BUILDING COMMUNITY FOR CHANGE

2025–26 IMPACT REPORT

www.imcl.org.au

INNER MELBOURNE COMMUNITY LEGAL

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT OF TRADITIONAL OWNERS

Inner Melbourne Community Legal respectfully acknowledges the Wurundjeri Woi-wurrung and Bunurong Boon Wurrung peoples of the Eastern Kulin as the Traditional Custodians and Owners of the lands, rivers and skies within which we have the privilege to work. We pay our respect to their Elders and leaders, past and present, and acknowledge the continuing harm and suffering that colonisation has brought to the world's longest continuing culture. We are committed to playing our role in bringing justice for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander People and ensuring this is central to everything that we do. These lands always were and always will be Aboriginal lands—sovereignty has never been ceded.

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About IMCL

We are an independent community legal centre providing free legal help to people living, working or accessing services in the inner Melbourne area since 1978.

Our vision

We are working towards a future where systemic injustices that affect our target clients are recognised and addressed.

Our objective

To create a just society by building fairness and wellbeing in our local community through the legal system.

Who we help

Our clients experience, or are at risk of, chronic or acute legal crises. They live within an unjust system in which they experience complex forms of social and economic disadvantage and inequality and face structural barriers to accessing justice.

We have four key client groups:

- People experiencing family distress and violence
- Public and community housing renters
- People experiencing over- and under-policing
- People with mental illness and AOD-related challenges or experiencing homelessness

Our values

INTEGRITY

We act with integrity in all that we do. We work honestly, respectfully and consistently with our values. We do this even when it is difficult, inconvenient or carries risk. Our decisions are ethical, transparent and guided by principle, not just rules, reputation or expedience.

COURAGE

We are courageous in the pursuit of justice. We speak out against injustice, challenge harmful systems and are bold and brave in our advocacy for clients and their communities. We are prepared to lead and take considered risks in complex or contested environments where necessary to advance social justice.

RADICALISM

We seek systemic change, alongside individual remedies. We recognise that the legal problems affecting our clients are often the product of entrenched inequality and structural harm. We seek fundamental changes and work to challenge, disrupt and dismantle oppressive systems.

COMMUNITY

Communities shape our work and hold us to account. IMCL listens to and elevates the experiences of those most systemically harmed through casework and systemic advocacy. We recognise power imbalances, build trust, and work together to design services, set priorities and drive change.

CARE

We centre compassion, dignity, and humanity in our client-focused practice. Through a trauma-informed lens we work to ensure our clients and their communities are heard by the systems affecting them. We extend this care, support and compassion to each other, acknowledging that our shared and sustainable wellbeing underpins our impact.

What we do

The work of Inner Melbourne Community Legal is made up of three areas of activity:

SPECIALISED LEGAL SERVICES

We provide specialist wrap-around legal help that supports common life problems faced by our key client groups:

- **Family issues:** Parenting, child protection, child support, property and divorce.
- **Family violence:** Help to obtain or respond to family violence intervention orders and assistance with breaches of orders, Financial Assistance Scheme.
- **Housing problems**: Public and community housing, evictions, repairs, transfers, bond and compensation claims, reductions and creations of tenancy in family violence situations.
- **Policing & the criminal justice system:** Criminal matters heard at the Magistrates' Court, police complaints and related criminal defence, civil litigation and family violence casework.
- **Money problems:** Fines, referrals for debts to financial counselling support.
- **Immigration:** Visa applications, humanitarian offshore family reunion applications and citizenship applications.

LAW REFORM AND STRATEGIC ADVOCACY

We listen to our clients and their communities to elevate their voices and speak boldly about the need for change to reduce the impact of unfair laws and policies through:

- Civil litigation and class actions
- Pushing for law reform
- Partnerships with other community legal centres (CLCs) and human rights organisations
- Membership of working groups

COMMUNITY AND INTEGRATED PARTNERSHIPS

We adopt a whole person approach to help with legal and non-legal needs by collaborating with community partners in education, housing, health and homelessness and other crisis agencies to engage with our clients when they are using critical care services. We reach and support clients through the following streams of work:



How we make change

Our Theory of Change sets out how our way of working creates impact for individual clients, for their communities and, ultimately, for the systems that shape their lives. This is how we make change:

We **work in deep, sustained partnership with the people and communities most affected by the problem** we seek to solve...

We **build trust, show up early, work collaboratively** with others and **stay the course**...

We use what we learn from individual crises to challenge systemic harm...

Then we not only resolve legal issues to create fairer individual outcomes and improved wellbeing, but **prevent them** and **reduce their severity**, and importantly **shift the systems that produce them**.

The problem we are trying to solve and the outcomes we seek

The problem

Our clients experience, or are at risk of, chronic or acute legal crises. They live within an unjust system in which they experience complex forms of social and economic disadvantage and inequality and face structural barriers to accessing justice.

Our strategic activities

Specialised legal services

Community and integrated partnerships

Law reform and strategic advocacy

Short term outcomes

- Clients can access legal help at a time and place that feels safe, directly or when interacting with our community and service partnerships
- Clients trust that they are taken seriously and their voice is respected
- Clients have confidence that their issues are resolved effectively
- Advocacy decisions are s shaped by our client and community voices



BELOW IMCL Theory of Change.

Medium term outcomes

- Clients feel listened to and trust the advice they receive
- Clients can make informed choices about their current and future legal issues
- Clients have an immediate improvement in their quality of life
- Legal issues are resolved, prevented or the severity is reduced
- Crisis, support and critical care workers are trained to identify legal needs and make appropriate referrals, removing the pressure to respond to legal matters
- Client and community voices and experiences drive our advocacy priorities and approach
- Community collaboration on complex social problems amplifies the call for action
- Over-policing of clients in our community is reduced
- Decision makers hear and understand the experiences of our clients and their communities, and the root causes of unfair interactions with the justice system are addressed
- Access to a fair outcome is improved for people in our community

Long term outcomes

Fairer legal outcomes

- Clients' dignity and agency is respected
- Clients achieve fairer outcomes in the legal system

Improved wellbeing

- Clients are supported to minimise and/or address the adverse impact of life crises
- Clients are empowered to access culturally safe legal and non-legal help that they need in the future

Fairer laws

- Laws, policies, policing and justice systems acknowledge the disproportionate impact on our clients and their communities, and work towards remedies
- The harm experienced by our clients and their communities due to unjust laws, policies, policing and justice systems is minimized

Chairperson and CEO report

Every day at Inner Melbourne Community Legal, we see the difference that timely, thoughtful legal help can make to someone's life. It might mean someone keeping their home, a woman and her children getting support to safely leave a violent relationship, a young person staying engaged in school rather than becoming involved in the criminal justice system, or challenging an unfair fine that cannot be paid.

These things matter enormously to the people involved. They can mean the difference between stability and crisis, between having choices and feeling that there are none; the difference between having hope and having none. But our work also teaches us a lot about the systems that shape people's lives.

Many of the people we assist are navigating several systems at once: housing, health, family violence, policing and the courts. Too often, the systems don't work well together, respond too late, or make already difficult circumstances worse. Problems that could have been prevented or resolved early become more serious, with consequences for individuals, families and the wider community.

We know that these outcomes are not inevitable. Laws, policies and public services can be designed and delivered differently, and people who have experienced their shortcomings have an important role to play in making them better.

This belief is what sits behind our strategic commitment to **Centering People. Changing Systems**: over the last few years we've proudly built an organisation capable of doing much more than responding to individual legal crises, as important as this is.

We are not content just to help someone through the problem in front of them. We want to understand what sits behind it: why the system didn't work or was unfair, what could have happened differently or earlier, how the problem affects not just that person but their family, neighbours and wider community, and what we can change so the next person has a different and fairer experience.

What begins with one person's experience can lead to change that benefits thousands more and reduces pressure on over-burdened systems. Through our ongoing sector-leading infringements, housing and policing law reform work, our advocacy turns what we learn from people we represent into reforms that make systems fairer and more accountable for everyone that comes after.

That is why this year's impact report is titled **Building Community for Change**.

It reflects our belief that lasting change is rarely achieved by one organisation or through one intervention. It comes from people working together, building trust, sharing knowledge and staying committed, often over many years.

Sometimes that means finding a practical solution with a housing worker, health professional or school. Sometimes it means legally challenging an unfair decision, changing the way a service responds, or taking a case to court. And sometimes it means working over many years with communities and others to change laws and policies that cause harm.





ABOVE Michelle Bissett (left) and Nadia Morales (right).

PARTNERSHIPS WITH PEOPLE, COMMUNITIES AND LOCAL SERVICES

Collaboration is at the heart of our work as a legal centre, and some of the most important work we do begins well before someone walks through the door of a legal centre.

IMCL operates in Melbourne's inner city, an area with a high concentration of major tertiary hospitals, community health services, community hubs, schools, youth services and other essential supports. Through partnerships with many major service hubs, we see people from across Victoria. These hubs expand opportunities for us to reach people who experience significant legal problems but may be unable or are unlikely to seek legal assistance on their own or where they live.

The people we reach might be an expectant mother who seeks a lawyer through a maternal child health worker, someone who has presented at the emergency department in a major hospital with significant mental ill-health, or someone receiving specialist cancer treatment with limited ability to manage legal affairs outside of their hospital stay.

Our proven model of integrated service practice also supports critical community services and their workers by allowing them to focus on their core work.

This year our lawyers provided **2889 services to 1674** people as a result of referrals or direct contact at clinics through these partnerships, around 60% of all referrals.

BUILDING TRUST AND STAYING THE COURSE

Many of our clients have experienced harm across multiple government systems. Their legal problems rarely exist in isolation, caused or compounded by poverty, trauma, poor health, family violence, insecure housing and other difficult personal circumstances. For many, negative experiences have left them fearful or deeply distrustful of the very institutions they are expected to turn to for help.

Building trust in these circumstances is critical and takes time. Our integrated services and ways of working have been carefully developed over many years through relationship building, testing and refining. Our work requires deep listening, working at clients' pace and over time, and creating safety and confidence in circumstances where sharing has previously exposed them to judgement, discrimination or even harm. It is intensive and sustained work, with support often across multiple areas of law, through multiple crises over many years. We stay involved long-term and create joined-up systems of care across multiple community service areas.

CHALLENGING SYSTEMIC HARM

Our advocacy is shaped and guided by our client and community voices; their concerns, experiences and wishes. We seek to make decision makers hear and understand our client and community experiences so the root causes of unfair interactions with the justice and related systems are addressed and harm is minimised.

We do this through strategic litigation, working with politicians to achieve legislative change, media engagement, and other forms of public advocacy such as oral and written submissions to inquiries.

In 2025-26, IMCL made five written submissions to parliamentary inquiries, government reviews and the City of Melbourne Budget, and co-ordinated 10 meetings with federal and state MPs, government agencies and other high-level decision makers.

This year we have been proud to be able to represent our communities in landmark litigation. In December 2025, the International Mining And Resources Conference class action resulted in a significant finding of unlawful conduct by police when they used capsicum spray on protesters at a climate protest in 2019. The ongoing class action over the demolition of three public housing towers in North Melbourne and Flemington has enabled the question of residents' rights to be heard in the High Court, and has had a snowball effect with growing understanding about concerns around the government's redevelopment program, together with calls for greater investment in the public housing sector and improved rights for community housing tenants.

