

State of the Sector 2022–23 survey report

# A sector in crisis

March 2024



**Community Legal Centres**  
Australia



## Acknowledgement of country

Community Legal Centres Australia recognises that the land we work, live, and learn on is unceded Aboriginal Land. Our office stands on Gadigal Land. We acknowledge Elders, both past and present. We acknowledge the First Nations workers in our sector across a great many Aboriginal lands on this continent and its surrounding islands, and we thank them for their generosity and persistence in supporting our sector to always be on a journey of learning and growth as we seek to decolonise our minds and hearts and apply this to all our work. Always was and always will be Aboriginal land.

## Acknowledgements

Thank you to all centres that responded to the State of the Sector survey 2022–23, participated in our national consultations on the NLAP Review or provided case studies illuminating some of the most significant challenges faced by so many centres working relentlessly to improve the lives of the people and communities they serve.

Thank you also to the state and territory community legal sector peaks and associations for collaborating with us on this survey: ACT Association of Community Legal Centres, Community Legal Centres New South Wales, Community Legal Centres Queensland, Community Legal Centres South Australia, Community Legal WA, Federation of Community Legal Centres (Vic.), Northern Territory Association of Community Legal Centres and Tasmanian Association of Community Legal Centres.

## About Community Legal Centres Australia

Community Legal Centres Australia is the national representative voice for the community legal sector. We are an independent, non-profit organisation set up to support the community legal sector to provide high-quality free and accessible legal and related services to everyday people, especially people experiencing financial hardship, disadvantage, discrimination, or domestic and family violence.

We strive to be leaders in good practice, to advocate for justice and the promotion and protection of human rights, to be responsive to the needs of the community legal sector and to maintain and strengthen the collaborative networks that allow our sector to provide holistic support to communities.

Our members are the eight state and territory community legal sector peak bodies. Together, we represent over 150 community legal centres, eleven Family Violence Prevention Legal Services and two Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Legal Services across Australia.

Our movement's vision is for a fair and equitable society in which:

- Our legal systems and institutions are accessible to all, decolonised, and no longer criminalise poverty, disadvantage or disability
- All members of our community have access to the power, tools and means to live safe, secure and meaningful lives, free from discrimination, violence, exploitation and abuse
- We respect and protect the rights of First Nations people and communities to land, language, culture and self-determination
- We respect and protect the natural environment for current and future generations.

Our expertise is grounded in the stories of the 200,000 people who engage our sector's services each year and who experience first-hand the barriers to justice that exist in our legal system. Our public advocacy ensures that their voices and experiences drive progressive system reform.

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## Data sources

This report uses data collected via Community Legal Centres Australia's State of the Sector Survey between October 2023 and February 2024. The data covers the 2022–23 financial year. It also draws case studies and qualitative data from the national peak's extensive sector consultations to inform our input to the Independent Review of the National Legal Assistance Partnership (NLAP Review), which took place from August to October 2023.

### State of the Sector survey 2022–23

The 2022–23 State of the Sector survey (the survey) received 125 responses, including 20 partial responses. We excluded eight of the partial responses due to inadequate data. In total, we used data from 117 out of 165 centres for analysis. This represents a response rate of 71% of our sector.

The dataset includes responses from community legal centres, Family Violence Prevention Legal Services (FVPLSs), and one Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Legal Service (ATSILS) in Community Legal Centres Australia's national membership network.

A breakdown of respondents by jurisdiction, location (metro, regional, and remote), provider type and more is included in [Appendix 1](#).

### NLAP consultations and centre case studies

Community Legal Centres Australia conducted national sector consultations from August to October 2023 to inform our input to the NLAP Review. More than 130 people participated in the sessions, which explored the experiences of centres in different states and territories, including centres in rural, regional remote and very remote (RRRR) communities and those working with specific groups of people in the community or specialising in specific legal issues under the current NLAP (2020 – 2025).

Through these consultations, centres shared with us stories about the impacts of inadequate indexation, chronic underfunding, and growing demand for assistance, on their capacity to meet the needs of people in their communities, as well as the impacts of the workforce crisis our sector is experiencing nationwide. Where relevant to the data gathered via the State of the Sector survey 2022–23, and with centres' consent, we have included some of these stories in this report.

In collecting case studies, we have focussed on the challenges faced by RRRR centres. We have chosen this focus to illustrate the additional struggles these organisations face in servicing their communities.

## A note on terms

In this report, we use 'centre(s)' as a collective noun for community legal centres, FVPLSs and ATSILSs in Community Legal Centres Australia's national membership network. Where we intend to refer to one of the provider types only, we use its unique name or acronym.

## Introduction

Underfunding of legal assistance services, including the community legal sector, is chronic and longstanding. A decade ago, the Productivity Commission recommended an immediate injection of \$200 million into the legal assistance sector to meet need for civil law assistance, with the Commonwealth contributing 60% and states and territories contributing 40%.<sup>1</sup> In 2018, the Law Council of Australia revised this figure upward to \$390 million per year, to be invested by all governments.<sup>2</sup> More recently, the Law Council of Australia put the national funding shortfall for legal assistance services at \$500 million per year.

Over the same period, several independent, national and state-based surveys and studies have shown that unmet legal need is high and growing.<sup>3</sup> While the last national survey of legal need was conducted in 2009, the data in the report (on increasing demand for services and numbers of people turned away each year) is consistent with past findings: legal need in the community is high and growing, and centres simply cannot meet it.

The current crisis has been made worse for the community legal sector because indexation on most Commonwealth funding delivered via the National Legal Assistance Partnership Agreement 2020-2025 (NLAP) service contracts (fixed at around 1.5% for each of the five years of the agreement) has not kept pace with inflation or the true cost of delivering services.

Inadequate indexation coupled with rising costs (including welcome mandatory increases to award wages and superannuation contributions for workers) means that, for most centres, funding has decreased in real terms year on year since 2020. With demand increasing, and budgets flatlining, centres have been forced into difficult decisions to limit access to services, close outreaches and turn-away ever-increasing numbers of people who need help.

A national workforce crisis is further stretching centres' capacity to meet demand for legal assistance. Overwhelming demand and increasing numbers of people with complex needs seeking assistance is driving high rates of vicarious trauma and burnout in the community legal sector workforce. This, along with low wages and limited opportunities for career advancement results in high staff turnover, with many centres unable to replace departing staff at all (due to funding pressures) or to recruit suitably qualified and experienced workers in a timely way. For those who stay, low wages in our highly feminised workforce also contribute to the gender pay gap and ongoing systemic gender inequality in the wider community.

Fewer workers mean reduced capacity to deliver much needed services, feeding into the chronic cycle of increased demand, higher numbers of people turned away, mounting unmet need, and constant staff turnover.



*Workers are really attracted to community legal centres because of the sense of purpose that drives our work. We are trying to make things better. It is incredibly dispiriting to have to say to people in desperate need we can't help you because we don't have the resources to assist.*

*Tim Leach, CLCs Australia CEO, ABC News Radio, 9 February 2024*

In short, ours is a sector in crisis.

<sup>1</sup> Productivity Commission (2014). Access to justice arrangements – Inquiry report: <https://www.pc.gov.au/inquiries/completed/access-justice/report>

<sup>2</sup> Law Council of Australia (2018). The Justice Project – Final report: <https://lawcouncil.au/justice-project/final-report>

<sup>3</sup> Law and Justice Foundation of NSW (2012). Legal Australia Wide Survey: <https://www.nationallegalaid.org/resources/legal-australia-wide-survey/>; Victoria Law Foundation (2023). The Public Understanding of Laws Survey (Vol 1) – Everyday problems and legal need: <https://victorialawfoundation.org.au/research/puls>

## Executive summary: A sector in crisis

The findings in this report support the narrative emerging of a sector in crisis and identifies the key drivers of this crisis.

Overwhelmingly, respondents identified lack of funding (56.4%), staff recruitment (45.7%), and increased client demand (44.7%) as the top three challenges for our sector in 2022–23.

Survey respondents reported overwhelming and growing demand for services from people in their communities and increasing numbers of people turned away.

- Overall, 89% reported that demand for services increased in 2022–23, when compared with the previous year. No centres reported a decrease in demand.
- Collectively, we estimate the centres across the country turned away over 350 000 people who approached them for assistance with everyday legal problems.

On average, centres told us they need an additional 12.0 Full-Time Equivalent (FTE) workers to respond better to growing demand in their communities. And yet, many centres report high vacancy rates and difficulty recruiting qualified staff to key positions due to low wages (compared to the public service and private sector) and the challenging nature of the work.

Centres operating in rural, regional, remote and very remote (RRRR) communities tell us consistently that, for them, the impacts of these challenges are both unique and acute. RRRR centres tell us that their vacant positions stay unfilled for longer, the costs of delivering services are higher and, though populations may be smaller, rates of disadvantage and legal need are much higher, and people's needs are more complex.

Qualitative survey responses reveal that these challenges are inextricably linked.



*We are unable to recruit lawyers in [location], as our remuneration is not competitive. We have consequently had to reduce 1800 call assistance and established outreach.*



*Increases to funding with minimal and inconsistent indexation does not cover wage rates and superannuation guarantee increases and the rise in other costs so as a result difficult staffing decisions have to be made and the scope of assistance provided to users of the service reviewed.*

Ultimately, it is people and communities who bear the burden of our sector's crisis. People and communities experiencing financial hardship, social disadvantage, discrimination, and domestic and family violence. Those at risk of losing their homes, their jobs and their children, or of ending up in crippling debt, in hospital or in prison.



## Part 1: What makes a community legal centre?

Community legal centres are unique within the legal assistance sector. We are independent organisations connected within a community legal sector movement. Our independence allows us to respond quickly to our communities' needs. Our connectedness ensures a network of services on which these communities can rely for place-based, and specialist supports.

The first community legal centres were set up over 50 years ago by activists and advocates frustrated at the injustices faced by their communities, and a legal system that punished poverty and difference. The first community legal centres set about providing free legal assistance to people in need. Just as importantly, they used people's stories to advocate for legal system reform. Their aim was to ensure that everyone had equal access to justice, no matter their bank balance.

