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# Making a difference

## Our vision

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

## Our purpose

To make a difference in the lives of our clients and for the community by:

* resolving and preventing legal problems
* encouraging a fair and transparent justice system.

## Our values

### Fairness

We stand up for what is fair.

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.

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.

We act with courage to be the best we can be.

# Year ahead

In 2017–18 we will continue to invest in additional and better services for our clients that will advance our strategic directions and respond to major reviews and government inquiries.

As we embark on the final year of Our Strategy 2015–18, we will conclude significant foundational review work in child protection, summary crime, youth crime and our means test as all four areas shift into implementation and improving the way we deliver our services. We will continue implementing the recommendations of the Royal Commission into Family Violence (RCFV) and modernising Legal Help, alongside a stronger focus on client and staff care.

Six agency-wide priorities will guide our effort over the next 12 months:

* **Sustainable summary crime legal services** – Findings from an independent evaluation of our summary crime program show that the criminal justice system is ‘approaching crisis or already in crisis’. Over the next 12 months, we will develop responses to improve the appropriateness and sustainability of summary crime services by working closely with our justice system partners to create ‘better justice, every day’. Importantly, we will also be investing in workload relief in key areas across the state, alongside improved workload management practices.
* **Improving child protection services** – Our child protection review has provided a range of options and recommendations for change in the system. In September, we will communicate our future directions to ensure our child protection services are more appropriate, effective and providing more timely support for children and families, particularly those at risk of long-term disadvantage.
* **Progressing our response to the RCFV** – We remain committed to developing better system responses to family violence that provide increased protection for victims and increased accountability for perpetrators. Additional funds from the State Government will allow us to improve and expand family violence duty lawyer services and support the rollout of the five specialist courts. Extensive work supporting a range of other reforms across government, such as the roll-out of support and safety hubs, will also continue.
* **Building a sustainable Legal Help** – Work continues to modernise and expand Legal Help as the main ‘entry point’ to the legal assistance sector. The year ahead will see us better supporting our staff and upgrading the service’s systems and support tools to underpin future expansion.
* **Improving personal safety of staff** – We will embark on important cultural shifts and living out our value of care by acting on several safety risks to our staff, including increasing workload pressures, psychological wellbeing and work conducted in sub-standard offsite locations such as courts and tribunals.
* **Making greater use of data** – We will trial our sector planning approach in a small number of locations and develop our first data strategy, strengthening our ability to deliver evidence-based responses to better meet the legal needs of local communities.

In 2016–17 we saw increases in the number of people needing our help, particularly for more serious matters and this trend is set to continue. Positive State Budget outcomes will allow us to provide more grants of assistance and duty lawyer services in summary crime, child protection, youth crime and family violence. However, most of the funding will support new services in response to various government policies, with the balance providing some important short-term relief to underlying demand growth. Our total revenue will increase by $21.7 million while expenditure is forecast to grow by $23.9 million. We expect to be in deficit by the end of 2018 and will continue our advocacy to secure our financial future in response to a range of community safety initiatives, such as the impact of 3,135 additional police.

The increase in expenditure will see expansion in all parts of the mixed model. Community legal centres, the private profession and other justice partners will be critical to our efforts to improve family violence responses. The private profession will continue to help meet growing demand for grants of aid in areas such as child protection, summary crime and youth crime, while our staff practice will also receive much needed additional capacity across the state.

Community safety continues to attract a high level of public interest and it will be important that we continue to explain the role and benefits of legal assistance as part of public discussions and future public policy responses. Following the government response and additional investment to support the Access to Justice review, we look forward to working with government and our stakeholders to implement the recommendations.

We will also continue to progress ongoing reforms in youth crime, our means test, family law services, the strengthening of the community legal sector and expanding access to justice in regional areas such as the Mallee region.

# Victoria Legal Aid client services

While we progress with the breadth of reforms and initiatives being undertaken across the organisation, we remain committed to ensuring we continue to provide accessible legal assistance, information and services to the Victorian community. In 2017–18 we expect to see increases in the number of clients we assist and the number of services we provide. Our forecast targets anticipate we will assist approximately 94,400 unique clients, provide 98,900 duty lawyers services and 43,600 grants of legal assistance.