Throughout the year we also met with MPs, including a visit in March by Victorian Attorney-General Sonya Kilkenny and Northern Metro MLC Sheena Watt to our North Melbourne office, where they met with our Chair and CEO and many of our staff. This was an opportunity to see our practice in action and to hear about the impact it has in the community.

GOVERNANCE, GROWTH AND SUSTAINABILITY

Like the rest of the community legal sector, IMCL operates in a volatile funding environment characterised by a mix of recurrent government funding and competitive grants.

Many of our in-demand services are under-funded or funded on a year-to-year basis. Longstanding partnerships that are subject to lapsing funding present challenges for us as we strive to maintain the important relationships and not lose the momentum of long term and careful relational work that drives referrals and builds our reputation.

Whenever we have the opportunity, we will continue to make the case to potential funders that legal need is not just a matter of geography or demographics. They need to consider service design and delivery models which are able to reach those most in need, sustain client engagement and achieve long-term holistic outcomes.

In 2025-26 we saw a small increase in total income to $4.4 million, underpinned by core funding from the state and commonwealth governments.

The appointment through the year of a Director for Operations has already enhanced our financial, human resources and facilities management. We have also conducted a review of our online presence and anticipate the delivery of a new, contemporary website in the 2026-27 financial year.

We have benefited from a skilled Board with a mix of skills and experiences and finalised a values statement that is an important public expression of our role and purpose.

OUR PEOPLE

As always, the strength of Inner Melbourne Community Legal comes from the professionalism and commitment of our people — staff, volunteers, and partners.

We are thankful to our partners in the fields of health, housing, education and justice and for the ongoing support of our funders and pro bono partners and collaborators. Our Board put in many hours of unpaid work and we are grateful for their wisdom and strategic guidance Thank you to our staff, who are talented and committed, who go above and beyond to seek justice for our clients.

INNER MELBOURNE COMMUNITY LEGAL BOARD 2025–26

Michelle Bissett	Chair
Stephen Somerville	Deputy Chair
Umeya Chaudhuri	Secretary
Luke White	Treasurer
Jenny Si	
Kenneth Cheng	
Aileen Ashford	
Daniel Scoullar until his resignation from the Board on 21 November 2025	Chair

LOOKING AHEAD

IMCL has developed a reputation as a legal centre that is brave and innovative and in the year ahead we will continue to be a vocal advocate for justice and equity for our communities.

The public housing class action is reaching its zenith, but we anticipate a continuing high workload dealing with relocations and issues associated with the growing reliance on community housing, including through the Social Housing Legal Program.

The Police Accountability Project will continue to represent people who experience police harm and lead the sector in calling for improved oversight and an independent complaint system. We are also on the watch for further opportunities to provide a statewide police complaint legal service to support communities experiencing police misconduct.

There is exciting potential to expand our youth and education justice partnerships to deliver early intervention legal support for young people facing marginalisation from barriers to engaging and staying in the school system.

Change comes through building community. It starts through relationships, grows through trust and is delivered through integrated legal services that not only change individual lives for the better but reform the systems that impact on them.

— MICHELLE BISSETT, CHAIR
— NADIA MORALES, CEO

Making impact

OUR CLIENTS

Of the **1674** people we helped in 2025–26:

75%
EXPERIENCED SIGNIFICANT **FINANCIAL DISADVANTAGE**

49%
WERE BORN OUTSIDE AUSTRALIA
FROM 99 DIFFERENT COUNTRIES
TOP 3: SOMALIA, ETHIOPIA, CHINA

54%
WERE EXPERIENCING
OR AT RISK OF
FAMILY VIOLENCE

26%
SPOKE A LANGUAGE OTHER
THAN ENGLISH AT HOME
FROM 55 DIFFERENT LANGUAGES
TOP 3: SOMALI, MANDARIN, ARABIC

45%
WERE LIVING WITH
A **DISABILITY**

82%
FACED **MORE THAN ONE BARRIER**
TO ACCESSING LEGAL HELP
SUCH AS LIVING WITH FAMILY VIOLENCE,
HOMELESSNESS, LIVING WITH A DISABILITY

29%
WERE EXPERIENCING OR AT
RISK OF **HOMELESSNESS**

54%
FACED **MORE THAN TWO BARRIERS**
TO ACCESSING LEGAL HELP

46%
IDENTIFIED AS **FEMALE**

35%
IDENTIFIED AS **MALE**

1%
IDENTIFIED AS NEITHER

11%
WERE AGED
UNDER 25

62%
WERE AGED
BETWEEN 25–49

25%
WERE AGED
OVER 50

7%
WERE AGED
OVER 65

OUR SERVICES

We provided a total of **2889** services for our clients.

We provided a graduated level of client legal assistance depending on client need from information and referrals to complex casework requiring more intensive or ongoing support, including legal representation at a court or tribunal.

We represented clients in more than **925** court or tribunal matters.

Most common legal issues were:

1. family violence protection orders
2. fines
3. parenting and family law
4. tenancy
5. criminal law

We also provided information services and secondary consultation services to assist other professionals to navigate legal issues experienced by the people they assist, in addition to warm referrals to other community partners and services.

We delivered **52** presentations or training programs through our community and professional legal education.

We participated in **34** working groups, community networks or consultative committees.

We held **12** meetings with politicians, high level bureaucrats and policy makers, gave evidence at **two** Victorian parliamentary inquiry hearings, and produced **four** submissions or briefing papers for governments and parliaments.

Our work was cited in media **40** times.

MEASURING THE CHANGE

Our clients experience legal problems alongside multiple and intersecting forms of disadvantage. For that reason, we do not measure our impact simply by the number of legal services we provide or matters we resolve.

We ask whether people can access help when they need it; whether clients feel heard and understood; whether our assistance leads to fairer legal outcomes; whether problems are prevented from escalating or recurring; whether resolving legal problems improves health, safety and quality of life; and whether what we learn through our work contributes to changing the laws, policies and systems that cause harm in the first place.

This financial year **30%** of advices resulted in casework:

94% OF CLIENTS SAID OUR SERVICES ARE ACCESSIBLE

89% OF CLIENTS SAID THEY FELT RESPECTED AND LISTENED TO

83% OF CLIENTS SAID THEY UNDERSTOOD THEIR LEGAL MATTER BETTER

75% OF CLIENTS SAID LEGAL ASSISTANCE MADE THEM FEEL SAFER

72% OF CLIENTS SAW A LAWYER BEFORE THEIR MATTER ESCALATED AND **9%** RECEIVED HELP EVEN EARLIER

61% OF CLIENTS REPORTED THAT LEGAL HELP IMPROVED THEIR OVERALL WELLBEING

57% OF CLIENTS REPORTED THEIR HOUSING SITUATION WAS BETTER AS A RESULT OF LEGAL HELP

OUR PARTNERSHIPS

IMCL is proud of our extensive and longstanding partnerships with the organisations and services working in our community and supporting IMCL clients. The listed organisations comprise of formal outreach and service delivery partners, education and community engagement partners.

Beyond these, IMCL works daily with a significant number of other key stakeholders to further our legal service delivery and policy advocacy objectives, including community organisations, other community legal centres, Victoria Legal Aid, peak bodies, working groups, pro bono law firms and peer-led organisations.

Housing Justice



- **VincentCare** Ozanam House and case management programs
- **Salvation Army** Flagstaff Accommodation, the Open Door and community outreach and case management programs
- **Djerring Flemington Hub**
- **Kensington Neighbourhood House**
- **Carlton Learning Precinct** Our Place
- **City of Melbourne** Neighbourhood and Healthy Ageing teams
- **North & West Melbourne Neighbourhood Centre**
- **Victorian Public Tenants Association**

Health and Family Justice



- **Royal Women's Hospital** including Allied Health, Women's Alcohol and Drugs Service, Centre Against Sexual Assault (CASA House) and Cornelia House
- **Royal Melbourne Hospital** including Allied Health, John Cade Unit, Royal Park Campus—aged care rehabilitation and community therapy units
- **Inner West Area Mental Health**
- **Peter MacCallum Cancer Centre**
- **City of Melbourne Family Services**
- **cohealth**
- Family Violence duty lawyer service—**Melbourne Magistrates' Court**

Poverty and Policing Justice



- **Flat Out** including Beyond Survival Program
- **VincentCare** Ozanam House and case management programs
- **Salvation Army** Flagstaff Accommodation, the Open Door and community outreach and case management programs
- **cohealth**
- **Police accountability** statewide legal and community sector networks

Education Justice



- **Study Melbourne Hub**
- **Hester Hornbrook Academy**
- **Saints College**
- **The Huddle**
- **The Drum Youth Services**
- **Wombat Housing Youth Programs**
- **North Melbourne Language and Learning**
- **Carlton Neighbourhood Learning Centre**
- **River Nile Learning Centre**

Our staff

Chief Executive Officer
Nadia Morales



Executive Assistant
Gail Guest
Finance and Administration
Thuan Nguyen

Director of Legal Practice
Marlene Dixon



Director of Engagement and Projects
Molly Williams



Director of Policy and Advocacy
Michelle Reynolds



Operations Director
Phyllis Campbell McCrae



Research, Engagement and Education Officer
Betty Ayano
Evaluations Officer
Holly Buykx
PAP Senior Project Lead
Eva Lazzaro

Communications Lead
Mark Phillips

Managing Lawyer — Tenancy
Louisa Bassini

Senior Lawyer
Mikele Prestia
Lawyer
Jack Price
Graduate Lawyer
Marthea Stamatopoulos

Managing Lawyer — Family and Family Violence
Kirstyn Campbell

Senior Lawyer
Charlotte Watson
Senior Lawyer
Puneet Dhillon
Senior Lawyer (FAS)
Lokesh Kashyap

Managing Lawyer — Crime and Policing
Vacant

Senior Lawyer
Michal Kedem
Senior Lawyer
Nimet Gurleyen
Senior Lawyer
Vacant
Lawyer
Emma Hagan

Managing Lawyer — Mental Health, Youth and AOD
Shifrah Blustein

Senior Lawyer
Dylan Goldsworthy
Graduate Lawyer
Isabella Jones

Senior Lawyer (Health Justice Partnerships)
Tabitha O'Shea

Legal Practice Mangager
Vacant

Intake Paralegal
Rosie Pegler
Intake Paralegal
Ikram Nur
Intake Paralegal
Henry Ley
Intake Paralegal
Asha Sok
Intake & Fines Paralegal
Maddie Linden-White

As at 30 August 2026

We also acknowledge the support of our incredible volunteers in 2025–26: Clodagh McMahon, Vera Maitrak, Kathryn Port, Barath Baskaran, Ashani Thenahennadi, Shagofa Abdul, Rosie Hallihan, Camilo Ramirez-Borcherdt, Jennifer Binegas.

Housing Justice

BELOW IMCL Director of Engagement & Projects Molly Williams and Research, Engagement and Education Officer Betty Ayano with public towers residents on the steps of the Victorian Court of Appeal after a hearing in October 2025.



The goal of our housing practice is to ensure that vulnerable Victorians have greater access to legal help and improved health, safety and security in their housing. We focus our efforts on assisting public and community housing residents, international students and people experiencing or at risk of homelessness.

SNAPSHOT OF HOUSING AND TENANCY WORK

We helped **221** people with **268** legal services.

We provided ongoing casework assistance (including tribunal representation) for **73** cases.

Most common housing problems:

1. Tenancy repairs
2. Termination of tenancy by lessor
3. Tower relocation
4. Rent
5. Ending tenancy

PUBLIC HOUSING RESIDENTS

The IMCL catchment is home to a large concentration of public housing estates, which means that much of our case work involves dealing with the State of Victoria as the landlord.