Community legal centres are rights-based. Our services promote everyday justice and help to counterbalance government and bureaucratic power. We have long recognised that the need for legal assistance and representation extends beyond the criminal courts. For many of us, it is the everyday infringements of our basic rights – the right to a safe, secure, affordable home, the right to a liveable income, the right to healthcare – that have the greatest impacts on our lives.

Community legal centres resist the idea that lawyers can solve all problems. We recognise that many people's legal issues are connected to other social and economic problems and that the best supports address these challenges together. Critically, we recognise the impacts of trauma and discrimination on people's ability to access justice. That's why centres employ not just lawyers but social workers, financial counsellors, tenant advocates and community development workers, and prioritise trauma-informed and culturally safe practice.

Community legal centres recognise that often the best assistance is to help people avoid the legal system altogether. Early intervention, and empowering communities to understand and avoid legal problems, have been hallmarks of our services since the beginning and explain our traditional focus on community legal education.

To this day, trauma-informed holistic support, prevention, and systemic advocacy remain central to the community legal sector's service models. In 2022–23, 72% of survey respondents employed people in social and community services roles, including:

- social workers, case workers, or counsellors (42%)
- Aboriginal community engagement or support workers in identified positions (26%)
- community development/engagement workers (26%)
- financial counsellors (24%)
- other roles: disability justice liaison officers, industrial, tenant and disability advocates, mental health clinicians, and policy officers (24%).

Overall, 65% of survey respondents partnered with government agencies and community-based organisations to provide outreach and early support services, including:

- domestic violence shelters (43%)
- hospitals or health services (33%), and mental health services (21%)
- Aboriginal community-controlled organisations (ACCOs; 20%)
- and youth services (13%).

In addition, 29% reported partnering with other services including housing, parental and child support, refugee and disability services, community and neighbourhood centres, and schools and universities.

Investment in community legal centres is an investment in people's and communities' wellbeing.

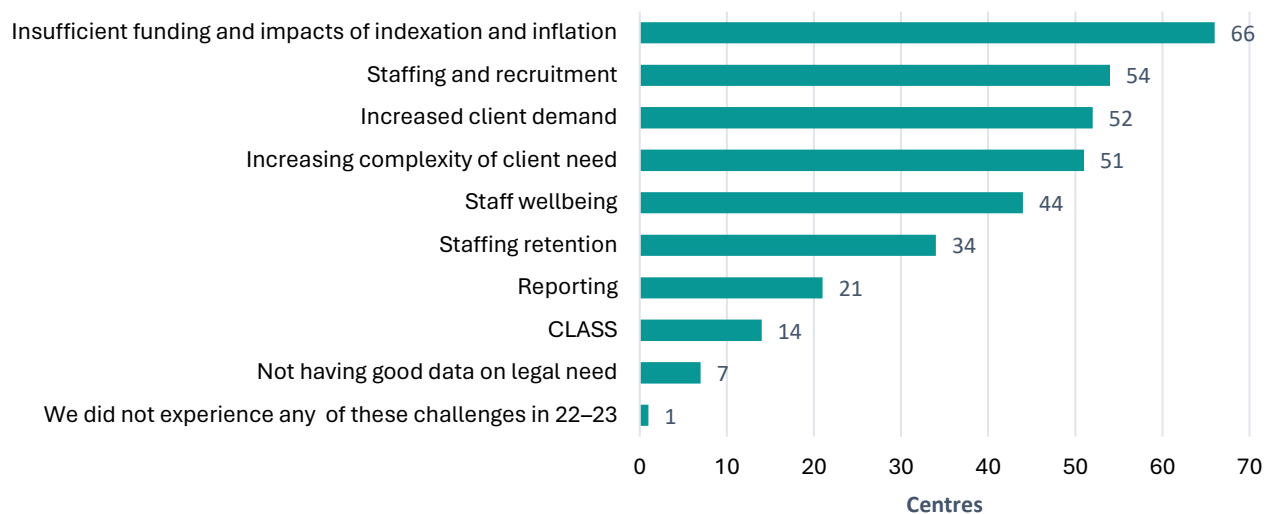


## Part 2: Key challenges in 2022–23

The survey asked centres to identify the top three challenges they faced in 2022–23 from a list of nine options, including funding adequacy, client demand and complexity of need, staffing (recruitment, retention, and wellbeing), reporting obligations, the Community Legal Assistance Service System (CLASS),<sup>4</sup> and the adequacy of available data on legal needs.

Overwhelmingly, the most-identified challenge for respondent centres was inadequate funding (including the impacts of inadequate indexation and high inflation; 66 centres, 56.4%), followed by staffing and recruitment (54 centres, 46.2%), increased client demand (52 centres, 44.4%) and increased complexity of client need (51 centres, 43.6%).

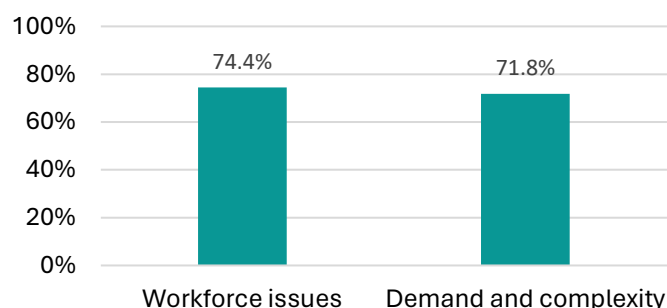
Figure 1: Top challenges respondent centres faced in 2022–23



By combining responses for all staffing-related (recruitment, retention, and wellbeing), and client-related (demand and complexity of need) challenges, it becomes clear that workforce-related issues and client demand and complexity were significant challenges for most centres.

- 74.4% faced workforce challenges related to recruitment, retention, or staff well-being.
- 71.8% faced challenges related to increased client demand or complexity of need.


Figure 2: Workforce (recruitment, retention, and well-being) and client (increased demand, complexity) issues combined.





<sup>4</sup> CLASS is a service data collection and reporting tool, which most centres are required to use to report to governments on services delivered with NLAP 2020–25 funding.


Of the other challenges survey respondents could identify, the next highest was reporting (18.1%), followed by CLASS (12.1%) and not having good enough data on legal need (6%).


Open-ended responses to survey questions highlight the interconnections between funding shortages, staffing, and service delivery, as well as their impacts on workers, and, most importantly, clients and communities.


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*This year we experienced incredibly high demand on our service, seeing overall client services increase by 42% while calls to front reception increased by up to 117%. Ongoing legal support services increased by 137% and our court work exceeded the yearly target by 66%. We cannot continue to meet these ever-increasing numbers without sufficient funding.*
- 

*We are finding increasing demand and also more difficult circumstances. As a youth service we're seeing highly vulnerable clients with multiple legal issues and having to ever tighten our casework to limit who we can assist.*
- 

*Uncertainty of funding also increases the stress on staff, who are already dealing with vicarious trauma, and also have anxiety over the viability of their employment... In FY 22-23 we have also seen a huge spike in demand, meaning more clients must be turned away.*
- 

*The lack of referral options for services where we are at capacity or have a conflict is really impacting clients' trust in our service and the justice system and increasing trauma for staff in turning away clients.*
- 

*We have made the difficult decision to cease our partnership with [Family Relationship Centre] to assist with family law mediations in order to prioritise our GLBTQ+-focussed domestic violence service and duty service at the [local court]. We have also needed to terminate our HJP [Health Justice Partnership] with the [community health centre].*
- 

*It seems that despite increasing demand, indexation has not been commensurate. We are expected to continue to deliver a higher level of service on essentially less money year on year. This means we have to prioritise clients differently and this leads to dissatisfaction as we cannot address every client's needs.*
- 

*There are shortages of children's lawyers in [three separate locations], and we have at least one lawyer willing to service [location] but can't obtain funding. This shortage is contributing to children staying for longer periods in the watchhouses and on remand in detention centres, and is a human rights issue, but is not receiving any attention from the relevant funding bodies.*



## Centres report overwhelming and increasing unmet legal need in their communities

Survey responses indicate that the community legal sector experienced overwhelming and increasing demand for services in 2022–23. This is consistent with the findings of multiple comprehensive national surveys, inquiries, and reports on legal need, which have found consistent high (and increasing) levels of unmet legal need across this country. These include:

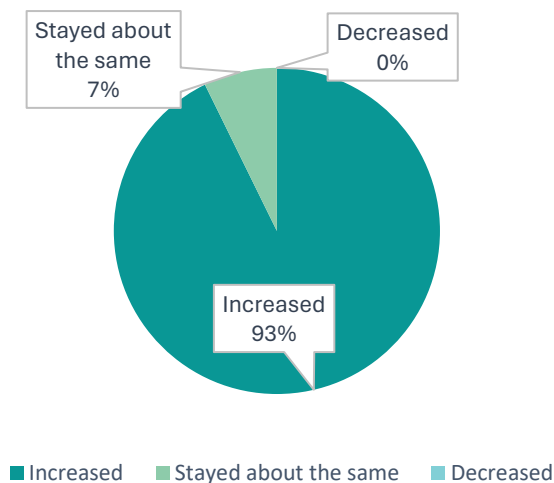
- Law and Justice Foundation of NSW’s Laws Australia Wide Survey<sup>5</sup>
- Australian Productivity Commission’s Inquiry into Access to Justice Arrangements<sup>6</sup>
- Law Council of Australia’s Justice Project<sup>7</sup>
- Victoria Law Foundation’s August 2023 first report on findings from the Public Understanding of Laws Survey (PULS).<sup>8</sup>

### Almost 90% of centres reported increased demand for services in 2022–23

Overall, 89.5% of respondent centres in the SOSS reported that demand for services increased in 2022–23 compared to the previous year, 7.0% reported that demand stayed the same, while 3.5% of centres selected ‘don’t know’. No centres reported that demand for services decreased.

