

Annual Report 2020–21



Justice Connect designs and delivers high-impact interventions that increase access to legal support and progress social justice.

We believe in a fair and just world, where people and communities are supported to engage with and fully participate in our legal and social systems, and avoid the negative impacts on their wellbeing or organisational health that flow from unresolved legal problems.

Justice Connect acknowledges the Wurundjeri and Boon Wurrung peoples of the Kulin Nation, and the Gadigal peoples of the Eora Nation as the Traditional Owners of the land in which we meet and work. We acknowledge that sovereignty was never ceded and pay our respects to Elders past and present.



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Letter from our CEO

Chris Povey

In the last financial year, thanks to our responsive, innovative, and collaborative staff, and with support from our board, our funders, and our deeply committed pro bono network, we have continued to deliver high intensity services and training to thousands of individuals and not-for-profit organisations.



In August 2021, we ran a test case in the Victorian Civil and Administrative Tribunal (VCAT) on behalf of a renter who could not pay their rent due to the impacts of COVID-19. Before the pandemic, our client was already barely getting by while working as a rideshare driver. Then COVID-19 hit, and with it, came a choice between spending money on health, or food, or rent.

This was just one example of the many hundreds of cases we responded to. Across the year, we saw increasing numbers of people in crisis and not-for-profit organisations facing extremely complex challenges.

Our 2024 strategy addresses the challenges faced by the community and our role in responding purposefully. It pushes us to expand our impact, stretch our reach, our partnerships, and capacity to innovate to help more people and communities.

As we reflect on the year, I'm reminded that working at Justice Connect, collaborating with our partners, and serving our clients is a privilege.

This financial year, our *Seeking Legal Help Online: Understanding the 'Missing Majority'* research project demonstrated how involving people with lived experience in researching, designing, testing, and evaluating online resources can improve our sector's resources and services.

We helped thousands of renters in Victoria respond to continual changes in tenancy regulation, including through our self-help tool *Dear Landlord*. We also used technology to assist not-for-profit organisations make sense of tax laws through our *Deductible Gift Recipient (DGR) Tool*. And we supported and improved the capacity of legal organisations to understand and engage with technology to help facilitate integrated inter-agency referrals through our *Joining Up Justice* project.

We continued to focus on client-centred innovation. In addition to publishing landmark research in this area, our commitment to technology that works for people seeking legal help is a priority as we build an artificial intelligence (AI) language processor that can be seamlessly integrated into intake and triage processes across the legal services sector. Volumes of research (including our own) show that people can be excluded by the language of the law. This issue matters because if you're not understood by the legal system, then you cannot receive help. Our language processor will use AI to correctly diagnose legal problems and enable people to write or articulate their problem in their own words – cutting down the time it takes for them to access support.

As we reflect on the year, I'm reminded that working at Justice Connect, collaborating with our partners, and serving our clients is a privilege. At the same time, these roles are not easy, even during the best of times. Delivering services, working with people in crisis, raising funds, running projects, supporting each other, keeping the organisation going – there's always lots happening. And it's much, much harder during a global pandemic.

Getting the job done – and done really well – isn't easy when we are dispersed, when so many of us are isolated, some of us are alone, and a number are juggling work with important personal commitments. This annual report and the stories of outstanding outcomes and innovative responses are a tribute to our staff's deep commitment to social justice. And as always, their achievements would be impossible without the ongoing support of our Chair The Hon. Marcia Neave AO and our dedicated Board, together with our funders and pro bono partners.

Letter from our Chair

The Hon. Marcia Neave AO

I am pleased to reflect on another year of advocacy and strategic engagement as chair of Justice Connect. Our work has helped to make the law fairer and more responsive to people's legal needs by making sure that they receive appropriate legal support.



COVID-19 has exposed the growing justice gap for many people and not-for-profit organisations. An important part of our 2024 strategy is to transform our service delivery so that it contributes to broader social change. My experience in advocating for law reform to address systemic disadvantages faced by women and children who have experienced violence, as well as people on the margins of society, shows how advocacy can improve the legal system, ensure better outcomes for people, and protect them from further harm.

The pandemic has put many community organisations under immense pressure. In running Australia's specialist legal service for not-for-profit organisations, we have witnessed how the community sector has continued to respond to greater demand for services despite shrinking resources. They deliver indispensable services to support communities. This is one of the many reasons we are proud to have continued leading our campaign to

By focusing on prevention, early support, a housing-first policy, and service-based responses, we know that governments can stop homelessness before it starts.

#FixFundraising, and joined over 60 other charities to ensure that the democratic and civil rights of charities and their volunteers remain legally protected.

Not-for-profit organisations aren't the only ones who need timely legal intervention.

We know an increasing number of people – particularly renters without secure housing or work – are struggling and facing evictions into homelessness. Drawing on our casework and data, we advocated for better legal and financial supports for renters. Our legal services prove how integrated legal and social work assistance can help people avoid homelessness, and support them to achieve long-term stability and safety.

The criminal justice system is no answer to homelessness. Relying on it criminalises social and health issues, compounds homelessness, and further burdens Victoria's already stretched justice system. By focusing on prevention, early support, a housing-first policy, and service-based responses, we know that governments can stop homelessness before it starts.

Increasing financial pressures on family members, including job losses, extreme housing pressure, and relationship breakdowns, have also led to a rise in the abuse of older people. Public health restrictions also restricted access to community, particularly for older people – making it harder to report or access support to address abuse. In response to this rising legal need, we were one of the first organisations to integrate telehealth video conferencing into our specialist legal services for older people. Key jurisdictions also trialled 'remote witnessing' to allow important legal documents such as wills, Powers of Attorney (PoAs), and statutory declarations to be witnessed and executed using digital technology. Informed by our extensive experience in assisting our older clients execute PoAs, Enduring Guardianship Appointments and wills, we made a submission strongly supporting permanent remote witnessing in NSW, provided that adequate safeguards are put in place.

I thank Chris Povey for his support and crucial leadership. I also want to acknowledge our Board: Nicky Friedman, Tristan Cutcliffe, Dr Crystal McKinnon, Professor Sarah Maddison, Jidah Clark, and Vicki Jamieson for your exceptional contributions.

I want to thank Justice Connect's staff for the tenacity, commitment, and resilience they have shown in increasing access to legal support and progressing social justice during this challenging time.

Who is Justice Connect?



In the face of rising levels of unmet legal need, we design and deliver high-impact interventions to increase access to legal support and progress social justice.

Every year, over 8.5 million Australians experience legal problems, and more than half don't get the legal help they need. Amongst these are disadvantaged communities who often can't afford a lawyer – including people who live in regional or rural areas, older people ageing alone, or migrants on temporary visas. The evidence we gather in our legal services clearly show how accessing legal help can make a positive impact on a person's health, housing security, financial stability, and relationships.

