

Under One Roof

Innovating in response to the increased legal needs of Victorians experiencing homelessness during COVID-19

May 2022

Over the last 12 months, Justice Connect's Homeless Law (Justice Connect) has seen the ongoing impacts of COVID-19 on people experiencing or at risk of homelessness across Victoria, particularly people sleeping rough. Despite some valuable government initiatives to provide more housing to people experiencing homelessness, many Victorians have been unable to access secure housing, or have recently returned to homelessness.

Thanks to the strength of Justice Connect's embedded community partnerships and colocations through our Under One Roof project, we have been able to responsively adapt our services as COVID-19 has continued. Through this collaborative model, we have delivered an intensive combination of legal and social work assistance to Victorians with complex needs who would have otherwise fallen through the cracks in the pandemic.

Throughout COVID-19, there has been significant demand for our Under One Roof legal supports, with 274 new legal enquiries this year (June 2021–May 2022), representing a 45% increase from last year. Since the project started in 2015, we have seen a remarkable 342% increase in legal enquiries. 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 have enabled us to provide homeless or at risk Victorians with seamless, remote access to legal services during COVID-19.

Access to Justice Connect's integrated criminal law help has also increased, with our senior criminal lawyer providing intensive assistance through 131 new client files (up by 130% from last year). Of these, 59% of clients reported having slept rough, and 55% were referred from our Under One Roof partners. Justice Connect's Homeless Persons' Liaison Officer also provided tailored, integrated social work supports to 78 people with 378 non-legal issues, which were holistically addressed alongside their legal needs.

INNOVATING TO HOLISTICALLY MEET LEGAL NEEDS DURING COVID-19 & THE INITIAL RECOVERY PHASE

During COVID-19 and in the initial recovery phase, we have focussed on addressing the priority legal needs that have been caused and compounded by the pandemic, including by scaling the reach of our services through digital technology. We have been able to innovate and adapt our wrap-around model in three key ways:



01

Adapting and expanding our service model to become hybrid, with both in-person and digital engagement, improving accessibility and more flexibly meeting client needs. This includes launching a new outreach legal clinic in August 2021 at Launch Housing's St Kilda site to better assist people experiencing or at risk of homelessness in Melbourne's south-east.

02

Using digital technology to increase capacity of our frontline homelessness and community-health partners to strengthen their understanding, identification, and referral of legal needs through:

- Delivering a customised online training program for our partners, which has directly built the capabilities of more frontline workers;
- Co-designing an innovative digital workers hub, which will effectively provide our partners with a comprehensive website that supports them to better understand, identify, and refer clients with legal needs.

03

Piloting a specialised list in the Magistrates' Court for people experiencing homelessness

With courts moving to online hearings, we have taken the opportunity to work with the Magistrates' Court to create a specialised list for people experiencing homelessness, which involves our senior criminal lawyer and our Homeless Persons' Liaison Officer social worker. This significantly enhances the ability of our clients with criminal charges to successfully access, navigate, and exit the justice system, providing them with a tailored process to secure more therapeutic, long-term outcomes.

FUTURE DIRECTIONS

We know that the impact of COVID-19 on people experiencing or at risk of homelessness is ongoing. With housing affordability and availability at an all-time low, and reduced housing and financial supports for at-risk Victorians, the need for our services continues to grow. In particular, housing insecurity and homelessness in regional Victoria is ever-increasing, with recent research showing that there are no affordable rentals in regional Victoria for a single-parent and their children on income support.

Building on our learnings from COVID-19, we hope to use our high-impact digital innovation work to further expand our support for Victorians who are experiencing or at risk of homelessness, particularly in outer metropolitan, rural, and regional communities. Given the rapid growth of online and phone-based services during COVID-19, we see important opportunities to build the capacity of frontline workers in homelessness and community-health agencies across the state, so they can more confidently understand, identify, and refer the legal needs of their clients.