Anecdotally, survey respondents noted marked increases in need for family law and family violence services (including financial and elder abuse), tenancy services, disaster legal assistance, as well as increased need amongst young people with criminal and civil law problems, and people experiencing or at risk of homelessness. Many centres also noted an increase in the number of people experiencing financial hardship in their communities, including housing stress and food insecurity, which is driving an increase in the complexity of people’s legal problems.

Figure 3: Changes in demand for services in 2022-23 compared to the previous year<sup>9</sup>



<sup>5</sup> Law and Justice Foundation of NSW (2012). Legal Australia Wide Survey: <https://www.nationallegalaid.org/resources/legal-australia-wide-survey/>

<sup>6</sup> Productivity Commission (2014). Access to justice arrangements – Inquiry report: <https://www.pc.gov.au/inquiries/completed/access-justice/report>

<sup>7</sup> Law Council of Australia (2018). The Justice Project – Final report: <https://lawcouncil.au/justice-project/final-report>

<sup>8</sup> Victoria Law Foundation (2023). The Public Understanding of Laws Survey (Vol 1) – Everyday problems and legal need: <https://victorialawfoundation.org.au/research/puls>

<sup>9</sup> Don’t know responses excluded.



*Increasing DFSV [Domestic, Family, and Sexual Violence] need and complexity in the NT: between Jan–Mar 2023 and Apr–Jun 2023, 1100%+ increase in NT Police referrals to [centre].*



*Far higher numbers of clients experiencing family law and family and domestic violence...So many families desperately seeking housing, women living in cars after fleeing FDV [family and domestic violence] or staying because they have no options. People are more angry and stressed, takes more time to unpick an issue when their emotions are so heightened.*



*Increased violence against the elderly, clients present with a minimum of three complex legal issues. And of greatest impact is the increased number of diagnosed, hospitalised clients presenting with mental health issues. This has had a huge impact on the lawyers especially because the work is exponentially more demanding...*



*The increased cost of living and lack of available public and social housing is contributing to the increased demand we are seeing for our non-legal services (social work and financial counsellors).*



*We recently saw 1000 clients in just one quarter. This is a 50% increase since the start of the year! People are seeking answers through different mediums – we now have repeat clients emailing us for advice as our phone system is booked out for a week in advance. Again, a first EVER.*



*The housing crisis including < 1% tenancy vacancy rate are increasing demand and reducing options for many tenancy clients but also for family law clients. Women escaping family violence have far fewer realistic options...Inflation and other cost of living pressures are likely a major cause of increased demand for civil law advice.*



*Floods and climate impacts significantly increased demand for allied services in our region, such as the need for financial counsellors, social workers, community development workers and community legal education.*



*In 22–23 [centre name] has noted a marked increase in legal needs in our area...Our client demographic may not have shifted too much but the amount of people who need help has increased.*



*The rising cost of living and housing crisis has led to a huge demand on our tenancy service and associated demand on other services including credit and debt, employment, and financial abuse.*

## Centres turned away over 350 000 people who sought help in 2022–23

Despite the recommendations of several national reports over the past decade, there remains no nationally consistent way to measure unmet legal need across the country. As a proxy, Community Legal Centres Australia estimates the number of people centres in our national membership network turn-away each year (turn-aways). We do this using estimates centres provide us through the survey.

We know that counting the number of people centres turn-away is a limited measure of unmet legal need (as it only counts people who asked for assistance but didn't receive it). Actual levels of unmet legal need are much, much higher. Further, centres use different ways of calculating the number of clients turned away each year.

Our sector strongly supports the need for regular, independent, national legal needs analyses. We also support better resourcing for centres to track and estimate turn-aways more consistently and in more detail.

However, the national peak's turn-aways data is consistent with other measures of legal need, and simply corroborates the many reports and surveys that have found high and increasing rates of legal need in the community. [Appendix 1](#) sets out the range of methods centres use to calculate turn-aways and how we calculated the annual turn-away figure for 2022–23.

Overall, 76.3% of survey respondents tracked the number of people they turned away in 2022–23. Sixty-nine respondents provided usable data on the estimate of weekly turn-aways for their centre, and an explanation of how they calculated that figure.

Using the responses from these 69 centres, we estimate that nationally centres turned away 368 652 people who asked for help in 2022–23.

- On average, respondents reported turning away 44.7 people per week.
- This equates to 2234 turn-aways per year per respondent centre.
- Calculated across the 165 centres in our membership network in 2022–23, this is more than 350 000 people turned away per year.<sup>10</sup>

Some centres noted that it is very difficult to accurately measure turn-aways due to being over-worked and under-funded. One respondent stated:



*We would love to start recording turn-aways, however we barely keep up with demand as it is!*

Our analysis of the methods centres used to estimate total national turn-aways suggest that many centres are likely to be underestimating the numbers of people they are unable to assist. Our turn-away data only represents expressed unmet legal need,<sup>11</sup> and overall unmet legal need across the country is much higher. Centres also reflected on this fact in open-ended survey responses:

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<sup>10</sup>We also tested what this number would be when we removed an outlier centre with the highest number of estimated turn-aways, the total national estimate in this case is still over 320 000 per year.

<sup>11</sup> Expressed unmet legal need refers to people who know they have a legal problem, seek assistance to resolve it, but cannot get assistance for a variety of reasons. It does not include the many people who never seek assistance to resolve legal problems, including because they aren't aware that their problem has a legal solution, or that free legal help is available, or simply because they are overwhelmed.



*We frequently have to consider how to limit our assistance due to capacity. This has not been counted in the turn-aways.*



*We estimate approximately 25% unmet need, but the true numbers are likely much higher.*

Some centres have developed very sophisticated methods of tracking the number of people they turn-away, reflecting the fact that there are many different points in a person's engagement with a service at which they can be turned away, and that even if they receive a service of some kind, it may not meet all their needs.

## CASE STUDY

### Caxton Community Legal Centre's three tiers of turn-away data

Caxton Community Legal Centre (Caxton) used phone records and CLASS data to classify the people they turned away from different levels of service offerings into three tiers.

- **Tier 1 – Access to information:** Over five years, Caxton received approximately 150 000 calls for assistance and provided 126 613 legal information services. That is, the centre was not able to answer and assist approximately 25 000 people who contacted the centre. This provides a first tier turn-away figure of almost 16%.
- **Tier 2 – Access to advice:** During the same five-year period, the service provided legal advice services to 25 530 callers or approximately 17% of all people who called the centre for assistance. This provides a second tier turn-away figure of 83% of all answered calls.
- **Tier 3 – Access to casework or representation:** Finally, over the same period, Caxton provided 1451 representation or casework services, the most intensive service centres deliver and, often, the most effective. This means that just 1% of the initial calls for assistance resulted in an intensive service response and represents a third tier turn-away figure of 99%.

## The most common reason centres turn people away is lack of capacity

The survey asked respondents to identify the main reasons they turned people away from their service in 2022–23. Overwhelmingly, centres reported lack of capacity as the main reason they were not able to assist people who approached them.

- 79% of respondents reported they did not have capacity to assist at all or couldn't assist within the required timeframe.
- 55% and 48% of respondents respectively reported turning people away because they were not eligible for the service or because the centre did not practice in relevant area of law.<sup>12</sup>

Some centres don't turn people away but still struggle to meet need.

<sup>12</sup> Centres will usually make a referral for people who are not eligible for their service (e.g., due to a conflict of interest) or where they don't practice in the relevant area of law. However, there is no way of determining how many of these referrals ultimately receive a service and so we include these people in our turn-aways data.

## CASE STUDY

### Central Australian Women's Legal Service (CAWLS)

CAWLS operates a drop-in service model for women experiencing domestic and family violence in central Australia who need legal assistance with family law and family violence matters.

Due to the magnitude of need and limited available services, and as many of these women are at high risk, CAWLS operates this service with a 'no turn-aways' policy. In 2023 CAWLS assisted 800 women via this drop-in service and over 80% were First Nations women.

This means that staff keep the drop-in clinic open until every woman has been seen and, where necessary, senior executive staff including the CEO will see drop-in clients to ensure no-one misses out. Due to increased demand, this model is becoming unsustainable for workers long-term, and insufficient to meet growing need in the community.

CAWLS also assists more women experiencing domestic and family violence via referrals from its Health Justice Partnerships and other service providers.

## The community legal sector is facing a workforce crisis



*Workers are really attracted to community legal centres because of the sense of purpose that drives our work. We are trying to make things better. It is incredibly dispiriting having to say to people in desperate need we can't help you because we don't have the resources to assist. This is bad for communities, but it is really bad for those workers as well.*

*Tim Leach, CLCs Australia CEO, ABC News Radio, 9 February 2024*

The community legal sector is in the middle of a workforce crisis. Overworked staff are burnt out and demoralised in the face of overwhelming demand for services from people and communities. Centres, particularly those in RRRR communities, are struggling to recruit and retain suitably qualified workers. Under-resourcing is directly linked to staff being both overworked and overwhelmed, and centres' inability to keep pace with increased demand. As a result of these combined challenges, people and communities experiencing poverty, disadvantage, discrimination, and domestic and family violence are missing out on critical supports.



*We are a small centre with less than 8 FTE. Our service agreements under the NLAP are unrealistic and this has caused significant burnout and turnover. We lost two junior solicitors to Legal Aid in July this year, both had less than a year of service accrued. We have communicated to [funding body] that we have had to cut some services owing to the above and we have had push-back and some of this decision-making challenged... This is incredibly stressful as the decisions have been made in the interest of staff wellbeing and yet we always feel pressured to do more with less*



## The sector urgently needs an extra 2000 workers to meet growing need

Respondent centres reported staffing levels ranging from 0 (volunteers only) to 110.25 FTE workers, with an average of 19.1. The median had an FTE of 13 staff members. The total number of FTE staff from the 106 centres that responded to this question was 2044.3.

