

Annual Report

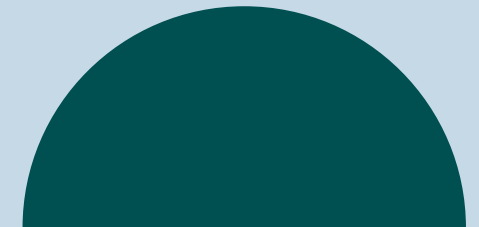
2023–24





Acknowledgement of Country

Southside Justice acknowledges over 65,000 years of continuous custodianship and care by the Boon Wurrong people of the Kulin nation for the lands and waters where we live and work. We acknowledge the Boon Wurrong people as the traditional and rightful owners of these lands, whose sovereignty has never been ceded. We pay respect to elders past and present and all Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, recognising their ongoing leadership and strength of the world's oldest living culture.



Message from Denis & Mel

Shaping our future

As we present our 23-24 annual report, we want to start by acknowledging our most invaluable asset — our staff. The dedication, expertise and passion of each team member are the driving forces behind the accomplishments showcased in the following pages. We extend our heartfelt thanks to our staff—Bridget, Charlotte, Emily, Erika, Jess, Julia, Leeah, Lloyd, Maie, Mikayla and Victoria—for their unwavering commitment and extraordinary talent, which enable us to fulfill our purpose and create meaningful change.

We would like to express our thanks to our volunteer board members for their contributions this year—Amanda Storey (Deputy Chair), Elliot Anderson (Treasurer), Brendan Lacota (Secretary), Sonia Clarke, Peter Dikranis and Hayley Jones. The time and expertise they generously offer not only enhance our governance but also contribute to the ongoing success of Southside Justice. We also extend special thanks to Stephen Somerville for his remarkable support and infectious laugh during his time on the board.



Amid the usual busyness of managing a community legal centre, we accomplished two significant milestones:

Celebrating our 50th anniversary:

Marking half a century of service, we reflected on our rich history, recognising the many individuals and partners who have played an important role in advancing the legal rights of people in our community. This milestone not only served as a testament to our history but reinforced our resolve to continue advocating for justice in the years ahead.

Launching a new strategic plan:

In tandem with our anniversary celebration, we unveiled a realistically ambitious five-year strategic plan designed to guide the next phase of our growth and impact. This plan outlines our renewed commitment to responding to legal need, expanding our work with others and focusing on where we can add the most value. A major priority for the next five years is strengthening our financial sustainability. This focus will be crucial in ensuring we can continue to deliver vital services and expand our impact, allowing us to address the growing needs of our community while maintaining long-term stability and resilience.

We thank both the Commonwealth and Victorian Government for their funding support and look forward to their continued and strengthened support through the new National Access to Justice Partnership, set to commence in 2025.

We also recognise the significant support from the Victorian Legal Services Board. This year, we secured a Strong Foundations grant that allowed us to employ our first Director of Engagement and Impact. We greatly appreciate the VLBSB's transition from project funding to a trust-based and unrestricted funding model, and we hope that more funders will adopt this approach in the future.

This year, we were fortunate to establish a pro bono secondee arrangement with Barry Nilsson, and we extend our special thanks to Katie, Stephen and Will. This partnership allowed us to employ a family lawyer, which significantly increased our ability to address the growing legal need. We also thank our long-standing pro bono partner Clayton Utz, for their continued support, often provided quietly and without seeking public recognition.

Our clients are central to everything we do, and we acknowledge their strength, resilience and hope by sharing a selection of their stories in the following pages. These narratives not only highlight their experiences but also illustrate the impact of our work and the importance of accessible legal support in their lives.

With thanks,

Denis Nelthorpe,
Chair

Mel Dye,
Chief Executive Officer



Celebrating 50 years

On 13 November 2023, we celebrated the 50th anniversary of Southside Justice, formerly St Kilda Legal Service. It was a night filled with cheer, nostalgia and a renewed commitment to the values that have guided Southside Justice through half a century of service.