Throughout the year we provided 216 advice services to 292 public housing residents in relation to: repairs, fines, family or domestic violence orders, divorce/ separation and the tower relocation.

HOW WE REACH CLIENTS

Integrated legal services and community engagement

Our services for public housing residents are designed to be accessible and integrated in the places people are already using in their day-to-day lives. This starts with deep engagement and partnership with the varied services in our catchment—ranging from adult education centres, neighbourhood houses, early childhood, school and youth programs, maternal & child health services and community centres that host sports programs and regular social group activities and cultural events for public housing residents.

Our relationships are built on continuity, being flexible to meet emerging community need and regular professional and community education about common legal issues and seeking help.

With funding from the Department of Justice & Community Safety and the Victorian Legal Services Board + Commissioner Public Purpose Fund, we have embedded our lawyers and engagement staff across multiple sites including Djerring Hub in Flemington, the Carlton Learning Precinct and the North Melbourne public housing estate.

In partnership with the Salvation Army, we have provided a regular legal information clinic at 159 Melrose Street, North Melbourne for older public housing residents whose lives will be impacted by the demolition of their building. The prospect of relocation is especially distressing for older people and we have worked closely with the Salvation Army and other services to ensure we are providing timely and flexible assistance, including meeting residents in place to reduce barriers to seeking legal support.

Producing legal information resources for tenants facing relocation is essential to ensure as many people as possible have independent and rights-based information to navigate the process. Our resources are written in plain English suitable for community members who have limited legal literacy and have been translated into eight common languages to support accessibility. This year, we focused on disseminating legal education materials across a range of our online platforms and in various formats (such as social media tiles and videos).

Djerring Hub and the Help Hub Initiative

IMCL plays a critical role in coordinating and delivering the monthly Help Hub at Djerring Flemington Hub, which is a joint initiative of Kensington Neighbourhood House, IMCL, Moonee Valley City Council and Moonee Valley Legal Service. The purpose is to create a regular forum that brings together local service providers and community members in one space to share information, build connections and increase access to support.

The Hub provides a range of services and offerings under the one roof, in an accessible location for community, particularly those from diverse backgrounds and living in public or community housing. Services at the Help Hub include housing, financial counselling, health and wellbeing, education and employment and government agencies. Each monthly Help Hub has a theme and attending services come together to focus on achieving collaborative outcomes—for example, a Finance and Debt themed event had representatives from financial counselling services, Services Australia, the Energy & Water Ombudsman and legal services, so attendees could access appropriate support to resolve issues caused by utility bills and other cost of living pressures. The presence of financial counsellors also means that the escalation of issues can be prevented, reducing the likelihood of future legal issues.

Typically, about 60 to 70 community members attend the Help Hubs each month, including some who travel from other local government areas to seek supports following their relocation from the local public housing estates. For community members from diverse backgrounds, being able to meet a range of different service providers face to face makes a significant difference.

We attended 10 of these events in 2025–26 where our lawyers were available to discuss legal issues on the spot and if necessary to book clients in for a meeting for further advice. Services in attendance also harnessed the co-location at Help Hub to build cross referrals, both during the Help Hub sessions and outside of them.



ABOVE Manager Lawyer for Tenancy and Housing Louisa Bassini speaking at a media conference with public housing residents and advocates following a Court of Appeal hearing on 19 December 2025.

JOHN'S STORY

John* lives in a public housing tower with his wife and children.

John was shocked when Homes Victoria increased the rent at his property by more than 80 per cent. He had lived in public housing for many years, and had never heard of anyone receiving such a drastic rent increase.

John thought the increase was deeply unfair, particularly given his tower would be one of the first to be demolished under the Victorian Government's plan to redevelop Melbourne's public housing towers.

IMCL assisted John to challenge the rent increase as being excessive at Victorian Civil and Administrative Tribunal. We argued that the tribunal should take into account the planned demolition of John's home when assessing whether his rent was excessive.

VCAT ordered that John's rent was excessive and must be reduced. With IMCL's assistance, John's rent was reduced by more than $50 per week for a period of nearly two years.

This was a big help for John and his family, at a time when they are experiencing great uncertainty due to the government's public housing tower demolition plans.

* Name changed to protect anonymity

KEY AREAS OF LEGAL WORK

Public housing class action

Our tenancy and housing lawyers assist many public housing residents with issues such as rental arrears which can escalate into notices to vacate being issued and applications for possession orders in VCAT being made if left unaddressed. Legal assistance at the earliest opportunity is essential to prevent these issues escalating and risking the housing security of these tenants. The integrated nature of our community partnerships with neighbourhood houses and community centres on public housing estates is integral to reaching these clients as early as possible and advocating to prevent evictions.

Inadequate maintenance of public housing stock over many years drives demand from our client base for legal help to enforce their rights to homes that are safe and maintained in good repair. Common repairs problems impacting our public housing clients include recurrent mould and pest issues which require a systemic approach from the rental provider to address and have a significant impact on the health and wellbeing of residents. Legal advocacy in these matters can be protracted and require multiple legal interventions.

Challenging rent increases

IMCL pursued strategic litigation with the support of pro bono counsel on behalf of public housing residents who were hit with big rent increases at the start of the 2024–25 financial year.

In a decision in June 2026, the Victorian Civil and Administrative Tribunal found that Homes Victoria charged excessive rent for 18 months for a three-bedroom apartment in North Melbourne and should reimburse our client more than $2000. We are awaiting a decision in another case.

Public housing tower demolition

IMCL has been working closely with tenants on the issue of the erosion of public housing in Victoria for many years.

The previous 'Public Housing Renewal Program' saw the relocation and demolition of a number of low-rise public housing estates and the redevelopment of those estates as community housing. IMCL assisted individual tenants impacted by this program and undertook advocacy regarding the implications for the housing rights of tenants by the change to a different housing model.

Adding to this, the last three years have been defined by the state government's 2023 announcement that it would demolish all 44 public housing towers in the state, starting with three towers in North Melbourne and Flemington in our catchment. This fundamentally ruptured some of the public housing communities that we work with, as many families are relocated to other areas of Melbourne or into the non-government community housing sector.

Since the announcement of the program, IMCL has also provided ongoing individual legal assistance to many residents of impacted towers, supporting them to ensure their needs and preferences are heard in the relocation process.

Alongside individual legal casework, we have continued to pursue the class action against the decision to demolish for a failure to consult with residents or properly consider their human rights. Following a court ruling in April 2025 in favour of the government, IMCL lodged an appeal on six grounds.

Despite acknowledging the disruption that has been caused to lives of residents, the Victorian Court of Appeal ruled in favour of the original decision on 19 December 2025.

The final avenue to overturn the Supreme Court decision is by appealing to the High Court of Australia. On 14 May 2026, the High Court granted special leave to appeal. The date for the hearing was set for 7 October. IMCL will argue in the High Court that the state government was required to afford procedural fairness to those living in the towers and it failed to do so.

While the majority of residents have moved out of the buildings, IMCL obtained an injunction from the Court of Appeal restraining Homes Victoria from issuing any notices to vacate to remaining tenants until the legal matters have been finalised.

In addition to holding the government to account, the class action has given residents a voice they were denied by the initial decision and has produced better outcomes for many of those who have relocated. As a result, there is now stronger activism in other towers to campaign against future demolition plans.

The case has gained national and international attention about whether the Victorian Government has breached the basic human right to housing by moving to demolish the buildings without prior consultation of the residents.

It has also put a spotlight on the underinvestment in public housing and the role that has played in the national housing affordability crisis.

IMCL's team has been led by the Managing Lawyer for Housing and Tenancy, Louisa Bassini along with Stephanie Price of the Social Housing Legal Program, who have worked with pro bono counsel including Kateena O'Gorman SC, Tim Farhall, Leigh Howard, Gemma Cafarella, Katie O'Byrne and Shawn Rajanayagam to prosecute the residents' case.

OUR ADVOCACY TO MAKE CHANGE

Our housing advocacy emerges directly from our work with clients. While there are many issues in need of reform, we focus our efforts on the systemic problems most significantly impacting our clients, using what we learn from individual cases to identify patterns of unfairness, challenge systemic harm and advocacy for changes that benefit whole communities.

Public housing tower demolition

This year, the proposed demolition of Victoria's public housing towers was a central focus of our systemic reform work given its impact for the housing, rights and futures of the residents we work alongside.

In addition to the class action and legal help for individual clients, IMCL made written submissions and provided evidence at public hearing for the inquiry into the redevelopment of the public housing towers by the Legislative Council's Legal and Social Issues Committee in 2025.

The committee report, tabled on 2 December, drew heavily on evidence by IMCL. Our submission was referenced 15 times and the **Social Housing Legal Program's** submission which was co-authored by IMCL was referenced eight times, while evidence provided by IMCL at the public hearing in June 2025 was quoted throughout.

The report made a number of solid recommendations consistent with our asks: including halting the redevelopment until cost-benefit analysis, feasibility studies of alternatives and condition reports were made public.

Additionally, it called for a stronger and enforceable right of return for residents, and greater transparency on the different rental standards between public and community housing.

Overall, the report found that the government and Homes Victoria engaged in coercive and misleading practices which caused "deep harm" to the social and emotional wellbeing of residents. IMCL also supported the recommendation to ensure that residents' wellbeing is prioritised and respected.

While the government rejected many of the findings and recommendations of the inquiry, it has since resulted in parliamentary referral to the Victorian Ombudsman on 19 June 2026. The Ombudsman will investigate the experience of residents who have been required to relocate due to the demolition of public housing towers.

IMCL has worked with the Castan Centre Human Rights Clinic at Monash University and retired Supreme Court Justice Kevin Bell AO KC to prepare a complaint about the redevelopment program to the United Nations Special Rapporteur on the right to adequate housing

To assist with compiling the complaint, a community meeting to gather evidence from residents was held on 24 October 2025 at the Djerring Flemington Hub. About 40 residents of public housing towers in North Melbourne, Flemington, Kensington, Carlton, Richmond and Fitzroy attended the meeting.

The complaint argues the Victorian and Australian governments have failed to comply with their obligations under international human rights law and consequently, the evictions and demolitions should be suspended. It says there have been serious, and ongoing violations of the right to adequate housing and non-discrimination arising from the plan.

A decision from the Special Rapporteur was expected late in 2026.

Since the class action began, IMCL's Managing Lawyer for Housing and Tenancy, Louisa Bassini, has spoken at numerous public and media events, including at the Standing Together For Public Housing forum at the Capitol Theatre on 23 October 2025.

This latter forum brought together a range of experts from legal, academic and architectural backgrounds to tease out the flaws in the demolition program and to demonstrate a better approach for maintaining and growing Melbourne's public housing stock.

COMMUNITY HOUSING RENTERS

A growing base of IMCL clients live in community housing, both within our geographic catchment and beyond. The City of Melbourne has the highest number of community housing dwellings of any local government area in Victoria.

The impact of the public housing relocation program has also led to many former public housing residents being relocated into community housing and experiencing new legal issues with that change of tenure, such as higher rents, service charges and increased costs associated with embedded utility networks, repairs issues arising from the quality of the buildings and challenges with obtaining necessary disability modifications.



ABOVE Managing Lawyer for Tenancy and Housing Louisa Bassini speaking at the Stand Together for Public Housing event at The Capitol on 23 October 2025.

