# Decorative cover including Victoria Legal Aid logo and text which reads "Corporate Plan 2023–24".About Us

Victoria Legal Aid is a statutory authority that serves the broader community by providing information, legal advice, and education with a focus on the prevention and early resolution of legal problems. We prioritise more intensive services, such as legal advice, legal representation, non-legal advocacy, and family dispute resolution for those who need it most. We recognise the intersections between legal and social issues in how we do our work and advocacy. We also work to dismantle the barriers that prevent people from accessing the justice system by participating in systemic reforms and strategic advocacy.

# Our vision

A fair, just, and inclusive society where people can get help with their legal problems and have a stronger voice in how laws and legal processes affect them.

# Our purpose

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 values

### Fairness

We are committed to fairness in society and facilitating fair and equitable access to legal support.

### Care

We care about our clients and the community and approach our work informed by the effects that trauma and discrimination can have. We learn from people affected about what matters most. We treat each other with kindness and respect.

### Courage

We approach our work with strength and confidence. We are guided by our values and what matters most to our clients and society.

### Inclusion

We work to provide an inclusive environment for clients, staff, and referral partners.

# Our outcomes

Victoria Legal Aid has five outcome pillars that it will focus on over the next seven years (2022-2030):

1. **Clients:** Clients have increased access to justice
2. **Community:** The community has an improved legal understanding
3. **Legal assistance sector:** The legal assistance sector is collaborative and coordinated
4. **Laws and systems:** Laws and systems are fairer
5. **Victoria Legal Aid:** Victoria Legal Aid is effective and sustainable

# Acknowledgement of country

This submission 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.

# Message from Chairperson and CEO

We are now entering the second year of our Strategy 2022–26 (Strategy 26) and we remain committed to providing our clients with sustainable and effective services. Over the next 12 months, we will be concentrating our efforts on reviewing and modernising services to ensure they are best meeting client need and ensuring our staff and practice partners are equipped to deliver high quality services.

Thanks to funding received from the state government we will increase our Independent Mental Health Advocacy and Mental Health and Disability Law services to better support and deliver services to those experiencing mental health issues. Throughout the year we will also improve how we deliver legal advice and information through our Legal Help service, ensuring that services align better with client need. With courts now having returned to their pre-covid activity, it is important that we ensure that clients can equitably access services that are appropriate and meet their needs. We will continue to deliver and enhance pre-court services such as Help Before Court and integrate them with our duty lawyer services. We will also implement recommendations from the independent review of our remand services to make sure they are culturally appropriate, safe, and equitable.

We also look forward to the National Legal Assistance Partnership Review to be undertaken in the lead up to the 2024 Federal Budget. This will give us the opportunity to identify additional investments needed in the legal assistance sector, and the systems in which we work.

Strategy 26 highlights VLA’s vision for a fair, just and inclusive society where people can easily access legal services when they need them. This vision centres our work on improving access to both our services, as well as fairer laws and systems.

Every day in our work in courts across the state, our lawyers and staff see systemic injustice and unfairness as a result of the ongoing impacts of structural racism in our justice system, including through the overrepresentation of our First Nations clients in the child protection and criminal justice systems. Over the coming 12 months, we will continue to use our evidence base to support the advocacy of First Nations communities and truth-telling and treaty processes in Victoria, as well as progressing our strategic advocacy priorities such as bail reform, raising the age of criminal responsibility, and changes to the child protection system that support families to stay together where it is safe to do so.

In line with our continued commitment to improving outcomes for First Nations clients and addressing barriers to accessing our services, this year we will launch our third Reconciliation Action Plan. The actions detailed in this Plan will include the expansion of our Aboriginal Community Engagement Officer program, developing cultural competency standards for our staff and private practitioners and the establishment of a specialist First Nations Legal Helpline.

Over the past few years, we have made progress towards being a more inclusive and diverse organisation. However, we understand that more needs to be done. It is important that both our staff and clients are working in, and experience, environments that are safe, inclusive, and equitable.