Having a mix of past and present supporters in the room added a unique energy and depth to the celebration. Particular thanks to Willie Pepper from the Boon Wurrong Foundation for a moving Welcome to Country, Nina Taylor MP for her kind words of recognition and support, and Michael D'Argaville for sharing his reflections of working at St Kilda Legal Service in the 1980s.

For 50 years we have played a unique and important role in advancing the rights of people and for social justice. As one of the first community legal centres in Victoria, St Kilda Legal Service was established by a group of passionate volunteers with the goal of enhancing access to justice for people disproportionately affected by systemic inequity.

We were extremely fortunate to be joined by four of the original volunteers – Barry Berger, Alan Rochman, Sam Chizik and Joe Katz.

Half a century of unwavering commitment, dedication, and community spirit have brought us to this remarkable milestone, and we want to acknowledge and thank everyone who has been part of our journey.



Our new strategy

This year, we launched our new five-year strategy that strengthens our commitment to addressing critical social issues through three key impact areas:

Safe Justice, Housing Justice and Economic Justice. These pillars will guide our efforts as we work to support people facing disadvantage and tackle systemic inequalities.

Alongside our strategy, we also developed a monitoring, evaluation and learning framework. This framework will enable us to:

- **Understand our impact**
- **Be accountable to our community and funders**
- **Continuously learn to improve.**

The results of our inaugural client survey revealed that we are making a meaningful impact and effectively helping people.

89%

**Contacting
Southside Justice
was easy**

94%

**The waiting time to
receive help was
acceptable**

100%

**Clients felt
welcome and
safe at our
service**

100%

**The lawyer
helped clients
gain a better legal
understanding**

100%

**The lawyer
helped clients
understand what
to do and how to
act**

78%

**Clients felt less
stressed after
talking to the
lawyer**

94%

**Clients felt more
confident to get
legal help in the
future**

Our strategy: on a page

Vision

A fair, safe and inclusive community.

Purpose

To increase access to legal support, promote fairness and advocate for social justice.

Role

We support people facing the greatest need in our community understand their legal rights and access the support and services they need.

We advocate for people to achieve fair and just outcomes, for better laws and systems that promote fairness and progress social justice.

We collaborate with community and sector partners at the right time and place to help people overcome complex problems and to improve their lives.

Safe justice

Promoting safety and freedom from gender-based violence, and advocating for people harmed by discrimination and criminalisation.

Housing justice

Standing up for the right to safe, secure, and affordable housing through supporting people experiencing homelessness and housing insecurity.

Economic justice

Pursuing the right of all in our community to enjoy economic security, a fair level of income support and a life free of unjust debt.

Values

Inclusive. We are respectful and informed, addressing the impacts of inequity and discrimination and celebrating diversity.

Courageous. We are considered yet brave and bold in our actions, decisions and practice.

Adaptable. We listen, learn and evolve with the needs of our staff, partners and community.

Principles

Community lawyering. We practice with self-awareness, compassion, and a commitment to working in solidarity.

People and communities are the experts in their own lives. We recognise, listen to, and amplify their voices.

Together is better. We know that the community and legal sector are more effective together. We always collaborate for greater and deeper impact.

Enablers

Focus on place and community

Effective and responsive team

Enabling partnerships

Greater funding security

Safe Justice

Promoting safety and freedom from gender-based violence and advocating for people harmed by discrimination and criminalisation.

Our work includes providing legal support to victim survivors, advocating for stronger legal protections and pushing for reforms that ensure long-term safety and equality.

An overwhelming 82% of our clients are women, with 80% affected by family violence.

Additionally, many clients encounter intersectional challenges related to gender-based violence, including racism, psychosocial disability and anti-sex work discrimination.

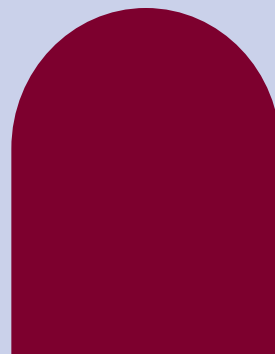
This year, we purposefully focused on strengthening our collaboration with local agencies to support people harmed by violence, discrimination and criminalisation. By adopting an integrated and trauma-informed approach, we have improved our ability to address intersectional needs and deliver tailored support.