We use digital strategies so our lawyers and social workers can spend their time doing the work that adds the most value: assisting communities that are disproportionately impacted by the law.

While existing unmet legal need remains, COVID-19 and other disasters are driving extreme hardship and financial stress, leaving more individuals and not-for-profit organisations seeking help with new and even more complex legal issues.

Through our multi-channel and multi-intensity legal services and network of over 10,000 pro bono lawyers, we work across a wide range of areas of law and at all stages of legal issues, from providing legal support to communities affected by natural disasters, to helping employees and not-for-profit organisations navigate complex regulatory requirements.

Being nimble and responding to the needs of communities is a priority, so we employ inclusive design approaches to help develop legal interventions alongside the people who are most impacted. We recognise the importance of a holistic, client-centred approach and co-locate our services across Victoria and New South Wales to reach more people.

Consistent with our commitment to closing the justice gap, we collaborate with like-minded organisations to share our innovative technology and service design insights to increase access to justice both nationally and internationally. We use digital strategies so our lawyers and social workers can spend their time doing the work that adds the most value: assisting communities that are disproportionately impacted by the law.

We don't just help people navigate the legal system, we also work to improve it. With passionate and creative staff, a deep expertise in the law and an evidence-informed mindset, we leverage casework insights and data to advocate for policy change and systems level change.

Complex laws, and low awareness of the legal dimensions of a problem or the available help out there prevent people from seeking help. We democratise access to legal information by developing plain language resources and self-help tools that empower people to self-advocate and find solutions.

We stay accountable by rigorously monitoring and evaluating the tangible impacts of our services, and being responsive to those learnings in order to achieve our theory of change.

Launching our 2024 strategy

To help the community overcome more frequent natural disasters, an increasing lack of affordable housing, and the erosion of the social safety net, legal service organisations like ours must design and deliver more effective services that can withstand not just the crises of today, but those to come as well.

Taking stock of the challenges ahead of us, our 2024 strategy reinforces our commitment to innovate so we can assist the growing number of people seeking legal help in the most effective way, with the limited resources that we have.

Our strategic directions will enable us to increase access to justice for the many people and not-for-profit organisations who cannot afford or access legal support. By investing in digital strategies and developing service provision and consumer-facing tools, we will reach more communities

that need help and build public support for the issues we advocate on. We'll pursue better outcomes by including the people we seek to help in the design of solutions, as well as fostering innovation and creativity among our staff.

We won't just stop at helping people navigate the law, we will also challenge the system-level drivers of

legal need and disadvantage. We will influence better policy and legal processes by harnessing our strong partnerships, the evidence in our casework and data, and the lived experiences of those we help.

This work has never been more important. To ensure we can continue running our tools and services, we will focus on initiatives that build our organisational resilience.

We will continue to hold ourselves accountable to our objectives by continuously measuring, evaluating, and learning from our work.

Above all else, we will always put the needs of people and communities at the heart of everything we do, and prioritise interventions that demonstrate better outcomes for them.

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Our impact in numbers

Our theory of change culminates in four impacts that guide and shape our work:



Every day, our dedicated and highly skilled staff deliver urgently needed legal assistance to people facing legal problems that threaten their financial, physical, and mental wellbeing.

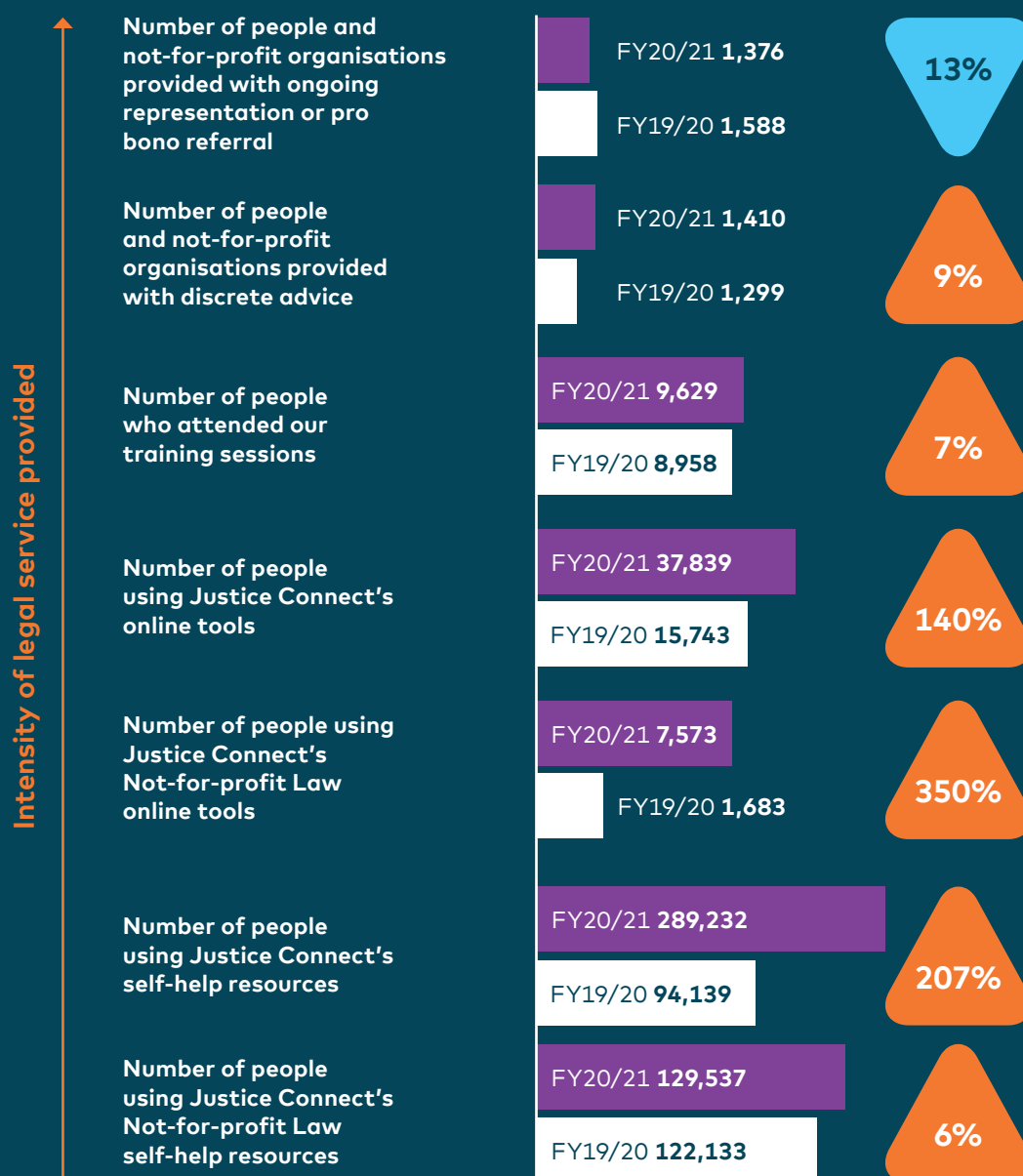
We know that different legal problems require different solutions. So our multi-intensity and multi-channel approach allows us to provide varying levels of assistance according to the needs and nature of people's legal issues. We deliver help through self-help resources, interactive tools and apps, legal advice, and case work. We're able to achieve this mix of assistance by using the knowledge and insights of our expert staff, close collaboration with our pro bono network, and by harnessing our digital capability.

