



WOMEN'S
LEGAL CENTRE ACT

STRONGER. SAFER. BETTER.

ANNUAL REPORT
2020/21





ACKNOWLEDGEMENT OF COUNTRY

The Women's Legal Centre acknowledges the traditional custodians of the lands on which we work.

We recognise this land was never ceded and the experience of colonisation and loss continues to affect the lives of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women and communities today. Despite this, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people's connection to land, sea and community is strong and continuing.

We pay our respects to elders past and present, and to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and future leaders, for they hold the memories, the traditions, the culture and the hopes of First Nations people.

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OUR VISION: WOMEN ARE SAFE, STRONG & IN CONTROL OF THEIR LIVES.



CHAIR'S REPORT

With the global pandemic continuing to disrupt our lives and our work this year, the team at the Centre have continued to prove their agility, professionalism and innovation, and deliver assistance to women in need of community legal services in the ACT. These skills have been crucial this year particularly, as demand for our services has been at an all-time high, while our resourcing has changed little.

In December 2020, I stepped into the role of Chair of the Centre, following on from the amazing work of our previous Chair, Nerida Gill. My thanks to Nerida, for her wonderful stewardship over the past three years.

In the coming year we will finalise our Strategic Plan, together with a new impact measurement framework and risk management framework for the Centre. We will continue to strengthen our relationships with our core funding partners across governments, as well as expand our connections and partnerships with the Canberra community sector and business community.

Operationally, we are evolving our finance and governance processes and importantly, we are strengthening our support for our valued staff, to ensure long-term, sustainable delivery of services for women in need.

I come to this role from a background of public policy, with a particular focus on advancing gender equality. I am drawn to the Centre as I see it as a critical thread in the fabric of services to support women who, for many reasons, may have fewer options to assist them in securing a fair legal outcome at a vulnerable stage of their lives.

Supporting women to achieve safety for themselves and their families, as well as economic independence and security, is not the work of one sector, organisation or individual. At its core, when this network of partners functions effectively, it achieves more than the sum of its parts – it advances gender equality, benefitting everyone across society and the economy.

Maintaining strong and productive partnerships requires sustained leadership and commitment from governments, business and the community sector alike.

This commitment must be to develop a shared vision, together with a willingness to engage genuinely and deeply with partners.

Policy makers must listen, as a partner, to those on the front line, engaging in a systematic and genuine manner, with a long-term view of resourcing to ensure legal support for vulnerable women can reliably shape fair and secure individual and community outcomes.

The history of women's legal services' relationship with funding partners is cast in terms which have been far from this partnership ideal. I look forward to the opportunity to re-set in the year ahead, to achieve stronger outcomes for women and our community.



Trish Bergin
Chair

"Policy makers must listen, as a partner, to those on the front line, engaging in a systematic and genuine manner, with a long-term view of resourcing to ensure that legal support for vulnerable women can reliably shape fair and secure individual and community outcomes."

CEO'S REPORT

Momentum. Rage. Optimism. Accountability. Change.

The photo on the front of this year's report was taken at the March for Justice on 15 March 2021.

The Centre felt the groundswell of grief, distress and rage pulse through Canberra and across Australia in the opening months of 2021.

It was our hope, and the hope of the tens of thousands of people that marched, that in the bright autumn sun this pulse would crystallize to a moment of change.

As 20/21 year draws to close, it is clear that keeping the promise inherent in that day requires structural change and leadership.

STRUCTURAL CHANGE MEANS SOCIAL, JUSTICE AND POLITICAL STRUCTURES MUST BE HELD ACCOUNTABLE TO WOMEN.

The ways these systems operate to excuse, ignore and embolden gender-based violence has been articulately exposed by the advocacy and leadership of young Australian women Grace Tame and Brittany Higgins. It threads back to the call of early silence breaker and founder of the #MeToo movement, Tarana Burke, who explains believing women is a simple concept. It means we take disclosures seriously. We investigate.

HOLDING THE SYSTEM ACCOUNTABLE TO WOMEN IS, OF COURSE, THE REASON THE CENTRE EXISTS.

By providing legal advice and representation to women we step forward to ameliorate inherent power imbalances. We seek to ensure women can access their rights and entitlements, so they are stronger and safer when they step forward into their lives. Our representation and our advocacy calls on the legal system and other responses to violence and discrimination to be more accountable to those most at risk of harm.

COVID-19 HAS EXPOSED EXISTING INEQUALITIES AND EXACERBATED THESE.

In 20/21, the Centre has seen sustained need for legal assistance and support from women in Canberra.

We have continued to see unprecedented demand across our core practice areas in family and employment law. This year we delivered a total of **4,887** legal and support services to women. This was almost 40% more total services than 19/20.

As COVID wears on, women have continued to present with more complex personal circumstances and more complex legal matters.

In 19/20, we observed our clients presenting with increasing levels of distress and anxiety. This year we delivered 150 services to women who expressed suicidal ideation at the time we were assisting them. This pattern is unlikely to abate.

WE HAVE ALSO SEEN EVIDENCE OF WHAT WE HAVE COME TO CALL THE 'GRACE TAME AND BRITTANY HIGGINS EFFECT.'

This year, there has been a significant increase in women coming forward to seek redress in relation to sexual violence and gender-based discrimination. Overall, we have seen a 46% increase in need for assistance related to gender-based discrimination, sexual harassment and sexual assault in the last 12 months.

This trend has been particularly pronounced in services related to sexual harassment, where we have seen an increase of 186% over the past 12 months.

The increase in requests for assistance related to sexual assault have been even more significant, 229% higher in 20/21 than in 19/20. While this is of the base of a modest number of services, it is worth noting the Centre does not yet practice in the area and does not advertise that we can assist women in relation to sexual assault. Many of the women who contact the Centre are looking for a rights-based response to sexual violence either instead of, or to complement, a therapeutic response.

This year the Centre has continued to refine our organisational structure to clarify our purpose, better support our core functions and meet ongoing levels of need.

This has included a focus on boosting accessibility to women in the ACT by maintaining expanded hours for our Intake and Advice line and opening new access points through our website, that are increasingly used by women to make initial contact.

We have maintained and increased our focus on providing services in a multi-disciplinary model, strengthening both our internal social work team but also looking to strengthen and expand our partnerships with key services in the community.

THE CENTRE HAS ALSO CONTINUED TO LEAD THE DEVELOPMENT OF TRAUMA-INFORMED LEGAL SERVICE DELIVERY.

Importantly, this year, we have been able to share this expertise, training more than 100 local lawyers in the Principles of Trauma-Informed Legal Practice. This will support strong trauma-informed practice across the broader legal profession.

IT HAS BEEN A COMBINATION OF MOMENTUM, RAGE AND OPTIMISM THAT HAS KEPT US GOING.