HOW WE REACH CLIENTS

Through the **Social Housing Legal Program** (SHLP)—a specialist three-year partnership with West Heidelberg Legal Service (funded by the Victorian Legal Services Board)—we focus on improving the standards and rights of people living in community housing. This program has a statewide remit, offering legal advice and representation for renters with issues that we identify have a strategic or systemic impact.

In year one of the program, **63 clients** were supported with **114 services**, including **ongoing representation in 35 matters**.

Legal assistance in this context is vital to community housing renters achieving just outcomes. Community housing policies and guidelines vary depending on the provider. They can be difficult to locate and are often too brief to provide a clear understanding of the rights held by the affected renters. This is especially the case for those recently relocated from public to community housing, who have often done so on the basis of verbal assurances that their rights will not be greatly affected in the process. Ascertaining the rights owed to such community housing renters is currently very difficult, and underlines the importance of working to restore clear, legally enforceable agreements as well as fulsome and fair provider policies.

Many IMCL clients living in community housing also reside outside of the City of Melbourne, coming to us via our integrated partnerships and programs. Our clients might be hospitalised with a physical or mental health issue which is directly linked to their housing being precarious, such as rental arrears, the threat of eviction or issues with their homes being unsafe or poorly maintained by the rental provider.

KEY AREAS OF LEGAL WORK

Top five community housing issues we assisted with were:

- **Evictions/termination of tenancy by rental provider:** Our case studies show a higher inclination of community housing providers to seek to evict renters than Homes Victoria. This is often on the basis of a small amount of rental arrears, or alleged renter behavioural issues, where alternate approaches to resolution have not been exhausted
- **Repairs:** Despite much of the community housing stock being recently built, poor construction and a failure to maintain these homes with a building-wide approach results in high occurrences of mould and pest issues amongst our clients.
- **Rent calculation:** Unclear calculation policies, an inflexibility in how such policies are applied and incorporate changes to the household income of clients results in many enquiries to our service. This is compounded by service charges imposed by community housing providers, that can often be very costly to the clients, and without a clear basis.
- **Transfers:** This inadequacy of social housing stock at a time when the rental market is increasingly difficult to access results in many renters being unable to secure or move to a house that suits their needs as their lives change.
- **Bonds:** Disputes over a community housing provider seeking to retain part of a bond for things like damage, cleaning or unpaid rent can result in lengthy legal processes up to a formal VCAT hearing.

OUR ADVOCACY TO MAKE CHANGE

The SHLP seeks to build on the individual legal work through systemic advocacy, in partnership with academics, community health and housing organisations. The program is advised by a group of practitioners and academics with specialist expertise across a range of fields. This provides our program with varied and valuable insights into the day-to-day functioning of social housing and broader societal impacts, which helps to effectively guide the program.

In 2025–26, program staff:

- Provided a submission and gave evidence at the Parliamentary Inquiry into the Melbourne's Public Housing Redevelopment—our contributions were cited nine times in the final report of the committee.
- Made a submission on Community Housing Performance Standards.
- Presented at two forums on housing rights and housing law.
- Met with the Commonwealth Special Envoy for Social Housing.
- Had consultations with the Victorian Civil and Administrative Tribunal on improving supports for social housing renters in the Rental Dispute Resolution Victoria.
- Undertook seven engagement/capacity building activities with housing and community legal sector organisations.



RIGHT IMCL Research, Engagement and Education Officer Betty Ayano and Tenancy Lawyer Marthea Stamatopoulos at the Study Melbourne Hub.

INTERNATIONAL STUDENTS

Many of the thousands of international students who are drawn to Melbourne's tertiary system experience housing vulnerability and exploitation due to their temporary migration status, financial insecurity, limited knowledge of their rights within Australian legal systems and dependence on employers, landlords and education providers. Our housing program seeks to provide independent, accessible and specialist advice on tenancy issues, while identifying systemic practices that require regulatory and policy reform.

"As an international student, following an incident involving assault, it was really difficult for me to navigate this very complex situation. I received support right from representation in court for an IVO til a VOCAT application ... Lokesh was extremely professional and put a lot of effort and time into the documentation and made the process extremely simple for me ... Thanks to him I finally feel like I got justice after getting a positive response on my application and for me this has been life changing. I'm extremely grateful!"

— IMCL CLIENT

HOW WE REACH CLIENTS

Building on previous work, in 2026, IMCL began delivering **Study Melbourne's International Student Employment & Accommodation Legal (ISEAL)** program in partnership with the Migrant Workers Centre.

This has been funded by Study Melbourne through the Department of Jobs, Skills, Industry and Regions.

The ISEAL Program provides international students in Victoria with free access to legal help on employment and accommodation issues.

An IMCL lawyer is available for confidential one-on-one legal advice appointments about housing and tenancy issues five times a fortnight at the Study Melbourne Hub in the CBD.

IMCL's involvement draws on our extensive experience and expertise in providing tenancy and other legal support to international students since 2016.

This includes our multilingual online resource, **ishelp.org.au**, which had 2921 visitors in 2025–26. It provides international students with accessible information in English, Mandarin, Vietnamese and Spanish about housing, work rights, personal safety, and other issues.

KEY AREAS OF LEGAL WORK

The ISEAL program was still in its infancy in the latter part of the 2025–26 financial year, but had provided **55 services to 37 clients** in its first months.

Common legal issues we assisted with:

1. Termination of tenancy (Notices to Vacate issued by rental provider)
2. Lease-breaking by tenant
3. Bond disputes
4. Rooming house issues
5. Repairs
6. Fees and charges

PEOPLE EXPERIENCING HOMELESSNESS

People experiencing homelessness often face multiple, interconnected challenges that make it difficult to access legal assistance and achieve stability in their lives. The shortage of affordable housing, combined with gaps in health, mental health, family violence and other support systems, means that many people are experiencing prolonged periods of housing insecurity, with limited pathways into safe and permanent accommodation.

Legal problems can both contribute to homelessness and make it harder to move out of it. Issues such as fines, criminal charges, family violence and tenancy disputes can compound financial hardship, affect health and wellbeing, and create further barriers to securing and maintaining housing. For people managing multiple crises, accessing conventional legal services can be particularly difficult.

The homeless population in Melbourne's CBD has swelled over the past few years due to a lack of permanent affordable housing options across the metropolitan area. We have observed a corresponding increase in the proportion of our clients who are homeless or at risk of homelessness, who in 2025–26 made up 29 per cent of our total clients.

SNAPSHOT OF HOUSING JUSTICE PARTNERSHIPS

We assisted 197 people with 380 services, including more than 50 matters with court representation.

1. **155** clients at Ozanam House
2. **42** clients at Flagstaff and Open Door

63% had a disability, of which **49%** had mental health issues
44% had a drug or alcohol dependency issue (casework only)

Most common problems:

1. Criminal charges
2. Fines
3. Tenancy
4. Family or domestic violence order

Top three outcomes:

1. Fines withdrawn
2. Charges withdrawn in full
3. Adjourned undertaking without conviction

BELOW IMCL staff at a strategic planning day at the Kensington Town Hall in June.



HOW WE REACH CLIENTS

Our integrated legal services for people experiencing homelessness

Unhoused people are pushed into the city centre in search of support services that are located there. Drawing on the successful Health Justice Partnership model, IMCL has longstanding relationships with homelessness service providers for the high number of disadvantaged people in the inner city, including those in crisis accommodation, those sleeping rough in the CBD and surrounds and those accessing case management and outreach support.

Gaps in support systems — like mental health care, disability support, and family violence services — also leave people without the help they need to stay housed or recover from crisis. In this context, legal issues can be a further barrier to stability.

IMCL's Housing Justice Partnerships with homelessness service providers span more than two decades. Our lawyers work closely with **VincentCare's Ozanam Community Centre** and the **Salvation Army's Flagstaff** and **Open Door crisis accommodation centres**, running regular clinics for clients and providing responsive secondary consultations and capacity building for staff.

At our weekly outreach clinics, service users can access legal help and work with our lawyers alongside case management, Alcohol and other Drugs (AoD) and housing support from the partner services. The program has been proven to effectively resolve legal issues and to improve housing security, health and wellbeing.

An independent evaluation in 2024 of our Housing Justice Partnership model demonstrated that an accessible, integrated practice model to people experiencing or at risk of homelessness improves both legal and non-legal outcomes for them, and generates substantial cost savings to government.

The clients we support through these partnerships experience a range of legal issues interlinked with their homelessness, including criminal charges and fines, tenancy issues and family violence and family law matters. Often the legal issues present barriers to these clients stabilising their lives after a period of homelessness. Placed based legal support, in partnership with the holistic supports of housing, AoD and health supports are critical at enabling these clients to rebuild their lives and secure stable housing.

RAHUL'S STORY

Rahul* is a CALD person with a long history of psychiatric admissions and mental ill health who was referred to IMCL through one of our Housing Justice Partnership outreach services.

On two occasions, police used force against him while he was unwell and charged him. In the first instance, police withdrew charges on the basis of an expert clinical report. In the second instance, the court struck out charges at the contest hearing.

On the first occasion, Rahul was experiencing a mental health crisis in a public place. Police used OC spray on him and arrested him. Police charged him with property damage but withdrew the charge after a clinical report assessed he was impaired at the time of the incident.

He had a second set of charges not long after. Police were called to take him to the hospital for an involuntary treatment order, during which he was charged with assaulting police and an emergency worker. These charges were struck out at a contested hearing based on his mental health at the time of the incident.

Without legal representation to establish that the defence of mental impairment was applicable to him, Rahul could have been at risk of imprisonment or a community corrections order. This would have criminalised his mental health issues and exacerbated them, instead of enabling him to address them.

* Name changed to protect anonymity

Poverty and Policing Justice

Through this program we seek to both challenge unfair criminal charges and to prevent poor and under- and over-policed people and communities from entering the justice system unnecessarily. Our intensive, wrap-around response brings together criminal law, fines, and police accountability law through the Police Accountability Project.

An increasing number of our clients experiencing poverty, homelessness, mental ill-health, trauma and discrimination are disproportionately and unfairly exposed to policing and criminalisation. In a highly diverse catchment like inner Melbourne, language and other cultural factors contribute to difficulties accessing and trusting the Australian legal system.

Rather than receiving the support and protection they need, they face police responses that cause and compound harm, made worse by an increasingly punitive justice system and significant gaps in access to legal assistance. Due to stringent Legal Aid funding and duty lawyer guidelines, access to timely legal advice and representation—particularly in criminal law and infringement matters—is a major obstacle to justice for people in situations of vulnerability and disadvantage who experience high rates of over-policing.

ESTHER'S STORY

Esther* was referred to Beyond Survival for legal support and assistance after she was charged by police with assault, assault with weapon, and property damage. Esther's previous partner used family violence against her for over 11 months. She attempted to report this violence to police, but no action was taken to investigate, follow up or refer her for family violence support.

On one occasion, two different neighbours overheard Esther's partner assaulting her and called 000. When police arrived, Esther was barricaded in the bathroom with injuries including a broken arm. Her partner went and met police, presenting as calm and saying that he was "just trying to get her out of the house".

Police then incorrectly identified Esther as the 'predominant aggressor' (the person using violence in the relationship), sought a Family Violence Intervention Order (FVIO) against her with her ex-partner as the 'protected person', and charged her with assault.

After this incident she sought medical attention and the doctor who witnessed the bruises and injuries, including from strangulation, sent her to hospital and the hospital linked her with support services.

