# Victoria Legal Aid 2023–24 quarter three report January–March 2024

## Message from the CEO

On 1 March 2024, we commenced our expanded [Victim Legal Service](https://www.legalaid.vic.gov.au/victims-legal-service). As part of a federal funded pilot program, this service will provide legal assistance, advice and representation to victim-survivors of sexual violence who want to understand their options to protect their confidential communications and health information, such as medical or counselling records, in a court proceeding. As part of the expansion, and in partnership with Djirra, the Victim Legal Service will also provide support to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander victim-survivors seeking to report sexual assault.

We were also pleased to launch our new pilot [Equity and Diversity List](https://www.legalaid.vic.gov.au/were-launching-pilot-equity-and-diversity-list-support-equitable-briefing) which is aimed at supporting equitable briefings. It is anticipated that this List will assist lawyers find and brief diverse counsel for legally aided matters. The development of the List is part of our Equitable Briefing Strategy, which is underpinned by our commitment to fairness, diversity and inclusion. The pilot was supported by the Chief Justice of the Supreme Court of Victoria and has been well received by the legal profession in general.

In March, we were joined by our legal sector partners to officially open our newly relocated office in Sunshine. The new office has already become a hub for collaboration with our sector partners. The relocation is part of our broader plan to support our regional offices with modern, safe, and accessible workplaces. It also comes as work on the Wyndham Law Courts continues, which will service the western growth corridor.

We acknowledge the government’s response to the landmark [Yoorrook for Justice report](https://yoorrookforjustice.org.au/). We are disappointed that the government has not supported three key recommendations for meaningful reform and failed to provide a more comprehensive response to act on others. We are committed to working with First Nations communities, Aboriginal community-controlled organisations, and the government to address the report recommendations to bring about transformative change.

The final report of the independent [Review](https://ministers.ag.gov.au/media-centre/independent-review-national-legal-assistance-partnership-06-03-2024) of the National Legal Assistance Partnership (NLAP) by Dr Mundy has now been provided to Government. We await the Government’s formal response which is due by early June. With the current NLAP agreement due to expire next year, we continue our advocacy on much needed reforms and investment from the federal government in family law, family violence and civil law services. Our current data indicates that 13 per cent of the population live below the poverty line and only 8 per cent qualify for legal aid. A demand based funded legal assistance sector would help deliver on the Commonwealth Government's commitment to women's safety, equality, and economic security.

**LOUISE GLANVILLE**
Chief Executive Officer

## Client and community services

Our services are targeted to people facing disadvantage who have the greatest legal need. We tailor our services to people’s diverse needs and capabilities and recognise that many people experience barriers to accessing justice. We provide a mix of early intervention and preventative services, high intensity legal services, and non-legal specialist resolution and advocacy services.

## Client services

In quarter three 2023–24, we saw 16,760 unique clients (Table 1.1). This is a 21 per-cent decrease from quarter two. Clients are only counted the first time they receive a legal assistance service in a financial year. Some clients may receive multiple services in the same financial year and as a result our unique client count decreases as the year progresses. Each client is now averaging two services, which is higher than the same time last financial year.

There was a 14 per-cent decrease in the number of Duty Lawyer Services in quarter three compared to the previous quarter. In quarter two 2023-24 we made some interim adjustments to the reported Duty Lawyer Services to address underreporting of our services in the first half of the year. This underreporting was due to inconsistencies with how we collect data during the transition from our legacy systems, which we continue to address.

The number of Grants of Legal Assistance in quarter three was at a similar level with the previous quarter.

Table 1.1 Unique client count and services

|  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
| **Clients and Client Services** | **Q2** | **Q3** | **Q4 2023-24** |
| **2023-24** | **2023-24** | **projection** |
| Unique Clients1  | 21,174 | 16,760 | 20,829 |
| Legal Advice and Minor Work sessions   | 9,211 | 8,981 | 7,620 |
| Duty Lawyer Services2  | 26,156 | 22,406 | 24,429 |
| Grants of Legal Assistance  | 9,745 | 9,873 | 11,875 |

 A unique client is an individual who has accessed one or more of our legal services and with whom a client-lawyer relationship was formed. We count our unique clients the first time we see them in the year. This definition does not include those clients who received information over the phone or via our online web chat (Legal Help), from our website, in person at a court counter, or those who attended one of our community legal education sessions.

2 The quarter two (Q2) figure includes an adjustment of 3,719 duty lawyer services.

## Community services

The number of Legal Help sessions increased from the previous quarter, an increase of 3 per-cent (Table 1.2). The wait time increased during the quarter due to higher staff leave during January, however it continues to remain lower than the full year projection. Overall, there has been a positive impact on the quality and delivery of our Legal Help services from the recent transition to our new technology platform and implementation of specialist lines. The project to improve our webchat tool is on track to be completed by the end of June. The improvements will enable faster intake via VLA’s website and support future innovations to enhance the experience for clients (for example, the use of artificial intelligence).

In quarter three 2023–24, we provided 36 Community Legal Education (CLE) sessions (Table 1.2). We continued our work with people in incarceration to educate them on legal processes, along with at-risk youth to deliver preventative education sessions. We are currently projecting similar results in quarter four. We will continue to actively reach out and engage with community organisations and education providers.