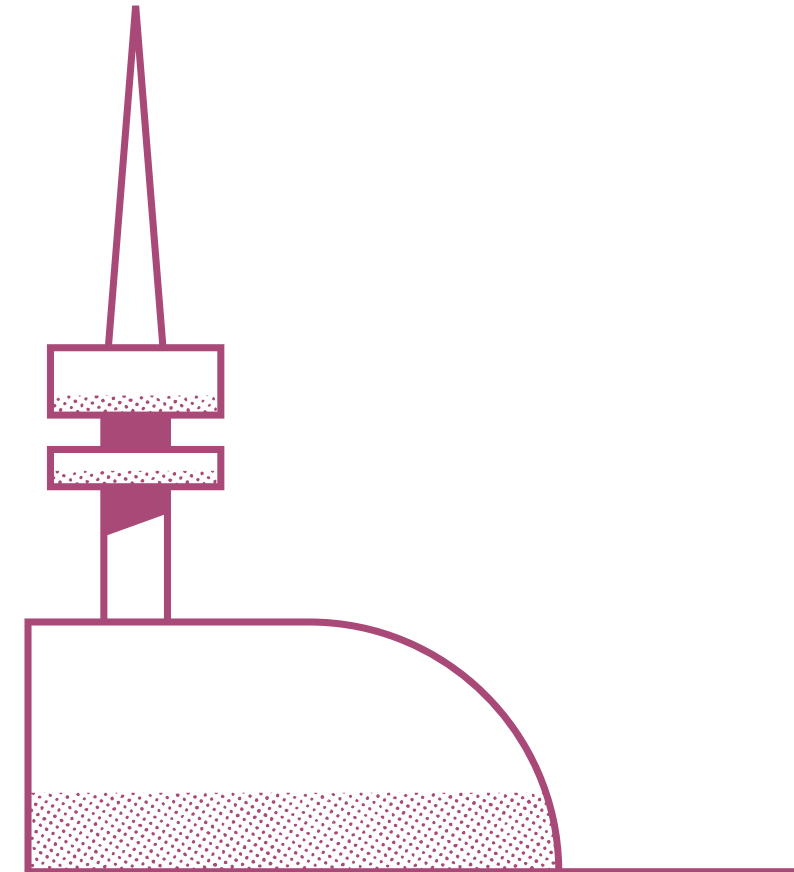
I want to thank staff, who have for a second year, kept an essential service operating in extraordinarily difficult circumstances. Their professionalism, creativity and good will are an exceptional asset to the Centre. In turn, I know they have been buoyed by the ongoing determination of our clients. The Board has continued its steadfast and principled support and our partners have remained source of energy and innovation.

It has also been an extraordinarily difficult year. Our funding arrangements have been inadequate and short-term, crippling service delivery at a time we know it is needed most and directly contributing to the structural insecurity and inequality faced by women in the workforce.

THINGS MUST CHANGE.

The Centre's services are critical to achieving true structural change that means that women are safe, economically secure and in control of their lives.

We look forward to working with governments, the private sector and communities to promote this as a shared agenda in 2022.



"The Centre's services are critical to achieving true structural change that means that women are safe, economically secure and in control of their lives."



Elena Rosenman
Chief Executive Officer
Women's Legal Centre ACT

OUR CLIENTS



1,558
Clients assisted



Through our clients we have impacted the lives of
1,945
children



10%
identify as First Nations women


22% identify as women with disability



12% speak a language other than English at home




<\$52k




90% of new ongoing clients earn **under \$52k** per annum

<\$32k




57% of new ongoing clients earn **under \$32k** per annum

No income



12% of new ongoing clients **did not have an income**



97%
of new ongoing family law clients have experienced or were at risk of **family and domestic violence**

95% experienced multiple forms of violence

94% experienced emotional or psychological violence (coercive control)

58% experienced physical violence

47% experienced financial abuse

21% experienced sexual violence

100% of clients found it easy to contact the Centre when they needed help


95% of clients felt the Centre listened to their legal problem

98% of clients felt the Centre helped them understand how to deal with their legal problem

95% of clients said they would recommend the Centre to other people

"Because of the assistance I received from the Women's Legal Centre I am able to get on with life and plan for the future!"

"I was lost about what I could do. I contacted so many people and no one could help me. From the first moment I contacted the Women's Legal Centre I knew I found someone that would listen to me and help me. They were great, I can't thank them enough."



OUR SERVICES



2,106
Legal advices provided



284
Ongoing legal matters represented by our lawyers



183
Ongoing legal matters resolved

340
Legal tasks completed

408
social work and cultural support services provided





1,276
client needs assessments undertaken

2,127
referrals provided

88
Ongoing social work and cultural support files closed



87
ongoing social work and cultural support files opened

"I felt heard, supported and empowered to put forward a claim."

"The Women's Legal Centre took me all the way through from a difficult legal matter to family court. Without them I would have had no idea!"

TOP 3 PROBLEM TYPES

1.
Child contacts or contact orders

2.
Property

3.
Domestic and family violence



| MOST COMMON PROBLEM TYPES FOR ONGOING FAMILY LAW MATTERS | MOST COMMON PROBLEM TYPES FOR ONGOING CIVIL LAW MATTERS |
|--|---|
| <p>1. Parenting arrangements</p> | <p>1. Child protection</p> |
| <p>2. Divorce/de facto separation</p> | <p>2. Victim compensation</p> |
| <p>3. Property</p> | <p>3. Employment</p> |
| <p>4. Domestic and family violence</p> | <p>4. Discrimination</p> |

TOP 3 REFERRAL POINTS

1.
Word of mouth

2.
Domestic Violence Crisis Service

3.
Internet search

ONGOING LEGAL SERVICES TARGET PRIORITY POPULATIONS*

31% of ongoing legal matters were provided to women with disability affected by domestic and family violence

22% of ongoing legal matters were provided to First Nations women affected by domestic and family violence

18% of ongoing legal matters provided to women who speak a language other than English at home

*percentage of closed matters.

OUR IMPACT

SAFETY

| | |
|----------|--|
| OUR GOAL | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Legal outcomes reduce risk of harm to women and their children. ■ Women's safety is supported throughout legal processes. |
| HOW | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ We provide high quality legal services to help women understand their options in relation to separation and care in the context of domestic and family violence. ■ We pursue legal outcomes that support the safety of women and their children. ■ We maintain strong relationships with specialist domestic and family violence agencies to maximise accessibility and responsiveness. ■ We provide multi-disciplinary and trauma-informed services, including domestic and family violence support and safety planning and ongoing case management services. ■ We provide culturally safe services to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women to seek assistance in relation to violence and care of children. |
| WHY | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Domestic and family violence is one of the most serious and prevalent social issues facing Australia. ■ Women and their children are at increased risk of violence at the time of separation. ■ First Nations women are more likely to experience domestic and family violence and government and service responses can inhibit their willingness to seek assistance. ■ Following separation, women are subject to legal systems abuse, (the misuse of legitimate legal processes to create fear, delay or uncertainty). |

- 95%** of ongoing clients had experienced or were at risk of domestic or family violence.
- 22%** of all ongoing legal services closed were provided to Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander women who were experiencing, or at risk, of domestic and family violence.
- 31%** of ongoing legal services closed were provided to women with disability who were experiencing or at risk of domestic and family violence.
- 159** women with complex needs supported by our Socio-Legal team, including safety planning, support at court or case conferences, crisis intervention and intensive case management.
- 70** Aboriginal women supported by our Aboriginal Case Manager, who provided support including safety planning, support at court or case conferences, connecting women to community or culture, and culturally informed case management.
- 1,082** services provided to assist women with gender-based violence (including domestic and family violence, sexual harassment and sexual assault).
- 235** legal advices provided to women in relation to child protection to ensure due process and keep families safe.

"I feel more safe and supported. Now I understand my rights at workplace."

"After leaving abusive relationship I am strongly able to think positive and able to do my routine tasks for my kids and myself."



