Community Legal Centres Australia

VISION FOR JUSTICE

2026-27 Pre-Budget Submission

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.

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Introduction

Community legal centres help hundreds of thousands of people each year to resolve everyday legal problems in areas like housing, relationships, debts and money problems, and discrimination. People trust their local community legal centre to support them early, before legal problems snowball to crisis point. A properly funded legal assistance sector strengthens communities and delivers benefits to government across a range of departments including health, social services, home affairs, and employment and workplace relations.

Community legal centres in Australia have long been significantly under-funded. Over a decade's worth of national inquiries, surveys and reports have found high and increasing levels of unmet legal need across the country.[1] This hurts people and communities, and it also increases downstream costs to governments via the health, social services, and criminal justice systems.

The 2025-30 National Access to Justice Partnership (NAJP) includes a modest funding uplift for legal assistance providers. While welcome, the increase does not come close to the doubling of existing funding community legal centres require to begin to meet legal need.

In September 2025, we launched our Vision for Justice and Actions for the 48th Parliament of Australia. Together, these set out the system barriers we see preventing people and communities accessing justice, our vision for how the world would look if governments addressed these barriers, and concrete actions the current government could take to help us step towards this vision. The Actions for the 48th Parliament of Australia include recommendations for legislative and policy reform, as well as community legal centre sector development and resourcing.

This submission recommends six targeted Commonwealth investments in community legal centres in 2026-27 set out in our *Actions for the 48th Parliament of Australia*. Alone, these investments won't achieve our *Vision for Justice* or resolve the significant disparity between unmet legal need and our sector's capacity to respond, but they will help to fill some critical justice gaps.

Thank you for taking the time to consider our submission. If you need further information, please contact Emily Hamilton, Advocacy and Communications Manager, on emily.hamilton@clcs.org.au.

[1] 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

Summary of recommendations

In the 2026-27 budget the federal government should:

1. Urgently reduce the number of victims-survivors turned away from community legal centres by investing an extra $95 million per year through the NAJP. Funding should flow to all community legal centres that support victims-survivors of domestic, family and sexual violence, including place-based or 'generalist' centres, Women's Legal Services, and other specialist community legal centres.
2. Provide an extra $15.8 million per year through the NAJP to enable community legal centres in regional and remote communities to increase advice and representation services to women involved in Family Court proceedings.
3. Invest an extra $9.4 million per year from the Department of Health in community legal centres and Family Violence Prevention and Legal Services to expand or establish health justice partnerships and deliver mental health legal services
4. Implement the Robodebt Royal Commission's call for increased resourcing for free legal assistance by investing an extra $5 million per year in Department of Social Services funding for specialist social security legal services.
5. Deliver an extra $14.5 million through the NAJP to enable community legal centres to plan and deliver services to LGBTIQ+ people. Ensuring new funding acknowledges the expertise of existing services supporting these communities.
6. Deliver an extra $14.5 million through the NAJP to enable community legal centres to plan and deliver services to refugees, people seeking asylum, and vulnerable migrants. Ensure new funding acknowledges the expertise of existing services supporting these communities.
7. Invest an additional $72 million to increase the wages of workers at community-based legal assistance providers towards parity with workers in equivalent roles at Legal Aid Commissions.
8. Provide:
    - $120,000 to the Workforce Strategy Project Team within the Attorney-General's Department's Legal Assistance Branch to develop the workforce strategy required under the NAJP
    - An additional $100,000 to Community Legal Centres Australia to support community legal centres to participate fully in the development process, including comprehensive consultations with legal assistance providers in regional and remote communities to inform the strategy.

Urgently invest in community legal centres' domestic, family and sexual violence work

The community legal sector is a cornerstone of Australia's frontline domestic, family and sexual violence service system. Of the 160+ organisations in our membership, 94% provide services to victims-survivors of domestic and family violence for legal problems directly related to their experience of violence like parenting arrangements and property settlements (family law), family violence orders, child protection, and victims of crime compensation. Most also offer trauma-informed, integrated, wraparound supports provided by allied professionals like social workers, court advocates, and counsellors.

Community legal centres that don't provide direct services for family violence-related legal problems – like specialist tenancy, social security, and credit and debt services – are also crucial parts of the network of supports on which victims-survivors rely. Victims-survivors' legal problems in these areas are often connected to their experiences of abuse, and support to resolve them can be vital for safety, justice and healing.

