

Under One Roof

Rapidly responding to the increased legal needs of Victorians experiencing homelessness during COVID-19

May 2021

Over the last 12 months, Justice Connect has seen firsthand the impact of the coronavirus (COVID-19) public health pandemic on people experiencing or at risk of homelessness across Victoria. COVID-19 has created a new cohort of 'future homeless' and financially insecure, as well as compounding difficulties experienced by the most vulnerable in our community, particularly people sleeping rough.

In this context, our Under One Roof project has been key to Justice Connect Homeless Law's (Justice Connect) responsive, client-centred approach to COVID-19. Through our established community partnerships and innovative colocations, we were able to rapidly adapt to meet the needs of people experiencing or at risk of homelessness during the pandemic, providing an intensive combination of legal and social work assistance to Victorians with complex needs, who would have otherwise fallen through the cracks.

Throughout COVID-19, there has been significant demand for our Under One Roof legal supports, with 189 new legal enquiries this year (June 2020–May 2021), representing a 29% increase from last year. Of these, 71% were provided ongoing legal casework (up by 21% from last year). This reflects the long-term strength of our embedded partnerships with Launch Housing, Sacred Heart Mission – Journey to Social Inclusion and Greenlight, and cohealth, which enabled us to provide homeless or at risk Victorians with seamless, remote access to legal services when COVID hit.

IMPROVING ACCESS TO INTEGRATED LEGAL SERVICES DURING COVID-19 FOR PEOPLE SLEEPING ROUGH

COVID-19 presented a unique opportunity for engagement with people sleeping rough, with the Victorian government's Homelessness Hotel Emergency Response providing access to COVID-19 hotel accommodation with supports. With two of our Under One Roof community partners supporting people who had exited rough sleeping into these COVID-19 emergency hotels, we were able to provide dedicated legal supports and referral pathways. This enabled us to engage more easily with those who had been sleeping rough and are often difficult to reach, with 33% of people we helped through Under One Roof in the last year accessing us through these COVID-19 emergency hotels or crisis accommodation.

Access to Justice Connect's integrated criminal law help was more important than ever, with 63% of referrals to our senior criminal lawyer from Under One Roof partners. We also provided intensive assistance through 57 new criminal legal files, and of these, 67% of clients reported having slept rough.

Justice Connect's Homeless Persons' Liaison Officer also provided tailored, integrated social work supports to 118 people with 453 non-legal issues, which were holistically addressed alongside their legal needs.

Recognising the challenges for people experiencing homelessness in understanding and complying with the ever-changing public health directions, we developed new resources for people to understand their rights and get access to legal help, including:

01

COVID-19 phone advice line

Implementing a COVID-19 phone advice line for people sleeping rough and their frontline workers;

02

Co-designed resources

Creating digital and hardcopy resources for people sleeping rough on their rights under the new emergency powers, and how to get our help, including through a co-designed publication by people with lived experience.

For our community partners, we also rapidly developed a range of customised tools, resources and training to support them in understanding the new laws and how to refer clients for legal help.

REDUCING THE IMPACT OF COVID-19 ON PEOPLE FACING HOMELESSNESS THROUGH STRATEGIC ENGAGEMENT

Given the disproportionate impact of COVID-19 on people facing homelessness, we have continued to draw on client and casework insights from our Under One Roof legal services to advocate for systems-level change. In the last year, this included:

01

Rental protections

Collaboratively calling for and achieving the strongest COVID-residential tenancies protections in Australia;

02

Fairer fines

Securing fairer fines practices from the Victorian Government during COVID-19, including a suspension of enforcement action and fines-debt recovery campaigns;

03

Advocating with Victoria Police

Advocating with Victoria Police to exercise discretion and reduce the impact of COVID-specific fines on people experiencing homelessness;

04

Make Social Housing Work

Launching and promoting the Make Social Housing Work blueprint through the Victorian Housing Peaks alliance, which informed the state government's social and affordable housing investment of over \$5.3 billion that will deliver 12,300 new homes for Victorians in four years.





FUTURE DIRECTIONS

Despite the challenges of the last year, COVID-19 has presented important opportunities to prevent homelessness and increase access to legal help for homeless or at risk Victorians.

Building on our learnings around accessibility through digital and online platforms, we have started scoping the development of an online resources hub for frontline workers from our Under One Roof community partners. This digital resource hub will use the existing infrastructure and design principles from Homeless Law in Practice, which is our recently relaunched, practice-based online resource for pro bono and community lawyers across Victoria. We are also exploring opportunities through the Online Magistrates' Court to allow our clients with criminal charges to access a specialised process, allowing them to secure more therapeutic, long-term outcomes.

