

State of the Sector 2023–24 survey report

# More than legal services: Preventing crises, strengthening communities



Community Legal Centres  
Australia

***More than legal services: Preventing crises, strengthening communities***

State of the Sector 2023-24 survey report

Published November 2024

## 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.

## Acknowledgements

Thank you to all centres that responded to the State of the Sector survey 2023-24 or provided case studies. Thank you to all that endorsed the *Save community legal centres: End the funding crisis* campaign and provided testimonials.

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 152 community legal centres (including thirteen Women's Legal Services), eleven Family Violence Prevention and Legal Services and two Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Legal Services across Australia.

Our expertise is grounded in the stories of the hundreds of thousands of 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.

# Table of contents

<b>Data sources</b>	<b>5</b>
State of the Sector survey 2023-24	5
Community legal centre service data 2023-24	5
Save community legal centres: End the funding crisis testimonials	5
<b>Terminology</b>	<b>5</b>
<b>Executive summary</b>	<b>6</b>
<b>Part 1 – Impact</b>	<b>8</b>
Domestic and family violence	8
Access to justice in regional, rural, remote and very remote areas	13
Seeing and helping <i>people</i> , not just solving legal problems	15
Preventing problems before they arise	21
<b>Part 2 – Tracking the state of the sector</b>	<b>27</b>
Funding	27
Demand	29
Workforce	31
Turn-aways	36
<b>Appendix 1: Demographics and methods</b>	<b>39</b>
Responses	39
Accounting for the underuse of the family violence indicator in centre service data	40
Comparing metro, regional, and remote centres	41
Calculating turn-aways	41
Survey questionnaire	42
<b>Appendix 2: Community Legal Centres Australia member network 2023–24</b>	<b>43</b>
State and territory associations	43
Member centres	43

## Data sources

### State of the Sector survey 2023-24

Community Legal Centres Australia received 134 responses, including 14 partial responses, to our State of the Sector survey (the survey). This represents a response rate of 81% of our sector.

The data was collected between 24 July and 18 September 2024 and relates to the period July 2023 to June 2024. The dataset includes responses from community legal centres (including Women's Legal Services), Family Violence Prevention and Legal Services, and one Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Legal Service in Community Legal Centres Australia's national membership network.

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

Centre and client case studies in this report are drawn from qualitative responses to the survey, which, in some cases, we have edited for brevity.

### Community legal centre service data 2023-24

Centre service data referenced in this report includes information about the services provided in 2023-24 by 122 community legal centres (including 13 Women's Legal Services), whose data Community Legal Centres Australia holds in our national data warehouse. It does not include data from the 11 Family Violence Prevention and Legal Services and two Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Legal Services in our national membership network. It does not include data from about 30 community legal centres that do not share data with the national peak. It does not include any data about information and referral services, only more substantial services like tasks, advice and representation.

### Save community legal centres: End the funding crisis testimonials

The *Save community legal centres: End the funding crisis* campaign sought endorsements from allied organisations for its campaign sign-on in July and August 2024. From over 200 organisational endorsements, approximately 50 organisations provided written testimonials speaking to their recent work with their local community legal centre or the wider community legal sector. The client testimonial included in this report was provided through a phone interview in early September 2024.

## Terminology

In this report, we use 'centre(s)' to refer collectively to the community legal centres, Women's Legal Services, Family Violence Prevention and Legal Services and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Legal Services in Community Legal Centres Australia's national membership network. Where we intend to refer to a specific provider type, we use its unique name or acronym.

## Executive summary

**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<sup>1</sup>, 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 and assist 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% of centres), advocates (29% of centres), identified Aboriginal community engagement or support workers (25% of centres), 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% of centres), and health services (26% of centres).

**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 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.

---

<sup>1</sup> Vinson, T., Rawsthorne, R., Beavis, A., and Ericson, M. (2015). *Dropping off the edge – persistent disadvantage in Australia*: <https://apo.org.au/node/56085>

**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.

*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

# Part 1 – Impact

## Domestic and family violence

The community legal sector is a cornerstone of Australia’s frontline domestic and family violence service system. Centres play a crucial role in preventing and responding to domestic and family violence. These services make up the largest area of our work nationally.

Community legal centres provide integrated, trauma-informed support by employing not just lawyers but social workers, financial counsellors, Aboriginal community development workers, tenant advocates, and more. This means we can provide people with holistic support to untangle lots of different but connected problems all at once.

**Overall, 94% of respondent centres provided direct services to victim-survivors of domestic and family violence in 2023-24.** This included legal services, and other supports from allied professionals. In 2023-24:

- 91.6% of respondent centres provided legal services to victim-survivors
- 58% provided other support services to victim-survivors.

### Client case study: Johanna\*

Johanna is a primary carer of three children under ten. She runs a small business but with little to no financial support from the children’s father, she struggles financially. Johanna’s ex-partner perpetrated violence many times, including in front of the children, and Victoria Police were called to her home several times. Between the family violence, the pressure of running her business, and isolation from her family due to being unable to travel to her home country, Johanna’s mental health was significantly impacted.

Johanna first contacted her local community legal centre for advice with parenting matters. A month after her initial appointment, Johanna ran into the same community lawyer while they were conducting outreach in the community. The lawyer could see Johanna was visibly upset, and Johanna disclosed a recent family violence incident.

The community lawyer immediately assisted Johanna to apply for a family violence intervention and the following week went with Johanna to court to represent her in her application for an urgent interim intervention order, to protect Johanna and her kids while the case went through the court system.

Through the community legal centre’s Health Justice Partnership, Johanna was referred to further supports for ongoing help. The centre is continuing to assist Johanna with her family violence matter and with parenting arrangement negotiations.



Some centres also work with users of violence, including through several preventative men's behavioural change programs. In 2023-24:

- 54.2% of respondent centres provided legal services to users of violence
- 22.9% provided other support services to users of violence.

### **Client case study: Daniel\***

Daniel is a man in his 30s who first contacted his local community legal centre in need of representation at court in his Apprehended Domestic Violence matter. The person seeking protection was his ex-partner, Jenny\*.

As part of its Community Court User Scheme, the centre referred Daniel to a men's behaviour change program. The community lawyer's strong relationships with local domestic and family violence services, including the men's program, meant that the referral process was well-established and had clear objectives of early therapeutic and primary interventions.

Since the initial referral, Daniel has participated in several 1 on 1 sessions and around twenty face-to-face group sessions and continues to engage in the men's behaviour change program. The program has provided Daniel with a space to consider the impacts of his violence and abuse while respectfully challenging his violence-supporting narratives. He has been able to explore emotional regulation, his own trauma, violence-supporting attitudes, and violence interruption strategies while developing help-seeking behaviour.

The service offering the men's behaviour change program was also able to reach out to Jenny and offer her much-needed support during a difficult and uncertain time.

The strong relationship and collaboration between the community legal centre and local men's behaviour program helped to reduce the risk that Daniel would continue to use violence and Jenny would remain unsafe and without support.

**Across respondent centres, an average of 45.4% of the people they helped in 2023-24 disclosed to the centre that they were impacted by domestic and family violence**, including where the help they sought related to a different legal problem (like tenancy, social security, or credit and debt).

This suggests that even where centres do not provide direct domestic and family violence services, they are an important part of the network of community supports people impacted by domestic and family violence rely on to resolve a range of legal and other problems, often connected to their experience of abuse.

*Many of the women we support have legal issues related to the economic abuse they've experienced but also few resources because of the economic abuse. Often, a Women's Legal Service/community legal centre is the only remaining option for support at a critical time.*

Centre for Women's Economic Safety

Centre service data Community Legal Centres Australia holds in our national data warehouse supports the finding that over 40% of the sector's clients in 2023-24 were impacted by domestic and family violence. This data tracks clients who have experienced, are experiencing, or are at risk of, domestic and family violence, using a "family violence indicator". The indicator is not a mandatory field for reporting and is notoriously under-used.<sup>2</sup> As such, the sector's service data undercounts the number of clients (regardless of legal service sought) who have experienced, are experiencing, or are at risk of experiencing domestic and family violence.

Keeping these caveats in mind, our raw client services data for in 2023-24 shows that:

- 34.3% of client records were tagged with the family violence indicator
- 37.8% of total services were provided to people with the indicator<sup>3</sup>
- 42.8% of problems centres helped with related to services for people with the indicator.<sup>4</sup>

To better understand the extent to which the family violence indicator is under-used across the sector, we analysed client services data for two problem types we know indicate a person experienced or is experiencing domestic and family violence. These are "Family Law – Domestic/Family violence", and "Family Law – Domestic violence protection orders". While 100% of people assisted with these problems have experienced or are experiencing domestic and family violence, in 2023-24, only 85.6% of records related to these problems were marked with the family violence indicator.

Using this as the closest available proxy for the rate of the under-use of the family violence indicator across our sector, we adjusted whole-of-sector data to provide a more accurate estimate of the proportion of our work in 2023-24 that related to domestic and family violence.

---

<sup>2</sup> Some of the reasons for its underuse include: that workers may not ask a client about domestic and family violence if the worker is not equipped to assist in this area; where workers provide one-off advice on a discrete legal problem, it may not be appropriate to ask about a client's experience of domestic and family violence; clients may choose not to disclose, for any number of reasons; workers are time-poor and data entry mistakes happen; turnover in the sector is high, and new workers may not understand the function of the family violence indicator and therefore not use it.