We will continue to implement the recommendations from the Victorian Equal Opportunity and Human Rights Commission (VEOHRC) review of our sexual harassment policy and processes and work to improve confidence in raising inappropriate behaviours. We will also undertake our third Gender Diversity and Inclusion survey and evaluate our progress against our inaugural Cultural Diversity and Inclusion Strategy and our Anti-Racism Action plan, laying the foundation for our next Inclusion and Anti-Racism Strategy. This work will help us continue our journey to embedding diverse and inclusive practices, systems, and approaches in all aspects of our work.

Getting the fundamentals right will be key in allowing us to deliver high quality services in the most effective and efficient way. The pandemic has changed how and where staff work and we need to develop new ways of providing support to our staff.

We will upgrade and modernise our technology with the rollout our case management system across the organisation and develop our new grants management product—ensuring our technology is best meeting client, staff and practice partner needs. With the significant increase in cyber security threats within Australia over the last year, we want to strengthen our cyber security practices through implementation of our cyber security strategy, and strengthened data security practices to protect client and staff information.

### Our 2023–24 budget

In 2023–24, court activity is expected to continue to ramp-up to tackle the backlog of matters already in the system, resulting in a projected financial deficit of ($16.5m). However, our cash balance is unusually high due to reduced court activity during the pandemic. In the short term, we will use these funds to meet demand and our deferred grant commitments. But these cash reserves need to be carefully managed to ensure we can continue to meet our ongoing commitments.

In 2023–24 we have budgeted $333.6 million in revenue, an increase of $42.7 million on the 2022–23 budget. Our short-term revenue outlook has improved due to an increase in interest rates leading to the reversal of funding cuts and one-off project investment from the Public Purpose Fund (PPF). This has allowed us to defer service reductions, however, we continue to face significant uncertainties. A weaker economic outlook and possible interest rate movements create volatility in our funding sources, leading to potential revenue reductions.

Additional funding announced in previous Federal and State Budgets are welcomed to expand service delivery in specific areas including Independent Mental Health Advocacy services, Drug Court related support, assisting people through the Help Before Court and Early Resolution Services to receive early criminal and family violence related advice, and Specialist Family Violence Court related help in new locations across Victoria. This funding supports those specific programs and does not increase our core funding.

**Table 1: 2023–24 revenue by source ($m)**

| **Source of revenue** | **2022–23 Budget $ million** | **2023–24 Budget $ million** | **Growth %** |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
| State Government – VLA | 140.0 | 148.7 | 6 |
| State Government – Community Legal Centre | 27.1 | 31.1 | 15 |
| Commonwealth Government | 69.2 | 71.2 | 3 |
| Commonwealth Government – Community Legal Centre | 25.8 | 26.5 | 3 |
| Public Purpose Fund | 23.1 | 47.0 | 103 |
| Case revenue (incl client contributions) & other income | 5.7 | 9.0 | 58 |
| **Total revenue** | **290.9** | **333.5** | **15** |

In 2023–24, the budgeted expenditure of $350 million is an increase of $40.1 million on the 2022–23 budget. The case expenditure budget increase reflects the projected ramp-up in court activity as they continue to tackle the backlog of matters already in the system.

The increase in Community Legal Centre expenditure results from increased revenue from the Commonwealth and State Government in 2023–24. Similarly, increased employee-related expenditure primarily reflects new positions funded through State Government budget initiatives, including the Independent Mental Health Advocacy services and Specialist Family Violence Court related help in new locations across Victoria.

The increase in other operating expenditure is due to one-off costs to enhance our digital legal services, implement our cyber resilience strategy and strengthen the security of our data through improved data disposal and access monitoring processes.

**Table 2: 2023–24 expenditure by category ($m)**

| **Expenditure category** | **2022–23 Budget $ million** | **2023–24 Budget $ million** | **Growth %** |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
| Case expenditure | 123.5 | 134.6 | 9 |
| Employee-related expenditure | 105.8 | 124.3 | 17 |
| Community Legal Centre payments | 52.9 | 57.6 | 9 |
| Other operating expenditure | 24.9 | 30.7 | 23 |
| Depreciation and amortisation | 2.8 | 2.8 | 0 |
| **Total expenditure** | **309.9** | **350.0** | **13** |

### Our financial outlook

Beyond 2023–24, longer term projections continue to highlight that core funding is insufficient to meet the projected demand. 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 demand-based funding model to address the volatility in our current funding arrangements and meet the increasing demand for our services that exceed core funding.

