

Victorian Aboriginal Legal Service

ANNUAL REPORT

2024 -2025





Acknowledgement of Country

VALS pays our deepest respect to traditional owners across Victoria, in particular, to all Elders past, present and emerging. We also acknowledge all Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people in Victoria and pay respect to the knowledge, cultures and continued history of all Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Nations.

We pay our respects to all Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Elders who have maintained the struggle to achieve justice.

Across Australia, we live on unceded land. Sovereignty has never been ceded. It always was and always will be, Aboriginal land.

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Victorian Aboriginal Legal Service

About Us

The Victorian Aboriginal Legal Service (VALS) is an Aboriginal Community Controlled Organisation (ACCO) with over 50 years of experience providing high quality, culturally capable legal and community justice services to our people across Victoria.

We strive to:

- Promote social justice for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples;
- Promote the right of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples empowerment, identity and culture;
- Ensure that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples enjoy their rights, are aware of their responsibilities under the law and have access to appropriate advice, assistance and representation;
- Reduce the disproportionate involvement of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples in the criminal legal system; and
- Promote the review of legislation and other practices which discriminate against Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples.

We were established by Aboriginal people for Aboriginal people to address the gross over-representation of Aboriginal people in custody and to reduce Aboriginal deaths in custody. 50 years may have passed but both issues persist as overwhelming problems that affect Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people in Victoria, with impacts that affect our communities across generations.

We are funded through the National Access to Justice Partnership (NAJP) and the Victorian Government, with some additional funding made available through our partners Victorian Legal Services Board, Victoria Legal Aid, Oak Foundation, and many individuals who want to see improved justice and equity outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people.

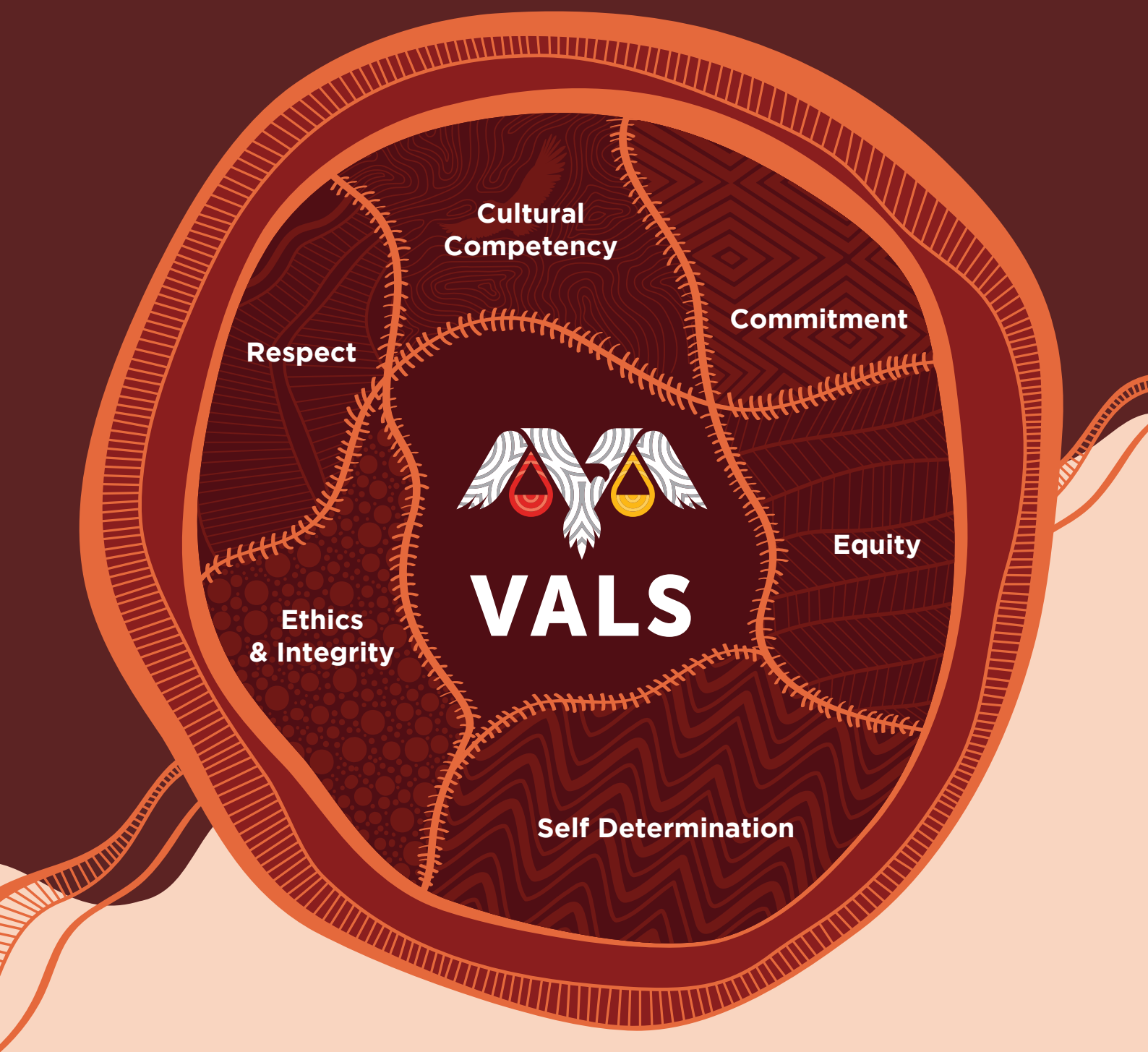
Over time, VALS has expanded its services for Aboriginal and Torres Strait people. Our practice areas include criminal law, family law, civil and human rights law, a dedicated youth legal service - Balit Ngulu, and Wirraway, our Police and Prison Accountability service. This is a unique service offering amongst Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander legal services nationally.

As part of delivering high quality, culturally capable and accessible legal assistance, VALS provides a range of Community Justice Programs which provide key supports for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities in Victoria. This includes a 24/7 Custody Notification Service, Baggarrook - our transitional housing support program for women with complex needs leaving custody. We also have client service support officers which sit within our legal teams, and provide community legal education across Victoria to equip Aboriginal people with the knowledge and skills to confidently self-advocate for their rights. We have a staunch and respected voice in policy and advocacy, and are building our research and evidence development unit.

****Please note, the names of clients whose stories are included in this report have been changed to protect their identities.***



Our Values



Artwork



At the heart of the artwork stands Lady Justice, embodying the call for truth, equity, and reform. Pathways lead towards her, from the community, united in their walk toward a more just and hopeful future.

Their journey is safeguarded by a continuous path of traditional shields—symbols of strength, resilience, and protection. These shields encircle the form of a possum skin cloak, etched with the stories, identities, and deep connections to Country that define who we are.

Main artwork by Reanna Bono, Wiradjuri and Wemba Wemba.

Lady Justice by Natasha Corrigan, a Walabhul, Bundjalung, Dungidau/Dala and Jinibara artist.

Chairperson Statement



I am very proud that in my second year as Chairperson at VALS, we have seen such staunch advocacy in the face of regressive reforms. It has been a great honour to be Chairperson of VALS, and to work alongside all fellow Board members and VALS Executive to continue to be a strong, well-respected voice as an ACCO and Aboriginal legal service. VALS continues to grow to be able to meet community needs, our diverse legal and non-legal service offerings exemplify this. In this challenging political environment, where progress made is met with the rolling back of commitments and the implementation of more punitive approaches to community and family policing. VALS continues to be strong in our position that our people deserve high quality, culturally capable legal assistance to be provided to our community, wherever they live in Victoria.

“We are unapologetic in our calls for transformative reform. In the lead up to an election year, it is a time to be future focussed, to stop tinkering with the colonial systems that continue to fail our people, but instead explore and develop models that will help to achieve self-determination and more just outcomes for our people.”

I want to thank everyone at VALS, from our CSOs, to our lawyers, volunteers, community engagement team, policy and communications, research and evidence development teams, and back of house. Everyone plays an integral role at VALS. To my fellow Board members, thank you for walking alongside me this year.

I would like to thank the Board for all their work during the year. Thank you to Cienan Muir, Apryl Day, Sarina Gentile, Tiana Koehrer, Holly Charles, Tarneen Onus Browne, Lisa Briggs, and Uncle Bobby Nicholls. It is a significant commitment to be on the VALS Board, and I acknowledge the time and effort you have all made over the past year to contribute to strengthening VALS' service

offerings and to meet the needs of our people. I also want to extend a sincere thank you to our fearless and tireless CEO, Nerita Waight. I want to note the significant dual roles that Nerita has undertaken this year, both in her role as CEO but also as elected member of the First Peoples Assembly of Victoria and Treaty Co-Convenor and Negotiator. These are both significant and vital community leadership roles, and Nerita has been able to undertake this work with great integrity and commitment, and I know the outcomes will benefit our peoples for generations to come, including through VALS' *Justice Through Treaty* project.

Nerita is supported by our Deputy CEO, Amanda Dunstall, who's diligence and commitment to VALS as always, has been steadfast. To see the renovated Preston office reflect who we are as an ACCO is something we can all be proud of. Our Regional Justice Hub model is saving lives, to have our lawyers based in the community they serve ensures that we are a trusted legal service. As we look to the year ahead, I know there will be immense challenges, as we try and meet demands for

legal assistance following the introduction of regressive bail laws, and expansion of police powers that will see more of our people incarcerated.

"We must take a moment to celebrate the wins for our community, large and small, from strengthening the anti-vilification protections, to seeing the age of criminal responsibility raised to 12 years of age, to being on the cusp of Victoria's first Treaty."

These are significant wins. I know VALS is making a difference, and will continue to. I look forward to supporting VALS to continue to be lead the fight for change in the justice space for our people, and to continue to grow and strengthen as an organisation serving the Victorian Aboriginal community.

**Associate Professor
Crystal McKinnon**

CEO Statement



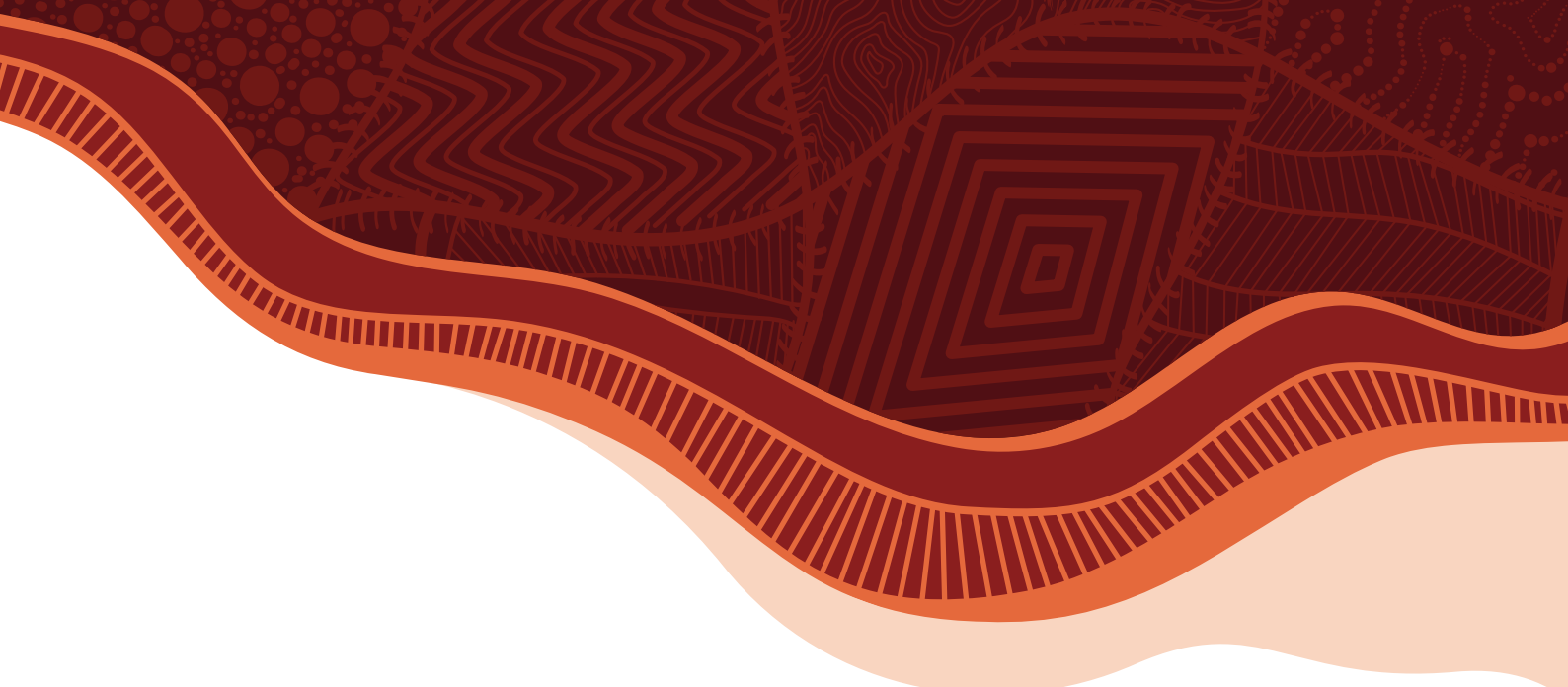
Through my role as Treaty Negotiator this year, I have had to reflect a lot on what has come before me. The tireless advocacy of my ancestors, the resistance fighters, the activists, the staunch Aboriginal leaders who set up the Aboriginal Community Controlled Organisations, including VALS, over half a century ago, who have advocated for our rights to be upheld. They have paved the way for us to be here today, entering a Treaty era.

There are no first contact treaties in Australia, unlike other similarly colonised countries, the land we now know as Australia was invaded on the premise of the now debunked concept of “terra nullius”. So any recognition before the law of our inherent and unique rights as First Nations peoples is something that we have fought and advocated for.

“This year has been a stark reminder of the tenuous nature of progress and reform.”

On the one hand we have had the introduction of regressive reforms that have seen, and will continue to see, the mass incarceration of our peoples, and on the other we have this nation’s first treaty on the cusp of being entered into. A re-shaping of our relationship of the state, one which is based on our rights as sovereign peoples. This dichotomy is not lost on me.

Photograph taken by Cam Matheson
for the Yoorrook Justice Commission
Walk for Truth Campaign



The Aboriginal Justice Caucus has been overseeing the review of every single recommendation in the Royal Commission into Aboriginal Deaths in Custody, a project which VALS has auspiced. As we have reviewed each one, whilst there has been some progress, it has been disheartening and distressing to see how far we have to go. There have now been over 600 Aboriginal Deaths in Custody since the final report was released. Governments on all levels are not listening, they do not want to hear and honour our voices. We have been clear, and unapologetic in our stance, but we do not hold the power. This is about to change.

If we were to do the same with the Bringing Them Home Report, I am troubled knowing the haunting voices of mother's seeking for their babies and children be returned are still echoed today in the children and families we support through child protection matters in

our Aboriginal Families and Balit Ngulu Practices. One man shared how the state "...inflicted a terrible pain of Separation, Anguish and Grief upon a mother who only ever wanted her son back...."¹. The Yoorrook Justice Commission in its findings also reported the letters of resistance from mothers seeking the return of their children, or simply the permission to visit them, that were "...polite in tone, desperate in substance, and unyielding in purpose."²

"This resistance and undying love for our children and young people is our humanity in the face of discriminatory colonial systems of oppression and control which continue today."

This is why VALS is focussing our advocacy efforts on progressive and transformational reform projects that seek to progress understandings on what

self-determined models for Aboriginal legal and children and family safety systems, and youth decarcerations models, could and should look like.

Our communities have the solutions; the time is now.

I want to thank our Board, especially our Chairperson Dr Crystal McKinnon, our Executive Team and all VALS staff and volunteers for their unwavering support, tireless efforts for the Aboriginal community, and strength through a very challenging 12 months. VALS will continue to be unrelenting in our pursuit for a more just justice system. I could not do this work without you.

Nerita Waight, CEO.

¹ Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission, Bringing them Home Report of the National Inquiry into the Separation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Children from Their Families, 1997, Chapter 4.

² Yoorrook Justice Commission, Yoorrook: Truth Be Told (2025) , p75.

Board of Directors



Crystal McKinnon

Associate Professor in History, Law and Justice at the University of Melbourne
Chairperson

Dr Crystal McKinnon is a Yamatji person and is an Associate Professor in History, Law and Justice at the University of Melbourne. Crystal is an extensively published academic and expert speaker and presenter on subjects related to critical Indigenous studies, Indigenous People's histories, social movements, sovereignty and justice. Crystal is a member of various academic bodies and is involved in academic administration, university governance and wider participation in the Boards and steering committees of various not-for-profit and community organisations.



Cienan Muir

Founder of INDIGINERD
Deputy Chair

Cienan Muir is a Yorta Yorta, Taungurung and Ngarrindjeri man who grew up in Northcote, Echuca, Moama and Mooroopna.

Cienan has held numerous roles within the Victorian Government from Department of Justice to Homes Victoria, stepping away temporarily to work at the Koorie Youth Council in advocating for our young peoples voices, a time he is most proud of. He now works in the natural resource management space of the Victorian Government as a policy officer. Cienan has completed the Company Directors Course through the Australia Institute of Company Directors (AICD) and completed a similar course through the Institute of Company Directors Australia (ICDA).

Cienan delivered Australia's first ever Indigenous Comic Con in 2019, founded his company INDIGINERD, creating space for Indigenous representation across the popular culture area and has written for the Australian Centre for the Moving Images (ACMI).



Apryl Day

Executive Director and Founder of Dhadjowa Foundation
Secretary

Apryl Day is a proud Yorta Yorta, Wemba Wemba and Barapa Barapa woman. She is a community organiser and campaigner, and a member of both Warriors of the Aboriginal Resistance Victoria and Pay the Rent. She is the daughter of Tanya Day – a proud Yorta Yorta woman who died in custody in 2017. Apryl and her family successfully led the campaign to end the criminalisation of public drunkenness in Victoria and is at the forefront of the fight for police accountability and justice matters. Apryl is the Executive Officer and Founder of the Dhadjowa Foundation which provides culturally safe and strategic guidance and support to families whose loved ones have died in custody in hopes to amplify the campaigning of families and end Aboriginal deaths in custody.

Apryl Day is co-owner of Interlude Bar, a cocktail bar and restaurant. She has won many awards, including Voltaire Human Rights Award (Jun 2021), Liberty Victoria, Civil Justice Award (May 2021), Australian Lawyers Alliance, Women of the Year Recipient (Nov 2020), Marie Claire, and the Tim McCoy Human Rights Award (Nov 2019).



Sarina Gentile

Treasurer

Sarina Gentile is a proud Aboriginal woman from the Wollithiga clan of the Yorta Yorta Nation. She brings over two decades of leadership and advocacy experience across government and community sectors. Her career has been grounded in a strong commitment to justice reform, culturally informed practice, and the empowerment of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities.

Sarina has held senior roles in both government and community-led organisations, where she has led initiatives focused on improving justice outcomes, building culturally safe systems, and strengthening accountability to Aboriginal communities.

Her work spans policy development, program design, and strategic leadership — all with a focus on addressing the systemic challenges faced by Aboriginal people within the justice system.

With a proven ability to influence change at both operational and strategic levels, Sarina is deeply committed to building partnerships, embedding cultural integrity, and promoting long-term, community-led solutions. Her appointment to the Board of VALS reflects her enduring dedication to equity, justice, and self-determination.



Lisa Briggs

Executive Director, Ngawweyan Maar-oo
Member

Lisa Briggs is a proud Gunditjmara woman from the western district of Victoria with connections to Framlingham and Lake Condah Mission. I live off country in Naarm Wurundjeri country and pay my respects to their Elders, past and present. Lisa holds a Masters in Public Health and an Aboriginal Health Worker by Trade.

Lisa has over 40 years' experience working at executive level in public policy for Aboriginal Affairs at the national, state, regional and local level within the Aboriginal Community Controlled Sector. Lisa currently the Executive Director for Ngaweeyan Maar-oo which means "Voice of the People" in Gunditjmara dialect and recognised partner with the Victorian government on the National Closing the Gap Agreement. Lisa is also a metropolitan member for First Peoples Assembly in working towards Australia's first ever Treaty.



Holly Charles

Member

Holly Charles is a Yorta Yorta and Gunai woman who grew up on Waddawurrung country and spent several years living in Geelong and Melbourne before recently returning to Yorta Yorta country. She is a Research Fellow at the University of Melbourne and has worked across government, education and community advocacy roles. Holly previously worked as a lawyer in Commonwealth agencies and now focusses on community-led research and justice reform. Her work centres on race and the law, and the role of First Nations knowledges in challenging colonial systems and creating self-determined futures.



Tiana Koehrer

Member

Tiana is a proud Yorta Yorta and Wurundjeri woman.

Born and raised in the eastern suburbs of Melbourne, Tiana has actively contributed to her community through volunteer work and advocacy.

Tiana has worked for several years in a number of high-level roles across the health, Treaty and justice spaces. She also has a wealth of governance experience through past and current board member opportunities.

Currently working as a Manager in the Justice sector, Tiana is passionate about ensuring all Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander Victorians have access to culturally safe supports and services, especially those in contact with the justice system.

She is passionate about working with young, incarcerated mob to build tools with them to ensure they do not return to custody.