In living our principle of Together is Better, we extend our thanks to the following organisations: Better Health Network, Emerge, Sacred Heart Mission, The Orange Door, The Salvation Army and Vincent Care.

With the support of a grant from the Jack Brockhoff Foundation, we initiated a Health Justice Partnership with the Maternal and Child Health service at the City of Port Phillip.

Research indicates that women who are pregnant and new mothers face a significantly increased risk of family violence. Studies also show that if a woman is experiencing family violence, she is more likely to disclose to a health practitioner than any other type of professional.

This highlights the critical role of health services as an access point to support women with legal needs after childbirth, and especially for those at risk of or experiencing family violence, like Miriam.



Miriam's story

Working together to keep new mothers safe from harm

Miriam* arrived in Australia in 2022 and soon after married Harry. When she became pregnant, Harry's violent behaviour escalated, resulting in a Family Violence Intervention Order being issued before the baby was born.

A worried Miriam approached her Maternal Child Health (MCH) Nurse three days before the intervention order was due to expire.

Thanks to our Health Justice Partnership with the MCH service in the City of Port Phillip, the nurse immediately connected Miriam to our lawyer who was on-site.

With our support, the intervention order was extended, supporting Miriam to continue her life with her child with a renewed sense of safety. We are now helping Miriam to apply for a divorce so she can move forward with her life.

Working in partnership with local services is a core principle of Southside Justice. Miriam's case is an example of how we can be more effective when we work together, providing timely, coordinated action to keep community members safe.

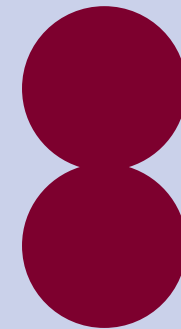
* Name has been changed to protect confidentiality.





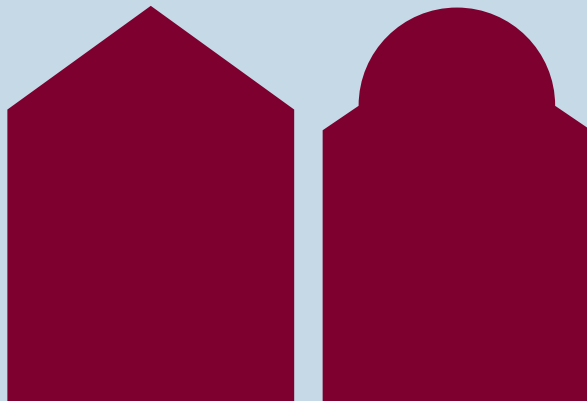
Alex, the Coordinator of the MCH service, reflected,

“This initiative has been a huge benefit for the nursing team who know appointments are easily accessible for their clients with little to no wait times. It has also given our most vulnerable clients much needed support and guidance during what can be extremely stressful life events. Already we are seeing positive outcomes with women feeling safe to access this free service.”



Housing Justice

Standing up for the right to safe, secure and affordable housing through supporting people experiencing homelessness and housing insecurity.



A key characteristic of our community is the significant concentration of social housing (umbrella term for public and community housing) and organisations supporting people experiencing homelessness.

Our catchment area accounts for over 8% of all social housing in the state, with the City of Port Phillip being the largest contributor having nearly four times the state average for social housing per Local Government Area (LGA).

Overall, the combined average across our three LGAs is more than double the state average for social housing per LGA.

In light of these statistics, it's clear why we have strengthened our partnerships with organisations such as Better Health Network, Launch Housing, Sacred Heart Mission, The Salvation Army, Uniting, and community support programs within local councils, all of which are equally committed to assisting people living in social housing and experiencing homelessness.

This year, we conducted several information sessions for public housing residents regarding their rights as tenants. We've heard from residents expressing concerns about the prevalence of black mould and the ongoing neglect of their buildings; Fana's story illustrates these challenges.



