



CORPORATE PLAN 2020-21

Acknowledgement of Country

Victoria Legal Aid acknowledges the Traditional Custodians of the land where we work and pays respect to their Elders both past and present. We recognise their continuing connection to Country and the resilience and strength of Victoria's Aboriginal communities.

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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 legal services, such as legal advice and representation, to those who need it the most. We recognise the intersections between legal and social issues in the way we do our work and advocate for change. We also work to address the barriers that prevent people from accessing the justice system by participating in systemic reforms and strategic advocacy.

Our vision

A fair and just society where rights and responsibilities are upheld.

Our purpose

To make a difference for clients and the community, through the provision of effective legal services and collaborative leadership of a strong and dynamic legal assistance sector.

Our values

Fairness

We stand up for what is fair and we aim to be fair when making choices about which people we help and how we help them.

Care

We care about our clients and the community in which we live, and we look out for, and take care of, each other.

Courage

We act with courage backed by evidence about what is best for clients and the community, and we act with courage to be the best we can be.

Our statutory objectives

Victoria Legal Aid was established under the *Legal Aid Act 1978* with the objectives to:

- provide legal aid in the most effective, economic and efficient manner
- manage our resources to make legal aid available at a reasonable cost to the community and on an equitable basis throughout the state
- ensure the coordination of the provision of legal aid so that it responds to the legal and related needs of the community
- ensure the coordination of the provision of legal assistance information so that the information responds to the legal and related needs of the community, including by being accessible, current, high quality and of sufficient breadth
- provide the community with improved access to justice and legal remedies
- pursue innovative means of providing legal aid directed at minimising the need for individual legal services in the community.

The year ahead

This year marks the third year of Strategy 22. While the first two years were focused on implementing priority actions to address our strategic goals, this year will be different. The devastating bushfires in the east and northeast of Victoria, followed by the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic in early 2020, have had a serious impact on our community and similarly caused significant disruption to the justice system and the services that we deliver.

This year much of our focus will be on responding and adapting to these disruptions, while ensuring that we continue to deliver essential legal services to the community and progress our Strategy 22 goals.

The impact of the pandemic also coincided with the ongoing challenges with our financial sustainability. Last year we developed strategies to ensure that we remained financially sustainable. These too have been impacted by the pandemic due to changes to service delivery across the justice system, the deferral of many court cases and their delayed expenditure and the delay in finalising the State Budget. These dual pressures mean that there will be a lot of uncertainty over the next 12 months, which makes planning for the year ahead more challenging than other years.

Our effort over the first part of 2020 was focused on responding to the bushfires and then responding and adapting to the pandemic to enable us to deliver our services with as little disruption as possible and ensuring we remained financially sustainable. Our efforts over 2020–21 will be more targeted than in previous years. First and foremost, they will be geared towards transitioning from the pandemic and developing innovative operating and service delivery models, that respond to the impacts of COVID-19 to produce better outcomes for our clients. This includes influencing lasting change in other parts of the justice system. Our regional offices play a vital role in servicing the community, providing professional and timely advice to those living in rural and remote parts of Victoria and service delivery in the regions remains a focus. We will also continue to focus on our financial sustainability to ensure we operate within our financial means. The remainder of our focus will be on a smaller number of high priority initiatives that are essential to our most vulnerable clients, those recovering from other disasters and to safeguard the health and wellbeing of our staff.

During 2019–20, we developed three key strategies as part of the Corporate Plan to underpin how we work and how we develop services: the Client First Strategy, our second Reconciliation Action Plan, and our first Cultural Diversity and Inclusion Strategy. With the Black Lives Matter movement again highlighting the ongoing systemic racism and oppression that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and people from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds continue to face, these strategies are now more important ever. As an organisation that works to redress the inequalities of laws on people experiencing disadvantage and vulnerability, we cannot ignore or fail to acknowledge the ongoing and disproportionate effect the law has on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities, and on culturally and linguistically diverse communities.

With the foundational work done through the development of these key strategies, in 2020–21 our focus will be on improving our cultural competency and enhancing our cultural safety. One way we will do this is to increase the representation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people within our workforce, consistent with our recently released Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Employment Strategy. This will ensure we better reflect the clients we serve. We will also undertake organisation-wide cultural learning, with the expectation that this will contribute to a more culturally safe organisation for our clients, staff and colleagues working at, and engaging with, VLA. Becoming a culturally competent

organisation will take many years. These steps, and the many other actions we will implement from our strategies, will help us along the path to cultural competency.

In recognition of the ongoing uncertainty and the delay to the State Budget, we will review this Corporate Plan at its midpoint. This will provide us with the opportunity to update the plan depending on what the landscape looks like following the release of the State Budget. This is an unusual step, but an important one so we remain agile and able to transparently respond to new risks and challenges.

Our 2020–21 budget

We are pleased to receive one off COVID-19 specific funding from both state and federal governments. These funds ensure many vulnerable Victorians have access to justice and receive fair, equitable treatment in the justice system, which is critical in times of crisis. We are also pleased to see the new National Legal Assistance Partnership (NLAP) was agreed by the state government in May 2020. This provides certainty of federal funding for the next five years.