With many Australian cities in lockdown, and with people relying on the internet to maintain connection with their communities,

the 2020-21 financial year saw us invest heavily in increasing the visibility of our existing range of self-help tools and resources, as well as designing and developing new ones.

People's legal needs are changing. We're seeing more people needing help, and the help they need is more complex. For clients who required more intensive or holistic support, our legal services and pro bono network were there to help them. As part of our multi-intensity approach, we also published 57 new self-help resources for individuals, and 11 new self-help resources for not-for-profit organisations. We then built or enhanced three self-help tools that responded to rising legal need across several areas of law. This allowed more people and community organisations to instantly access the support and advice they needed to self-advocate and solve their legal problems.

This year we more than doubled the number of people accessing our continually updated and growing library of self-help legal resources, and more than three times as many people and not-for-profit organisations used our specialised online legal tools.



This financial year we fielded enquiries from 24,706 people and not-for-profit organisations. Updates to our intake and referrer tools meant eligibility was made clearer to people seeking help earlier in the process, while a new spam filter resulted in lower but more genuine enquiries. While there was an increase in online enquiries, offline and traditional channels like the

courts and other offices experienced a decrease during the peak of COVID-19 restrictions.

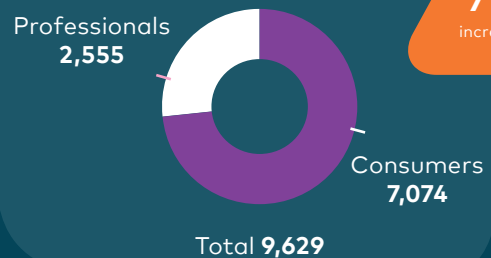
We also ran a record number of in-depth training sessions for individuals, professionals, and member firms to increase the sector's capacity to help people navigate the legal system.

We leveraged
51,054 pro
bono hours

13%
increase

Valued at
\$20,421,600

Number of people who attended
our training sessions



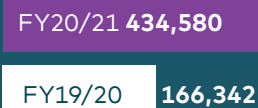
7%
increase

Number of pro bono referrals



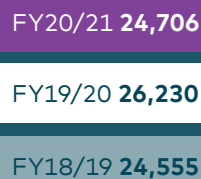
9%
decrease

Overall users on Justice
Connect's websites

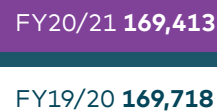


161%
increase

Number of people and not-for-profit
organisations that made
enquiries with Justice Connect



Overall users on Justice
Connect's Not-for-profit
Law website



By leveraging the insights, evidence, and expertise gained through our casework, we advocated to increase awareness of system-level issues, reduce the incidence of legal problems, and progress social justice.



6 submissions to State and Federal Governments, building on expertise from our casework and client insights

1. Submission to the PAEC Inquiry into the Victorian Government's Response to the COVID-19 Pandemic (July 2020)
2. Joint policy statement with the Charities Crisis Cabinet on our campaign to Fix Fundraising (November 2020)
3. Submission to the New South Wales Government on the proposed Charitable Fundraising Regulation 2020 (NSW) (September 2020)
4. Submission to the Federal Treasury's exposure draft of the ACNC Amendment (2021 Measures No. 2) Regulations 2021 (March 2021)
5. Fundraising Survey 2021 in partnership with the Charities Crisis Cabinet (May 2021)
6. Submission to the New South Wales Government's Department of Communities and Justice's remote witnessing consultation paper (June 2021)

We were named a winner in the 2020 HESTA Excellence Awards in the category of Community Services. The HESTA Excellence Awards recognise the work of teams and organisations who enhance the health and wellbeing of individuals, families, and communities.

Key advocacy moments

- **DEC 2020:** The Federal Government put fundraising law reform on the National Federation Reform Council (NFRC)'s agenda.
- **MAR 2021:** Housing a welcome focus in Victorian Government's Mental Health Royal Commission.
- **MAR 2021:** Victoria makes digital witnessing of legal documents permanent.
- **APR 2021:** Victorian Government's final report on their Inquiry into Homelessness in Victoria reflects the evidence we gave during our public hearing and in our final submission.
- **APR 2021:** Bolstering the sector's response to the ACNC Amendment

Sharing our technology here and around the world

Every year more than 5 billion people globally have a legal problem, with the majority missing out on any legal assistance. At the same time, the appetite in the legal profession to undertake pro bono work is steadily increasing. By applying sophisticated technology to unlock and match pro bono legal capacity with unmet legal need, we can make sure more people have access to justice.

While communities in Australia are still recovering from the 2019-20 Black Summer bushfires, and enduring the ongoing challenges of COVID-19, the demand on community legal centres (CLCs) has never been greater. New groups of people who've never required assistance are now seeking

legal help for the first time, with many of their issues falling outside of their local CLC's areas of expertise. In turn, these CLCs are facing increasing pressure to respond despite their capacity and funding constraints.

While these pressures mount, law firms are stepping up with a desire to do more for the community. Firms have the expertise to assist with a range of specialised and complex matters, and have highly engaged and experienced staff who have worked in increasing access to justice over an extended period. In this context, our

pro bono network offers huge opportunities for CLCs needing to meet demand, and our digital platforms help by overcoming the barriers to providing in-person services during COVID-19.

Our CLCs on the Portal pilot project

In the aftermath of unrelenting disasters, it was clear that there was a need to better connect under-resourced rural and regional CLCs with large city-based law firms. Our *Pro Bono Portal* was in a strong position to tackle this challenge, designed to quickly and simply match and refer clients to our network of over 10,000 pro bono lawyers using built-in algorithms.