Under One Roof

June 2021 to May 2022



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

274 new legal enquiries

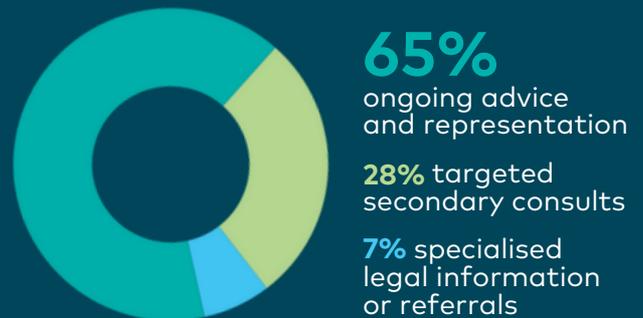
Since the project started in 2015, we have seen a **342% increase** in legal enquiries.



Housing type



Legal help provided



Integrated criminal law help

131 new client files

130% increase from last year

78 people with 378 non-legal issues were provided with integrated social work supports through Justice Connect's Homeless Persons' Liaison Officer

Of clients who received integrated criminal law help:



INNOVATING TO MEET THE INCREASED LEGAL NEEDS OF PEOPLE EXPERIENCING HOMELESSNESS CAUSED AND COMPOUNDED BY COVID-19

Over the last 12 months, we have seen firsthand the ongoing impacts of COVID-19 on Victorians who are experiencing or at risk of homelessness, and have focused on innovating our services to responsively address their increased legal needs.

Thanks to the strength of our embedded community partnerships and colocations, we have been able to dynamically adapt our services to create a multi-channel approach, including:

- iterating a hybrid model of in-person and digital engagement with clients and their frontline workers;
- promoting our customised online intake tool;
- continuing our impactful co-locations at Launch Housing and cohealth; and
- delivering targeted in-person outreach, particularly for people sleeping rough, as required.

This year we received 274 enquiries from our Under One Roof community partners (up by 45% from last year), demonstrating the rising demand for our wrap-around services. Of those enquiries, 44% were from Sacred Heart Mission, demonstrating the strength of our collaboration. This was recognised in a partnership profile published by Sacred Heart Mission (see Fig. 1), which highlighted our collective impact in preventing and ending homelessness.