To estimate the FTE of the 165 centres in our sector, we removed the two national centres from the data as they are, in a sense, outliers (95 and 110.25 FTE). We then applied the average of the remaining 104 respondents to 163 non-national centres, and then reapplied the national centres' FTE. This calculation provides an estimated national workforce of 3087.6 FTE for the community legal sector.<sup>13</sup> This method has been applied to the following data in this section.

Community legal centres specialise in integrated practice, employing professionals across a range of disciplines to deliver coordinated assistance to meet all a person's needs. Participating centres provided the following FTE staff totals broken down by role.

Table 1: FTE staff by role type (actual figures for respondent centres and estimated sector total)

Role	Reported FTE (107 centres)	Estimated FTE for sector (165 centres)
Direct service: Legal role	1020.2	1537.4
Direct service: Non-legal role <sup>14</sup>	482.4	733.6
Operational roles: Executive	178.7	273.2
Operational roles: Non-executive	363.0	545.0

In addition, the survey asked centres how many additional FTE staff across different roles they would need *and could reasonably absorb*, to meet demand for services. In total, 107 centres reported they would need (and could reasonably absorb) an extra 1284 FTE workers nationally to meet demand for services, or an average of 12 FTE workers per centre.

Applying the average across all 165 centres in our membership network, and using the same method as described above for the current FTE estimate, our sector needs (and could reasonably absorb) 1949.5 FTE workers nationally. This represents a 63.1% increase on the estimated FTE in the sector (3087.6 FTE).

Centres reported needing additional workers across all role types, with the greatest need reported for legal, integrated services, and operational roles (particularly office management and administration roles.)

<sup>13</sup> In 2022–23, Community Legal Centres Australia's national membership network comprised 154 community legal centres, 11 Family Violence Prevention Legal Services, and two Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Legal Services.

<sup>14</sup> Our survey used a breakdown of legal v non-legal as one way of demonstrating that legal staff are but a part of our overall workforce. Centres employ staff in many roles as they seek to deliver integrated services capable of meeting all of a client's needs. In future years we intend to dispense with this distinction in line with our integrated service model.

Table 2: Reported (respondents) and estimated (sector) extra FTE staff centres require to meet need<sup>15</sup>

Role	FTE increase needed (107 centres)	FTE increase estimated (165 centres)
Direct service: Legal role	432.2	658.2
Direct service: Paralegal and intake	181.6	277.6
Direct service: Integrated services (non-legal)	203.5	310.9
Direct service: Community legal education	85.8	130.4
Operating roles: Executive team	82.2	123.7
Operating roles: Admin/office manager	118.0	174.3
Operating roles: IT, data, reporting	72.6	111.0
Operating roles: Law reform and comms	108.2	163.2
<b>Total</b>	<b>1284.0</b>	<b>1949.5</b>

## Centres struggle to recruit and retain qualified workers due to low wages and limited career pathways

Community legal sector workers are classified as community services workers and paid under the Social, Community, Health, Aged Care and Disability Services Award (SCHADS). SCHADS wages are significantly lower than government and private sector wages. Even where centres pay above award rates, community lawyers and allied professionals working in community legal settings receive much lower wages than they would in the government and private sectors.

In NSW, community lawyers earn between 10% and 35% less than Legal Aid NSW lawyers, and allied professionals earn between 10% and 20% less than those working in the same roles at Legal Aid NSW. This wage gap increases as workers gain experience and seniority. The wages gap is so significant that Community Legal Centres NSW estimates the NSW community legal sector would require an additional \$9 million to deliver wages parity between people working in community legal centres and at Legal Aid NSW, across legal and allied professional roles.<sup>16</sup>

Similarly, a recent workforce survey conducted by Community Legal Centres Queensland (CLCQ) found that on average, community legal sector workers earn 22% less than people working at Legal Aid Queensland. In response the state peak recommended a \$15.8 million investment in Queensland community legal centres to address this gap and to provide 20% wages loading to people working in rural, regional, and remote communities and a cultural load allowance for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people working in the community legal sector.<sup>17</sup>

During our national NLAP consultations, centres told us that the wages gap and lack of career pathways within our sector drive lawyers and allied professionals from community settings to seek jobs in the public or private sector.

<sup>15</sup> The FTE increase column provides the total estimate from 107 survey responses to the question: "Thinking about the service you would like to be able to deliver, how many additional FTE positions would you need – and could you reasonably manage – to better respond to unmet need in your community?" The right hand column provides an estimation for the 165 centres in our sector (see methodology section for method used).

<sup>16</sup> Community Legal Centres Australia, 2024-25 Pre-Budget Submission, 22 January 2024: <https://clcs.org.au/law-reform-and-advocacy-submissions/>

<sup>17</sup> Community Legal Centres Queensland, 2024-25 State Government Budget Submission, 27 November 2023: <https://www.communitylegalqld.org.au/news/2024-25-state-government-budget-submission/>

Structurally, the wages gap also contributes to the gender pay gap, with women making up the majority of our sector's workers. For example, Community Legal Centres QLD's 2023 Report, *Working in Community Legal Centres in Queensland*, found that in 2022–23, 84.9% of workers in community legal centres in QLD were women.<sup>18</sup> The Federation of Community Legal Centres (Vic.)'s 2022 report, *Working in Community Legal Centres in Victoria*, found that 77% of the community legal centre workforce are women, and that women dominate all roles in the sector.<sup>19</sup> Similar findings are likely to be replicated nationally. For example, most respondents to the ACOSS Australian Community Sector Survey 2023 were women (69%), with this figure rising to 81% for respondents working in organisations focussed on financial, legal and emergency support services, and to 85% for services focussed on domestic and family violence and other services for families.<sup>20</sup>

Overall, 74.4% of survey respondents identified workforce issues, including challenges related to recruitment, retention, and staff well-being as amongst the biggest challenges their centre faced in 2022–23. Low remuneration and lack of career pathways were key drivers of resignations across the sector and presented the biggest barriers to attracting and retaining qualified staff.

More centres reported higher resignation rates (37 centres) in 2022–23 than the previous year, compared with those that reported lower resignation rates (24 centres). The remaining centres experiencing no change or selected 'don't know.'

The top drivers of resignations from centres in 2022–23 were remuneration (63% of respondents that had staff resign) and a lack of career pathways (46% of centres that had staff resign). Where respondents offered 'other' reasons for resignations, these were often linked to remuneration and job security (for example, funding uncertainty).

The average number of positions that respondent centres advertised in 2022-23 was 6.3 FTE, while the median was 4. On average, most centres reported that they filled vacant positions within three months. However, some centres reported being unable to fill positions within six or even twelve months.

Centres also identified remuneration (80% of centres) and lack of career pathways (44%) as the most significant barriers to attracting and retaining qualified staff. Again, several centres identified funding uncertainty and short-term contracts as 'other' barriers.

## Wage costs are rising for all centres

Despite centres identifying low wages as a key driver of the sector's workforce crisis, wage increases (driven by welcome increases to mandatory superannuation contributions, the Equal Remuneration Order and annual wage increases granted to SCHADS workers by the Fair Work Commission) are further stretching centres' budgets. With these wage increases<sup>21</sup> far outpacing indexation on centres funding contracts (which is set at 1.5% per year for Commonwealth government funding delivered via NLAP), centres report being unable to fill some positions when they fall vacant and reducing their overall FTE staff numbers. As open-ended responses to the survey and the case study below

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<sup>18</sup> Community Legal Centres Queensland (2023) *Working in Community Legal Centres in Queensland: Summary report*.

<sup>19</sup> Jozica Kutin, Hugh M. McDonald, Nigel J. Balmer, Tenielle Hagland and Clare Kennedy (2022), *Working in Community Legal Centres in Victoria: Results from the Community Legal Centres Workforce Project*, Federation of Community Legal Centres VIC and the Victoria Law Foundation: [https://assets-global.website-files.com/64e6d2582dd4319151be6a26/653b3bdc8690c39e6a94cf62\\_64ec1449ec1cda0a02ebdf1a\\_working\\_in\\_community\\_legal\\_centres\\_in\\_victoria\\_sustainable\\_workforce.pdf](https://assets-global.website-files.com/64e6d2582dd4319151be6a26/653b3bdc8690c39e6a94cf62_64ec1449ec1cda0a02ebdf1a_working_in_community_legal_centres_in_victoria_sustainable_workforce.pdf)

<sup>20</sup> ACOSS (2023) *Australian Community Sector Survey 2023. At the precipice - Australia's Community Sector through the Cost-of-living Crisis*: <https://www.acoss.org.au/acss-april-2023/>

<sup>21</sup> On 1 July 2023 the Fair Work Commission granted SCHADS workers a 5.7% increase.

demonstrate, fewer staff ultimately means fewer services delivered to people and communities in need.



*When staff have left, we have decided not to re-hire someone for that position so those wages could be used to meet the Fair Work increases*

*[Centre] was unable to replace a 0.8FTE triage officer for 2023–2024 in order to accommodate the increase in staff wages. This has meant we only have one person answering phone and booking appointments and dealing with 'walk-ins' in an office where we get 1000 per month on average, excluding email contacts, website enquiries and organisation to organisation referrals which are about 6 per week.*

Overall, 88% of centres reported increased expenditure on wages in 2022–23. While some centres also reported an increase in FTE staff in 2022–23, centres reported rising wages bills even where staffing levels remained the same or decreased. Of the centres that reported no change or a decrease in staff numbers, 75% still reported spending more on wages in 2022–23 than they did in the previous year.

**CASE STUDY**

**Launceston Community Legal Centre**

In 2018–19 Launceston Community Legal Centre had sufficient core funding to employ 4.4 FTE advocates to provide legal services. By 2022–2023 this figure was 3.4 FTE advocates employed through NLAP funding. This 25% reduction in workforce has resulted in a 37% reduction in the number of advices provided, a 55% reduction in case work, and a 60% reduction in community legal education (CLE) compared to 2018–2019.

The inability to pay more senior solicitors a competitive salary in comparison to equivalent public sector roles has made it difficult to retain senior staff. The centre believes the reduction in senior and experienced advocates explains the disparity in the reduction of services. Junior staff require additional supervision from senior lawyers which reduces their capacity to do CLE and casework. Junior staff also have a lower work output.