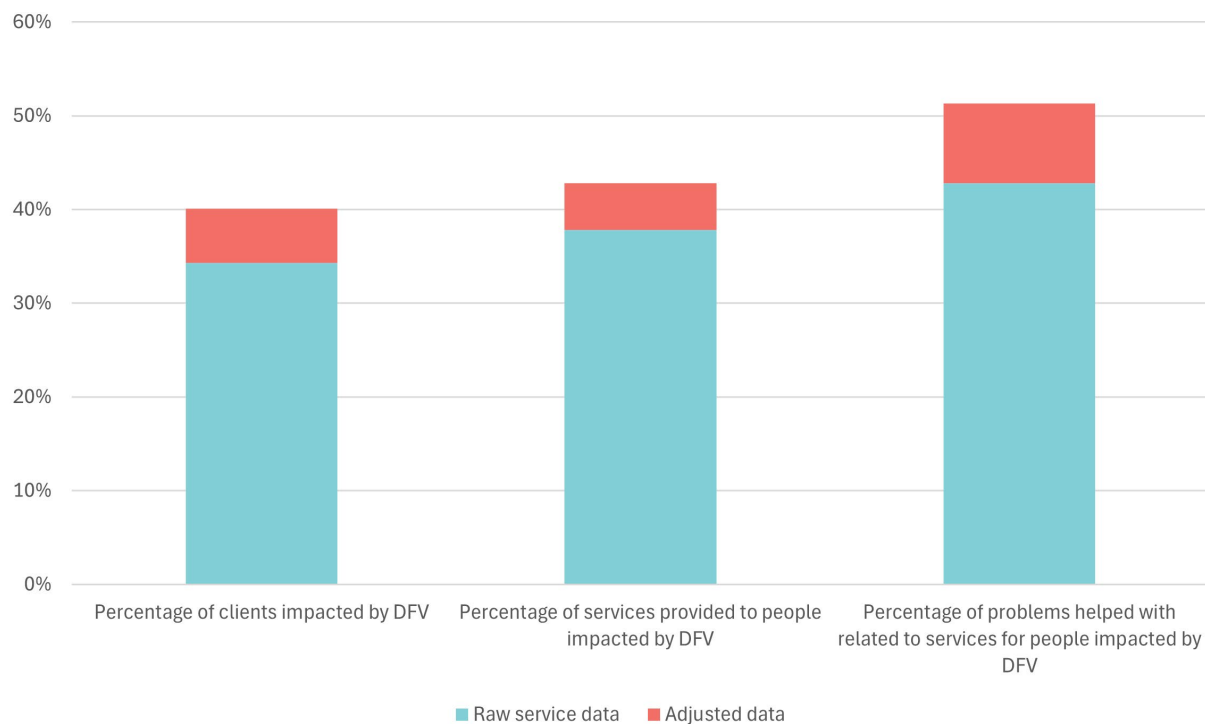
<sup>3</sup> A single client may require multiple services. For example, a "legal advice" is one service, and a "legal task" (like drafting a letter) is another. This metric refers to the percentage of total services provided by community legal centres in 2023-24 that were provided to people who had the family violence indicator.

<sup>4</sup> A single service may involve multiple legal problem types. For example, one legal advice service may be in relation to a "domestic/family violence" problem and an "injury compensation" problem. This metric refers to the percentage of total problems centres helped with in 2023-24 that related to services for people with the family violence indicator.

In 2023-24, we estimate that:

- **40.1% of clients were experiencing, had experienced or were at risk of domestic and family violence**
- **44.3% of all services were provided to people impacted by domestic and family violence**
- **51.3% of problems centres helped with related to services for people impacted by domestic and family violence.**

Figure 1: Estimated proportion of community legal centres work that is supporting people impacted by domestic and family violence



Appendix 1 explains several of the methods we used to analyse and adjust for the under-use of the family violence indicator by community legal centres when collecting client data. Each method achieved similar results, which suggests the upward revisions reported above are sound.

*Community legal centres are absolutely vital in supporting women experiencing domestic and family violence, particularly in regional areas. In the last month alone 17 of our clients have consented to referrals to our local community legal centres for assistance. The community legal centre's support allows women to regain their independence after experiencing domestic violence.*

Central West NSW Women's Domestic Violence Court Advocacy Service

## Access to justice in regional, rural, remote and very remote areas

The roughly sixty-four<sup>5</sup> community legal centres operating in regional, rural, remote and very remote (regional and remote) areas face unique challenges and are particularly disadvantaged in their efforts to respond to legal need in the community. People and communities in regional and remote areas have greater levels and complexity of legal need,<sup>6</sup> and less access to services, than those in metropolitan areas.

In places like Katherine and Alice Springs in the Northern Territory, the Kimberley region in WA, and far-north Queensland, many communities (especially remote Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities) experience the intersection of the ongoing impacts of colonisation, deep and persistent socio-economic disadvantage, intergenerational trauma, and government decisions that have limited education and employment opportunities. These factors drive high levels of complex legal and related need.

Communities in regional and remote areas have access to fewer services, and to a narrower range of services. This means that the community legal centres that support them are often required to meet a whole range of needs for people who cannot access support elsewhere.

Community legal centres are embedded in the communities they serve in deep and longstanding ways. Centres prioritise community ownership and accountability, which is crucial for building the level of trust required to provide effective services in regional and remote communities. Community legal centres in regional and remote areas have grown and adapted to meet the unique needs of their communities: through establishing innovative ways of delivering services, building relationships of trust and collaboration with other local services, and fostering reputations of trustworthiness and reliability over many years.

**In 2023-24, 92.3% of regional and remote centres offered outreach services to regional and remote communities in their catchment areas.**

Many of the people serviced through these outreaches would not otherwise have had access to free legal assistance or other related supports.

*Our community is a small and remote community that doesn't have our own local community legal service. We rely on Mackay Regional Community Legal Centre to travel to support members of our community.*

Proserpine Community Centre in remote Queensland

---

<sup>5</sup> Definitions of rural, regional, remote, and very remote (regional and remote) can vary. The State of the Sector survey 2023-24, asked respondents to self-identify. For this report, we included all respondents that self-identified as a regional and remote centre and added relevant centres that did not participate to identify 64 regional and remote centres in the sector.

<sup>6</sup> Vinson, T., Rawsthorne, R., Beavis, A., and Ericson, M. (2015). *Dropping off the edge – persistent disadvantage in Australia*: <https://apo.org.au/node/56085>

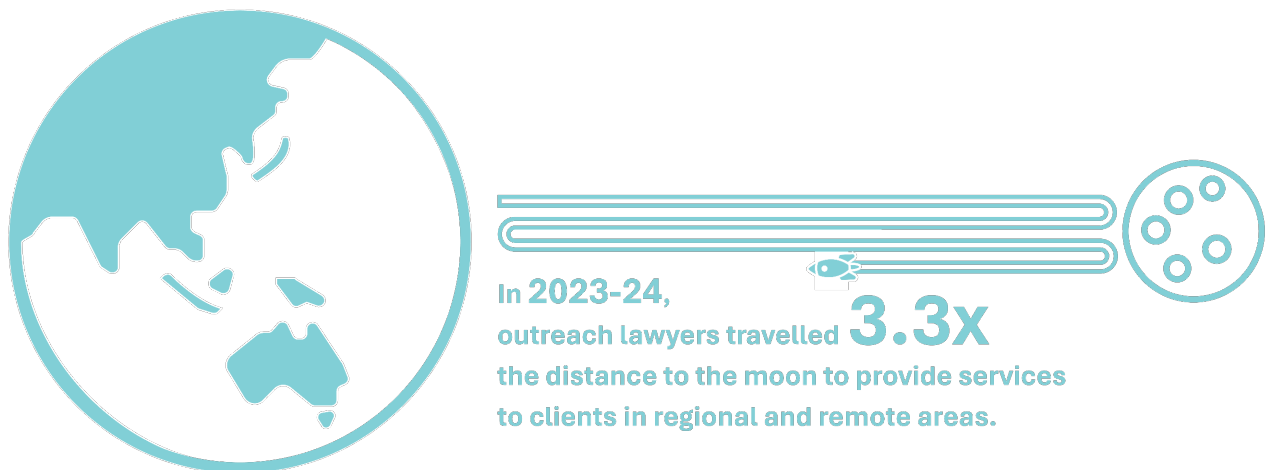
Community legal centres are independent organisations. However, they are also connected to one another as a community legal sector movement. This ensures a network of services on which the community can rely for both place-based and specialist supports.

While regional and remote community legal centres provide the backbone of legal assistance support to their communities, several specialist community legal centres based in metropolitan centres also regularly travel to regional and remote areas to provide outreach services. The 10 centres that travelled the furthest to do outreach work in 2023-24 included generalist and specialist centres, across four different jurisdictions.

**The most kilometres travelled by a single centre in 2023-24 to conduct outreach to regional and remote communities was a staggering 62,812km across 41 trips.**

The total distance travelled by survey respondents to deliver outreach in 2023-24 was 993,181km. Using this data from 130 respondents, **we estimate the entire sector travelled about 1.26 million km to provide services to rural, regional, remote, and very remote communities in 2023-24.** To put that in perspective, that's far enough to travel between Earth and the moon 3.3 times over, or to cross the entire width of this continent 315 times.

Figure 2: Estimated distance centres travelled in 2023-24 to provide outreach services



**The work of regional and remote centres is disproportionately in domestic and family violence.**

As discussed above, survey responses find that 45.4% of people centres helped in 2023-24 disclosed that they were impacted by domestic and family violence, including where the help they sought related to a different problem (like tenancy, social security, or credit and debt). This percentage rises to 53.1% for all rural, regional, remote and very remote centres. The following table shows the percentage of clients that disclosed they were impacted by domestic and family violence in 2023-24 across regional, rural, remote and very remote centres.

	Regional	Rural	Remote	Very remote
Average percentage of clients that disclosed that they were impacted by domestic and family violence in 2023-24	42.9%	74.4%	72.0%	77.5%

## Seeing and helping *people*, not just solving legal problems

### Integrated, trauma-informed support

Laws and legal systems in Australia are complex to navigate, and systemic barriers and unfairness are commonplace. Many people who find themselves facing everyday legal problems may not identify their problems as legal or access legal help until one unaddressed problem has snowballed into a mess of complex, intersecting problems that seriously impact their quality of life and feel impossible to resolve.