We developed a pilot project to test the hypothesis that technology and pro bono could help people that the CLCs could not. Using an iterative, human-centred design approach to understand CLCs' key requirements, we began the design and development process to enable CLCs to post opportunities on the *Portal* in mid-2020. The pilot successfully demonstrated that CLCs could use technology to place matters on the *Portal* and that the technology was adaptable and scalable for use among a range of organisations. In addition to tackling legal need, the pilot allowed the 14 participating CLCs and 12 member firms to collaborate and build stronger relationships. The feedback we received indicated that the project helped build the technical capacity of CLCs, and supported CLCs to find new pathways to better assist people.

CLCs on the Portal pilot

CLC onboarded

14



Law firms engaged

12

CLC users onboarded

96

Our Pro Bono Portal went global

Following the launch of our *Pro Bono Portal* in Australia, we received many requests to license the platform internationally. We conducted three years of research and product development with global clearinghouses and law firms for our *Gateway Project*, which demonstrated that the user experience of existing approaches to placing matters in the global pro bono ecosystem was poor for every stakeholder involved. Clearinghouses and firms have been using time- and resource-inefficient systems that ultimately reduced access to justice.

Aside from the enormous challenges involved in developing an AI model, we've been working to make sure the model is inclusive and works for the people who are most impacted by the legal system and in greatest need of help.

To swiftly meet the growing international demand, we launched global pilots in the United Kingdom, Ireland and New Zealand – jurisdictions similar to Australia in terms of language and legal system. After extensive discussions, we deployed the first *Global Portal* platform to UK partner LawWorks in July 2020. Since then, they have assisted us to develop new features which they are

using to promote the *Portal* across the UK. We also deployed the *Portal* to Public Interest Law Alliance (PILA) – Ireland's only pro bono referral service – and to Te Ara Ture, the first clearinghouse service of its kind in New Zealand.

The insights from these global deployments have and will continue to inform the development of *Portal* features across every jurisdiction, language group, and legal system.

We're building cutting edge artificial intelligence (AI) to better connect people seeking legal help to service providers

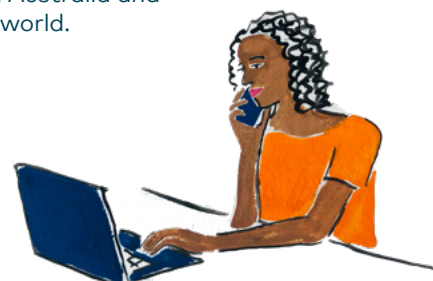
While online tools like our *Pro Bono Portal* form an integral part in scaling our services,

it is important to acknowledge that there are other critical barriers to accessing justice. Through our research, we uncovered that 41% of our online users were unable to correctly categorise their legal issue when applying for legal help. Despite people believing they had applied for help using the correct pathway or category in the enquiry process, their own legal diagnoses were highly inaccurate. This proved the huge potential of natural language processing to help improve the intake process, empower people to confidently describe their problem in their own words, and ultimately direct them to the right legal service and resources efficiently.

We established a partnership with AI experts at the University of Melbourne School of Computing Science, who have been developing and helping us train an AI natural language processing model that can diagnose legal problems described by people in their own words.

Aside from the enormous challenges involved in developing an AI model, we've been working to make sure the model is inclusive and works for the people who are most impacted by the legal system and in greatest need of help. We know that biased systems lead to poorer outcomes when members of diverse communities seek legal help, so we're actively sourcing language samples from people from a range of marginalised backgrounds and applying our inclusive design approach to the development of the model.

By continuing to implement one of our key strategic directions to scale our services using digital strategies, we can improve the experiences of people seeking help both in Australia and around the world.





Helping small business owners and farmers affected by natural disasters

Ben's story*

We have played a leading role in the pro bono legal response to natural disasters for over a decade. Through our service delivery, we've witnessed how the wellbeing of communities is closely linked to the wellbeing of their local small businesses. We have adopted disaster response as a key strategic priority, with a focus on strengthening community resilience for individuals, small businesses, farmers, and not-for-profit organisations.

Ben is a small business owner who ran three businesses including a tour business in Sydney, and another tour business and café on the Mid-North Coast. When the

bushfires raged through the region during what should have been peak season in October 2019, his businesses began to accumulate almost \$30,000 in unpaid bills.

As his businesses had not been operating for long, Ben was not eligible for any government support. He was left with no choice but to close his café in January 2020.

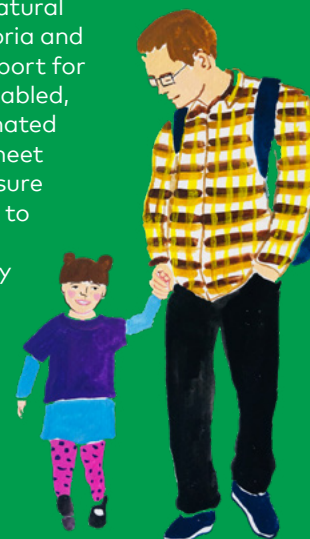
Ben tried to keep up with the bills for his remaining tour businesses. But then COVID-19 struck in 2020, followed by the Mid-North Coast floods in March 2021. The pressure was immense – and he didn't know where to turn to for help.

"It was one thing after another."

Ben heard about Justice Connect when he attended a floods recovery hub and mentioned to a frontline worker that he was struggling to manage his complicated and interrelated problems. He had previously approached a solicitor for help but couldn't even afford the initial advice. The disaster recovery support worker suggested Ben apply for help from Justice Connect. In June 2021, Ben applied for legal help online using our specially tailored intake tool for small businesses impacted by natural disasters. Shortly after, our lawyers called Ben to discuss his concerns and identified four discrete legal issues: managing his substantial business debts; a workplace injury claim; overcharging by an accountant; and a dispute with a storage provider about unfair business storage costs.

Our lawyers successfully connected Ben with a firm for ongoing pro bono assistance for all four matters via our *Pro Bono Portal*.

Stories like Ben's are just one of the many we've encountered from our work responding to natural disasters across Victoria and NSW. With more support for scaled-up, digitally enabled, strategic, and coordinated sector responses to meet legal need, we can ensure communities are able to access legal help as quickly and seamlessly as possible.



*All names in this story have been changed to protect their identity.

Strategic engagement and advocacy



By leveraging the insights, evidence, and expertise gained through our work we can increase awareness of systemic issues, reduce the incidence of legal problems, and progress social justice.

Over the last 12 months, the pandemic has exposed the fault lines of disadvantage. Even before the devastating 2019-20 Black Summer bushfires and COVID-19, thousands of people were already experiencing or at risk of homelessness. Our clients are cutting spending on healthcare and groceries just to keep a roof over their head – making the need for targeted legal and financial supports more important than ever. With

more people and not-for-profit organisations seeking legal help, building stronger public support for systems-level change and better service design became a key strategic priority.

