# Victoria Legal Aid 2024–25 quarter one report

# July – September 2024

## Message from the acting CEO

In quarter one 2024-25, we continued to see external system demand drivers impact demand levels for our legal services, which we will actively monitor as the year progresses. Our advocacy services continued to grow following the expansion of our Independent Mental Health Service to more offices. At the end of the quarter, we had a small operating deficit of $0.5 million reflecting our ongoing core funding shortfall.

We continued our work to support improvements to the system and better outcomes for the most marginalised in our community, including First Nations children and young people who are overrepresented in the justice system. Recently we made a submission to the Senate Inquiry examining the [outcomes and impacts of youth justice systems in Australia](https://www.aph.gov.au/Parliamentary_Business/Committees/Senate/Legal_and_Constitutional_Affairs/Incarceration47). Drawing on the experience of our specialist youth crime lawyers and our clients who have been involved in the youth justice system, [our submission](https://www.legalaid.vic.gov.au/first-nations-led-solutions-vital-transformational-change-young-people) made six recommendations highlighting the clear and compelling recommendations made by the Yoorrook Justice Commission. It encourages the government to listen to the voices of children, young people and their families in designing a system that helps keep children out of the system and ensure their human rights are protected.

We also made a [submission to the Inquiry into Family Violence orders](https://www.legalaid.vic.gov.au/improving-experiences-victim-survivors-family-law-system) that calls for investment in women’s legal services and Legal Aid family law and child support legal assistance, as well as further law reform and investment in programs for First Nations communities. The rate of family violence is continuing to grow, which was reflected in figures recently released by the Crime Statistics Agency. It is critical that victim-survivors in the family law system experience safe, accessible, inclusive services centred on their needs.

As part of National Legal Aid, [we welcomed the announcement by National Cabinet of additional funding](https://www.nationallegalaid.org/resources/national-legal-aid-statement-national-legal-aid-welcomes-announcement-of-additional-funding-for-legal-assistance-services/) for legal assistance services and the commitment to longer term funding under a new National Access to Justice Partnership (NAJP). We are currently awaiting further details on funding allocations for VLA and the sector which are being finalised.

Finally, our Legal Help service celebrated its 40-year anniversary. It started as a telephone advice service in 1984 and has since evolved as the primary intake point for legal assistance in Victoria. Over the years, the service was expanded to include the introduction of different language lines, priority lines for family violence clients and both in-person and webchat-based services. Recently, we [upgraded our online chat](https://www.legalaid.vic.gov.au/upgrading-online-chat-provide-better-service-help-seekers?utm_source=LAB&utm_medium=email&utm_campaign=Upgrading+our+online+chat+to+provide+a+better+service+LAB) to make it easier to use and provide a better service to help seekers. We will continue to modernise and tailor services to make them more responsive and sustainable.

**Rowan Mcrae**
Acting Chief Executive Officer

## Our services

Our client and community services are targeted towards 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 services including independent advocacy and specialist resolution services.

## Client services

In quarter one, we saw 29,934 unique clients (Table 1.1). As clients are only counted the first time they receive a legal assistance service in a financial year, our unique client count is always the highest at the start of the financial year and decreases as the year progresses. The current measure does not capture all the services VLA provides including information and independent advocacy services. VLA is working with the Department to improve our service performance measures for 2025-26.

Legal advice and minor assistance provided during the quarter was 11 per cent lower than last quarter. Higher level of vacancies in regional locations may be contributing to this result. Despite the lower result observed this quarter, VLA still continues its strong focus on early intervention services including our [Help Before Court](https://www.legalaid.vic.gov.au/help-before-court-criminal-charges) and [Pre-Court Engagement](https://www.legalaid.vic.gov.au/early-resolution-service-family-violence-matters) services.

Grants of legal assistance and Duty lawyer services were 4 per cent and 12 per cent lower than last quarter. System demand drivers affecting the criminal justice and child protection systems (including bail law reforms and lower child protection applications) continue to impact current demand levels. However, recent Criminal Statistics Agency’s (CSA) statistics for financial year 2023-24 show an increase in criminal offenses in the last 12 months which may impact future demand levels as this flows through the system. This will be monitored in the coming quarters. In addition, we continue to observe that cases are becoming increasingly complex which has resulted in some backlog of grant applications, however additional resources this quarter have helped address this.

Table 1.1 Unique client count and client services

| **Unique clients and client services** | **Q4** | **Q1** | **Q2 2024-25** |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
| **2023-24** | **2024-25** | **projection** |
| Unique clients1 [[1]](#footnote-2) | 14,963 | 29,934 | 25,220 |
| Legal advice and minor assistance | 8,925 | 7,973 | 8,884 |
| Duty lawyer services | 23,943 | 21,057 | 22,140 |
| Grants of legal assistance  | 10,480 | 10,052 | 10,010 |

## Community information and education services

Our Legal Help phone line and webchat service remains the key entry point for Victorians seeking legal assistance. The Legal Help team experienced higher demand during the quarter especially through the webchat channel. Recent recruitment helped to service this increased demand, with the number of Legal Help sessions delivered increasing by 7 per cent from last quarter (Table 1.2). Short-term work to modernise our Legal Help service continued during the quarter, which contributed to a higher combined wait time than last quarter (Table 1.2) but still within our external performance target. Work to modernise the Legal Help service will continue into the next quarter, resulting in some further disruptions to our service.

