



# Andrews Government funding decisions and new client freeze at VALS

## Why is VALS freezing new client intake?

Delivering high quality, culturally safe legal services is core to VALS' mission. We cannot compromise on ensuring the standard of our services.

Demand for our services has sharply increased due to the Andrews Government's Law and Order approach, including draconian bail laws and policing response to the COVID pandemic.

Our average caseload per lawyer is currently 130 files. The sector recommendation is 50 files. This is an OH&S risk for staff and hinders our capacity to continue to deliver the quality of service Aboriginal people deserve.

There are only two ways to solve this problem - more staff or fewer casefiles.

We have asked the Victorian Government for \$26.5 million over four years so that we could meet the demand for our services and we have been provided with just \$2 million over two years.

As we have not been provided with enough funding to hire the lawyers needed to cover the increase in demand, we must have a freeze on new client intake until the caseload recovers to an appropriate level.

## What does a freeze on new client intake mean?

In practice this freeze will mean that:

- For the next 3 months, our Criminal Law and Family Law teams will not take on any new matters, except for existing clients for whom we currently have an open file.
- Our Civil legal team will delay the planned expansion of services to Gippsland.

As Wirraway, our Specialist Legal and Litigation Practice, that focuses



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on police, corrections and government accountability through litigation is funded through donations, it will be continuing to build its practice.

## How long will the freeze last?

The freeze will last 3 months. At the end of this 3 months, the Board will consider the caseload and decide whether the freeze needs to be extended.

It will take time for us to work through the existing caseload and it may take longer than 3 months for caseloads to return to appropriate levels, especially considering the COVID backlog of matters the courts need to work through.

## What happens to new clients?

We will warmly refer any enquiries from clients who do not currently have an open file with us to another legal service.

VALS acknowledges that this may be distressing for some Aboriginal people who are in need of culturally safe legal services. We hope that we receive government funding in the near future so that we can provide services to all Aboriginal people who want to be represented by VALS.

## Will any staff lose their jobs?

No.

This freeze is, in part, intended to protect the welfare and wellbeing of our staff. VALS wants to ensure our staff wellbeing is protected and we have a duty of care to them. The freeze will ensure high quality service for our clients.

Existing clients will continue to be supported by the VALS staff that are already representing them.