Fana's story

No one should live in a home that makes them unwell—advocating for safe and healthy housing

Fana* is a single mother with three children who has been living with black mould in her public housing apartment. Both Fana and her children have experienced respiratory health issues directly attributable to the mould, requiring ongoing specialist care.

Despite many attempts by Fana over two years to advocate to fix the source of the rising damp, no meaningful action was taken by public housing officials.

Fana was eventually referred to us by a community worker from her local council, and we began advocating on her behalf. Our efforts included representing her at tribunal hearings, which led to repair orders, filing a complaint with the Victorian Ombudsman, ongoing advocacy with the local housing office, and sending letters to politicians.

While Fana's property was attended to multiple times to clean, paint or fog treat the mould, the cause was never rectified, and it continued to come back.

Fana knew her rights. If the source of the mould could not be fixed, her family needed to be relocated to a new home.

After 12 months of advocacy from our team and Fana's unwavering determination, she was finally offered relocation. This marks a fresh start for her family to rebuild their health after years of living with toxic mould.

Reflecting on her engagement with us, Fana said she was so grateful to be connected to Southside Justice through her community worker. She knows so many of her neighbours and community members have similar issues but don't know how to start or where to go for help.

Fana's case highlights the protracted and challenging process residents often face when seeking solutions to urgent housing issues. We remain dedicated to working with social housing residents to uphold their right to fair and safe living conditions.

* Name has been changed to protect confidentiality.

Paula, the CALD Engagement Worker at Uniting, expressed,

“I recognise Southside Justice as an essential service in helping individuals, particularly those from Culturally and Linguistically Diverse communities, navigate complex legal issues. Southside Justice has provided crucial support and guidance, to public house tenants to maintain secure and safe housing while improving their understanding of their rights and responsibilities. This tailored assistance enables people to overcome barriers, access vital services, and promotes trust within the community, fostering stability and well-being.”



Economic Justice

Pursuing the right of all in our community to enjoy economic security, a fair level of income support and a life free of unjust debt.

90%

**Clients
experiencing
financial
disadvantage**

Economic justice has increasingly become a key focus of our work, with **90 per cent of our clients experiencing financial disadvantage and accounting for over one-third of our casework this year**. This includes a wide range of legal issues such as employment disputes, debt recovery, family law property matters, fines and victim compensation. As the cost of living continues to rise, accessible legal assistance is crucial in helping people address their financial challenges and achieve greater financial stability.

To strengthen our commitment to economic justice, we established a partnership this year with Good Shepherd's Financial Independence Hub, a service that assists people recovering from financial abuse. This collaboration streamlines referrals, enabling clients to receive both legal and financial counselling services at the same time. To further enhance this integrated approach, a Good Shepherd financial counsellor is now located at our St Kilda office, fostering stronger collaboration between our teams. We sincerely thank Sonja and Cathy from Good Shepherd for their invaluable contributions this year and enabling us to help Joanne.

Joanne's story

Breaking free from financial abuse

Joanne* had recently separated from a long-term relationship where she had experienced significant financial abuse and controlling behaviours, including the accumulation of approximately \$38,000 of fine debt.

With support from Good Shepherd, Joanne began reclaiming control of her finances. Recognising the need for legal support, the financial counsellor made several attempts to connect Joanne with legal help but faced difficulties with cumbersome paperwork and intake processes. However, thanks to our new partnership with Good Shepherd, a seamless referral was made, allowing us to engage with Joanne swiftly.

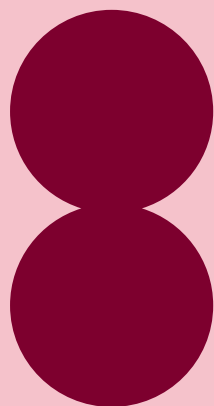
We worked closely with Joanne to gather support material for a Family Violence Scheme application, a program designed to assist victim-survivors in cases where fines are linked to family violence. The application was successful, and all of Joanne's eligible fines were withdrawn.

