

About Community Legal WA

Community Legal WA is the peak body for community legal centres in WA. Our purpose is to support our members and work for a fair WA, where everybody has access to justice.



About Community Legal Centres

Community legal centres (CLCs) are independent community organisations that provide free or low-cost legal help to people when they need it most. There are 26 Centres across WA, including 3 specialist Aboriginal community controlled Family Violence Prevention Legal Services (FVPLS).

About Legal Assistance

The law affects every part of people's lives and CLCs are fundamental in supporting members of our community in need. This includes helping people who are facing eviction and homelessness, family breakdown, crippling debts and fines, discrimination, exploitation at work and unfair dismissal. CLCs, including specialist family violence services, play a crucial role in enhancing the safety of victim survivors of family violence and preventing perpetrators from causing further harm.

Unaddressed legal issues can cause serious consequences, including financial stress or bankruptcy, ill-health, psychological distress and homelessness. These risks are compounded for our clients who are already experiencing disadvantage. Getting legal help in time can stop problems getting worse – keeping people in work, families in their homes and kids safe.

That's why it's so important that WA's 2024-25 State Budget ensures equal access to justice for all Western Australians.

PRIORITIES 2024-25

1

Access to Justice

Centres are delivering more services than before, but demand is rising faster. They are unable to meet current need for legal assistance, turning away hundreds of people every week. With the rising cost of living, continuing housing crisis and population growth, this number will only grow.

We are calling on government to deliver:

- ▶ Increased investment in community legal centres, for a thriving legal assistance sector so that all Western Australians can access legal help when they need it
 - › Increased sustainable investment so that CLCs can better meet need
 - › Increased baseline funding so that CLCs can do more prevention and early intervention work, like community legal education and law reform, preventing legal problems and addressing them early
 - › Better indexation so that funding keeps pace with cost increases
- ▶ Specific investment in ensuring people can access justice, no matter where they live in WA
 - › More funding to support CLCs to recruit and retain lawyers in RRR areas (e.g., housing support for CLC staff, and workforce incentives like those used to support the RRR health workforce)
 - › More funding for place-based and specialist outreach to regional, remote and very remote communities

“Demand in civil law has been spiking massively... and seems to be connected to the increase in cost of living/general financial hardship/rent crisis” (CEO, Specialist CLC, 2023)

“We are in a crisis cycle. We can't shift to prevention or even early intervention without letting down the people we are assisting now unless there's more money” (WA CLC, 2023)

*The 2023 Public Understanding of Law Survey found that 42% of people surveyed reported one or more legal problems over the past two years, and 53% of those who had faced problems reported multiple problems. Where a legal need existed at the time of interview, **more than three-quarters was unmet (78%)**. Unmet need was the norm not the exception.*

2

Integrated Support

The urgency and complexity of legal matters for people seeking help continues to increase, with many people at crisis point with multiple legal issues by the time they contact a CLC. They need holistic and wraparound services to achieve good outcomes.

We are calling for:

- ▶ Government investment to support integrated service approaches including case management, collaboration and partnerships. Investment in both legal and non-legal support improves people's access to wraparound services and enables services to help people with complex needs for better outcomes.

"Looking at the whole person – their financial, legal, social, community and support needs in entirety - leads to better outcomes" (Metro generalist CLC CEO, 2023)

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More Support for Renters

Housing is one of the most pressing issues currently facing CLC clients and was the top problem type for people accessing WA CLCs in 2022-23. Tenancy services are more important than ever, but current funding is insecure, and services don't have capacity to meet need.

2024-25 will be a crucial year as CLCs work to secure sustainable funding for this essential program, to shape and influence crucial reforms to WA's Residential Tenancies Act, and to support people to understand and exercise their rights as the laws change.

We are calling on government to:

- ▶ Prioritise an increased, secure long term funding stream for the tenancy program to meet need across WA
- ▶ Invest in education and support for tenants as changes are made to the Residential Tenancies Act

Current funding for tenant advocates is only enough for one tenant advocate for the whole Midwest Gascoyne region - an area nearly 3 times the size of Victoria.

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Better Outcomes for Aboriginal People

Funding for legal assistance services is essential in work towards Closing the Gap, including reducing the overrepresentation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people in the criminal justice system and reducing family violence and abuse.

We are calling for:

- ▶ State government investment in increased, sustainable funding for Family Violence Prevention Legal Services and the WA Aboriginal Legal Service
- ▶ Investment in increasing CLCs' capacity to deliver culturally safe, trauma informed and accessible legal help for Aboriginal people across WA

"Closing the Gap is underpinned by the belief that when Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people have a genuine say in the design and delivery of policies, programs and services that affect them, better life outcomes are achieved." (Closing the Gap, 2023)

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Disasters and Climate Justice

Disasters - like bushfires, the recent Kimberley floods and Cyclone Seroja - are associated with higher numbers of people experiencing legal need, and a greater likelihood of people experiencing multiple problems. Legal need often continues for years after a disaster.

We are calling on government to:

- ▶ Increase baseline funding for CLCs and FVPLS to increase capacity to engage in disaster readiness and support work, and to enable centres to identify and address new legal assistance need from climate change
- ▶ Provide funding for CLWA to support sector capacity building and collaboration to develop legal assistance

“The summer of 2019-2020 - in which some communities experienced drought, heatwaves, bushfires, hailstorms, and flooding - provided only a glimpse of the types of events that Australia may face in the future.” (Royal Commission into National Natural Disaster Arrangements)

“Disaster response will become more necessary, need to last longer and be framed in line with people’s perceptions and characterisation of their problems” (Public Understanding of Law Survey, 2023).

THE PEOPLE WE HELP


WA CLCs helped more than **24,500** people last year. Of these people:



16%
identified as **Aboriginal** or **Torres Strait Islander**




29%
told us they were experiencing **family violence**




20%
lived in **regional** or **remote** areas



22%
disclosed a **disability** or **mental health** issue



8%
spoke a **language** other than English at home



9%
were experiencing or at risk of **homelessness**

> The **top 6** legal issues for clients who accessed CLC support last year were:

- > Housing
- > Parenting arrangements
- > Wills and estates
- > Family Violence Restraining Orders
- > Family law (property)
- > Credit and debt