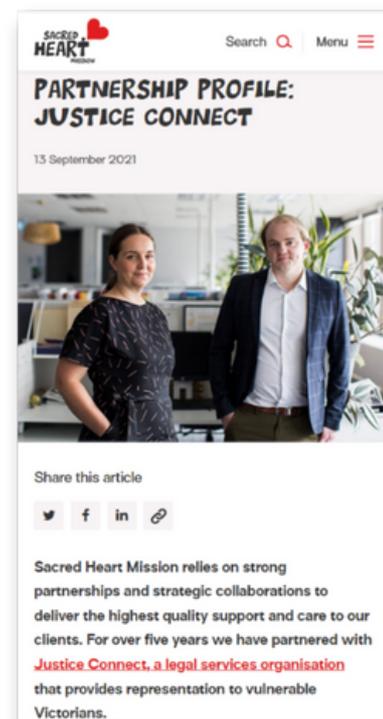


Fig. 1: Screenshot of partnership profile from Sacred Heart Mission



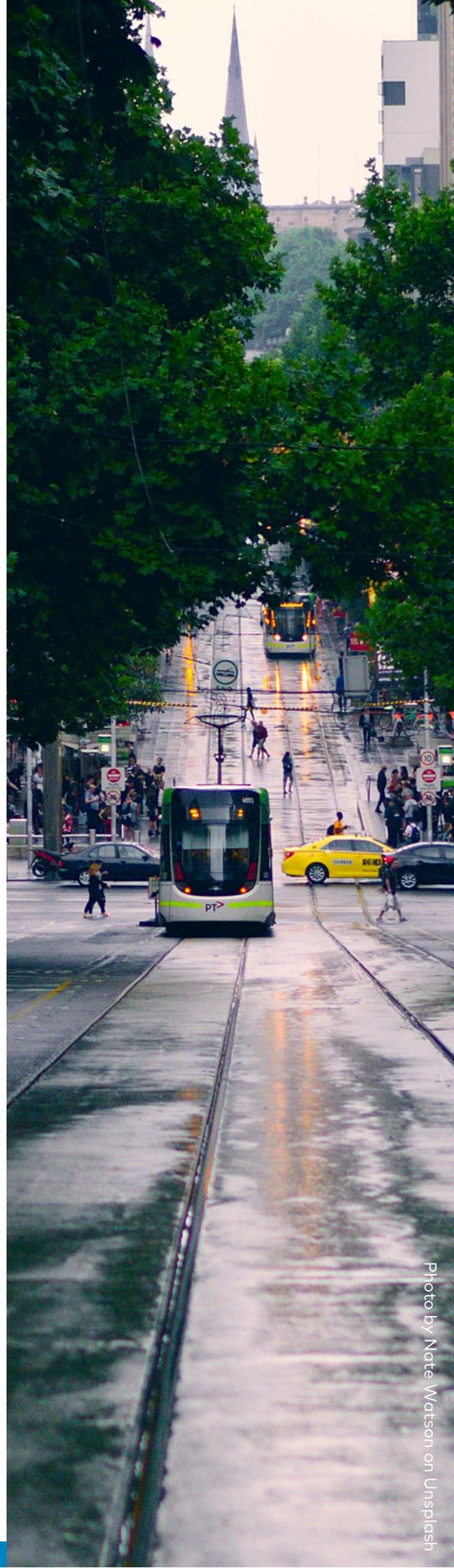
REACHING OUT TO MORE PEOPLE SLEEPING ROUGH

As the COVID-19 recovery phase progresses, and governments' remaining COVID-19 housing and financial supports end, we are seeing a range of complex issues arising for people as they continue in new housing initiatives or return to rough sleeping.

In 2021, after considering the needs of people in emergency accommodation, the government launched the Homelessness to a Home (H2H) initiative. Since that time, H2H has offered tailored housing and support packages to over 1,800 people who had previously experienced homelessness. The H2H program aimed to reduce the number of people who returned to homelessness after the pandemic, and the packages have been provided by a range of organisations, including our community partners.

We have received a considerable number of referrals from our community partners regarding the H2H clients they are supporting (over 25% of our enquiries this year were from H2H workers). Unfortunately, many H2H clients who were offered long-term sustainable housing through the program have found themselves facing eviction.

Through our specialised assistance, we have been able to support many highly-vulnerable clients to avoid homelessness, along with providing regular, evidence-based feedback to government on the issues we have seen arising through the H2H priority initiative.





ISLA'S STORY

Aboriginal family violence survivor avoids eviction into homelessness during COVID-19 through holistic legal assistance.

Isla* is an Aboriginal woman who entered into homelessness after fleeing family violence. She lives with ongoing mental health and substance dependence issues. Isla secured housing through the Homelessness to a Home (H2H) initiative, but her rental agreement was part of a complex multi-party head-leasing arrangement.

Isla's Launch Housing support worker contacted Justice Connect's co-located lawyer, as Isla had received a notice of a VCAT eviction hearing. Justice Connect's lawyers discovered that the private owner of the property was trying to evict Isla, however, her community housing rental provider wanted to maintain her tenancy. After advising Isla about her legal rights, Justice Connect represented Isla at the VCAT hearing and had the application dismissed, as the owner had not followed the correct legal process.

Two months later, Isla's worker referred her back to Justice Connect, as the private owner was seeking to evict Isla on new grounds. Isla's community housing provider had no concerns regarding the tenancy and did not want to see Isla evicted. Justice Connect again extensively advocated for Isla at VCAT, and the application was dismissed as the private owner failed to prove the allegations in the application.

Isla expressed her relief and appreciation to Justice Connect at avoiding eviction back into homelessness, which has ensured that she can prioritise her ongoing safety and health recovery during and after COVID-19.

**All clients' names have been changed.*





SONNY'S STORY

\$5,000 of public transport and COVID-19 fines waived for person who experienced long-term homelessness and substance dependence issues.

Sonny* lives with significant mental health issues and dual substance dependency, which has resulted in periods of homelessness since he was a teenager. Sonny was linked in with the Journey to Social Inclusion (J2SI) Program who, as a first step, assisted him to move into a stable community housing property.