We launched a strategic engagement pilot program to facilitate better coordination of our campaigns and build the internal enablers for effective public communications. We continued to shape policy with well thought

out and sustained communications strategies across our key issue areas including preventing the criminalisation of homelessness, establishing a single national scheme to #FixFundraising, preventing sexual harassment in the workplace, and introducing safeguards to address and prevent the abuse of older people.

We continued to shape policy with strategic and sustained communications strategies on our key issue areas including preventing the criminalisation of homelessness, establishing a single national scheme to #FixFundraising, preventing sexual harassment in the workplace, and introducing safeguards to address and prevent the abuse of older people.

Our issue-based campaign pages served as hubs for submissions, articles, and relevant actions, playing a key part in our strategy to link our consultations with government and policy makers with our public facing advocacy. By better showcasing our strategic engagement activities and improving visibility of our campaigns, we are building public support and continuing to tackle the system level drivers of disadvantage.

Building on previous casework across a diverse range of areas of law, we engaged in policy reform by making submissions to all levels of government. Our efforts did not go unnoticed. In March 2021, the Victorian Government tabled the final report from the state's first ever Inquiry into Homelessness. The inquiry was a crucial step towards acknowledging and responding to the changing scale and nature of homelessness across the state. We were the only legal services provider invited to give evidence. Many of the report's 51 recommendations directly reflected our recommendations on how to prioritise prevention, and intervene early to ensure that people do not become homeless.

During the past financial year, we also submitted to the Federal Treasury's exposure draft of the ACNC Amendment (2021 Measures No. 2) Regulations 2021, the NSW Government's proposed Charitable Fundraising Regulation, the NSW Government Department of Communities and Justice's consultation into remote witnessing, and the Public Accounts and Estimates Committee (PAEC)'s Inquiry into the Victorian Government's response to the COVID-19 pandemic.

By better showcasing our strategic engagement activities and improving visibility of our campaigns, we are building public support and continuing to tackle the system level drivers of disadvantage.

We've continued to work closely with our partners to make the legal system and legal services sector better serve people who turn to us for help. We launched *Joining Up Justice*, an interactive website summarising years of cross-sector research with the aim of improving the experience of

individuals seeking legal help. The *Joining Up Justice* website plots the various stages of the legal help-seeking journey from both the perspectives of a help-seeker and assisting legal organisation. Having a shared understanding of the complex and often challenging journey can help our sector seize

opportunities for improvement, including using more supportive technology to deliver better services and outcomes. Our goal is to continue enriching the website over time and use it to advocate for change at both the organisational and ecosystem level.

We published a groundbreaking research report, *Seeking Legal Help Online: Understanding the 'Missing Majority'*, which examined how people search for legal help, and the ways in which legal service organisations can improve the way we develop legal information and tools using a human-centred design approach. Given ongoing disruptions to in-person services, and an increase of people looking for legal help online, our 12 design principles offer a framework to help respond to changing legal need effectively.



Keeping renters safely housed through strategic litigation

Margaret's story*

On behalf of our client Margaret, and in collaboration with our pro bono member firms and counsel, we ran a test case to confirm whether Victorian renters can be evicted for rental arrears accrued due to COVID-19 and its associated restrictions.

Margaret had been renting her home in one of north-west Melbourne's green, leafy suburbs since 2015. Before the pandemic, she always paid rent on time, and was able to rely on her income from rideshare driving to cover her rent and other expenses.

However when the pandemic hit, resulting in a massive fall in demand for rideshare services, Margaret suffered severe financial hardship. She was at a loss. For the first time in over six years, she could not afford to pay rent. With only JobSeeker (which made up just about 30% of her usual income), to cover all her living expenses, Margaret went

into debt and was forced to cut spending on her health, groceries, and pets just to keep a roof over her head.

Two days after the Victorian eviction moratorium for residential tenants ended on 28 March 2021, Margaret's rental provider started eviction proceedings for unpaid rent. Margaret was already struggling through anxiety and panic attacks because she wasn't able to make full rent payments

while falling behind on other bills. While on the brink of homelessness, she wasn't sure where to go for help.

Thankfully, Consumer Affairs Victoria put Margaret in touch with us. Running the test case pro bono, our lawyers argued that renters like Margaret who could not pay their rent due to COVID-19 should not be evicted. Although the Victorian Civil and Administrative Tribunal (VCAT) acknowledged that Margaret fell behind rent due to a valid COVID-19 reason**, VCAT found Margaret's eviction to be lawful. On behalf of Margaret, our pro bono member firm, Clayton Utz, and pro bono counsel will appeal VCAT's decision in the Court of Appeal of the Supreme Court of Victoria in September 2021. At the time of publishing, an outcome had not yet been determined.

Margaret's experience highlights the ongoing and cumulative impact of COVID-19, and how Victorian renters do not have sufficient legal and financial supports to stay safely housed.

The impacts of the global pandemic did not end for people at the conclusion of Victoria's eviction moratorium. As a result, we are building this decision into our advocacy for better housing security and supports for Victorian renters during and after COVID-19. Using evidence from our integrated legal and social work services, we will continue to advocate for stronger protections and rights for renters like Margaret, to ensure more people stay safely housed during and after the pandemic.



The impacts of this global pandemic did not end for people at the conclusion of Victoria's eviction moratorium on 28 March 2021. As a result, we are building this decision into our advocacy for better housing security and supports for Victorian renters during and after COVID-19.

*All names in this story have been changed to protect their identity.

**A COVID-19 reason is defined in the legislation as illness, being unable to comply because of restrictions, being unable to comply without suffering severe hardship, or as a result of any exceptional circumstance related to the pandemic.

Helping organisations comply with complex laws

Kyogle Together

Delivering legal services to empower stronger and more effective community organisations is a core part of our theory of change. By building community resilience, and providing timely and appropriate legal support, we help smaller not-for-profit organisations better understand complicated laws and stay legally compliant.

Kyogle Together is a community organisation based in Kyogle, a small town in the Northern Rivers region of New South Wales with a population of less than 3,000 people. The organisation, run by 13 part-time staff and just over 30 volunteers, provides a wide range of essential social and health services including emergency relief, family and domestic violence support, and drug and alcohol harm prevention.

Without our legal interventions, small organisations like Kyogle Together would not have been able to afford the expert pro bono legal advice we provided and facilitated.

Kyogle Together's General Manager, Sharyn Marshall, first engaged our Not-for-Profit Law program when she worked at another small not-for-profit organisation that needed legal help to change their constitution years before. From that experience, she knew about our specialist legal service for not-for-profit organisations in Australia.