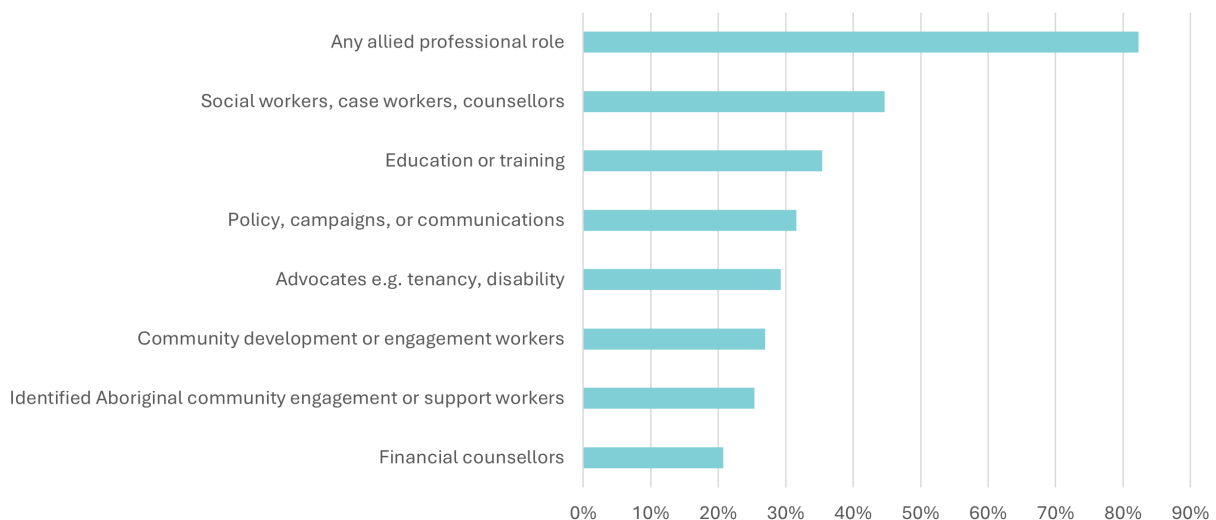
Community legal centres recognise that many people's legal problems are connected to other social and economic problems and that the best supports address all these challenges together. We understand that lawyers are not the solution to everything. Critically, we recognise the impacts of trauma and discrimination on people's ability to access justice.

For these reasons, community legal centres employ not just lawyers but a range of allied professional workers to prioritise trauma-informed, culturally safe practice. Together, these workers can help people to untangle the messy and interconnected legal and social problems making their lives harder.

**In 2023-24, 82% of centres employed allied professionals, including:**

- Social workers (44.6% of centres)
- Education or training workers, including community legal education workers (35.4%)
- Policy, campaigns or communications staff (31.5%)
- Advocates, including tenants' or disability advocates (29.2%)
- Community development or engagement workers (26.9%)
- Identified Aboriginal community engagement or support workers (25.4%).

*Figure 3: Percentage of centres employing allied professional workers*



### **Supporting Women with Mental Health Conditions to Access the Justice System – Central Australian Women’s Legal Service**

As a specialist women’s legal service operating a Domestic Violence Unit, Domestic Violence Legal Service and a generalist civil law clinic, the Central Australian Women’s Legal Service (CAWLS) was uniquely placed to develop a Mental Health Justice Partnership (MHJP) to address the intersection of access to justice and mental health, which disproportionately and adversely impacts women.

The unique service focuses on supporting women in Central Australia with mental health conditions because of domestic, family or sexual violence who also have a criminal law matter before the court.

Supporting Women with Mental Health Conditions to Access the Justice System brings together specialist domestic violence lawyers (with extensive criminal law experience), financial counsellors, and other allied professionals to provide wrap-around support to women consistent with the existing Health Justice Partnership model at the centre. Critically, it offers expert criminal law services to women with criminal matters before the courts via the Criminal Defence Legal Practice.

During the first reporting period after its establishment, the Criminal Defence Legal Practice provided 350 Services and assisted over 90 clients at both the Alice Springs Local and Supreme Courts. CAWLS’ multi-disciplinary services have ensured that Aboriginal women and victim survivors are provided with succinct and relevant legal advice and representation.

## Working in collaboration to provide wrap-around help

Centres develop strong partnerships with other trusted, local services to help reach people early, and to ensure people can access wrap-around support to meet a range of needs at once.

We understand that many people and groups distrust lawyers and the legal system and may not reach out to a legal assistance service for support when they are in trouble. Centres build relationships of trust with a broad range of local community services so that those services' clients can access our lawyers through the services they already know and feel safe with.

*The Barwon Community Legal Service has been working from out of our youth site and seeing people in the space they see other staff. To be able to locate in a space that creates comfort, and accessibility has been vital to allowing advice to occur. Without a community legal service, so, so, so many people would not have legal advice given.*

A local community service in Victoria

*We strongly support and value the work of community legal centres for our culturally diverse communities to access equitable legal service provisions.*

*The Eastern Community Legal Centre has assisted many of our multicultural communities to be informed, supported and represented across the Eastern metro regions and has actively supported our organisation through partnerships and resource sharing that has demonstrated their commitment to local community.*

Communities Council on Ethnic Issues, Victoria

Centres employ a range of allied professionals to provide trauma-informed, holistic support to meet a range of clients' non-legal needs in-house. We also understand that many clients have needs that we cannot meet. We build up strong referral pathways with other services so that the people we help can access the other types of help they need.

*We work very closely to provide care and support for our clients. The community legal services that we work alongside are vital for ensuring our clients have access to the holistic service that they require to ensure safety and recovery.*

The Sexual Assault Referral Centre, Northern Territory



*The work of community legal centres is so important for the most vulnerable families we work with. Community legal centres understand the complexity of our clients lives and provide legal information and advice in an accessible and trauma informed way. They also play an important role in educating the sector on legal issues so we can better support our clients.*

Gateway Family Services, NSW

**In 2023-24, 70% of centres delivered integrated services in collaboration with other organisations.** This includes with:

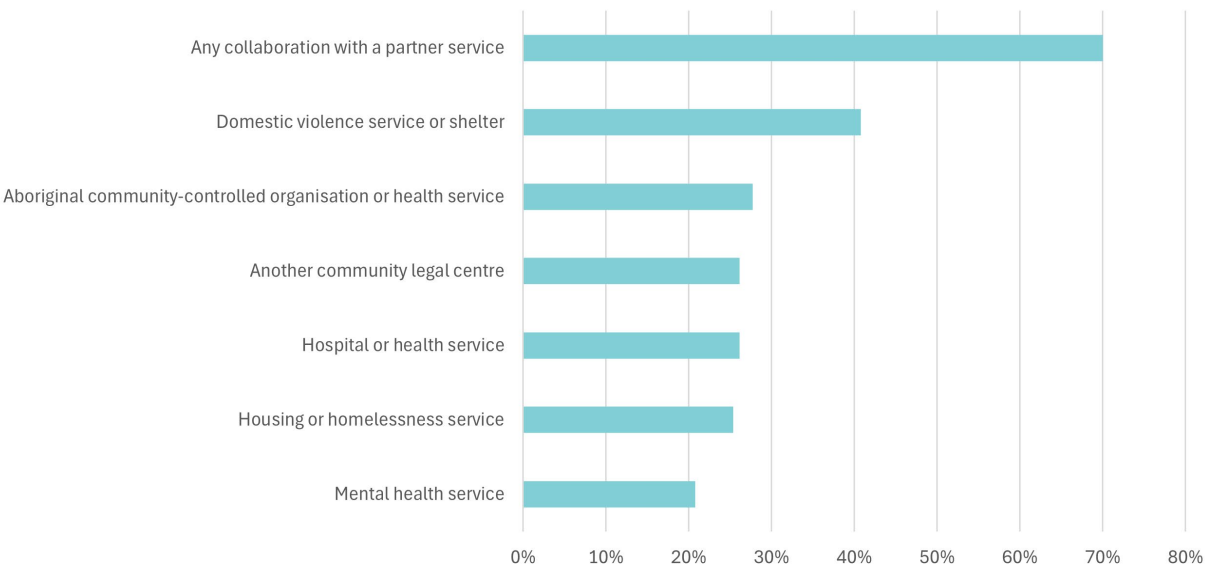
- Domestic violence services (40.8%)
- Aboriginal community-controlled organisations or health services (27.7%)
- Another community legal centre (26.2%)
- Hospital or health services (26.2%)
- Housing or homelessness services (25.4%)
- Mental health services (20.8%).

Centres rely on these partner services, and in turn other local services rely on community legal centres.

*Community legal centres provide support for the victims of domestic family violence. As our organisation takes care of victims of domestic and family violence, the community legal centres have become our backbone partner in resolving the violence.*

The Indonesian Women Islamic Network of Australia Inc.

Figure 3: Percentage of centres delivering integrated services in collaboration with other organisations in 2023-24



*We partner closely with the Inner City Legal Centre, who administer the sex worker legal service, a unique and essential service for NSW sex workers. We also work with various other legal centres to meet the broad range of needs for our diverse community. The work of these legal centres is vital to improving access to safety and justice for marginalised and/or vulnerable populations.*

The Sex Workers Outreach Project Inc (SWOP) in NSW

### **Collaboration to Support People in Prison – Legal Information Fair**

In February 2024, four community legal centres\*, were among seven services^ that delivered the Legal Information Fair at Townsville Men's and Women's Correctional Centres. The Fair aimed to remove some of the barriers people in prison face in accessing legal help by providing them with an opportunity to connect with different services and to promote collaboration between different providers to best meet attendees' intersecting legal needs.

Before the event, Prisoners' Legal Service arranged an online induction for service providers and handled much of the event administration.

Each morning of the fair, service providers set up stalls, and the Prisoners Legal Service also hosted a central hub. Attendees could visit relevant stalls for information and advice, and the central hub served as a space for attendees to congregate while they waited or who did not feel comfortable immediately approaching a service. A Prisoners Legal Service representative was available at the hub to have informal conversations with attendees to help them identify the legal service that might work best and to make an introduction if needed.