Table 1 – Client and service targets

|  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
|  | 2014 | 2015 | 2016 | 2017 | 2018B |
| **Clients** | | | | | |
| Unique clients | 81,853 | 85,007[[1]](#footnote-1) | 86,847 | 88,649 | 94,400 |
| Calls answered by Legal Help | 94,151 | 114,391 | 111,504 | 125,652 | 131,646 |
| **Legal services** | | | | | |
| Grants[[2]](#footnote-2) | 33,339 | 34,681 | 38,345 | 41,638 | 39,661 |
| Duty lawyer services2 | 73,147 | 83,674 | 87,162 | 93,697 | 74,400 |
| Legal advice and minor work2 | 46,932 | 48,925 | 40,770 | 41,725 | 41,290 |
| Legal Information (including Legal Help)[[3]](#footnote-3) | 111,574 | 137,342 | 125,892 | 129,260 | 123,000 |
| **Family violence services** | | | | | |
| Family violence legal services[[4]](#footnote-4) |  | - | - | - | 30,610 |
| Community legal education and legal information services – family violence related services[[5]](#footnote-5) | - | - | - | - | 13,000 |

# Our priorities

## 1**. Sustainable summary crime legal services**

Demand for legal services continues to outstrip supply. To improve the sustainability for adult summary crime services against rising pressure Victoria Legal Aid (VLA) changed its eligibility guidelines in 2012–13, limiting services to more serious matters, including people in-custody, facing a custodial sentence and priority clients. To assess the appropriateness and sustainability of those changes in 2016, VLA engaged the Law and Justice Foundation to undertake an evaluation. The findings show that while the changes improved sustainability, demand has continued to increase to the extent that the system is now overloaded, under resourced, and approaching crisis. The evaluation sets out a series of recommendations to improve the effectiveness and efficiency both within VLA and across the criminal justice system. Providing us with the strongest evidence base we have ever had to highlight the growing and crippling pressures for the criminal justice system we will use these findings to influence changes across the system.

**Outcome:**

Sustainable, efficient and accessible summary crime legal services that provide timely and appropriate services that meet the needs of our clients.

**Key activities:**

* Establish a working group of internal and external stakeholders to develop a coordinated approach to progress adopted recommendations.
* Develop an implementation strategy, including specific short-term actions around workload relief and demand management.

**Measures:**

* Progress against implementation strategy, including reported workload relief from staff.
* External stakeholders (eg Victoria Police and Magistrates’ Court of Victoria) are effectively contributing to and influencing system reform.

**Connection to our strategy:**

* *Match services to the needs and abilities of our clients* – We will continue to improve how we match legal need and capability through enhanced client focused legal assistance for defined priority areas, by responding to the recommendations from the review.
* *Maximise benefits by working with others* – To influence system changes, we will work collaboratively with our stakeholders using evidence and experience to innovate practices, also ensuring we provide care for and support to our staff in their demanding roles.

## 2. Improving legally aided child protection services

VLA has a significant presence and important role in the delivery of child protection services, providing legal advice and representation services to Victorians who are involved in matters before the court. This includes representation of children who are the subject of child protection proceedings. The removal of a child from the family is one of the most serious actions the state can take. To ensure that we continue to provide the most effective and efficient services, VLA commenced a review of its child protection services in 2016. The Child Protection Legal Aid Services Review will help us to ensure we deliver services that provide more timely support to parents and more integrated help for children at risk of further legal problems, while helping to promote early intervention and reduce long term engagement with the legal system.

**Outcome:**

VLA’s child protection legal services are more timely and appropriate, better at supporting children, particularly those at risk of long term disadvantage, more consistent across the state and of higher quality.

**Key activities:**

* Public release of final report of the Child Protection Legal Aid Services Review, following Board approval.
* Consultation and development of consistent state-wide allocations process for new matters and guidelines for the duty lawyer scheme.
* Consultation and development of an education strategy to improve community and client understanding of legal rights and responsibilities in the child protection system.
* Commence a number of pilot initiatives to improve, and make timelier, the services we provide for children and young people and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families.