Constitutions are important as they set out the rules for how not-for-profit organisations will operate, including the way the organisation's governing body makes decisions and is accountable to their members. Not-for-profit organisations also need their constitutions to contain certain clauses to be endorsed as a Deductible Gift Recipient (DGR). When Sharyn approached us, Kyogle Together needed help updating their constitution to apply for DGR endorsement. For years, Sharyn wanted to

apply for DGR status, but like many smaller not-for-profit organisations, couldn't due to limited time and capacity. Having DGR endorsement would enable donors to make tax-deductible donations to Kyogle Together, and allow the organisation to apply for funding from grant-makers and philanthropic bodies who only fund DGRs. Within just one week, we were able to connect Kyogle Together with our member law firm Clyde & Co for pro bono assistance with an application for DGR endorsement.

"Justice Connect's lawyers were always prompt and really helpful. Whenever we talked, they understood exactly what we were requesting. We'll definitely be contacting them again for assistance."
– Sharyn Marshall, General Manager of Kyogle Together.

A few months later, we also assisted Kyogle Together through our *Governance Health Check*, a service offered to not-for-profit organisations funded by the NSW Department of Communities and Justice. Through the service, our lawyers personally assessed the organisation's governance and legal processes and obligations, and provided recommendations for any areas of improvement.

Sharyn described our *Governance Health Check* as "brilliant" as it gave the organisation a path to set priorities, and a new awareness of what needed to be done to reinvigorate their processes. By supporting and improving the capacity of not-for-profit organisations to understand complex laws, and facilitating referrals through our pro bono partners, we can free up their limited resources so they can achieve their mission of serving their communities.



Preventing abuse of older people with pro bono and health justice partnerships

Bethany and Divya's stories*

By building pathways across our pro bono network and through health justice partnerships (HJPs) across Victoria and New South Wales, we're able to identify cases of elder abuse and execute the necessary legal documents that support older people to build more safe and secure futures for themselves.

Our client Bethany was an older woman, who in 2018 started working casually in a company warehouse owned by her son, Mark. Later that year, Mark asked Bethany to become a company director despite Bethany having no previous relevant experience.

In early 2019, Mark borrowed funds for the company from a lender, Ezy-Funds. The loan agreement listed Bethany as a director and signatory to the loan, and offered any property owned by the company as security. But the company subsequently fell into financial distress and failed to service the loan. By January 2020, it was placed into liquidation, and not long after, Mark entered into voluntary bankruptcy.

In April 2020, Ezy-Funds sought court orders for the possession and sale of Bethany's home. This was despite there being no reference to Bethany's personal property in the loan agreement's security arrangement.

When Bethany applied for help from Justice Connect, she was facing default judgement and ultimately the loss of her home, unless she took immediate steps to file a defence. Like most people who need legal assistance, she was not familiar with the law and needed timely support to avoid potentially losing her home and money over a legal problem caused by her son and his bankruptcy. Over a series of three appointments, we took comprehensive instructions from Bethany, helped her obtain key documents, and prepared and filed a defence to stave off an application for default judgement.

We subsequently placed a referral to one of our pro bono members and, at the firm's request, engaged a senior barrister. We played a vital role in facilitating discussions between Bethany (who had no computer access and very little understanding of legal procedure) and the legal team.

Our intervention and subsequent pro bono referral changed the trajectory of Bethany's circumstances. Ezy-Funds ceased contacting her with threats and demands concerning the case. Bethany was finally free to live her life without putting her financial and housing security at risk.

Researchers estimate that 14% of Australian's ageing population have experienced elder abuse. With increased social isolation comes the threat of an even bigger spike going undetected. By training healthcare and social workers to identify the





common signs of elder abuse, they can refer clients to our lawyers – enabling older people to access specialist support in a safe and supportive environment.

Divya*, who was referred to us by a social worker through one of our health justice partnerships (HJPs) at the Sacred Heart Health Service in Sydney, had been

experiencing a complex case of financial abuse by her son, Ravi. Ravi, like many hospitality workers in casual positions, lost his job during the pandemic which further complicated his mental health and addiction issues. As a result, he became more dependent on Divya by living in her home rent-free and without contributing to groceries or bills. The financial and emotional abuse started to escalate

when he found a way to access his mother's aged pension using her keycard.

Divya was hesitant to report her son's abuse as her two older children Yash and Ruhi were overseas, and she didn't want to end up further isolated. We use opportunities to resolve more minor or non-legal matters such as bank fraud or debt to build the

necessary trust needed to tackle the more complex matters of abuse. We first set out to help Divya cancel the keycard held by Ravi and advised her bank that Ravi should be denied access to the account. Once we built that relationship with Divya, we were able to suggest the necessary legal interventions to help her regain dignity and control of her life.

Our lawyers drafted and executed an Enduring Power of Attorney (EPoA) and Enduring Guardianship Appointment (EGA) which appointed Ruhi and Yash as her attorney and guardian – leaving important decisions concerning Divya's finances and health with people that she trusted. We were also able to overcome COVID-19 restrictions and apply newly introduced remote witnessing laws to help execute both documents and witness the signatures through video conferencing.

Bethany and Divya's stories show how older people unfamiliar with the law or who are socially isolated can be at greater risk of abuse. Without our legal interventions, training provided to healthcare workers, and access to our pro bono network, Bethany and Divya would have never been able to utilise the necessary legal documents to affirm their agency and wellbeing.

By training healthcare and social workers to identify the common signs of elder abuse, they can refer clients to our lawyers – enabling older people to access specialist support in a safe and supportive environment.

*All names in this story have been changed to protect their identity.



A multi-channel and multi-intensity approach

We use a multi-channel and multi-intensity approach to ensure we reach the greatest number of individuals and not-for-profit organisations. Not all legal matters require one-to-one legal services – many people are capable of self-help and self-advocacy when empowered with the right resources.

Legal service organisations cannot wait for people needing legal help to find our services once their problem has escalated into a crisis. Over the 2020-21 financial year, we developed a range of solutions and outreach strategies with the intention of getting people to tackle their problem as early as possible.

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We launched our digital consumer outreach program to help plan and execute marketing strategies and tactics to increase engagement with the full range of our service offerings. Using a multi-channel approach including paid marketing and organic social media, we tested new platforms and reached out to frontline services and local government agencies with tailored engagement.

Between June 2020 and July 2021, we collectively reached people over 10.2 million times through our digital consumer outreach, across Google, Bing, Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, and LinkedIn. In particular, we drove an 89% increase in people visiting our self-help resources for individuals and not-for-profit organisations.

We took an iterative approach and ensured our strategies were guided by message testing, best practice marketing, and

platform optimisation. We kept a keen eye on legal enquiry and search trends, page views, as well as direct feedback from people with lived experience.