### Our client services

Our unique client and service counts continue to be higher compared to 2022–23 reflecting a ramp-up in court activity to address the backlog of matters. Despite the increases in service performance, we may not meet the 2023–24 BP3 targets which reflect pre-pandemic service expectations. In general terms, there are many contributing external and internal factors which impact service performance including disruption caused with operational and technology changes such as new digital work practices, new pre-court service models and court processes, along with recruitment challenges and onboarding new staff has made it difficult to forecast future demand. In 2023–24 we will mature our demand forecasting to better align with court activity and will continue to engage with the courts to ensure we continue to meet the needs of our clients.

In addition, VLA has been funded in recent State Budgets to provide specialist resolution and advocacy services which form a critical part of our service delivery and focus on early intervention and prevention to help clients resolve their issue before it escalates or ends up at court. Although reported in our Annual Report – these services do not form part of the BP3 reported figures.

Non-legal advocacy is a critical part of our service delivery. It is a service provided by allied professionals to support people to understand and enact their rights, navigate systems, access the services they need to address legal and psychosocial needs and present their views and preferences to decision makers, for example, to mental health clinicians or child protection practitioners. From 1 September 2023, the new *Mental Health and Wellbeing Act* 2022 (Vic) will come into effect, and non-legal advocacy for people receiving or at risk of compulsory mental health treatment will become an ‘opt out’ service model. VLA’s Independent Mental Health Advocacy (IMHA) service has been designated as the primary provider of non-legal advocacy under the Act and will be expanded respond to the increase in the number of consumers accessing the service. This is likely to result in a tripling of IMHA’s current Key Performance Indicators and will be set prior to the commencement of the new Act. Current KPIs for the service are the delivery of 6000 high intensity services and 14,000 low intensity services. The coming year will be a significant establishment phase for the expanded service and will help build understanding of demand.

During 2022–23, VLA identified some inconsistencies with how we collect our data that contributed to some under-reporting of VLA services for this year. We engaged a consultant to undertake a review who recommended improvements to our data management practices. We will commence the implementation of these recommendations in 2023–24. In the interim, a conservative adjustment has been made to some of the 2022–23 actuals, as recommended in the review, to reflect the projected under-reported services.

**Table 3: Budget Paper 3 Performance Measures**

| **Measure** | **2021**–**22 actual** | **2022**–**23 actual** | **2023–24 target** |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
| **Unique clients** | 80,547 | 86,321 | 105,000 |
| **Community Legal Education and Information Services (excl. family violence)** | 84,100 | 97,418[[1]](#footnote-2) | 102,000 |
| **Community Legal Education and Information Services – family violence–related services** | 19,373 | 21,675[[2]](#footnote-3) | 27,000 |
| **Duty Lawyer Services (excl. family violence)** | 36,200 | 58,044[[3]](#footnote-4) | 70,853 |
| **Grants of legal assistance provided (excl. family violence)** | 29,305 | 28,716 | 32,900 |
| **Legal advice and minor assistance (excl. family violence)** | 23,531 | 25,978 | 41,347 |
| **Family violence legal services** | 47,433 | 59,540[[4]](#footnote-5) | 46,000 |
| **Client satisfaction (per cent)** | 67% | 62% | 80% |
| **Average wait time to Legal Help** | 11.23 mins | 8.54 | <15 mins |