Bobby Nicholls

Member

Bobby Nicholls is a proud Yorta Yorta, Dja Dja Wurrung, and Wadjabalok man and the nephew of Sir Douglas Nicholls. He is the Chairperson of Yorta Yorta Nations Aboriginal Corporation YYNAC. Bobby was a Director of VACCA for 10 years, first joining in 1981. Bobby has worked in community run organisations such as the Aborigines Advancement League, Victorian Aboriginal Child Care Agency, and the Aboriginal Housing Board of Victoria. Bobby is one of the founding members of Yarnin' Pictures, formed by his passion to document Elders stories whilst training Aboriginal youth in the art of filmmaking. To this end, he helped create an App called "Yalinguth" a Woi-wurrung word meaning 'yesterday' which echoes the sentiments of many Elders that "we need to go back, before we can go forwards".

The Yalinguth app can be used for many educational and cultural applications, including efforts towards greater cultural awareness within schools for teachers and students, and in particular as a resource for the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Histories and Cultures cross-curriculum priority.



Tarneen Onus Williams

Member

Tarneen Onus Williams is a proud Gunditjmara, Yorta Yorta person through their mother and Bindal and Meriam person through their father. Tarneen is living on the unceded land of the Wurundjeri peoples.

Tarneen is a community organising lead at Australian Progress, previously VALS community legal educator, a community organiser for Warriors of the Aboriginal Resistance working on Invasion Day, Black Deaths in Custody and Black Lives Matter. They're also a writer and filmmaker that has been published in IndigenousX, The Urban List, Crikey, NITV and RightNow. Tarneen's film "young mob questioning treaty" has been screened internationally at ImagineNATIVE in Toronto and Tampere Film Festival in Finland.

The History of the Legal System in Victoria



**This has been adapted from Nerita Waight's speech for Swinburne University of Technology Barak Wonga Oration, delivered in September 2025*

For over 50 years, VALS has been advocating for a more just justice system. We cannot however continue to tinker on the edges of the colonial state systems that systemically discriminates against us and criminalises us. Through Treaty we have a path forward towards establishing a fair and equitable justice system for Aboriginal communities.

Aboriginal people were chained, forcibly and violently removed from their Country, denied access to economic prosperity by having our wages stolen and returning soldiers were denied soldier settlement, and continue to be locked up at disproportionate rates. But we have resisted, we survived genocide.

The Yoorrook Justice Commission holds the submissions, evidence, transcripts, official public records and reports canvassing the historical and contemporary injustice our peoples have faced, but it is also a record of our strength, our resistance and our connections to Country, culture and community.

Coranderrk Station is an example of this resistance in the face of oppression. "The history of Coranderrk is in many ways a microcosm of the impacts of colonialism on the economies of Aboriginal societies."³ Those on the reserve managed to develop and operate a "thriving farming community"⁴, Wurundjeri people were economically viable and sustainable, and Wonga and Barak had to repeatedly petition the government not to close down the station. The station was eventually closed down in 1924. Yoorrook evidence captures the "...punitive, petty cruelty of the system that governed Aboriginal people's lives."⁵ It took 100 years for a small portion of the original estate to be returning to the Wurundjeri Corporation. Our resistance, and political activism has never waned.

³ The Wurundjeri Woi-wurrung Cultural Heritage Aboriginal Corporation's submission on economic prosperity, June 2024

⁴ Ibid

⁵ Yoorrook Justice Commission, Yoorrook: Truth Be Told (2025), p76



William Barak and Simon Wonga, two proud Wurundjeri leaders both lived on Coranderrk, who as children were present on 6 June 1835 at a meeting between their Elders and John Batman. Batman would go on to falsely claim that he had signed a treaty with Wurundjeri Elders and received permission to ‘take’ their lands. Violence, discrimination, lies and deceit have characterised much of this state’s colonial history. So, as we near toward the passage into law of this continent’s first legitimate Treaty, and having navigated Victoria’s fifth truth telling process, we are clearer in our vision of the pathways for achieving justice for our people and community it provides.

The History of the Legal System in Victoria

To understand why Treaty is so important, first there is a need to understand the history of this place and the role that the legal system has played in the oppression of Aboriginal people.

“The Australian legal system is a relic of colonisation. It is a system that was designed to destroy the oldest continuous culture on earth, and it has not finished pursuing this goal. It is grounded in violence, racism and the denial of Aboriginal self-determination.”

This began with the foundational legal myth of this country, Terra Nullius and continued when our people were forced onto missions, our children were removed, when our right to vote and participate in democratic life was denied. All of these tools were enacted through the legislative framework of the colonial state. Yoorrook found that this was genocide and “a coordinated plan of different actions aimed at the destruction of the essential foundations of the life of national groups”.⁶ Today this goal continues through the contemporary legal system, with the Victorian government acknowledging this in their submission to Yoorrook.⁷

The legal system still perpetuates these harms against Aboriginal people. Since the Royal Commission into Aboriginal Deaths in Custody over 35 years ago we have felt the pain and loss of the deaths of over 609 Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander people who have passed away in custody – no one has been held criminally responsible for any of these deaths.⁸ Aboriginal people continue to be the most incarcerated people on earth, at a rate more than 12 times higher than other people – our children represent 60% of young people in custody.⁹ Aboriginal women represent over 15% of the prison population because of our harmful and discriminatory bail laws.¹⁰ Our children are removed from their families, communities and culture and placed in out-of-home care at astonishing rates.¹¹ And the systems that are meant to protect us continue to fail – with IBAC finding that 41% of investigations into police complaints were showing indications of bias.¹²

⁶ Yoorrook Justice Commission, Yoorrook for Transformation: Third Interim Report (2025), p32.

⁷ Yoorrook Justice Commission, Yoorrook for Justice: Report into Victoria’s Child Protection and Criminal Justice Systems (2023), p46, footnote 4. State of Victoria, Response to Issues Paper 1: Call for Submissions on Systemic Injustice in the Criminal Justice System, [36]

⁸ Deaths in custody in Australia | Australian Institute of Criminology; and The Conversation, Despite 432 Indigenous deaths in custody since 1991, no one has ever been convicted. Racist silence..., 2020; BBC, Indigenous deaths in custody haunt Australia, 2024

⁹ See UTS, ‘First Nations Imprisonment is at a record high’, 8 May 2024, Corrective Services, Australia, June Quarter 2025 | Australian Bureau of Statistics; and Source: Prisoners in Australia, 2024 | Australian Bureau of Statistics

¹⁰ Source: Corrections Victoria monthly prison and community corrections statistics. In August 2025, there were **58** Aboriginal women in the prison system, representing **15%** of the total female prison population. 12 months ago, there were **32** Aboriginal women in the prison system, representing **11%** of the total female prison population.

¹¹ Source: Closing the Gap data dashboard Target 12. In 2024, 90 out of every 1,000 Aboriginal children in Victoria were in OOHC. This was the highest out of every jurisdiction.

¹² Source: IBAC audit report: Victoria Police handling of complaints made by Aboriginal people, May 2022. 22 of the 54 files audited found potential indicators of bias from investigators.

“Fundamentally, Aboriginal people who end up having contact with the legal system have almost always been failed by government and society many times before they end up in the legal system.”

From the over-intervention of the child protection system, through to culturally unsafe education environments, to lack of access to safe health services, increasing insecure housing and employment opportunities; Aboriginal people experience racism through all these systems. We are then punished by the legal system because these other systems in our society failed. We see this in their “tough on crime” approach to bail, where VALS warned the government that tightening the bail laws would be a costly and dangerous mistake for Aboriginal people. How many coronial inquests do we need to highlight what we already know what is harming Aboriginal people? It is clear our lives do not matter to them.

Activism and Work Thus Far

At the same time, our people are strong. It is important to remember that although the British sought to erase Indigenous legal systems through the imposition of their common law across this country, that goal was and never will be accomplished. Aboriginal resistance to the colonial legal system, as well as ongoing efforts to assert and practice our own legal traditions is evidence of that; such as through Native Title and the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Child Placement Principle.

There is also a long legacy of Aboriginal Elders who have fought to reform the legal system and increased recognition of our inherent right to be self-determining and control our own justice matters including William Barak, Shadrach Livingstone James, William Cooper, Douglas Nicholls, Alf Bamblett, Aunty Geraldine Atkinson, just to name a few.

A significant marker in our journey towards a more just society, was the 1967 Referendum, where over 90 per cent of Australians voted yes. The 67’ referendum’s result was in stark contrast to our most recent referendum on a voice to parliament, which failed on all fronts because of the government’s mismanagement of the yes campaign. This put our people at greater risk of racism and discrimination and has stymied any potential rights-based progress at a federal level significantly.

The Closing the Gap framework is flawed and framed in Eurocentric metrics of success. Success for Aboriginal people must and will look different because of our sovereign and unique status as First Peoples. So, whilst the Voice wasn’t treaty, it was movement forward as a nation, and it is now being used as an opportunity for regression.



Current Policy and Legal Landscape

The Victorian government and politicians frequently talk about self-determination whilst concurrently undermining it through hypocritical approaches and a lack of action. For example, recent bail amendments have shown the inconsistency between the government's words and its practices, and why a truly just justice system for our people cannot be achieved within the confines the colonial legal system.

The 2018 bail reforms were a knee jerk policy response had disastrous consequences, and were later found to be a "complete and unmitigated disaster". Veronica Nelson was a proud Gunditjmara, Dja Dja Wurrung, Wiradjuri and Yorta Yorta woman, who passed away at the Dame Phyllis Frost Centre on 2 January 2020, after days of crying out for help. Victoria's unfair and discriminatory bail laws put Veronica in prison for minor shop-lifting and failure to appear on bail. Veronica passed away in that prison, alone and isolated from culture and support.

Veronica's loved ones called for urgent changes to the bail laws and asked that these reforms are referred to as Poccum's Law. This advocacy resulted in some significant reforms, including the removal of two bail offences, strengthening of special considerations for Aboriginal people and changes to the reverse onus provisions.

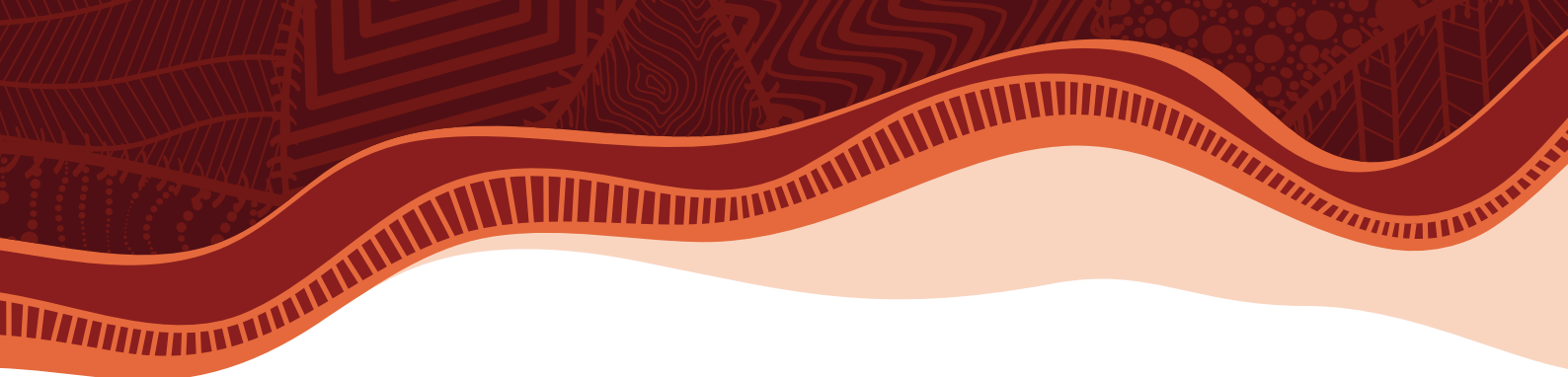
However, the 2023 bail reform didn't implement Poccum's Law in full, nor did it respond to all the coronial recommendations from Veronica's Inquest. Still, there was a drop in the number of our people on remand through these reforms, and it felt like we were on an important path, working together with the government to at least mitigate the violence and injustice that our people experience at the hands of the colonial legal system.

Less than a year after later, on what would have been Veronica's 43rd birthday, the government dismantled those bail laws and introduced far more harmful provisions, that we have already seen cause so much harm.

The Challenge at Hand and What 'Justice' Means

The current legislative and policy landscape in the criminal legal sector constitute a major step backward in the relationship between Aboriginal peoples and the state government. It is very clear the Allan Labor Government are repeatedly saying 'no to justice' for Aboriginal people.

Justice for our people is not achieved through a system that overincarcerates our people, including our children. And the government and media are selling people a false promise, because the evidence is unequivocal, imprisonment does nothing to address the underlying causes of offending behaviour, in fact it makes it worse.



We need to look outside of Australia, so see what other jurisdictions are doing. In Scotland they took a public health approach, and it's working. There was the inherent push back and pressure to return to their carceral response to crime, but the Scottish government showed leadership and withstood, and the results speak for themselves.

The wider societal perception of community safety is shaped by news and media. We are not having sophisticated conversations about what is actually required to effect change, rather we are oversimplifying, focusing on narrow elements of the criminal legal process, such as bail, treating it like a solution to community safety. But in fact the government's bad bail laws are a path of pre-trial mass incarceration for Victorians.

This is not about just policy, nor is it about keeping community safe, it is about maintaining power, and winning votes at the upcoming state election. They are using peoples lives and safety as a chip to win votes. You cannot on the one hand tighten bail laws, and on the other cut funding to youth programs, bail support programs, remand supports, housing supply, AOD supports. And then point the finger at the individuals they have failed to protect and criminalise, they are trying to hoodwink the Victorian public.

“It is deceitful, it is disingenuous, it is dangerous.”

So what does ‘justice’ mean for Aboriginal people? Yoorrook’s shone the light on historical and contemporary injustices and reflects a fundamental truth about the colonial project and the ways it is experienced by our people. Colonialism continues in the here and now through undermining our sovereignty, intervening in the lives of our families, and denying our right to self-determine our own destinies. It continues when government try and say that they know “what’s best” for us.

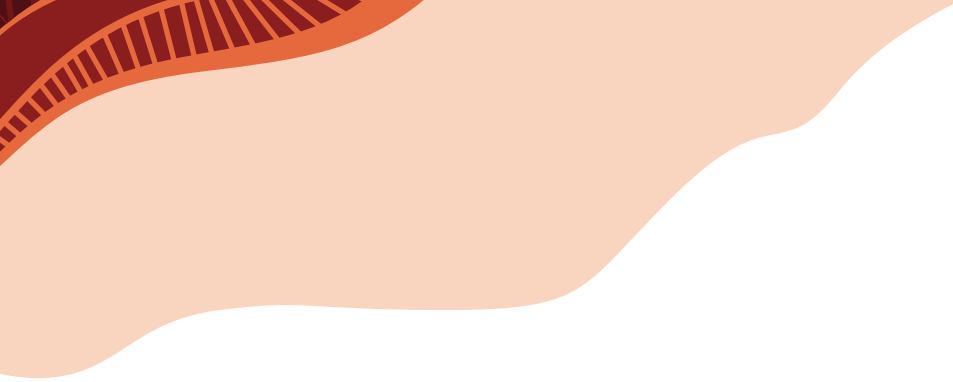
Yoorrook Justice Commission demonstrates that it is our people who are the experts on the needs of our communities. Aboriginal communities have been loud and clear in calling for self-determined solutions to address the injustices caused by the state of Victoria. Yoorrook’s work in truth telling, is an invitation from Aboriginal peoples to decision-makers and the broader community to walk alongside us and provides a framework for a just justice system, including through recognition of the ongoing reality of legal and political pluralism in Victoria.

The Aboriginal Justice Caucus articulates that a ‘just’ justice system is one that operates in accordance with “Aboriginal approaches to wrongdoing, restorative and therapeutic approaches, cultural, spiritual, and physical healing, and strengthening cultural and community are central elements”.¹³

Yoorrook called for the government to give full effect to the right of Aboriginal peoples to self-determination in the justice system, including through the transfer of decision-making power, authority, control and sources that will enable us to create a system that actually meets the aspirations and needs of our people.

Taken together, the work of Yoorrook constitutes a clear and concise pathway to ensure safety, transformation and a future where our communities have an opportunity to thrive and have access to the services that are based on early intervention, prevention and rehabilitation to address the injustices our people have faced since invasion, and that drive contact with the criminal legal system.

¹³ Aboriginal Justice Caucus, ‘Nuther-mooyoop to the Yoorrook Justice Commission: Systemic Injustice in the Criminal Justice and Child Protection Systems’, 2023.



We already have some examples in place in Victoria on what those self-determined solutions will look like, and these are the building blocks that we need to create a just justice system. Our Balit Ngulu program is one example of this. Balit Ngulu provides wrap-around legal and support service for Aboriginal children and young people. This not only to reduces the overincarceration of our children, but also creates the conditions in which Aboriginal children are empowered and thrive in their culture.

Aboriginal children as ‘offenders’ or ‘threats’ to community safety – they are the future leaders of our communities. We recognise the importance of holding young people to account when they make mistakes, and doing it in ways that allow them to heal. We work with young people to strengthen and build strong relationships with their Elders and community. It is these networks that hold true cultural authority, and are best placed to support Aboriginal children to understand the consequences of their actions and support them to do what is necessary to take accountability and address any harm they might have caused.

This type of ‘justice’ is not available through a punitive, carceral model that further disconnects a child from society and community. Instead, youth prisons steal our children’s future and increase the likelihood that they will become trapped in the legal system for their whole life. That is not justice. And it is absurd for this approach to be labelled as ‘community safety’.

Another important counter to the ‘deficit’ narrative that runs rampant in how our communities are constructed in debates concerning the criminal legal system is Aboriginal “storying” in sentencing processes.

VALS’ Aboriginal Community Justice Reports (ACJRs), which are inspired by Gladue reports model out of Turtle Island, are a mechanism of supporting Aboriginal people to tell their life stories on their own terms, during the sentencing process. The reports *“provide a more complete picture of a person’s life and circumstances...They amplify the aspirations, interests, strengths, connections, culture, and supports of the individual, as well as the adverse impact of colonial and carceral systems on their life.”*¹⁴

The ACJR reports have allowed Aboriginal people to feel supported and humanised in sentencing. The ACJR process has improved sentencing outcomes for Aboriginal people, as noted by a Victorian Judge who described the reports as “a wider lens that brings perspective on the collective experiences of the individual, family and community, as well as a relevant history of colonisation and its impacts.”¹⁵

These are important examples of the ingenuity of our community and the ways in which we have been able to take a broken, oppressive system that is designed to suppress our own systems of law, so that there is at least some recognition of our legal practices and epistemologies.

Yet, these approaches, while vital and important, are still about exploring ways in which the existing system can be ‘informed’ by self-determination. We know that if self-determination is going to be fully realised, there needs to be space for stand-alone, self-determined models, accompanied by independent funding sources and the progressive transfer of power and control back to our communities.

And this is where we see the opportunities available to us through the Treaty process.

¹⁴ Anthony, T., ‘The role of ‘re-storying’ in addressing over-incarceration of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples’ The Conversation, <https://theconversation.com/the-role-of-re-storying-in-addressing-over-incarceration-of-aboriginal-and-torres-strait-islander-peoples-163577>

¹⁵ Anthony, T., ‘The role of ‘re-storying’ in addressing over-incarceration of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples’ The Conversation, <https://theconversation.com/the-role-of-re-storying-in-addressing-over-incarceration-of-aboriginal-and-torres-strait-islander-peoples-163577>



Treaty and its Opportunities

On the one hand we have a government celebrating this country's toughest bail laws, and on the other we are on the cusp of finalising this country's first Treaty. The plethora of agreements in place to address the overincarceration of our people can feel meaningless at the moment and it might seem like Treaty is going to join that list. I can assure you it will not, whether it takes a year, a decade or a lifetime we will ensure justice through Treaty is realised.

“We have learnt time and time again we cannot continue to tinker with broken colonial systems but in fact must steadily work towards transforming them so that they are responsive to the needs of all citizens and effective in ensuring a just society for all. Treaty is integral to that as it provides us with the power to make our own decisions, designing and delivering solutions that will support our people to thrive and deliver the fundamental change to carceral systems that is so clearly needed.”

The Statewide Treaty Bill, which is currently before Parliament, enshrines core Treaty commitments into legislation. At the centre of the first statewide Treaty is the representative body Gellung Warl, which includes the First

Peoples Assembly, Nginma Ngainga Wara – which is an independent accountability mechanism, and Nyerna Yoorrook Telkuna, a permanent truth-telling body.

This Treaty embeds recognition of our right to self-determination within Victoria's political system. It creates the political space and an overall framework for both traditional owner and future statewide treaties. Yet, this is just the first of many agreements that are needed, and much structural change is still needed to transform the government systems that continue to oppress our people.

At VALS, a focus for us is utilising the Treaty process to deliver on Recommendation 2 of the Yoorrook Justice Commission's report around building a self-determined Aboriginal justice system. As part of VALS' commitment to developing a more just justice system, we have been progressing the Justice Through Treaty Project, which aims to envision how we might achieve greater Aboriginal community control over justice matters. Through this work, we are engaging with Aboriginal leaders and the community on their priorities for transformational change within the justice system, and how we can best ensure that Treaty leads to reforms that address the justice needs of our communities.

And some of the things we have had heard thus far are that an Aboriginal justice system would:

- reinstate cultural authority, and Aboriginal ways of being, including a leading role for our Elders and other Respected Persons
- be founded on and prioritise principles of care, healing, strength, connection to culture, protection, support and restoration
- Provide equality of access to programs and support to Aboriginal children, women and men in all Aboriginal communities in metropolitan, rural and remote areas of Victoria.
- Have accountability back to community
- Recognise the law-making powers, and decision-making and resource allocation capabilities of our community

Crucially, this new approach would reject the primacy of incarceration as a justice response—it would involve the phase-out of prisons, and be re-oriented away from having police as the gatekeepers of the system. Instead, the system would strive to break intergenerational cycles of trauma and incarceration by steering people away from child protection, youth justice and adult prisons. It would see the decriminalisation of systemic social inequalities, and a holistic focus on supporting people experiencing trauma, homelessness, drug and alcohol use, mental health issues, family violence and social exclusion.

