

Victoria Legal Aid

Reconciliation Action Plan 2023–25

Mid-term report



RECONCILIATION
ACTION PLAN

INNOVATE



Victoria Legal Aid



‘Changing Ways’ (2022) Jackson H, Wadawurrung

When I do paintings I don't expect to make a story out of it but as I go along the story comes into my head. I grew up in Geelong and Warrnambool and swam everyday out near Stingray Bay to Penguin Island; it's deep, it's dangerous, it's exciting. The handprints are the many people over the years reaching into our oceans and taking what they want. My Mob only took what they needed, the newcomers took too much and destroyed our sea life. The splatters represent the blood that has been shed. The white lines are the connection back to where the turtles were born to lay their eggs, they go back and forth, they always go back.

The Torch

The artwork has been supplied by The Torch, a project which provides support to First Nations people with lived experience of the Victorian criminal legal system through art, cultural and arts vocational programs. By embracing program participants as artists, The Torch provides an avenue to change. www.thetorch.org.au

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Acknowledgement of Country

Victoria Legal Aid acknowledges the Traditional Custodians of the lands where we work and pay our respects to their Elders past and present. We recognise their continuing connection to and care for Country and the resilience and strength of First Nations communities across the state.

About our RAP

In October 2023, we launched our Reconciliation Action Plan (RAP) 2023–25. The RAP – our third since 2015 – represents our continued commitment to reconciliation and First Nations justice. It provides us with an opportunity to reflect on learnings from our first two RAPs and to embed these in how we seek to progress this important work.

This report outlines our progress against the RAP in its first 12 months, particularly around its four focus areas of relationships, respect, opportunities and governance.

Key developments

Relationships

We have worked with First Nations partners in designing a new priority legal helpline for First Nations people, to be launched in 2025.

The service is co-designed with the Victorian Aboriginal Legal Service (VALS) and Djirra, with Yamagigu Consulting providing service design recommendations. The project's steering committee is made up of representatives from VLA, VALS, Djirra, the Aboriginal Justice Caucus and the Regional Aboriginal Justice Advisory Committees Network.

Our Board has been meeting with the boards of VALS and Djirra, providing opportunities to discuss areas of shared concern and interest. We have also had monthly policy meetings with VALS and Djirra to discuss collaborative approaches to policy work, and continually sought opportunities to elevate Aboriginal community-controlled organisations in policy.

Respect

For NAIDOC Week, our First Nations Services team hosted a weaving workshop for staff held at our Melbourne office and run by Mayapa Weaving, a First Nations-run business. Staff, senior leaders and Board members also participated in the state-wide NAIDOC march.

Some of our regional offices have also participated in cultural learning days with local Aboriginal co-operatives in their respective regions. This included a walk through Budj Bim National Park and a cultural immersion day at Halls Gap.

Opportunities

On 1 October 2024, we had 52 First Nations staff, 58 per cent more than 12 months earlier in September 2023. First Nations staff now represent 3.8 per cent of our total workforce.

The First Nations Services team has grown, with the appointment of a new director and associate director, new staff and work to establish the team's vision and direction. The team is now a stand-alone directorate led by Executive Director Ashley Morris, which elevates First Nations leadership in our organisation while providing clear governance mechanisms for First Nations projects and initiatives.

We are pleased that a number of First Nations staff have had opportunities to engage in leadership and professional development thanks to the initiative of teams across the organisation looking for innovative ways to facilitate this. For example, our Family Dispute Resolution Service supported two First Nations staff to undertake a Graduate Diploma in Family Dispute Resolution Practice.

The expansion of our Aboriginal Community Engagement Officer program has seen the commencement of a team leader for the North region and ongoing recruitment for team leaders in the South-East and South-West.

Governance

We have made changes to our RAP reporting and governance structures. This includes the creation of a steering committee of senior leaders, including our Board RAP Champion, Robbie Campo, and a project oversight committee of staff leading key RAP projects. Both committees meet regularly to monitor progress and address challenges.