Sonny was referred to Justice Connect by his intensive case manager at J2SI for assistance with nine fines, totalling over \$5,000. Most of Sonny's fines were for failing to purchase a public transport ticket, which he incurred while experiencing homelessness and financial hardship. Sonny also received a fine for sitting in a park with a friend, in breach of Victoria's COVID-19 restrictions. At the time, Sonny was struggling with increased substance dependence and had sought out specialised drug and alcohol supports, but he was required to wait many months for a referral to detox given limited sector resourcing.

After advising Sonny about his legal rights and options, Justice Connect assisted Sonny to have all fines waived based on his special circumstances. Since that positive outcome, Sonny's J2SI worker has reported that Sonny has stabilised and continues to make excellent progress toward recovery, while enjoying regular connection with friends and family. After being relieved of his heavy fines-burden, Sonny can now focus on his wellbeing in his long-term stable housing with J2SI supports.

**All clients' names have been changed.*



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

As we navigated through the ever-changing COVID-19 landscape over the last year, our integrated Homeless Persons' Liaison Officer (HPLO) social worker has been critical to the Under One Roof project's impact.

With the justice system taking a hybrid approach to the pandemic, our HPLO's social work services helping people experiencing homelessness, particularly people sleeping rough, to resolve Victorian court and tribunal matters has been critical. In the last 12 months, the HPLO provided tailored, integrated social work supports to 78 of the most transient and isolated community members, who faced 378 non-legal issues that were holistically addressed alongside their legal needs.

Our HPLO social worker worked closely with our in-house senior criminal lawyer, who has had an 130% increase in new client files compared to the previous year. Of these, 59% of clients reported having slept rough and 55% were referred from our Under One Roof community partners, highlighting the complexity of non-legal needs, such as family violence, housing, mental ill-health, and substance dependence issues.





The benefits of this deeply integrated, multi-disciplinary assistance are reflected by the following direct client insights:

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"Thank you [HPLO social worker] for all your incredible help and support over the past couple of months. Your generosity and calm voice has put my woes at ease. People like you make good change happen."

"Everything was clear, huge weight lifted off my shoulders - follow-up was timely and thorough, [the senior criminal lawyer] always did what they said they would do."

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"The [HPLO social worker] really helped me out... I was really down at the time, and they supported me all the way through, and even followed up after to see how I was... I've recommended it to other people, saying you should call Justice Connect."

"Couldn't describe the difference it has made – it's massive. I've dealt with so many poor services, and Justice Connect was like a light at the end of the tunnel – gave me motivation to keep going."

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"Justice Connect gave me more faith in the justice system and the community."



HAYLEY'S STORY

Integrated legal services ensure that woman with chronic mental health conditions stays safely housed and regains custody of her child during COVID-19.

Hayley* has a long history of experiencing family violence, homelessness, substance dependence issues, and chronic mental health conditions. When Hayley engaged with Justice Connect, she was on the brink of eviction into homelessness after losing her COVID-19 JobSeeker income. Hayley was also facing multiple minor criminal charges directly connected to her mental health decline due to COVID-19.

Justice Connect's senior criminal lawyer and tenancy lawyers advised Hayley about her rights and options, and connected her with our HPLO social worker. When the HPLO began helping Hayley, her child had been removed from her care, and her priority was family reunification. She also struggled to engage with services, so the HPLO supported Hayley for over 12 months by case-coordinating with her mental health, substance dependence, and family supports, providing a trusted voice for Hayley to move forward. The HPLO also secured material aid for Hayley so she could prioritise her limited income for rent.

The Justice Connect lawyers and HPLO collaborated closely together throughout Hayley's legal matters. This included ongoing negotiations with Hayley's rental provider, and representation at multiple VCAT and Magistrates' Court hearings. Due to Justice Connect's interventions, Hayley received a 14-month adjourned undertaking without conviction for her criminal matters, avoided eviction, and obtained both a COVID-19 rental reduction, and an order for essential repairs at her property.