CASE STUDY

HANNAH'S STORY

Careful safety planning ensures a woman's safety as she seeks legal separation from a violent partner and division of their assets.

Hannah had separated from her partner, Richard, due to his physical, emotional and financial violence. However he was continuing to harass her through text messages and phone calls.

Hannah needed legal assistance to formalise the separation, gain access to her share of the property, and agree arrangements for the care of their two children. However, she was worried about how Richard would respond as he was contacting her daily and threatening to kill himself. She sought assistance from the Domestic Violence Crisis Service, which changed the locks on her property, removed the surveillance cameras Richard had installed, and referred her to the Women's Legal Centre.

Hannah was an Aboriginal woman and met with the Centre's Mulleun Mura solicitor for advice. Separation is a time of increased risk of violence for women leaving a violent relationship, and so the Centre's

social worker worked with Hannah and the solicitor to provide specialist, tailored safety planning. The team worked with Hannah to consider each point of possible escalation and risk, and Richard's use of technology-facilitated abuse, including tracking her through her devices and vehicle. Together, they developed a safety plan that covered each legal step towards separation and supported Hannah to leave the ACT to an unknown destination just before Richard received the first legal letter regarding the separation.

The Centre represented Hannah in ongoing negotiations with Richard and achieved a fair division of property and finances, as well as agreement that the children would spend supervised time with their father.

Importantly, the solicitor's approach meant the matter was resolved quickly and fairly and Hannah was able to avoid litigation. By working in a multi-disciplinary team, the Centre was able to keep Hannah and her children safe throughout a high-risk process.

Following settlement, the Centre's Wills Clinic, a pro bono service provided by Sparke Helmore, helped her draft a new will and removed Richard as power of attorney.

OUR IMPACT SECURITY

| | |
|----------|---|
| OUR GOAL | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Legal outcomes protect women’s rights and entitlements and create the foundation for women’s financial security and independence. |
| HOW | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> We provide high quality legal services to assist women to understand and enforce rights and entitlements relating to property division following separation. We provide high quality legal services to assist women to understand and enforce rights and entitlements relating to employment and discrimination. We prioritise ongoing services in matters where legal representation can ameliorate risk of poverty, unemployment, homelessness and other forms of financial dependence. |
| WHY | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Women are more likely to live below the poverty line; more likely to be in low-paid, part-time or casual employment than men; and retire with less superannuation than men or none at all. 15% of women experience financial abuse in their intimate relationship. Post separation, women’s incomes drop on average by 21%, and they are at greater risk of homelessness than men. |

- 1 in 2 clients affected by domestic and family violence reported experiencing financial abuse.
- 637 legal advices provided to women in relation to family law property matters.
- 67 ongoing legal matters to assist women secure a just property settlement post separation.
- 589 legal advices provided to women in relation to employment and entitlements at work.
- 30 ongoing legal matters to assist women stay in employment, access entitlements or correct underpayment.
- \$73,201 financial assistance secured for women who have been a victim of crime.

“After years of having my missed and underpayments of salary ignored, it was a relief to not feel alone. I realised that the way I was being treated was unacceptable and that my contributions at work should be valued by being correctly remunerated. I regained my confidence by having my concerns heard by the Centre and found new employment where I am valued and paid correctly!!”

“Women’s Legal Centre assisted me with my property settlement and I did get a good result which I could not do by myself. I am a single mum and my ex-husband put me and my daughter in the homeless situation. Women’s Legal Centre not only help me with financial settlement, but also support my mental health during the difficult time.”



CASE STUDY ALI’S STORY

A young woman with disability retains her job and financial security with assistance from the Centre.

Ali worked as a security officer for a small firm. Her employer introduced a new policy on drug testing. Ali was taking a regular medication prescribed by her doctor to help manage a chronic disability and so tested positive for a banned substance. The medication was necessary and did not have any side-effects. She tried to explain this to her employer, even showing them a copy of the doctor’s prescription, but consistent with the new policy, she was stood down from her position, without pay.

Ali lived in a private rental with her partner, whose employment had been affected by COVID-19 shutdowns. Without Ali’s income they were behind in rent payments, their utility bills were unpaid, and they were at risk of losing their car and becoming homeless.

The Centre’s Employment and Discrimination Solicitor advised Ali that her employer’s new policy was indirectly discriminatory against Ali as a person with a disability. Ali liked her job and wanted to keep it if possible, so the Solicitor helped her write to her employer herself. Her employer did not respond.

The Centre’s Solicitor then wrote to the employer seeking a positive resolution. Through negotiation, the Centre obtained backpay for the period Ali had been stood down. Even more importantly for Ali, her employer agreed she could go back to work. In addition, the Centre’s Social Worker helped Ali get in touch with Care Financial who assist her to negotiate with her utility providers and organisations that provided material relief.

As a result of the Centre’s assistance, Ali has been able to stay in paid work and catch up financially. Her tenancy is no longer at risk, and she is well on the way to repaying her debts. Her employer is reviewing the new policy to remove any risk of indirect discrimination against people with disability.

OUR IMPACT ENGAGEMENT

| | |
|----------|---|
| OUR GOAL | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Build coalitions of support and expertise to deliver the highest quality legal services. ■ Better law and policy responses to women. |
| HOW | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Leverage pro bono and low bono relationships with the private sector to increase the depth and breadth of services available to clients. ■ Use the skills and energy of volunteers to increase the number of clients assisted and support our work. ■ Provide expert advice to the community, governments, and others, based on client experience and expertise. ■ Provide community legal education and information to support better understanding and use of legal processes. |
| WHY | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Women affected by domestic and family violence are ten times as vulnerable to legal problems as the rest of the population and often face multiple, intersecting and complex legal matters. ■ The Centre operates within strict funding constraints. Pro bono partners and our volunteers increase our ability to meet the need for our services. ■ Communities and private firms want to use their time and expertise to contribute to gender equality and support safe and respectful relationships ■ Laws and policies developed without considering the needs of women may have a disproportionate and adverse effect on them. |

- 9 pro bono partners delivered over 190 legal services to clients.
- 62 volunteers supported core service delivery.
- 47 law and policy reform projects.
- 106 Canberra lawyers trained in principles of trauma-informed legal practice.
- 140 ACT public servants trained in recognising and responding to domestic violence and best practice workplace responses to domestic violence.