We analysed how people were engaging with specific legal matters online to help inform our own language and framing. By mapping the personas and archetypes of people who engaged with us, we were able to better understand their emotional state when trying to resolve their legal problem, and tailor our messaging and outreach in response to those needs. We listened to our target cohorts using surveys, user data, and heat-maps to improve all of our online tools and apps.

In the last year we launched our *Victorian Rules Tool*, designed to help incorporated associations draft their constitution quickly and easily. We also developed two new self-help tools in response to feedback from not-for-profit organisations who were struggling to navigate complex regulations and laws. The first, our *Deductible Gift Recipient (DGR) Tool*, which guides organisations through complicated tax laws, and provides them with a tailored, downloadable report on their eligibility for DGR status. The second, our *NSW Constitution Tool*, allows incorporated associations in NSW to build a customised constitution that's ready to lodge with NSW Fair Trading.

We tackled misinformation by ensuring people can access timely, accurate, and trustworthy information. Our self-help resources on the various State and Territory Governments' emergency powers under public health orders continued to be highly-visited resources, as was our explainer on the new Victorian rental laws introduced in March 2021.



Dear Landlord: adapting and scaling in a crisis

Since the end of the eviction moratorium in March 2021, we witnessed a rise in demand for help with eviction matters: 95% more renters faced eviction for unpaid rent, while 64% more used our free self-help tool *Dear Landlord*. Given the far-reaching and ongoing impacts of COVID-19, we adapted *Dear Landlord* in response to fast-moving policy changes, user feedback, and the needs of renters in Victoria.

Dear Landlord is a free, online self-help tool supporting renters in Victoria to avoid eviction and stay safely housed. Since its launch in 2018, we have continued to develop *Dear Landlord* by responding to changing legal need and addressing the feedback provided by users of the tool.

Given the ongoing impacts of COVID-19, more people are facing financial stress and the risk of eviction into homelessness. To meet the growing demand with our limited resources, we

identified elements of our integrated services – such as assistance with drafting letters to rental providers and preparing for VCAT – that could be scaled with digital innovation.

Taking a human-centered design approach to understand and respond to the changing needs of renters facing eviction, we came to understand how renters facing eviction had limited understanding of their legal rights and how they felt overwhelmed by the challenges they faced.

We designed *Dear Landlord* to support renters every step of the way by:

- generating tailored legal documents (e.g. a letter to the rental provider, application to VCAT);
- explaining the eviction process in plain language (including an animation and communications strategy); and
- providing guidance to seek further financial and legal support.

To coincide with the introduction of Victoria's new rental laws and the end of the COVID-19-related eviction moratorium in March 2021, we relaunched a third version of *Dear Landlord* with new features.

We recognised that renters face a range of legal and financial issues, and built in off-ramps to our network of pro bono lawyers and in-house social workers who could offer ongoing help. The latest iteration of *Dear Landlord* saw a 71% increase in users compared to the previous year. We also consistently saw first-time users accessing the online tool prior to or upon receiving their first Notice to Vacate (NTV) for rental arrears (83% of users), highlighting the importance of *Dear Landlord* as an early intervention tool to prevent eviction. Over 500 documents have been generated since September 2020.

We also consistently saw first-time users accessing the online tool prior to or upon receiving their first Notice to Vacate (NTV) for rental arrears (83% of users), highlighting the importance of *Dear Landlord* as an early intervention tool to prevent eviction.

As Victorians continue to endure the COVID-19 health crisis and face financial and housing pressures, we'll be making sure that *Dear Landlord* can adapt to the challenges they face. We'll be continuing to respond quickly and in real-time to snap lockdowns; notifying renters of available government support; integrating financial support and other resources; and rolling out significant evidence-based improvements to the user-experience flow and accessibility of the tool.

Using the insights and rich data gathered through *Dear Landlord*, we are also continuing to advocate on behalf of Victorian renters around systemic issues and trends, including ongoing advocacy with the Victorian Government for more financial and legal supports during COVID-19.

New Dear Landlord features



A landing page that alerts renters to the changed laws, explains what the tool is, who can use it and how it can help – including a step-by-step animation video explaining the eviction process;



Helpful tips alongside *Dear Landlord* content that further explains legal terms, the new laws, the eviction process, and use of the online tool; and



Responsive logic-driven pathways, enabling renters to determine where they are in the eviction process, and what their options and rights are by answering a few questions.



Our people

There is an entire community of people that make our impact possible.

Staff

Our work is conducted by 87 staff across Australia. Our exceptional team has continued to deliver outstanding client-centred services remotely due to COVID-19. We recognise that the process has not been straightforward or easy, and deeply appreciate their efforts.

Secondees

Our member firms offer invaluable support to our initiatives by providing secondees for three to six month periods. These partnerships are critical to our capacity to provide timely and effective legal support to the community.

Volunteers

Our volunteers include a diverse range of professionals, law students, and practical legal trainees. We extend our thanks to them for their remarkable commitment and service.

Pro bono lawyers

Our valued network of over 10,000 pro bono lawyers offer their time, expertise, and dedication to prevent the negative consequences of legal problems experienced by individuals and not-for-profit organisations. With their help, we are able to deliver impactful responses to unmet legal need, and improve the community's wellbeing.

Our patrons

We offer a special thanks to our patrons whose support and commitment to our organisation has been vital to engaging new supporters and beneficiaries alike.

Emeritus Professor Gillian Triggs
Ruth McColl AO
Robert Fitzgerald AM

Board

We are governed by an independent, skills-based volunteer board whose commitment to Justice Connect is crucial to our success.

Our directors for 2020-21 were:

Marcia Neave (Chair)
Nicky Friedman (Deputy Chair)
Dr Crystal McKinnon (Director)
Tristan Cutcliffe (Director)
Professor Sarah Maddison (Director)
David Bardsley (Director – retired November 2020)
Gordon Renouf (Director – retired April 2021)
Richard Wilson (Director – retired July 2021)



Our members and secondees

Members

abode migration lawyers
 Allen & Overy
 Allens
 Arnold Bloch Leibler
 Arnold Dallas McPherson Injury Lawyers
 Ashurst
 Baker McKenzie
 Banki Haddock Fiora
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 Makinson d'Apice
 Maurice Blackburn Lawyers
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 McCullough Robertson Lawyers
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 Robinson Gill
 Ross Mackay Legal
 Russell Kennedy Lawyers
 Sparke Helmore
 The Victorian Bar
 Thomson Geer
 Transport Accident Commission
 Webb Henderson
 White & Case
 Women's Legal Service Victoria
 Woolf Associates Solicitors
 Wotton + Kearney