**Measures:**

* State-wide child protection legal matters allocations process determined and ready for roll-out.
* Education strategy approved and implementation strategy finalised.

**Connection to our strategy:**

* *Invest in timely intervention, especially for children and young people* – The review will assist us to ensure that child protection services are more timely to support parents and provide integrated help for children at risk of further legal problems. It will also allow us to provide a more intensive coordinated service to address the underlying causes of legal problems and reduce escalation.
* *Match services to the needs and abilities of our clients* – The review will help us to target services and provide improved responses to assist those most disadvantaged, including indigenous clients, clients with mental health issues, and children who are parents of children themselves, by responding in the most complete way.
* *Maximise benefits by working with others* – By working with the Department of Health and Human Services (DHHS) and other allied service providers we will be better placed to represent our clients, provide relevant legal information and advice to meet the community needs, and contribute to a well-functioning child protection system.

## 3. Progressing VLA’s response to the RCFV

In March 2016, the State Government agreed to implement all 227 recommendations of the RCFV, and while none specifically target VLA, many will impact upon our clients and the services we deliver. These changes pave the way for VLA to adopt better system responses by working collaboratively with legal and non-legal services to provide more timely and client centred approaches to service delivery, leading to increased protection for victims of family violence and increased accountability for perpetrators.

**Outcome:**

An integrated and coordinated VLA-wide response to RCFV recommendations that delivers increased protection for victims of family violence and accountability for perpetrators, contributes to the reduction of the instance and impacts of family violence, works with our partners on whole of legal assistance sector planning with respect to family violence prevention and service delivery, and promotes a better understanding by government, family violence service providers and the community of the role and benefits of legal assistance.

**Key activities:**

* Support the rollout of five specialist family violence courts in Ballarat, Heidelberg, Frankston, Moorabbin and Shepparton.
* Use evidence-based data to increase access and better meet demand for family violence duty lawyer services.
* A consistent and coordinated VLA-wide response to the recommendations of the RCFV, including responding to policy and law reform submissions and co-design of the Support and Safety Hubs.
* Work with stakeholders including courts, police, community legal centres and family violence services to promote the role of legal services in family violence responses and increase early access to VLA legal services (including Legal Help).
* Family violence response pilots are implemented to improve the access or quality of family violence services.

**Measures:**

* Services provided within the five specialist courts and an increase in family violence services.
* VLA contributions to the state-wide planning and co-design of the Support and Safety Hub rollout.
* VLA submissions to law and policy reform proposals and contribution to state-wide steering committee meetings.

**Connection to our strategy:**

* *Match services to the needs and abilities of our clients* – We will continue to encourage and provide better system responses tailored to meet the needs of clients to reduce the instances and/or impact of family violence based on client safety risk assessment, providing more targeted service responses, and better referrals to promote longer term safer outcomes.
* *Maximise benefits by working with others* – VLA will continue work with justice sector partners to develop better system responses to family violence legal and non-legal services that builds on the expansion of coordinated services that promote best practice.
* *Working together better* – Through our relationships with our justice sector partners, we will continue to innovate and reform practices by trialling new approaches, learning from experience, and using evidence to improve legal service delivery.

## 4. Building a sustainable Legal Help service

Legal Help provides a main point of entry to the legal assistance sector for all members of the Victorian community who face a legal problem. Our Legal Help staff assess a caller’s needs and provide legal information, legal advice and referral as required. Over recent years we have modernised and expanded Legal Help in response to increasing community demand. The year ahead will see us better supporting our staff and upgrading the service’s systems and support tools that are necessary for the service to expand. This will enable us to better assist the Victorian community by helping people to respond to legal problems before they escalate.

**Outcome:**

To provide a modernised and stabilised Legal Help telephone service that can offer the community an expanded and contemporary service.

