# Our Specialist Family Violence Courts’ Client First Approach

Victoria Legal Aid’s (VLA) specialist family violence courts (SFVCs) project intends to deliver *client centred* quality legal services at the SFVCs that are easy to access, safe to use and integrated within the family violence service system.

What is a ‘client first’ approach?

We are committed to creating SFVC services that meet the needs of our clients, rather than relying on what our system assumes they need. We know we can’t do that without their input. The SFVCs present an opportunity to make changes to the legal process and system that we often don’t get the chance to do.

We want to recognise and value the diverse perspectives and experiences of people with legal needs and listen to and involve them in designing and delivering legal services.

We have used [VLA’s Client First Strategy](https://www.legalaid.vic.gov.au/about-us/our-organisation/how-we-are-improving-our-services/client-first-strategy) to inform this approach.

In this document, we use the terms ‘clients’, ‘people with legal needs’, and ‘people with lived experience’ interchangeably. These are all distinct groups of people that may be overlapping, but our intention is to capture the input and engagement of as many people in all three groups where possible.

While there are real benefits with taking a client centred approach, there are also real challenges. Most importantly we want to ensure that we are able to provide an environment for clients to feel safe and supported to share, engage and contribute to the project.

## Commitments to people with lived experience

The Project Team is committed to ensuring that people engaged to be part of the project are provided with a safe and supportive environment. We will facilitate this by:

* Outlining the different roles and ways to engage with the process
* Ensuring that responsibilities and expectations are clearly defined
* Obtaining consent from clients on their involvement in the project
* Ensuring there are appropriate support structures
* Reducing organisational lingo and jargon where possible
* Regularly checking in with people
* Providing updates for people to see how their input was used to implement initiatives
* Remunerating people of lived experience where they provide their time and input to the project.

## What we’ve done so far

The project has begun to engage with clients to develop our legal services model and the 30 initiatives to implement it by:

* Observing at two SFVC sites to explore clients’ actual experience of family violence legal services in a court setting
* Interviewing and discussing with clients their experience at court, to develop thirteen client stories and journey maps
* Including people with lived experience of family violence and the justice response in workshops

Convening one on one consultations with people with lived experience Our legal services model reflects what we’ve learned from this engagement so far and seeks to address some of the challenges people experience in the family violence legal system. We want to build on this by having people with legal needs involved at more levels and stages of the project.

### Who are people with legal needs?

It is the responsibility of the legal sector to understand the gendered dynamics of family violence, recognising that it is primarily perpetrated by men against women and children. The family violence legal sector provides services to a diverse range of people with legal needs.

VLA and Community Legal Centres provide information, referrals, legal advice and legal representation to people who are alleged to have used family violence and to people experiencing family violence. In engaging clients in the process we need to ensure that those we consult with and reflect this diversity of experience.

Family violence occurs within LGBTI communities, within culturally and linguistically diverse communities and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities. While family violence occurs across all ages, socioeconomic and demographic groups, many people with family violence legal needs live below the poverty threshold. Many people who use or experience family violence have mental health issues and disabilities or are homeless. These factors are high risk indicators and are linked to a greater likelihood of family violence.

This means it is vitally important that we consult with people with lived experience of family violence from as broad a background as possible, to ensure the processes, policies and products that we design meet the needs of our clients.

Due to the prevalence of family violence within the community, we know that professionals within the family violence service system that are engaged in this project may also bring their own experiences of family violence to this work, however there is no expectation that they do so. This reinforces the importance of ensuring there are support structures available to all people engaged in this project regardless of their role.

## How we will do this

We want people with lived experience to be involved in the design and development of the legal services model initiatives, and to have a role in decision-making.

### Project governance

We will have people with lived experience at all levels of our project to promote accountability and transparency. We will have lived experience consultants on our steering committee, the applicant advisory group and respondent advisory group, as well as the service design, learning and development and evaluation and monitoring working groups.

We will appoint these consultants through an expression of interest process and all groups will be supported by terms of reference that will help provide guidance around roles, responsibilities, decision-making authority and dealing with differing views and conflicts on issues and perspectives.

### Client first consultation

With the exception of specific initiatives that relate to the resourcing of roles (such as duty lawyers), all project initiatives are divided amongst the different working groups. Each of these initiatives will involve a range of activities that include engaging with clients and people with legal needs in different ways, beyond the role of participation within working groups and the client advisory groups themselves.

We have used VLA’s Client First Strategy to identify the five different ways we will engage with clients: informing, consulting, involving, collaborating and sharing control. These range from a lower level of involvement to the most intensive level of involvement.

We will endeavour to consult with a wide range of people with legal needs that reflect the diverse cohort that are our clients. We will also work with other client-led groups such as InTouch’s InSpire Advisory Group which is made up of women from refugee and migrant backgrounds that have lived experience of family violence. In addition, we will endeavour to consult with clients from family violence organisations that service other groups that experience family violence such as people that identify as LGBTIQ, older people that experience family violence, and young people.

## More information

If you have any questions about VLA’s SFVC Client First Approach or would like more information, contact Project Coordinator, Specialist Family Violence Courts by phone on 9606 5253 or by email at Sharika.Jeyakumar@vla.vic.gov.au.

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We are adopting a ‘continuous improvement’ approach, so this document may be updated over the life of the project.