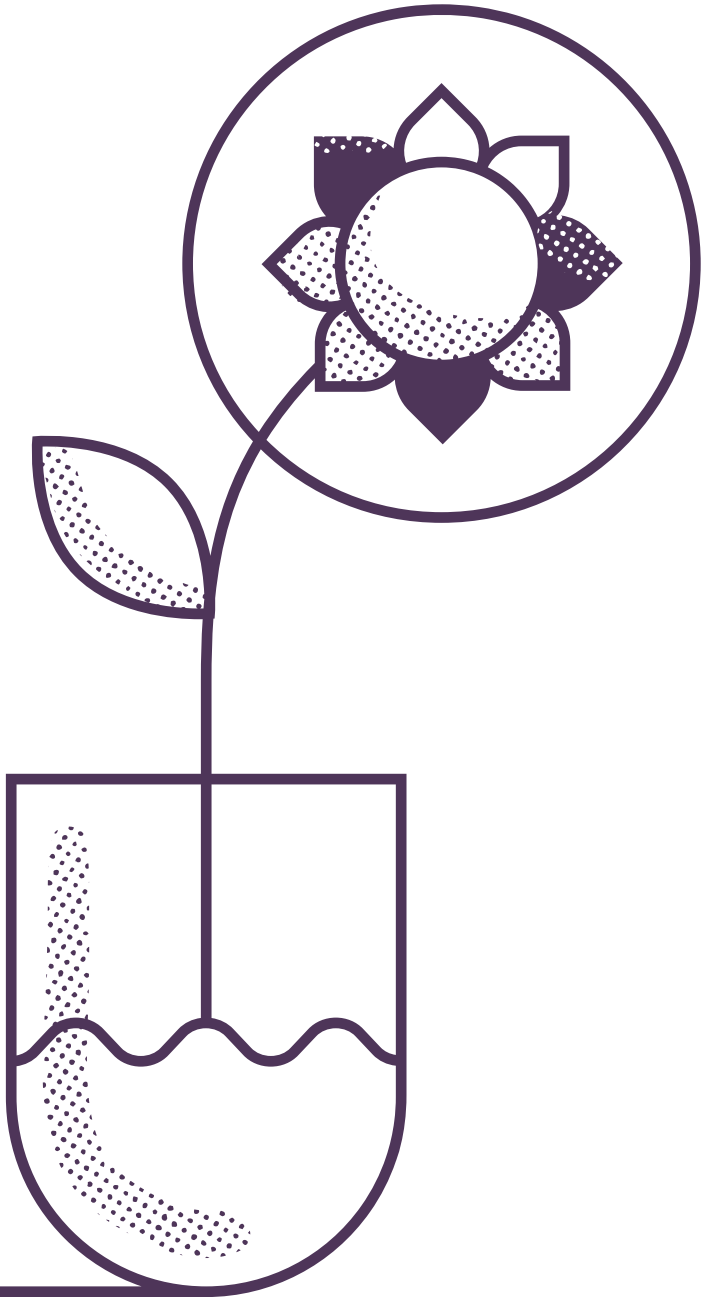
“Very useful tips for practice, implemented them in appointments the very next day!”

Principles of Trauma-Informed Legal Practice training participant

“Both the Centre’s Principal Solicitor and Head of Socio-Legal Practice were excellent. A really thought-provoking and relevant presentation.”

Principles of Trauma-Informed Legal Practice training participant

PRACTICE AND PROGRAM REPORTS



FAMILY LAW PRACTICE REPORT



KEY ACHIEVEMENTS

The continued evolution of the Centre allowed us to create the new role of Head of Practice(Family Law)/ Deputy Principal Solicitor this year and we were thrilled when Sarah Milson-Mahy accepted the position. Sarah’s deep experience and knowledge of family law has greatly bolstered our capacity to resolve highly complex cases and provide skilled and warm professional mentorship to our more junior lawyers.

As the economic fallout of COVID continues, the Practice has retained a focus on providing advice and representation in property matters. The very high and increasing cost of housing in Canberra means securing a just share of family assets, particularly the family home, is more important than ever for our clients. For example, this year we were able to negotiate Final Orders that allowed a client to remain in her home and achieve her goal of providing a stable and secure home for herself and her adult children with disabilities. For her and many other clients, the just division of even a small asset pool have been the difference between secure and independent housing and homelessness.

Over COVID we observed an increase in the level of mental ill health and distress experienced by our clients. This pattern has continued this year, where we have delivered almost **150** services to women who identified they were experiencing suicidal ideation at the time of support.

We have continued to develop our integrated approach to multi-disciplinary service delivery to support women whose personal circumstances and legal matters have become increasingly risky and complex.

Our solicitors have worked closely with the socio-legal team to ensure vulnerable and high-needs clients are provided with wrap-around care, including safety planning to manage heightened risk. This included working together to support an older woman leave her long-term abusive marriage safely and negotiate a fair settlement to allow her to find stable housing and start a new life free from violence.

The intensity of this multi-disciplinary approach can be seen in the **42%** increase in total family law related services when compared with 19/20, and the Practice is grateful for the skillful support of the Centre’s Social Workers and Aboriginal Case Manager.

“The Centre’s assistance gave me some clarity around what decisions I need to make and the impacts it had, which led me to change my decision for the better.”

HEALTH JUSTICE PARTNERSHIP PROGRAM

In July 2021, the Centre was finally able to secure long-term funding for the highly successful Health Justice Partnership (HJP) Program through the ACT Government Safer Families initiative. The Centre has welcomed the ACT Government’s willingness to test and support innovative legal assistance delivery models.

The Centre’s HJPs with Calvary Public Hospital and Gungahlin Child and Family Centre (GCFC) have proven particularly effective at reaching women who speak a language other than English at home. Providing legal services through a locally-based community service and mainstream health service has made this kind of support more accessible for women who may otherwise experience high levels of social isolation.

HJP solicitors often provide legal advice to clients in the early stages of their legal problem. This is particularly common in clients seeking family law advice as part of contemplating or planning to separate from their partner.

This includes a woman who met with the solicitor at GCFC several times in 20/21, seeking advice in relation to separating her finances and making parenting arrangements should she separate from her husband. He closely monitored her movements, would not allow her to obtain work, and controlled her access to money, but she was able to attend GCFC. Following a particularly violent incident at home, she decided she was ready to take the next step and separate. She met the solicitor at the ACT Magistrates Court the next day and secured a Family Violence Order. The solicitor is now negotiating parenting arrangements and the separation of their finances.

This focus on sustained relationships, accessibility and early intervention legal assistance allows clients to make informed decisions and plan for safe and fair separation.

TRENDS

During 20/21, the Centre provided **1,564** family law advices and a further **235** advices in relation to Child Protection. We opened **137** new ongoing family law matters and **30** Child Protection matters.

The most common reason women seek our assistance continues to be parenting arrangements, division of property and divorce and separation. As consistent with previous years, these issues continue to arise in the context of domestic and family violence, and **97%** of new ongoing family law clients had experienced or were at risk of family and domestic violence.

Most of these women (95%) have experienced multiple forms of violence, though this year there were notable increases in the number of women reporting financial abuse (10%) and sexual violence (5%) as part of the violence they experienced.

FUTURE NEEDS AND DIRECTION

The Centre anticipates the need for assistance related to family law assistance in property settlements in the context of domestic and family violence to continue and grow. We also expect the increases in rates of domestic violence and mental ill health and the complexity of women’s circumstances to become the new normal and the level and intensity of client need to persist.



Paralegal Nicola Mildren was admitted in 20/21 and joined the practice as a graduate Solicitor.

EMPLOYMENT & DISCRIMINATION PRACTICE REPORT

KEY ACHIEVEMENTS

We believe keeping women in safe and secure employment is crucial to their safety, independence and well-being.

The Centre's Employment and Discrimination practice provides legal assistance to women in low-paid and/or precarious employment who are experiencing problems at work. We can help clients enforce their rights and entitlements at work, including access to maternity leave and flexible work arrangements and the right to be free from discrimination and sexual harassment at work.

COVID-19 has had a disproportionate effect on women, who were more likely to lose hours and pay during over the past 12 months.

In recognition of this, the Centre received additional temporary funding to add a second Solicitor to the practice. Our Pro Bono partner, Clayton Utz also recognised the importance of this practice area and seconded a full-time solicitor from their Employment team to the Centre in 2021.