With the support of family violence services, Esther obtained her own FVIO (protecting herself and her children). She again attempted to report the violence to police, but no action was taken.

Esther was referred to Beyond Survival, and received legal assistance related to the criminal charges she was facing from project lawyers at IMCL.

Despite ongoing negotiations with prosecutors, the legal matter ran all the way to trial and a barrister was engaged by the project to represent Esther. At trial, all of the charges against Esther were withdrawn.

Esther's experience demonstrates misidentification often occurs when the person experiencing violence is a woman from a racialised background, where police responses to violence compound and extend the violence, and rather than increasing safety, function instead to further target and criminalise the victim-survivor.

* Name changed to protect anonymity

KEY AREAS OF LEGAL WORK

Tackling the unfair criminalisation of poverty and mental ill-health

People experiencing poverty, mental-ill health, homelessness and trauma are too often drawn into the criminal justice system for behaviour connected to their circumstances, with devastating consequences for their housing, employment, family relationships and future.

Our criminal lawyers advocate for responses that recognise underlying causes and poor policing practices.

In 2025–26, about 25 per cent of our criminal casework matters were contested, ensuring that unsupported police allegations were appropriately tested. The most common outcome across our criminal casework was full or partial withdrawal of unfair charges.

In particular, we have a focus on the prevention of criminalisation of people experiencing mental ill-health. This year we:

1. Had a number of clients who successfully graduated from the Assessment and Referral Court List (a therapeutic court where people with mental health diagnoses or cognitive impairment receive support from the court to address the drivers of their offending); and

2. Achieved a number of successful case withdrawals and not guilty findings on the basis of a defence of mental impairment.

Taking on punitive fines

The imposition of fines creates a constant source of demand for IMCL services that we cannot meet. Due to their living circumstances clients struggle to cope with infringements which can balloon into significant debts during a severe cost of living crisis.

Fines Victoria is implementing increasingly punitive measures to restrict people's access to the protections available in the system (for example, by tightening eligibility for access to certain schemes) and by expediting imposition of sanctions and other penalties that severely impact people's lives and cause harm (for example, cancelling people's driver's licences before people have had an opportunity to access assistance with unmanageable fines debt).

The system is hostile to clients whose fines were committed by people using violence against them as ways to control them, clients unable to navigate the fines system due to severe disability who are nevertheless subjected to enforcement action, and clients who were the victims of identity theft and were accruing dozens or hundreds of fines as a result of fraudulent nominations.

We have been able to have large quantums of fines debt cancelled, enabling our clients to use their precious incomes for the essentials of life instead. In 2025–26 we secured the **withdrawal or waiver of $379,982 in fines**.

We have also successfully assisted people navigating the sharper ends of the infringements system, including clients facing prison time for their inability to deal with their fines, clients subject to sanctions that limit their movement, and clients forced onto unmanageable payment plans by Fines Victoria.

SPECIAL PROGRAM AREAS

POLICE ACCOUNTABILITY PROJECT

The Police Accountability Project is a unique statewide service that continues to be a flagship project of IMCL since the merger with Flemington Kensington Community Legal Centre in 2022.

PAP undertakes casework, advocacy and community engagement in the areas of family violence policing (including misidentification), racialised policing and excessive use of force through specialist criminal, family violence and civil expertise.

The casework undertaken by our lawyers is for clients who have experienced unwarranted and targeted over-policing, criminalisation and excessive use of force. This case work feeds into and responds to our knowledge of systemic issues and advocacy work.

In 2025–26, PAP assisted 79 people with the most common problems being complaints against police and inappropriate family violence responses.

Police Accountability Worker Line

Following a successful grant application to the Victoria Law Foundation in late-2025, a Police Accountability Worker Line was newly established in mid-2026. The Worker Line is a specialist service designed to uplift the capacity of lawyers and other targeted community workers to provide person-centred, and agency-driven support to clients who have experienced police misconduct.

The Worker Line will be staffed by a lawyer or paralegal with specialist knowledge in legal and non-legal options available to people experienc-ing police and Protective Service Officer misconduct. The Worker Line will support by:

- Identifying legal and non-legal avenues that may be available to clients.
- Supporting chain of command advocacy.
- Where appropriate, making referrals for civil litigation advice.
- Providing secondary consultation support for workers navigating policing issues.
- Exploring options for making a formal complaint (including through the Independent Broad-based Anti-corruption Commission and Victoria Police Professional Standards Command).

FAMILY VIOLENCE POLICING: BEYOND SURVIVAL PROJECT

The Beyond Survival Project is a statewide partnership between Flat Out Inc and the Police Accountability Project that operates at the intersection of policing and family violence, where impacts of high-risk family violence are compounded by duty failures, harms or accountability issues in family violence policing.

This includes misidentification and discrimination in family violence cases, and police-perpetrated family violence. The program seeks to prevent the criminalisation of victim-survivors and to provide survivor-led support, legal assistance, training and capacity building and advocacy and campaign work that is grounded in genuine improvements to safety.

IMCL's involvement includes specialist family violence legal support delivered by senior lawyers, including a weekly intake clinic. The service assisted 42 people in 2025–26.

In August 2025, BSP, Flat Out and RMIT University released the results of a major research project which documented evidence from 225 Victorian frontline workers about their experiences of police responses to family violence.

The report, *Harm in the Name of Safety*, found that harmful family violence policing practices were frequent and widespread across Victoria, and that alternative community-based response pathways for victim-survivors are urgently needed.

It detailed extensive examples of police minimising and dismissing family violence, engaging in racially targeted, sexist and discriminatory police practices, colluding with perpetrators in ways that extend violence and abuse, and misidentifying victim-survivors as perpetrators.

It also shows that many workers have witnessed cases of police-perpetrated family violence as well as widespread institutional protection of, and collusion with, officers who are abusive.

OUR ADVOCACY TO MAKE CHANGE

We use what we learn through casework to challenge discriminatory policing, strengthen police accountability and advocate for reforms that prevent the criminalisation of poverty, homelessness and mental ill-health.

Court finds police unlawfully used capsicum spray at climate protest

A longstanding area of involvement by the Police Accountability Project going back to last decade has been to uphold the rights to peaceful protest.

It was through this work that PAP launched a landmark class action on behalf of people who alleged they had been unlawfully sprayed with Oleoresin Capsicum (OC) foam by police at a rally outside the International Mining and Resources Conference (IMARC) in Melbourne in late-2019.

PAP together with law firm Phi Finney McDonald launched the class action in 2022 that examined the use of force by police in a context of the ever-broadening scope of police powers and deterioration of protest rights. The lead plaintiff was Jordan Brown, who suffered physical and psychological injury as a result of being sprayed by police at the IMARC protest on 30 October 2019.

During hearings held in early 2025, it was argued that the use of OC spray on Mr Brown and other group members by police was unlawful and they posed no immediate or proportionate threat to police officers or the public. It was argued that the use of force constituted a breach of rights protected under the *Charter of Human Rights and Responsibilities Act 2006*.

The case came to a conclusion on 12 December 2025, when Justice Claire Harris of the Supreme Court upheld the rights of protesters to demonstrate without fear of heavy-handed police tactics.

Her Honour held that police officers' conduct at the IMARC protest when they twice sprayed Mr Brown with OC foam, also known as capsicum spray, was an unlawful use of force, constituting battery.



ABOVE Jordan Brown.

He was awarded $54,000 in damages in recognition that the incidents were "likely to increase his distress and humiliation".

The case will have an important deterrent factor on police when deciding what is the appropriate use of force at protests.

Mr Brown pursued court action after his initial complaint to police resulted in no action being taken against the officers who sprayed him.

In May 2026, he was presented the Victorian Civil Justice Award from the Australian Lawyers Alliance for his courage and commitment in the pursuit of justice.

Tackling policing, quasi-policing and criminalisation

Local and state governments are broadening the scope of the conduct that can lead to exclusion from access to basic rights and participation in public life, and to criminalisation; and with more police, Protective Services Officers and various forms of security guards patrolling the streets where unhoused and marginalised people are known to be.

Often this can manifest as people simply insisting on their right to exist in public spaces without harassment from police or private security.

The cutting of funding from prevention and funnelling of money into policing and quasi-policing responses like security guards means behaviour that could be treated or prevented is instead being criminalised.

As a result, we are dealing with an ever-increasing level of legal need and suffering in the community. This requires us to not only undertake effective casework but to think about broader strategic responses that may produce benefits for a greater number of people affected by the same problem or injustice.

Working collaboratively with organisations like the Homeless Persons' Union of Victoria, IMCL has also led advocacy for early intervention to address the causes of homelessness and to oppose punitive policies that criminalise homelessness and poverty, such as the extension of the City of Melbourne's security guard program. This included IMCL making a submission to the council's five-year plan and appearing at the council meeting in September 2025 to speak to the submission.

BELOW Attorney-General Sonya Kilkenny (left) and Northern Metro MLC Sheena Watt (right), with IMCL chair Michelle Bissett and CEO Nadia Morales, when they visited our North Melbourne office on 12 March 2026.



Charting the way towards police accountability

With funding from the Victorian Legal Services Board & Commissioner, IMCL in 2025 explored the feasibility of a statewide police accountability service.

The project analysed Victoria Police complaints and use of force data between January 2023 and June 2024 to produce a comprehensive statewide picture of which regions receive the most complaints and which members of the community are most highly represented as having forced used against them.

The project identified a clear service gap for people making police complaints. It recommended the implementation of a specialist statewide Police Accountability Justice Centre which would provide legal representation, professional support and supervision, community outreach and education, and strategic advocacy.

IMCL continues to engage with government to progress this proposal.

In 2025–26, on behalf of PAP we also made a submission to the Commonwealth Government's review of the Disability Discrimination Act; and to the Victorian Parliamentary Inquiry into Anti-LGBTIQA+ Hate Crimes (with lived experience advocate Atomic Wylder).

"I was highly impressed by the total professionalism and quality of care and service. To the point that respect was earned. Which is extremely rare for one like me...!!!"

— IMCL CLIENT

MAY'S STORY

May* is a woman aged in her 60s and an asylum seeker who was living in her car when IMCL first met her.

In July 2024, police stopped and searched May and her vehicle. They located and seized a large sum of cash, stating that they suspected it of being proceeds of crime.

As a person from a culturally and linguistically diverse background with limited English proficiency, May experienced significant barriers during the search and arrest process. Due to the absence of an interpreter, she did not fully understand what was happening nor adequately comprehend the police.

May had a lawful explanation for the cash, that it was her accumulated savings.

Nevertheless, police maintained that the money was linked to criminal activity and seized it, leaving May without any money and fully reliant on charitable organisations for food and other necessities. May also received reduced social security payments as an asylum seeker, which were cancelled as a result of her being charged. The charges also put May's bridging visa at risk.

IMCL assisted May with understanding the charges against her.

After reviewing the circumstances of the case, including concerns regarding the basis for the police suspicion, IMCL requested that police withdraw the charges and return the seized funds to May.

The police refused to withdraw the charges, and the matter proceeded to a contested hearing.

At the contested hearing, IMCL briefed a barrister who challenged the legality of the vehicle search, arguing that police lacked lawful grounds to stop and search May.

The court determined that the search of May's vehicle had been unlawful and thus ruled that the evidence obtained as a consequence of the search was inadmissible.

As a result, all charges against May were dismissed, and all of the money was returned to her.