We have also seen a significant demand for our integrated services, and recognise the importance of getting back out into the community. We have recently restarted our colocations at Launch Housing and cohealth, and we are also planning to start a new legal clinic at Launch Housing in St Kilda, which will increase our reach in meeting the rising legal needs of Victorians with complex vulnerabilities.

Under One Roof

June 2020 to May 2021

12 months of increased access to holistic legal services for homeless or at-risk Victorians during COVID-19



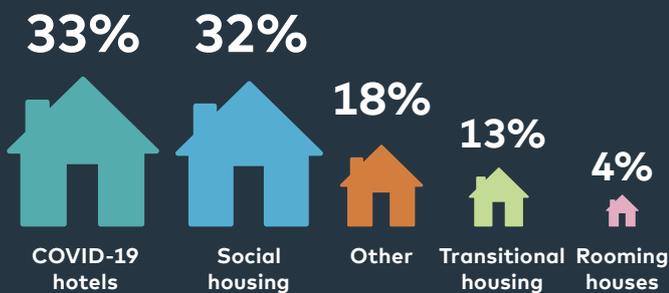
189 new legal enquiries

Since the project started in 2015 we experienced a **205% increase in legal enquiries.**

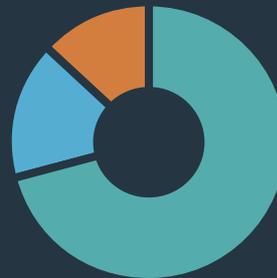
Legal problems



Housing type



Legal help provided



71% ongoing advice and representation
16% targeted secondary consultations
13% specialised legal information or referrals

Integrated criminal law help

57 new client files

118 people with 453 non legal issues were provided with integrated social work supports through Justice Connect's Homeless Persons' Liaison Officer

Of clients who received integrated criminal legal help:



EXTENDING OUR REACH FOR PEOPLE WHO HAVE EXPERIENCED HOMELESSNESS

With the support of our community partners, Under One Roof's COVID-19 response focussed on reducing the disproportionate impact of the pandemic on Victorians who have experienced homelessness.

COVID-19 presented a distinct opportunity for engagement with rough sleepers, with the Victorian government's Homelessness Hotel Emergency Response providing access to COVID-19 hotel accommodation with supports. Given two of our community partners were on the frontline in supporting rough sleepers into these emergency hotels, we were able to provide timely and targeted legal supports and resources. This resulted in our improved engagement with Victorians who had been sleeping rough in the last year, with 33% of people helped through Under One Roof connecting with us while in COVID-19 emergency hotels or crisis accommodation.

33%

of people helped through Under One Roof connecting with us while in COVID-19 emergency hotels or crisis accommodation.

COVID-19 also created immense challenges for people experiencing homelessness in understanding and complying with the ever-changing public health directions. As a result, we recognised the need to develop innovative strategies for people to understand their rights and get access to legal help. This included:

01

COVID-19 phone advice line

Implementing a COVID-19 phone advice line for people sleeping rough and their frontline workers from our community partners, with a specialised focus on COVID-specific fines, charges and police powers, which delivered 40% direct advices to people sleeping rough and 60% secondary consultations to their frontline workers;

02

Digital and hardcopy resources

Creating digital and hardcopy resources for people sleeping rough on their rights under the new emergency powers, and how to get our help if approached by police, or if they get fines or charges;

03

Collaborating with cohealth

Contributing legal information about COVID-19 and legal rights as part of Need to Know, a publication co-designed by people with lived experience through cohealth's Harm Minimisation Project, and distributed to people sleeping rough and online.

The impact of COVID-19-specific fines on people experiencing homelessness was clear, with an increase from 18% to 33% of clients with fines, many of which related to an alleged breach of COVID-19 restrictions. Of Under One Roof referrals received in the last year, 49% were for clients who had been rough sleeping and were now in COVID-19 emergency accommodation.

We also received a heightened number of enquiries related to historic public housing debts, as people in the COVID-19 emergency hotels were being supported to apply for social housing by our community partners. Many of these clients had experienced chronic homelessness, and we used our expertise in resolving public housing debts to secure them waivers and significant reductions, removing a longstanding barrier to their housing security.