In total, 338 people in prison (or about one third of the correctional centres' entire population) attended the Fair. Services provided legal help to meet a range of needs, including immediate issues (like criminal charges, bail and parole), as well as longer-term legal problems that could impact people's return to the community (like debts, Centrelink, housing, domestic and family violence, and child protection).

The fair enabled people in prison to establish face-to-face relationships with services they otherwise might not have known about or trusted, and to develop knowledge of who they could contact to resolve problems both in and out of prison. These face-to-face interactions were particularly important for First Nations people in prison as introductions could be made in a culturally appropriate way. First Nations Women's Legal Service indicated that of the 25 women they engaged with, 14 women received further advice following the event.

\*Prisoners' Legal Service, Townsville Community Law, First Nations Women's Legal Service North Queensland, Women's Legal Service Queensland.

^The other participating services were the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Legal Service Queensland, Legal Aid Queensland, and Relationships Australia.

## Preventing problems before they arise

Community legal centres' service model and values are grounded in the principle that prevention is better than cure. Centres work every day to help people to work through complex and interconnected legal and social problems. But for our sector – and for the people we support – a fair community is one in which people's problems don't escalate far enough to need intensive support.

This is why community legal centres emphasise *preventative* work. We know that often the best thing to do is to help people avoid the legal system altogether or support their exit from it as soon as possible.

### Innovation for early intervention and community legal education

Early intervention, and empowering communities to avoid legal problems, are hallmarks of community legal centre services. Centres across the country are continuously developing and refining innovative models for service delivery to reach people early, before their legal problems snowball to a crisis.

We tailor innovative early support programs to the communities we are embedded in by sending lawyers out to hospitals, women's health clinics, and doctors' offices in health justice partnerships; helping young people with their legal problems in schools; and making sure we're visible at local community events.

In these ways, we try to reach as many people as we can before a legal problem has arisen, or when their problems are small and simple and we can help to resolve them before they escalate. This can prevent a huge amount of pain down the track.

**In 2023-24, community legal centres' community legal education programs reached an estimated 161,200 people.**

*Having supported LGBTQIA, neurodiverse, and marginalised young people in southwest regional Victoria for many years, we have experienced frustration with the lack of attention, efforts and funding allocated to supporting young people in our region. Our partnership with Barwon Community Legal Service (BCLS) has been unique in its efficacy.*

*Creative, quick response programs have been developed on the fly to engage young regional people in immediate legal distress and have empowered countless young people to better navigate the legal landscape resulting in better physical and mental health. The effect of BCLS's efforts continue to flow through peer groups in the southwest.*

*Without our community legal ally, the health and wellbeing of young people in the southwest would suffer, resulting in increased suicidality, mental health emergencies, drug use and family violence.*

Fingle Sin, workshop facilitator in Victoria

### **Law Skills for Life – Barwon Community Legal Service**

Barwon Community Legal Service’s Law for Life Skills program sets up innovative collaborations with other trusted organisations in the region to provide civil law education and assistance and otherwise meet the needs of at-risk young people.

The program empowers at risk young people with life skills needed to successfully engage in civil society, including in employment, training, housing, decision-making and safe relationships, and aims to prevent the underlying causes of crime and antisocial behaviour.

Early Intervention Youth Engagement Activities: The centre provides activities and workshops for young people by bringing them together in a place where they feel safe (partner sites), to do activities they are interested in (such as boxing or art). During activities, the centre provides information about civil law issues that might affect participants, answers their questions, and works to break down barriers to accessing legal assistance such as understanding their rights and responsibilities within the law, and their negative perceptions of lawyers. Through participating in the program, young people gain tools and knowledge to make positive life choices and reduce their likelihood of involvement in the justice system.

Civil Law Advice: The centre provides legal information and advice on civil law issues to young people through referrals from program partners and self-referrals from young people.

Integrated Legal Health Checks: The centre provides comprehensive assessments to identify legal needs and potential challenges young people might face. These are often run during engagement activities, by youth workers.

Capacity Building Legal Training: The centre provides specialised training for youth workers to equip them with the knowledge and skills to better support at-risk youth to handle their legal problems and know when to refer young people to a lawyer.

*Barwon Community Legal Service provides an excellent and much required service to the multicultural communities we work alongside within Geelong and surrounding areas.*

Cultura, in Victoria

*Our clients have benefited from the services of community legal centres for many years. We have a successful partnership with a local community legal centre that provides essential legal support and advice to our clients. Community legal centres are active participants in our family law networks and their commitment to collaboration leads to better outcomes for the clients and families we work with. Community legal centres are absolutely vital to the community and need ongoing funding security.*

CatholicCare Victoria and Family Relationship Centre Ballarat, Geelong and Shepparton

## Law reform

The first community legal centres were established more than half a century ago by activists and advocates frustrated and angered by the injustices faced by their communities. They were responding to the unfairnesses of a legal system that punished poverty and difference.

These first centres set about providing free legal help to people in need, and just as importantly, they used people's stories to drive advocacy for legal system reform. In early years, Fitzroy Legal Service supported in the anti-conscription movement, while Redfern Legal Centre advocated for prison reform and helped defend people arrested at the first Mardi Gras in 1978.

This ethos endures to this day. Community legal centres see that if bad laws are harming people, it is important to help the people navigate that harm, but also to change the laws to prevent future harm. Community legal centres work every day with people most impacted by unfair laws and as such are well-placed to identify and advocate changes to harmful laws.

**Law reform is often the most effective form of harm prevention: stopping problems from arising and often preventing unnecessary legal and court processes. This delivers benefits to people, communities, and governments.**

The Robodebt Royal Commission Report recently recognised the crucial public interest contributions of specialist social security legal services and called for this to be considered with respect to funding decisions. Many of the report's findings and recommendations acknowledged the contribution of advocates from the legal assistance and social services sectors, and grassroots activists, in bringing attention to the scheme's unfairness and unlawfulness over many years.

Looking forward, the Commission recognised the ongoing role specialist social security legal services will have in preventing a repetition of a similarly harmful scheme. It recommended greater investment in legal assistance and social services to build service delivery and advocacy capacity and to build better mechanisms for consultation and input to government services and initiatives.

### **Sexual Harassment Law Reform – Kingsford Legal Centre**

Community lawyers know that the fear of being bankrupted by a legal action is a significant barrier for people who experience sexual harassment and discrimination. It can prevent people from bringing a claim at all or can mean clients settle for much smaller sums than they are entitled to.

The Australian Human Rights Commission's 2020 Respect@Work report identified that adverse costs provisions impacted access to justice for people subjected to discrimination by discouraging them from pursuing matters through the courts. However, the Federal Government's initial response did not go far enough to protect claimants in discrimination cases from the risk of adverse costs decisions.

In the years since, Kingsford Legal Centre and the broader community legal sector have been advocating for urgent wider reform. As a result of joint advocacy across community legal centres, National Legal Aid, the ACTU and the Power to Prevent Coalition, the Federal Government consulted on a new costs model in 2023. This led to widespread support for the 'equal access' costs model strongly supported by our sector.

The *Australian Human Rights (Costs Protection) Act 2024* recently came into force, implementing the first ever 'equal access' costs model in Australia. Under the new provisions, people who bring claims do not run the risk of paying the other side's legal costs if they lose. If successful in their claim, they can recover their legal costs from the other party.

While community legal centres believe in the power and benefits of law reform, this work is often forced to take a backseat to the more pressing demands of client service delivery.

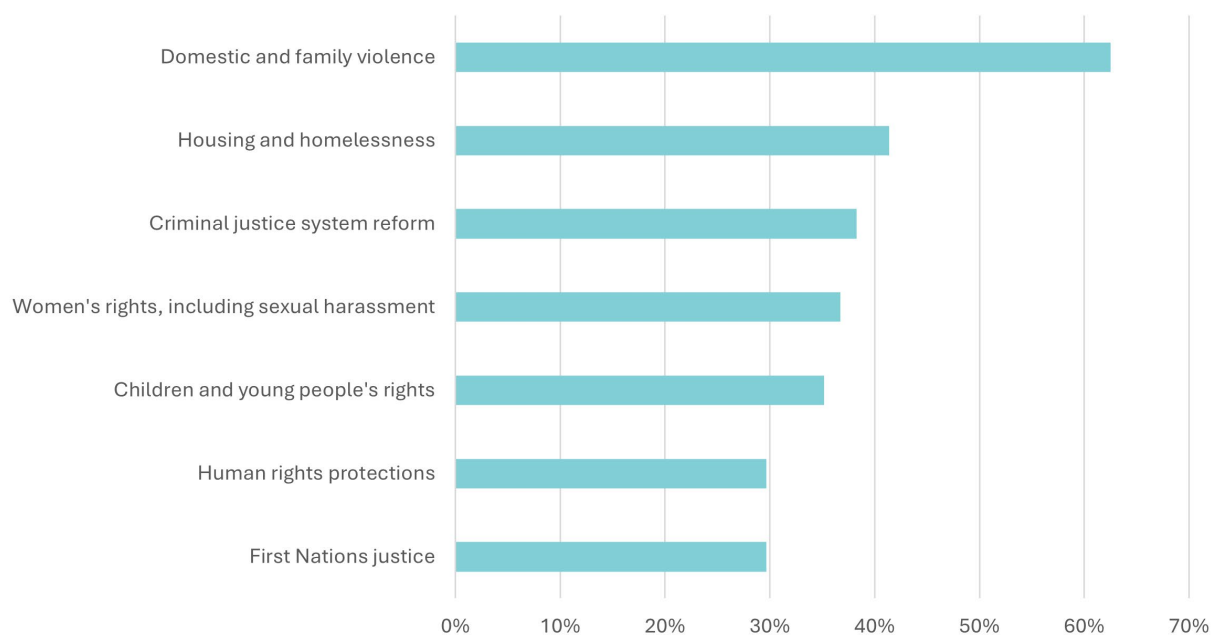
### **In 2023-24, law reform work made up just 12.7% of respondent centres' work.**

Seven per cent of centres are not able to do this work at all, and many centres are only able to do a very small amount of law reform work. Of the 93% of centres that have capacity to do some law reform work, almost half (47.5%) report that law reform makes up less than 5% of the centre's work, and almost four fifths (77.1%) report that law reform makes up less than 10% of the centre's work. No centres wanted to decrease the proportion of their law reform work, and 80% wanted to increase capacity for this work.