We recognise that building such a system will take time and needs to be staged. But as some of the examples I have spoken about so far illustrate, we have already started the process of building the foundation and framework.

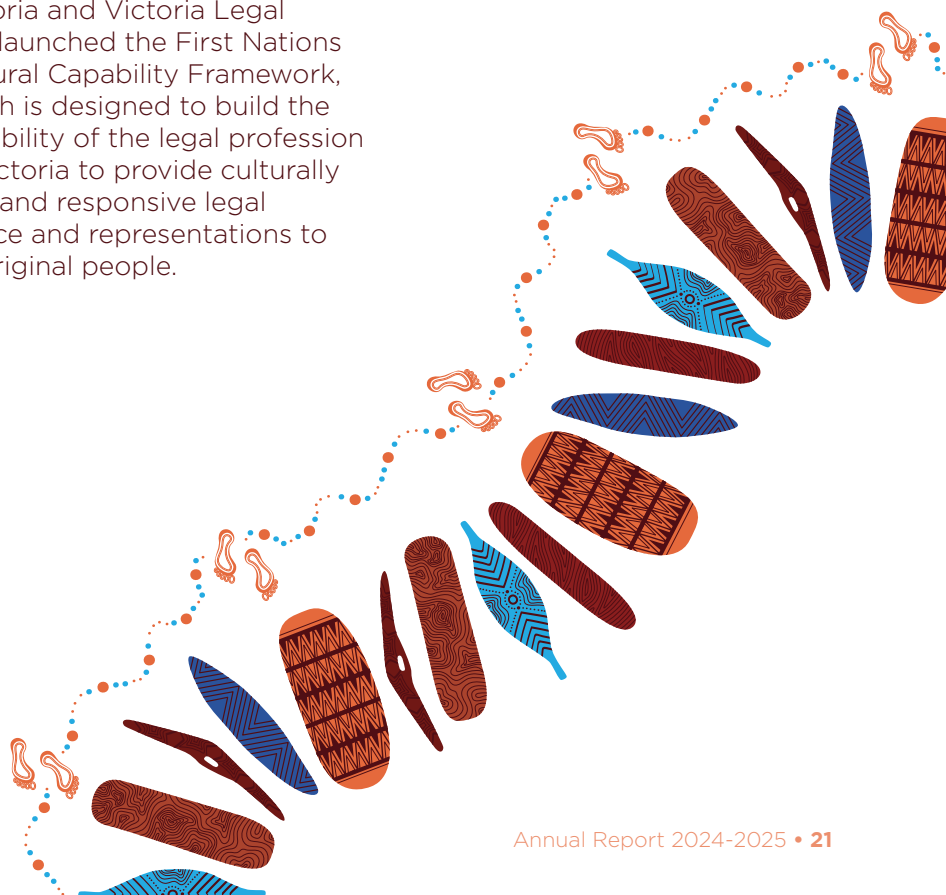
We have strong foundations of reform, and now through the work of the First Peoples' Assembly of Victoria we will be in a position to utilise the mechanisms of the Gellung Warl to listen to community truths, to hold government to account for its policies, programs and commitments, to work with communities and governments to understand what is and what isn't working on the ground to then inform future ongoing Treaty negotiations – whether that be justice, education, families

Recently, VALS, in partnership with the Law Institute of Victoria and Victoria Legal Aid, launched the First Nations Cultural Capability Framework, which is designed to build the capability of the legal profession in Victoria to provide culturally safe and responsive legal advice and representations to Aboriginal people.

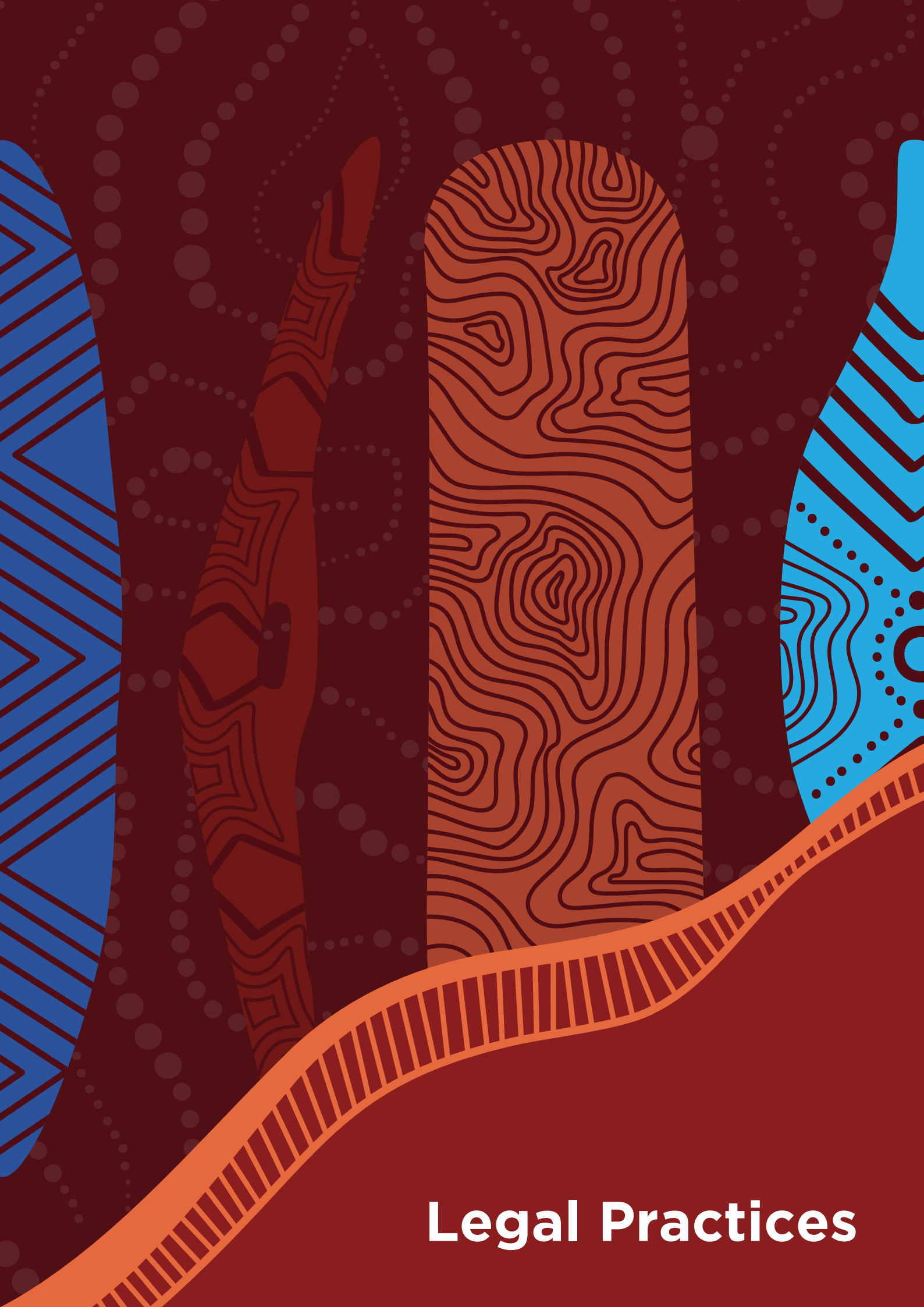
Culturally accessible, safe, and responsive legal services play a key role in reducing disadvantage and strengthening the justice equity outcomes experienced by First Nations peoples. Legal professionals have a crucial role in producing a more just 'justice' system.

“Treaty is our chance to right the wrongs of the past and create a better future together.”

We need to reclaim the conversation around community safety, and what it means for people to be safe. Community safety must be determined by communities, rather than politicians and media personalities, and legal and policy responses to support safe and thriving communities must be informed by these definitions whilst also upholding our rights.







Legal Practices

Aboriginal Families

The Aboriginal Families Practice increased its reach and presence in regional Victoria this year, which has significantly increased community access to legal support and has streamlined service delivery overall. Our Family practice in Regional Hub sites at Mildura, Warrnambool and West Melbourne currently operate at full capacity, which demonstrates the level of demand. Future funding permitting, on current demand there is a case for an additional lawyer in all three regions.

Child Protection

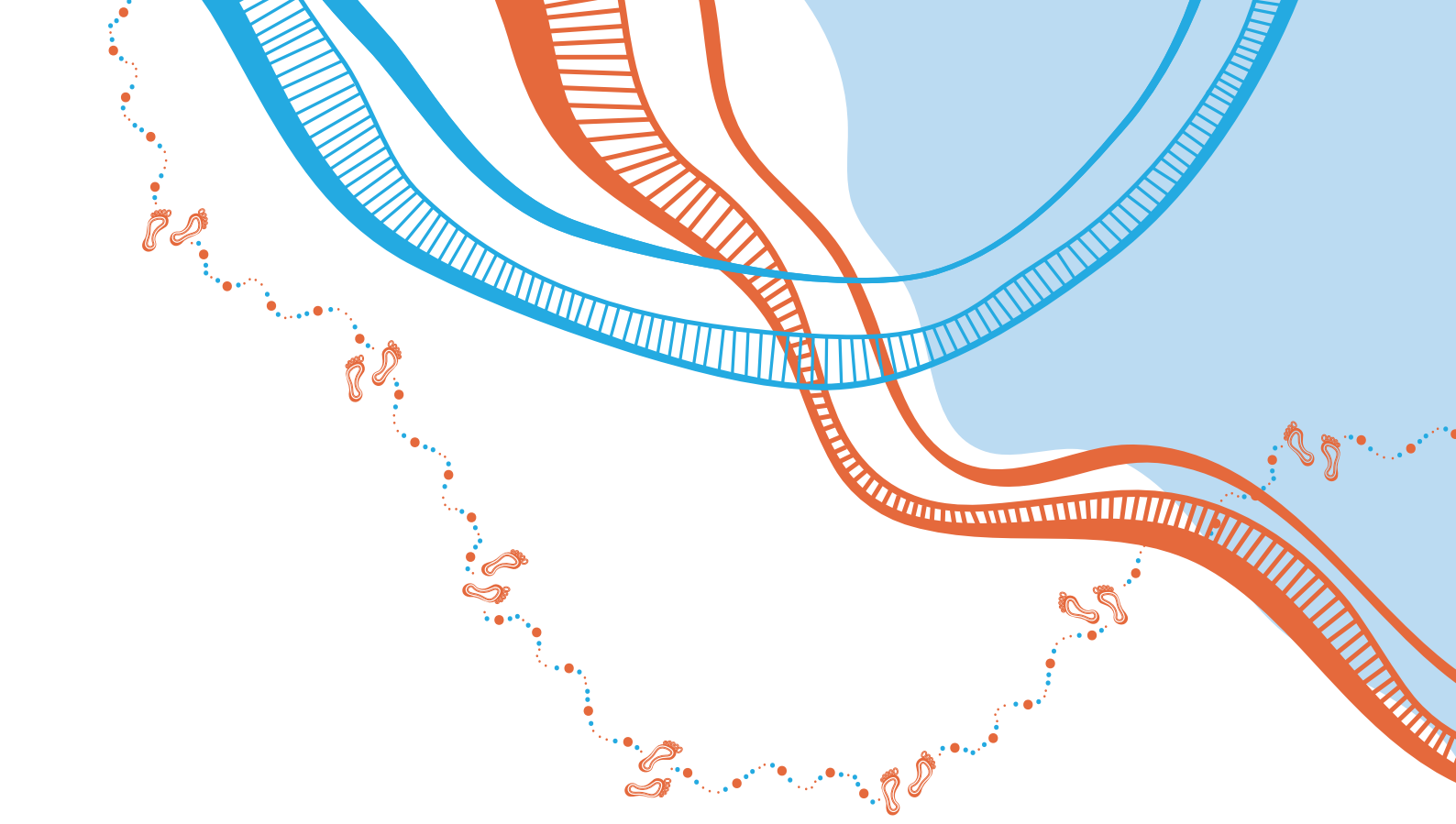
To provide a truly just child protection system, the State need to be held accountable for unacceptable conduct, both before and during litigation matters. Our lawyers this year have pressed for costs, filed appeals and demanded formal accountability at a rate that far surpasses previous years; a reflection on the deteriorating conduct displayed by the State in every step of a child protection matter. We've seen instances where the state is essentially coercing parents into signing agreements without legal advice; many of which fail, putting families in a worse position. We continue to raise awareness in the community, educating them on such a practice, and warning them of the harms. This is why we have continued to advocate for a Child Protection Notification Scheme that ensures parents have access to legal assistance early, in line with Yoorrook's recommendations.

Family Violence

The Practice presented evidence at the Yoorrook Justice Commission as well as a state inquiry into family violence, including misidentification. We remain part of the Pre Court Engagement (PCE) program, which aims to settle family violence applications before the first court mention. While this has been successful in protecting clients from the trauma of litigation, PCE is also the best avenue for drawing cases of misidentification, as it allows time for a client to speak at length to a lawyer.

Family Law

In line with the current family law regime, the Practice continues to promote negotiated outcomes where circumstances allow. When parents are involved in the processes and determining the solutions, there are better outcomes for everyone in the family, including any children involved. The Practice also provided submissions, and continues to have input, into amendments to the Family Law Act 1975 (Cth).



Advocacy

The Practice advocates in the following forums:

- Shepparton Marram Ngala Ganbu Children's Court working group
- Child Protection & Youth Justice Forum
- VALS/Djirra ACCO joint child protection working group
- Community Legal Centre family violence working group
- Family Law Community of Practice VLA
- Family Violence Working Group, Consultation - Commonwealth Systems Abuse Audit
- Family Law Roundtable - Commonwealth Government
- PCE Steering Committee
- Women, Families and Victims Collaborative Working Group

Looking forward

The Practice has been working jointly with a number of Community Legal Centres in relation to Victoria Police training for family violence response, including misidentification. Although the updated manual reflects a theoretical improvement in response policy, training is only offered to front line police. We continue to advocate for senior police training to be mandated.

We continue to support the PCE program and advocate on its benefits. The few cases of misidentification that have arisen are, we believe, a small sample of the real figure. The program itself, while having finally received proper funding, is at risk of being eroded by court funding cutbacks and lack of police staff in that department. We continue to advocate jointly with VLA in relation to this risk, so we can achieve better outcomes for Aboriginal children and families.

The courts have removed conciliation conferences from child protection matters. We continue to advocate for genuine alternatives as the current proposal would see a judicial member chairing mediation conferences; removing impartiality and confidentiality from negotiations.

We continue to focus on populating the remaining hub offices with Aboriginal Family lawyers, CSOs and legal assistants as this will greatly enhance region appropriate service delivery.

Client Story

Aboriginal Families Practice

An Aboriginal mother sought our assistance in relation to a child protection matter. The matter involved two children: a 7-month-old and a 2-year-old.

The Department of Families Fairness and Housing had significant involvement with this family. The 2-year-old had been removed from the mother's care in January 2024 after the child was presented to hospital by the mother with a number of visible injuries. The hospital, as a mandatory reporter, reported to DFFH.

The 2-year-old was subsequently removed and an application made for a family preservation order to the child's father. Curiously, no application was made in relation to the 7-month-old, who remained in the mother's care.

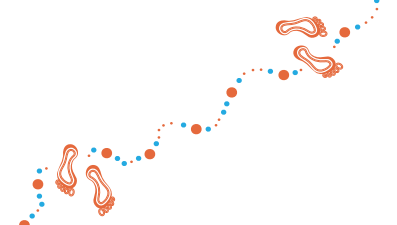
The lawyer and the CSO worked together to refer and ensure the mother attended appropriate support services to address risk factors. She engaged well with these services, and continues to do so. She remains on supervised contact with the 2-year-old.

In May 2025, the father breached a condition of the FPO by consuming alcohol to such an extent that the child was found alone in someone's front yard. The child was placed in alternative care. This application and attached evidence were not served on us until the morning of the mention, which we find to be a common occurrence.

In the meantime, we sought to progress the mother's contact, which was opposed by DFFH on the basis on very dated evidence of illicit drug use. DFFH stated they had further evidence, but refused to supply it, and sought that the mother attend upon random drug testing. We submitted this was unfair and punitive, and sought removal of that condition before the Court; which granted our request. We sought costs.

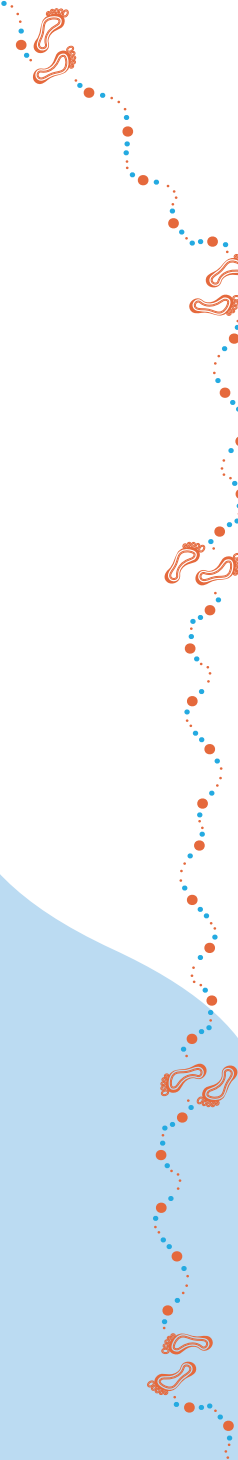
A psychologist report was requested by us, and prepared in relation to the mother, which was favourable but measured. On the basis of that report, we were able to progress to community supervised time. There have been no subsequent reports of harm issues in relation to the 7-month-old and we are treating the contact progression as part of a longer strategy to reunite the mother with the 2 year old.

This matter, while still ongoing, demonstrates the unacceptable and arbitrary action of the State in child protection matters. It also demonstrates the immeasurable value of place-based lawyers and CSOs, who were able to work together to provide wrap around support for the client which ultimately resulted in a positive step forward for the client.



Balit Ngulu

Over the last year, Balit Ngulu experienced a significant increase in service demand across metropolitan Melbourne and the Greater Shepparton regions. The program supported over 185 young people in 12 months, in matters in the criminal division and related intervention orders. Balit Ngulu also supported young people with Children and Young Persons Infringement Notices (CAYPINS) matters in the Children's Court.



In addition to legal assistance, our Aboriginal Community Engagement (ACE) Worker provided holistic case management, supporting young people with non-legal needs such as:

- Social and emotional wellbeing
- Educational engagement and school re-entry
- Access to employment pathways and training

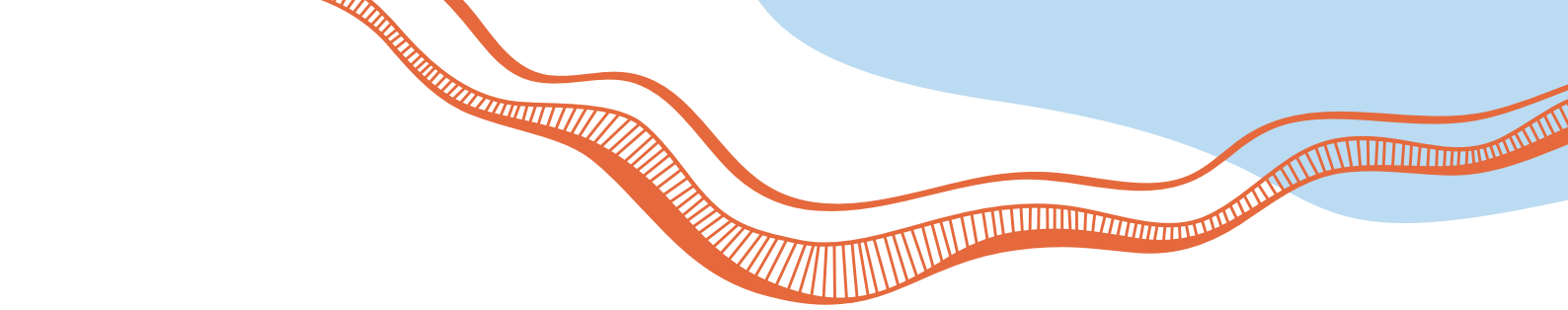
This wraparound model remains central to the Balit Ngulu approach, recognising that legal issues are often intertwined with broader systemic and social challenges. Throughout the reporting period, Balit Ngulu has continued to demonstrate a strong commitment to delivering wraparound culturally safe legal services to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and young people.

A key focus of the program has been building staff capacity and ensuring workforce stability, with particularly strong outcomes in staff retention and the ongoing professional development of our specialist youth lawyers.

The program benefits from a team of experienced and culturally competent lawyers, whose work is grounded in both legal expertise and an understanding of the systemic challenges faced by Aboriginal young people in the youth justice system. Over the last 12 months, staff retention remains strong with no departures from the team of lawyers.

Balit Ngulu has received consistently positive feedback from judicial officers, with both Magistrates and Judges regularly acknowledging the value of our involvement in court matters. One Magistrate remarked:

"I'm always just so relieved when I see VALS involved, because we know you all do such good work."



This recognition has translated into an increase in referrals made directly from the bench, underscoring the high level of trust the courts place in Balit Ngulu to support Aboriginal children and young people. Such referrals reflect the growing awareness within the judiciary of the unique and culturally safe support Balit Ngulu provides and serve as a strong endorsement of the team's professionalism and impact.