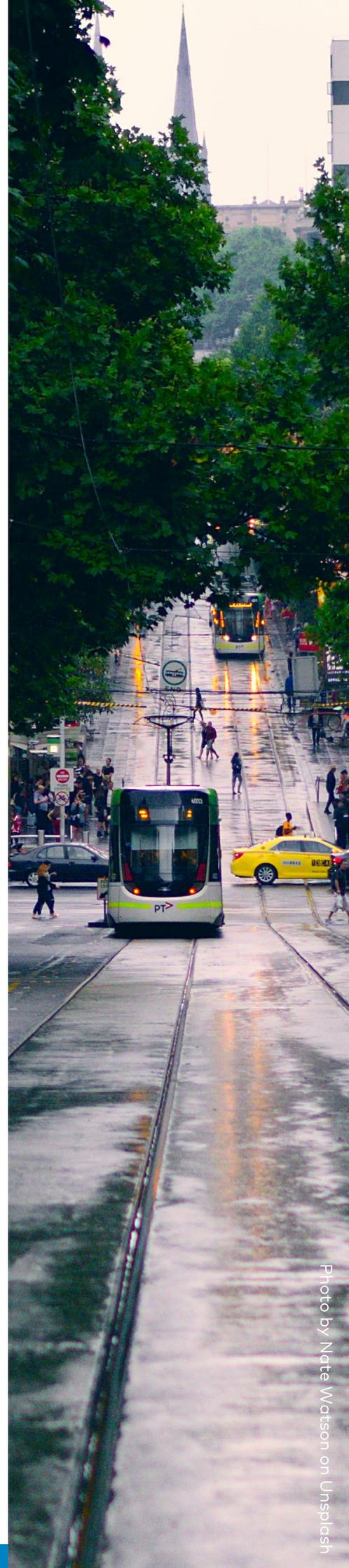


Photo by Nate Watson on Unsplash



ANDREW'S STORY

Holistic social work and legal supports help young-man sleeping rough to resolve fines and prioritise his mental health recovery during COVID-19

Andrew* is a young man who has experienced homelessness for the past 15 years and was sleeping rough at the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic. Andrew was supported by the Greenlight program, who helped him into COVID hotel accommodation and referred him to Justice Connect for his unresolved fines.

Andrew's fines were all directly related to his experiences of homelessness, including COVID-19-specific fines. Justice Connect's lawyers provided intensive legal help to deal with his fines through an application for them to be withdrawn based on his special circumstance of homelessness. As part of this, the lawyers connected Andrew with our Homeless Persons' Liaison Officer for integrated social work services, which included providing supporting evidence to assist in resolving his fines.

Due to Andrew's experience of chronic homelessness from a young age, and the impact of COVID-19, he initially told the HPLO that he was beginning to lose hope about support services assisting him. Through ongoing engagement with Andrew, the HPLO was able to build rapport and help Andrew to link back in with other community-based services, which were able to provide him with further mental health and case management.

Through this wrap-around social work and legal assistance provided through Justice Connect's Under One Roof project, Andrew has had his fines successfully resolved, allowing him to prioritise his mental health recovery and securing long-term housing during the COVID-19 recovery phase.

**All clients' names have been changed.*

ACHIEVING BETTER OUTCOMES FOR PEOPLE EXPERIENCING HOMELESSNESS THROUGH INTEGRATED SOCIAL WORK AND LEGAL SUPPORTS

Over the last year and particularly in response to COVID-19, our integrated Homeless Persons' Liaison Officer (HPLO) program has been a critical, multi-disciplinary complement to our Under One Roof project. Throughout the pandemic, we have observed increased demand for the HPLO's social work services in helping people experiencing homelessness, particularly rough sleepers, to resolve Victorian court and tribunal matters, to maintain or access housing, and to address their essential needs.

In the last 12 months, the HPLO offered targeted social work supports to 118 new clients with 52 children in their care, who faced 453 non-legal issues (such as family violence and mental health issues) that were holistically dealt with alongside their legal issues. Of these clients, 94% had no income or were reliant on Centrelink. The HPLO has also remotely maintained the program's embedded partnership with cohealth's Central City Community Health Service, with 73% of legal enquiries received being rapidly engaged with Justice Connect for our ongoing representation.

The HPLO's impact is further reflected through the program's close integration with Justice Connect's senior criminal lawyer, which has kept some of the most isolated and transient community members engaged during COVID-19. In the last year, this multi-disciplinary criminal justice assistance was delivered to clients with highly-complex needs through 57 new criminal legal files. Of these clients:

100% of clients reported having mental health issues

67% of clients reported having slept rough

89% of clients reported having substance dependence issues



The benefits of this deeply integrated, tailored assistance are reflected by the following client insights:

“

"I'm still going strong and sober. About 6 or so weeks ago cohealth were doing interviews for peer workers and I was successful in getting the job...you had a lot to do with helping me turn my life around."