Sector data shows that nationally, 40-50% of all people centres helped in 2023-24 disclosed that they were impacted by domestic and family violence. This is likely to be a significant under-count, with the real number of people impacted by violence helped by our sector likely far higher.[2]

Centres in regional, rural remote and very remote (regional and remote)[3] areas have a disproportionately high rate of clients who disclose that they are victims-survivors of domestic and family violence. On average, three quarters of rural, remote and very remote centres' clients disclose having been impacted by domestic and family violence. These centres tend to be smaller, place-based, and experience acute challenges attracting and retaining staff, and significantly higher service delivery costs.

Reduce the number of victims-survivors turned away from community legal centres

Under-funding is forcing the community legal sector to turn away at least 400 victims-survivors of domestic, sexual and family violence every single day. We estimate our network needs at least an extra $95 million per year to significantly reduce the number of victims-survivors turned away from community legal centres.

We welcomed the modest increase in community legal centre funding the Federal Government delivered via the NAJP from 2025-26. Any funding uplift to our member organisations is helpful, however:

- The targeted Women's Legal Services funding uplift fell far short of the amount these centres need to meet demand for specialist services from women and children experiencing gender-based violence
- Most of the other 130+ community legal centres in our membership also play a critical role in domestic and family violence prevention and response. The very limited general uplift for community legal centres delivered via the NAJP means many of these centres

[2] This is because the community legal centres' sector's current data collection system results in under-use of the 'family violence indicator' for clients and because some clients choose not to disclose their experience of violence.
[3] Throughout this document we use 'regional and remote' to describe all centres operating in regional, rural, remote, and very remote communities. In specific cases, we use different formulation where the data we cite relates to centres in some but not all these locations. This includes data on the proportion of rural, remote, and very remote centres' clients who experience DFV.

have seen a very modest, or indeed no, real increase in funding to support victim-survivors or domestic and family violence.

Community legal centres are independent organisations that together make up the community legal centres movement. The connectedness of the centres in our movement ensures a network of services on which communities can rely. The sum of our movement is greater than its individual parts. Place based and specialist centres often work together to provide holistic support to people, cross-refer clients between centres, and run programs together. If one part of the sector is in crisis, this impacts the service capacity of its other parts and increases the strain on our sector across the board.

To effectively address unmet domestic, family and sexual violence legal need, our entire sector must be adequately resourced.

Recommendation 1:

Urgently reduce the number of victims-survivors turned away from community legal centres by investing an extra $95 million per year through the NAJP, from 2026-27. Funding should flow to all community legal centres that support victims-survivors of domestic, family and sexual violence including place-based or 'generalist' centres, Women's Legal Services, and other specialist community legal centres.

Improve access to justice and safety for victims-survivors of family violence in family law proceedings in regional and remote communities

The Federal Circuit and Family Court of Australia consistently reports that over 80% of family law matters it deals with involve family violence. However, too many victims-survivors face the family law system without the community legal centre help they need.

The family law system itself is chronically under-resourced. Courts have significant delays and backlogs, which can leave victims-survivors of violence trapped in legal proceedings for years. Women who once had means to hire a private lawyer can quickly run out of money and be left destitute and facing ongoing legal proceedings without help. People who use violence can too easily weaponise the overstretched family law system to drag out proceedings further until a victim-survivor runs out of resources for legal help, and to aggressively pursue property and parenting outcomes that put women and children at risk of poverty, homelessness and further violence.

Family law services made up 31% of community legal centres' total services in 2023-24. Many of the people who receive these services are victims-survivors of domestic and family violence. As noted above, in 2023-24, 40-50% of community legal centres' clients disclosed that they were impacted by domestic and family violence (across all service types). This rose to 72-78% for rural, remote and very remote community legal centres.

However, community legal centres that provide free, specialised family law advice and representation services remain significantly under-funded to meet need. Underfunding for and lack of access to family law services is even worse in regional and remote communities.

People who live in regional and remote communities face unique barriers to accessing justice not experienced by metropolitan communities. Courts, including the Family Court, and tribunals do not sit in regional and remote communities as regularly as they do in cities (or at all). Governments increasingly rely on digital solutions as 'one-size-fits-all' responses to remoteness, despite evidence that these can reduce accessibility for people experiencing disadvantage and marginalisation. Regional and remote communities have access to fewer services, and to a narrower range of services. This means services, including community legal

centres, that do operate in these areas are left to meet a broad range of needs for people who often cannot access other supports.

The high cost of delivering effective services to regional and remote communities is not reflected in funding contracts. This leaves community-based services struggling to meet demand with limited resources. Regional and remote community legal centres travel very long distances to provide outreach services to meet the needs of people who live in geographically isolated communities. Centres and the communities they support are disadvantaged by government funding models that rely too heavily on population data, don't accurately reflect the true cost of delivering services, and don't aim to provide full geographic service coverage.