This staffing challenge has become more acute since November last year when the centre's Deputy Principal Solicitor took twelve months' extended leave. As of March 2024, the centre has yet to secure a replacement. As a result, the centre has temporarily paused CLE, reduced the number of outreach clinics by a quarter, and significantly reduced the number of clients it can assist with employment or disability discrimination issues. This will cause a significant further reduction in the number of cases and advice the centre will provide this financial year.

Currently, the centre has a four-week wait to see family law and civil solicitors.

## Volunteers are central to our movement, but no substitute for a qualified, well-supported workforce

The community legal centre movement was founded through volunteer law students and advocates. Our movement has thrived in meeting gaps in community need by leveraging volunteers' significant contributions to our sector. In 2022–23, 86% of respondent centres used volunteers to support their work.

- 79% use law student volunteers
- 22% use social work student volunteers
- 55% use law graduate volunteers (completing the practical requirements of their practical legal training)

However, while many student volunteers take entry-level jobs in the community legal sector, centres that participated in our national NLAP consultations described a common trajectory: new graduates take entry level positions and gain a few years' experience in a community legal centre before moving on to better-paid jobs in the government, particularly Legal Aid Commissions, or private sector. This contributes to workforce shortages across our sector and means that centres face particular challenges recruiting more senior and experienced staff. Young lawyers cut their teeth in our sector but can't afford to stay long-term.

Governments cannot rely on the goodwill of volunteers as a substitute for adequate funding for community-based legal assistance providers to attract, nurture, and retain a capable and well-supported workforce.

## The sector's workforce crisis means fewer services for people in need

### CASE STUDY

#### Southside Justice

Southside Justice receives funding from the Commonwealth Government through NLAP which is enough to employ an 0.3 FTE family lawyer.

In April 2022, the centre's family lawyer resigned. Due to annual funding confirmation requirements, the centre could not start recruiting the position until July 2022. The new lawyer started in September 2022. During this time (April–September 2022), the centre ceased its family law clinics. For six months (September 2022 to February 2023) it offered limited family law clinic appointments to people living in its catchment (325 000 people).

In February 2023, the centre made the difficult decision to cease the family law clinic for people living in its catchment and focus its limited family law resources on working with community agencies. But even so, the centre can only provide discrete task assistance. It cannot provide ongoing legal assistance and cannot represent people in family law litigation, even in matters of family violence.

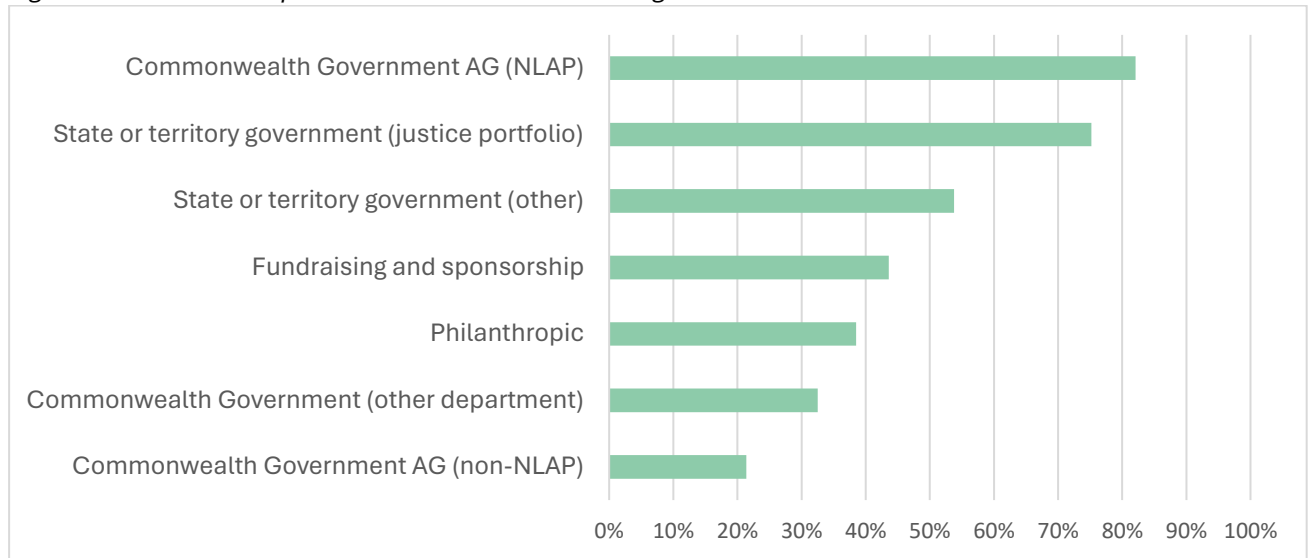
Victoria Legal Aid (VLA) now does Southside Justice's intake and triage. However, they don't refer family law matters to the centre because it doesn't have a family law clinic. This means that unless a person is engaged with a community agency in its catchment, they cannot receive free legal advice from their local community legal centre. With VLA now doing Southside Justice's intake, the centre does not have current turn-away figures in family law. However, the recent PULS survey result highlights that 'family law legal need had the highest percentage of unmet civil legal needs' considered by the survey (at 70.1%).

## Funding

Chronic funding shortages are a key driver of increased demand for legal assistance and the community legal sector’s workforce crisis. As noted above, inadequate funding was the single issue survey respondents were most likely to identify as one of the top challenges they faced in 2022–23 (56%), followed by recruitment (45.7%) and increased client demand (44.7%).

Community legal centres receive funding from a range of government and non-government sources, with many centres receiving funds from multiple sources.

Figure 4: All sources respondent centres received funding from in 2022–23



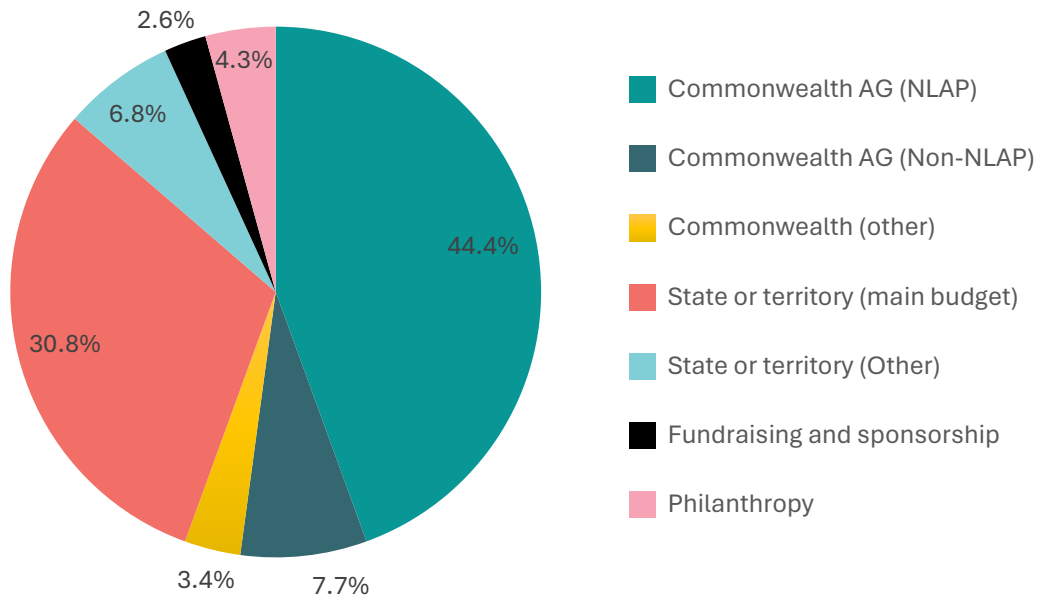
### Governments are the main source of funding for most centres

Although centres receive money from multiple sources, most centres received at least some money from governments (Commonwealth, state, and territory). For most centres, governments are the primary source of income. This underscores the clear responsibility governments have for funding the community legal sector, including via the NLAP.

Most respondent centres (93.2%) receive Commonwealth funding – NLAP or non-NLAP. For 60% of these centres, Commonwealth funding made up their main funding source. A significant majority (82.1%) of respondent centres received Commonwealth funding via the NLAP, and for over half (54%) of these centres, NLAP funding was their main source of funding. In total, Commonwealth Government funding provided the primary source of funding for 56% of respondent centres.

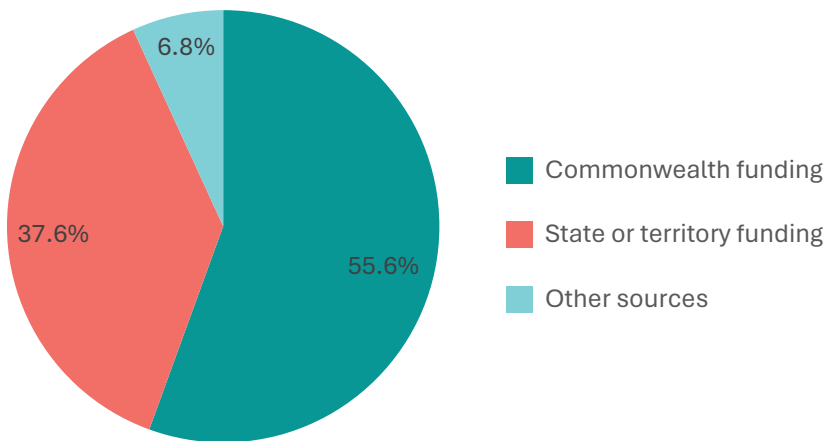
Given the Commonwealth’s historical leadership in funding the community legal sector, it has a particular responsibility to support our work. The task of fixing the sector’s chronic under-resourcing must begin with a significant increase in Commonwealth support. However, states and territories will also need to step up.