# Our 2023–24 priorities

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

### Strategic direction 1 – Clients

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| **Priority** | **Activities** | **Sub-outcome** |
| Strengthen access to non-legal advocacy and legal assistance in the Mental Health Tribunal for people facing compulsory mental health treatment | Increase our Independent Mental Health Advocacy and Mental Health and Disability Law services to better support and deliver services to those experiencing mental health issues | 1.2 Clients equitably access timely legal and related services, including early intervention and preventative services that meet their needs and capabilities |
| Strengthen regional service delivery | Expand our services in the Assessment and Referral Court to Bendigo, Ballarat and Heidelberg Magistrates Courts | 1.2 Clients equitably access timely legal and related services, including early intervention and preventative services that meet their needs and capabilities |
| Modernise our Sunshine and the Mildura offices to enable improved service delivery | 1.2 Clients equitably access timely legal and related services, including early intervention and preventative services that meet their needs and capabilities |
| Enhance and develop services for First Nations clients | Expand and enhance services and for First Nations clients through the implementation of our Reconciliation Action Plan 3 and responding to the death in custody coronial inquest findings | 1.3 First Nations clients experience culturally safe legal services and increased access to justice |
| Review and update remand services to ensure they are culturally appropriate, safe, accessible, inclusive, and equitable | Implement recommendations from the independent review of our remand services | 1.4 Clients experience culturally safe, accessible, inclusive, and respectful services |
| Ensure early intervention services are best meeting client needs and assisting them to address or prevent legal problems | Continue and enhance Help Before Court and integrate with at-court duty lawyer services | 1.2 Clients equitably access timely legal and related services, including early intervention and preventative services that meet their needs and capabilities |
| Focus on lived experience leadership in service design implementation, evaluation and strategic advocacy | Use lived experience to design and deliver services within Mental Health and Disability Law, Independent Mental Health Advocacy, Victims Legal Services, Child Protection and remand services | 1.5 Clients have a strong voice in services and systems affecting them |
| Strengthen the delivery of Child Protection and Family Law and Family Violence legal services across Victoria | Expand and enhance our Family Law, Child Protection, Family Violence services | 1.2 Clients equitably access timely legal and related services, including early intervention and preventative services that meet their needs and capabilities |

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

### Strategic direction 2 – Community

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| **Priority** | **Activities** | **Sub-outcome** |
| Improve access for clients and the community to legal aid services and ensure services are sustainable | Enhance our Legal Help service to provide timelier and client-centred services | 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** |
| Continuing to improve relationships with private practitioners and create better work practices | Explore options to improve private practitioner engagement and participation on VLA’s practitioner panels | 3.1 The legal assistance sector works together to deliver coordinated and responsive services and advocacy |
| Establish regional networks for panel practitioners to enhance communication, collaboration and professional development opportunities | 3.1 The legal assistance sector works together to deliver coordinated and responsive services and advocacy |
| Work with our partners to improve service provision and influence system reform | Contribute to the review of the National Legal Assistance Partnership Agreement review and enhance our advocacy on matters of national interest | 3.3 The legal assistance sector shares and uses evidence to design and deliver services |
| Work with CLCs and other sector partners to deliver services in Melbourne’s West | Continue to participate in the collaboration in the west project including the establishing an external forum and participating in Wyndham Justice Precinct planning | 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 10 through our Strategic Advocacy Priorities.

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

### Strategic direction 5 – VLA

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| **Priority** | **Activities** | **Sub-outcome** |
| Pursue sustainable funding | Respond to and apply the Public Understanding of Law Survey findings and further mature the demand funding model | 5.4 VLA is equipped with sustainable resources and technology, that reduce our environmental impact and enable us to deliver services |
| Work towards improving cultural safety and inclusion, applying an ‘intersectional lens’ | Implement actions in our Diversity and Inclusion framework including develop our new Cultural Diversity and Anti Racism plan, review our recruitment practices, improving our diversity and inclusion training and our baseline data sets | 5.3 VLA is a safe, inclusive, and equitable organisation, with diverse and skilled staff |
| Improve service quality for clients through better assurance and improved technology | Strengthen quality assurance and financial controls to ensure the Legal Aid Fund is not susceptible to fraud or corruption | 5.4 VLA is equipped with sustainable resources and technology, that reduce our environmental impact and enable us to deliver services |
| Commence development of a new grants management product | 5.4 VLA is equipped with sustainable resources and technology, that reduce our environmental impact and enable us to deliver services |
| Ensure cyber and data security | Implement our cyber resilience strategy and strengthen the security of our data through improved data disposal and access monitoring processes | 5.4 VLA is equipped with sustainable resources and technology, that reduce our environmental impact and enable us to deliver services |
| Invest in our staff and technology to develop our legal practice fundamentals to provide clients with better quality services and create more efficient work practices | Enhance practice fundamentals through professional development for our lawyers | 5.3 VLA is a safe, inclusive, and equitable organisation with diverse and skilled staff |
| Rollout of case management system across the organisation | 5.4 VLA is equipped with sustainable resources and technology, that reduce our environmental impact and enable us to deliver services |