We relaunched our RAP Champions Network with new co-chairs and a refresh of the membership. This staff network of around 70 members enables passionate staff to be strong reconciliation advocates and good allies to First Nations people.

Members have committed to being active allies, promoting the RAP by supporting discussions within their teams, and implementing local initiatives aligned with racial justice. While network meetings are well attended, we will take steps to encourage broader and more active engagement in between network meetings.

Progress snapshot

In the first 12 months of RAP's implementation (September 2023 to September 2024), we were required to report on 93 deliverables which fell due.

Thirty-nine of these were one-off deliverables, requiring a final update on their implementation. Of these deliverables, 17 (43 per cent) were completed versus 22 (56 per cent) that remain incomplete.

The remaining 54 have quarterly, bi-annual or annual deadlines to reflect the ongoing nature of the work. Of those deliverables, 45 (83 per cent) were completed versus 9 (17 per cent) that were incomplete.

Twenty-eight (30 per cent) of all deliverables were not completed due to several factors, including insufficient reporting information, recruitment challenges or changing priorities from when the RAP was drafted as guided by the expertise of First Nations Services.

Key statistics

By September 2024, we saw:

- 58 per cent increase in First Nations staff
- nine staff in First Nations Services, up from three a year earlier
- three First Nations graduates completing practical legal training through First Nations graduate law program
- \$430,000 spent on procurement from First Nations businesses (two per cent of all procurement spending).

RELATIONSHIPS



70%

21 out of 30 deliverables complete

RESPECT



42%

8 out of 19 deliverables complete

OPPORTUNITIES



67%

14 out of 21 deliverables complete

GOVERNANCE



91%

21 out of 23 deliverables complete

Our progress

This section outlines the progress we have made on each of the 23 priority actions in the first year of the RAP. As we enter the plan's second year, our commitment to achieving our RAP goals remains an organisational priority.

RELATIONSHIPS

ACTION 1 – Establish and maintain mutually beneficial relationships with First Nations stakeholders and organisations

- Developed a paper for our Executive Management Group and Board on the meaning of self-determination.
- Reviewed current engagement and guidelines for work with Aboriginal community-controlled organisations and Regional Aboriginal Justice Advisory Committees.
- Worked closely with VALS and Djirra on development and design of a First Nations legal help phone line.

ACTION 2 – Build relationships through celebrating National Reconciliation Week (NRW)

- Hosted an all-staff event for NRW, which was one of the most highly attended staff events in recent years and attended by senior leaders and members of the Board, including Uncle Andrew Jackomos and Robbie Campo.
- Regional offices participated in Victorian Aboriginal Child Care Agency Morning Tea for Culture.

ACTION 3 – Promote reconciliation through our sphere of influence

- Drew links to our reconciliation commitment in our communications, such as when announcing the establishment of a First Nations Services directorate.
- Provided encouragement for other organisations to develop a RAP, with the Victorian Legal Services Board and Commissioner saying in their December 2023 newsletter that they endeavour to learn from our experience as they develop their first RAP.

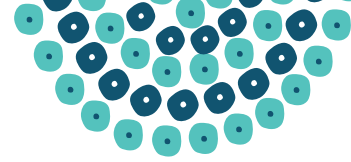
- Promoted our Equitable Briefing Strategy and Equity and Diversity List (which includes First Nations identification) and encouraged reconciliation work at the Victorian Bar.

ACTION 4 – Promote positive race relations through anti-racism and anti-discrimination strategies

- Launched our second Cultural Diversity and Anti-Racism Action Plan, which aims to move us beyond simple inclusion, committing to tangible short-term actions targeting both individual and systemic impacts of racism.
- Continued to build senior leaders' knowledge on racism and its harms, including through participation in cultural learning.

ACTION 5 – Ensure the development of collaborative efforts and partnerships with Aboriginal legal services are underpinned by principles of self-determination

- First Nations Services provided our Executive Management Group and Board with a paper aimed at increasing knowledge, confidence and organisational readiness to consider options for advancing First Nations self-determination at our organisation.
- We remain committed to respecting the expertise of, and allowing space for, existing external First Nations authority and governance structures to define what self-determination might look like at our organisation.
- As external Treaty processes unfold, First Nations Services will continue to undertake much-needed foundational work aimed at ensuring organisational readiness for the implementation of any resulting reforms.