The achievements of the Balit Ngulu program over the past year are a testament to the strength of our team and the enduring importance of Aboriginal-led, community-controlled legal services. The program continues to play a vital role in advocating for diversion outcomes and community disposition for Aboriginal youth through specialist legal representation.

Program Expansion

In line with our commitment to expanding culturally safe and community-led legal and support services, Balit Ngulu was successful in securing funding for two key program extensions during 2024/2025 financial year.

Balit Ngulu Child Protection and Family Violence Legal Services, Darebin LGA

In June 2024, VALS submitted an application for funding through the Closing the Gap Outcomes and Evidence Fund to expand Balit Ngulu into the child protection and family violence legal space, specifically in the Darebin local government area.

In March 2025, VALS was formally invited by the Department of Social Services to deliver the Balit Ngulu Strong Voice for Early Intervention Program. This long-awaited and much-needed service will expand the program's reach, enabling more comprehensive support for young people encountering the child protection system.

The program will replicate the current Balit Ngulu model and deliver:

- Culturally safe, holistic case management, ensuring young people feel seen, heard, and connected, and are supported towards positive outcomes
- High-quality legal advice and representation for children and young people in child protection and family violence matters, ensuring independent advocacy and just outcomes

As of 30 June 2025, this program is in the early stages of development and recruitment, with service delivery set to commence in the 2025–2026 financial year.

Youth Empowerment Project – Strong Voice, Strong Futures

In 2024/2025 financial year, Balit Ngulu was also successful in securing Federal Government funding to establish the Strong Voice, Strong Futures initiative, targeting Aboriginal children and young people aged 10 to 17 who are engaged in or at risk of engagement in criminal justice system.

The program will be delivered in partnership with the Victorian Aboriginal Education Association Incorporated (VAEAI) and will operate largely across metropolitan Melbourne with a strong focus on:

- Educational re-engagement
- Employment readiness
- Cultural connection and identity
- Supportive peer and community relationships

The activities the program will provide young people include:

- One-on-one tutoring and mentoring
- Life skills sessions
- Access to VALS' existing Lubly Consent program
- Tailored individual plans developed in partnership with participants
- Flexible brokerage to address barriers such as transport, uniforms, devices, or re-engagement costs



The two dedicated Youth Pathways Coordinators will support participants to build confidence, overcome shame associated with disengagement from school, and reduce reoffending through targeted, strengths-based support.

Balit Ngulu's continued expansion reflects not only our commitment to youth justice reform and early intervention models. In 2025–2026, we will focus on:

- Operationalising the new program streams
- Strengthening partnerships across education, ACCOs and youth justice programs
- Continue advocating for system-wide reforms to reduce overrepresentation of Aboriginal children and young people and support healing through culture, connection and community.

Balit Ngulu continues to play a critical role in supporting Aboriginal young people to remain strong in culture, safe within their communities, and empowered to positively reshape their futures beyond the criminal legal system.

We do this by:

- Building capacity within the team with experienced youth advocates, which enables us to maintain good staff retention with.
- Cautions/diversion: Balit lawyers and ACE workers continue to achieve positive outcomes together deterring young people away from the criminal legal system through advocacy for non-court dispositions such as Police cautions, Aboriginal Youth Caution program and also Children's Court Youth Diversion Program. This is possible because of the referrals and supports put in place in the community largely led by our Aboriginal Community Engagement (ACE) worker.
- Balit has been successful in achieving withdrawals in every case involving Aboriginal children under the age of 14 years old.
- Koori court participation has increased over the past 12 months with many young people opting to have their matters heard in Koori Court and being supported by their lawyers and ACE worker to participate in that process.

Client Story

Balit Ngulu Practice

In February 2025, Sam*, a 15-year-old young person, was referred to Balit Ngulu after being charged with multiple serious offences. Although Sam had no prior convictions, they had previously completed a Children's Court Youth Diversion in late 2024.

Following intake, Sam was connected with our Balit Ngulu Aboriginal Community Engagement (ACE) worker. The ACE worker quickly established a strong and trusting relationship with Sam, which led to high engagement over the following months. Together, they identified key goals, with Sam expressing a strong desire to return to school as a priority.

Re-engaging Sam with education required significant advocacy. The ACE worker established a care team and led the coordinated effort involving the school, Koori Education Support Officer, and Sam's family. Despite initial resistance from the school, persistence to develop a plan led to Sam successfully enrolling in their preferred school. This outcome was a major milestone for Sam and a testament to the ACE worker's dedication and culturally safe approach.

The support provided by Balit Ngulu was deeply appreciated by both Sam and their family and was formally acknowledged by the Magistrate in the Koori Court. The Magistrate commended the work of the ACE worker, expressing hope that more young people could access similar support and that ACE workers could remain engaged with young people for longer periods.

In the end, Sam was sentenced to a five-month Good Behaviour Bond. The Magistrate recognised Sam's genuine efforts to make positive life changes and engage in pro-social activities such as school. Since the finalisation of their matter, Sam has had no further contact with police.

Before closing Sam's file, the ACE worker ensured they were connected with ongoing community supports, reinforcing Balit Ngulu's commitment to long-term positive outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander young people.

Civil and Human Rights

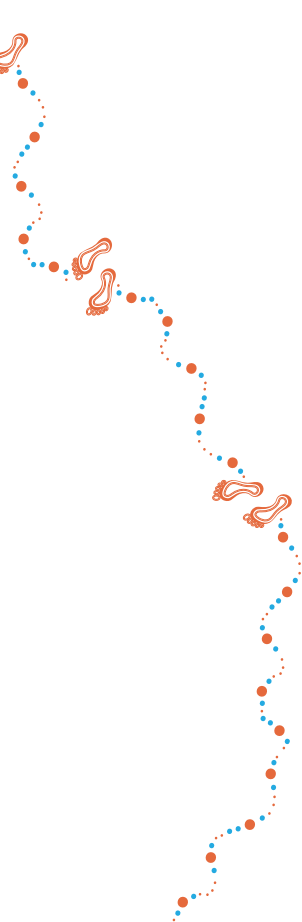
This year has been an important year of growth for the Civil and Human Rights Team as we have embedded our new Mental Health team into our practice. The Mental Health team includes five dedicated lawyers, a social and emotional wellbeing officer, paralegal and secretary who have all grown in their experience and skills. The lawyers regularly appear in Mental Health Tribunal matters for clients on inpatient and community treatment orders. This service ensures that our clients have access to culturally safe legal services at a time in their life where they most need support.

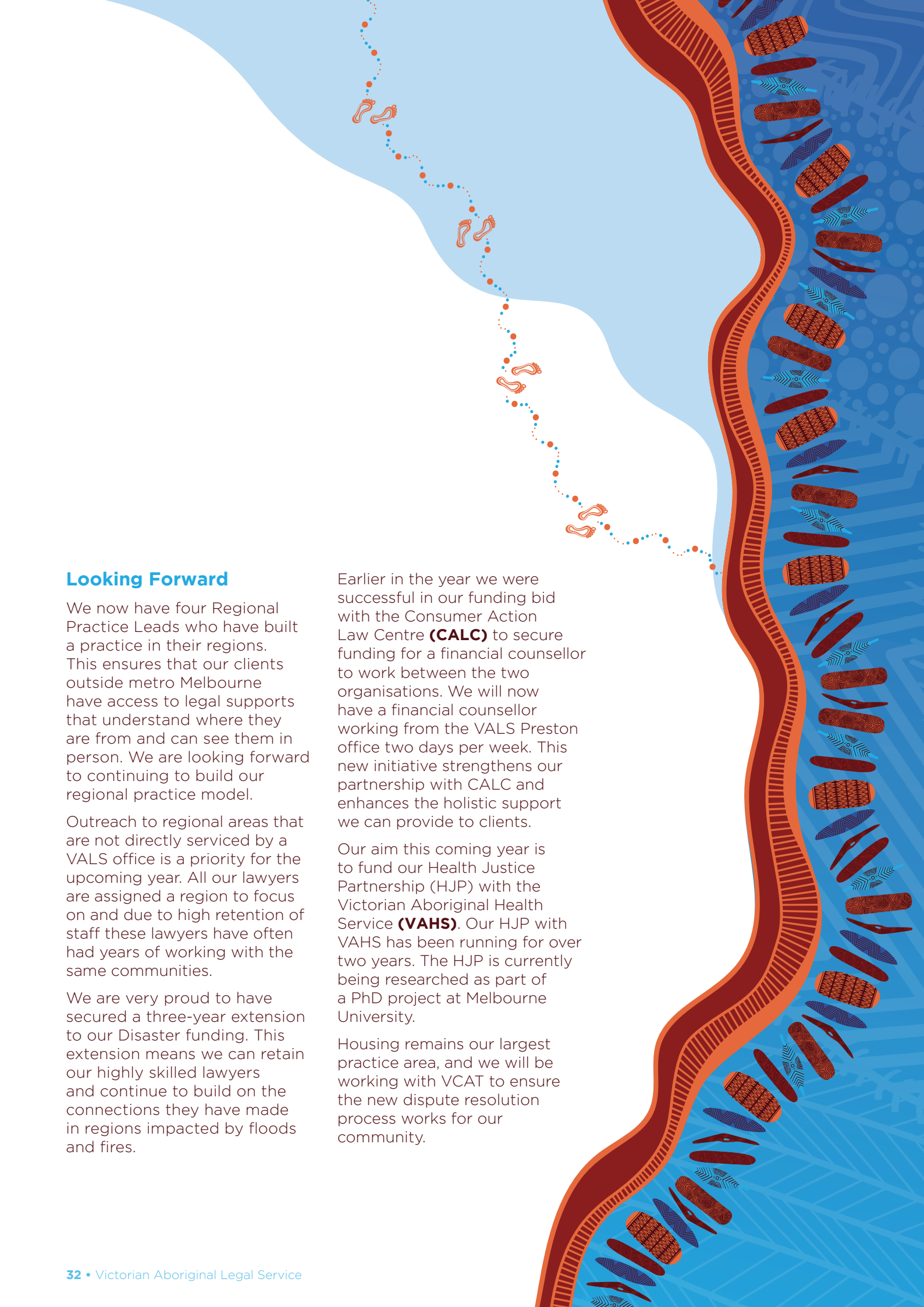
We have continued to be an integral part of the Victims Legal Service with our team pushing for changes to the new Financial Assistance Scheme to ensure it operates fairly for our clients. The new scheme has been a challenge, but we have not let that deter us from providing a high-quality service to clients. This service has been complemented by our efforts to secure pro bono legal support for clients on our waitlist.

We remain proud of our achievements in the Infringements clinic which is run by student volunteers supervised by our lawyers. **This year we successfully waived \$594,000 of fines.**

We have seen an increase in demand for legal advice involving motor vehicle accidents and insurance this year. These incidents can have devastating impacts on our clients' finances and we are pleased to offer advice and representation. We regularly act in Unfair Dismissal matters, Discrimination claims and Consumer Credit and Debt matters. **This year we assisted our clients in receiving \$125,000 in compensation.**

We have diversified our pro bono connections which ensures our clients have access to the best legal firms in Australia. Our pro bono partners work with our lawyers to upskills them in more complex matters, providing legal resources and training material. We also regularly refer matters that sit outside our areas of practice enabling us to provide a level of assistance to nearly ever matter that comes our way. We are thankful to our pro bono partners who provide us with secondee lawyers who work at VALS. This increases our capacity and ensures workloads remain manageable.





Looking Forward

We now have four Regional Practice Leads who have built a practice in their regions. This ensures that our clients outside metro Melbourne have access to legal supports that understand where they are from and can see them in person. We are looking forward to continuing to build our regional practice model.

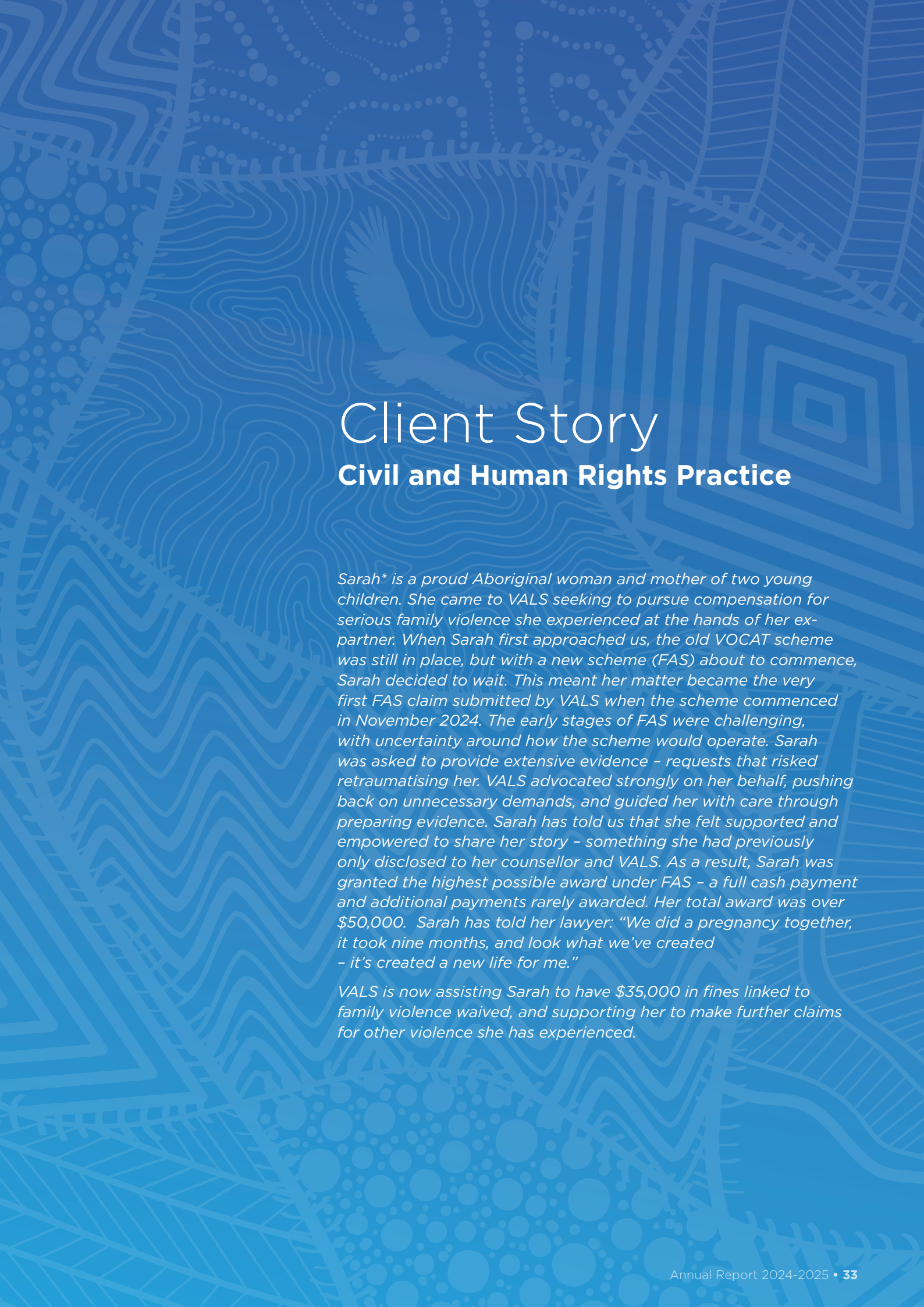
Outreach to regional areas that are not directly serviced by a VALS office is a priority for the upcoming year. All our lawyers are assigned a region to focus on and due to high retention of staff these lawyers have often had years of working with the same communities.

We are very proud to have secured a three-year extension to our Disaster funding. This extension means we can retain our highly skilled lawyers and continue to build on the connections they have made in regions impacted by floods and fires.

Earlier in the year we were successful in our funding bid with the Consumer Action Law Centre (**CALC**) to secure funding for a financial counsellor to work between the two organisations. We will now have a financial counsellor working from the VALS Preston office two days per week. This new initiative strengthens our partnership with CALC and enhances the holistic support we can provide to clients.

Our aim this coming year is to fund our Health Justice Partnership (HJP) with the Victorian Aboriginal Health Service (**VAHS**). Our HJP with VAHS has been running for over two years. The HJP is currently being researched as part of a PhD project at Melbourne University.

Housing remains our largest practice area, and we will be working with VCAT to ensure the new dispute resolution process works for our community.



Client Story

Civil and Human Rights Practice

Sarah is a proud Aboriginal woman and mother of two young children. She came to VALS seeking to pursue compensation for serious family violence she experienced at the hands of her ex-partner. When Sarah first approached us, the old VOCAT scheme was still in place, but with a new scheme (FAS) about to commence, Sarah decided to wait. This meant her matter became the very first FAS claim submitted by VALS when the scheme commenced in November 2024. The early stages of FAS were challenging, with uncertainty around how the scheme would operate. Sarah was asked to provide extensive evidence – requests that risked retraumatising her. VALS advocated strongly on her behalf, pushing back on unnecessary demands, and guided her with care through preparing evidence. Sarah has told us that she felt supported and empowered to share her story – something she had previously only disclosed to her counsellor and VALS. As a result, Sarah was granted the highest possible award under FAS – a full cash payment and additional payments rarely awarded. Her total award was over \$50,000. Sarah has told her lawyer: “We did a pregnancy together, it took nine months, and look what we’ve created – it’s created a new life for me.”*

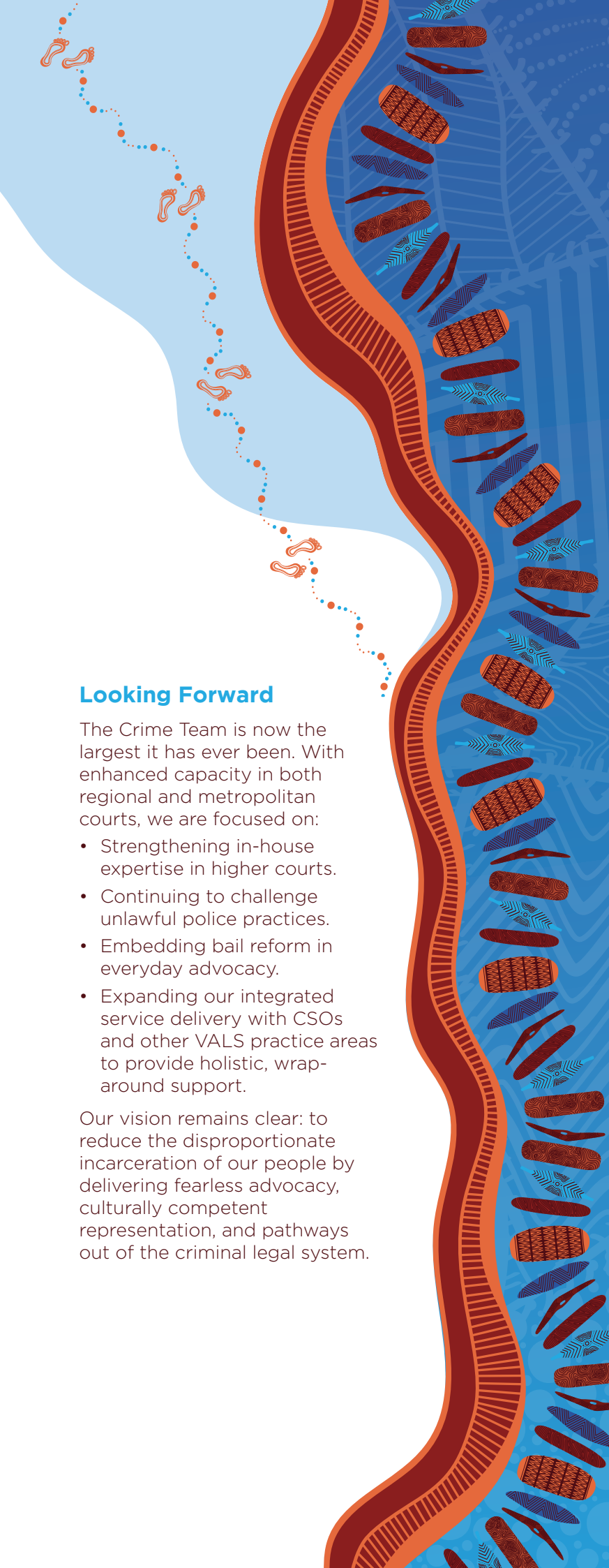
VALS is now assisting Sarah to have \$35,000 in fines linked to family violence waived, and supporting her to make further claims for other violence she has experienced.

Criminal

Our Criminal Law Practice continues to provide legal advice, advocacy, and representation to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people across Victoria. We assist clients at every stage of the criminal process – from bail applications and duty lawyer services through to higher court representation. The team remains at the frontline of addressing the disproportionate criminalisation of our people, ensuring culturally safe and competent advocacy in every matter.

Key Achievements

- **Expanded client reach:** In 2024–25 we provided assistance in **1,592 new matters**, compared to 2,157 in 2023–24. While the total number of matters decreased slightly, the nature of our work shifted towards more intensive casework, particularly in contested hearings and duty lawyer services.
- **Court representation:** Court and tribunal services remained our largest service stream with **747 new matters** this year. Duty lawyer services more than doubled – **274 matters in 2024–25**, up from 144 the year before – highlighting the increasing demand for immediate, on-the-spot advocacy.
- **Early intervention and advice:** Legal advice services decreased (160 this year compared to 380 in 2023–24), reflecting changes in resourcing and the shift towards in-court representation. Information and referral services also declined, indicating that clients are increasingly engaging with VALS through substantive legal matters rather than brief advice.
- **Client profile:** We assisted **1,350 unique clients** in 2024–25, down from 1,747 the previous year. Importantly, the reduction reflects structural changes in the bail landscape and the success of reforms advocated for by VALS. Our clients were **68% male (923)**, **31% female (420)**, and 1% identified as other or not stated (7).
- **Bail law expertise:** Following the passage of the new bail reforms, our team played a leading role in ensuring that the expanded section 3A considerations were applied meaningfully in court. Our lawyers appeared in multiple successful Supreme Court bail applications, with judges recognising that Aboriginality must “inform every consideration” of bail decisions.
- **Remand Court services:** With new funding secured, we expanded our coverage of remand hearings, employing three additional lawyers to ensure Aboriginal clients receive timely bail applications and culturally safe representation at their first appearance.
- **Contested hearings and police accountability:** Our senior lawyers continued to run contested hearings in matters not ordinarily aided by Legal Aid, reducing the systemic pressure on clients to plead guilty. Many of these contests resulted in acquittals, particularly where charges arose from improper policing or discriminatory practices.