The lack of housing and childcare in regional and remote areas, chronic service underfunding, and lack of a strategic response to these challenges are driving an acute workforce crisis for community legal centres and other local services. Staff shortages leave people and communities without access to the help they need and workers at risk of burnout and vicarious trauma.

In recognition of the acute workforce challenges faced by community legal centres in regional and remote communities, the Queensland Government applied a 20% regional and remote loading for the existing community legal sector workforce as part of its 2024 funding injection.

Improving access to safety and justice for victims-survivors of family violence in family law proceedings in regional and remote communities, requires increasing regional and remote centres' family law and family violence service capacity and adequately accounting for the higher cost of delivering family law and family violence services outside metropolitan areas.

On average, enabling regional and remote centres to hire one additional family lawyer and one additional social worker (including on-costs), and providing a 20% regional and remote loading, would cost the Federal Government $360,000 per centre. In 2024-25, there were 44 community legal centres operating in regional and remote communities. Across 44 centres, the total additional investment needed is $15.8 million per year.[4]

Recommendation 2:

Provide a targeted investment of $15.8 million per year through the NAJP to enable community legal centres in regional and remote communities to increase advice and representation services to women involved in Family Court proceedings.

[4] We are not suggesting that funding should flow to specifically one additional family lawyer and one additional social worker per centre, but that this is the minimum total additional investment that would start to make a real difference for victims-survivors of domestic and family violence in family law proceedings in regional and remote communities.

Invest in better health and social outcomes through legal help

Through its 2023 *Measuring What Matters: Australia's First Wellbeing Framework* the Federal Government committed to building healthy, secure, cohesive and prosperous communities for everyone, including through access to justice.

A properly funded legal assistance sector delivers benefits to government across a range of departments including health, social security, immigration, and employment and workplace relations. Conversely, when people can't access legal help, they can experience a range of harms and often end up needing much more comprehensive support. 'Savings' through underfunding legal assistance are far outweighed by increased costs to other government portfolios, like health, social security, community and disability services, and child protection.

Community legal centres understand that legal, social, health and economic determinants of wellbeing are connected, and so we help people holistically. Our services are trauma-informed and integrate lots of different professional supports, like social work, counselling, disability and tenancy advocacy, and community development. Community legal centres help people in a range of settings, like health centres, hospitals, domestic violence and homelessness shelters, and prisons, and prioritise prevention and early support.

For example, a centre in the Northern Territory has developed a mental health justice partnership to help women experiencing mental health conditions due to gender-based violence navigate the criminal legal system. The partnership brings together specialist domestic violence lawyers with extensive criminal law experience, financial counsellors, and other allied professionals, to provide these women with trauma-informed, wrap-around support.

Similarly, a centre in Victoria partners with local youth services to provide legal education to young people in areas like housing, employment, and financial management, during programmed activities like art and boxing. This format engages young people and helps set them up with the life skills needed to successfully engage in civil society. Another centre has developed an interactive theatre project to engage with secondary school students on domestic and family violence as a form of creative primary prevention.

Despite the clear benefits our sector delivers across a range of government priorities, the Federal Government's approach to legal assistance funding is limited and siloed. Almost all funding comes from the Attorney-General's Department. A very limited amount of targeted funding flows to some centres from other departments like Social Services, Home Affairs, and the Office for Women.

As part of its commitment to wellbeing, the Federal Government should assess the benefits and cost-savings that legal assistance already delivers across key portfolios and develop comprehensive proposals for targeted investments in community legal centres from key portfolios beyond the Attorney-General's. These proposals should be fully developed and ready to implement in the last budget of the 48th Parliament.

While the review is ongoing, the Federal Government should immediately invest additional funding in community legal centres via the departments of health and social services to support community legal centres to deliver health justice partnerships, mental health legal services, and specialist social security legal services.

The significant benefits of community-based legal assistance providers' mental health legal services and Health Justice Partnerships are already well-established. In the 2021-22 budget, the Federal Government provided two targeted investments via the National Legal Assistance Partnership Agreement 2020-25 (NLAP) to boost legal assistance services and wrap-around supports for people experiencing mental ill-health:

- $17.1 million over four years for existing Domestic Violence Units and Health Justice Partnerships to employ mental health workers to assist women who have experienced family violence (as part of a broader women's safety package)[5]
- $60 million over four years for legal assistance providers to support the early resolution of legal problems for people experiencing mental illness (as part of a broader mental health package).[6]

From 2025-26, both these funding streams have been continued, with the mental health funding delivered via baseline NAJP funding, and the HJP and DVU funding delivered via two separate streams. While the extension of this funding is welcome, the quantum falls far short of what is needed to meet community need.

