | 26.5 | 27.1 | 3 |
| Public Purpose Fund | 47.0 | 62.8 | 34 |
| Case revenue (incl client contributions) & other income | 9.0 | 9.6 | 6 |
| **Total revenue** | **333.5** | **369.8** | **11** |

In 2024–25, the budgeted expenditure of $392.7 million is an increase of $42.7 million (12 per cent) on the 2023–24 budget. The increase in case expenditure and employee-related expenditure primarily reflects additional funding received for a range of specific programs. These include the statewide rollout of independent mental health advocacy services, early intervention services (Help Before Court and Independent Family Advocacy and Support), our statewide expansion of the Aboriginal Community Engagement Officer program, expanded migration services to support reducing the backlog at the Administrative Appeals Tribunal, piloting an integrated remand service in the Bail and Remand Court, and expansion of the Assessment and Referral Courts services to Dandenong, Sunshine, and Shepparton Magistrates’ Courts.

The increase in Community Legal Centre (CLC) expenditure results from increased revenue from the Commonwealth and State Governments in 2024–25. VLA administers this funding on behalf of the State Government and distributes funding aligned with government decisions.

The increase in depreciation and amortisation reflects additional capital investment over recent years to upgrade our ageing and inadequate regional accommodation that supports staff wellbeing and improves the client experience.

Table 2: 2024–25 expenditure by category ($m)

| **Expenditure category** | **2023–24 Budget $ million** | **2024–25 Budget $ million** | **Growth %** |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
| Case expenditure | 134.6 | 143.2 | 6 |
| Employee-related expenditure | 124.3 | 151.3 | 22 |
| Community Legal Centre payments | 57.6 | 64.4 | 12 |
| Other operating expenditure | 30.7 | 30.4 | -1 |
| Depreciation and amortisation | 2.8 | 3.4 | 21 |
| **Total expenditure** | **350.0** | **392.7** | **12** |

## Our financial outlook

VLA has implemented short-term mitigation strategies to defer the need to implement service reductions. However, these are not sustainable in the long term. Beyond 2024–25, longer-term projections continue to highlight that core funding is insufficient to meet the projected demand and address government-imposed savings and reprioritisation decisions. Further analysis will be undertaken in 2025–26 on the impact of our early intervention initiatives and the legislative changes (for example, changes to bail law) on the level of demand. These impacts are projected to reduce, not address our funding shortfall. Without additional funding, we will need to consider service reductions, whilst carefully managing our cash reserves. Any service reductions would be for court-based services, following consultation with sector partners.

We continue to advocate for a legal assistance demand-based funding model to address the volatility in our current funding arrangements and to meet the increasing demand for our services that exceed core funding.

## Our client services

Aligned with the revenue increases above, VLA is experiencing significant service growth including non-legal specialist resolution and advocacy services (Table 4) and the expansion of our Aboriginal Community Engagement Officer program to support First Nation clients. However, these service types are not appropriately reflected in our current Budget Paper 3 measures.

Overall, existing output service projections are expected to be largely similar to 2023–24 levels, aligned with court activity. While some measures are expected to be below the 2023–24 target, this is primarily due to how family violence services are reported across a number of our measures, and the significant growth for these services over the last 12 months. In addition, there are many contributing factors that impact our service performance including new operating models like pre-court services, working in new digital ways and external demand drivers such as crime rates and lower than expected child protection applications, and legislative changes.

Our service delivery measures and targets have been consecutively rolled over and do not account for changes in our external environment and new operating models. In the year ahead, we will review and update our measures and targets with the Department of Justice and Community Safety (DJCS).

Table 3: Budget Paper 3 Performance Measures

| **Measure** | **2022–23 actual** | **2023–24 actual** | **2024–25 target** |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
| Unique clients | 86,321 | 82,606 | 105,000 |
| Community Legal Education and Information Services (excl. family violence) | 97,418 | 107,321 | 102,000 |
| Community Legal Education and Information Services – family violence–related services | 21,675 | 22,597 | 27,000 |
| Duty Lawyer Services (excl. family violence)[[1]](#footnote-2) | 58,044 | 59,328 | 71,000 |
| Grants of legal assistance provided (excl. family violence) | 28,716 | 27,711 | 33,000 |
| Legal advice and minor assistance (excl. family violence) | 25,978 | 24,041 | 41,000 |
| Family violence legal services | 59,540 | 60,361 | 46,000 |
| Client satisfaction (per cent) | 62 | 65 | 80 |
| Average wait time to Legal Help | 8.54 | 9.58 | <15 |