ACTION 6 – Strengthen strategic advocacy on First Nations justice issues in collaboration with Aboriginal legal services, Aboriginal community-controlled organisations, the First Peoples’ Assembly of Victoria and the Yoorrook Justice Commission

- Our CEO and Director, First Nations Services meet regularly with VALS and Djirra CEOs to discuss priority issues and opportunities for collaboration.
- Continued to work closely with VALS and Djirra’s policy teams to align our policy agendas and explore opportunities for joint work.
- Our policy teams meet with VALS monthly to discuss priorities and relevant work. Our Family, Youth and Children’s Law team meets with Djirra quarterly.
- Ensured our strategic advocacy priorities identify and prioritise First Nations justice and reform, in consultation with First Nations Services and First Nations staff.
- The establishment of Manager, Policy, Advocacy and Reform role in First Nations Services team to plan, support and lead strategic advocacy and reform activities that pursue and progress First Nations justice in Victoria.

ACTION 7 – Continue joint VLA and VALS board meetings to identify opportunities for ongoing collaboration

- Continued joint VLA and VALS board meetings, with both boards committing to ongoing engagement.
- Positive outcomes included aligned advocacy on National Legal Assistance Partnership funding and other law reform activities.

ACTION 8 – Initiate joint VLA and Djirra board meetings to identify opportunities for ongoing collaboration

- Boards of VLA and Djirra have committed to ongoing engagement to build collaboration and support between the two organisations.

RESPECT

ACTION 9 – Increase understanding, value and recognition of First Nations cultures, histories, knowledge and rights through cultural learning

- Further work understanding our organisation’s cultural learning needs is required. We continue to be engaged in the development of a First Nations cultural capability framework, led by VALS, which will inform what this work looks like in 2025 and beyond.

ACTION 10 – Demonstrate respect to First Nations peoples by observing cultural protocols

- A Welcome to Country was organised for significant events, including the 2023 end of year staff event, opening of the new Sunshine office, International Women’s Day event and Bail Reforms Conference (hosted with VALS and Office of Public Prosecutions).
- An Acknowledgement of Country is included in the agenda of all meetings of the Executive Management Group and Senior Leadership Team and recorded in minutes.
- Other meetings in the organisation often include an Acknowledgment of Country.

ACTION 11 – Build respect for First Nations cultures and histories by celebrating NAIDOC Week

- First Nations Services hosted a weaving workshop held at our Melbourne office and run by Mayapa Weaving.
- Staff, senior leaders and Board members participated in the state-wide NAIDOC march.

ACTION 12 – Improve the accessibility, cultural safety and responsiveness of legally aided services for First Nations people

- Revisited the program logic of our Aboriginal Community Engagement Officer program to ensure it accurately reflects the program’s current state and is fit for purpose across all our locations in the state.
- First Nations Services is scoping further work to conduct an organisational readiness audit to assess cultural safety for First Nations lived experience experts engaged by us.

ACTION 13 – Improve the cultural safety of our workplaces for First Nations staff

- Updated requirements in our VLA and Me staff performance cycle to ensure all non-First Nations staff are required to complete cultural reflection in discussion with their manager.
- Some of our regional offices have participated in cultural learning days with local Aboriginal organisations.

OPPORTUNITIES

ACTION 14 – Improve employment outcomes by increasing First Nations recruitment, retention and professional development

- Fifty-eight per cent increase in the number of First Nations staff in our workforce since September 2023.
- A First Nations candidate participated in the 2024 intake of our staff leadership program, provided annually to 34 participants.
- Our Family Dispute Resolution Service supported two First Nations staff to undertake a Graduate Diploma in Family Dispute Resolution Practice.
- Two First Nations staff participated in the Hatchery’s annual First Nations leadership summit and a further group of First Nations staff were invited to attend a summit on First Nations leadership in the justice sector.

