

Community legal centres' invaluable contribution to communities recognised in the budget – but much more investment is needed

Yesterday, the Victorian Government confirmed that it would continue to fund a range of community legal centres' lifechanging integrated justice programs in its 2025 budget, signalling its recognition of the value of community legal centres as services that 'matter most'.

For more than 50 years, community legal centres have been at the heart of supporting hundreds of thousands of Victorians experiencing hardship to access to justice.

The budget confirmed crucial legal assistance in family violence matters will continue to be funded, through the continuation of the pre-court engagement model and the CLC Family Violence Assistance Fund. This funding is essential to provide family members experiencing violence, typically women and children, with independent legal advice.

Other investments in the community legal sector include funding for Mortgage Stress Victoria; and for community legal and Aboriginal legal services operating at the new Wyndham Law Courts.

Whilst community legal centres are relieved that existing programs that are proven to work are being re-funded to continue for the next three years, what the budget failed to do was increase investment to allow community legal services to expand their early intervention and crisis support work. With 91 per cent of community legal centres reporting increased demand for their services over the past year, and nearly 2,000 help seekers being turned away each week across the state, the absence of significant investment in the community legal sector is creating serious issues for delivering holistic legal assistance services to Victorians.

Louisa Gibbs, CEO at the Federation of Community Legal Centres said: "Today's budget allocation for community legal centres is far from what is needed for the sector to meet legal need, but it is recognition of the value of community legal centres' programs and services.

"Whilst we recognise challenging fiscal environment in which the Victorian Government has created this budget, we saw a \$1.6 billion investment into prison beds and punitive measures, rather than investing in social services that prevent the root causes of offending, or early intervention services such as those provided by community legal centres.

“Going forward, we look forward to working closely with Attorney-General Kilkenny to identify strategic areas for increased investment in the future. Ensuring that all Victorians have access to justice makes our state fairer and safer.”