In 2023-24, the issues respondent centres were most likely to engage in law reform work on were:

- Domestic and family violence (62.5% of respondents did law reform work in this area)
- Housing and homelessness, including renters' rights (41.4%)
- Criminal justice system reform (38.3%)
- Women's rights including sexual harassment (36.7%)
- Children and young people (35.2%)
- Human rights protections (29.7%)
- First Nations justice, including Closing the Gap, incarceration, and domestic and family violence (29.7%)

*Figure 4: Percentage of centres doing law reform and advocacy work by justice issue*



Where centres have the resources to carry out law reform work, these are the areas that they prioritise.



### **Consumers' rights law reform – Financial Rights Legal Centre**

Financial Rights and its First Nations team, Mob Strong, led advocacy on seeking justice and redress for the hundreds of First Nations' consumers affected by the collapse of the Aboriginal Community Benefit Fund (Youpla).

This advocacy, and close consultation with government, directly led to the introduction of an enduring resolution called the Youpla Support Program, which commenced 1 July 2024.

### **Renting reform**

Community legal centres have driven renting reform in jurisdictions across the continent in 2023-24. Renting reform is critical for the security of all renters. For victim-survivors of domestic and family violence, fairer rental laws can be lifesaving.

In NSW, no grounds evictions are set to become outlawed following nearly 50 years of campaigning led by the Tenants' Union of NSW, since the 'Law and Poverty' inquiries identified it as a concern in 1975.

Queensland has seen improvements in the *Residential Tenancy and Rooming Accommodation 2008* following advocacy led by the Make Renting Fair in Queensland Alliance and Tenants Queensland.

At the March 2024 Tasmanian state election, following years of advocacy from the Tenants' Union of Tasmania, all major parties finally committed to reform on the issue of pets in rental properties. The elected Government has since introduced a Bill to change the law.

Western Australian tenant advocates in our sector have been heavily involved in recent changes to renters' rights, including through representing the interest of tenants in consultations with policymakers around issues like security of tenure, fairer rent increase processes, and protections from retaliatory evictions.

The efforts of our sector have led to significant legislative reforms, ensuring that renters have more stability and are better equipped to stand up for their rights.

## Part 2 – Tracking the state of the sector

### Funding

Community legal centres are chronically underfunded to deliver on what governments and the communities we serve expect of us. In 2014, the Productivity Commission's inquiry into access to justice arrangements recommended an increase of \$200 million per year in legal assistance funding. This recommendation was not implemented. Over five years ago, the Law Council of Australia recommended an increase of \$390 million per year in government funding to legal assistance services to address unmet legal need. Since then, legal need has only grown and, in its 2024 pre-budget submission, the Law Council revised its recommendation to \$500 million per year.<sup>7</sup>

Instead, community legal centre funding has gone backwards in real terms in recent years. Under the expiring National Legal Assistance Partnership (NLAP) 2020-25, centres were locked into annual funding increases of just 1.5%, including during years when inflation ran as high as 7%. The Commonwealth's efforts to increase indexation for 2024-25 were welcome but insufficient to reverse the impacts of years of inadequate indexation.

Ahead of the 2024-25 federal budget Community Legal Centres Australia calculated that community legal centres required a doubling of annual funding to begin to address the sector's funding and workforce crisis. The budget did not deliver. The final report of the independent review of the NLAP, published in late May 2024, recommended significant additional investment in legal assistance by all governments, and estimated the funds currently in the community legal centres service system at \$135 million per year.

We used community legal centre service data for the 2023 calendar year to calculate the estimated number of victim-survivors of domestic and family violence centres turned away nationally per year due to under-resourcing. We estimated that to meet the needs of these people would require an additional \$95 million per year in targeted domestic and family violence funding for community legal centres.

On this basis, we determined that under the next legal assistance partnership, community legal centres require a minimum of \$270 million per year in baseline funding (a doubling of the \$135 million currently in the system), as well as a targeted \$95 million per year uplift in frontline domestic and family violence funding, to flow to all community legal centres that do this work.

**In total Community Legal Centres Australia sought an extra \$230 million per year for our sector on top of Commonwealth funds currently in the service system.**

---

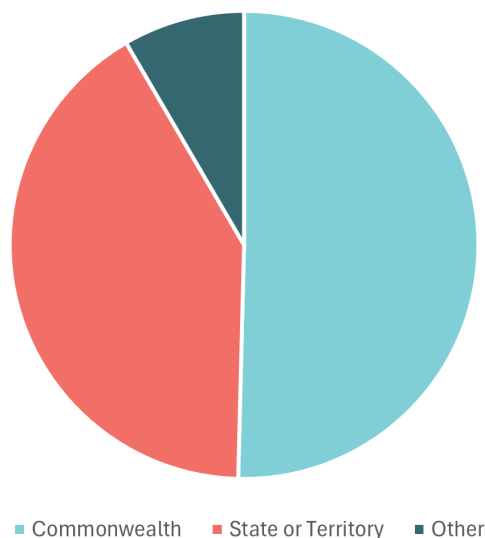
<sup>7</sup> Productivity Commission (2014) *Access to justice arrangements – Inquiry report*: <https://www.pc.gov.au/inquiries/completed/access-justice/report>; Law Council of Australia (2018) *The Justice Project – Final report*: <https://lawcouncil.au/justice-project/final-report>; Law Council of Australia (2023) *Independent Review of the National Legal assistance Partnership*: <https://acrobat.adobe.com/id/urn:aaid:sc:AP:066c1825-f8eb-4281-972f-7ec225aaf516>

Overwhelmingly, community legal centres rely on the Commonwealth, state, and territory governments to fund services and to meet legal need in the community.

In 2023-24:

- 50.4% of respondent centres' main source of funding was the Commonwealth Government
- 41.2% of respondent centres' main source of funding was state or territory governments
- 8.4% of respondent centres' main source of funding was either local government, philanthropy, or fundraising and sponsorship.

Figure 5: Centres' main source of funding in 2023-24



**The Commonwealth's announcement of its commitment to the new National Access to Justice Partnership (NAJP) due to commence on 1 July 2025 is welcome but insufficient to meet legal need in the community.**

In September 2024, the Commonwealth Government announced its contribution to the 2025-30 NAJP, which includes an increase of \$800 million over five years for legal assistance (\$160 million per year), to be split between community legal centres, Women's Legal Services, Family Violence Prevention and Legal Services, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Legal Services and Legal Aid Commissions.

This increase includes:

- \$500 million for general uplift for frontline services (to be targeted to the Commonwealth's priorities including domestic and family violence, family law, alleviating cost of living pressures, and Closing the Gap)
- \$300 million for indexation and increased wages for community legal sector workers.

**From the outset it was clear that the additional funding announced, while welcome, would not go anywhere near towards meeting need.** The total annual increase for five sectors is less than we had sought for our sector alone.

The Commonwealth recently announced how this additional funding would be split between providers. Welcome injections of funding for Women's Legal Services and Family Violence Prevention and Legal Services will make a difference for these centres, but, for the rest of the community legal sector, the increase is far more modest.

From here the focus should be on the adequacy of funding and the ongoing gap between what is being provided and what the community needs. In the following sections on client demand and workforce issues, we present further analysis to demonstrate that the announced Commonwealth funding increases are insufficient to meet the scale of need in the community.

## Demand

Over the past decade, many national inquiries, surveys and reports have found high and increasing levels of unmet legal need across the country.<sup>8</sup> In recent years factors like the cost-of-living and rental crises, the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic, various climate disasters, the spread of laws likely to increase criminalisation of vulnerable groups, and rising gender-based violence have all driven escalating legal need in the community.

**Nine out of ten centres (90%) reported an increase in legal need in 2023-24 as compared to in 2022-23, with none reporting a reduction in demand.**

This is especially alarming given that nine out of ten centres also reported an increase in legal need in 2022-23 as compared to the previous year. In 2023-24, 64% of centres said that legal need increased “a lot”, and 26% said that it increased “a little”.

The two demographics centres were most likely to identify as accounting for new demand for services were people seeking assistance for domestic violence and family related matters, and people who never thought they would need to access a free legal assistance service (including homeowners and people on middle-incomes).

Centres were asked to rate the various challenges they faced in meeting their community’s legal need in 2023-24, with 1 being “did not impact our ability to meet need at all” and 5 being “made it extremely challenging to meet need”. The greatest challenges to meeting demand for services our sector experienced in 2023-24 are listed in the table below.