Table 4 Specialist resolution and advocacy services

| **Measure** | **2022–23 actual** | **2023–24 actual** | **2024–25 target** |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
| IMHA information and referral sessions | 25,658 | 46,658 | 45,000 |
| IMHA advocacy and self-advocacy | 18,280 | 41,002 | 40,000 |
| IFAS information and referral sessions | 2,011 | 2,955 | 2,440 |
| IFAS advocacy and self-advocacy | 2,327 | 2,866 | 2,520 |

## Our 2024–25 priorities

### Outcome 1 – Clients have increased access to justice

Strategic direction 1 – Clients

| **Priority** | **Activities** | **Sub-outcome** |
| --- | --- | --- |
| Strengthen early intervention services and early engagement and resolution services to prevent the escalation of legal problems and better connect with allied services. | Pilot an integrated remand service in the Bail and Remand Court to better meet the legal and non-legal needs of people facing first remand | 1.1 Clients are assisted to address or prevent legal problems. |
| Strengthen early intervention services and early engagement and resolution services to prevent the escalation of legal problems and better connect with allied services. | Embed and expand the Independent Family Advocacy and Support and Help Before Court services | 1.2 Clients equitably access timely legal and related services, including early intervention and preventative services that meet their needs and capabilities. |
| Strengthen our regional service delivery and non-legal advocacy services. | Establish new services in Victoria’s North-East, in the Ovens Murray Region, to meet unmet demand and strengthen the ‘mixed model’ | 1.2 Clients equitably access timely legal and related services, including early intervention and preventative services that meet their needs and capabilities |
| Work to ensure our services are culturally safe, accessible, inclusive, and equitable. | Review and update our service delivery model in the Assessment and Referral Courts (ARC) across the state and expand ARC services to Dandenong, Sunshine, and Shepparton Magistrates’ Courts. | 1.2 Clients equitably access timely legal and related services, including early intervention and preventative services that meet their needs and capabilities. |
| Work to ensure our services are culturally safe, accessible, inclusive, and equitable. | Work with sector partners to expand our migration legal assistance services for people appealing permanent protection visa decisions (merit review to the Administrative Appeals Tribunal and judicial review to the Federal Courts) | 1.2 Clients equitably access timely legal and related services, including early intervention and preventative services that meet their needs and capabilities. |
| Develop culturally safe services for First Nations clients while supporting the principle of self-determination and the important role of Aboriginal community-controlled legal services. | Work with VALS and Djirra to create and implement a First Nations Helpline for community, and a Cultural Capability Framework for practitioners | 1.3 First Nations clients experience culturally safe legal services and increased access to justice. |
| Develop culturally safe services for First Nations clients while supporting the principle of self-determination and the important role of Aboriginal community-controlled legal services. | Expand the Aboriginal Community Engagement Officer program to enhance service for First Nations clients across the state | 1.3 First Nations clients experience culturally safe legal services and increased access to justice. |

### Outcome 2 – Improved legal understanding in the community

Strategic direction 2 – Community

| **Priority** | **Activities** | **Sub-outcome** |
| --- | --- | --- |
| Expand and improve access to online, phone and face-to-face legal information that addresses peoples’ diverse needs and capabilities. | Modernise our Legal Help service to ensure it provides accessible client-centred services as it continues to grow and develop new ways to assist people | 2.2 Community members access reliable, timely and targeted legal information that meets their needs and capabilities |

### Outcome 3 – Collaborative legal assistance sector

Strategic Direction 3 –Legal Assistance Sector

| **Priority** | **Activities** | **Sub-outcome** |
| --- | --- | --- |
| Improve engagement with, and make it easier for, private practitioners and community legal centres to work with VLA | Complete a targeted review of Criminal and Family Law fees, and implement initial changes | 3.1 The legal assistance sector works together to deliver coordinated and responsive services and advocacy |
| Collaborate with legal aid providers in other states and territories on service provision and systems reform. | Collaborate with Legal Aid Commissions and the legal assistance sector on a new national funding agreement, and other sector reform opportunities | 3.3 The legal assistance sector shares and uses evidence to design and deliver services |
| Create opportunities and support improved service coordination, collaboration, and transparency across the legal assistance sector. | Work with sector partners on the specialist Victims Legal Service, including transitioning to the Financial Assistance Scheme. | 3.1 The legal assistance sector works together to deliver coordinated and responsive services and advocacy |

### Outcome 4 – Fairer laws and systems

Our priorities for this outcome are outlined on page 12 through our Strategic Advocacy Priorities.