Secondees

Ella Alexander, Makinson d'Apice
 Victor Bold, Herbert Smith Freehills
 Rosie Camilleri, cohealth
 Daisy Eales, DLA Piper Australia
 Laura Elliot, DLA Piper Australia
 Rosie Evans, Norton Rose Fullbright
 Monique Failla, Maddocks
 Antonia Glover, MinterEllison
 Tatum Joseph, MinterEllison
 Philippa Lo, Ashurst
 Jacqueline Morgan, Allens
 Lauren Musgrave, Corrs Chambers Westgarth
 Gerard Papas, Allens
 Breigh Smith, Herbert Smith Freehills
 Shayne Solin, Allens
 Courtney Spear, Norton Rose Fullbright
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 Romany Tauber, Australian Government Solicitors
 Xavier Vale, MinterEllison
 William Wong, Allens
 Henry Yuan, Norton Rose Fullbright

We'd like to thank the following members who participated in our online legal clinics, CLCs on the Portal pilot, and AI language tagging:

Allens
 Baker McKenzie
 Clayton Utz
 Corrs Chambers Westgarth
 Hall & Willcox
 Herbert Smith Freehills
 Holding Redlich
 K&L Gates
 King & Wood Mallesons
 Lander & Rodgers
 MinterEllison
 Norton Rose Fullbright
 Women's Legal Service Victoria



Our finances

The audited financial result for the 2020-21 financial year is a surplus of \$501,281 representing 4.8% of our annual income. At 30 June 2021, we maintained healthy net assets and retained earnings of \$2,113,283.

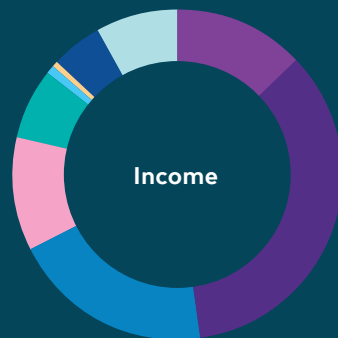
We have continued to diversify our funding sources and increase the number of funding partners, seeing our income grow on 2019-20 by 11% to \$10,419,624.

This positive financial picture is made possible largely thanks to the generosity of government and philanthropy, recognising the need for sustained investment to

support our sector respond to the 2019-20 Black Summer bushfires and COVID-19.

We will continue to pursue our purpose in the most effective and financially sustainable way, by investing and focusing our limited resources on initiatives that build our organisational resilience.

In 2020-21, we received funding from the sources shown in the charts. We also received a range of very generous in-kind support from our members which assisted in making our work possible through staff secondments, volunteer engagement, and donation of resources and facilities.



Federal Government
13%

State Government
35%

Philanthropic
20%

Fee for Service
11%

Membership Fees
7%

Fundraising
1%

Investment Income
0.4%

Other
5%

Other (Government Support)
8%



Employee
74%

Administration
5%

Occupancy
7%

ICT
11%

Direct Program
3%

Fundraising
0%

Our funders and partners

Our high-impact interventions for individuals and community organisations are made possible by the contributions from our valued funders and partners.

Australian Government
Attorney-General's Department
City of Melbourne
Consumer Affairs Victoria
Court Services Victoria
Equity Trustees

- Truby & Florence Williams Charitable Trust

Australian Government Department of Social Services
Helen Macpherson Smith Trust
Ian Potter Foundation
Launch Housing
Lord Mayor's Charitable Foundation
Mannifera
New South Wales Aboriginal Land Council
New South Wales Government Ageing & Disability Commission

New South Wales Government
Department of Communities and Justice
New South Wales Government Women NSW
New South Wales Government Office of Attorney General and Minister for Justice

Perpetual Limited

- Centenary Foundation
- H & L Hecht Trust
- Ian Rollo Currie Estate Foundation

Portland House Foundation
Rotary Australia (Melbourne Division)
Seniors Rights Victoria
StreetSmart Australia
The Shine On Foundation
Transport Accident Commission
Victoria Legal Aid

Victorian Government Department of Families, Fairness and Housing
Victorian Government Department of Justice and Community Safety
Victorian Government Department of Premier and Cabinet
Victorian Legal Services Board + Commissioner



Other thanks

We receive help in many ways from people and organisations, whether through reduced fee services, access to facilities, research, joint advocacy, or through service delivery partnerships.

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 Arnold Bloch Leibler
 Arts Law Centre of Australia
 Australian Centre of Philanthropy and Nonprofit Studies
 Australian Men's Shed Association
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 Clyde & Co
 cohealth
 Committo
 Community Council for Australia
 Consumer Action Law Centre
 Council on the Ageing Victoria
 Council to Homeless Persons
 County Court of Victoria
 Database Consultants Australia
 Dr. Lillian De Bertoli
 DLA Piper Australia
 Domestic Building Dispute Resolution Victoria
 Eastern Community Legal Centre
 Equality Australia
 FAL Lawyers
 Federal Circuit and Family Court of Australia
 Financial Rights Legal Centre
 Fitted for Work

Fitzroy Legal Service
 Dame Phyllis Frost Centre
 FundraisingForce
 Herbert Smith Freehills
 Mitzi Gilligan
 Good Shepherd Australia New Zealand
 Health Justice Australia
 Human Rights Law Centre
 Hume Riverina Community Legal Service
 Hunter Community Legal Centre
 Inner Melbourne Community Legal
 King & Wood Mallesons
 Lanrex
 Law Institute of Victoria
 LawWorks
 Marrickville Legal Centre
 Melbourne City Library
 MinterEllison
 Monash University
 Murrumbidgee Local Health District,
 New South Wales Government
 New South Wales Council of Social Service
 Northern Rivers Community Legal Centre
 Prof. Ann O'Connell
 Office of the Public Advocate
 Paper Giant
 Public Interest Law Alliance
 Piper Alderman

Public Interest Advocacy Centre
Redfern Legal Centre
Sacred Heart Mission
Shoalcoast Community Legal Centre
Social Traders
Social Ventures Australia
Springvale Neighbourhood House
St Kilda Legal Service
St Vincent's Health Network Sydney
St Vincent's Hospital Melbourne
Pat Stragalinos
Stripo
Supreme Court of Victoria
Jo Szczepanska

Te Ara Ture
Tenants Victoria
The Community Street Soccer Program,
The Big Issue
The Centre for Volunteering
Uniting War Memorial Hospital
University of Melbourne
Victorian Association For The Care And
Resettlement Of Offenders (VACRO)
Victorian Civil and Administrative Tribunal
Victorian Council of Social Service
Volunteering Australia
WEstjustice
Women's Legal Service Victoria

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our purpose.**

Julian Burnside AO, QC
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Anton & Jenny Gaudry
Mitzi & George Gilligan
Alix McLean
Fiona & Angus Mcleay
Andrew & Kerry Stephenson

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