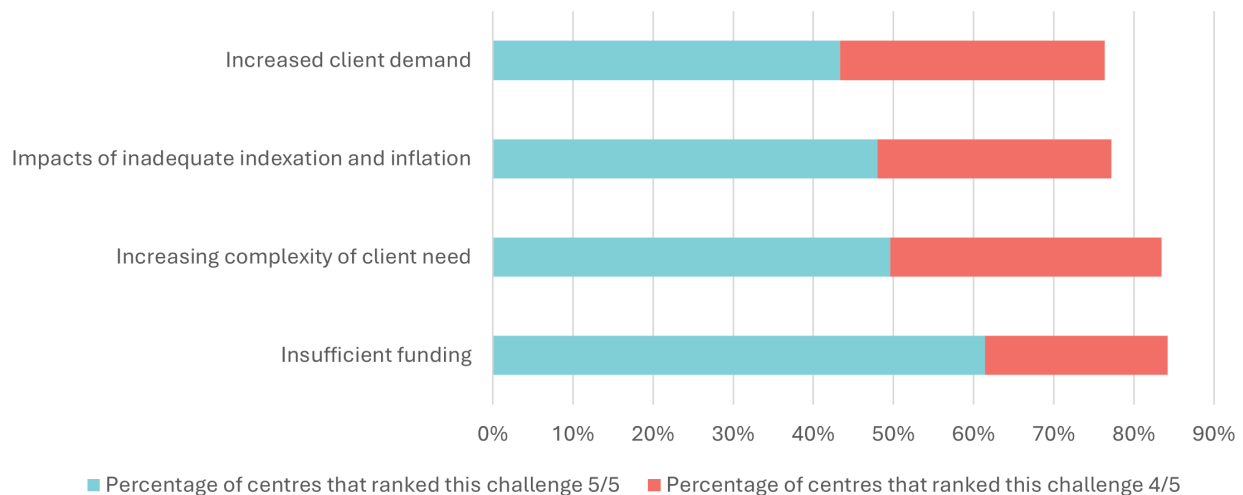
<i>Challenge</i>	<b>Average rating out of 5 across all respondent centres</b>	<b>Percentage of respondent centres that rated this challenge 4/5 or 5/5</b>
<i>Insufficient funding</i>	4.4	84.3%
<i>Increasing complexity of client need</i>	4.3	83.5%
<i>Impacts of inadequate indexation and inflation</i>	4.1	77.2%
<i>Increased client demand</i>	4.1	76.4%

These are the same challenges centres identified as having the greatest impact on their ability to meet demand in the 2022-23 State of the Sector survey report, *A Sector in Crisis*.

---

<sup>8</sup> Attorney-General’s Department (2024) *Independent review of the National Legal Assistance Partnership 2020-25 Final Report*: <https://www.ag.gov.au/legal-system/publications/independent-review-national-legal-assistance-partnership-2020-25>; Productivity Commission (2014) *Access to justice arrangements – Inquiry report*: <https://www.pc.gov.au/inquiries/completed/access-justice/report>; Law Council of Australia (2018) *The Justice Project – Final report*: <https://lawcouncil.au/justice-project/final-report>; Victoria Law Foundation (2023) *The Public Understanding of Laws Survey (Vol 1) – Everyday problems and legal need*: <https://victorialawfoundation.org.au/research/puls>

Figure 6: Most significant challenges for centres in meeting legal need in 2023-24



In 2023-24, the 152 community legal centres and Women’s Legal Services in our membership network needed (and were ready to onboard) about an extra 1,441 full-time-equivalent (FTE) roles nationally to meet demand. Estimating the cost for each additional FTE position (including on-costs) at \$165,000 per year, these 152 centres would need an extra \$237.8 million per year to employ the workers they need – and are prepared to onboard – to meet demand.<sup>9</sup>

The Commonwealth’s September 2024 announcement included an additional \$500 million for general uplift to legal assistance. This is \$100 million per year over five years, to be split between community legal centres, Women’s Legal Services, Family Violence Prevention and Legal Services, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Legal Services and Legal Aid Commissions. Our sector’s share of this funding falls far short of what is required to enable centres to meet growing demand for legal assistance in the community.

*We have seen a 17.69% increase in total client numbers over the course of this year. Previous years under the NLAP have averaged around a 3% increase year on year. Inflation has outstripped indexation in every area which has meant budgeting (let alone expanding our service) has been challenging.*

*Staff are now at full capacity trying to meet the basic demand given the increase in clients but lack of funding to employ more lawyers. Client need is increasing – matters are becoming more complex and more resource intensive. This is exacerbated by the fact that other specialised services in the area are at capacity, too.*

Regional centre in Tasmania

<sup>9</sup> Note: this figure does not account for the challenges some centres, particularly in rural, regional, remote and very remote areas, have attracting and retaining staff (largely associated with inadequate remuneration) and the additional costs associated with addressing these challenges.

## Workforce

The community legal sector's workforce is highly skilled, values-driven, and overwhelmingly female. Recent workforce surveys have consistently found that up to 85% of workers across our sector are women.<sup>10</sup> Due to funding constraints, many professional workers (mostly women) across our sector work in part-time roles. In 2023-24, the ongoing wages disparity experienced by workers across all community-based legal assistance providers<sup>11</sup> continued to contribute to Australia's intractable gender pay gap.

As of 30 June 2024:

- there were an estimated 3,411 FTE roles in the community legal sector nationally, filled by approximately 4,186 workers
- 64% of centres had a combined total of 333 unfilled positions
- only 4% of centres reported having enough staff to meet legal need in their communities.

To meet demand in the community, we estimate that across all 165 centres in our national membership network (including community legal centres, Women's Legal Services, Family Violence Prevention and Legal Services, and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Legal Services), our sector needs (and is ready to onboard), an extra 1,582 FTE positions, including 534 legal, 250 paralegal and intake, and 315 other professional positions.

Looking at community legal centres and Women's Legal Services alone, in 2023-24 there were an estimated 3,092 FTE workers across 152 centres. Based on the median salary in the community legal sector (\$97,750) and the average pay gap (22%),<sup>12</sup> it would cost approximately \$66 million per year to raise the wages of people currently employed at community legal centres and Women's Legal Services to parity with Legal Aid Commissions.

The Commonwealth's September 2024 announcement included \$300 million for indexation and pay parity measures. We do not yet know the exact rate of indexation that will be applied under the National Access to Justice Partnership (NAJP), and so we do not know how much of this \$300 million will be required to fund indexation, and how much can be applied to pay parity measures.

Using a conservative estimate of 2.5% average indexation, the \$3.9 billion in Commonwealth funds announced for the NAJP will require at least \$100 million for indexation. This would leave a maximum of \$200 million over 5 years, or \$40 million per year, for pay parity measures, to be shared between community legal centres, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Legal Services, Family Violence Prevention and Legal Services, and Women's Legal Services.

---

<sup>10</sup> See for example: Community Legal Centres Queensland (2023) *Working in Community Legal Centres in Queensland: Summary report*; and the Federation of Community Legal Centres (Victoria) and the Victoria Law Foundation's 2022 report, *Working in Community Legal Centres in Victoria: Results from the Community Legal Centres Workforce Project*: [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>11</sup> In the 2022-23 State of the Sector survey report, *A Sector in Crisis*, we reported that community legal sector workers earn anywhere between 10 and 35% less than counterparts working in the same roles at Legal Aid Commissions.

<sup>12</sup> Community Legal Centres Queensland's recent workforce survey found an average pay gap of 22% between workers at community legal centres and equivalent roles at Legal Aid Queensland, with a median salary (excluding CEOs) of \$97,750. This aligns with salary benchmarking research by Community Legal Centres NSW in 2022 which found a median salary for the most common legal and allied professional roles at \$95,500.

These calculations make clear that the entire Commonwealth allocation for wages increases for all community-based legal assistance services falls significantly short of the funding that is required to deliver pay parity just for community legal centres and Women’s Legal Services alone.<sup>13</sup>

### Turnover and vacancies

**The community legal sector workforce turnover rate was 21.3% in 2023-24<sup>14</sup>, or almost double the national not-for-profit turnover rate of 12%.<sup>15</sup>** The turnover rate, and the number of unfilled positions, are both higher for centres in regional and remote areas, particularly remote and very remote centres.

	Metro	Rural and regional	Remote and very remote	All centres
<i>Worker turnover rate</i>	18.9%	23.1%	38.4%	21.3%
<i>Unfilled positions by number of workers</i>	6.1%	10.9%	15.1%	7.9%

Every day that a community legal centre position is vacant results in people being unable to access the help they need. However, a quarter of respondent centres reported holding positions vacant because of funding constraints in 2023-24, for an average of just under 6 months. Based on this data, **collectively the community legal sector held positions vacant due to funding constraints for 19 years in 2023-24.**

Centres were asked to rate the various challenges they faced in attracting and retaining staff in 2023-24, with 1 being "did not impact our ability at all" and 5 being "made it extremely challenging to attract and retain workers". The greatest challenges to our sector in 2023-24 are listed below.

<i>Challenge</i>	Average rating out of 5 across all respondent centres	Percentage of respondent centres that rated this challenge 4/5 or 5/5
<i>Remuneration</i>	3.9	66%
<i>Lack of career pathways</i>	3.3	50%
<i>Vicarious Trauma</i>	2.8	28.3%
<i>Workload</i>	2.7	24.2%

<sup>13</sup> Particularly given that these calculations are based on current workforce estimates, and do not include the 1,441 extra FTE workers community legal centres and Women’s Legal Services need to meet legal need. If our sector was properly funded to hire the additional workers needed to meet legal need in the community, the amount of extra funding needed to deliver pay parity for workers in our sector would increase significantly.

<sup>14</sup> This number is based on the people that left respondent centres compared to the number of people that worked at respondent centres in 2023-24 in total for each sub-section of centres.

<sup>15</sup> Reported by the Australian Human Resources Institute, using data from October 2023: [https://www.ahri.com.au/wp-content/uploads/AHRI\\_Quarterly-Australian-Work-Outlook-Report\\_December.pdf](https://www.ahri.com.au/wp-content/uploads/AHRI_Quarterly-Australian-Work-Outlook-Report_December.pdf)

*Increased client demand and complexity are having a direct impact on staff wellbeing. Staff want to help and find it hard to say no even when resources are restrictive because we are the only free legal service present in this region.*

Regional centre in Victoria

*Retention, and attracting staff, would be less challenging if we could pay in line with market rates. We had some difficulty recruiting with the current pay scales and the challenging work. Demand is high, and callers are more distressed – staff report high levels of stress.*

Metropolitan centre in NSW

Across 2023-24, centres advertised an estimated 1,056 vacant positions. It took centres an average of 3 months to fill these positions, with regional and remote centres experiencing greater challenges. The vacancy rates and average time taken to fill a vacant role across different parts of the community legal sector in 2023-24 are as follows:

	Metro	Rural and regional	Remote and very remote	All centres
<b><i>Vacancy rate<sup>16</sup></i></b>	23.3%	27%	40.6%	25.4%
<b><i>Average time to fill a vacancy</i></b>	2.2 months	3.8 months	5.5 months	3 months

Our sector faces several interrelated workforce problems. Poor remuneration, lack of job security, never-ending demand and vicarious trauma make it hard to fill roles. However, even centres with all roles filled cannot meet the community's demand for their services – centres have a huge need for more positions.