In 20/21, the practice provided **589** legal advices and **120** legal task services related to employment and **189** legal advices and **28** legal task services related to discrimination. The team represented **55** ongoing employment and discrimination matters, supporting women to address discrimination, stay connected to work and/or access entitlements. This included supporting a childhood educator on a temporary visa who had been dismissed from her position during COVID recover lost wages, representing an older woman in her sexual harassment complaint to secure redress, and supporting a woman secure transfer to a different role while she was pregnant, in line with her rights to a safe job.

The team also provided evidence to the Senate Education & Employment Committee on the proposed Sex Discrimination and Fair Work (Respect at Work) Amendment Bill 2021. The Centre made submissions about the effectiveness of the proposed Respect@Work amendments addressing sexual harassment in the workplace and provided additional expert advice on proposed legislative responses to Parliamentarians on the strength of these submissions.

The Centre continued to deliver its respected Domestic Violence and the Workplace training to ACT Government employees. Managers learnt how to respond to disclosures about family violence, a key factor influencing victim-survivors' future employment relationships and their decision to seek help from specialist services.

TRENDS

The additional resources available to the Practice meant we could support increased need for assistance. This year, we delivered **30%** more employment law advices and provide **193%** more legal task services than 19/20, which was itself a record year for the practice.

While overall numbers remain modest, the Centre has been observing steady increases in requests for assistance related to sexual harassment over recent years. In 2021, Brittany Higgins's advocacy brought the issue of sexual harassment in the workplace to the forefront in the public conversation, increasing awareness of the issue in the community. This year we have seen a **186%** increase in the number of services related to sexual harassment. Two thirds of the women we have assisted are aged between 18 and 34, supporting higher incidence but also suggesting more young women are looking for a right-based response to gender-based violence at work.

FUTURE NEEDS AND DIRECTIONS

Women in low paid and traditionally female-dominated employment are often unaware of their employment rights and at risk of unfair treatment in the workplace. In the coming year, the Practice will prioritise developing key partnerships to reach women in these industries, early in their careers, to build their awareness of and ability to secure their access to legal entitlements. This initiative will target women in jobs most effected by COVID and underpayment issues, such as hospitality, health and beauty, childcare and aged care/disability support workers.

The Practice will also prioritise providing ongoing assistance to women to keep them in gainful employment, noting the Centre's commitment to supporting women to maintain financial independence to maximise their safety and security.

MULLEUN MURA REPORT

KEY ACHIEVEMENTS

Mulleun Mura works to strengthen First Nations culture and communities by supporting women and families to stay connected and stay safe.

Mulleun Mura is the only law and justice service dedicated to First Nations women and their families in the ACT and surrounding region.

The Program believes the law can assist vulnerable First Nations women, if they can access it with culturally appropriate knowledge and support. The Program focuses on using a multi-disciplinary model guided by First Nations staff to ensure culturally safe and informed service provision for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women.

In 20/21, the Program assisted **90** women. The majority of these women (96%) were Aboriginal and Torres Strait women, though the Program also assisted a small number of women who did not identify as First Nations but whose children are Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander.

The Program delivered **68** legal advice services, **43** legal task services and represented women in **45** ongoing legal matters.

The Program also provided **133** discrete cultural support services, including support at Courts, mediation and Case Conferences; domestic and family violence support and safety planning; advocacy with community and government services and crisis support. We also opened **27** ongoing cultural support matters and closed **34** ongoing cultural support matters once their legal matters had been successfully resolved.

TRENDS

Overall, the Program assisted fewer clients than in 19/20. This was caused in part by the effects of COVID on community events and gatherings, which have always acted as a critical point for the Program to connect with women and families in need of support. This was also caused in part by insecurity in Program funding arrangements which led to staff shortages in 2021.

The reasons women seek assistance through the Program have remained consistent over more than a decade, reflecting both inadequate investment in specific services to support First Nations women affected by domestic and family violence, and issues of systemic racism.

The most common reasons women sought assistance from the Program in 20/21 was in relation to the

care of their children. This included family law processes following relationship or family breakdown and engagement with Child and Youth Protection Services (CYPS). The issues related to care of children in both jurisdictions occurred most often in the shadow of domestic and family violence.

The majority of ongoing legal matters this year have been in relation to engagement with CYPS. The Centre believes when women are supported, are on an equal footing and processes are fair, transparent and accountable, CYPS can make better decisions about the care of children and the trauma and separation of families can be reduced.

This year, for example, the Program supported a woman affected by mental ill-health and problematic alcohol use whose daughter was subject to emergency action. The Program supported her to agree to Interim Orders that meant her mother could look after her daughter and give her the time to address her health and wellbeing. The team provided co-ordinated legal assistance and practical and cultural support and worked with her until her daughter was able to be restored to her for the majority of her care. As a result, a young First Nations family has been kept together and a child's connection to her culture and strength has been protected.

The Program also represented women in the family law jurisdiction to support strong connections to family and culture.

This included a supporting a client who was incarcerated to re-establish contact with her children who were in the care of their grandmother. The Program represented her through a Family Dispute Resolution mediation and was able to secure an agreement to establish regular contact between our client and her children. Her children have reconnected with their culture and, as our client said to the team, the opportunity to have a relationship with her kids, "gives her reason to get up each day."

FUTURE NEEDS AND DIRECTIONS

This year, the Program farewelled Leah House, who left the Program after almost three years providing strong cultural support and leadership to clients and the Centre.

The Program looks forward to welcoming Kamilaroi woman Alex-Lee Hargy to the Program in the new financial year and will retain and strengthen its focus on supporting and empowering First Nations women to stay connected, safe and strong.

SOCIAL LEGAL REPORT



KEY ACHIEVEMENTS

The Centre’s Social Work team started as a single position in the Specialist Domestic and Family Violence Unit in 2019, funded by the Australian Government. The position provided individualised safety planning for women who were separating from violent partners and recognised the value of providing legal assistance within a multi-disciplinary model that could better support women affected by domestic and family violence.

In 20/21, the team grew to include two social workers, thanks to COVID funds provided by the ACT Community Services Directorate. We have also worked closely with the Mulleun Mura Aboriginal Case Manager this year to deliver culturally safe support to First Nations clients.

The Centre’s multi-disciplinary practice model has matured and now provides support across all areas of the Centre’s legal practice, strengthening our approach to trauma-informed lawyering and service delivery. This year we finalised development of our Socio-Legal Data Standards Manual to support a consistent approach to measuring and evaluating our services and this Manual has been used as a basis for the development of national guidance on Socio-Legal service delivery.

Each legal step in family law matters can increase risk for women and their children who have lived with domestic and family violence. Our social workers support clients to develop safety and exit plans, and provide case management and referrals to ensure clients are supported in all areas of need during what can be an overwhelming time of change and new beginnings.

We also support families to navigate child protection appraisal processes. By providing wrap-around support alongside legal advice, families have avoided emergency action such as child removals,

and children have been safely restored to their families with vital and ongoing support in place.

In 2020-21, the team provided **408** social work and cultural support services.

TRENDS

COVID has increased risk for women, due to loss of work and increased and sustained stressors in households. We have continued to see high numbers of clients with heightened levels of vulnerability and risk.

In 2020-21, the team opened **60** ongoing Case Management matters, providing intensive support to women to protect their safety and allow them to stay engaged with their legal matters. This is a **43%** increase when compared to 19/20. We also closed **88** ongoing Case Management services when their legal matter was successfully resolved.

