



# New client freeze at VALS due to lack of funding and increasing demand

## 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 in recent years due to a lack of funding to expand the Criminal Law practice team, lack of workforce, the ongoing COVID-19 backlog and delays, and the Andrews Government's Law and Order approach, including punitive bail laws.

Our criminal lawyers have caseloads that are far in excess of the average at other legal services. This poses a risk to the welfare of our staff and the quality of our service.

By not taking on new clients in the Criminal Legal practice, we hope that these risks can be managed.

We hope that new funding is made available as soon as possible and that caseloads return to healthy levels.

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

For the next 3 months, our Criminal Law practice will not take on any new matters, except for existing clients for whom we currently have an open file.

Our Civil and Human Rights Law practice, Family Law practice, Wirraway practice and Balit Ngulu will continue to take on new clients.

VALS will refer any community member who is not an existing client and needs criminal legal advice and representation on to other services.



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## 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 and/or Torres Strait Islander 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 of our 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 has a duty of care to its staff and we are committed to delivering on that responsibility.

The freeze will ensure our clients continue to receive high quality services. Existing clients will continue to be supported by the VALS staff that are already representing them.