**Key activities:**

* Improve ability to accurately forecast and manage future demand.
* Improve operational support and management to ensure Legal Help delivers quality and timely services:

1. align workforce management with operational needs and performance for effective service and planning
2. work on continuous improvement methodologies to improve client and staff experience
3. improve staff engagement through staff development and training.

* Increase access to family violence matters and continue the pilot of Prisoner Legal Help service.

**Measures:**

* Answer 131,600 calls at a call answer rate of 65 per cent.
* Improved demand management and forecasting capability.
* Improved staff engagement.
* Increase in the number of family violence and prisoner legal help matters.

**Connection to our strategy:**

* *Matching services to the needs and abilities of our clients* – We are continuing to progress against our commitment to provide a bigger, modernised Legal Help telephone service by preparing for new ways for clients and the community to access and engage with Legal Help.
* *Working better together* – We are continuing to improve, innovate and reform our practices to provide better services to our clients. We are supporting our staff in their professional development and building on their capabilities and improving the way we manage change and communicate with staff. We will continue to improve access to our services through monitoring and evaluating our performance.

## 5. Improving personal safety and workload for VLA staff

Our approach to the health, safety and wellbeing (HSW) of our staff has matured where we now have improved systems in place to assess and manage workplace risk. To ensure we live out our value of care and meet our occupational health and safety (OHS) obligations we have focused our attention on staff personal safety. Through this, we have identified six key safety risks, including an increasing risk around workload pressures and offsite locations where our staff work, that require better management and attention.

**Outcome:**

Staff wellbeing is supported and enhanced through effective and timely health and safety programs and risk management strategies.

**Key activities:**

* Workload pressures are identified and appropriate staff work practices are trialled, implemented and reviewed for effectiveness (including work being undertaken by the Summary Crime Working Group, Summary Crime evaluation and other management work practices).
* Promote the new Employee Assistance Program services to support staff and increase their psychological wellbeing and resilience.
* Pilot and evaluate psychological wellbeing programs and initiatives that will enhance staff wellbeing and reduce the risk of stress and psychological wellbeing related injury and illness.
* Develop a Personal Safety Project action plan and begin to implement.

**Measures:**

* Commence implementation of Personal Safety Project action plan.
* Establish a state-wide model for the delivery of psychological wellbeing programs.
* Improvement in the results for the safety and workload questions of the 2018 engagement survey.

**Connection to our strategy:**

* *Maximise benefits by working with others* – The Personal Safety Project will enable better collaboration between internal and external stakeholders (courts, tribunals, hospital and detention centres) to improve safety performance, risk management practices and positive safety outcomes for staff.
* *Support our people* – We continue to take care of each other and build our collective resilience through improving management of and responses to workload pressures, and providing effective wellbeing programs and initiatives that promote staff wellbeing.

## 6. Making greater use of data and evidence

Demand for legal services is heavily influenced by external factors, including demographic changes, policy decisions and economic conditions. Effective planning for legal assistance services needs to be based on the best evidence available about where services are most needed and likely to have the greatest impact. By developing an organisational data strategy that supports us to make greater use of legal needs and service performance data, we will strengthen our ability to develop evidence-based responses to increase access to justice and meet the legal needs of the Victorian community.

**Outcome:**

Improved access to services through data-driven planning and decision making.

**Key activities:**

* Develop an organisational data strategy outlining the objectives and priorities that inform our use of data.
* Develop and implement a data governance framework outlining who is responsible for decisions involving data collection and usage.
* Undertake collaborative planning with stakeholders and sector partners, by testing a data model designed to measure legal need across Victoria and determine the most effective way for the legal assistance sector to meet those needs.
* Use the expertise of our data working group to identify opportunities to improve the way we collect, analyse, store and share data to improve our services to clients and the broader community.

**Measures:**

* Organisational data strategy endorsed and published.
* Legal needs model refined and verified following testing within a cross-section of regions.
* Data governance framework implemented and administered.