“

"The HPLO assisted and supported me in a way that I never imagined...completely changed my life."

“

"They were good at following things up and helping me with my specific issues...I'm also really happy because Homeless Law helped change the housing department's policy to debt - they made real change to the system."

“

"I was in a very dark spot and I was in fear of my life. The HPLO saved my life."

The HPLO and our senior criminal lawyer also continued to build the capacity and skills of Justice Connect's 550 pro bono lawyers in helping vulnerable clients to remotely navigate and successfully exit the justice system, including by providing expert, day-to-day guidance and delivering targeted online training and resources. The benefits of this model are seen through the following feedback from Justice Connect pro bono lawyers:

"The HPLO role is essential to the work we do with our clients. I am grateful for the non-legal support my clients have received - it has made an undeniable impact on their success navigating through their legal issues."

”

"Fines Victoria withdrew the 46 infringements as a result of our successful Family Violence Scheme Application. The Prosecution has also now agreed to withdraw all 22 traffic related charges...Thank you [senior criminal lawyer] for all of your support on this, it's great to get such a satisfying outcome for the client."

”

For our clients experiencing homelessness, the Victorian Magistrates' Court's move to the Online Magistrates' Court due to COVID-19 presented initial challenges related to understanding and engagement with the court process. However we have been able to collaborate closely with the Magistrates' Court to allow our clients with criminal charges to access a specialised process to secure more therapeutic, long-term outcomes, and we will continue to progress this priority strategy in the recovery phase.



CHRISTINA'S STORY

Integrated services holistically support family violence victim-survivor to exit homelessness and address complex legal, health and financial issues during the pandemic

Christina* is a family violence victim-survivor with mental health and substance dependence issues. These complexities caused Christina to enter into homelessness and lose the care of her young son around three years ago. Christina also lost her casual work due to COVID-19 and was not eligible for Centrelink payments because of her visa status, which placed her health and safety at further-risk.

When she first contacted Justice Connect, Christina was facing court for multiple criminal charges related to her highly-vulnerable circumstances, including her ongoing experiences of family violence and her substance dependence issues that had escalated in COVID-19. Justice Connect's senior criminal lawyer advised Christina about her legal rights and options, and appeared for her several times through the Online Magistrates' Court to positively resolve her charges.

Christina had also expressed feeling isolated and that she found it difficult to meaningfully engage with ongoing support from community services, so Justice Connect linked her to our integrated Homeless Persons' Liaison Officer. The HPLO built a relationship of trust with Christina that ensured her continued engagement with the justice system throughout 2020. Over this period of time, the HPLO's delivered extensive direct social work supports, along with securing vital financial brokerage to cover food and phone credit for Christina, so her essential needs were met and she could continue speaking with her son overseas. The HPLO made 29 targeted referrals to housing, alcohol and drug counselling, family violence, and financial support services for Christina, including through Launch Housing. The HPLO also actively participated in a care coordination process, which resulted in Christina securing new accommodation.

These wrap-around legal and social work supports ensured Christina's successful exit from homelessness into safe housing during COVID-19, and she shared that Justice Connect: "made me feel heard" and "gave me hope to hold onto when I had just about given up, and courage to believe in myself when everything was crumbling."

**All clients' names have been changed.*



INNOVATING TO ENHANCE CAPACITY IN OUR COMMUNITY PARTNERS DURING COVID-19

In addition to direct legal services for people experiencing homelessness, we rapidly developed a range of digital tools and resources for community partners and workers to support them in understanding the new laws and in feeling confident to refer clients for legal help.

For people who had exited rough sleeping into the COVID-19 emergency hotels, we developed a customised, digital referral tool for their workers, which streamlined their referral pathway to us. We also created COVID-19 fact sheets on the relevant laws and how they impacted on people experiencing homelessness, which complemented the responsive COVID-19 phone advice line that we established for our key community partners and their clients.

We implemented tailored online training sessions to increase our partners' understanding on the rapidly changing legal landscape, including training on the temporary COVID-19 tenancy laws, fines & charges (including COVID-specific fines), and housing debts. Using an online training platform, we were able to engage with more workers across a range of teams to increase our reach, which encompassed five different frontline teams across four different areas of legal needs. These sessions were also recorded, so they could be viewed more widely on-demand by our Under One Roof community partners.





The feedback from this targeted online training was overwhelmingly positive, with workers who attended sharing:

“

"The COVID-19 updates were extremely helpful as I completed the training last year and a lot has changed."

“

"Approachable great presenters with a lot of knowledge. Not only about their own service but our service also so their training could be well adjusted to our service needs."