We continue to face the challenge of growing demand on the justice system due to factors such as population growth and increasing case complexity, beyond what we can deliver within existing funding. This is coupled with the added complexity of the flow on effects of COVID-19 – with the State Budget being delayed and the uncertainty around the budget outcomes. The effects of COVID-19 have also resulted in the deferral of many court cases and their expenditure. However, these commitments will result in higher case expenditure from next financial year as system capacity returns.

Compounding these challenges is the fall in the investment market and interest rates, which has impacted the funding available from the Public Purpose Fund. The Legal Services Board manage this fund. This will have a considerable impact on VLA, along with many other agencies in the justice system, given we receive a significant part of our funding from this source. We are keen to work with government on a more sustainable funding model that is less reliant on the volatile nature of the markets and the economy.

All these changes mean we had to reassess our planned savings measures until we have more certainty around our financial position and know the impacts of COVID-19 and outcomes of the State Budget. We will continue to seek an increase to our base funding to meet the structural gap in our ability to address growing legal needs and continue to engage with our partners on our financial situation.

Our client services

We target our services to meet the diverse needs of our clients, many of whom face complex legal problems and experience language, literacy or cultural barriers, disability or other health issues, or social and geographic isolation. We provide information and services in criminal law, family and children's law, family violence and civil law. Our client cohort has shifted and increased since the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, with a greater proportion of the Victorian community affected by unemployment, economic and social disadvantage, mental health issues, and financial strain. In the coming months we will need to respond to demand arising from our clients adjourned matters in the courts and predictions of significant backlogs. We see an opportunity for the justice system to work together to respond to the needs of vulnerable Victorians with a vision for an improved and strengthened justice system.

Eligibility for VLA services varies depending on the service provided. As service intensity increases eligibility tightens. Our services range from:

- information services on our website – a low intensity service available to everyone
- telephone and webchat services – a lower intensity service available to people who meet one of our priority indicators
- advice and representation at courts across Victoria – the highest intensity services available to a smaller group of people experiencing select circumstances.

Every year we forecast the number of services we will deliver as part of the state budget process. The delay to the State Budget means we are unable to reliably forecast our service levels. We will publish our budget and service projections after the State Budget is delivered.

Our 2020–21 priorities

Priority	Outputs	Measures	Strategy 22
<p>COVID-19 pandemic response and transition</p> <p>Develop and implement strategies to respond and transition from the impacts of COVID-19.</p>	<p>Develop and implement response and transition strategies, including:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Return to work • Service delivery • Practice partners <p>Maintain / embed COVID reforms and processes that are beneficial to VLA clients and the justice sector</p>	<p>100 per cent of strategies have implementation plans</p> <p>Three pulse surveys are conducted in 2020–21</p> <p>Pulse survey results increase in favourability or remain consistent compared with results from June 2020</p>	<p>Client Impact Together</p>
<p>Financial sustainability</p> <p>Implement service delivery and administrative changes so VLA can manage and maintain a balanced operating position over time.</p>	<p>Implement initiatives for:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Summary and indictable crime • Child protection • Civil law • Family law <p>Develop and implement change management strategies for financial sustainability.</p> <p>Advocate for funding opportunities across the government and with our justice sector and community partners</p>	<p>A balanced operating position by 30 June 2021</p> <p>100 per cent of savings initiatives have implementation plans</p> <p>100 per cent of identified stakeholders consulted before implementation of initiatives</p>	<p>Impact Together</p>

Priority	Outputs	Measures	Strategy 22
<p>Digital Legal Aid Leverage technology to significantly improve client services, productivity and access to justice.</p>	<p>Design and implement digital tools to support legal practice areas and service delivery to clients:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Client record management system • Legal Help intake solution • Duty Lawyer triaging tool and record • Case management system • VLA website upgrade 	<p>Legal Help Intake Solution implemented by 30 November 2020</p> <p>Client Management system designed and developed by 31 November 2020</p> <p>Case Management – designed and developed by 31 January 2021 and implementation in progress by 30 June 2021</p> <p>Duty Lawyer designed and developed by 31 March 2021 and implementation in progress by 30 June 2021</p> <p>New website complete and ready for launch by 30 June 2021</p>	<p>Client Impact Together</p>
<p>Family violence response Work with our legal assistance partners, the courts, police and family violence services to improve access to legal help for people affected by family violence.</p>	<p>Implement new legal services in the Specialist Family Violence courts</p> <p>Monitor and evaluate our Legal Help phone and webchat service’s new family violence priority call queue and webchat channel</p> <p>Convert our face-to-face Client Safety Framework training into a more broadly available online learning modules</p>	<p>Specialist Family Violence service delivery and client satisfaction targets are met</p> <p>Average Legal Help phone and webchat wait time for family violence priority clients is shorter than for other clients</p> <p>50 new users have completed at least one new Client Safety Framework online module by 30 June 2021</p>	<p>Client Impact Together</p>