For people whose problems fall in the intersection of health and justice, it is equally the responsibility of the Department of Health to ensure their support needs are met. The Department of Health should match the funding provided by the Attorney-General's Department to support community legal centres across the country to expand existing and establish new health justice partnerships and mental health legal services. This funding should be indexed at an adequate rate.

Recommendation 3:

Invest an extra $9.4 million[7] per year from the Department of Health in community legal centres and Family Violence Prevention and Legal Services to expand or establish health justice partnerships and deliver mental health legal services

Poverty can trigger many legal problems while leaving people with fewer resources to address them. Lifting people out of poverty improves overall wellbeing. It also prevents legal problems arising, increases people's capacity to resolve issues quickly, and reduces demand on legal assistance and other support services.

Social security payments are both inadequate and inaccessible. One way to improve the social security system is to ensure that people who have been denied access can get free and independent legal advice. Another is to ensure specialist social security legal services are resourced to carry out expert advocacy to improve systems. The Robodebt Royal Commission recommended additional resourcing for specialist social security legal services. This recommendation has not yet been met.

Recommendation 4:

Implement the Robodebt Royal Commission's call for increased resourcing for free legal services by investing an additional $5 million per year in Department of Social Services funding for specialist social security legal services, starting from 2026-27.

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[5] This funding was earmarked for existing Domestic Violence Units and Health Justice Partnerships, many of which involve community legal centres. As we don't know exactly how state and territory governments distributed this funding, we estimate that about 50% of this funding, or $8.55 million, flowed to community legal centres, or $2.14 million per year.

[6] The Federal Government delivered $15 million per year to the states and territories to allocate between three types of legal assistance providers: Legal Aid Commissions, community legal centres, and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Legal Services. It is not clear exactly how each jurisdiction divided the funds. For the purposes of this submission, we assume that one third flowed to community legal centres, or $5 million per year.

[7] $7.14 million in 2021-22 indexed at 5.75% per year comes to $9.4 million.

Invest in access to justice for newly added priority groups for legal assistance

The NAJP lists several new priority groups for legal assistance, including LGBTIQ+ people and refugees, people seeking asylum, and vulnerable migrants. The final details of the NAJP, including the additional priority groups, were published after the Federal Government announced its funding commitment to the agreement. As a result, the Federal Government has not provided any additional funding for community legal centres to meet the needs of these new priority groups.

Access to justice for LGBTIQ+ people

LGBTIQ+ legal services provide specialist legal help in areas like domestic, family and sexual violence, discrimination, identification documentation amendments, and online abuse and doxing. They also provide safe, LGBTIQ+-friendly support for people to resolve a wide range of everyday problems and build the wider sector's capacity to appropriately support LGBTIQ+ clients. Governments frequently call on them to provide expert input into laws and policies that relate to the LGBTIQ+ community.

In three Australian jurisdictions (Queensland, Victoria, and New South Wales), LGBTIQ+ people can access a LGBTIQ+ specialist community legal centre or program. These services are very poorly funded, relying on a mix of State Government funding, philanthropic donations, and substantial pro bono support. Two receive dedicated funding to provide specialist LGBTIQ+ services, while the other is unfunded for this work. Most operate with fewer than four lawyers to service statewide catchments. In one jurisdiction (Western Australia), a specialist service was established but is on pause due to a lack of resourcing. In four jurisdictions (South Australia, the Northern Territory, the ACT, and Tasmania) there is no specialist LGBTIQ+ service at all.

To ensure a funded specialist LGBTIQ+ community legal service in each jurisdiction, the Federal Government should invest a minimum of $1.6 million per jurisdiction, rising to $2 million in NSW, Victoria and Queensland to account for larger population sizes.

Specialist services are crucial, but it is also important that all community legal centres are equipped to meet the needs of LGBTIQ+ people. The Federal Government should also invest a small amount of additional resourcing ($0.5 million) across the whole sector to enable all centres to provide staff and volunteer training to ensure service provision to this group is effective and safe.

Recommendation 5:

Deliver an extra $14.5 million through the NAJP to enable community legal centres to plan and deliver services to LGBTIQ+ people, ensuring new funding acknowledges the expertise of existing services supporting these communities.

Access to justice for refugees, people seeking asylum, and vulnerable migrants

Community legal centres work with refugees and asylum seekers, migrant women experiencing domestic and family violence, international students, and migrant workers to provide specialist, culturally responsive support across a range of areas of law. Some centres provide specialised support for people to navigate immigration law problems, a highly complex and specialised area of law, which few lawyers practice. Centres also provide culturally responsive support to refugees, asylum seekers and vulnerable migrants in other areas like domestic, family and sexual violence and employment.

