# Victoria Legal Aid 2024–25 Quarter two report 1 October – 31 December 2024

## Message from the CEO

In quarter two, we delivered greater client and independent advocacy services to the Victorian community. We reported an operating surplus at the end of the quarter that was largely driven by the timing of external grant funding. We are still projecting a consolidated deficit for 2024–25 as the projected demand for services continues to exceed the level of core funding received. We will continue to carefully manage cash reserves to meet this funding shortfall in the short-term. This is not a sustainable strategy in the long-term and we will continue to work with the Department of Justice and Community Service on sustainable funding options.

In November 2024, we launched the [Being Believed, Being Heard Report](https://www.legalaid.vic.gov.au/hearing-and-believing-people-lived-experience-compulsory-mental-health-treatment) to bring together the stories of people who have experienced compulsory mental health treatment. The report highlighted common issues and identified priority areas in line with the findings of the Royal Commission into Victoria’s mental health system. We will continue to advocate for the reduced use of compulsory treatments and a mental health system that respects people’s rights.

In recognition of International Day for the Elimination of Violence Against Women in November, we launched the [Evaluation of Victoria Legal Aid’s Specialist Family Violence Courts Legal Practice Model](https://www.legalaid.vic.gov.au/best-practice-legal-services-helping-reduce-family-violence-risk-victoria). The evaluation found that services provided by Victoria Legal Aid and our community legal centre partners in five of the Victorian specialist family courts have holistically supported clients, helped address people’s non-legal needs and contributed to improved safety. We hope that ongoing funding will be made available to extend the model to all 13 specialist family violence courts across the State, so that a greater number of clients experiencing family violence can be reached.

We support recent calls to repeal the Commonwealth Government’s mandatory policy to cancel a person’s visa and provide them with 28 days to respond. We acknowledge that this causes systemic barriers for many people, and we welcomed the recent landmark [High Court of Australia decision](https://www.legalaid.vic.gov.au/high-court-ruling-visa-cancellation-people-without-legal-capacity) that deemed notices of visa cancellation to be invalid where the recipient lacks legal capacity to respond to that notice.

Finally, the State Government has announced a review of the bail law changes introduced in March 2024. We recognise the resilience of the First Nations communities who fought for those changes following years of advocacy. We urge government to not overlook the devasting impacts of the previous bail laws and to listen to the practice experience of the legal assistance sector, Aboriginal community-controlled organisations and the Aboriginal Justice Caucus when considering any changes.

**Toby Hemming**
Chief Executive Officer

## Our services

Our client and community services are targeted towards people facing disadvantage and 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, communication legal education and information services and independent advocacy and specialist resolution services.

### Client services

In quarter two, we delivered more client services across all service types (Table 1.1). Our legal advice and minor assistance services include growth in our early intervention services. We also experienced greater demand for our grants of legal assistance and duty lawyer services in line with rising criminal offences.

We delivered services to a total of 19,488 unique clients (Table 1.1). Our unique client count is always lower than the previous quarter as clients are only counted the first time they receive a service in the financial year. The current measure does not capture our information and independent advocacy services. We have been working with the Department of Justice and Community Safety Victoria to improve our service performance measures.

Table 1.1 Unique client count and client services

| **Unique clients and client services** | **Q1 2024–25** | **Q2 2024–25** | **Q3 2024–25** |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
| **actual** | **actual** | **projection** |
| Unique clients[[1]](#footnote-2) | 29,934 | 19,488 | 18,853 |
| Legal advice and minor assistance | 7,973 | 9,164 | 8,599 |
| Duty lawyer services | 21,057 | 21,533 | 21,779 |
| Grants of legal assistance  | 10,052 | 10,378 | 10,144 |

### Community information and education services

Our Legal Help phone line and webchat service remains the key entry point for Victorians seeking legal assistance. In November 2024, we launched our new Legal Help operating model to improve the accessibility of Legal Help’s services to help seekers. Temporary disruptions leading up to the launch meant a slight drop in legal information services provided and minor increase in wait times the number (Table 1.2). We expect higher volume of services to be delivered and an improvement in wait times next quarter.

During the quarter, we delivered 1,658 information sessions outside of Legal Help’s channels that were both face-to-face sessions at our offices and through our Help Before Court service.

In quarter two, we delivered 47 community legal education sessions (Table 1.2) which included a series of sessions delivered to conclude the school year. We expect fewer sessions early next quarter due to schools re-opening later January.