If remuneration was fair, and properly accounted for the costs of working in rural, regional, remote, and very remote locations, problems related to worker recruitment and retention would be significantly reduced. However, it would still not solve our workforce problems.

<sup>16</sup> The number of vacant roles advertised divided by this part of the sector as a percentage of the total number of people working in that part of the sector.



## Volunteers and pro bono work

Community legal centres began as grassroots, volunteer-driven organisations. This history, and the ongoing contributions of voluntary work by community members, are part of what makes centres so good at serving their communities.

**In 2023-24, we estimate that nationally, volunteers contributed 9,982 hours per week, and pro bono support contributed 5,919 hours per week to the community legal sector.**

These volunteer and pro bono contributions increase sector's total work output (measured in work hours) to 3,835 FTE roles.

- Paid workers: 3,411 FTE or 89%
- Volunteers: 266 FTE or 7%
- Pro bono: 158 FTE or 4%

Volunteer and pro bono contributions are far more available to metro centres than to regional, rural, remote, and very remote centres. The following table shows the availability of volunteer and pro bono contributions across metropolitan, rural/regional and remote/very remote centres in 2023-24.

	Had volunteers	Average volunteer hours per week	Had pro bono contributions	Average pro bono hours per week
Metro	89%	105 hours	90%	64 hours
Rural and regional	82%	19 hours	64%	9 hours
Remote and very remote	40%	7 hours	70%	7.5 hours

Paid community legal sector workers have developed unique skillsets that cannot easily be replicated. Volunteer and pro bono hours cannot generally be compared to paid role hours. Effectively leveraging and managing voluntary and pro bono contributions also creates additional work for paid staff. Where centres are critically under-resourced, they may not have the capacity to dedicate the staff time needed to make use of volunteer and pro bono contributions.

Volunteers and pro bono partners make an invaluable contribution to the community legal sector, but these contributions are not a solution to the chronic under-resourcing of our sector.

## Turn-aways

Centres cannot help every person that comes to them in need. Many people who reach out to a centre for assistance are told that the centre cannot provide the help that they need or cannot assist within the required timeframe. It is this group of people we are referring to when we use the term “turn-aways”.

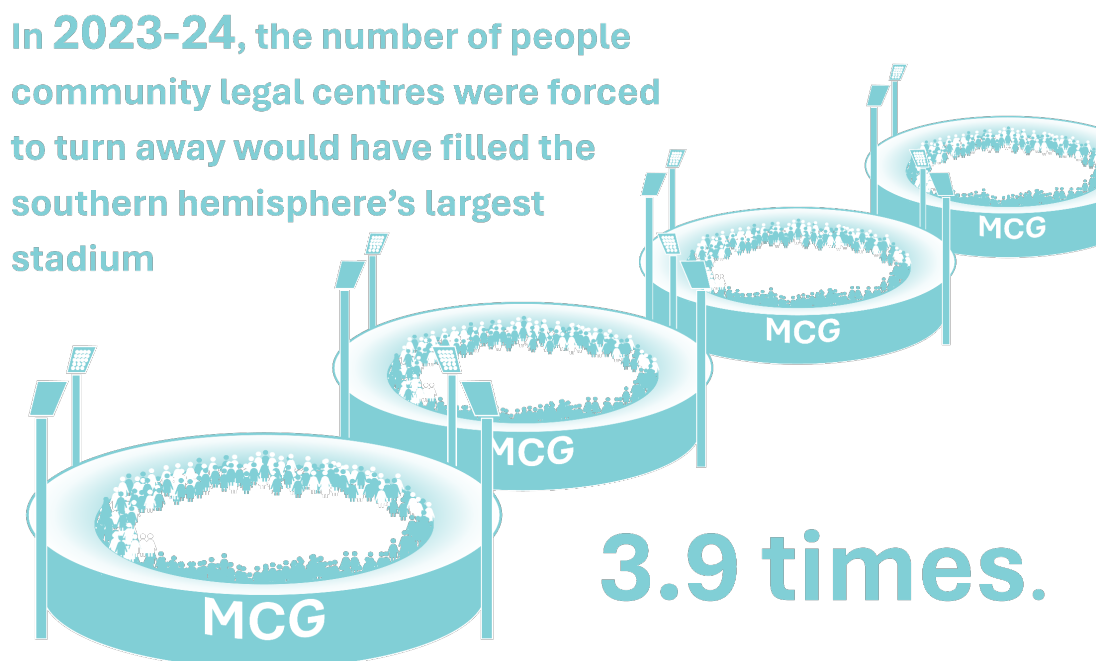
There are many people with legal problems who would benefit from community-based legal help, but who never reach out. This includes people who do not identify their problems as legal, who do not know about our sector or how to get in touch, and who fear or distrust lawyers. These people are not counted in our turn-aways. We know actual unmet legal need in the community is far, far higher than just our turn-away numbers.

We estimate that the average turn-aways per week per respondent centre in 2023-24 was 47.1. This amounts to an average of 2,356 people per year per centre.

**Based on this data, we estimate that the community legal sector turned away around 388,869 people in 2023-24. That’s 7,478 people per week, or 1,065 people a day.<sup>17</sup>**

This compares to 368,652 in 2022-23, or a 5.5% increase. Our data is stronger this year with turn-away numbers reported by 108 respondents compared to 69 in 2022-23.

*Figure 7: Visual representation of the number of people turned away from community legal centres in 2023-24*



<sup>17</sup> Appendix 1 sets out the methodology we used to calculate these figures in detail.

**We can't track the individual journeys of people turned away from our services. But we know that when a person has a legal problem they cannot resolve alone and they aren't able to access help, the consequences can be catastrophic.**

An unpaid fine or simple tenancy problem can snowball into compounding credit, debt and housing problems, which can impact a person's mental health, employment, relationships and housing security. This is often deeply distressing to the person, destabilising to families and communities, and ultimately increases downstream costs to governments via the health, social services, and criminal justice systems.<sup>18</sup>

*We encountered a family law client we were unable to assist. She then fell into a gap where she couldn't afford private legal services but also didn't qualify for Legal Aid. Unfortunately, we don't track outcomes for such clients, but this situation is common.*

*Without support from community legal centres or Legal Aid, these women would likely not achieve a property settlement, often leaving them with debt and with no superannuation. This results in a poorer financial future for them and their children.*

Regional centre in Victoria

#### **Client case study: Jake\***

Jake approached his local community legal centre in early 2024 for advice on a default judgement in the Local Court. The centre advised Jake on how to file to set aside on the default judgement and provided some drafts to him to help him self-represent. Jake wanted ongoing representation, but the centre was unable to provide this because of capacity. Months later, Jake returned to the centre with a bankruptcy notice due to not being able to take the self-representation steps required.

*In the past four months, we have had three people tell us that they were thinking of self-harming or of suicide because we were unable to provide assistance. This has had a significant impact on our staff, and we are in the process of organising a mental health training for our staff. We have ongoing concern for those community members who feel that this is the only option available to them.*

Metropolitan centre in Victoria

---

<sup>18</sup> In 2020, the Federation of Community Legal Centres (Vic) commissioned Ernst&Young to develop a business case demonstrating the value of government investment in community legal centres. The final report, *Meeting demand for community legal assistance*, analysed various client journeys through the legal, health and social service systems and compared costs to government depending on when in the person's journey they received community based legal assistance. The research demonstrates the incredible cost-effectiveness of our sector's preventive approach and the downstream health, social services, and criminal justice costs to governments avoided through early intervention in people's legal problems.

## Part 2 – Tracking the State of the Sector

In 2023-24, an estimated 40.1% of community legal sector clients were experiencing, had experienced, or were at risk of domestic and family violence. If we assume the same proportion of people turned away were experiencing, had experienced or were at risk of domestic and family violence, in 2023-24 we estimate centres were forced to turn away 155,936 people impacted by domestic and family violence.

**In 2023-24, we estimate that centres turned away 3,000 people impacted by domestic and family violence per week (or 427 per day) who sought assistance.**

*As we are funded to only open 2 days per week, we are unable to provide representation to victims of family violence in applications for intervention orders.*

*Unless the duty solicitor can assist them, the victim is then left to self-represent and come face-to-face with the perpetrator at court. This results in further trauma.*

Metropolitan centre in Victoria

*A new Specialist Family Violence Court was established in our area in late 2022. The Courts say that they are designed to support the safety and wellbeing of people affected by family violence. And yet, our centre and others in Victoria have not been funded sufficiently to provide legal support – especially to women and children – at this Court.*

*We have had to cap the number of clients we see at this court to ensure quality of services and protect staff, but it means women experiencing family violence are regularly left unrepresented and at serious safety risk. Staff worry about the women they cannot help or are directly turned away. It is an awful dilemma and an untenable situation.*

Metropolitan centre in Victoria

# Appendix 1: Demographics and methods

## Responses

### Total

There were 134 valid responses (complete and partial) to the survey. This represents a response rate of 81% (134 of 165 centres).