Beyond Legal Help, we also delivered 1,648 information sessions. These were mainly provided face-to-face at our offices or through our Help Before Court service.

VLA delivered 35 Community Legal Education sessions (Table 1.2) in quarter one. While it had been anticipated that fewer sessions would be delivered because of higher staff vacancies, the result was higher than expected due to more sessions being booked at various secondary schools.

‘Engaged sessions of legal information website pages’ increased by 3 per cent from last quarter (Table 1.2). There is not yet enough historical data available to make quarterly projections for this relatively new performance measure.

Table 1.2 Community information and education services

| **Services** | **Q4** | **Q1** | **Q2 2024-25** |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
| **2023-24** | **2024-25** | **projection** |
| Number of Legal Help sessions delivered  | 34,250 | 36,707 | 30,805 |
| Combined average wait time (minutes)  | 9:58 | 13:11 | 14:20 |
| Information sessions  | 33,969 | 31,294 | 25,246 |
| Community Legal Education sessions  | 84 | 35 | 25 |
| Engaged sessions[[2]](#footnote-3) of legal information website pages  | 287,044 | 294,149 | N/A |

## Independent advocacy services

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.

Since September 2023, our Independent Mental Health Advocacy (IMHA) service has operated on an ‘opt-out’ model. Since this model commenced, there has been a significant increase in demand for our services. IMHA is now present in Melbourne and eight other locations around Victoria. There is also a team of First Nations advocates working closely with the Victorian Aboriginal Legal Service, increasing access for First Nations consumers. The high demand for services during the quarter is expected to continue (Table 1.3).

Independent Family Advocacy and Support (IFAS) provides non-legal advocacy to parents and primary carers navigating the early stages of the child protection system. This service helps achieve better justice outcomes by diverting families from the court system in child protection matters. IFAS services were overall lower than last quarter (Table 1.3), due to staff vacancies rather than a change in demand. The recruitment of new advocates is expected to bolster service delivery levels next quarter.

Table 1.3 Independent advocacy services

| **Independent advocacy services** | **Q4** | **Q1** | **Q2 2024-25** |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
| **2023-24** | **2024-25** | **projection** |
| IMHA information and referral sessions | 16,651 | 17,150 | 17,100 |
| IMHA advocacy and self-advocacy | 13,782 | 13,536 | 13,500 |
| IFAS information and referral sessions  | 1,004 | 557 | 700 |
| IFAS advocacy and self-advocacy | 834 | 570 | 650 |

## Financial summary

In quarter one, our consolidated operating position was a small deficit of $0.5 million.

We are projecting a further deficit in 2024-25 which is being driven by a core funding shortfall that is not expected to be fully offset by an easing of external demand. Also contributing to this deficit is the timing of when we receive funding for our initiative projects as well as when that funding is spent, which is aligned with court activity and can span multiple years. Due to this timing issue, the funding received for these initiatives in previous financial years is also contributing to a higher than expected cash balance.

We project that our current cash reserves will be sufficient to meet this projected deficit in 2024-25 which defers the need for service reductions, however, drawing on cash reserves is not sustainable in the longer term. In the absence of additional funding, we will need to manage our cash carefully to ensure that we can meet our existing legal aid grant commitments of up to $72m (which have already been approved but where the work is yet to be completed) and future demand for core services. Otherwise, we may need to consult sector partners on possible reductions to court-based services.

Table 2.1 Total revenue breakdown ($’000)

| **Revenue**  | **Q4** | **Q1** | **Q2 2024-25** |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
| **2023-24** | **2024-25** | **projection** |
| Commonwealth Government – grants  | 31,141 | 26,051 | 25,994 |
| State Government – grants  | 52,626 | 48,846 | 49,096 |
| Public Purpose Fund - grants | 14,950 | 12,850 | 17,068 |
| Case revenue  | 1,435 | 784 | 1,016 |
| Other income  | 1,607 | 1,775 | 1,773 |
| **Total revenue**  | **101,759** | **90,306** | **94,947** |

Table 2.2 Total expenditure breakdown ($’000)

| **Expenditure**  | **Q4** | **Q1** | **Q2 2024-25** |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
| **2023-24** | **2024-25** | **projection** |
| Case expenditure  | (34,801) | (31,093) | (31,514) |
| Community Legal Centre payments  | (18,155) | (16,631) | (15,733) |
| Staff costs  | (35,019) | (35,864) | (39,168) |
| Administration  | (7,708) | (6,416) | (7,381) |
| Depreciation and Revaluation  | (1,389) | (811) | (936) |
| **Total Expenditure**  | **(97,072)** | **(90,815)** | **(94,731)** |

1. A unique client is an individual who has accessed one or more of our legal assistance services during the financial year and with whom a client-lawyer relationship was formed. We count our clients the first time we see them in the financial year only even though some clients may receive multiple services throughout the financial year. This definition does not include individuals who have 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 have attended one of our community legal education sessions. It also excludes individuals who have received one of our independent advocacy and specialist resolution services. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
2. 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. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)