 ‘Engaged sessions of legal information website pages’ were lower than expected this quarter (Table 1.2) due to the impacts of Google AI that have similarly affected other government agency websites. Less users were directed to our website due to Google AI showing users information in search results instead. We will continue to monitor these impacts as the year progresses. There is still not enough historical data available to make quarterly projections for this relatively new performance measure.

Table 1.2 Community information and education services

| **Community information and education services** | **Q1 2024–25** | **Q2 2024–25** | **Q3 2024–25** |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
| **actual** | **actual** | **projection** |
| Number of Legal Help sessions delivered  | 36,707 | 34,789 | 36,815 |
| Combined average wait time (minutes)  | 13:11 | 14:57 | 13:00 |
| Information sessions  | 31,294 | 28,281 | 34,531 |
| Community legal education sessions  | 35 | 47 | 30 |
| Engaged sessions[[2]](#footnote-3) of legal information website pages  | 294,149 | 230,048 | N/A |

### Independent advocacy services

At Victoria Legal Aid we provide 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.

Our Independent Mental Health Advocacy services have continued to rise (Table 1.3). This has trended upwards since the introduction of the 'opt-out' model in September 2023. Our services have also expanded from our Melbourne office to 8 other locations across Victoria. This includes a dedicated team of First Nations advocates who work closely with the Victorian Aboriginal Legal Service to increase access for First Nations consumers.

Independent Family Advocacy and Support provides vital non-legal advocacy to parents and primary carers navigating the early stages of the child protection system. We recruited new advocates during the quarter which enabled us to deliver more services (Table 1.3).

Table 1.3 Independent advocacy services

| **Independent advocacy services** | **Q1 2024–25** | **Q2 2024–25** | **Q3 2024–25** |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
| **actual** | **actual** | **projection** |
| Independent Mental Health Advocacy information and referral sessions | 17,150 | 17,109 | 17,100 |
| Independent Mental Health Advocacy advocacy and self-advocacy | 13,536 | 13,445 | 13,400 |
| Independent Family Advocacy and Support information and referral sessions  | 557 | 576 | 600 |
| Independent Family Advocacy and Support advocacy and self-advocacy | 570 | 812 | 800 |

## Our financials

In quarter two, our consolidated operating position was a surplus of $1.5 million.

This surplus is driven by the timing of our external grant funding which is primarily received in the first half of the financial year. We still project a consolidated deficit for 2024–25 as we expect demand for our services to exceed the level of core funding we receive.

Our cash reserves are expected to be sufficient to meet the projected deficit in 2024–25. This will defer the need for immediate service reductions in the short-term. The drawdown of our cash reserves is not considered a sustainable strategy in the long-term. Careful management of our cash reserves remains our critical focus to ensure that we can meet existing grant commitments. We will continue to work with the Department of Justice and Community Service on sustainable funding options. Without sufficient ongoing core funding, we will need to consider potential reductions in court-based services in consultation with our sector partners.

**Table 2.1 Total revenue breakdown ($’000**)

| **Revenue**  | **Q1 2024–25** | **Q2 2024–25** | **Q3 2024–25** |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
| **actual** | **actual** | **projection** |
| Commonwealth Government – grants  | 26,051 | 26,070 | 26,010 |
| State Government – grants  | 48,846 | 49,096 | 50,160 |
| Public Purpose Fund - grants | 12,850 | 17,068 | 16,176 |
| Case revenue  | 784 | 1,495 | 1,016 |
| Other income  | 1,775 | 1,779 | 1,778 |
| **Total revenue**  | **90,306** | **95,508** | **95,140** |

Table 2.2 Total expenditure breakdown ($’000)

| **Expenditure**  | **Q1 2024–25** | **Q2 2024–25** | **Q3 2024–25** |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
| **actual** | **actual** | **projection** |
| Case expenditure  | (31,093) | (31,013) | (32,806) |
| Community legal centre payments  | (16,631) | (15,733) | (17,506) |
| Staff costs  | (35,864) | (39,264) | (37,319) |
| Administration  | (6,416) | (7,106) | (7,669) |
| Depreciation and revaluation  | (811) | (906) | (936) |
| **Total expenditure**  | **(90,815)** | **(94,022)** | **(96,237)** |

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 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, through our Help Before Court service 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)