

# More than legal services: Preventing crises, strengthening communities

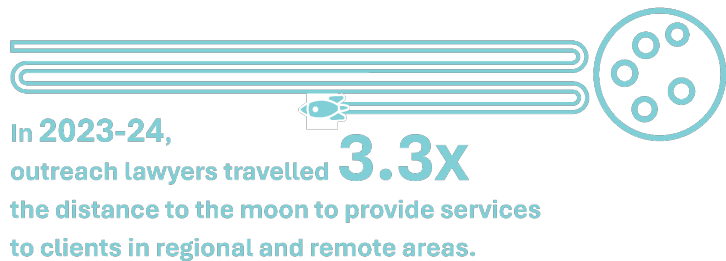
November 2024



**The community legal sector helps hundreds of thousands of people every year to resolve their everyday legal problems before they snowball to hit crisis.**

**Frontline domestic and family violence prevention and response** services make up 40-50% of the community legal sector's work nationally. This makes it our sector's largest area of work.

**Centres provide irreplaceable services to people in regional, rural, remote and very remote communities** where legal need is greater and more complex, and where access to other services is often limited. Centres travelled 1.26 million kilometres (3.3 times the distance to the moon) to provide outreach services in 2023-24.



**We see whole people not just legal problems.** Centres employ a range of allied professional workers, including social workers (45% of centres), education or training workers (35%), advocates (29%), identified Aboriginal community engagement or support workers (25%), and more. We do this to provide holistic, trauma-informed and culturally safe support, to help people untangle a range of legal and related problems all at once. We build strong relationships of trust with other local services to ensure the people in the communities we serve get the most complete support possible. In 2023-24, 70% of centres delivered integrated services in collaboration with other organisations, including domestic violence services (41% of centres), Aboriginal community-controlled services (28%), and health services (26%).

*The first time I was ever validated in my experience as a victim of domestic violence was when Caxton Legal Centre believed me. That was the first time I heard someone say "Sam, this is real, and it is wrong. This should not have happened to you. This is serious, and it is important".*

*When people come to be involved with the legal system, it's because their needs haven't been addressed. Community legal centres help with the immediate legal problem, but they look beyond people's legal matters and into the future, too, and provide holistic support which improves outcomes for people who are vulnerable, like domestic violence victims.*

*I was a shell of a person when I made it to Caxton. They believed and validated me, and they gave me all the support I needed over five years.*

*I never in a million years would have thought this would happen to me. I didn't think of myself as someone who'd need a community legal centre. But now I don't think I'm the exception. I know there are thousands and thousands of other people in similar circumstances.*

**Sam, a former community legal centre client**

**Our sector understands that prevention is generally better than a cure.** Centres develop innovative community legal education and early intervention programs tailored to the communities they serve, to empower people to avoid legal problems altogether and to recognise and resolve them quickly when they arise. In 2023-24, our community legal education programs reached over 160,000 people.

**Working every day with people most impacted by unfair and unjust laws means our sector is also well-placed to identify and advocate changes to bad laws.** Our law reform work improves the lives of people experiencing poverty and injustice. It also delivers significant benefits to the wider community and to governments. Good laws can keep people supported in safe homes and communities, promote health, and limit unnecessary court and legal proceedings. This is good for individuals, for communities, and for governments. In 2023-24, the issues centres were most likely to advocate on were domestic and family violence (63% of centres), and housing and homelessness (41% of centres).

**The community legal sector is chronically underfunded. Centres are struggling to provide the services that people, communities and governments expect.** The Commonwealth's announcement in September 2024 of its contribution to legal assistance under the National Access to Justice Partnership 2025-30 provided some welcome news for the legal assistance sector in the form of additional funding, but it will not resolve our sector's funding and workforce problems. The additional funding, while helpful, falls far short of what is required to meet all the community demand for our services.

**Legal need in the community is growing. More people need community legal support, and their cases are more complex.** Nine out of ten centres reported an increase in legal need in 2023-24 as compared to 2022-23, with none reporting a reduction in demand. The two demographics centres most identified as accounting for the rise in demand were people seeking help for domestic violence and family related matters, and people who never thought they would need to access a free legal assistance service.

**There are not enough community legal sector workers to meet community need.** There are an estimated 3,411 full-time-equivalent (FTE) roles in the sector, being filled by an estimated 4,186 workers, many of whom work part-time. To meet community need, the sector needs (and is ready to onboard) an additional 1,582 FTE workers – this would require a workforce increase of 46.4%.

**The number of people seeking community legal help and being turned away is increasing.** In 2023-24, centres were forced to turn away an estimated 388,869 people. This comes to 7,478 people per week, or 1,065 people a day. Among those turned away by centres each week, we estimate that approximately 3,000 were people impacted by domestic and family violence.

**In 2023-24, the number of people community legal centres were forced to turn away would have filled the southern hemisphere's largest stadium**