Google has been making changes to the way they track user data, which has had a flow-on impact on the analytics available to measure our website performance. In 2023-24, we updated our performance measure to ‘Engaged sessions of legal information website pages’ (Table 1.2), which counts sessions that last longer than ten seconds or where a user has been actively engaged with the content. In this quarter, we saw an increase of 7 per-cent from quarter two, however, there is currently not enough historical data available for this new measure to be able to make quarterly projections.

Table 1.2 Community information and education services

|  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
| **Community information and education Services** | **Q2** | **Q3** | **Q4 2023-24** |
| **2023-24** | **2023-24** | **projection** |
| Number of Legal Help sessions delivered  | 37,400 | 38,457 | 33,961 |
| Combined average wait time (minutes)  | 6:27 | 8.23 | 9:00 |
| Information sessions  | 31,515 | 32,388 | 28,318 |
| Community Legal Education sessions  | 45 | 36 | 35 |
| Engaged sessions3 of legal information website pages  | 262,716 | 280,977 | N/A |

3 Engaged sessions are when a website session lasts longer than ten seconds, when a session includes at least one conversion, or when a session includes two or more page views.

VLA provides specialist non-legal services that help people advocate for themselves and inform people and communities of their rights when it comes to both the mental health and the child protection systems.

People undergoing compulsory mental health treatments are now required to opt out of our Independent Mental Health Advocacy (IMHA) service. This has led to a large increase in demand for our services. In quarter three 2023-24, we saw a 28 per‑cent increase in both the number of IMHA information and referral sessions, as well as advocacy and self-advocacy services (Table 1.3). We anticipate that these results will continue to increase next quarter as we continue to reach out to consumers through in‑service visits.

The quarter three results for the Independent Family Advocacy and Support (IFAS) services were higher than quarter two. This was partly due to staffing levels returning to full capacity, with our advocates coming back from leave and vacant positions being filled. Quarter three also falls within a busy period of the year for Child Protection matters as schools are back from holidays. We are anticipating that there will be a slight increase next quarter due to an anticipated increase in community education and the promotion of IFAS services.

Table 1.3 Specialist resolution and advocacy services

|  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
| **Specialist resolution and advocacy services** | **Q2** | **Q3** | **Q4 2023-24** |
| **2023-24** | **2023-24** | **projection** |
| IMHA information and referral sessions | 10,714 | 13,730 | 14,000 |
| IMHA advocacy and self-advocacy | 9,873 | 12,602 | 13,000 |
| IFAS information and referral sessions  | 533 | 854 | 900 |
| IFAS advocacy and self-advocacy | 534 | 730 | 750 |

## Financial summary

In quarter three 2023-24, our consolidated operating position was a surplus of $6.1 million. A surplus in initiative or project funding remains the driver to the consolidated surplus result. Initiative funding continues to be a significant portion of our overall funding and is fully committed to delivering our projects in addition to our base funding for core services. There is, however, often a timing difference between when the funding is received and when the expenditure is incurred. Expenditure is largely aligned with court activity, which can span multiple years and result in a surplus in the first year of funding. As a result, we are expecting a surplus in initiative funding at the end of the financial year, however this is fully committed to meet service delivery demands.

Analysis shows demand for our core services still exceeds our base funding levels with a projected base funding deficit for the financial year. Our cash balance remains unusually high due to reduced court activity during the pandemic, and in the short term, we will use these funds to meet current demand. Our cash reserves need to be carefully managed to ensure we can continue to meet our existing grant commitments which span multiple years aligned with court activity.

We project current cash balances will be sufficient to meet the projected deficit in 2024-25. However, long-term projections continue to highlight that base funding is insufficient to meet the projected demand. Without additional funding from 2025-26, we will need to consider service reductions. Any service reductions would be for court-based services, following consultation with sector partners. We continue to work with the Victorian Department of Justice and Community Safety to resolve these financial sustainability challenges.

Table 2.1 Total revenue breakdown ($’000)

|  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
| **Revenue**  | **Q2** | **Q3** | **Q4 2023-24** |
| **2023-24** | **2023-24** | **projection** |
| Commonwealth – grants  |  24,735  |  25,494  | 24,701 |
| ECCCF income  |  -  |  -  |  -  |
| State – grants  |  50,265  |  51,776  | 52,488 |
| Public Purpose Fund  |  9,925  |  14,950  | 14,950 |
| Case revenue  |  1,337  |  544  | 1,015 |
| Other income  |  1,799  |  1,602  | 1,867 |
| **Total revenue**  |  **88,061**  |  **94,366**  |  **95,021**  |

Table 2.2 Total expenditure breakdown ($’000)

|  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
| **Expenditure**  | **Q2** | **Q3** | **Q4 2023-24** |
| **2023-24** | **2023-24** | **projection** |
| Case expenditure (including ECCCF)  | (30,599) | (29,968) | (41,213) |
| Community Legal Centre payments  | (14,941) | (18,514) | (14,563) |
| Staff costs  | (32,858) | (32,820) | (38,417) |
| Administration  | (6,130) | (6,350) | (11,444) |
| Depreciation and Revaluation  | (574) | (568) | (1,017) |
| **Total Expenditure**  | **(85,102)** | **(88,220)** | **(106,655)** |