Through the HPLO's extensive supports, and the positive outcomes achieved by Justice Connect's senior criminal and tenancy lawyers, Hayley has also regained the full-custody of her child, with the resolution of her legal matters ensuring that they have a secure home together as COVID-19 continues.

**All clients' names have been changed.*

PILOTING A SPECIALISED MAGISTRATES' COURT LIST FOR PEOPLE EXPERIENCING HOMELESSNESS IN COVID-19

During COVID-19, we worked closely with the Magistrates' Court of Victoria to pilot a specialised list for Justice Connect clients through the Online Magistrates' Court.

Our senior criminal lawyer and integrated HPLO social worker coordinated this list, with clients appearing in court using WebEx. Each client was offered integrated legal and social work supports pre-court to make sure they could access the hearing and knew what to expect.

Over four afternoon sittings, we supported 13 clients with complex vulnerabilities to deal with 43 sets of criminal law charges. Of these clients, 62% reported having slept rough, 100% reported having mental health issues and 70% received direct supports from our integrated HPLO social worker. 62% of clients also received Justice Connect's help for their other civil legal needs, such as fines and debts.

Through our specialised Magistrates' Court list for people experiencing homelessness, we supported

13 clients with complex vulnerabilities

deal with

43 sets of criminal law charges





Clients were keen to participate in this list because of the unique opportunity to have their stories heard, considered, and understood by the court. At the conclusion of one of the hearings, the presiding Magistrate noted that it was remarkable that everyone attended, supported by an environment where people were able to participate and engage in the court process. This was achieved through the wrap-around supports of Homeless Law's multi-disciplinary team, along with our embedded partnership with cohealth. The following direct client insights highlight the impact of this specialised approach for Victorians who are experiencing homelessness:

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"Being in the 'Homeless List' gave me the opportunity to link with services, and being able to be at court with people who I know are compassionate and sensitive to my situation. That doesn't always happen in a homeless situation. I felt like it was the best place I could be."

"My previous court experiences weren't great... I felt involved and I felt heard. I also understood what was going on. Knowing the court would be compassionate to my situation relieved some of my anxiety."

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"The Magistrate took into account everyone's stories and was compassionate about people's situation. It was obvious that she was genuinely interested in supporting them moving forward, I wouldn't say lenient but was taking people's situations into account."



ISABELLE'S STORY

Woman with history of chronic rough sleeping successfully exits the criminal justice system through tailored Homeless List model.

Isabelle* has spent large parts of her life sleeping rough. She has recently received extensive support from Justice Connect's community and health partners, including through the H2H program during COVID-19. Through her supports, Isabelle had secured transitional housing, but after being subjected to 'run throughs' in her home, it was deemed that the housing was not secure. Isabelle left and returned to street homelessness. While sleeping rough she was charged with begging and possessing cannabis. Through extensive legal advocacy as part of the specialised pilot Homeless List, Justice Connect's senior criminal lawyer secured police approval for both charges to be listed for Diversion, meaning that Isabelle was able to avoid a conviction and be diverted out of the criminal justice system to receive the social work supports she needed. Justice Connect's HPLO social worker also provided vital supports, including material aid, for Isabelle before and after her hearing. The therapeutic outcomes achieved through this innovative model have given Isabelle a clean slate as the COVID-19 recovery phase continues.

**All clients' names have been changed.*



DIGITAL ENGAGEMENT ENHANCES THE CAPACITY OF OUR EMBEDDED COMMUNITY PARTNERS

In response to the ongoing challenges of COVID-19, we have leveraged digital engagement to build the capability of our embedded homelessness and community-health partners, ensuring that we are best connected to those who are hardest to reach in our community.

DIGITAL WORKERS' RESOURCES HUB

We know that frontline workers are key in connecting people with legal help. Building on our existing digital infrastructure, we have been co-designing a digital workers' resources hub for our Under One Roof community partners. This customised resources hub will help workers to better understand legal processes, more effectively work with their clients on taking initial steps, and make earlier referrals for legal help (see Fig. 2). Justice Connect wants to go beyond providing simple factsheets by making information deployable and actionable by workers and their clients who are experiencing or at risk of homelessness.