## 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 work collaboratively with Aboriginal community-controlled organisations to inform our advocacy and reform work, and support truth-telling and treaty processes in Victoria.
2. Our advocacy is shaped by the experience 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 people’s experiences of discrimination and inequity.
4. We acknowledge and challenge structural discrimination, with a particular focus on structural racism, to improve access to justice and build fairer laws and systems.

**Our strategic advocacy priorities:**

1. Work with First Nations communities and communities of colour to advocate to end their over-criminalisation and disproportionate representation in the youth justice and child protection systems.
2. Bail, sentencing and summary offence reforms to ensure that imprisonment is a sanction of last resort and to reduce involvement in the criminal justice system.
3. Raise the age of criminal responsibility to 14 without delay and embed the necessary supports children and young people need to thrive.
4. Strengthen police accountability and criminal justice system oversight.
5. Mental health reforms that promote consumer rights, embed consumer leadership and increase accountability, to ensure we work toward the elimination of compulsory treatment and seclusion and restrictive practices.
6. Strengthen rights and accountability across Federal systems, with a particular focus on migration and the National Disability Insurance Scheme.
7. A self-determined approach to the welfare of First Nations children.
8. Reforms to the child protection system 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 2023–24 priorities and activities align with our Outcomes Framework, which defines our work’s intended outcomes – the difference that we want our services to make for our clients and the Victorian community. We will monitor progress against our 2023–24 priorities throughout the year and how they contribute to these longer-term outcomes.

## Infographic of VLA's Outcomes Framework. It reads: 1. Clients have increased access to justice 1.1. Clients are assisted to address or prevent legal problems 1.2. Clients equitably access timely legal and related services, including early intervention and preventative services, that meet their needs and capabilities 1.3. First Nations clients experience culturally safe legal services and increased access to justice 1.4. Clients experience culturally safe, accessible, inclusive, and respectful services 1.5. Clients have a strong voice in services and systems affecting them 2. Improved legal understanding in the community 2.1. Community members have improved understanding and capability to address or prevent legal problems 2.2. Community members access reliable, timely and targeted legal information that meets their needs and capabilities 3. Collaborative legal assistance sector 3.1. The legal assistance sector works together to deliver coordinated and responsive services and advocacy 3.2. VLA effectively supports self-determination of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander legal services 3.3. The legal assistance sector shares and uses evidence to design and deliver services 4. Fairer laws and systems 4.1. Laws and policies address systemic injustices and improve equality for clients and communities 4.2. Changes in practices by government, courts, tribunals, police, corrections, and service providers to be people-centred and embed self-determination 5. Effective and sustainable Victoria Legal Aid 5.1. VLA services and advocacy are shaped by people with lived experience 5.2. VLA practices are culturally safe and embed First Nations peoples’ self-determination 5.3. VLA is a safe, inclusive, and equitable organisation, with diverse and skilled staff 5.4. VLA is equipped with sustainable resources and technology, that reduce our environmental impact and enable us to deliver services 5.5. VLA’s data capabilities are strengthened to support outcomes and evidence-based services.

1. Adjusted by 3,299 information services. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
2. Adjusted by 734 family violence related information services. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
3. Adjusted by 2,354 duty lawyer services. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
4. Adjusted by 5,084 duty lawyers service and 225 legal advice and minor work services. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)