Client Story

Criminal Law Practice

Our client first sought assistance from a regional office in mid-2023. He faced a series of low-level offences, including theft and breach of bail, compounded by substance use and unstable housing. Police also laid an assault charge which, through the advocacy of our lawyer, was ultimately withdrawn.

By mid-2024, further charges were laid, including family violence and dishonesty offences. The Department of Families, Fairness and Housing became involved due to concerns about mutual drug use and violence. At the contested hearing, our lawyer successfully negotiated the withdrawal of the most serious allegations, ensuring the outcome reflected our client's early admissions.

With coordinated support from our regional family lawyer, Client Service Officers, and external agencies (Dardi Munwurro, DFFH, Gunditjmara Family Violence Services), our client engaged with treatment programs and began rebuilding stability. In late 2024, when his nine-year-old son was excluded from the mother's care, the child was placed with our client. Despite being charged with breaching a Family Violence Intervention Order due to caring for his son, the matter was ultimately proven and dismissed.

Today, our client is substance-free, the sole carer of his son, and is seeking custody of his youngest child. This case demonstrates the strength of VALS' **Regional Hub model** – where lawyers and CSOs work hand-in-hand with external services to achieve life-changing outcomes.

Looking Forward

The Crime Team is now the largest it has ever been. With enhanced capacity in both regional and metropolitan courts, we are focused on:

- Strengthening in-house expertise in higher courts.
- Continuing to challenge unlawful police practices.
- Embedding bail reform in everyday advocacy.
- Expanding our integrated service delivery with CSOs and other VALS practice areas to provide holistic, wrap-around support.

Our vision remains clear: to reduce the disproportionate incarceration of our people by delivering fearless advocacy, culturally competent representation, and pathways out of the criminal legal system.

Wirraway Police and Prison Accountability

The Wirraway practice acts for members of the Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander community in Victoria who experience policing and prison harms. The Wirraway practice also assists with coronial inquests into deaths in custody.

Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander deaths in custody are the most tragic indicator of harms and inequality experienced by our clients and their families. Assisting them is the most important work that our team does.

We are proud to have acted in the inquest into the passing of Heather Calgaret, a staunch Yamatji, Noongar, Wongi and Pitjantjatjara woman. Heather's inquest drew to conclusion almost four years since her tragic passing in custody and following an incredibly painful and burdensome journey for her family. Coroner Sarah Gebert found that not only was Heather's passing preventable, but that she should not have passed away in the manner that

she did. The findings are another reminder of the ongoing failing of the state's duty of care towards Aboriginal women.

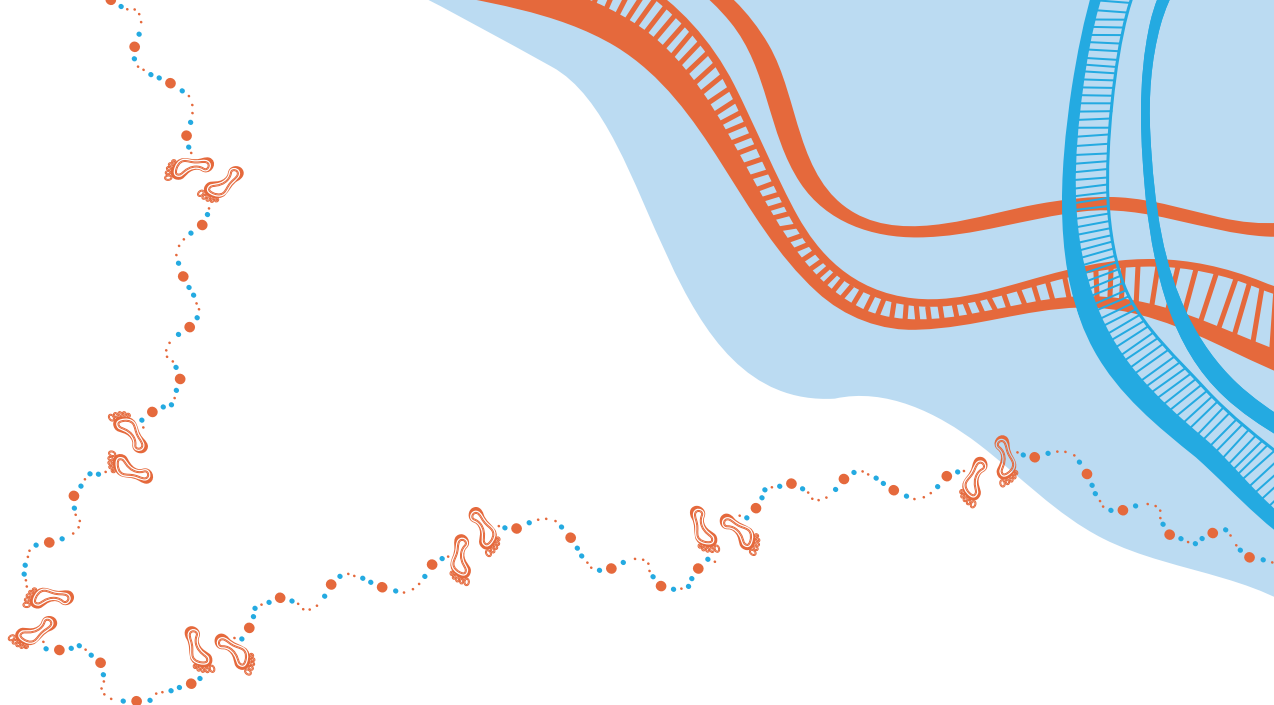
The Coroner also found that Victoria's parole system is operating in a way that is inconsistent with the Department's commitments to Aboriginal self-determination and reducing over-representation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people in Victorian custodial settings.

We continue to support Heather's family in exploring the potential for further advocacy and potential civil litigation compensation.

In this reporting period, we also provided legal and family assistance to support four other

Heather Calgaret Coronial Inquest





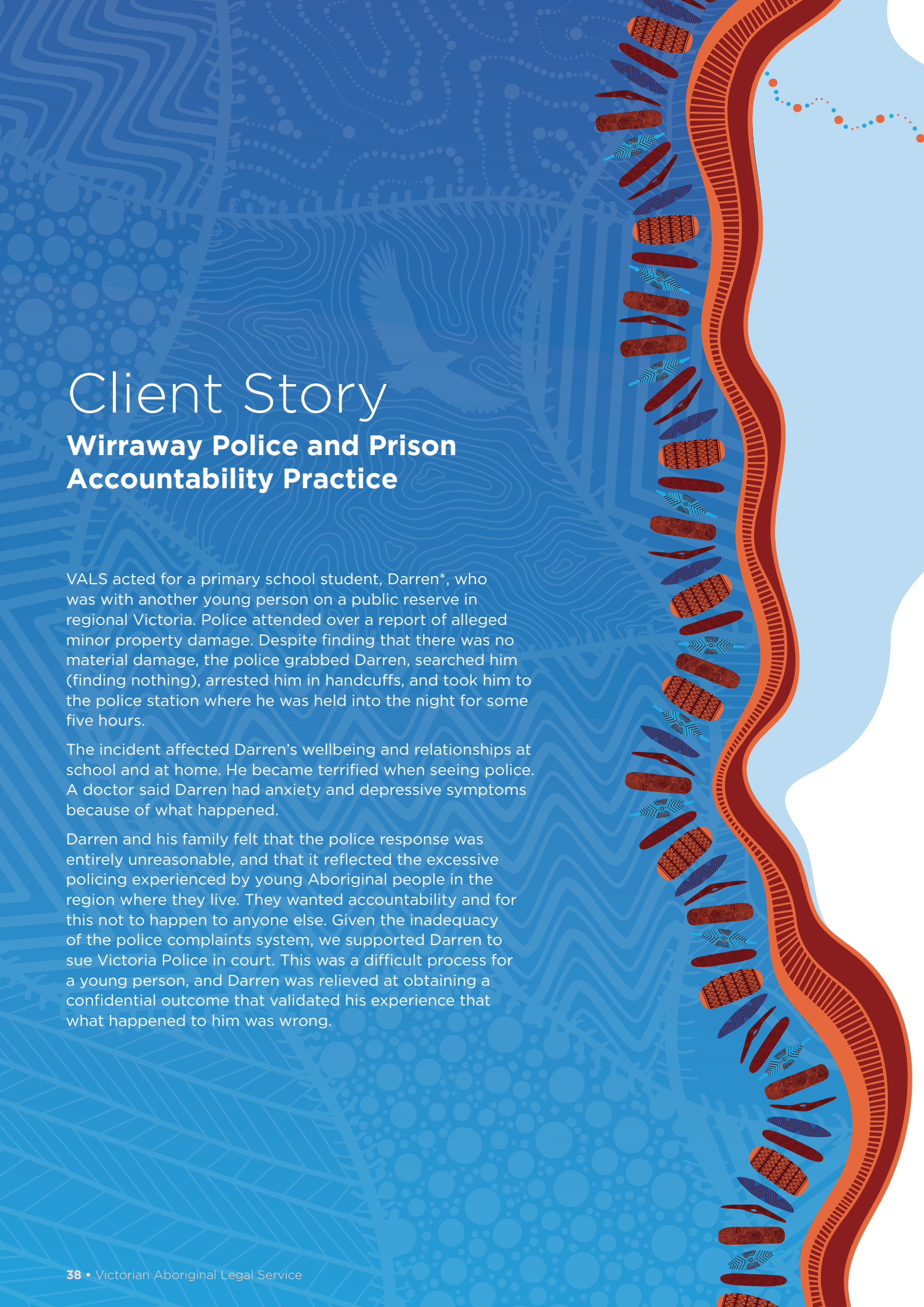
families whose loved ones in passed in custody to navigate the coronial process. Inquest work is incredibly complex and challenging, but central to our team's mission. We will continue to support these families in their search for answers and justice as the coronial inquests progress.

With our police accountability work we were pleased to finalise three court cases against the State alleging police misconduct. These cases allowed our clients to speak their truth against institutional harm and seek compensation for the damage they experienced. These cases respond to and inform VALS' wider police accountability policy and advocacy work.

A key area of our recent work has been in response to rolling lockdowns within youth detention and in the Dame Phylliss Frost women's prison. Our clients described unacceptable conditions in prison, including missing out on meals, family visits, programs, lawyer contacts, access to fresh air, and vital time out of their cells. Our team, alongside the Policy Communications and Strategy team was central in driving sector-wide advocacy with government and Corrections. We will continue this work, recognising the disproportionate impact prisons have on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community members.

In this last reporting period, the Wirraway team also focused on regional outreach, joining VALS colleagues on multiple visits to each of the regions, where we attended community events, met with clients, and delivered training, including know-your-rights training and on the new public intoxication law reforms. We will continue doing this work, to build relationships and support our clients in the regions.





Client Story

Wirraway Police and Prison Accountability Practice

VALS acted for a primary school student, Darren*, who was with another young person on a public reserve in regional Victoria. Police attended over a report of alleged minor property damage. Despite finding that there was no material damage, the police grabbed Darren, searched him (finding nothing), arrested him in handcuffs, and took him to the police station where he was held into the night for some five hours.

The incident affected Darren's wellbeing and relationships at school and at home. He became terrified when seeing police. A doctor said Darren had anxiety and depressive symptoms because of what happened.

Darren and his family felt that the police response was entirely unreasonable, and that it reflected the excessive policing experienced by young Aboriginal people in the region where they live. They wanted accountability and for this not to happen to anyone else. Given the inadequacy of the police complaints system, we supported Darren to sue Victoria Police in court. This was a difficult process for a young person, and Darren was relieved at obtaining a confidential outcome that validated his experience that what happened to him was wrong.



Looking Forward

In the next 12 months Wirraway will continue its work on seven ongoing coronial inquests. Guided by the families, we will tell the story of their loved one, fearlessly challenge institutional narratives, and amplify their calls for meaningful policy and law reform.

We are proud to underpin that work with our Aboriginal family support worker, who addresses cultural safety and connection, assists the families to work with our legal team and the court, and with transport accommodation and other needs.

Looking forward we will significantly increase the number of client claims filed in the Supreme Court against the State for police and prison harms. Bringing these case responds to increasing police powers and misconduct in the absence of any meaningful police accountability, and the dehumanising conditions in prison.

We will focus on the systemic complaints we hear from our clients, including:

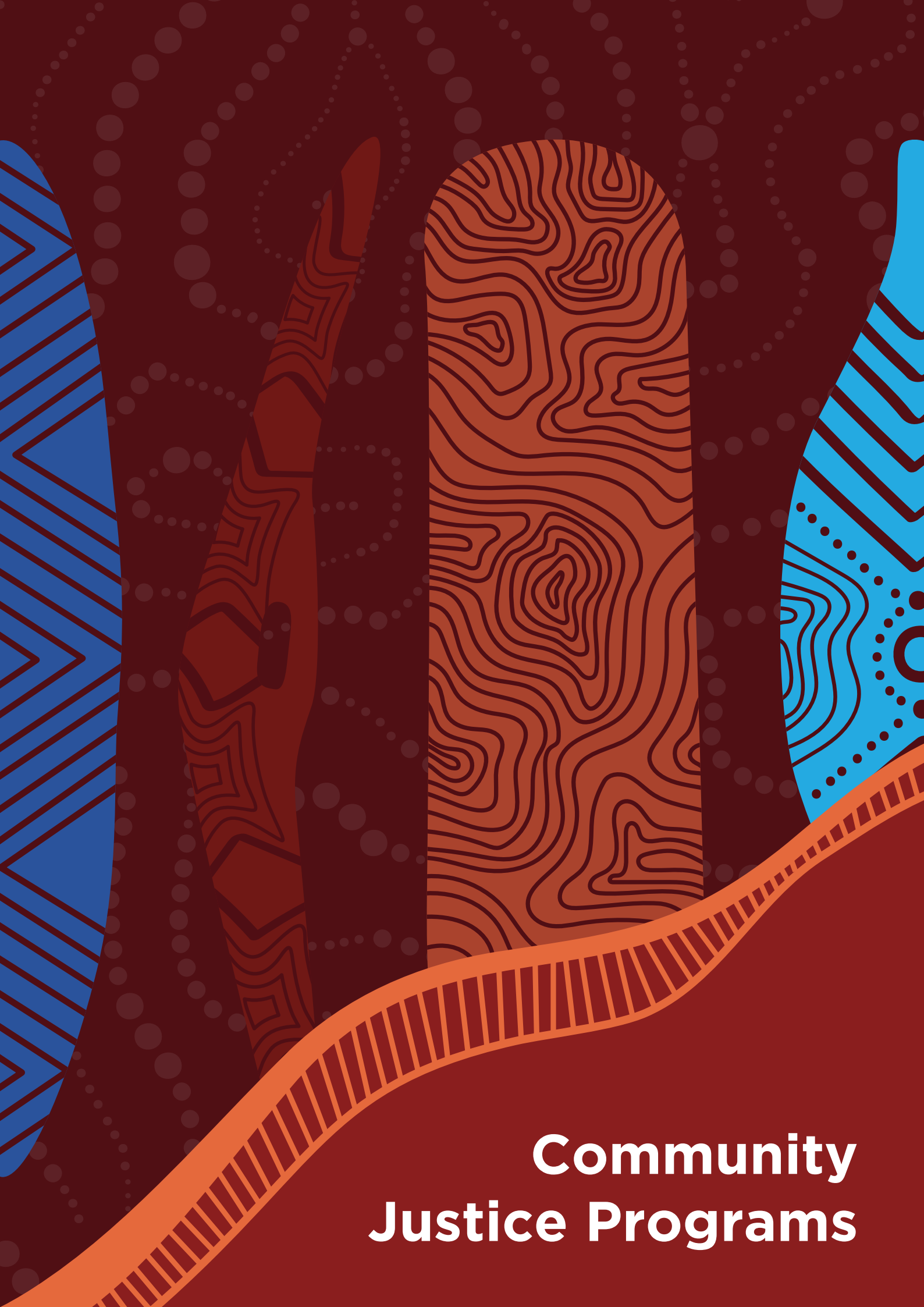
- illegal searches of our clients and their cars
- the increasing police use of tasers and capsicum spray
- gratuitous violence from police when they speak to or arrest Aboriginal people instances of systemic misconduct in the regions, and
- the ongoing harmful practice of lockdowns in youth detention and in the DPFC women's prison.

Importantly, we will not shy away from calling out institutional racism in our court work.

The Wirraway team is also exploring race discrimination cases and judicial review as pathways for redress. We will also progress a case where we are advocating in favour of the Coroner's Court's jurisdiction to apply the *Charter of Human Rights and Responsibilities* in inquests. The Charter provides an important lens and safeguard for protecting Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community members in prison.

We cannot do the work without a collegiate team, which we support with care for each other and our clients. We are also greatly assisted in our work by a dedicated team of lawyers working at private law firm Allens.





Community Justice Programs

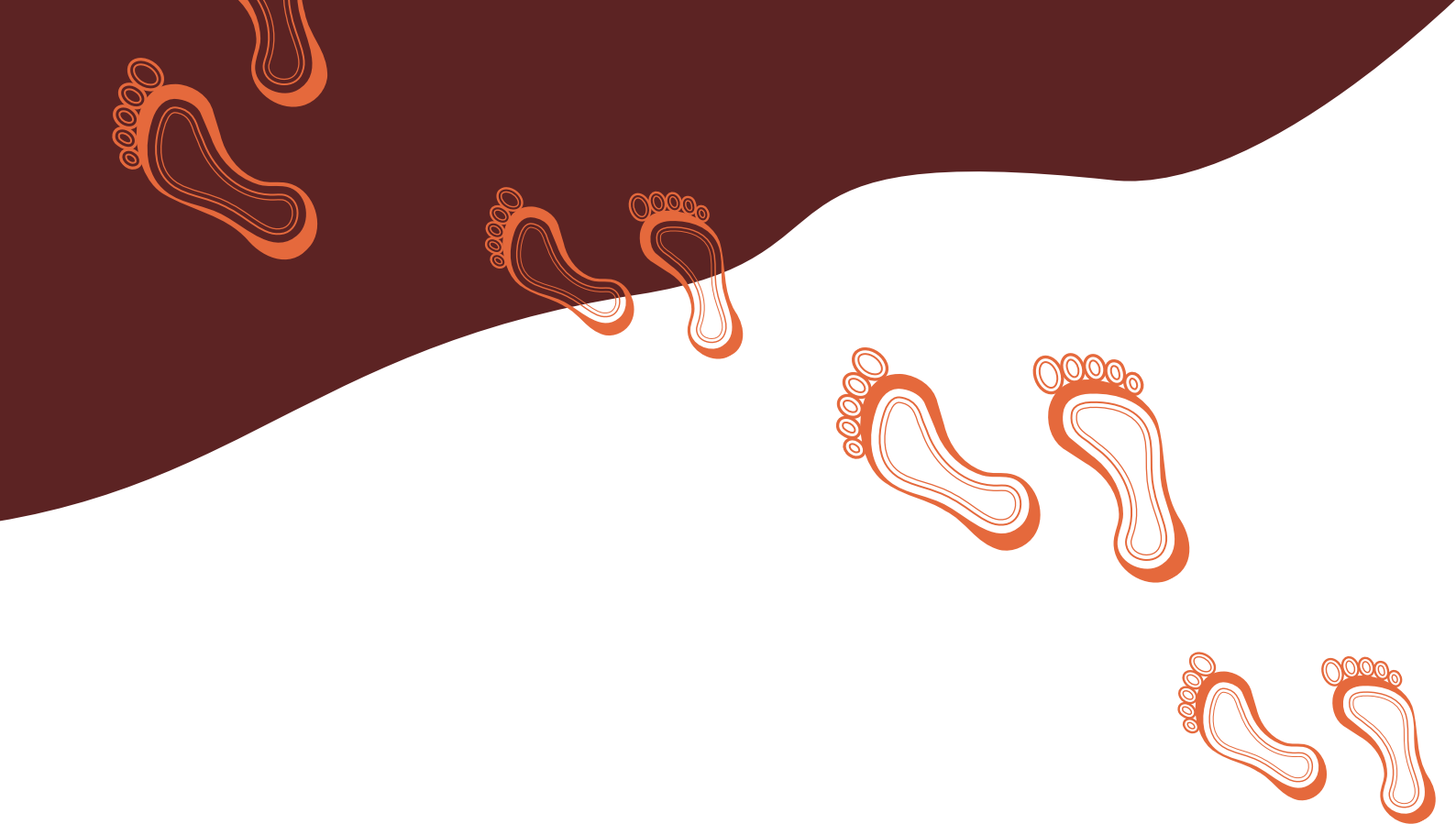
Aboriginal Community Justice Reports (ACJR)



Key Achievements

ACJR was invited to present at the Australia New Zealand School of Government Conference in December 2024 in New Zealand. Following the conference, The ACJR program was awarded the Indigenous Justice Award. The Indigenous Justice Award celebrates and promotes Indigenous and non-Indigenous scholars, advocates, community initiatives and organisations, who engage ethically with Indigenous peoples and contribute to the wellbeing of Indigenous communities. Following this accomplishment, ACJR has been offered to participate on the panel to determine 2025's winner of the ANZOG award, which is an honour in itself.