### Outcome 5 – Effective and sustainable Victoria Legal Aid

Strategic direction 5 – Victoria Legal Aid

| **Priority** | **Activities** | **Sub-outcome** |
| --- | --- | --- |
| Invest in our people and work in a safe, inclusive, equitable way that involves people with lived experience. | Develop a Diversity, Equity and Inclusion strategy that takes an intersectional approach to improving how our staff and our clients experience VLA and the broader sector | 5.3 VLA is a safe, inclusive, and equitable organisation, with diverse and skilled staff. |
| Invest in our people and work in a safe, inclusive, equitable way that involves people with lived experience. | Implement a Psychosocial Wellbeing Framework to ensure staff are supported and psychosocial risks are identified, assessed and managed | 5.3 VLA is a safe, inclusive, and equitable organisation, with diverse and skilled staff. |
| Achieve financial sustainability, including demand-based funding arrangements so that VLA can continue to support an effective and efficient justice system. | Work with the Department of Justice and Community Safety and the Victorian Government to develop a sector-wide demand-based funding model. | 5.4 VLA is equipped with sustainable resources and technology, that reduce our environmental impact and enable us to deliver services |
| Develop our digital and data systems to improve access to justice, provide clients with better quality services and choices appropriate to their capabilities, and create more efficient work practices. | Enhance rostering and payroll systems to better cater for shiftwork in legal and non-legal services and commence work to introduce a new Human Resource Information System. | 5.4 VLA is equipped with sustainable resources and technology, that reduce our environmental impact and enable us to deliver services |
| Develop our digital and data systems to improve access to justice, provide clients with better quality services and choices appropriate to their capabilities, and create more efficient work practices. | Develop a new Grants Management System to improve the partner and staff experience when accessing VLA services | 5.4 VLA is equipped with sustainable resources and technology, that reduce our environmental impact and enable us to deliver services |

## 2024–25 Strategic advocacy priorities

The *Legal Aid Act 1978* requires us to take steps to deliver legal services efficiently and innovatively to reduce the need for repeat, individualised legal services. One way we achieve this is by pursuing improvements in law and policy that result in better outcomes for our clients and the community, as detailed in our Outcomes Framework.

The following principles guide our strategic advocacy:

1. As part of our ongoing commitment to upholding First Nations peoples’ right to self-determination, we will be led by the expertise of, and work collaboratively with, Aboriginal community-controlled organisations and stakeholders to inform our advocacy and reform work, and support truth-telling and treaty processes in Victoria.
2. Our advocacy is shaped by the experiences and expertise of people directly affected.
3. We recognise that different aspects of identity—including race, sexual orientation, gender identity, disability, age, and socioeconomic status—intersect to affect a person’s experiences of discrimination and inequity.
4. We acknowledge and challenge structural discrimination, with a particular focus on structural racism, and will work with communities of colour and other affected communities to improve access to justice and build fairer laws and systems.

## Our strategic advocacy priorities:

We will prioritise advocacy aimed at achieving the following improvements in law and policy and better outcomes for clients and the community:

1. Systemic reform to improve women’s safety, including reducing misidentification of the primary aggressor of family violence.
2. Implementation of recommendations from the Yoorrook Justice Commission in the pursuit of meaningful and transformational structural change.
3. Meaningful youth justice reform including:
   1. Raise the age of criminal responsibility to 14 and the age of imprisonment to 16 without delay, and embed the necessary supports children and young people need to thrive.
   2. End over-criminalisation and the disproportionate representation of First Nations children in the youth justice system.
   3. End over-criminalisation and the disproportionate representation of children of colour in the youth justice system.
4. Sentencing reform and restorative justice to reduce involvement in, and minimise harm caused by, the criminal justice system.
5. Strengthen police accountability, criminal justice system and custodial oversight.
6. Mental health reforms that promote consumer rights, embed consumer leadership and cultural safety, and increase accountability to ensure we work toward the elimination of compulsory treatment and seclusion and restrictive practices.
7. Strengthen rights and accountability across Federal systems, with a particular focus on social security, migration, the National Disability Insurance Scheme, and a national human rights framework.
8. Tailored responses to children who use violence, including through providing holistic supports to families to reduce risk of entry/re-entry into the legal system.
9. Reforms to the child protection system underpinned by the principles of self-determination that improve fairness and support families to stay together where it is safe to do so.

We may also undertake strategic advocacy work in response to emerging or urgent systemic issues or to reform processes (for example, reviews, commissions, inquiries, or legislative change) that are not identified in these priorities.

## Our outcomes

Our 2024–25 priorities and activities align with our Outcomes Framework—the difference that we want our services to make for our clients and the Victorian community. We will monitor progress against our 2024–25 priorities throughout the year and how they contribute to these longer-term outcomes.



1. A manual adjustment has been included to reflect timing issues with the counting of services provided by Private Practitioners. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)