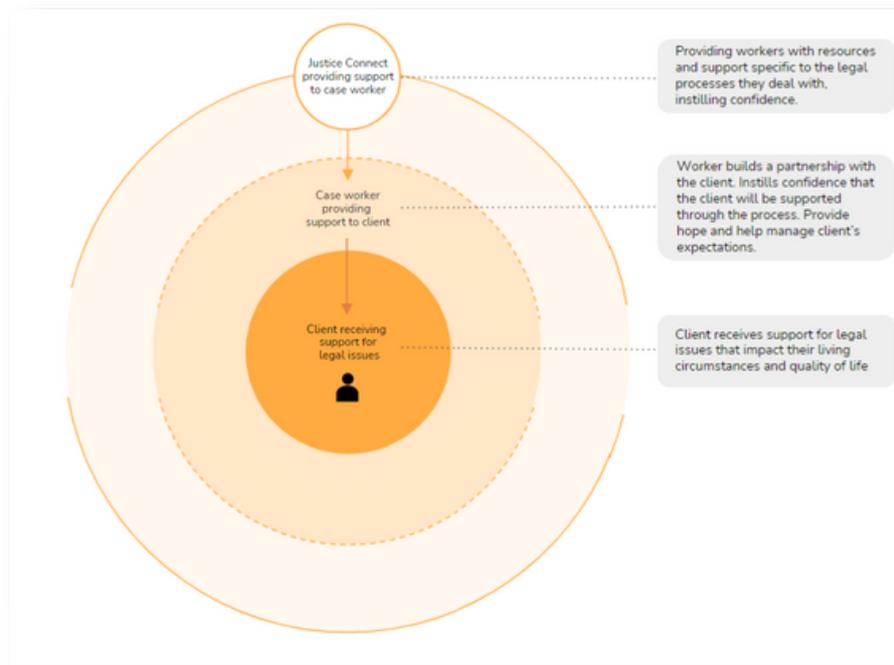


Fig. 2: The impact model of our digital workers' resources hub

Using a co-design process with our community partners, including surveys and discovery workshops, we identified key design principles to ensure that the workers' resources hub can best support frontline workers and their clients. Feedback from this process included:



"I tell my clients we're going to learn together" – Caseworker, Discovery workshop (2021)

"[The legal process] has to be led by the client – I won't pursue if the client doesn't want to approach the issue." – Caseworker, Discovery workshop (2021)



We have now developed proof of concept prototype designs which we have continued to further test with our community partners (see Fig. 3). Over the next six months, we will continue to build the digital workers' resources hub, with a view to launching in early 2023.