A key component of an ACJR is that it focuses on the individual's strength being rooted in their culture, challenging the traditional sentencing process which often looks at Aboriginality

An illustration at the top of the page shows a series of orange footprints of varying sizes and orientations, appearing to walk across a dark maroon background that curves down into a white background. The footprints are stylized with concentric lines representing toes and the sole of the foot.

through a deficit lens – which, in turn, can have negative impacts on an Aboriginal person’s sentencing outcome. The strengths of the individual are then used to establish alternatives to incarceration that are community-based and healing-focused. In sentencing remarks one County Court Judge described the reports as “a wider lens that brings perspective on the collective experiences of the individual, family and community, as well as a relevant history of colonisation and its impacts”. Another Judge has said it “provides a greater opportunity for you and your loved ones, those close to you, to tell your story yourselves, rather than have others tell it” This year the ACJR program was fully transferred to VALS, and has completed 6 reports in the last 6 months. These reports were welcomed by the County Court to offer insight into the cultural and historical implications of a person’s life.

Looking Forward

ACJR currently sits statewide in the County Court jurisdiction. Following on from the disastrous backflip on Poccums Law, and the introduction of incredibly punitive bail measures, ACJR is reviewing an expansion of service delivery to the Magistrates Court statewide.

The aim of this expansion is to ensure that there is a greater understanding of the continued impacts of colonisation and cultural factors in an Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait person coming before the court.

This expansion could mean that mainstream Magistrates courts are better equipped to understand the systemic and shortfalls of supports and services that have often been heavily involved in a person’s life, prior to their offending. A large number of ACJR clients are previous child protection clients, have experienced significant family violence as a child, and often then as an adult, and have experienced alcohol and other drug use, either parental substance misuse, or as an adult, as well as the intersection of mental

health and complexity of homelessness. The ACJR aims to provide a more holistic account of individual circumstances, including as they relate to a person’s community, culture and strengths and how these strengths can be applied to potential sentencing outcomes. This year, ACJR welcomed a second report writer to the team, we are hoping to be able to expand the team further to support more Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people before the Court. The aim to expand ACJR program into the Magistrates Court is to Reduce the overincarceration of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and Improve sentencing processes and outcomes for Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander defendants. It is noted that the vast majority of bail applications are before the Magistrates Court, VALS is seeking to expand ACJR to ensure there is a stronger awareness of information about underlying impacts on any Aboriginal before the Court.

Client Story

Aboriginal Community Justice Reports

A Life Marked by Systems, Not Choice

Rob was five years old when he and his sisters were removed from their mother's home and placed into the foster care, where instead of protection he was provided years of systemic betrayal. During their first placement, Rob and his sisters were physically restrained, starved of affection, and violently abused.

At their next placement Rob recalled experiencing love and affection for the first time. "I thought we were a part of a proper family." Until one day he overheard the foster parents discussing future plans which didn't involve them. "That's when I realised, they didn't really love us. We weren't a real family. They were only there for money. That's all we were to them."

This experience became foundational. The idea that care was performative and transactional, shaped his belief that genuine safety or love was never meant for him. That people only do good things for their own benefit.

Rob remained in foster care throughout the remainder of his childhood, moved from placement to placement, eventually being separated from his sisters. He was deprived of kinship, family, and culture. Including a relationship with his own grandmother, a well-known and respected elder who played a pivotal role in progressive community initiatives. "Maybe if I had of been raised by my Nan, I would have had a real chance." By the time he was 13, Rob had begun using illicit substances to numb his pain. By 16 he had run away from his latest foster home to escape their abuse. By his early 20s he had become involved with the criminal system and was incarcerated. By his late 30s he felt certain he would die in prison. "I'm just a criminal. When I think about the future it's just black."

What the ACJR Did Differently

The Aboriginal Community Justice Report gave Rob an opportunity to be seen as more than just a list of charges, but as a whole person. After reading the ACJR Rob's lawyer told writers that it provided her a deeper understanding of Rob. "I really feel like I know him now. It made me cry." It provided Rob a platform to tell his story in his own words. "That's stuff I've never spoken about with anyone. It allowed him a safe space to reframe his life not as a list of failures, but as a result of systemic harm, cultural disconnection, and unhealed trauma. "I feel like you guys really care, because I can see that you actually listen."

The ACJR became more than a report, it became a mirror. One that helped Rob see the roots of his pain but also reminded him of his strength and potential.

"Thank you so much for everything!!!

Also today being there...

If it wasn't for you.

I would never have dealt with my buried box of "don't open ever" in the trenches of the ocean."

ACJR

I believe this is an exercise of healing and reconciliation, connection and conversations. I/we cannot change the past but we can tell our story and illustrate our experiences. Maybe families of this era will want to seek their own stories for historical record and where possible seek justice...❤️

ACJR impact for Court and Rob

The ACJR provided insight into Rob's offending and its relationship with intergenerational trauma rooted in colonisation, forced removal, cultural disconnection, and systemic failure. It also highlighted his genuine efforts to seek support, reconnect with culture, and actively engage in his own healing and change. For Rob the process sparked self-awareness and hope. He voluntarily enrolled into a culturally safe men's behavioural program and began understanding the connection between trauma and behaviours. "I'm really starting to understand myself better, like why I used to be angry all the time." He didn't just want to address his trauma and heal, he believed he could. A man that initially described himself as "just a criminal" who was "broken" and had "no hope" started to talk about goals for his future. "This can't be my legacy."

Cultural Connection and Leadership

Rob's healing has been deeply connected to culture, particularly through painting. What began as survival on the streets became a sacred practice.

"When I paint, all my problems go away. I lose myself. I feel connected to the Ancestors. I feel them speaking with me, guiding me." Painting gives him a reason to remain sober "If I've been drinking or doing anything like that, I don't paint. Because I think it's disrespectful to the Ancestors, because they didn't do that."

And now, he wants to give that back. Rob dreams of creating a screen-printing business to employ other Aboriginal men coming out of prison. He doesn't want to be the exception; he wants to build a path for others "Most fellas I meet in here aren't bad people. They just did bad things. I want to give them a chance to make money, get back on their feet and not end up back in here."

Why This Matters

The ACJR didn't just provide context for sentencing, it changed a man's life. It helped Rob shift from "I'm just a criminal" to "This can't be my legacy." It gave him a safe space to process pain, to understand himself, and a reason to believe in tomorrow.

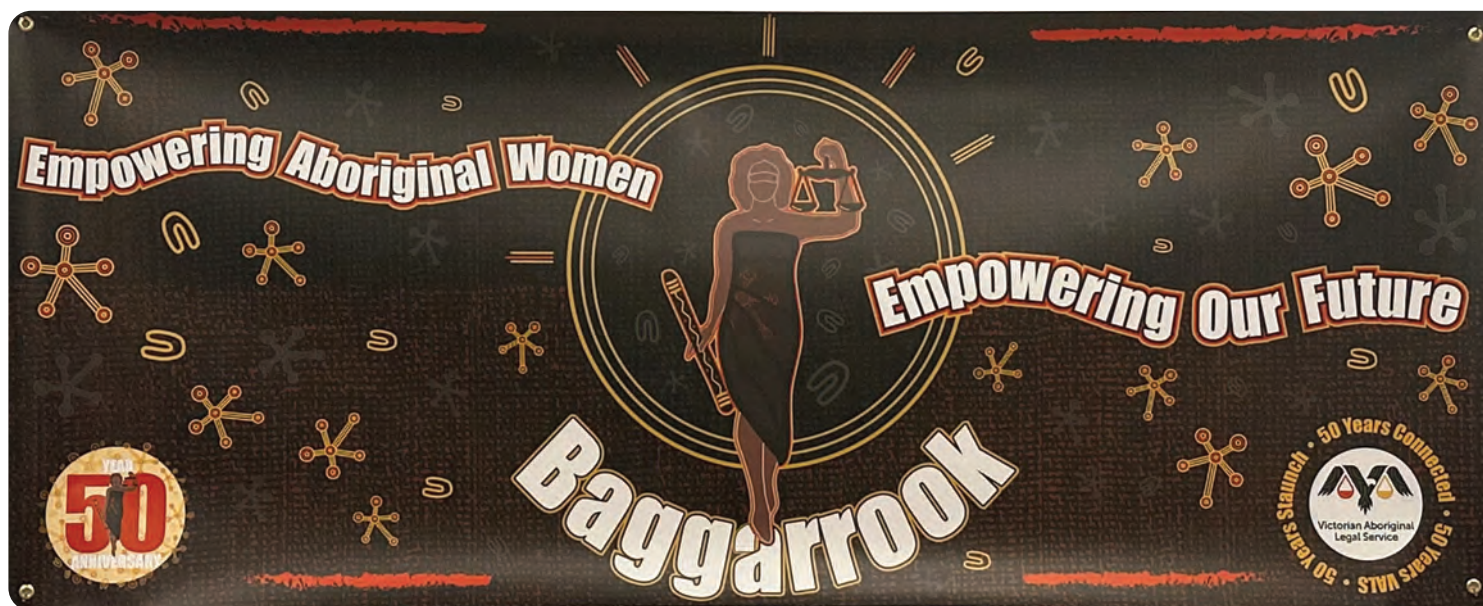
It exposed the generational wounds of colonisation. It honoured lived experience. It reminded the court and most importantly Rob, that even those most harmed by systems can carry enormous potential for healing, leadership, and change.

And for systems built on dispossession and disconnection, that's not just a good outcome, it's justice.

Baggarrook

Baggarrook's overarching objective is to increase rates of safe, secure and long-term housing for women in their community when exiting custody. In the past 12 months, the Baggarrook program has housed four women into long term secure housing and provided warm referrals to other housing support programs to ensure women exit custody into safe and secure housing options.

- No participant has returned to prison whilst being engaged with the Baggarrook program.
- Baggarrook staff have increased their outreach to both DPFC and Tarrengower to strengthen the relationship with both CV staff, and women in custody, this in turn has increased the referrals that come into Baggarrook, as well as the Community Justice Program more broadly.
- Baggarrook has also worked to strengthen relationships with stakeholders, particularly in the West Metro region to support the women reintegrating into the community. This has extended to Elizabeth Morgan House's Aboriginal Healing Unit at DPFC, to ensure Baggarrook's engagement with women is done in a culturally safe space.
- Provided four women with safe transitional housing post incarceration, individual support plans in a culturally safe and appropriate service.
- One Participant has continued to engage with the Torch program post release from custody, was supported to continue to engage whilst at Baggarrook and then this continued into her long term housing.
- All four Participant has achieved stable long-term housing after a lifetime of homelessness.
- All Participants that were welcomed into Baggarrook in this reporting period received parole on the basis of the Participant entering the Program post-release. This highlights the profile that Baggarrook holds in the Courts, and with Magistrates.



VALS Baggarrook Program's Banner

- To ensure Baggarrook maintains strong referral pathways into mainstream and ACCO services, there has been a focus on external stakeholder engagement in the Baggarrook region, as well as with statewide ACCO and mainstream providers. Baggarrook remains committed to ensuring that women coming into Baggarrook are provided with culturally appropriate holistic supports, that they determine will support them on their healing journey.
- A participant highlighted in the 2023/24 VALS Annual report has continued to remain out of custody for more than 36 months – this represents the longest period of remaining out of custody in over 20 years. She has continued to reach out to supports that the Baggarrook program linked her in with over 18 months ago.

Looking Forward

The Program is currently facilitated by Aboriginal women who can support women on their cultural journeys. Program staff work to organise cultural activities such as arts and crafts to help women connect to culture and further enhance formal and support networks as the women relax back into the community. VALS absolutely sees the importance of culturally strong and supported transition programs like Baggarrook and strongly advocates and continues to seek sustainable funding to extend further iterations of the program to best support men and young people exiting custody and transition in a supported and safe holistic way.

VALS knows the benefit and proven success of the program and is keen to further extend the Baggarrook model to support men and young people (18-21) transitioning from custody. There are limited supports that are embedded in culture to support reducing the cyclical nature of recidivism and the impacts that colonisation has on our community to heal. Whilst Baggarrook is currently funded to support up to 6 women, VALS sees a need to increase and further expand the program to ensure rates of safe, secure and long-term housing for women in their community is provided when they exit prison.

Client Story

Baggarrook

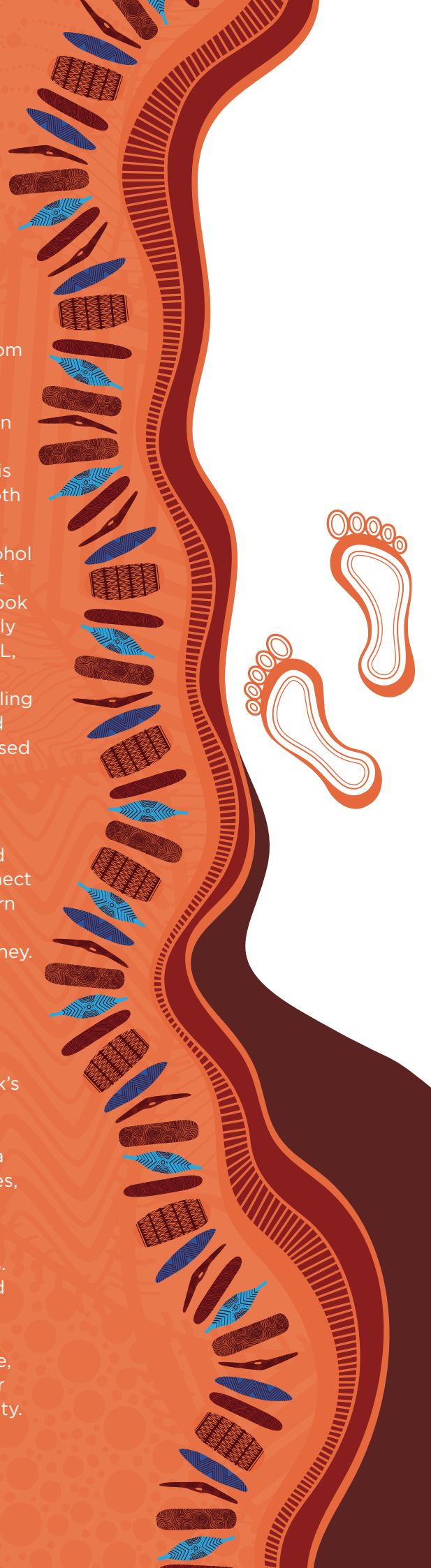
Aunty Amber, a staunchly proud and resilient Aboriginal woman, was referred to the Baggarrook program following her release from custody in late 2024. From the outset, she engaged deeply with staff, building a strong relationship that allowed her to voice her needs and aspirations. Shortly after release, she suffered a sudden medical episode and was diagnosed with a terminal illness—an illness that should have been detected much earlier. The diagnosis required aggressive treatment across multiple health services, both regionally and in Melbourne.

Aunty Amber's identified needs were multifaceted, spanning alcohol and other drug (AOD) support, mental health care, safe transport to medical appointments, and family violence supports. Baggarrook staff worked alongside her to coordinate a wide range of culturally safe and holistic referrals, including Djirra, Ngwala, VAHS, VACSAL, Cooina, VACCA, CoHealth, Uniting Care, and The Torch. Beyond formal referrals, staff provided intensive transport support, travelling long distances to ensure she could attend crucial treatments, and carried out ongoing family violence risk assessments that prioritised her safety and her wishes.

Despite the gravity of her medical circumstances, Aunty Amber showed extraordinary resilience and determination. She actively participated in Elders and women's groups, including cultural and wellbeing activities such as candle-making, and sought to reconnect with her family, including travelling interstate to meet her newborn grandchild. Baggarrook supported this request, recognising the importance of cultural and family connections in her healing journey.

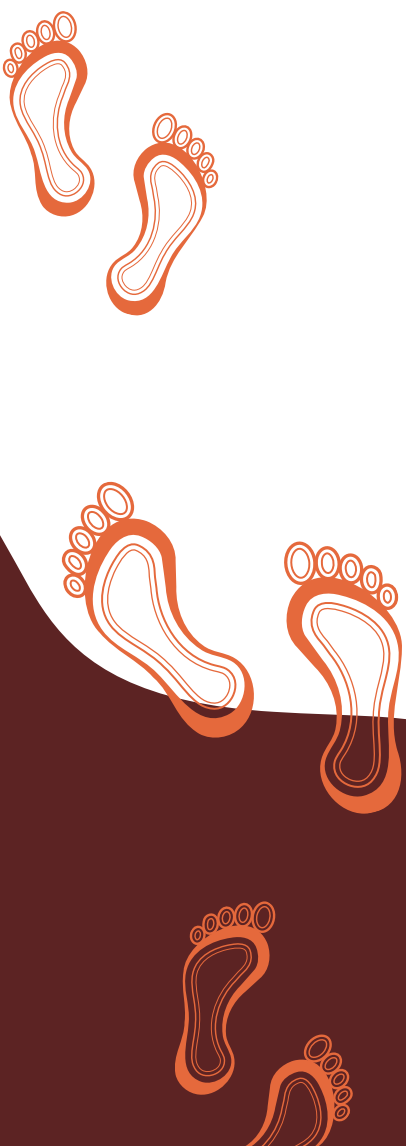
The outcome of this matter speaks to the theme *When will the Justice System Be Just?* highlighting how systemic neglect left a serious health condition undiagnosed until after release from custody. This failure reflects the ongoing inequities Aboriginal people face in health and justice systems. In contrast, Baggarrook's culturally responsive and wraparound support provided Amber with dignity, safety, and continuity of care at a time when the system had failed her. Advocacy from Baggarrook staff secured a larger, accessible two-bedroom property close to medical services, ensuring she could have family and carers present.

Aunty Amber continues to receive strong support and remains engaged with community through Elders and women's programs. While her health journey is deeply challenging, she has expressed her gratitude for the respect, humility, and consistency provided by Baggarrook. The program's ongoing advocacy and practical assistance have ensured that she is not facing her diagnosis alone, but rather surrounded by culturally safe support that honours her strength, her choices, and her connection to family and community.



Custody Notification Service (CNS)

The CNS program is the first point of contact to an Aboriginal community organisation when an Aboriginal person is in police custody, meaning this program is vital in ensuring the best outcomes can be achieved for our community members. Often the advocacy work undertaken by the CNS team is pivotal in ensuring that community members are accessing legal advice early and in a timely manner, and advocating for medical treatment and overview where required. The CNS team have been crucial in assisting to help identify any barriers that may impact on a person's ability to receive a culturally safe and appropriate supports whilst in police custody. This includes advocating for Aboriginal Community Justice Panel (ACJP) members or Independent Third Party (ITP) to attend where appropriate.

An illustration of several footprints in a dark brown color, arranged in a path that leads from the bottom left towards the top right. The footprints are stylized with visible toes and arches.

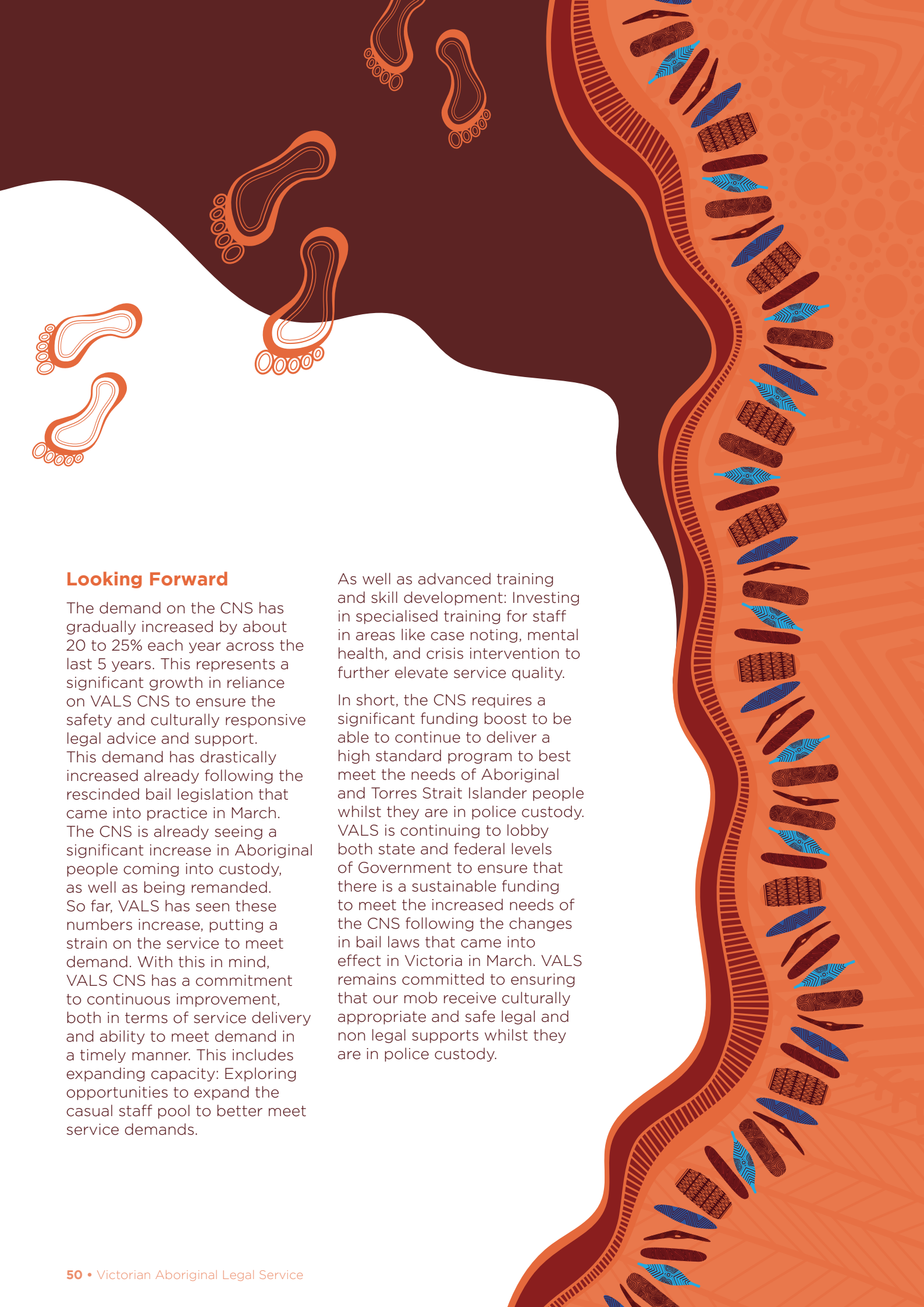
Between 1st July 2024 to 30th June 2025, the Notification Team processed over 18,428 individual notifications from police stations regarding an Aboriginal people in custody. Women made up 28.85% of these notifications.