**Connection to our strategy:**

* *Maximise benefits by working with others* – We will continue to collaborate with our partners in the legal assistance sector to jointly plan services that address areas of the highest need.
* *Working better together* – We will use evidence based data to improve legal service delivery, access to justice and better enable us to respond to changing needs. Strengthening our data will assist VLA to better meet the needs of the community, trial new and innovative approaches and assist us to continuously improve our service delivery.

# Commitments from the 2016–17 Business Plan continuing in 2017–18

Some of the work which commenced or progressed in 2016–17 remains current and will continue in 2017–18.

We will begin to implement our youth crime strategy and support recent changes in the justice system to respond to youth crime, which will provide increased options for earlier intervention and where appropriate more intensive, therapeutic responses to address the underlying causes of youth offending.

We are continuing work to improve access to justice and address gaps in service delivery in the Mallee region through working collaboratively alongside our sector partners, and continuing to develop a collaborative approach to sector planning in the Albury Wodonga area.

Additionally, the Community Legal Services Program (CLSP) reform project will strengthen the legal assistance sector by working with CLCs to develop a more integrated and coordinated client focused approach to ensure legal services are delivered to those most in need, and will modernise CLC funding arrangements for improved accountability.

We will see the completion of our means test review that will seek to expand eligibility and introduce a simpler and fairer approach to assessing eligibility, while ensuring our guidelines are up-to-date with the financial situations confronted by our clients.

| **Priority** | **Activities** | **Alignment with Strategy** |
| --- | --- | --- |
| **Improving youth crime legal services –** Improved delivery of legal services for young people, that provides a consistent, holistic and system focused approach. | * Implement of youth crime service review implementation * Provide legal assistance services to support the rollout and implementation of diversion, Intensive Bail Support and Youth Supervision Orders | * Invest in timely intervention, especially for children and young people * Match services to the needs and abilities of our clients |
| **Ongoing reforms to family law services –** Earlier and increased access to legal and non-legal services for family law clients. | * Continue the Briefing Practices and Advocacy Project * Implement Family Law Guideline changes * Continue to develop quality practice tools * Continue the community legal centre family violence to family law continuity of service delivery pilots, including mid-pilot review | * Invest in timely intervention, especially for children and young people * Match services to the needs and abilities of our clients * Maximise benefits by working with others * Working together better |
| **Access to justice in regional areas –** Improved access to justice in the Mallee region and Albury Wodonga. | * Continue work with stakeholders to develop referral pathways and increase access to services in the Mallee * Continue to strengthen relationships to improve access to services and cross border justice issues | * Match services to the needs and abilities of our clients * Maximise benefits by working with others |
| **Strengthening of the legal assistance sector –** The legal assistance sector provides improved access to services that respond to local needs. | * Complete and seek approval for the CLSP framework * Work with key stakeholders to finalise the design of the funding program | * Maximise benefits by working with others |
| **Review financial eligibility –** Financial eligibility for legal assistance better reflects legal need and reduces barriers to access legal help. | * Seek feedback on options paper * Draft recommendations for approval * Implement changes | * Match services to the needs and abilities of our clients * Maximise benefits by working with others * Working together better |