“

"I found the training valuable and relevant, the presentation was well presented easy to follow and understand. Thank you, that was the best workplace training I have had in 15 yrs. Keep up the good work."

96%

of workers referred their clients to us for legal help, demonstrating the effectiveness of our adaptive partnership, training and resources-model during the pandemic.





DONNA'S STORY

Woman with twenty-year history of homelessness maintains safe, secure housing in COVID-19 through collaborative legal supports

Donna* has experienced homelessness for approximately 20 years and suffers from ongoing mental health issues. Donna is engaged with Sacred Heart Mission's Journey to Social Inclusion program (J2SI), which assisted her to secure community housing.

When Donna was referred to Justice Connect by her case manager, her landlord had started eviction proceedings at VCAT based on allegations of 'danger', which were a direct result of her mental health issues. Justice Connect worked closely with Donna's support workers and negotiated with the community housing provider.

At the final VCAT hearing, Justice Connect provided evidence about how Donna's mental health had directly contributed to the allegations, and that Donna had access to additional supports through the NDIS to establish a holistic tenancy support plan. Due to Justice Connect's detailed submissions and evidence, VCAT dismissed the landlord's application, enabling Donna to focus on improving her mental health from the stability of her home.

Justice Connect is also continuing to help Donna with an application to have her fines waived based on her vulnerable special circumstances, including fines she received for alleged breaches of COVID-19 restrictions. We will keep working with Donna and her J2SI case manager until her fines are resolved, which will help her to move forward from COVID-19 with a clean slate.

**All clients' names have been changed.*





RESPONSIVELY INCREASING ACCESS TO LEGAL SUPPORTS THROUGH DIGITAL INITIATIVES

Over the last year, we saw more workers using digital and online tools to help clients, and as a result, we have also identified the need for our customised resources for workers to be more readily-accessible. We have also consulted with our Under One Roof community partners, and found that 89% would like us to create an online hub of legal resources for workers who support people experiencing or at risk of homelessness.

Drawing on these insights, we have started developing an online resources hub for workers. This will draw on the existing infrastructure and design principles from our recently relaunched [Homeless Law in Practice](#), which is Justice Connect's online, practice-based resource for pro bono and community lawyers across Victoria.

We will continue our workers hub development through a series of user-centred design workshops with our Under One Roof community partners. Once the hub has been launched, we will develop and test more online and digital resources with our community partners, continuing to update and improve the hub according to the needs of the workers who will be using it.

REDUCING THE IMPACT OF COVID-19 ON PEOPLE EXPERIENCING OR AT RISK OF HOMELESSNESS

Given the disproportionate impact of COVID-19 on people experiencing or at risk of homelessness, we have continued to draw on insights from our holistic legal services, including client and community partner-insights, to advocate for changes to laws, policies and practices.

Early on in the pandemic and recognising the real risk of a wave of evictions into homelessness, we worked closely with the legal and community sectors in successfully protecting Victorian renters by securing the strongest COVID-tenancy protections in Australia, such as the 'eviction moratorium' and rent reduction scheme.

We led the collective advocacy of 39 community-service sector organisations to secure fairer fines practices from the Victorian Government during COVID-19, including a suspension of enforcement action and fines-debt recovery campaigns. We also regularly advocated with Victoria Police around the importance of exercising discretion and taking a service and health-based response to people experiencing homelessness to reduce the issuing of COVID-specific fines.

With COVID-19 highlighting the importance of access to affordable housing, we launched and promoted the Make Social Housing Work blueprint and campaign through our role in the Victorian Housing Peaks alliance. This collective advocacy and strategic engagement influenced the state government's social and affordable housing investment of over \$5.3 billion, which will deliver 12,300 new homes for Victorians in four years.

Drawing on learnings from our homelessness prevention casework and client feedback, including through our Dear Landlord self-help tools and resources for Victorian renters (justiceconnect.org.au/help/dear-landlord), our collective systemic advocacy in response to COVID-19 also led to the Victorian government extending the COVID residential tenancies protections until late March 2021, when the state's long-term rental reforms commenced.





IT'S TIME TO END HOMELESSNESS



ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

FUNDING & PARTNERSHIPS

Justice Connect extends our sincere thanks to the Portland House Foundation for their significant and long-term support of Under One Roof, and the difference this continues to make for Victorians who are experiencing or at risk of homelessness, particularly during COVID-19.

We would also like to thank our key project partners Launch Housing, Sacred Heart Mission and cohealth for their invaluable collaborative work through Under One Roof to improve the lives of our mutual clients.

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