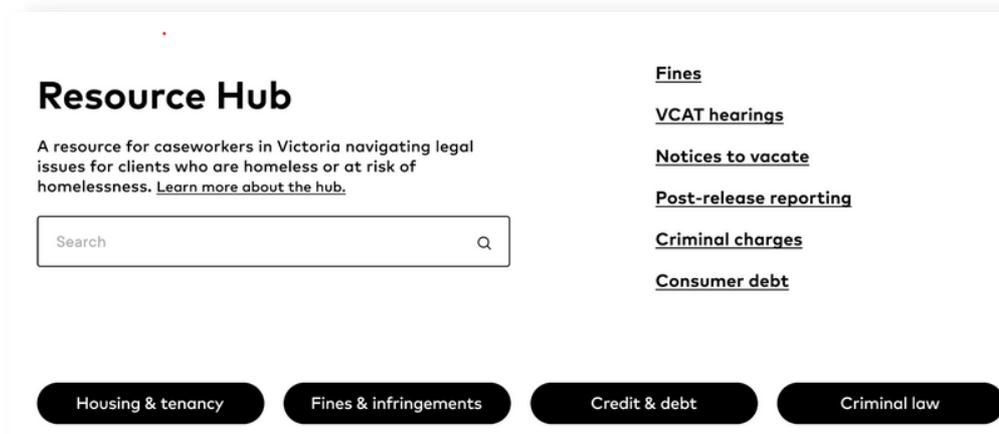
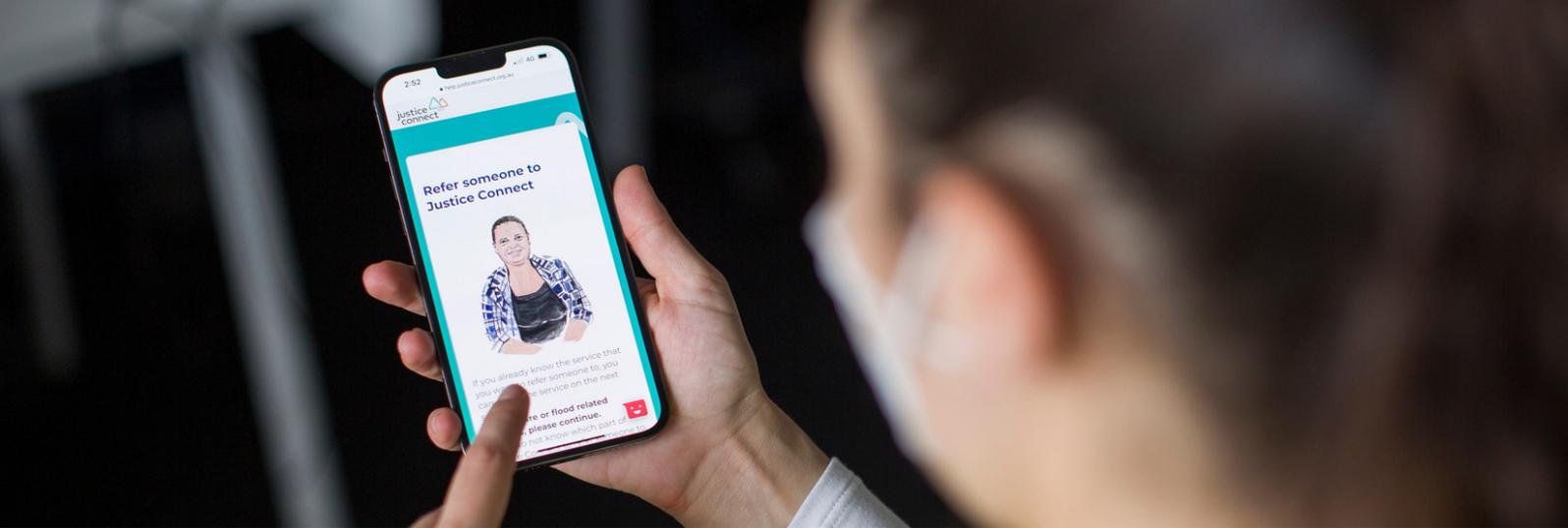


Fig. 3: A proof of concept prototype design of the digital workers' resource hub





CAPACITY BUILDING THROUGH TAILORED ONLINE TRAINING AND RESOURCES

Justice Connect continued to build the capacity of frontline workers by developing and delivering five targeted training sessions to 113 workers in key areas of legal need for people experiencing or at risk of homelessness during and after COVID-19, including fines, criminal charges, debts, and tenancy laws.

Our training sessions and related resources aim to better equip workers to spot legal issues and increase workers' confidence when supporting clients navigating legal problems by helping workers understand processes and procedures, and knowing the referral pathways to appropriate legal support.

Using an online training platform, we were able to engage with more workers across our community partners, which encompassed five different frontline teams across four different areas of legal needs. These sessions were also recorded to further increase our reach, with our community partners being able to view them on demand.

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

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"Training was fantastic, [the co-located lawyer's] role where she is available to Launch staff for secondary consult/referral is fantastic - hugely beneficial to clients." – Caseworker, Launch Housing

"Training is always great with Justice Connect, and they do a great job supporting our clients." – Caseworker, Sacred Heart Mission

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"I have many clients that face the issues that arose during training and I can now support my clients with informed knowledge." – Caseworker, Sacred Heart Mission



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 in the context of COVID-19 and the recovery phase.

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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