# Appendix 1 – Links to VLA’s Statutory Objectives, our Strategy 2015–18 and Business Plan

| **VLA Objectives** | **Measures** | **Strategic Directions** | **Strategic Outcomes** |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
| (a) To provide legal aid in the most effective, economic and efficient manner | * 94,400 unique clients helped * VLA is within +/- 5% of targets against key service types (refer table 1) * Percentage of 200 private practitioner files checked with a satisfactory rating (contributes to baseline for future) | 1.Invest in timely intervention, especially for children and young people | * At risk children and young people receiving a more intensive coordinated service which will address the underlying causes of their legal problems * Child protection legal services that focus on more timely support to parents and more integrated help for children at risk of further legal problems * An increase in the intensity of services at points that are likely to prevent legal problems from escalating |
| b) To manage its resources to make legal aid available at a reasonable cost to the community and on an equitable basis throughout the state | * 30% of unique clients residing in regional and rural areas * Progress of sector planning (including development of legal needs model) | 2. Match services to needs and abilities of our clients | * More Legal Help information services available to the community * Legal Help as a main entry point for clients to the whole legal assistance sector * A more coordinated approach to triage, assessment and intake at multiple entry points to the legal assistance sector * Consistent use of family violence safety and risk assessment tools as well as more and better referrals for clients to support services * More indigenous clients getting better legal assistance * Lawyers and social workers working together to provide a more comprehensive service to clients with a mental illness |
| c) To provide to the community improved access to justice and legal remedies | * 131,646 calls answered by Legal Help/65% answer rate * 5% increase in priority clients (unique) accessing grants of aid and duty lawyer services as a percentage of total clients by service type * >50% of service improvements identified through complaint-handling are implemented within six weeks | 3.Maximise benefits by working with others | * Expansion of coordinated service planning between VLA, CLCs and other justice partners * More legal services in the outer metropolitan fringe and in regional areas with acute needs * More consistent, easy to understand eligibility criteria, with more people eligible for legal assistance * Strategic advocacy that delivers broad community benefit and help clarify law and policy |
| (d) To pursue innovative means of providing legal aid directed at minimising the need for individual legal services in the community | * ≥80% of community legal education sessions targeted to vulnerable client groups or organisations/individuals that work with vulnerable * 15% increase in website sessions for Find legal answers | Working better together  1.Improve innovate and reform practices to provide better services to clients  2. Support our people  3. Engage externally for accountably and transparency  4. Use evidence and experience to improve legal service delivery | * Take care of staff, build their resilience and support their professional development * Build a culture that genuinely supports staff to make a positive contribution and take pride in their unique roles * Improve the way we manage and communicate with staff |

# Appendix 2 – Organisation-wide priorities and ongoing project responsibilities

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| **Organisation wide priorities** | **Responsibility** |
| Sustainable summary crime legal services | Executive Director, Criminal Law |
| Improving legally aided child protection services | Executive Director Family, Youth and Children’s Law |
| Progressing VLA’s response to the Royal Commission into Family Violence | Executive Director Family, Youth and Children’s Law |
| Building a sustainable Legal Help service | Executive Director, Civil Justice, Access and Equity |
| Improving personal safety and workload for VLA staff | Executive Director, Corporate Affairs |
| Making greater use of data and evidence | Executive Director, Services and Innovation |

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| **Ongoing projects from 2016–17** | **Responsibility** |
| Improving youth crime legal services | Executive Director, Criminal Law |
| Ongoing reforms to family law services | Executive Director Family, Youth and Children’s Law |
| Access to justice in regional areas | Executive Director, Services and Innovation |
| Strengthening of the legal assistance sector | Executive Director, Civil Justice, Access and Equity |
| Review financial eligibility | Executive Director, Legal Practice |

# Appendix 3 – Glossary

ARC – Assessment and Referral Court

CLC – community legal centre

CLSP – Community Legal Services Program

DHHS – Department of Health and Human Services

DL – duty lawyer

HSW – health, safety and wellbeing

OHS – occupational health and safety

RCFV – Royal Commission into Family Violence

SET – Senior Executive team

VLA – Victoria Legal Aid

1. This does not include clients assisted by a private lawyer through VLA’s private practitioner duty lawyer scheme [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Excludes family violence related services in 2018 target – *this is included in a new measure family violence legal services* [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Excludes family violence related services in 2018 target – *this is included in a new measure - community legal education and information services – family violence related services* [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. New performance measure in 2017-18 to reflect the Government’s priority in responding to family violence and providing assistance to those involved in family violence related incidents, including: *family violence related duty lawyer services provided by VLA in-house and private practitioners acting on behalf of VLA, family violence related grants for legal assistance approved by VLA, family violence related services of legal advice and minor assistance, including the perusal of documents, written advice, telephone calls, oral or written negotiations and less complicated appearances before Courts or tribunals.* [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. New performance measure in 2017-18 to reflect the Government’s priority in responding to family violence and providing assistance to those involved in family violence related incidents. *This measure reflects the number of community legal education and information services provided by VLA through various means*. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)