Reflecting on the experience, Joanne shared, "The first time I spoke with (my lawyer) I knew immediately I was in good hands. Women in difficult situations like myself really need that guidance and a helping hand. Southside Justice helped me to have a voice and have the courage and backing to move forward with my situation and my life in general."

* Name has been changed to protect confidentiality.

Sex Worker Legal Program

Victoria's first funded, specialised, free legal program for sex workers and one of just two legal programs for sex workers across Australia.



The Sex Worker Legal Program (SWLP) was established through the support of the Victorian Government following the passage of the Sex Work Decriminalisation Act 2022 (Vic). The Act is designed to reduce discrimination and harm against sex workers.

However, the true impact of this legislation goes beyond its formal passage—it relies on how effectively it is integrated into society and put into practice. Without proper socialisation and implementation, the law risks falling short of its goals, leaving sex workers without the full protections and benefits as intended.

The collaborative model with peer organisation Vixen is at the core of the strengths-based approach. We deeply value our work with Vixen and see their existence as integral to the continuation of the SWLP.

Additionally, we maintain strong relationships with the RhED Program at Better Health Network and the St Kilda Gatehouse, furthering the reach of the SWLP and ensuring effective channels for referrals, cross-communication and advocacy.

Within the legal sector, we continue to have strong relationships with community legal centres and Victoria Legal Aid to enhance access to justice for sex workers. Additionally, we have built a pro bono network to further support this effort.

Stage 2 of the decriminalisation process came into effect in December 2023. This coincided with a 113% increase in demand for our assistance. We consider this a positive development suggesting that the SWLP's reputation and relationships are growing stronger, and that sex workers' awareness of their legal rights are increasing.

In the past year we have strengthened our work in providing a safe, trusted and inclusive service while enhancing our ability to identify and address the diverse legal issues sex workers face—ranging from employment law, discrimination, and debt recovery to criminal law, personal safety and victims of crime assistance.

Despite demonstrated early success, funding for the program from the Victorian Government expired in July 2024. Fortunately, our funding from the Victorian Legal Services Board + Commissioner will see the program continue til December 2025, although at reduced capacity. Over the coming year, we will work with the Victorian Government to secure the reinstatement of funding.

Not only does the SWLP enhance access to justice for Victorian sex workers, but it is well placed within Victoria's broader policy priorities to improve the safety of women, strengthen workplace protections and advance human rights.

Juanita's story

Fighting stigma and discrimination to uphold sex workers' rights to work and live in peace

Facing unlawful eviction from her home, we helped Juanita to understand her rights, maintain her economic independence and keep her housing secure.

Juanita* had just resigned from her job at a sex service premises and started working for herself from home. Soon after, Juanita's neighbours were letter-boxed with a flyer from a 'Concerned Resident', complaining that Juanita was operating an 'illegal brothel'. Juanita suspected it was written by her former employer in retaliation for starting her own business.

Despite no previous problems with neighbours, the Council received complaints about Juanita and launched an investigation, alerting Juanita's landlord. Juanita's real estate agent then accused her of breaching her rental agreement, serving a formal notice and placing her housing at risk.

A referral from the RhED program put Juanita in contact with a lawyer at the SWLP. With the support of an interpreter, the SWLP lawyer explained Juanita's rights under the Sex Work Discrimination Act 2022 and set about the process of advocating with Council and Juanita's real estate agent.

* Name has been changed to protect confidentiality.

The Council thanked the SWLP for bringing the updated legislation to their attention, understanding that it was unlawful to discriminate against sex workers due to their occupation, and that sex workers are now entitled to operate a small home-based business. The Council is now in the process of updating their internal knowledge and information on their website.

With updated knowledge of the law, the real estate agent also stopped threatening Juanita's tenancy. Juanita can now continue to operate her business from home without threat of eviction.

Juanita reflected, "The lawyer was very helpful and fought for me a lot... I understand my rights better and feel more confident and supported. Without the [Sex Worker Legal] Program, I don't know where I could have asked for help and received it."