### Responses by jurisdiction

	Participating centres	Total centres in state or territory	Percentage of respondents
<b>ACT</b>	3	4	75%
<b>NSW</b>	33	37	89%
<b>NT</b>	5	6	83%
<b>QLD</b>	27	30	90%
<b>SA</b>	5	8	63%
<b>TAS</b>	7	8	88%
<b>VIC</b>	35	47	74%
<b>WA</b>	21	25	84%
<b>Total<sup>19</sup></b>	134	165	81%

### Responses by service type

- 129 community legal centres, including 11 Women's Legal Services
- Four Family Violence Prevention and Legal Services
- One Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Legal Service.

### Responses from community legal centres: specialist vs generalist

- Specialist centres: 61 (45.5%)
- Place-based (generalist) centres: 73 (54.5%). Of the 73 place-based centres, 54 also provide a specialist service or services
- Of the 73 place-based centres, 41 were regional, rural, remote, or very remote, and 32 were metro centres.

### Responses by geographic location

- 82 respondents operate in metro locations
- 52 respondents operate in regional, rural remote, and very remote locations:
  - Thirty-six operate in regional communities
  - Five operate in rural communities
  - Seven operate in remote communities
  - Four operate in very remote communities.

---

<sup>19</sup> Two centres are counted in both NSW and VIC jurisdictions. Two national centres are included in total centres (neither participated in the survey).

## Accounting for the underuse of the family violence indicator in centre service data

We know the family violence indicator is under-used by centres when collecting client services data.<sup>20</sup> To address this, we used several methods to adjust available data to calculate a more accurate estimate of the true proportion of our sector's work that relates to domestic and family violence.

First, we looked at the proportion of client records where at least one problem type assisted with indicated the client had experienced or was experiencing domestic and family violence. Of all legal problem types listed in our database, there are two problems for which 100% of clients assisted are impacted by domestic and family violence. Therefore 100% of these clients' records should be tagged with the family violence indicator. These are "Family Law – Domestic/Family violence", and "Family Law – Domestic violence protection orders".

In 2023-24, the 122 centres for which we have service data assisted with 91,025 Family Law – Domestic/Family violence or Family Law – Domestic violence protection orders problems. However, only 77,899 or 85.6% of these problem records had the family violence indicator. This means that about 15% of problem records that by their nature required that the client had experienced or was experiencing domestic and family violence did not have the indicator. We assess that this is the closest available proxy for the rate of the under-use of the indicator across our sector.<sup>21</sup>

Assuming data for the sector reflects the same proportionate under-use of the family violence indicator, we can adjust whole-of-sector data upwards accordingly to provide more accurate calculations of the proportion of our work in 2023-24 that related to domestic and family violence:

- 40.1% of clients were impacted by domestic and family violence
- 44.3% of services were provided to people impacted by domestic and family violence
- 51.3% of problems centres helped with related to services for people impacted by domestic and family violence.

Secondly, we compared the rate of under-use of the family violence indicator across individual centres. The rate of use of the family violence indicator for Family Law – Domestic/Family Violence and Family Law – Domestic violence protection order problems on a centre-by-centre basis can indicate an individual centre's likely rate of under-use of the indicator across all problem types. For example, one centre that assisted with approximately 1,500 of these two problems in 2023-24 only tagged the family violence indicator for 23% of them. Another that assisted with 1,000 of these two problems tagged the indicator for 99.5% of them. No centre that assisted with more than 50 of these problems used the indicator 100% of the time.

---

<sup>20</sup> Some of the reasons for its underuse include: that workers may not ask a client about domestic and family violence if the worker is not equipped to assist in this area; where workers provide information or one-off advice on a discrete legal problem, it may not be appropriate to ask about a client's experience of domestic and family violence; clients may choose not to disclose, for any number of reasons; workers are time-poor and data entry mistakes happen; turnover in the sector is high, and new workers may not understand the function of the family violence indicator and therefore not use it.

<sup>21</sup> We note that this still likely does not fully represent the extent of the under-use of the family violence indicator across the sector. In many cases where a client is being assisted with a problem unrelated to domestic and family violence, the topic may never arise at all, leading to greater under-use of the indicator than when the problem itself is directly related to the client's experience of violence.

## Appendix 1: Demographics and methods

After accounting for centres that did not assist with these problem types or only did so in small numbers (for which no adjustment was made), we used individual centres presumed rate of under-use of the indicator to provide a more accurate calculation of that centre's likely actual rates of domestic and family violence work in 2023-24. We then used these revised figures to re-calculate whole-of-sector data:

- 41.6% of clients were impacted by domestic and family violence
- 45.3% of services were provided to people impacted by domestic and family violence
- 51.9% of problems centres helped with related to services for people impacted by domestic and family violence.

This proportion of clients compares more closely to (although is still lower than) the self-reporting in the survey by centres, which estimated that in 2023-24 an average of 45.4% of their clients were victim-survivors of domestic and family violence.

Both adjustments outlined above resulted in similar upwards revisions of the proportion of the sector's work that is providing assistance to people impacted by domestic and family violence. For the purposes of this report, we chose the most conservative upward revision.

## Comparing metro, regional, and remote centres

Centres operating outside of major cities refer to themselves as regional, rural, remote, or very remote. Centres self-identified through the survey as either rural, regional, remote, very remote, or none of these. Centres that do not identify as regional, rural, remote, or very remote, are referred to as metro centres. For the purposes of some analysis, we grouped centres into three categories: "metro", "regional and rural", and "remote and very remote".

## 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:

- The centre did not have capacity to assist at all or within the required timeframe
- A person needed representation at a court or tribunal (which the centre could not provide)
- The centre could help with some but not the whole of a person's problem
- A person was not eligible for the centre's service (e.g. outside the centre's catchment area, a conflict of interest, not from a priority group, the centre doesn't practice in the relevant area of law).

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

In total, 77.6% (97 of 125) of survey respondents tracked turn-away data in 2023-24:

- 24% tracked turn-away data completely or formally
- 53.6% tracked turn-away data partially or formally
- 23.7% did not track turn-away data.

Of the centres that tracked turn-away data:

- 33% used a modern Client Management System (e.g. Actionstep, Consensus, CSnet)
- 25.8% used reception data
- 23.7% used the CLASS data management system
- 21.6% used phone records
- 2.1% used a regular survey of internal lawyers
- 26.8% used other methods (e.g. spreadsheets, intake systems).

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

Centres were asked to estimate their centre's average number of turn-aways per week. These numbers were cross-referenced and validated with a second question: "How did you calculate your weekly figure?".

One response was adjusted based on the answer to the follow-up question, which specified that the figure provided was over a month.

Two outlier centres and a third centre which provided an answer requiring clarification were contacted for further information, resulting in two further responses being adjusted.

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 2023-24.

### Survey questionnaire

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



## Appendix 2: Community Legal Centres Australia member network 2023–24

### State and territory associations

Community Legal Centres 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

Community Legal Centres 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 and 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  
Binaal Billa Family Violence Prevention Legal Service  
Central Coast Community Legal Centre  
Central Tablelands and Blue Mountains Community Legal Centre  
Environmental Defenders Office  
Far West Community Legal Centre  
Financial Rights Legal Centre  
HIV/AIDS Legal Centre (NSW)  
Hunter Community Legal Centre  
Illawarra Legal Centre

Immigration Advice and Rights Centre  
Inner City Legal Centre  
International Social Service Australia  
Justice and Equity Centre  
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  
Redfern Legal Centre  
Refugee Advice and Casework Service (Australia)

Seniors Rights Service  
Shoalcoast Community Legal Centre  
Tenants' Union of NSW  
Thiyama-li  
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 Aboriginal  
Corporation  
Central Australian Women's  
Legal Service (CAWLS)

Darwin Community Legal  
Service  
Katherine Women's Information  
and Legal Service (KWILS)

North Australian Aboriginal  
Family Legal Service (NAAFLS)  
Top End Women's Legal Service

## Queensland

Aboriginal Family Legal Services  
Queensland  
ADA Law (Aged and Disability  
Advocacy Australia)  
Basic Rights Queensland  
Bayside Community Legal  
Service  
Brisbane North Community  
Legal Service  
Cairns Community Legal Centre  
Caxton Community 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 (Wide Bay Burnett  
Community Legal Service)  
HUB Community Legal  
Institute for Urban Indigenous  
Health  
knowmore QLD  
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  
Ltd  
Family Violence Legal Service  
Aboriginal Corporation SA  
JusticeNet SA

Northern Community Legal  
Service  
Uniting Communities Law  
Centre  
WestSide Lawyers

Women's Legal Service (SA)  
Working Women's Centre SA

## 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	Fitzroy Legal Service	Refugee Legal
Anika Legal	Gippsland Community Legal Service	Seniors Rights Victoria
Animal Law Institute	Human Rights Law Centre	Social Security Rights Victoria
ARC Justice – Goulburn Valley and Loddon Campaspe Community Legal Centres	Hume Riverina Community Legal Service	South-East Monash Legal Service
Asylum Seeker Resource Centre and Human Rights Law Program	Inner Melbourne Community Legal	SouthPort Community Legal Service
Ballarat and Grampians Community Legal Service	InTouch Legal Centre	Southside Justice
Barwon Community Legal Service	JobWatch	Tenants Victoria
Brimbank Melton Community Legal Centre	Justice Connect – Head Office, Melbourne	University of Melbourne Student Union Legal Service
Consumer Action Law Centre	Law and Advocacy Centre for Women	Victorian Aboriginal Legal Service
Disability Discrimination Legal Service (Victoria)	Mallee Family Care Community Legal Centre	Villamanta Disability Rights Legal Service
Djirra	Mental Health Legal Centre	West Heidelberg Community Legal Service
Eastern Community Legal Centre	Monash Law Clinics	WEstjustice
Emma House Domestic Violence Services Legal Program	Moonee Valley Legal Service	Whittlesea Community Connections Community Legal Service
Environmental Justice Australia	Mortgage Stress Victoria	Women's Legal Service Victoria
First Step Legal	Northern Community Legal Centre	Young Workers Centre
	Peninsula Community Legal Centre	Youthlaw

## Western Australia

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