Figure 5: Main source of funding for respondent centres – all sources



Three quarters of respondent centres received state/territory funding delivered primarily through the justice portfolio (main budget). Of these centres, just under 40% reported state or territory funding as their main funding source. In total, main budget allocations from state and territory governments provided the main source of income for 30.8% of respondent centres.

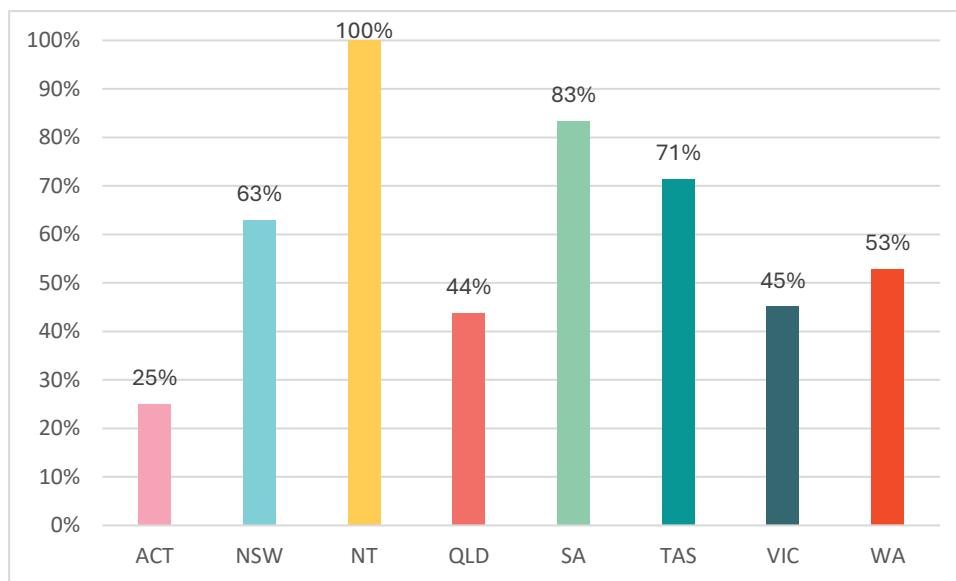
Figure 6: Main source of respondent centres funding – by Commonwealth Government, state or territory government and other sources



These national figures mask the fact that centres in different jurisdictions have very different experiences when it comes to securing additional legal assistance funding from state and territory governments. While state and territory contributions are significant to our sector and very welcome, they do not equally reach all centres or provide stability – and the NLAP does not mandate any state and territory contributions at all. Some state and territory governments contribute nothing or next to nothing by way of support for legal assistance. For example, 100% of centres in the NT and 83% of centres in SA reported that the Commonwealth provided their main source of funding in 2022-23.



Figure 7: Commonwealth Government funding (all sources) as main source of respondent centres funding by jurisdiction



## Community legal centres look to the Commonwealth to provide consistent, guaranteed baseline funding

Local communities need their community legal centres to have funding certainty, consistency, and stability so that centres can properly plan for and maintain their service delivery. At this stage, the sector cannot rely on state and territory governments for this. The Commonwealth Government has a responsibility to provide community legal centres with consistent, guaranteed, baseline funding.

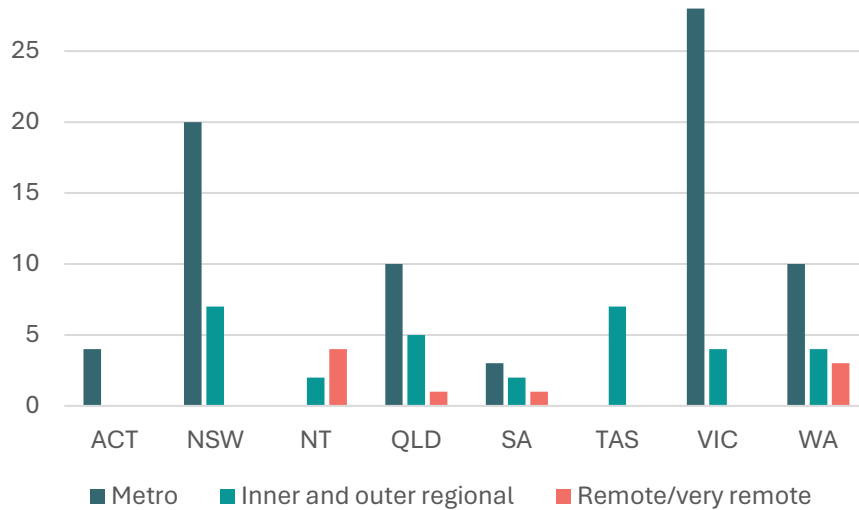
While funding from states and territories is welcome, there are two key problems with state/territory approaches to funding community legal centres. First, under the current NLAP, states and territories are responsible for allocating Commonwealth funding to community legal centres, and here, their performance is extremely varied. Some jurisdictions run lengthy procurement processes for Commonwealth money, there can be delays of up to a year between the allocation of Commonwealth NLAP funding and its distribution to centres. Second, many states/territories wait to see Commonwealth contributions confirmed before making decisions about their own contributions. This introduces yet another variable and means centres are even less able to rely on states and territories for funding security.

Ideally, states/territories will distribute Commonwealth funding for our sector, and their own funding for our sector, in a single process and for a minimum five years at a time. Without a Commonwealth commitment to funding of the next NLAP being confirmed in the May 2024 federal budget, state and territory allocation processes are unlikely to commence this year. If funding allocations are not announced until the 2025–26 federal budget, our centres will have less than two months' funding remaining. Without ongoing commitment, centres will be unable to attract or retain staff and critical programs will have to be wound down. Already, centres are extremely concerned about these risks, which are already impacting program planning. If an ongoing commitment to resource the next NLAP is not included in the 2024–25 budget, we can expect centres to begin shedding staff and winding down services almost immediately.

## Part 3: Spotlight on RRRR communities

Centres service inner and outer regional communities across most states and territories. However, centres operating from or delivering services to remote and very remote communities are concentrated in NT, QLD, SA, and WA.<sup>22</sup>

Figure 8: Metro, regional and remote centres by jurisdiction



Centres in regional and remote communities consistently report that they are uniquely impacted by the sector’s funding and workforce crises. Rates of socio-economic disadvantage are higher in regional and remote communities. With poverty being a key driver of legal need, demand for limited services in these communities can be high and complex.

### Distance and inflation drive high service delivery costs in remote areas


The cost of delivering services in RRRR communities is also higher, often requiring four-wheel drive vehicles and satellite phones, or higher budgets for flights and accommodation, to reach communities in the remotest parts of a centre’s catchment area. Some centres make regular road trips of hundreds of kilometres to outreach to the most remote communities in their catchments, including Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities.



*Our latest outreach was for four nights, with the furthest destination being 650km away, and it cost around \$1800 for fuel, accommodation and travel allowance. There needs to be recognition from government that establishing trust with communities, through outreach, takes time. People don’t simply turn up the first time you go somewhere. (NLAP consultations)*


<sup>22</sup>We have used the Australian Statistical Geography Standard (ASGS) to classify respondent centres as metro, inner regional, outer regional, remote and very remote. For the data analysis, we have used the ASGS classification to create three groups of centres: metro, regional (inner and outer regional), and remote (remote and very remote).

Centres also consistently report that working with people in regional and remote communities requires a different approach, with time to build trust and an on-the-ground presence critical.




*Despite being located in remote [jurisdiction] each community whether a larger centre or smaller communities all operate differently, and a localised approach needs to be taken for each location. Having local staff located in regional centres is critical.*

Inflation in the regions outpaces that in cities, legal need can be higher and often more complex, communities are harder to reach, and essential services like housing and childcare are limited or non-existent. Where they exist, high inflation makes them unaffordable for many workers earning community sector wages.



*In the [remote region], there is no rental supplement. We have two currently advertised vacancies, but there is only one available, affordable rental in [remote town]. Some of our staff live full-time in caravan parks – which is limiting for people with families.*



*In [remote region], people get about \$800 a week in rent supplements, but rent in some areas are \$2000 a week so the supplement is nowhere near enough. This means people withdraw their job applications.*

## Our workforce crisis is acute

While all centres consistently reported increased demand for services, centres in remote and very remote communities were more likely to report experiencing higher resignation rates than centres in metro and regional communities.

For example, 57.1% of remote centres reported a higher resignation rate in 2022–23 than the year before, compared with 35% of metro and regional centres combined.

*Table 3: Resignation rates for metro/regional and remote/very remote centres in 2022–23*

Resignation rate	Metro and regional	Remote and very remote
Higher	35.1%	57.1%
Same	41.5%	28.6%
Lower	23.4%	14.3%

As a result, remote centres had more vacant positions to fill in 2022–23 than metro and regional centres combined. We used the number of vacant positions advertised as a percentage of total FTE roles to calculate a ‘vacancy rate’ for each centre that responded. We then calculated the average vacancy rate for metro and regional centres combined, which was 31.6%. By comparison, the average vacancy rate for remote centres was 40.1%. That is, on average, in metro and regional centres, 31.6% of roles were vacant at some point during 2022–23. For remote and very remote centres, almost half available roles were vacant at some point during the year.

In addition, remote centres generally took much longer to recruit vacant positions, with 16.7% of respondents from remote centres reporting it took them 6 to 12 months to fill some vacancies, compared to just 3.4% of metro centres, and 0% of regional centres.




 *We advertised at [regional town] for a level 6 lawyer for 12 months and did not receive a single application. Centres in [jurisdiction] have 6 to 12 vacant positions at any given time, across the four providers. Every regional, rural and remote service says the same thing... There is a problem across the board, but it is acute regionally. (NLAP consultations)*


Table 4: Time to recruit vacant positions for metro, inner/outer regional and remote/very remote centres.

Time	Metro	Regional	Remote
Less than 1 month	20.7%	9.1%	16.7%
Up to 3 months	69.0%	86.4%	50.0%
3 to 6 months	17.2%	22.7%	33.3%
6 to 12 months	3.4%	0.0%	16.7%


Unsurprisingly, rising inflation and staffing shortages result in fewer services for people and communities at a time when cost of living pressures and the national housing crisis mean that many need services now more than ever.