In addition, the team provided **321** discreet social work supports, including crisis interventions and specialist domestic and family violence safety planning.

FUTURE NEEDS AND DIRECTION

As the Social Work team grows it becomes clear that our integrated multi-disciplinary model provides lasting and meaningful change in our clients’ lives by delivering practical and emotional supports alongside legal advice.

Looking to the future, we hope to build the Centre’s capacity to support women affected by mental ill-health and drug and alcohol dependency as well as women with disability and women with migrant and refugee experiences.



CASE STUDY KATHERINE'S STORY

The Centre provides wrap around care to help a woman leave her violent and controlling husband and build a new life.

Katherine had been married to Andrew for over 30 years and worked as the bookkeeper and administration officer in his business. Throughout their relationship he had been physically, verbally, emotionally, and financially abusive. He limited her access to money and separated her from friends and family so she had become isolated. Their children had left home and had little contact with them due to Andrew’s violence.

Katherine was desperate to leave the relationship but having no money or friends she was scared and unsure of how to go about it. Andrew had frequently told her that if she left him, she would get nothing as she had not contributed financially to the relationship.

Katherine found the Centre by googling support services. She could only communicate with the Centre by email as Andrew monitored her phone calls and she was worried about what would happen if he knew she was planning

to leave. The Centre’s social worker worked intensively to help her develop a safety and exit plan, determine an approach to withdrawing money that would not be noticed and secure somewhere to live. After many months of planning, Katherine was able to leave.

With Katherine now safe, the Centre was able to help her formalise her separation from both the marriage and the employment relationship. The Centre negotiated full disclosure of assets and agreement for Katherine to receive a cash payment which included a superannuation split and amounted to \$200,000.

The Centre’s Will Clinic helped her write a new will, and the social worker referred her to services that could provide the ongoing support and counselling needed to help her heal.

Katherine has secured stable accommodation at a location unknown to Andrew and is re-establishing her life. She has found a job that she enjoys and is planning the purchase of a small house. She is making new friends and rebuilding her relationship with her adult children.

OUR PEOPLE

BOARD AND COMMITTEES

The Centre has a strong, skilled and passionate Board who guide our strategic direction and ensure we meet our obligations as a transparent and accountable community organisation.

Our Board includes women from a broad range of professional backgrounds including senior women leaders from across the community, legal and government sectors.

| | |
|---------------------|---------------------|
| Chair | Secretary |
| Trish Bergin | Alana Fraser |
| Deputy Chair | Treasurer |
| Linda Crebbin | Agnes Kopras-Ianson |

Members
Katrina Fanning
Cathie Warbuton
Rebecca Hobbs (Young Woman Observer)

The Board is supported by two standing committees, the Governance Committee and the Finance and Risk Committee. The Committees include Board Directors and independent representatives.

| | |
|------------------------------------|-----------------------------------|
| Governance Committee | Finance and Risk Committee |
| Alana Fraser (Chair) | Agnes Kopras-Ianson (Chair) |
| Linda Crebbin | Cathie Warbuton |
| Trish Bergin | Christina Li (Independent Member) |
| Yvonne Korn (Independent Member) | Rebecca Hobbs |
| Juliette Ford (Independent Member) | |



ACT YOUNG LAWYER OF THE YEAR CAROLINE BEASLEY

Clayton Utz secondee, Caroline Beasley, was awarded the ACT Young Lawyer of the Year for 2021. Caroline was recognised for her work with the Centre and Canberra Community Law, as well as her commitment to mentoring female law students at the ANU and junior lawyers, and coordinating the Clayton Utz Community Connect Program.

Caroline was a much-valued member of the Centre's Employment and Discrimination Practice from January to June 2021.



STAFF PROFILE SARAH MILSON-MAHY

Sarah joined the Centre as Deputy Principal Solicitor, bringing with her a wealth of experience in the areas of Family Law and Child Protection. She moved from private practice so she could practise family law in a different way. "Many of the women who come to the Centre have multiple issues feeding into their family law problem. At the Centre, with the support of our socio-legal team, I am able to help my clients more holistically, and that is very rewarding." Sarah is a current ACT Law Society Councillor and a member of the ACT Law Society Family Law Committee.

OUR STAFF

The Centre has a diverse and dedicated staff team, with deep expertise in our key practice areas and broad professional experience across the government and non-government sector, community services and the private legal sector.

EXECUTIVE TEAM

CEO
Elena Rosenman
Principal Solicitor
Claudia Maclean

CORPORATE SUPPORT TEAM

Finance Manager
Marinda Burger
Office Manager
Magda Kaczmarek
Executive Officer
Alison Killen
Reception
Claudia Munnings

MULLEUN MURA TEAM

Case Manager
Leah House (resigned May 2021)
Solicitor
Philippa Daniel

CLIENT SERVICES TEAM

Client Services Manager
Ania Zalewska (resigned April 2021)
Paralegal and Intake Officers
Alex-Lee Hargy (Senior Paralegal)
Brodie Hart
Parul Gupta
Thanaya Naidu (resigned August 2020)
Nila Norbu (resigned January 2021)

SOCIO-LEGAL TEAM

Head of Practice
Kasumi Ejiri
Social Workers
Brianna Jarvinen
Kate Chen

EMPLOYMENT & DISCRIMINATION PRACTICE

Head of Practice
Beth Hender
Employment & Discrimination Solicitors
Ella Kelly
Caroline Beasley (Clayton Utz secondee)

FAMILY LAW TEAM

Head of Practice & Deputy Principal Solicitor
Sarah Milson-Mahy
Senior Solicitors
Marilyn Wright (resigned April 2021)
Solicitors
Lauren Callahan
Nicola Mildren
Health Justice Team
Rosa Grahame (Managing Solicitor)
Shireen Faghani (Managing Solicitor)
Emma Buckland
Anna Hutchinson (resigned August 2021)



OUR PRO BONO PARTNERS



CALD WOMEN'S DIVORCE CLINIC

Through the Divorce Clinic, Sparke Helmore lawyers provide advice and representation to clients from migrant and culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds seeking a divorce. This clinic has developed specialist expertise in addressing the significant legal issues which can be posed by migration, refugee experience and cultural and linguistic differences.

102 services provided, including 21 matters where Sparke Helmore attended court on behalf of WLC clients



DOMESTIC VIOLENCE CLINIC

The HCC Clinic provides high-quality family law advice to women who have experienced domestic and family violence. Clinic appointments provide clients with expert initial advice and a pathway into the legal system

57 legal advices



EMPLOYMENT LAW CLINIC

This year we commenced a new partnership with Slater + Gordon to deliver employment law services, particularly when there are worker's compensation elements to the matter. The Centre shares Slater + Gordon's ethos to assist the most vulnerable, and thank Martin Carrick and his team for their valuable contribution to the Centre. We look forward to continuing this clinic this coming financial year and to continue to provide holistic support in the employment space.



VICTIMS OF CRIME COMPENSATION CLINIC

Through the clinic, Clayton Utz lawyers provide assistance to clients who have suffered injury, loss or damage as a result of being a victim of crime (including domestic and family violence and sexual assault) to apply for financial compensation.