Many refugees and people seeking asylum can't afford private legal help because of government policies that restrict their rights to work and to access social security. Community legal centres are often the only places they can turn to for help. There are refugee specialist community legal centres in every jurisdiction except the Northern Territory. However, funding for these services is generally inadequate to meet community need, and there isn't consistency in funding quantum delivered by different state and territory governments. Commonwealth government policy decisions to withhold or withdraw funding from refugee legal services (supported by both major parties) have resulted in chronic underfunding of these services for decades. As a result, some services rely wholly on state government funding. At least one has been told by its state government that it will no longer be funded because it works in the federal jurisdiction. Several rely significantly on fundraising to keep their doors open.

The Federal Government should ensure that refugees, people seeking asylum and vulnerable migrants can access at least one funded specialist centre per jurisdiction and should fund training for all centres to enable effective and safe service provision to this group.

Recommendation 6:

Deliver an extra $14.5 million through the NAJP to enable community legal centres to plan and deliver services to refugees, people seeking asylum, and vulnerable migrants, ensuring new funding acknowledges the expertise of existing services supporting these communities.

Invest in the community legal sector workforce to improve gender equity and access to justice

The community legal sector's workforce is highly skilled, values-driven, and overwhelmingly female. Workers in the community legal sector experience high rates of burnout and vicarious trauma in the face of overwhelming demand for services from people and communities. There is growing legal need in the community, and people are approaching community legal centres with more complex legal and related problems.

Invest in the community legal sector workforce to narrow the gender pay gap

As of 2023-24, the ongoing wages disparity experienced by workers across all community-based legal assistance providers contributed to Australia's gender pay gap. There is a significant pay gap between workers at community-based legal assistance services and those at Legal Aid Commissions.[8]

The final report from the *Independent Review of the National Legal Assistance Partnership* recommended that the Commonwealth Government provide additional funding beginning in 2024-25 (for the final year of the NLAP, and to be embedded from the start of the NAJP 2025-30) to increase wages of workers at community-based legal assistance providers to equivalent pay to workers at Legal Aid Commissions in the same jurisdiction. The Reviewer costed this at $66 million for the 2024-25 financial year, and $69 million for the 2025-26 financial year.

The modest injection of Commonwealth funding via the NAJP in 2025-26 for community legal centres to pay workers closer to Legal Aid Commission wages was woefully insufficient.

Recommendation 7:

Invest an additional $72 million to increase the wages of workers at community-based legal assistance providers towards parity with workers in equivalent roles at Legal Aid Commissions.

Fund the development of the workforce strategy required by the National Access to Justice Partnership

Community legal centres' inability to offer competitive rates of pay due to under-resourcing means that centres, especially those in regional and remote areas, are struggling to recruit and retain suitably qualified workers. Staff are left overworked and overwhelmed, and centres are left unable to keep pace with increasing demand.

In 2023-24, across all 165 centres in our national membership network, our sector needed (and was ready to employ) an extra 1,582 full-time-equivalent positions to meet the needs of their communities.

The NAJP 2025-30 requires the development of a legal assistance sector workforce strategy. Despite establishing a project team to lead this work, the Federal Government has not dedicated any resources to developing or implementing this strategy. No successful workforce strategy can be 'resource neutral.'

[8] The Community Legal Centres Australia 2022-23 State of the Sector survey report, *A sector in crisis*, reported that community legal sector workers earn between 10 and 35% less than counterparts working in the same roles at Legal Aid Commissions. Community Legal Centres Queensland's 2024 workforce survey found an average pay gap of 22% between workers at community legal centres and equivalent workers at Legal Aid Queensland.

In 2026-27, the Commonwealth should invest $220,000 to develop the strategy. This should include funding for the community legal centre sector to participate fully in the development process. The strategy should respond to the needs, experiences, and challenges of regional and remote services and their workforce and should include realistic recommendations about the funding needed to implement the strategy.

From 2027-28, the Commonwealth should commit adequate funding to community legal centres to implement the workforce strategy.

Recommendation 8:

Provide:

- $120,000 to the Workforce Strategy Project Team within the Attorney-General's Department's Legal Assistance Branch to develop the workforce strategy required under the NAJP
- An additional $100,000 to Community Legal Centres Australia to support community legal centres to participate fully in the development process, including comprehensive consultations with legal assistance providers in regional and remote communities to inform the strategy.