 *Clients are definitely presenting with increased complexity and the housing crisis is having a disproportionate impact on our regional clients, with rental vacancies less than 1% and what is available is unaffordable.*

 *We are particularly concerned about the lack of access to services across our remote region in a twelve-month period of disrupted and limited services due to staffing (mainly recruitment and retention issues) across a number of the legal services operating in the region. Remote travel/outreach is often the first service that stops when faced with capacity issues/reduced service delivery*

 *Our rural and remote outreach trips have increased in cost extensively in the last financial year. Travel and staffing expense increases have led to altering planning and decreased service delivery to remote locations*

Where centres have received funding increases, these are often absorbed into meeting wages increases and rising costs.

 *We received a small amount of additional Commonwealth funding (\$30 000) with an expectation/demand of additional deliverables to account for this small increase, however this funding has really been just used up to cover wage increases, rent increases, petrol/car increases since COVID*

## CASE STUDY

### Pilbara Community Legal Centre

The Pilbara Community Legal Centre (PCLS) has been providing services across the Pilbara for over 30 years. PCLS operates from Karratha, South Hedland, Newman and Roebourne and provides a range of services including legal, financial counselling, tenancy advocacy and support, housing support, redress, domestic violence advocacy, victim support and community migrant services from these locations. The Pilbara is a vast area of approximately 506 000 square kilometres with a population of 62 000 people. Aboriginal people represent 14.8% of the population, compared to other Western Australian regions (3.3%) and Australia (3.2%).

The Pilbara is often referred to as the ‘engine room’ of Australia and makes a significant contribution to the Australian economy due to the abundance of natural resources. The wealth generated by this industry is in stark contrast to the disadvantage experienced by the majority of the centre’s clients in the Pilbara. PCLS receives funding from the state and federal governments (including via the NLAP). This funding enables the centre to employ three legal staff to cover the entire Pilbara region, including the Principal Solicitor. PCLS has increased its legal staff with grants from the National Indigenous Australians Agency Indigenous Women’s Program and the Law Society of WA Public Purpose Trust. However, current staffing levels remain inadequate to address the legal needs of people and communities across the Pilbara.

Due to the impact the mining industry has on the supply of affordable housing, it is increasingly difficult to attract and retain staff to fill vacant positions in the Pilbara. PCLS has had two domestic violence advocacy roles which have been vacant since November 2023 and one solicitor role vacant in South Hedland. The cost of living remotely, rental shortages and competition from other organisations greatly impact the number of applications the centre receives for vacant positions. When a job offer is made, the remuneration package often falls short of candidates’ expectations. Candidates decline offers, positions remain unfilled, and the centre must start again. These recruitment challenges result in increased costs and productivity for the centre. They also place added pressure on staff, contributing to burnout and low morale. Ultimately, the worst impacts are borne by people and communities experiencing disadvantage in the Pilbara, who have reduced access to timely legal assistance.

Current funding levels mean PCLS cannot employ solicitors in Roebourne and Newman, so these towns can only be serviced through outreach. While expensive, outreach is an important way to deliver multidisciplinary services to people and communities across the Pilbara face-to-face. Face-to-face services can be supplemented with technology. However, low literacy levels, lack of access to and reliability of technology, high rates of English as a second language, and intergenerational trauma mean that remote communication methods often not appropriate for working effectively with people and communities across the Pilbara.

Legal outreach to Newman requires a round trip of fourteen hours driving, which reduces the time staff have available for service provision. The centre also incurs high costs associated with the frequency of travel required, ensuring travel safety (by sending at least two staff on every trip), accommodation and purchasing and maintaining suitable equipment, such as vehicles, satellite phones and portable office equipment. Given the centre’s limited funding envelope, all of this reduces the amount of time and funding available for legal and non-legal staff to provide services to clients.

PCLS urgently needs increased Commonwealth Government funding to expand place-based, face-to-face service delivery with multidisciplinary teams in each major town to effectively deliver services to people and communities experiencing deep and persistent disadvantage across the region. Without recognition and investment by Government of the increased costs associated with delivering community legal services in remote and very remote places, people and communities in these regions will continue to experience structural barriers to accessing justice and equality before the law.

## Conclusion

Community legal centres are distinct within the legal assistance sector and make a unique contribution to meeting legal need and improving community wellbeing.

With the cost-of-living crisis contributing to high and increasing levels of unmet legal need in our communities, centres are experiencing overwhelming demand for services. Static budgets and challenges attracting and retaining suitably qualified staff forced centres to turn-away over 350 000 people in need in 2022–23.

All governments have a responsibility to ensure community legal centres are adequately resourced to support people and communities to address legal problems before they spiral out of control, and to help keep people safe, in their homes and jobs, out of hospitals and prisons, and off the streets.

Community legal centres need an urgent investment of an extra \$125 million in the 2024–25 financial year to keep their doors open and to help us at least begin to address rising unmet need for legal help. Our sector also needs long-term funding security so that people and communities' access to free legal assistance is not disrupted or withdrawn. The Commonwealth Government can provide this by making clear its commitment to legal assistance funding from 1 July 2025 in the May 2024 federal budget forward estimates.

People and communities experiencing disadvantage deserve to feel certain the holistic, trauma-informed services they rely on will be accessible where and when they need them – now, and into the future.

# Appendix 1: Demographics and methods

## Responses

### Total

- 125 total (complete and partial) responses
- 117 valid responses included in the dataset

This represents a response rate of 71% (117 of 165 centres).

### Responses by jurisdiction

Centres from every jurisdiction participated in the survey. The NT recorded the highest response rate and QLD the lowest. This is at least partially explained by the fact Community Legal Centres QLD was conducting a workforce survey at the same time our survey was in the field.

Jurisdiction	Participating centres	Total centres in sector
Australian Capital Territory	4	5
New South Wales	27	36
Northern Territory	6	6
Queensland	16	30
South Australia	6	8
Tasmania	7	8
Victoria	32	45
Western Australia	17	25

Excludes two participating national centres.

The chart below shows the percentage of each jurisdiction's participating centres.

*Proportional jurisdictional representation of respondent centres*





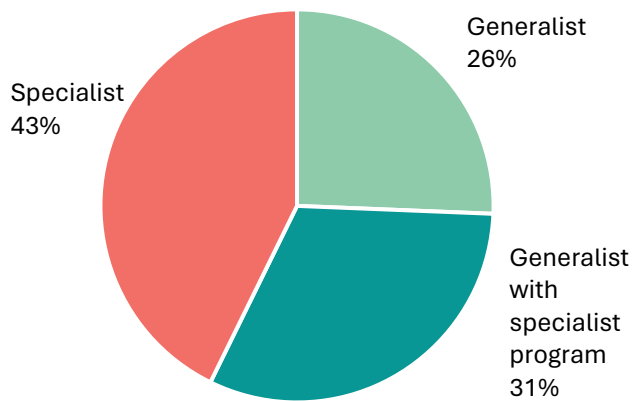
## Responses by service type

- 113 community legal centres
- Three Family Violence Prevention Legal Services
- One Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Legal Service

## Responses from community legal centres: Specialist versus generalist

- Specialist centres: 50 (44.5%)
- Generalist centres: 67 (55.5%); of the 67 generalist centres 37 also provide specialist services
- Of the 67 generalist centres, there were 31 RRRR centres and 36 metro centres

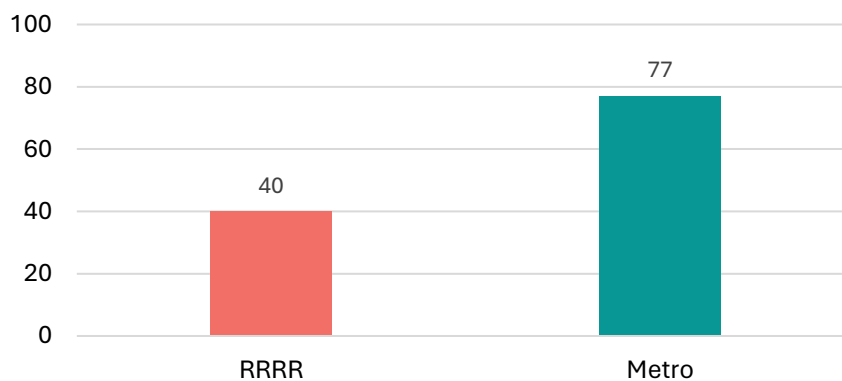
Respondent centres by type



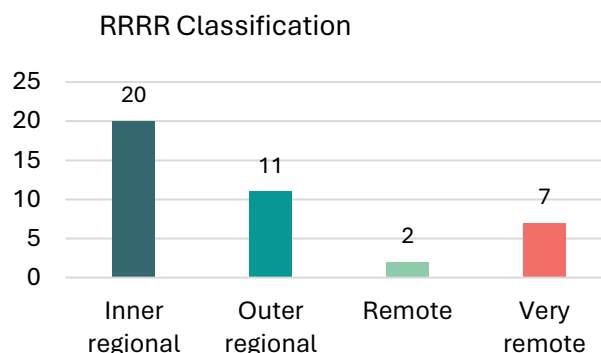
## Responses by geographic location

- 40 respondents operate in rural, regional, remote, and very remote (RRRR) locations.
- 77 respondents operate in metro (major city) locations.

Respondent centres: RRRR vs. Metro



- Of the 40 RRRR centres:<sup>23</sup>
  - Twenty operate in inner regional communities
  - Eleven operate in outer regional communities
  - Two operate in remote communities
  - Seven operate in very remote communities.



## Calculating turn-aways

### Definition

- For the purposes of the survey, we defined a turn-away as any person a centre could not assist, for reasons including:
  - did not have capacity to assist at all or within the required timeframe
  - could not offer the service needed, e.g., court representation
  - could help with some but not all of a person’s problem
  - don’t practice in the relevant area of law
  - the person was not eligible for the centre’s service, e.g. outside catchment area, conflict of interest, not from a priority group.