Priority	Outputs	Measures	Strategy 22
<p>Health, safety and wellbeing Review and manage health, safety and wellbeing activities to mitigate risk and prevent health and safety issues.</p>	<p>Review and update Psychological Wellbeing Plan (PWP) to respond to COVID-19</p> <p>Develop and implement system changes for:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • safe driving • contractor management. 	<p>VLA completes the update of the PWP by 31 December 2020</p> <p>Over 50 percent of staff participate in PWP initiatives</p> <p>60 percent of staff complete Safe Driving training module by 30 June 2021</p> <p>Contractor management system is in place by 31 December 2020</p>	<p>Impact Together</p>
<p>Enterprise Agreement negotiations Renegotiating VLA's Enterprise Agreement for the period 2020–24.</p>	<p>Certify and implement a new Enterprise Agreement for VLA staff.</p>	<p>VLA completes Enterprise Agreement negotiations by 28 September 2020</p> <p>VLA signs and implements the Enterprise Agreement by February 2021</p>	<p>Together</p>
<p>Legal sector service response to disasters Improve disaster response in the legal sector</p>	<p>Review Disaster Legal Help Victoria's (DLHV) service delivery model</p> <p>Coordinate legal assistance sector response</p> <p>Monitor the effectiveness of the DLHV website, phonenumber and communication channels during a disaster</p>	<p>VLA leads and completes collaborative review of DLHV 2019/20 response completed by 1 November</p> <p>Average Legal Help phone and webchat wait time for DLHV clients is shorter than for other legal help clients</p> <p>VLA leads and completes collaborative review of DLHV 2019/20 and update DLHV website by 1 November</p>	<p>Client Impact Together</p>

Priority	Outputs	Measures	Strategy 22
<p>NLAP Implementation</p> <p>Implement the requirements of the National Legal Aid Partnership Agreement and develop of better understanding of legal need in Victoria</p>	<p>Work with the Department and community legal assistance sector to develop and introduce the necessary changes to meet new data and reporting requirements of VLA, CLCs and the Victorian Aboriginal Legal Service</p> <p>Engage in Department led collaborative planning activities and continue to conduct collaborative planning activities with CLCs at a local level</p> <p>Support the Victoria Law Foundation in its public understanding of law survey</p> <p>Collaborate with the Department to develop the Victorian Legal Assistance Strategy and Action Plan</p>	<p>On-time reporting to the Commonwealth demonstrating service delivery to clients</p> <p>Collaborative planning activities contribute to the legal needs evidence base</p> <p>Collaborative service planning committee contributes to the development of the Legal assistance strategy and action plan in accordance with timeframes</p>	<p>Client</p> <p>Impact</p> <p>Together</p>

Priority	Outputs	Measures	Strategy 22
<p>Cultural competency</p> <p>Continuously strive to enhance cultural competency to ensure a culturally safe workplace and service</p>	<p>Launch and implement the year one actions of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Cultural Learning Strategy 2020-25</p> <p>Implement the actions in the Cultural Diversity inclusion strategy</p> <p>All staff, SET, Board complete:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultural awareness training • Unconscious bias training • Diversity and inclusion in the workplace training 	<p>100 percent of staff include cultural learning in their performance development as part of VLA & Me.</p> <p>Staff survey results report an increase in staff feeling comfortable to report physical and psychological health</p> <p>85 percent of existing staff will have completed the Unconscious Bias and Diversity and Inclusion in the Workplace training by 31 December 2020</p> <p>All SET and Board members will have completed the Unconscious Bias and Diversity and Inclusion in the Workplace training by 31 December 2020</p>	<p>Client Impact Together</p>

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.

For 2020–21 we will pursue the following strategic advocacy priorities and actions.

Strategic advocacy priorities

1. Responding to, and monitoring, the legal and related impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic on Victorians
2. Making sure change is shaped by the experience and expertise of people directly affected
3. Intervening early to promote social inclusion and prevent the escalation of legal and life issues
4. Contributing to a safe, fair, responsive, and accessible justice system with people at its centre
5. Promoting rights and accountability in systems and processes that affect people's lives

Actions

1. Advocating for fair laws and policies that reduce the negative impact of COVID-19 measures, including social drivers of legal need such as financial hardship, poverty, unstable housing and family violence
2. Advancing people's rights and recovery, through the Royal Commission into Victoria's Mental Health System
3. Addressing the over criminalisation of vulnerable groups, women and children and particularly Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women and children who have experienced family violence or trauma
4. Advancing reforms to the family law system to ensure a timely and appropriate response to family violence, and to ensure that it is safe, inclusive and accessible for everyone who needs to use it
5. Improving justice outcomes for vulnerable clients through Magistrates' Court processes, summary procedure and offences reform, police cautions, diversion and charging processes
6. Increasing access to therapeutic programs such as the Assessment and Referral Court, the Drug Court and other effective non-custodial interventions to help people in the criminal justice system address their underlying issues and break the cycle of reoffending.