On average each notification generated a minimum of five additional calls ensuring the clients wellbeing is being monitored, liaising with police, providing legal advice, notifying family or friends where requested, and locating other appropriate supports services.

The CNS program conducted in excess of 81,589 phone calls during this period.

This represents an increase of 27.6% in recorded notifications compared to the previous 2023/2024 financial year. In actual number terms, this equals 3998 additional occurrences of Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islanders coming into police custody in Victoria. This poses a significant risk to greater levels of incarceration of Aboriginal people in Victoria. It has led to an estimated 19,990 additional CNS contacts required to deliver the service and address the legal assistance and wellbeing needs of community members.

There has been considerable work done to strengthen the referral pathways between CNS and VALS VPcR program as the vulnerability and complexity of community members that are in Police Custody rise. The focus of these referrals continues to focus on housing/homelessness, emergency financial support and support for Alcohol and other Drugs.



Looking Forward

The demand on the CNS has gradually increased by about 20 to 25% each year across the last 5 years. This represents a significant growth in reliance on VALS CNS to ensure the safety and culturally responsive legal advice and support. This demand has drastically increased already following the rescinded bail legislation that came into practice in March. The CNS is already seeing a significant increase in Aboriginal people coming into custody, as well as being remanded. So far, VALS has seen these numbers increase, putting a strain on the service to meet demand. With this in mind, VALS CNS has a commitment to continuous improvement, both in terms of service delivery and ability to meet demand in a timely manner. This includes expanding capacity: Exploring opportunities to expand the casual staff pool to better meet service demands.

As well as advanced training and skill development: Investing in specialised training for staff in areas like case noting, mental health, and crisis intervention to further elevate service quality.

In short, the CNS requires a significant funding boost to be able to continue to deliver a high standard program to best meet the needs of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people whilst they are in police custody. VALS is continuing to lobby both state and federal levels of Government to ensure that there is a sustainable funding to meet the increased needs of the CNS following the changes in bail laws that came into effect in Victoria in March. VALS remains committed to ensuring that our mob receive culturally appropriate and safe legal and non legal supports whilst they are in police custody.

Client Story

Custody Notification Service

A client in police custody experienced a sudden and serious decline in health, and became unresponsive. Given the aim and role of the CNS, this matter was escalated to ensure sufficient oversight and support. The Acting Sergeant declined to call for further medical support, or an Ambulance, despite the person in custody remaining unresponsive and unconscious. There was considerable amount of advocacy done with the Sergeant in charge, that did not result in an Ambulance being called. The Custody Notification Officer (CNO) then spoke with the Police Custody Officer (PCO), who shared similar concerns about the person's presentation, and eventually after a number of phone calls between the CNO and the PCO, the PCO agreed to ring an Ambulance to respond adequately to the person's medical presentation. When the Ambulance arrived, they were assessed as so dire, that a Mobile Intensive Care Ambulance (MICA) unit was then called. This person was then transferred to hospital for urgent treatment. Once the person was transferred to hospital, the CNO remained committed to monitoring the client's wellbeing through regular welfare checks.

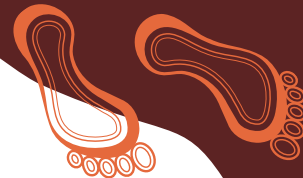
The CNO identified the client's deteriorating state and took initiative, advocating to the PCO to defy instructions from their Sergeant to call an Ambulance. This advocacy brought Ambulance Victoria to the scene, who in turn escalated the response to the MICA critical response unit. The CNO maintained connection with key points of contact by informing the on-call solicitor and then referring onto Wirraway for further follow up.

Even amid limited access to medical updates, the CNO undertook increased welfare checks to continue monitoring of the client's status, as well as discussing with police their planned response moving forward. The CNO demonstrated integrity by prioritising the person in custody's wellbeing, underscoring the CNS function in such circumstances, and acting with resolve to potentially prevent another Aboriginal death in police custody.

The person was transferred to hospital where they made a full recovery. Their health was stabilised through the critical care response enabled by the CNO's strong advocacy in prioritising a powerful strength-focused approach that reframed challenges as opportunities for proactive care. The Aboriginal person in custody, and their health and wellbeing were prioritised above all by the CNO, and there was a significant amount of advocacy initially with the Acting Sargent, then with the relevant PCO to ensure that the person in custody was responded to, and their basic human rights in terms of access to healthcare was met.

The matter was referred directly to VALS Wirraway, police and prison accountability team. The above highlights the vital role of the CNS, through resourcefulness and continued advocacy whilst navigating systemic barriers the CNO remained client-focused and potentially prevented a death in Police Custody.

Victoria Police e-Referral (VPeR)

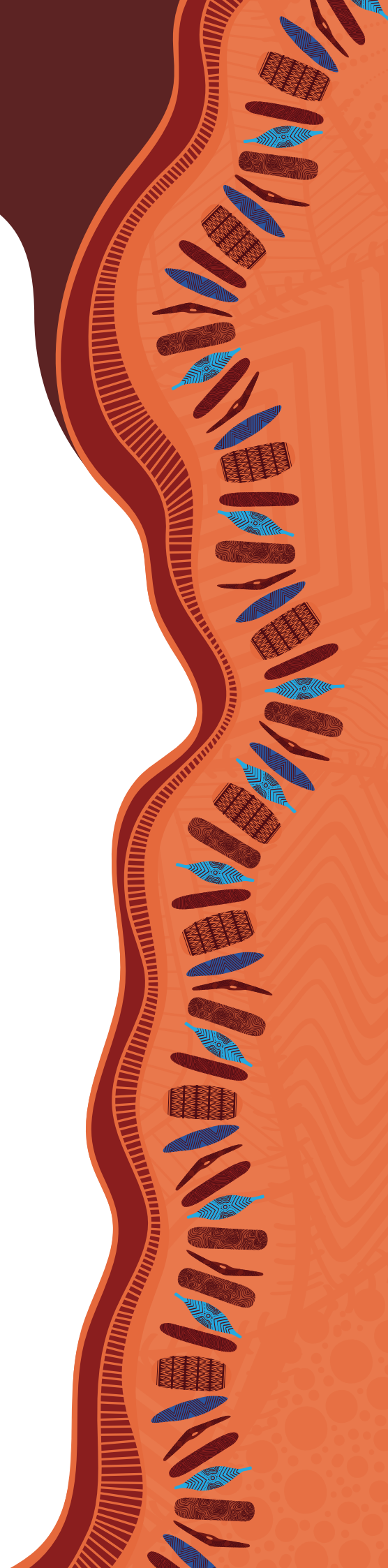


The VALS V-PER program plays a crucial role in assisting community members with non-custody issues referred by Victoria Police during noncrisis incidents. These referrals, known as V-PER notifications, are consented and are often received at a time of heightened emotional stress for clients. V-PER notifications are consented referrals during noncrisis incidents. The program also accepts referrals through community-based pathways, ensuring broader community access to culturally safe support. The V-PER program provides culturally safe and holistic support to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander clients at critical moments. By maintaining strong relationships with police, ACCOs and other agencies, the program ensures that clients receive culturally relevant services that align with their needs and preferences.

In a similar trend that has been noted in the CNS, the service demand has increased for VPeR services. **Between July 2024, and June 2025, the VPeR service has received over 330 e-referrals, and then provided over 400 referral pathways to support Aboriginal community members with voluntary community support options.** Overwhelmingly, the external referrals have related to AOD support, Greif & loss counselling, Homelessness and housing and links for youth supports.

Looking Forward

The VPeR program is positioned for continued growth and impact, with plans to expand staffing and deepen engagement with stakeholders across the justice and community sectors. Building on the strong referral pathway established through the Custody Notification Service, VPeR will further strengthen culturally safe access to support for Aboriginal people navigating the justice system. By expanding networks, engaging with more Aboriginal community members, and contributing to community legal education, the program will continue to champion social justice, amplify Aboriginal voices, and ensure that communities are empowered with the knowledge and connections they need to thrive. VPeR continues to act in non emergency settings, and work towards preventative and early intervention options for community members to access.

A decorative wavy line runs vertically down the left side of the page. It features a series of repeating Aboriginal-style patterns, including stylized feathers, speckled bands, and geometric shapes in dark brown, light brown, and blue. The background of the entire page is a solid orange color with a subtle, larger-scale Aboriginal dot pattern.

Client Story

VPeR

A community member attended their local police station in a highly distressed state. They disclosed that they were going through a complex and emotionally challenging divorce, which had left them facing financial hardship. This included difficulties meeting everyday living costs and paying for urgent car repairs. The individual identified as Aboriginal and shared experiences of cultural isolation during their marriage. She was referred to the VPeR program for continued supports.

The VPeR program responded by making direct contact with the individual to discuss their situation in a safe and respectful manner. Her immediate needs were explored and she was provided reassurance, while also encouraging them to connect with their nearest Aboriginal Community Controlled Organisation (ACCO). By working collaboratively, we identified appropriate services and programs that could strengthen their wellbeing and cultural connections. We coordinated referrals for legal advice, housing support, counselling, and participation in an Aboriginal Women's Group, ensuring the client could access holistic and culturally safe care.

Through these referrals, the individual gained access to legal guidance, health and wellbeing supports, and opportunities to connect with community and culture. This case highlights how Aboriginal people are often required to navigate legal, financial, and emotional challenges without adequate systemic support. The justice system, which should safeguard and uphold rights, too often relies on community-based organisations to fill significant gaps in culturally safe and accessible services. True justice will be achieved only when systems respond fairly and equitably to the lived realities of Aboriginal people, without them having to reach breaking point before support is provided.

Despite experiencing significant personal hardship, the individual demonstrated courage by reaching out for assistance and openly sharing their story. Their willingness to seek support, engage with services, and reconnect with community reflects resilience and determination to build a stronger and healthier future.

This Aboriginal Mum is now linked into multiple supports through their local ACCOs, including legal assistance, housing pathways, counselling referrals, and women's group programs. Early feedback indicates they are actively engaging with these services and beginning to feel more connected and supported. These steps are contributing to their healing journey and reinforcing their cultural and community connections.

Bail Saves Lives



When we think of unjust policy, the government's introduction of regressive bail reforms exemplifies this. In March 2025, VALS and over 100 representatives from ACCOs, community services, family violence and legal sectors stood together to launch our open letter calling for the Victorian Government to implement just and fair bail laws. The open letter, titled **Bail Saves Lives – Poccum's Law is the Way Forward**, demanded that any reform to bail laws should not detract from, and must align with Poccum's Law.

Our joint letter was a strong statement to the Victorian Government that we will not tolerate the reversion to discriminatory and unsafe bail laws that disproportionately impact Aboriginal people, especially Aboriginal women and young people.

VALS led the **Bail Saves Lives** campaign, which strongly condemned the knee-jerk bail law changes introduced by the Allan Labor Government in March 2025. We knew that these laws would impact our communities most, and we called for the government to implement Poccum's Law. We know that granting bail saves lives.

Anticipating the government's plan to progress with the bail amendments, VALS prepared a Statement of Advice which detailed 20 legislative and programmatic recommendations to minimise the inevitable harmful impacts of these regressive bail changes on Aboriginal people and communities. You can read VALS' Statement of Advice here: **Bail Saves Lives – VALS Statement of Advice: High Harm & Two Strike Bail Changes**





In March 2025, and again in July 2025 VALS co-organised two successful snap rallies, on the steps of Parliament to coincide with the Victorian Governments shameful announcement of dangerous bail laws. We were supported by Flat Out, Human Rights Law Centre, Fitzroy Legal Service, Federation of Community Legal Centres, Apryl Day, the FIGJAM advocacy group, Aunty Vickie Roach, Law & Advocacy Centre for Women, Rachel Payne, Katherine Copsey, and Senator Lidia Thorpe. We held a staunch and united presence, strong in our messaging that **bail saves lives**.

Why is the Bail Saves Lives campaign this so important?

Victoria's punitive bail system has always disproportionately impacted Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander people, resulting in a dramatic increase in the number of people in prison who have not been sentenced. 13.5% of people in custody in Victoria are Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander, even though we only make up 1% of the state's population.

As of May 2025, we have seen a 9.73% increase in the adult prison population in Victoria in a period of one year. Dangerous and discriminatory bail laws which are deeply harming Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities are making it easier to needlessly lock away more people – before trial or sentencing.

Over 35 years ago, the Royal Commission into Aboriginal Deaths in Custody handed down its report, which included recommendations to increase access to bail and only use prison “as a sanction of last resort”. Since then, the recommendations have been repeated in many reports, reviews, inquiries and forums, yet Victoria has failed to implement these recommendations and instead has gone backwards.

VALS continues to call for Poccum's Law to be implemented in full.





The background is a deep red color. It features several large, stylized shapes with Indigenous Australian patterns. On the left and right, there are blue shapes with black geometric patterns, including zig-zags and concentric circles. In the center, there is a large, vertical, rounded shape with a brown and orange wavy, topographic-like pattern. A thick, orange, wavy line with a series of small, dark red rectangular notches runs diagonally across the bottom of the image. The text is located in the bottom right corner, overlaid on the red background.

**Policy,
Communications
and Strategy**

Policy, Communications and Strategy

The Policy, Communications and Strategy (PCS) team have continued to grow in strength and success across our four areas, Policy, Communications, Community Engagement and Justice Through Treaty.

Policy

Over the past year the Policy Team have continued to cement VALS as a key leader of just law reform in Victoria. This is shown in the ***Bail Saves Lives*** campaign, in addition to other advocacy pieces. Including:

- **Anti-vilification:** alongside other advocates VALS prepared a joint submission about Victoria's Anti-Vilification laws. Our advocacy involved coordinated lobbying with key stakeholders, which resulted in positive inclusions and protections in the Anti-Vilification and Social Cohesion Bill. This includes an important recognition that a purpose of the Bill was to protect Aboriginal people from experiencing systemic injustice, structural oppression and vilification.
- **Protections for protesting:** VALS strongly advocated for our right to protest to be upheld in a way that is true to our values as the broader Victorian community. We drafted submissions and consulted with government, highlighting our opposition to any reforms that infringe on our rights to protest. VALS led the sector in the advocacy, and many others adopted our approach and looked to VALS for guidance. We were successful in this advocacy, with the proposed reforms being delayed and may not proceed in the way in which they were first proposed – which is a significant achievement for our freedom to engage in civil and political life.

- **Family violence:** we have been involved in substantial consultation with government over the past year regarding family violence reforms. We have commenced preparing a Policy Paper that provides an understanding of how family violence is experienced by, and impacts, our communities. It is informed by the way the systems that exist around family violence interact with, and fail our communities, and what needs to change to achieve real and appropriate results. The development of this paper was driven by the clear lack of understanding from government about what is needed to address family violence in a way that achieves real transformational change.

Our emergence as a sector leader over the past several years is reflected in the fact that VALS was invited to give evidence to the Senate Inquiry into Australia's Youth Justice and Incarceration System, the Victorian Parliamentary Inquiry into Personal Adult Cannabis Use, and the Victorian Parliamentary Inquiry into the Adequacy of IBAC's Legislative Framework. This highlights just how strong and successful VALS submissions and advocacy is in the justice sector.

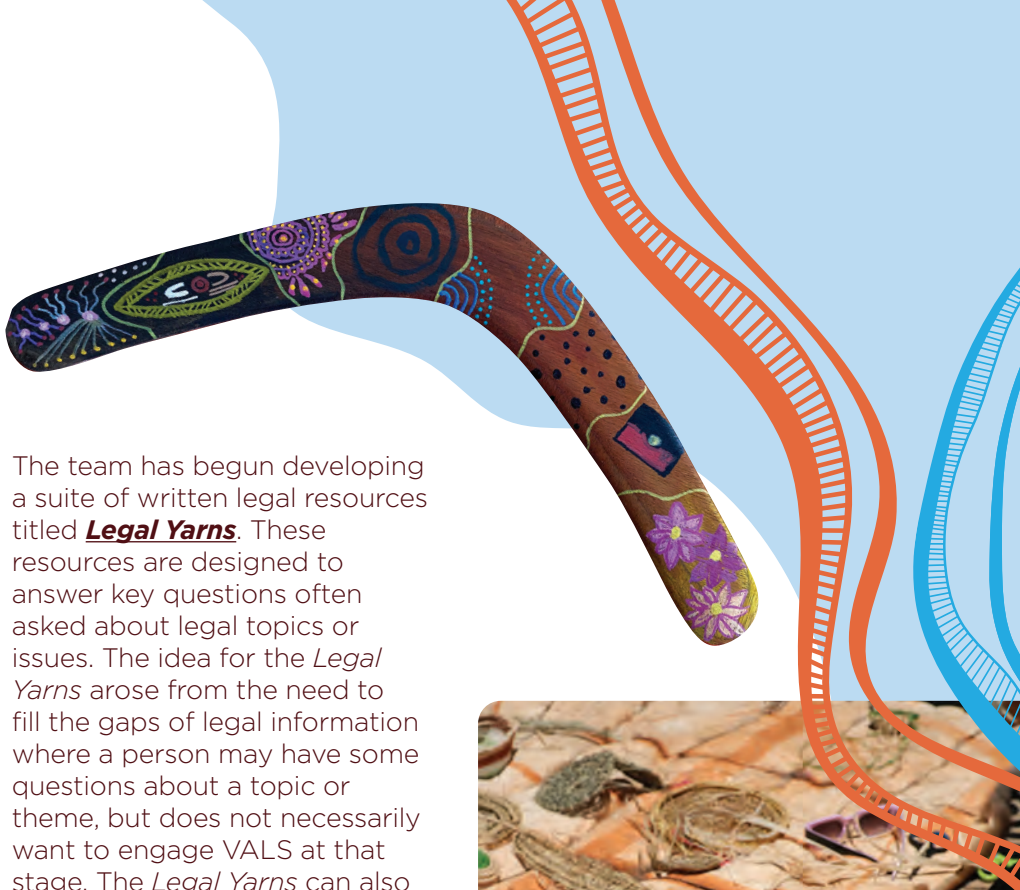
Community Engagement

Our Community Engagement Team has continued to grow from strength to strength. Over the 2024/25 year we have hosted over 17 events, including delivering 12 Community Legal Education (CLE) sessions about the decriminalisation of public intoxication and the new health response.

The Community Engagement Team has continued to focus on delivering CLE sessions regarding the decriminalisation of public intoxication. These CLE events have been a fantastic opportunity for VALS to strengthen organisational relationships with local ACCHOs and ACCOs. We have worked in partnership with VAHS and local outreach providers to share information with communities about the legal reforms, their rights, and new health supports available. The collaborative co-delivery of these sessions has meant that attendees are able to have their questions answered about all aspects of the public intoxication reforms, from legal through to health. This holistic approach to delivering CLE has been incredibly beneficial for community and staff, as we also gain a better understanding of how the reforms are understood by the general community and how they are playing out in practice. This information has informed our overarching PCS advocacy in the policy space.

The team has begun developing a suite of written legal resources titled **Legal Yarns**. These resources are designed to answer key questions often asked about legal topics or issues. The idea for the *Legal Yarns* arose from the need to fill the gaps of legal information where a person may have some questions about a topic or theme, but does not necessarily want to engage VALS at that stage. The *Legal Yarns* can also be used to supplement legal information given to VALS clients. For example, the **Spent Convictions Legal Yarn** will be attached to all close letters sent out by our Criminal Law Practice.

The team continues to build connections and relationships with organisations across Victoria through dedicated outreach and engagement at community events across the state. Collectively, the team continues to attend events across Victoria and develop relationships with key stakeholders and communities and improving access to VALS.



From top-bottom: Smoking Ceremony at VALS Public Intoxication CLE Session in Bairnsdale May 2025; Boomerang artwork from VALS Community Engagement Team's YouthFest Event in Shepparton; VALS NAIDOC Event in Morwell, October 2024.