* Name changed to protect anonymity

Campaigning for an effective police complaints system in Victoria

IMCL has been advocating for reform to strengthen independent police oversight for many years. The ultimate goal is a Police Ombudsman existing as a standalone agency that can investigate allegations of complaints of corruption, excessive use of force and criminality by police officers.

In the medium-term, we have sought to reform IBAC and strengthen its powers to investigate police complaints on their merits.

In August 2025, the Police Accountability Project made a submission to an inquiry by the Parliamentary Integrity and Oversight Committee (PIOC) into the legislative framework for IBAC.

Our recommendations included making victims of police harm more able to speak up, broadening the definition of police misconduct and changes to the confidentiality provisions that result in a lack of transparency about IBAC investigations and decisions.

Director of Policy and Advocacy, Michelle Reynolds, PAP program manager Anna Nguyen and police perpetrated family violence advocate Dr Jana Katerinskaja appeared together at a public hearing of the inquiry on 25 August. At that hearing, they specifically called for amendments to Section 15 of the *IBAC Act* to give investigations of serious police misconduct the same level of priority as public sector corruption.

The inquiry's report was tabled on 4 December with our submission and evidence quoted throughout, including 22 citations and references to our submissions in the introduction of the report. The report picked up five out of eight recommendations made in our submission, with a further eight recommendations that directly respond to our verbal evidence.

Following a public apology by IBAC to Dr Katerinskaja on 2 March 2026 for mishandling her case, IMCL again called for Parliament to adopt the recommendations of the PIOC report.

ESINI'S STORY

Esini* is a single mother of two children, Ella and Ben.

Esini sought assistance from IMCL due to parenting arrangements with Ella's father. She had concerns about Ella's safety with her father due to a history of family violence. During her engagement with a family lawyer, Esini mentioned that she had outstanding fines.

Esini's lawyer sought more information and discovered that Esini had 147 outstanding fines amounting to $51,627.90.

Esini explained that these fines were a result of family violence perpetrated by her two former partners.

Esini's lawyer assisted her by submitting a Family Violence Scheme (FVS) application, which detailed Esini's history of family violence, copies of family violence intervention orders, and support letters from her GP.

Esini's FVS application was successful, and the amount owing for the fines was withdrawn.

* Name changed to protect anonymity

"[The lawyer] has been an absolute blessing for us. She is diligent in her process and extremely kind in her demeanour. We're grateful for her help and her kindness. Thank you for everything you do."

— IMCL CLIENT

Exposing racialised policing in the inner city

Racial profiling and discrimination by Victoria Police was first exposed by the Police Accountability Project two decades ago.

In the late-2000s, this came to a climax with routine harassment of young African men in the Flemington and Kensington public housing estates. In 2008, the Police Accountability Project helped a group of brave young men commence legal action to force Victoria Police to acknowledge the existence of systemic racism in its ranks.

On the eve of the trial in 2013, the case settled with Victoria Police agreeing to take action to stamp out racism. To mark the 12th anniversary of what became known as the Haile-Michael Settlement, IMCL worked with Dr Tamar Hopkins to critically evaluate the police response.

Released in October 2025, the 56-page report, *12 Years On: Evaluating Victoria Police's Response to the Haile-Michael Settlement*, found that not only did racial profiling continue to be a problem in Victoria Police practice, but police resist oversight and public reporting.

The data shows substantially disproportionate rates of police searching people from African, Middle Eastern, Pasifika and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander backgrounds when compared with Caucasian people.

These findings contradict claims by Victoria Police that the force has "zero tolerance for racial profiling".

The report made a dozen recommendations including removing policing patrols from public housing estates, schools, youth services and mental health call outs; establishing an independent Police Ombudsman that can effectively investigate and hold to account any racial profiling and other forms of misconduct; and investing in community-led and culturally appropriate services.

This will form the basis of ongoing advocacy work by IMCL and PAP.

Taking on the unfair burden of fines and infringements

Victoria is one the remaining Australian jurisdictions where people can be jailed for unpaid fines. We know from the experiences of our clients that for people already experiencing disadvantage, a single infringement notice can soon become unmanageable, compounding and adding to existing health, financial and justice problems.

As a co-convenor of the Infringements Working Group—a joint working group of the Federation of Community Legal Centres, Financial Counselling Victoria and Victoria Legal Aid—IMCL has played a leading role in systemic advocacy to have this punitive approach changed and to relieve people of the threat of imprisonment for unpaid fines.

In 2017, legislative reform gave magistrates discretion on whether to jail people who did not have the capacity to pay their fines and made imprisonment a last resort.

But thousands of people continue to face the threat of jail under so-called "zombie warrants" issued before the law changed, and for orders made since which do not appear to align with the 2017 requirements.

The IWG secured a moratorium on the enforcement of imprisonment warrants in 2024, but the government has failed to make progress on abolishing imprisonment and voiding all the outstanding warrants.

This means that when the moratorium is lifted, the Sheriff's Department could again begin executing warrants for fines debts that people are unable to pay.

Progress has been made in extending the moratorium period, but the IWG's main goal is now to abolish the jailing powers entirely.

During 2025–26, this advocacy included continued engagement with the office of the Attorney-General, Department of Justice and Community Safety and MPs.

A media campaign including interviews on the ABC and prominent articles in *The Age* and the *Herald Sun* helped to frame the issue for the public as one of fairness.

Health and Family Justice

For people experiencing family violence, relationship and family breakdown and serious health challenges, legal problems are often intertwined with their safety, health and financial security. And often these experiences cluster, leaving individuals—including mothers and children, people with disabilities or people diagnosed with cancer and other significant illnesses—to navigate multiple legal and support systems at a time of significant vulnerability or incapacity.

People experiencing serious illness or the aftermath of violence or relationship breakdown may struggle to recognise or address legal problems while managing immediate survival and health crises. Legal help through health settings can make this accessible.

Our Health and Family Justice practice brings together different forms of legal assistance to respond to these interconnected challenges. Through our family violence and family law program, we support people to understand and exercise their rights before, during and after court proceedings, while our intensive family law casework addresses the consequences of separation, including parenting and financial arrangements. Our Health Justice Partnerships provide important service pathways.

FAMILY VIOLENCE PROGRAMS

Reported offences of family violence remain at historical highs in Victoria and the prevalence of family violence in the community is reflected in IMCL's client base: **more than half of clients in 2025–26 had experienced or were at risk of family violence**.

Reflecting the high need that presents across all streams of work and partnerships, IMCL provides a range of supports including :

- casework, including litigation;
- referrals for financial counselling, and;
- a duty lawyer program in the Specialist Family Violence Court at the Melbourne Magistrates' Court, which includes pre and post court assistance.

Family violence can have far-reaching consequences for victim-survivors and their children, affecting immediate safety, housing, financial independence and relationships.

The goal of our family violence practice is to ensure that people affected by family violence and conflict have access to safer and more secure outcomes through holistic service provision in partnership with other services.

Our lawyers work collaboratively with non-legal support workers to ensure that our clients receive holistic support to navigate the legal and life issues they are encountering.

Through legal advice and representation, victim-survivors are supported and perpetrators are less able to engage in systems abuse.

"The Health Justice Partnership has been incredibly helpful and it is a blessing to have this easy referral pathway for people who need legal support—thank you!!

— PETER MACCALLUM CANCER CENTRE WORKER

FAMILY VIOLENCE DUTY LAWYER

KEY AREAS OF LEGAL WORK

Help at court

IMCL has a family violence duty lawyer in the Melbourne Magistrates' Court four days each week, supporting up to six clients a day. This is the busiest court in Victoria.

The service provides unrepresented parties affected by family violence with free and confidential legal support on the day of the hearing without an appointment. Our lawyers represent both applicants and respondents in intervention order cases unlike some other duty lawyer programs.

In 2025–26, the duty lawyer service saw **567** clients and provided **695** services. Seventy-four per cent of clients we saw at MMC lived outside of our geographic catchment area.

75% of clients reported that legal assistance helped them feel safer.

Help before and after court

In addition to the expert legal advice and representation they provide in the courtroom itself, our lawyers are often the first point of contact for people who require holistic legal support. They are trained to identify and provide advice on other legal issues such as police misconduct, fines or tenancy, can assist with referrals to other parts of our legal practice or appropriate services in the community. Through our Pre-Court Engagement Service, clients with upcoming Family Violence Court matters can receive advice to prepare them for their hearing and progress resolution of their case before the court date, reducing distress and time spent in court.

ANNA'S STORY

Anna* was referred to Beyond Survival through the duty lawyer service at the Melbourne Magistrates' Court. They had recognised that she was misidentified as the respondent in a family violence intervention order. Police failed to speak with her to ask for her story.

She had reported rape and sexual violence to the police and that the other party had promised to 'get her permanent residency', that he was married, and he was sexually abusing a number young women.

Her lawyer told police about her disclosures and reports, and her deteriorating mental health as a result of the intervention order.

Police adjourned for a risk assessment.

At the next hearing, initially police said they had not and would not complete a risk assessment due to resourcing issues. They later said they had completed a risk assessment and had decided the intervention order protecting her ex-partner was needed.

Anna's Beyond Survival lawyer successfully made a strike out application by arguing that Anna had been misidentified as the respondent. The lawyer argued she carried all the hallmarks of a misidentified respondent—English is her second language, she was on a temporary visa, and had mental health issues. Her lawyer argued that the intervention order did not meet the test as it was wrongly applied for to protect the other party's reputation rather than for his safety, and was being used as an abuse of process.

The experience demonstrated a range of police failings including a failure to hear Anna's side of the story or to use an interpreter, failure to assess the merits of the intervention order, to assess the whole context, and to engage in meaningful or robust negotiation and consideration of the lawyer's arguments.

Anna's experience highlights the way in which perpetrators target young women with English as a second language, on temporary visas, with mental health issues and use family violence applications and orders as an abuse of process. It also demonstrates the racialised and discriminatory way in which police may respond to this harm.

* Name changed to protect anonymity

FAMILY LAW

KEY AREAS OF LEGAL WORK

The family law jurisdiction is complex and the system is loaded against people with limited financial resources. There is high demand for services in this system, significant unmet legal need and this casework is often among the most complex sometimes requiring ongoing legal support for several years to reach final resolution.

Our lawyers often encounter systems abuse by ex-partners, facilitated by private lawyers, who will seek to draw cases out to the detriment of applicant parties.

With the professional services of our small team of family law experts, we can secure them a just and fair outcome during a difficult and traumatic period of their life, including retaining a family home and care of children or pets.

Our legal services for people with family law issues

Parenting

IMCL's family team supports parents seeking to obtain safe and appropriate parenting arrangements, from advice, negotiation, mediation and litigation in the Federal Circuit and Family Court of Australia.

Our clients range from women who have experienced family violence referred through health and community partners, to men who have stabilised following periods of crisis or homelessness who are seeking to reconnect with their children. Working across this spectrum enables our lawyers to deliver services in a way that centre the safety of children, are non-collusive and trauma informed.

Parenting cases can take multiple years to resolve with myriad paperwork and filing requirements, and multiple court hearings. Of our family law casework matters in 2025–26, 40 per cent required more than 20 hours of legal work to reach resolution.

Property settlement assistance

We have sought to strengthen our practice through professional development and upskilling of lawyers to now cover financial property settlements, attend mediations and conferences and to appear in court for non-trial hearings.