### Methods used by centres to track turn-away figures.

In total, 76.1% (86 of 113) of survey respondents tracked turn-away data in 2022–23:

- 23.7% tracked turn-away data completely or formally
- 52.6% tracked turn-away data partially or informally
- 23.7% did not track turn-away data.

Of the centres that tracked turn-away data:

- 48.3% used data from reception
- 35.6% used data from CLASS<sup>24</sup>
  - 68% of this group used CLASS data based on people to whom they only provided a referral service to calculate turn-aways
  - 20% of this group used CLASS data based on people to whom they provided only a referral or information service to calculate turn-aways
- 32.2% used anecdotal evidence (such as consulting with staff)
- 25.3% used data phone records data
- 27.6% used other methods
  - 39.1% of this group used an internal database of some kind
  - 30.4% of this group used Actionstep.

<sup>23</sup> These classifications align with the ‘remoteness areas’ in the Australian Statistical Geography Standard: <https://www.abs.gov.au/statistics/standards/australian-statistical-geography-standard-asgs-edition-3/jul2021-jun2026/remoteness-structure/remoteness-areas>

<sup>24</sup> The Community Legal Assistance Service System that NLAP-funded centres are required to use to collect and report service data to federal, state, and territory governments.

## Method used in this report to calculate the national turn-away figure.

- Responses to the question “What is your centre’s average number of turn-aways per week?” were cross-referenced and validated via a follow-up question “How did you calculate your weekly figure?”
- Some responses were excluded or adjusted based on answers to the follow up question.
  - Where a range was provided (e.g. 20–50), we used the average.
  - Where a percentage was provided, we could not turn this into a whole number without data on that centre’s total services.
- There were 69 valid responses that were then used to calculate the average weekly turn-away figure for each respondent centre.
- We then multiplied the weekly average by 50 weeks (to account for planned service closures, for example over the summer holiday period). This gave us the average yearly turn-away figure per respondent centre.
- We then multiplied this number by 165 to provide an estimate of turn-aways across all centres in the sector in 2022–23.

## Comparing metro, regional, and remote centres

- Centres operating outside of major cities refer to themselves as RRRR (rural, regional, remote, and very remote).
- The survey did not ask centres to identify whether they were a RRRR centre.
- To analyse the data, we used the Australia Statistical Geography Standard (Edition 3) remoteness areas, which are also used in CLASS, to classify centres as:
  - Major city
  - Inner regional
  - Outer regional
  - Remote
  - Very remote.
- For the analysis in this report, we created three categories: metro (major city), regional (inner and outer regional), and remote (remote and very remote).
- Where a centre fell within multiple classifications, we allocated it to its most remote classification for analysis.
- Where the report makes comparisons between metro and RRRR centres, it uses several different breakdowns to demonstrate the varying challenges faced by RRRR centres, which are often exacerbated for more remote centres:
  - Metro centres vs. all regional and remote centres
  - Metro and all regional centres vs. all remote centres
  - Metro centres vs. regional centres v remote centres.

## Survey questionnaire

The full survey questionnaire is available online at [clcs.org.au/sots](https://clcs.org.au/sots).

## Appendix 2: CLCs Australia member network 2022–23

### State and territory associations

CLCs Australia’s members are the eight state and territory community legal centre associations.

- Australian Capital Territory Association of Community Legal Centres
- Community Legal Centres New South Wales
- Community Legal Centres Queensland
- Community Legal Centres South Australia
- Community Legal Centres Tasmania
- Community Legal Western Australia
- Federation of Community Legal Centres (Vic)
- Northern Territory Association of Community Legal Centres

### Member centres

CLCs Australia provides services and support to more than 160 organisations which are members of the eight state and territory associations, including community legal centres, Family Violence Prevention Legal Services and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Legal Services.

#### ACT

Animal Defenders Office  
ANUSA Legal Service  
Canberra Community Law  
Care Consumer Law  
Women's Legal Centre (ACT and Region)

#### New South Wales

Ability Rights Centre  
Arts Law Centre of Australia  
Australian Centre for Disability Law  
Australian Pro Bono Centre  
Binaal Billa Family Violence Prevention Legal Service  
Central Coast Community Legal Centre  
Central Tablelands and Blue Mountains Community Legal Centre  
Environmental Defenders Office (EDO)  
Far West Community Legal Centre  
Financial Rights Legal Centre  
HIV/AIDS Legal Centre

Hunter Community Legal Centre  
Illawarra Legal Centre  
Immigration Advice and Rights Centre  
Inner City Legal Centre  
International Social Service Australia  
Justice Support Centre  
Kingsford Legal Centre  
Macarthur Legal Centre  
Marrickville Legal Centre  
Mid North Coast Legal Centre  
North and North West Community Legal Service  
Northern Rivers Community Legal Centre  
Public Interest Advocacy Centre  
Redfern Legal Centre  
Refugee Advice and Casework Service  
Seniors Rights Service  
Shoalcoast Community Legal Centre  
Tenants' Union of NSW  
Thiyama-li Family Violence Service  
University of Newcastle Legal Centre

Welfare Rights Centre Western NSW Community Legal Centre  
Western Sydney Community Legal Centre  
Wirringa Baiya Aboriginal Women's Legal Centre  
Women's Legal Service NSW  
Youth Law Australia

#### Northern Territory

Central Australian Aboriginal Family Legal Unit  
Central Australian Women's Legal Service  
Darwin Community Legal Service  
Katherine Women's Information and Legal Service  
North Australian Aboriginal Family Legal Service  
Top End Women's Legal Service

#### Queensland

Aboriginal Family Legal Services Queensland  
ADA Law  
Basic Rights Queensland  
Bayside Community Legal Service

Brisbane North Community Legal Service  
 Cairns Community Legal Centre  
 Caxton Legal Centre  
 Central Queensland Community Legal Centre  
 First Nations Women's Legal Services QLD  
 Gold Coast Community Legal Centre and Advice Bureau  
 Hervey Bay Neighbourhood Centre  
 HUB Community Legal  
 Institute for Urban Indigenous Health  
 knowmore  
 LawRight  
 LGBTI Legal Service  
 Mackay Regional Community Legal Centre  
 My Community Legal Gold Coast  
 North Queensland Women's Legal Service  
 Pine Rivers Community Legal Service  
 Prisoners' Legal Service  
 Queensland Advocacy for Inclusion  
 Queensland Indigenous Family Violence Legal Service  
 Refugee and Immigration Legal Service  
 Suncoast Community Legal Service  
 TASC National  
 Tenants Queensland  
 Townsville Community Law  
 Women's Legal Service Queensland  
 YFS Legal  
 Youth Advocacy Centre

### South Australia

Community Justice Services SA  
 Family Violence Legal Service Aboriginal Corporation (SA)  
 JusticeNet SA  
 Northern Community Legal Service  
 Roma Mitchell Community Legal Centre  
 Uniting Communities Law Centre  
 WestSide Lawyers  
 Women's Legal Service (SA)  
 Working Women's Centre

### Tasmania

Hobart Community Legal Service  
 Launceston Community Legal Centre

North West Community Legal Centre  
 Tasmanian Aboriginal Legal Service  
 Tasmanian Refugee Legal Service  
 Tenants' Union of Tasmania  
 Women's Legal Service Tasmania  
 Worker Assist Tasmania

### Victoria

AED Legal Centre  
 Animal Law Institute  
 ARC Justice – Goulburn Valley and Loddon Campaspe Community Legal Centres  
 Asylum Seeker Resource Centre – Human Rights Law Program  
 Ballarat and Grampians Community Legal Service  
 Barwon Community Legal Service  
 Brimbank Melton Community Legal Centre  
 Consumer Action Law Centre  
 Disability Discrimination Legal Service  
 Djirra  
 Eastern Community Legal Centre  
 Emma House Domestic Violence Services Legal Program  
 Environmental Justice Australia  
 First Step Legal  
 Fitzroy Legal Service  
 Gippsland Community Legal Service  
 Human Rights Law Centre  
 Hume Riverina Community Legal Service  
 Inner Melbourne Community Legal  
 InTouch Legal Centre  
 JobWatch  
 Justice Connect  
 Law and Advocacy Centre for Women  
 Mallee Family Care Community Legal Centre  
 Mental Health Legal Centre  
 Monash Law Clinics  
 Moonee Valley Legal Service  
 Northern Community Legal Centre  
 Peninsula Community Legal Centre  
 Refugee Legal  
 Seniors Rights Victoria  
 Social Security Rights Victoria  
 South-East Monash Legal Service  
 SouthPort Community Legal Service  
 Southside Justice

Tenants Victoria  
 University of Melbourne Student Union Legal Service  
 Victorian Aboriginal Legal Service  
 Villamanta Disability Rights Legal Service  
 West Heidelberg Community Legal Service  
 WEstjustice  
 Whittlesea Community Connections Community Legal Service  
 Women's Legal Service Victoria  
 Young Workers Centre  
 Youthlaw

### Western Australia

Aboriginal Family Legal Services  
 Albany Community Legal Centre  
 Circle Green Community Legal  
 Citizens Advice Bureau  
 Consumer Credit Legal Service  
 Fremantle Community Legal Centre  
 Goldfields Community Legal Centre  
 Gosnells Community Legal Centre  
 Kimberley Community Legal Service  
 Marninwarntikura Women's Resource Centre  
 Mental Health Law Centre  
 Midland Information, Debt and Legal Advocacy Service  
 Northern Suburbs Community Legal Centre  
 Peel Community Legal Service  
 Pilbara Community Legal Service  
 Regional Alliance West  
 SCALES Community Legal Centre  
 South West Community Legal Centre  
 Southern Aboriginal Corporation Family Violence Prevention Legal Service  
 Street Law Centre  
 Sussex Street Community Law Service  
 Welfare Rights and Advocacy Service  
 Wheatbelt Community Legal Centre  
 Women's Legal Service (WA)  
 Youth Legal Service