10 Clients Assisted
\$73,201 Total compensation secured



TECHNICAL EXPERTISE

KPMG provides technical forensic and forensic accounting services, including title searches and company searches, recovery of deleted computer material and valuations of small businesses. This is a crucial service for clients who have experienced financial abuse and have limited information about relationship assets. With KPMG's assistance in 20/21, the Centre assisted clients gain full knowledge of assets to obtain fair property settlements, separate from violent partners and become financially independent.



AUSTRALIAN GOVERNMENT SOLICITOR

AGS send their brightest lawyers on regular placements with the Centre as part of their graduate year. AGS lawyers provide expert legal research and drafting support to the Centre's legal practice, assisting with complex legal matters with intelligence and precision. We thank Dinu and Tori for their contribution to the Centre this year.

PROXIMITY

PROXIMITY

This year, Proximity provided commercial law advice and assistance to our clients when it intersected with complex family law debt issues. Proximity also continued their secondee program at the Centre, where they provide a full-time secondee for a three-month placement every year.



KING WOODS MALLESON

King Wood Mallesons supports the Mulleun Mura program, providing advices on discrete technical issues of law affecting Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander clients and information to support community legal education.



VINCENTS ACCOUNTANTS

Our clients' matters can be complex, and we collaborate with specialist practitioners to ensure our client's receive specialist expert advice. Tony Lane, Head of Insolvency at Vincents Accountants, provides pro bono advice in relation to insolvency and bankruptcy. We look forward to continuing our work with Tony in this financial year, with his new advisory firm, Beacon Advisory.



PRO BONO PARTNER HIGHLIGHT CLAYTON UTZ

Clayton Utz is one of the Centre's oldest and most reliable pro bono partners. This report includes information on their significant contribution to increasing our clients' access to legal services.

However, what sets the Clayton Utz approach to pro bono support apart is their deep, quiet and unwavering commitment to supporting the organisational capacity of its community partners. This year, we saw this extend further than ever before when they seconded a full-time lawyer to the Centre's Employment and Discrimination Team to support this critical area of practice at a time of great need.

The Centre extends our sincere thanks to Caroline Beasley and Ali McMaster for their work with the Centre in 2021.

We also acknowledge the exceptional contribution of outgoing Pro Bono partner Jen Wyborn. Her personal commitment of time, expertise and indefatigable good humour have made an immeasurable difference to the evolution, growth and development of the Centre over the last five years.

Photo: Clayton Utz pro bono partner Jennifer Wyborn (centre) accepting the Law Society Pro Bono Service Award 2018

OUR VOLUNTEERS, INTERNS AND PLACEMENTS

VOLUNTEER SOLICITORS

Aarti Arora
 Amelia Barclay
 Catherine Coles
 Jacquelyn Curtis
 Julie Dobinson
 Cristina Heush
 Tina Lee
 Bridgett Madigan
 Margot McCabe
 Courtney Mullen
 Rebecca Munk
 Anna Neilan
 Magdalena Orczykowski
 Alison Osmand
 Debra Parker
 Rhonda Payget
 Kate Riley
 Monica Serci
 Bernadette Smyth
 Lucy Stramandinoli
 Anna Visser

HCC DFV FAMILY LAW CLINIC

Chloe Curran
 Holly Gunn
 Jenna Storrier
 Robyn Riley (admin support)

SPARKE HELMORE DIVORCE CLINIC

Mya Anumarlapudi
 Molly Campbell
 Katerina Calvert
 Alexandra Cornfield
 Molly Covell
 Lauren Davis
 Lara Douglas
 Laura Hinwood
 Rushil Sharma
 Rachel Walls
 Liana Westcott
 Jeanine Wong

CLAYTON UTZ VICTIMS OF CRIME CLINIC

Emma Letcher Boldt
 Cindy Chia
 Seth Godlewski
 Rachael Grivas
 Kyu-won Kim
 Beck Long
 Danna Krajina (admin support)
 Deborah Mark
 Nick Westfoy

SLATER AND GORDON EMPLOYMENT CLINIC

Lauren Carr
 Martin Carrick
 Josh Carroll
 Amy Foster (admin support)

CORPORATE SUPPORT VOLUNTEERS

Policy Advisor
 Alison Lendon

VOLUNTEER LEGAL ASSISTANTS

Davina Nair
 Senuri Perera
 Caitlin Plesek
 Serena Ricky
 Grace Sinstead- Reid
 Holly Stapledon

PRO BONO PLACEMENTS

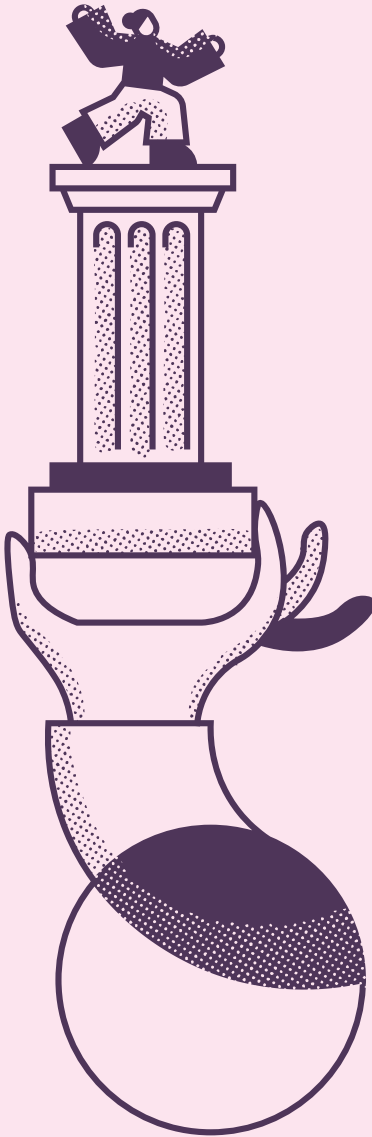
Radhika Bhatia (Proximity Legal)
 Dinu Kumarasinghe (Australian Government Solicitor)
 Victoria Sewell (Australian Government Solicitor)