Stigma and discrimination against sex workers remains prevalent in society. Juanita's story shows that societal understanding of the decriminalisation legislation still has a way to go.

Juanita's lawyer reflected,

"The main purpose of decriminalisation is to reduce discrimination against and harm to sex workers. As this case demonstrates, the legislation is only effective when it is known and enforced. Access to legal support is integral to both help socialise the legislation, and to uphold the rights of sex workers when discrimination arises."



Our impact in numbers

734 Clients

82%

Women

17%

Men

1%

Gender Diverse

1,679 Services

213

Information & referral

610

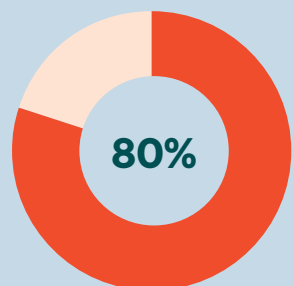
Advices

352

Cases

504

Duty lawyer



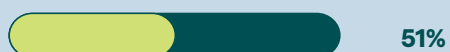
Women clients affected by family violence

Community Partnership Clients

Experiencing or at risk of homelessness



Living with a disability of mental illness



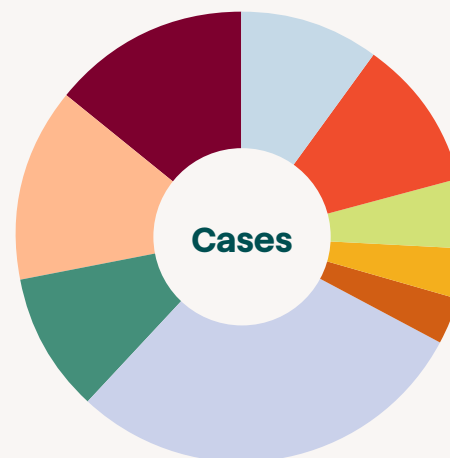
Experiencing or at risk of financial disadvantage



Areas of Law



- Family violence — **27%**
- Family law — **25%**
- Employment law & discrimination — **2%**
- Consumer law & debt — **3%**
- Victim compensation — **3%**
- Fines — **9%**
- Civil law — **9%**
- Housing — **10%**
- Criminal law — **12%**



- Family violence — **10%**
- Family law — **11%**
- Employment law & discrimination — **5%**
- Consumer law & debt — **3.5%**
- Victim compensation — **3.5%**
- Fines — **29%**
- Civil law — **10%**
- Housing — **14%**
- Criminal law — **14%**