ACTION 15 – Improve First Nations supplier diversity to support improved economic and social outcomes

- Renewed our Kinaway Chamber of Commerce Platinum Partnership.
- Engaged 13 First Nations businesses across various projects and categories, including IT consumables, office furniture, office relocation services, professional advisory services, design, stationery and digital services.
- Continued to work closely with staff to identify new opportunities to engage First Nations businesses.

ACTION 16 – Continue to build the capacity and capability of the First Nations Services team

- Announced the establishment of First Nations Services as a stand-alone directorate in our organisation to elevate First Nations leadership while providing clear governance mechanisms for our First Nations projects and initiatives.
- First Nations Services team grew from three employees to nine since September 2023.
- Senior Policy and Projects Manager role renamed to Manager, Policy, Advocacy and Law Reform to demonstrate First Nations Services’ commitment to advocating for law reform for First Nations people.

ACTION 17 – Expand the Aboriginal Community Engagement Officer (ACEO) Program

- ACEO program logic and project plan for the expansion developed and endorsed.
- Implementation working group and steering committee being established to provide high-level oversight and support for the expansion.
- Recruitment of ACEO team leaders commenced, with team leader for the North region appointed and ongoing recruitment for team leaders in the South-East and South-West.

ACTION 18 – Review and improve current data collection practices with regards to First Nations people

- Met with VALS and Djirra to discuss our proposed approach to Indigenous Data Sovereignty and have in-principle approval to work together including considering how self-determination will influence the project governance.

GOVERNANCE

ACTION 19 – Establish and maintain effective mechanisms to drive implementation of RAP

- Steering committee made up of senior leaders, including Board member Robbie Campo, set up to meet four times a year and oversee implementation.
- Project oversight committee, made up of staff leading key RAP projects, meets monthly and reports to steering committee on progress and challenges.

ACTION 20 – Provide appropriate support for effective implementation of RAP commitments

- RAP Project Officer commenced in December 2023, providing secretariat support to RAP governance groups and coordinating reporting.
- RAP steering committee members, made up of senior leaders from each of our directorates, are responsible for providing support to their directorate's RAP deliverables.
- Relunched our RAP Champions Network with new co-chairs and a refresh of the membership, enabling passionate staff to be strong reconciliation advocates and good allies to First Nations people.

ACTION 21 – Ensure the voices and lived experiences of First Nations people are regularly informing service design and performance

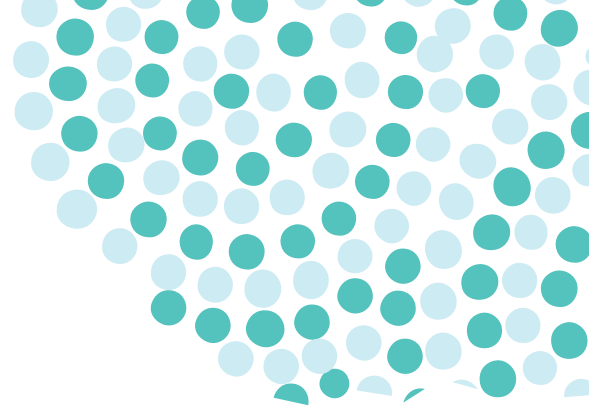
- First Nations Services is scoping further work to conduct an organisational readiness audit to assess cultural safety for First Nations lived experience experts engaged by us.

ACTION 22 – Build accountability and transparency through reporting RAP achievements, challenges and learnings both internally and externally

- Completed our RAP Impact Measurement Questionnaire and submitted it to Reconciliation Australia.
- Provided regular updates to all staff on RAP progress, as well as quarterly reports to the RAP Steering Committee.

ACTION 23 – Continue our reconciliation journey by developing our next RAP

- Began preliminary conversations internally about the most appropriate mechanism for progressing this work.
- Began the process of learning about self-determination as an organisation and reviewing and consolidating our existing First Nations strategies, including the Aboriginal Services Strategy 2020-25, Aboriginal Employment Strategy 2020-25, and Cultural Learning Strategy 2020-25 into a self-determination action plan.



Contact

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