As part of our upskilled family law financial settlement practice, we assisted eligible clients to secure **$484,000** of their entitlement to the finances from the relationship. This included maintaining home ownership and stable housing for children and keeping vulnerable community members out of poverty for the rest of their lives.

SNAPSHOT OF FAMILY LAW

We assisted **196** clients with **302** services, including ongoing assistance in **45 cases**.

Three most common problems:

1. Parenting
2. Separation/divorce
3. Property in marriage/de facto

Top three outcomes achieved:

1. Final orders made by consent
2. Agreement reached by negotiation
3. Final orders made by the court

Where clients come from:
(by number of clients and number of advices)

- Royal Women's Hospital (**52**)
- Royal Melbourne Hospital (**18**)
- Ozanam House (**15**)
- Peter MacCallum Cancer Centre (**13**)

RIGHT IMCL CEO Nadia Morales with Elinor Willumsen from Royal Melbourne Hospital's social work team at the launch of the Federation of Community Legal Centres' 2026 election campaign in Parliament House in June.

SPECIAL PROGRAM AREA

Victims Legal Service & Financial Assistance Scheme practice

The Financial Assistance Scheme (FAS) was introduced to replace the Victims of Crime scheme and provides financial assistance to victims of violent crime to help with things like counselling and medical expenses, safety-related expenses and loss of earnings. For many victim-survivors it is a complex system to negotiate particularly in the aftermath of traumatic incidents.

As one of seven local CLCs which are funded as a Victims Legal Service provider, IMCL supports marginalised victims to undertake the application process.

During 2025–26, a systematic approach cleared a backlog of pending applications and resolved 28 cases. It has also enabled IMCL to resume a specialist clinic to deal with FAS applications.

Along with other community legal centres and Victoria Legal Aid, IMCL was also part of a successful campaign of advocacy to secure further funding for the Victims Legal Service over the next two years.

Demand for the service has increased significantly since it commenced, with the average number of requests for help increasing from 205 per month in 2023 to 406 per month in 2025.



MAYA'S STORY

Maya* was an international student who sought IMCL's legal assistance as she was going through the process of making a statement with Victoria Police for family violence including sexual violence perpetrated against her by her former partner.

Maya did not have ties to community in Melbourne/Naarm and reported feeling isolated due to the violence.

She initially sought our legal assistance to understand her rights prior to making a police statement due to bad interaction with police officers while reporting the family violence. Maya was advised by our Beyond Survival Project lawyer who also made internal referrals to other IMCL services.

IMCL's Family Violence Duty Lawyer Service advised and represented Maya at a court hearing where she successfully secured a two-year full no contact Family Violence Intervention Order protection.

Our Victims Legal Service specialist assisted Maya in understanding the difference between the evidentiary requirements and assistance available under the Victims of Crime Assistance Tribunal (VOCAT) and the incoming Financial Assistance Scheme (FAS). After receiving the advice, Maya decided to withdraw her VOCAT application and lodge an application with FAS instead.

With IMCL's lawyers on the case, her FAS application was ultimately successful in getting three awards of assistance comprising of two interim awards and one final award totalling more than $48,500. This amount was made of Special Financial Assistance, reimbursement for previously incurred expenses and authorised future expenses including talk-therapy counselling sessions and EMDR sessions, loss and damage to clothing, safety related expenses, loss of earnings; and recovery expenses including music instrument, trauma-informed therapies, and assistance towards rent required due to relocation.

Because of IMCL's holistic and wrap-around legal assistance, Maya reported that she finally feels like she got justice and found the award life changing.

* Name changed to protect anonymity



HEALTH JUSTICE PARTNERSHIPS

- **Clients at Royal Melbourne Hospital** (41%)
- **Clients at Royal Women's Hospital** (34%)
- **Clients at Peter MacCallum Cancer Centre** (19%)
- **Clients at Women's Alcohol and Drug Service** (6%)

SNAPSHOT OF HEALTH JUSTICE PARTNERSHIPS

We supported **305** people with **573** services and worked on **106** casework matters:

1. **126** clients at Royal Melbourne Hospital (including **37** from Mental Health Services)
2. **104** clients at Royal Women's Hospital
3. **57** clients at Peter MacCallum Cancer Centre
4. **18** clients at Women's Alcohol and Drug Service

48% experienced or were at risk of experiencing family violence

11% were homeless;
12% were at risk of homelessness

Most common problems:

1. Parenting
2. Divorce
3. Family or domestic violence orders

Top three outcomes:

1. Power of Attorney/Medical Treatment Decision Maker documentation
2. Final [family law] orders made by consent
3. Charges withdrawn in full

WORKING IN PARTNERSHIP

4. **47%** of clients received concurrent non-legal help
5. **61%** of clients faced three or more barriers to accessing legal help (eg. experiencing family violence, homelessness, disability or from a CALD background)
6. **14** professional legal education sessions delivered to over **330** health care workers
7. **92%** of workers said their knowledge on legal needs had improved
8. **100%** of workers reported confidence to make referrals
9. We provided **23** secondary consultations

What hospital workers say about our Health Justice Partnerships

"This partnership is vital for the work I do as a hospital social worker. Being able to refer patients so they can access correct legal advice and support means that I can focus on areas of my expertise. More often than not, being able to refer patients to IMCL removes a barrier for them accessing appropriate health care because neither of us need to spend countless amount of hours attempting to navigate a system that is outside our area of expertise."

— ROYAL WOMEN'S HOSPITAL

"The Health Justice Partnership has been invaluable to the social work team at Peter Mac—when we refer patients, carers, and families, we know they will receive high quality, supportive, trauma-informed, thoughtful legal advise. When Inner Melbourne Community Legal provide secondary consultation to our team, we feel assured that the consultation is non-biased, non-judgemental, informed by current legal practice and case law, and very thoughtfully provided. IMCL has been excellent in adapting to our needs as a specialist cancer center—their input and presence in our centre is invaluable."

— PETER MACCALLUM CANCER CENTRE

"I think this is an extremely valuable commitment. I regularly refer to IMCL and my patients are seen by [Senior Lawyer] Tabitha [O'Shea] who has been amazing in supporting my patients around a variety of matters. Even having a service to offer that can assist in providing legal advice is so helpful and more professional then just saying you could speak to a lawyer. Thank you so much for all the support you have given my patients."

— ROYAL WOMEN'S HOSPITAL

HOW WE REACH CLIENTS

HEALTH JUSTICE PARTNERSHIPS

A major source of referrals come through our Health Justice Partnerships with major hospitals in the Parkville medical precinct. We formed our very first HJP at the Royal Women's Hospital in 2009.

Our partnerships with hospital and community-based health providers are pivotal in providing access to the right supports for people experiencing family violence and relationship breakdown. Every day, clients reach us through direct referrals from hospital social workers, family violence workers, maternal and child health nurses and other professionals who would otherwise be unable to access safe, free and responsive legal support.

Utilising the integrated practice model that has been refined over many years, lawyers and hospital staff work collaboratively to deliver holistic support through the resolution of legal issues and other forms of non-legal support.

Since then, the program has grown to include the Women's Alcohol and Drug Service and the Centre Against Sexual Assault, and Peter McCallum Cancer Centre, while at the Royal Melbourne Hospital, it has expanded from the main Parkville campus to also include the Royal Park Aged Care and Rehabilitation units.

In practice this means regular clinics and client appointments at all of these institutions.

These HJPs are a statewide service in the sense that our lawyers are available to attend to anyone who is referred through them regardless of where they live.

In 2025–26, 18 per cent of our clients came through our HJPs with 73 per cent living outside our geographic catchment in the inner suburbs of Melbourne. Clients frequently have multiple vulnerabilities, such as a disability, substance abuse or experience family violence. 75 per cent have low income and 18 per cent speak a main language other than English.

Regular professional legal education sessions are held with health care workers across the Parkville Precinct. In response to an annual survey of staff who have taken part in these sessions, 50 per cent strongly agreed they felt confident to recognise a legal matter faced by a patient, and 75 per cent strongly agreed they would be confident to make an appropriate referral for legal assistance.

In addition to training hospital staff to identify and refer legal problems, our lawyers benefit from these partnerships by developing skills and capacity to understand and navigate the healthcare system and how to access social supports in the community for our clients.

In 2025, we recorded a significant milestone with the tenth anniversary of our Health Justice Partnership with the Royal Melbourne Hospital.

Beginning as a pilot project in October 2015, the HJP at Royal Melbourne has worked with more than 700 clients. We celebrated the decade anniversary in December 2025, with an impact report launched by Victoria's Public Advocate, Daniel Stubbs, who was also CEO of IMCL when the partnership began.



ABOVE At an event to mark the tenth anniversary of the Health Justice Partnership at Royal Melbourne Hospital on 10 December 2025 were (from left) the hospital's Social Work Project Lead Melanie Van Diemen, IMCL Director of Engagement & Projects Molly Williams and Senior Lawyer Tabitha O'Shea.

OUR ADVOCACY TO MAKE CHANGE

As a member of the Federation of Community Legal Centres' family violence working group, IMCL has also contributed to legal reform advocacy for new definitions under the *Family Violence Protections Act*, reforms of family court payments for interpreters, and the wording of coercive control legislation.

BIRTHS REGISTRATION AND FAMILY VIOLENCE ADVOCACY

At clinics and referrals as part of our Health Justice Partnership at the Royal Women's Hospital, IMCL has come across many clients who are experiencing legal issues relating to family violence, parenting, and birth registration.

Part of the assistance IMCL provides to birthing parents who are victim-survivors of family violence is to help them prepare a statutory declaration and supporting documents which outline any safety concerns.

In situations where the birthing parent has experienced family violence or the threat of family violence from the other parent, they may seek to exclude the violent partner from the birth certificate because of their significant concerns about their and their child's safety.

But the process of registering a birth in these circumstances can be intimidating and distressing due to the amount of personal information that is often required to be submitted to Births, Deaths and Marriages Victoria (BDM).

Clients will often report that they feel confused and anxious about this process. This anxiety is often amplified when there is a delay in registration or a lack of clarity about what information is sufficient.

A delay in the registration of a child's birth can mean that the birthing parent cannot access Centrelink financial support or Medicare benefits or enrol the child in childcare.

This creates uncertainty for the birthing parent and undermines their sense of safety given they are victim-survivors of family violence.

In 2026, we engaged with BDM by sharing the experiences of clients on birth registration and family violence and seeking clarification on what information is required so as to avoid unnecessary delays in birth parents registering their child's birth.

Early signs are that this advocacy will result in a more sensitive approach from BDM in these situations.

"I've had Shifrah and Bella work with me and they have been lovely, I've known Shifrah for a while and she's always been well communicated with me. Very understanding and friendly and always seeks to help me emotionally and in my life circumstances I appreciate what she's done for me and continues to do so thank you!"

— IMCL CLIENT

Education Justice

BELOW IMCL staff Henry Levy, Lokesh Kashyap and Betty Ayano at the monthly Flemington Djerring Help Hub in May 2026.



The goal of our education justice practice is to enable young people to complete their schooling and provide a platform from which they from which they can enter a fulfilling life as an adult.

We focus our efforts on young people who are experiencing or at risk of family violence, homelessness, mental ill health, substance misuse, over-policing and other factors that expose them to the legal system, and in particular the criminal legal system.

Through our integrated partnership approach working with schools and youth outreach services, we contribute to young people's improved health and wellbeing, safety and educational engagement.

SCHOOL LAWYER PROGRAMS

Since 2019, IMCL's School Lawyer program has embedded lawyers in schools and flexible learning centres to provide age-appropriate legal support.