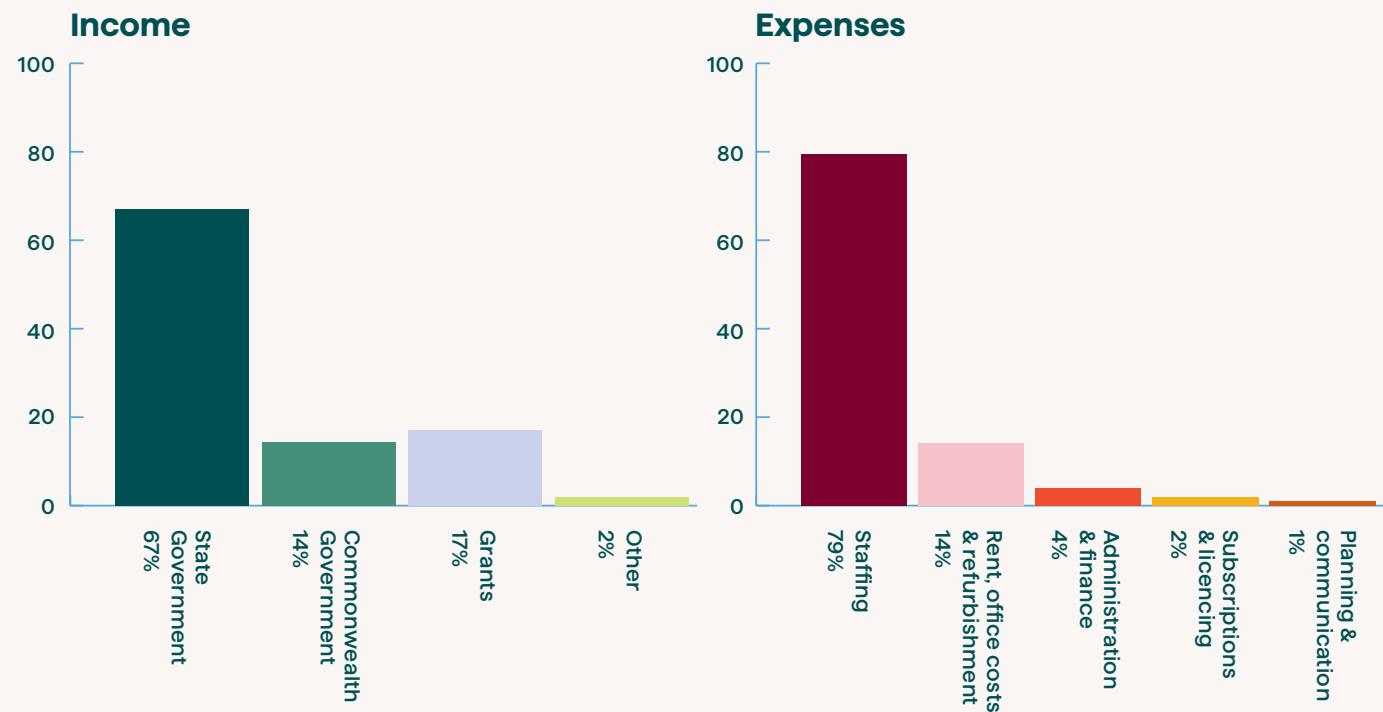
Our finances & funding

We are committed to ensuring that the funds we secure are used in the most effective way to enable us to provide the most impactful services to our clients.

In 2023-24, our total income was \$1,235,522, reflecting a 16% decline from the previous year, primarily due to the conclusion of the LGBTQ+ Legal Program.

Our total expenditure for the year was \$1,239,595, also showing a 16% reduction from 2022-23 as a result of this program ending.

The audited financial results for the 2023-24 financial year showed a small deficit of \$3,073. At 30 June 2024, we maintain a net assets and retained earnings of \$234,802.



Our income primarily comes from government sources, both State and Commonwealth, as well as grants.

Our largest expense is dedicated to our most valuable asset—our staff. Following that, the next significant expense is related to maintaining our excellent office space.

Thank you

We greatly appreciate the support and funding from:

Barristers

Jordan Wright

Community legal centres

Community Legal Centres Australia

Federation of Community Legal Centres

Job Watch

Justice Connect

Tenants Victoria

Women's Legal Service Victoria

Government & Statutory Authorities

City of Port Phillip

City of Stonnington

Commonwealth Government of Australia

Department of Justice and Community Safety

Victoria Legal Aid

Victorian Government

Victorian Law Foundation

Victorian Legal Services Board + Commissioner

Law firms

Ashurst

Barry Nilsson

Clayton Utz

HWL Ebsworth

Maddocks

Nicholes Family Lawyers

Organisations

Better Health Network + RhED

Ensemble Strategy

Family Life

Good Shepherd

Jack Brockhoff Foundation

Jewish Care

Just World Investments

Launch Housing

Maternal & Child Health services

Orange Door

Port Phillip Community Group

Sacred Heart Mission

Scarlet Alliance

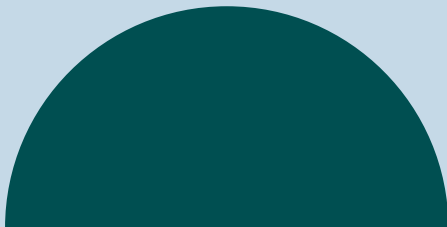
St Kilda Gatehouse

The Salvation Army

Uniting

Vincent Care

Vixen





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