GRADUATE DIPLOMA IN LEGAL PRACTICE

Charlene Ebbs

SOCIAL WORK STUDENT PLACEMENT

Sadhana Kunwar



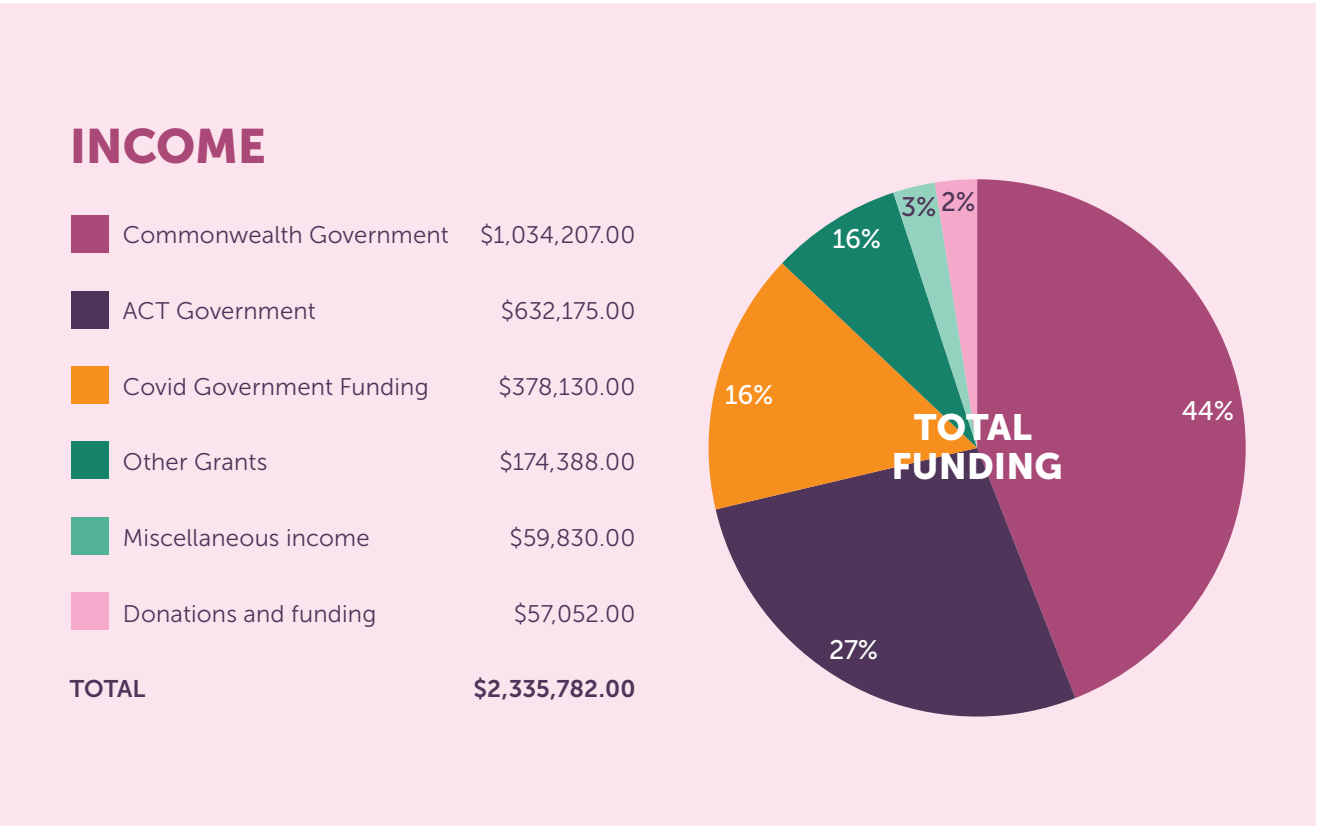
OUR FINANCES

The Board and the Finance and Risk Committee support good financial governance for the organisation. Financial management policies and procedures, robust internal control mechanisms and timely, reliable and transparent financial information and advice assists the Board to make sound financial decisions.

The financial outcome for Centre in 2020-21 resulted in a surplus of 6.8% of the annual revenue. This is an unusually high surplus, driven largely by non-recurring COVID-19 funding, constituting 16.1% of our total revenue. Without this additional funding, the Centre would not have been able to meet increasing legal need for women in the ACT.

This funding supported the Centre to maintain continuous service delivery to clients through the period, despite the significant disruptions to operations caused by COVID-19. Unfortunately, this funding was not provided in an ongoing way, despite the enduring need in the Canberra community.

As a service delivery organisation, employee expenses accounted for the majority of expenditure. As COVID-19 endured through the year, the Centre continued to make investments to maintain information technology, external communications and support staff through remote working arrangements due to COVID-19.





RSM Australia Pty Ltd

Building 4, Level 2, 70 Kent Street Deakin ACT 2600
200 Canberra ACT 2601

INDEPENDENT AUDITOR'S REPORT
TO THE MEMBERS OF
WOMEN'S LEGAL CENTRE (ACT & REGION) INCORPORATED

Opinion

We have audited the financial report of Women's Legal Centre (ACT & Region) Incorporated, which comprises the statement of financial position as at 30 June 2021, the statement of profit or loss and other comprehensive income, the statement of changes in equity and the statement of cash flows for the year then ended, and notes to the financial statements, including a summary of significant accounting policies, and the statement by the board.

In our opinion, the financial report of Women's Legal Centre (ACT & Region) Incorporated has been prepared in accordance with Australian Accounting Standards - Reduced Disclosure Requirements and Division 60 of the *Australian Charities and Not-for-profits Commission Act 2012*, including:

- (a) giving a true and fair view of the registered entity's financial position as at 30 June 2021 and of its financial performance and cash flows for the year ended on that date; and
- (b) complying with Australian Accounting Standards and Division 60 of the *Australian Charities and Not-for-profits Commission Regulation 2013*.

Basis for Opinion

We conducted our audit in accordance with Australian Auditing Standards. Our responsibilities under those standards are further described in the *Auditor's Responsibilities for the Audit of the Financial Report* section of our report. We are independent of the Women's Legal Centre (ACT & Region) Incorporated in accordance with the ethical requirements of the Accounting Professional and Ethical Standards Board's APES 110 *Code of Ethics for Professional Accountants* (the Code) that are relevant to our audit of the financial report in Australia. We have also fulfilled our other ethical responsibilities in accordance with the Code.

We believe that the audit evidence we have obtained is sufficient and appropriate to provide a basis for our opinion.

Other Information

Those charged with governance are responsible for the other information. The other information comprises the information included in Women's Legal Centre (ACT & Region) Incorporated's annual report for the year ended 30 June 2021, but does not include the financial report and the auditor's report thereon.

Our opinion on the financial report does not cover the other information and accordingly we do not express any form of assurance conclusion thereon.

In connection with our audit of the financial report, our responsibility is to read the other information and, in doing so, consider whether the other information is materially inconsistent with the financial report or our knowledge obtained in the audit or otherwise appears to be materially misstated.

THE POWER OF BEING UNDERSTOOD
AUDIT | TAX | CONSULTING

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If, based on the work we have performed, we conclude that there is a material misstatement of this other information, we are required to report that fact. We have nothing to report in this regard.

Responsibilities of Management and Those Charged with Governance for the Financial Report

The board members of the registered entity are responsible for the preparation of the financial report that gives a true and fair view in accordance with Australian Accounting Standards and the *Australian Charities and Not-for-profits Commission Act 2012* (ACNC Act) and for such internal control as the board members determine is necessary to enable the preparation of the financial report that gives a true and fair view and is free from material misstatement, whether due to fraud or error.

In preparing the financial report, the board members are responsible for assessing Women's Legal Centre (ACT & Region) Incorporated's ability to continue as a going concern, disclosing, as applicable, matters related to going concern and using the going concern basis of accounting unless management either intends to liquidate Women's Legal Centre (ACT & Region) Incorporated or to cease operations, or has no realistic alternative but to do so.

Auditor's Responsibilities for the Audit of the Financial Report

Our objectives are to obtain reasonable assurance about whether the financial report as a whole is free from material misstatement, whether due to fraud or error, and to issue an auditor's report that includes our opinion. Reasonable assurance is a high level of assurance, but is not a guarantee that an audit conducted in accordance with the Australian Auditing Standards will always detect a material misstatement when it exists. Misstatements can arise from fraud or error and are considered material if, individually or in the aggregate, they could reasonably be expected to influence the economic decisions of users taken on the basis of this financial report.

A further description of our responsibilities for the audit of the financial report is located at the Auditing and Assurance Standards Board website at: <http://www.auasb.gov.au/Pronouncements/Australian-Auditing-Standards/Auditors-Responsibilities.aspx>. This description forms part of our auditor's report.

RSM Australia Pty Ltd

Canberra, Australian Capital Territory
Dated: 4 November 2021

Rodney Miller
Director