This program is based on the principle that access to legal help at the right time can make all the difference to a young person's life, not only at a point of crisis but as an early intervention to avoid wrong decisions being made.

It goes without saying that education is critical to outcomes later in life, and that young people achieve better results when they can have a safe place to live and avoid interaction with the youth justice and criminal legal systems.

Our program at Hester Hornbrook Academy's city and South Melbourne campuses saw a School Lawyer present every week to provide one-on-one support to resolve legal and non-legal problems. Lawyers are available without appointment for anything from a casual conversation to a formal consultation.

Teaching and wellbeing staff are equipped to identify legal issues early so that at-risk students can get support while engaging with their education.

In the heat of an election year, political and media attention has been ramped up about a perceived increase in youth crime, but the law and order responses that have been generated do not address the underlying causes of young people's behaviour.

The young people we support are frequently dealing with multiple strands of disadvantage, including homelessness, family violence and involvement in the child protection system. 89 per cent of our student cohort are low income and 20 per cent are experiencing or at risk of homelessness.

In many cases, traumatic circumstances lead to criminal legal system contact, but timely legal intervention can increase young people's chances of achieving stability and wellbeing.

During the school term, we delivered a number of interactive legal sessions for students at Hester Hornbrook Academy covering topics which included rights and responsibilities of driving in Victoria, police powers and your rights, your rights while protesting and group offending and weapons.

The benefits of our collaborations are clear: improved educational outcomes through higher graduation rates and entry to post-school pathways; enhanced student wellbeing, including mental wellbeing; and avoiding involvement in the youth justice and criminal legal systems. There are also cost savings for government through early intervention.

RILEY'S STORY

18-year-old Riley* had previously accessed the school lawyer program for other problems and built a strong relationship with the lawyer. When she and her youth worker realised her Family Violence Intervention Order was due to expire in a few days, Riley was able to contact the school lawyer and quickly get assistance.

Riley's intimate relationship had ended with her ex-partner threatening serious violence against Riley and her family. Riley told the school lawyer she still experienced regular, vivid nightmares about her ex breaking into her house and hurting her, she was hypervigilant on public transport in case she saw him, and she had struggled to trust people since.

Riley's lawyer was quickly able to assist Riley to submit an application to extend the intervention order. IMCL was then able to represent Riley at court to ensure the court understood the ongoing impact of the ex's behaviour on Riley and the risk of further family violence if the order was allowed to lapse.

The court granted a 12-month extension of the order, despite no breaches of the order having occurred, which Riley reported took a huge weight off her shoulders. The court noted that, as a consequence of the previous order, Riley's ex-partner had successfully completed a men's behaviour change program—in combination with the extended order, this gave Riley additional confidence that her ex had learned how harmful his behaviour to her had been and that it would not be repeated.

The school lawyer also referred Riley to IMCL's in-house specialist assisting with Financial Assistance Scheme applications for victims of crime, who provided advice to Riley and her youth worker to lodge a FAS application to support Riley to continue to access psychologist support to recover from the family violence.

As a result of this assistance, Riley said she felt more secure and safe in her daily life, and was equipped to start recovering from the trauma the incident had caused her.

* Name changed to protect anonymity

YOUTH OUTREACH PROGRAMS

In the youth space, we have built on existing partnerships and developed new relationships with youth services as part of a new project to increase early intervention access to legal support for highly marginalised young people. As part of this work, we have provided legal education to workers, young leaders supporting their peers and young people at risk themselves to help equip them to be able to better navigate stressful encounters with police and other authorities and to seek legal advice early for a range of legal issues.

In late 2025, IMCL was successful in obtaining funding from The Leith Trust to employ a senior lawyer to expand the youth outreach and school lawyer model in the inner city to develop a comprehensive network of support for young people. This has seen a strengthening of our connections with agencies that reach scores of young people, such as:

- The Drum Youth Services in Carlton
- The Huddle, which is based at North Melbourne Football Club
- Wombat Housing Youth Programs; and
- Saints College.

We continue to regularly conduct community legal education sessions for teenagers and young adults, either on our own or with other community legal centres. These sessions can cover topics such as Victoria's new knife laws, police powers, drugs and the law, employment, cyber bullying and the criminal justice system.

In 2025-26, we conducted 52 community and professional legal education sessions both in person and online, including 22 in hospitals and healthcare settings and 18 specifically tailored for young people and youth services.

At The Drum and The Huddle, legal sessions were also delivered directly to young people on police powers and rights, and workers were upskilled on the legal rights of young people and how to access legal support. We also worked collaboratively with these organisations to co-design resources—ensuring that they are suitable for young people.

Other highlights of our community partnerships:

- Linking with Melbourne University Law School where students worked with IMCL to develop legal education resources as part of their Street Law Subject.
- Attendance at the 'Beyond the Gates' event at the North Melbourne Campus of Saints College where we provided students and their families with information about our services and how to access support.

SNAPSHOT OF HESTER HORNBROOK ACADEMY SCHOOL LAWYER

We provided **108** legal services to **48** people across two HHA campuses.

22% of clients were experiencing or at risk of family violence

7% were experiencing homelessness and **13%** were at risk of homelessness

60% had a disability, of which **40%** had mental health issues

Most common problems:

1. Fines
2. Injuries and assaults/FAS
3. Family or domestic violence order

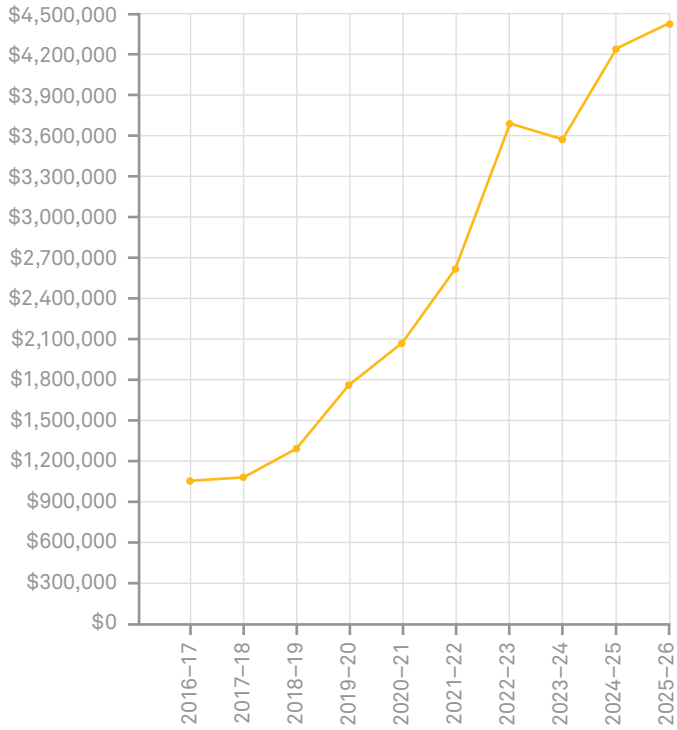
Top three outcomes:

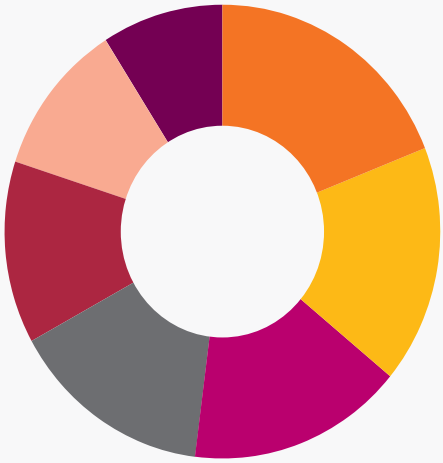
1. Fines withdrawn
2. Diversion
3. Charges withdrawn in full and adjourned undertaking without conviction (equal third)

Financial report

The audited financial results for 2025–26 show our total income to be $4,419,959.77.

We are funded by a range of government, statutory, philanthropic and individual sources. This includes the federal and state governments, the Legal Services Board, the Federation of Community Legal Centres, Victoria Law Foundation, and various individual donors. IMCL's complete audited financial report can be downloaded from the IMCL website.





2025–26 FUNDING SOURCES

- **19%** Federation of CLCs
- **17%** Core funding (Commonwealth)
- **16%** Core funding (Victoria)
- **15%** Other grants (Victoria): CLC FVA, Pre-Court Engagement, Victims Legal Service
- **13%** Department of Justice and Community Safety
- **11%** Other funding:
  - **32%** Hester Hornbrook Academy School Lawyer Program
  - **22%** Clayton Utz Foundation: Access to Justice
  - **14%** International Students Legal Program
  - **12%** Donations
  - **9%** Flora & Frank Leith Charitable Trust
  - **5%** Costs recovered & retained
  - **4%** Other revenue
  - **1%** Interest received
  - **1%** Interpreter allowance
- **9%** Legal Services Board

Thank you for your support

Our incredible funders, dedicated pro bono partners and supportive donors often help us fill the gaps. IMCL would like to say thank you for your timely and effective advice, representation and administrative support. A special thank you to our expert team of pro bono barristers who have led our work on the public housing class action. It has been invaluable, and we could not have met the demand for services without your help. It has equipped us to hold decision makers accountable and changed people's lives.

IMCL thanks law firms that have offered their time, resources and expertise to assist with referrals in the areas of employment, family, wills, property, estates, taxation, and victims of crime matters, including: Ashurst, Hall & Wilcox, Mills Oakley and Everyday Justice, and Dentons.

We would also like to thank our other valued pro bono partners including:

- **Moray & Agnew** who have funded a secondee lawyer within our organisation for over 10 years, substantially adding to our overall legal capacity, as well as assisting IMCL with training materials, referrals and internal legal advice.
- **Victorian Government Solicitor's Office (VGSO)** who have maintained a long-standing relationship with IMCL providing secondees for more than 15 years, which has allowed us to address more family violence matters.
- **Phi Finney McDonald** for partnering with the Police Accountability Project to undertake the successful capsicum spray class action against the Victorian State Government at the Supreme Court of Victoria.
- **Robinson Gill Lawyers** for ongoing support and collaboration concerning police accountability, including training and advocacy.
- **Herbert Smith Freehills** who provided secondee lawyers, host many of our events, made a substantial donation to support our project work and assisted IMCL with internal legal advice.
- **Clayton Utz** who assisted IMCL with internal legal advice and took on several referral matters, particularly for our clients referred through Health Justice Partnerships.
- **Maddocks** who assisted IMCL with substantial internal legal advice and internal policy development.
- **Lander & Rogers** who assisted us to deliver specialist training to health care workers at Peter MacCallum Cancer Centre and accepted referrals for IMCL clients.

A special thanks to **Maria Tucci**, who was a volunteer at Flemington Kensington Legal Service and then IMCL from 2010–2026. During that time, Maria was an incredible support to the migration team and assisted dozens of families to reunite in Australia, in particular working alongside the Refugee Minor Program helping young people bring over their parents and siblings. She brought a wealth of knowledge from her background working as a counsellor at Foundation House for three decades, which equipped her with the ability to hold space for young people dealing with trauma and the separation from their immediate family members.

DONATE TO HELP US CHANGE LIVES

We are strengthened in our mission to provide free legal help to vulnerable and disadvantaged members of our local community through donations.

As a registered charity, all donations over $2.00 are tax deductible.

Find out more and make a donation on our website **imcl.org.au/support-us/donations**

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