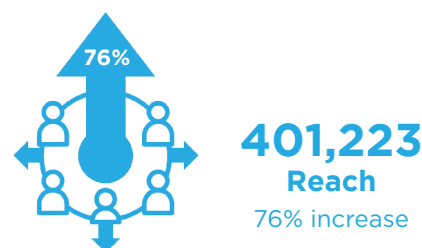
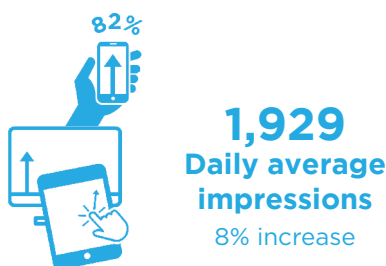
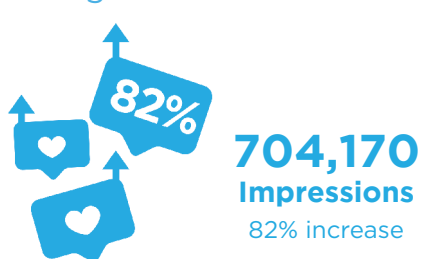
Communications

Our communications team were a consistent and staunch voice for VALS throughout a year of challenging legislative reforms, presenting opportunities of leadership in the sector. The partnership between our policy and communications teams has been crucial in amplifying the significant work policy do in advocating for much-needed justice reforms.

The Communications team have continued to strengthen VALS' digital platform reach and engagement with community, allies and supporters. We have grown our followers and engagement across all social platforms – most significantly Instagram.



Instagram



The theme of VALS end of financial year fundraising drive was 'Supporting Self-Determined Solutions'. We focussed on promoting key areas of our service that require further funding, including:

- Expanding our Regional Justice Hub network
- Expanding our Baggarook and Balut Ngulu programs
- Meeting the higher demand for our services as a result of disastrous new bail laws
- Establishing an Emergency Relief Fund for our clients

"We ran a successful campaign, raising \$7,639 in individual donations for the month of June 2025 - utilising our official VALS mascot, Lotjpa the decolonised Barbie in the drive. For the whole reporting period, VALS raised \$254,064 in donations."



Our webinars have been incredibly successful and have built a stronger support base and engagement on our policy platform. This year we have hosted two webinars. Our annual Invasion Day webinar, which this year titled 'The Strength Within – Aboriginal Experiences of The Prison System', had over 540 registrations and hundreds of people attending on the day.

A highlight and significant achievement was the webinar to launch the First Nations Cultural Capability Framework – a culmination of work led by VALS, alongside by Victoria Legal Aid and the Law Institute of Victoria. The FNCC is a landmark initiative to improve the experiences of First Nations peoples seeking legal advice and representation in Victoria, a major step towards long-term, meaningful change in the legal sector. The webinar featured discussion with Tim Goodwin (Barrister), Ashley Morris (Director of First Nations Services, Victoria Legal Aid), Adam Awty (CEO of the Law Institute of Victoria), Fiona McLeay (Commissioner of the Victorian Legal Services Board) and VALS CEO, Nerita Waight. In summary, we had 555 attendees out of over 900 registrations. Following the webinar we had over 80 expressions of interest to participate in the training pilot.



We received really positive feedback, particularly in relation to the impact of the leadership and unity of the panel, the videos from our contributors, Kelly Flanagan and Magistrate Prior, and to the commitment to ensuring that the training is one small part of a larger mandate of change in the profession.



VALS Public Intoxication Posters

This past year we have strengthened the partnership with our legal practices. Specifically we have worked closely with Wirraway in supporting their important work in police and prison accountability, as well as being able to empower families who are involved in coronial inquest proceedings. We've been able to further develop this cross-team strategy, ensuring our clients' voices are the centre of our advocacy. A key campaign our teams worked closely together in leading was in advocating for people in prison who have been experiencing excessive lockdowns due to inadequate staffing at Dame Phyllis Frost Centre. This involved a coordinated roll out of media, political lobbying and social media posts, forcing the government to be transparent about how corrections facilities were currently operating. During on Parliamentary sitting week, three members of the progressive crossbench raised this topic – including a direct question to the minister. Media outlets such as National Indigenous Times, the ABC, the 7.30 Report, The Saturday Paper and About Time Magazine covered this as well. We continue to put pressure on government to improve conditions in corrections facilities, as this is a blatant systemic failure in their duty of care.

In March 2025, the inquest into the passing of proud Gundijtmara and Wiradjuri man Clinton Austin commences. Our team provided platforms and support for Clinton's family to share his story and advocate for justice for son, brother and friend.



Justice Through Treaty Project

As part of VALS' commitment to developing a more just justice system, we have been progressing the Justice Through Treaty Project, which aims to envision how we might achieve greater Aboriginal community control over justice matters. Enabled by funding through the Victorian Legal Services Board and Commissioner, a team was established in late 2024 to support this work.

The first formal Treaty agreement is expected to be in place toward the end of 2025, and it is anticipated that it will set the stage for future negotiations in the areas where change is needed, including in relation to justice matters.

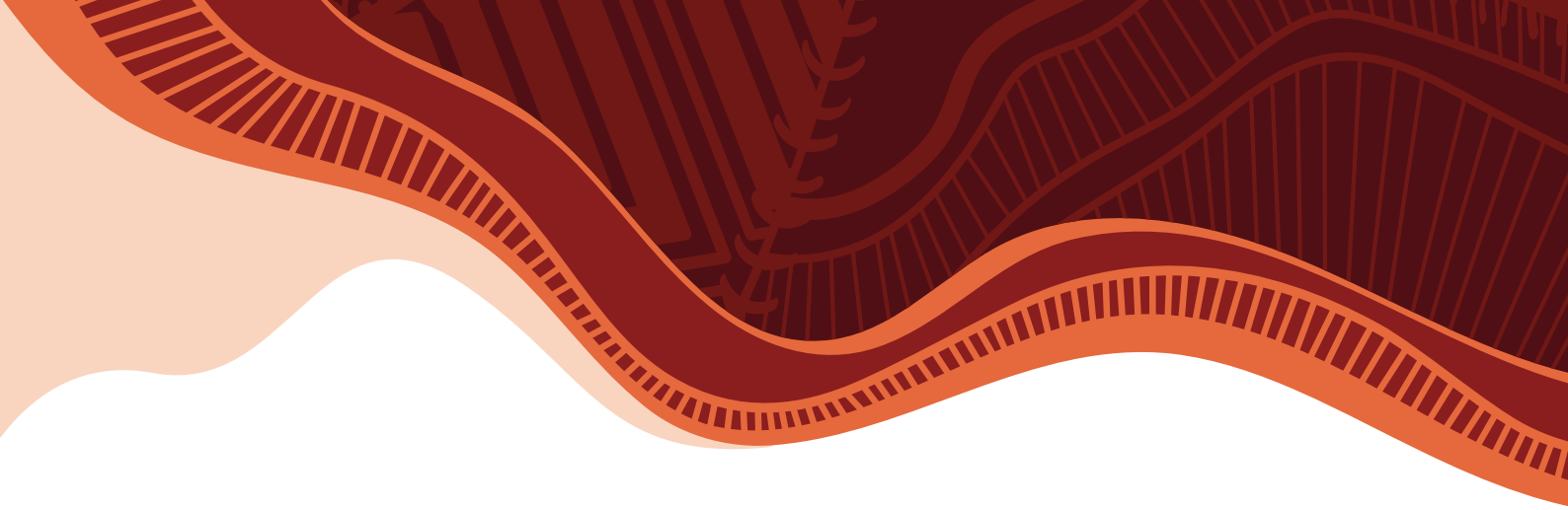
In November 2024, we held a workshop which brought together over 30 Indigenous justice and treaty experts, with participants from Australia, Aotearoa, Turtle Island and South Africa, to discuss experiences and key learnings in increasing recognition of Indigenous legal systems within their respective jurisdictions. We gathered input from Aboriginal leaders in Victoria on their priorities for a Justice Treaty, and how best to ensure that Treaty leads to changes that address community priorities and needs.

As part of our work, the team has also been engaging in international human rights review processes to elevate Treaty and the importance of increased self-determination over justice matters through the Victorian Treaty process.

VALS' believes that there needs to be foundational change in the legal system and its institutions, which puts decision-making in the hands of Aboriginal communities. The Victorian Treaty process offers the opportunity to achieve this transformational change.

The Justice Through Treaty team will continue to work on building a roadmap for progressing this transformational change through Treaty. We are in the process of working toward a second community workshop focusing on the development of Aboriginal-led self-determined dispute resolution models to be held later in 2025.

**Research
and Evidence
Development**



Research and Evidence Development

Research & Evidence Development work

VALS' Research and Evidence Development Unit has continued since its inception in early 2024 to grow VALS' capacity on both the research and evaluation fronts. This includes:

- finalising a self-determining, strategic research agenda that advances VALS' strategic directions;
- forging key strategic research partnerships and securing research funding to advance that agenda;
- building the capacity of VALS to better monitor and evaluate its services in a culturally safe and appropriate way and tell the stories of its impact.

Organisational evaluation capacity building has included a highly participatory approach to developing program logics and data plans, developing data tools, and overhauling and adapting VALS' information management system, Actionstep, to assist with more effective and streamlined data capture. Over time this work will inform program improvement, innovation, and policy advocacy. The team also resources VALS programs in negotiating external evaluations to advocate for culturally responsive evaluation design and implementation.

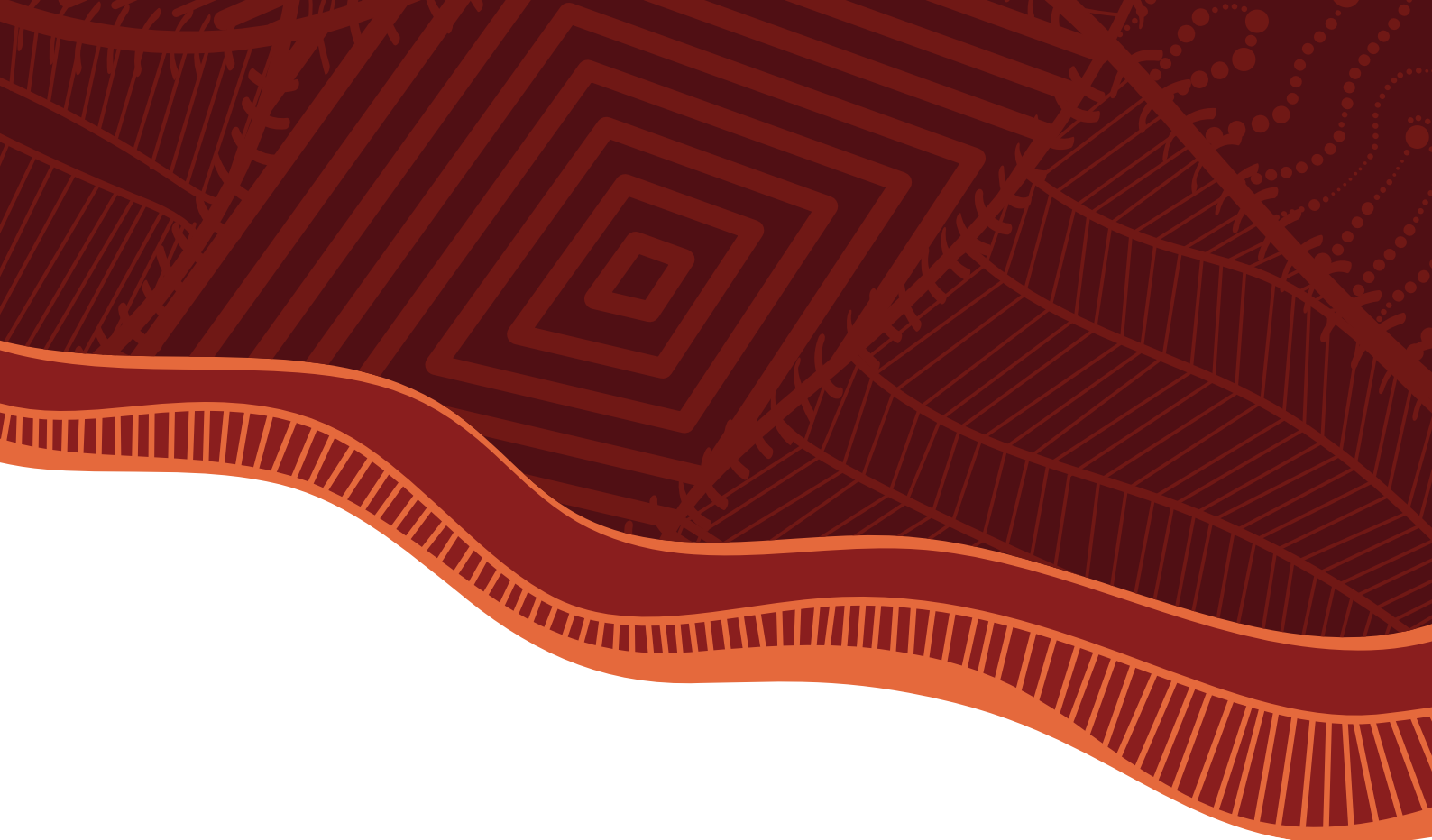
Evaluations underway that the team is involved with include:

- First Nations Cultural Capability Uplift pilot training evaluation
- Balit Ngulu Youth Engagement Program
- Balit Ngulu integrated response (addressing legal needs spanning the Child Protection, youth justice, family law and civil law (Family Violence) domains)
- Aboriginal Family Centred Youth Justice Program

A First Nations Cultural Capability Framework for the Victorian legal profession

The RED Unit has lead VALS' partnership project with the Law Institute of Victoria and Victoria Legal Aid, to build the capability of the legal profession in Victoria to provide culturally safe and responsive legal advice and representation to First Nations people (see feature below). Enabled by funding through the Victorian Legal Services Board and Commissioner, a range of resources is being produced through the project, including a capability framework, training and practice guidance.

The First Nations Cultural Capability Framework was launched via a webinar in June. The Framework identifies the foundational knowledge, attitudes and skills that employees and leadership need to perform their duties and obligations in a culturally responsive and appropriate way. The webinar launch was a great success, with over 500 people attending, and overwhelmingly



positive feedback. Panel members included the CEO of VALS, CEO of LIV, CEO and Commissioner of the VLSB+C, and the Executive Director of First Nations Services, with pre-filmed contributions by a lived experience expert and Magistrate Jillian Prior. The Framework provides the foundation for development of the training and practice guidance to come.

The Framework can be found on the websites of all three partner organisations.

Looking Forward

The RED Team will continue to work on the building blocks of evaluative capacity, including:

- improving VALS' information management system to generate reliable data for program improvement, innovation and advocacy;
- documenting how our services are designed (program logics and theories of change) and, based on this, identifying and collecting key data to better identify our impact; and
- supporting VALS' program team leaders and managers to make sense of this data for more effective decision making.

The team will continue to grow our research footprint through further partnering and efforts to source research funding.

We will also work with our partners in the First Nations Cultural Capability Uplift Project, along with the VLSBC+, to address the other drivers of capability uplift alongside training, namely: implementation support, compliance/accountability and advocacy strategies. If we succeed, this will build in more active investment of all partners and the regulator in the broader agenda of change, and put Victoria at the forefront of this nationally.





First Nations Cultural Capability Framework

Background

All First Nations peoples living in Victoria deserve legal assistance and representation which enables them to make informed choices, respects, appreciates, and upholds their cultural rights and needs, and contributes to improved legal outcomes. It is well established that First Nations peoples in Victoria frequently experience inadequate interactions with legal practitioners, organisations, and the justice system, and that this lack of culturally appropriate and responsive advocacy and support often translates into poor outcomes. The overrepresentation of First Nations people in incarceration, and the high number of First Nations children in out of home care, are stark reminders of this.

The need for legal practitioners to become more culturally capable in supporting First Nations people has been identified by many for some time. It was the Coronial Inquest into the tragic and preventable death of Aboriginal woman, Veronica Marie Nelson, however, that galvanised action. Ms Nelson, a Gunditjmara, Dja Dja Wurrung, Wiradjuri and Yorta Yorta woman, was found dead on the concrete floor of her cell in Melbourne's Dame Phyllis Frost Centre on 2 January 2020, three days after being taken into custody. She had been refused bail for shoplifting. She was 37 years old. Coroner Simon McGregor found that Ms Nelson's legal representation was inadequate, falling short of the standard expected. She was unrepresented in her bail application. Along with bail reform and more Aboriginal people working in the justice system, Coroner McGregor urged that cultural awareness education and training become mandatory for Victorian lawyers through continuing professional development and practical legal training.

First Nations cultural capability 'uplift' for the legal sector in Victoria is needed for several reasons:

- First Nations peoples in Australia are a sovereign people with unique rights, as recognised in the United Nations Declaration of the Rights of Indigenous Peoples. They occupy a unique position accordingly, one that is not equivalent to that of other culturally and linguistically diverse groups within Australia.
- Victorian and Australian law have been fundamental to the historical colonial oppression and dispossession of First Nations peoples. Notwithstanding the good intentions of many, the legal and justice systems uniquely target First Nation peoples, creating and perpetuating inequities and harm.
- Culturally accessible, safe, and responsive legal services play a key role in reducing disadvantage and strengthening the justice equity outcomes experienced by First Nations peoples. This Framework is a component of a broader project called the





The Project elements

The First Nations Cultural Capability Uplift Project is a partnership between the Victorian Aboriginal Legal Service (VALS), Victorian Legal Aid (VLA) and the Law Institute of Victoria (LIV). It began with LIV and VLA, with transfer of leadership for the project to VALS as ACCO in the partnership, in the spirit of self-determination. The partnership is underwritten by a tripartite agreement¹⁶.

The project consists of the following elements.

A First Nations Cultural Capability Framework

This Framework identifies the knowledge, attitudes, and skills that solicitors, barristers, paralegals, legal secretaries, and non-legal support staff need to perform their duties and obligations in a culturally responsive and appropriate way. It has been designed specifically to underpin capability building of legal practitioners - including magistrates, solicitors, barristers, in-house lawyers, paralegals, legal secretaries, law students, community support roles and community service officers - who are providing legal and non-legal support services to First Nations peoples in Victoria. This includes both non-Indigenous 'mainstream' legal organisations and Aboriginal Community Controlled Organisations. The Framework is First Nations-led and tailored specifically to the legal profession.

The Framework was launched via a webinar in July 2025.

The launch was a great success, with over 500 people attending the webinar. Panel members included the CEO of VALS, CEO of LIV, CEO and Commissioner of the VLSB+C, and the Executive Director of First Nations Services, with pre-filmed contributions by a lived experience expert and Magistrate Jillian Pryor. Online feedback was overwhelmingly positive and the partners have been invited to several forums to present on it. Links:

Framework: <https://www.vals.org.au/first-nations-cultural-capability-framework/>

Webinar: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=B0IU6jKqtVs&t=14s>

Tailored foundational training

Based on the identified capability domains of the Framework, the project will design and deliver tailored foundational training in First Nations cultural capability for the entire Victorian legal sector. This will take the form of self-directed online training focused on the knowledge-oriented capability domains, followed by a one-day face to face training offering focused on practices/skills development. Training will be rolled out in the first half of 2026 following a pilot period of testing. The roll-out will start with legal aid and community legal centre practitioners, followed by the broader legal sector.

Practice Guidance

We know that training impact tends to decay fairly quickly if not reinforced by other professional development strategies. In this spirit, the project will develop and provide a good practice guide for all training participants to take back into the office to support maintenance and further development of skills.

Community of Practice

Training participants will be invited to sign up for 6 community of practice session post training to provide a safe group forum for further exploration of practice challenges and issues and further provision of practice guidance.

The Project in its broader context

For the legal profession to be culturally capable in its practice with First Nations people, it is simply not enough to offer one off training. This is important, but not sufficient to support sustained improvement in professional behaviour and skill. VALS, LIV and VLA are clear that there are four enablers of this change- training, implementation support, compliance and accountability, and advocacy. The theory of change for the project can be found in the Framework document.

¹⁶ We recognise VLA and LIV's early leadership in the project and particularly their championing of the need for a strengths-based approach to build cultural capability and knowledge across the profession and their considerable

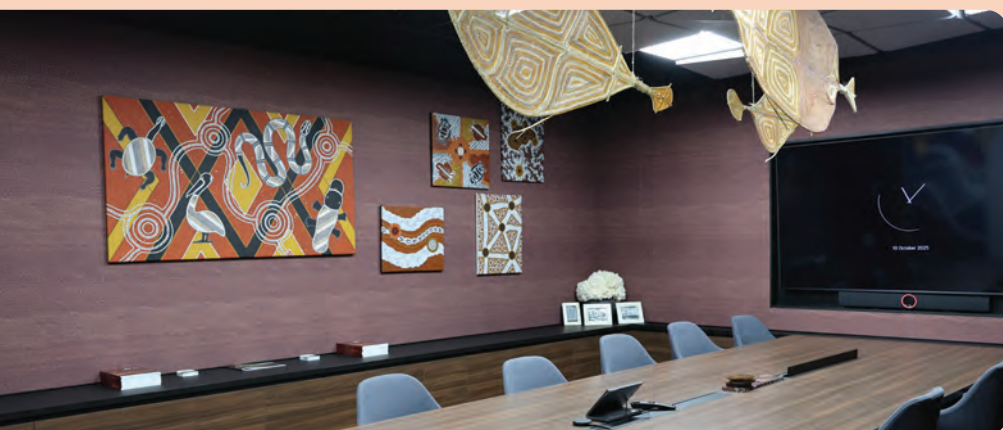
Executive and Corporate Services

Corporate Services

The 2024-25 financial year has been a big one for VALS' corporate services, especially after our Executive Planning Retreat in January 2025 led to launching our Back of House Uplift Program (BHUP). When will the justice system be just? It starts with making sure our own organisation is solid enough to support real change for First Nations communities.

At VALS, we know that justice isn't just what happens in courtrooms—it's built through good systems that help our frontline teams do their jobs well, making sure everything we do is culturally safe, and using data insights to make community voices heard. Our corporate services work supports this by creating the foundation we need for a legal system that's actually designed, led, and controlled by First Nations clients and communities.

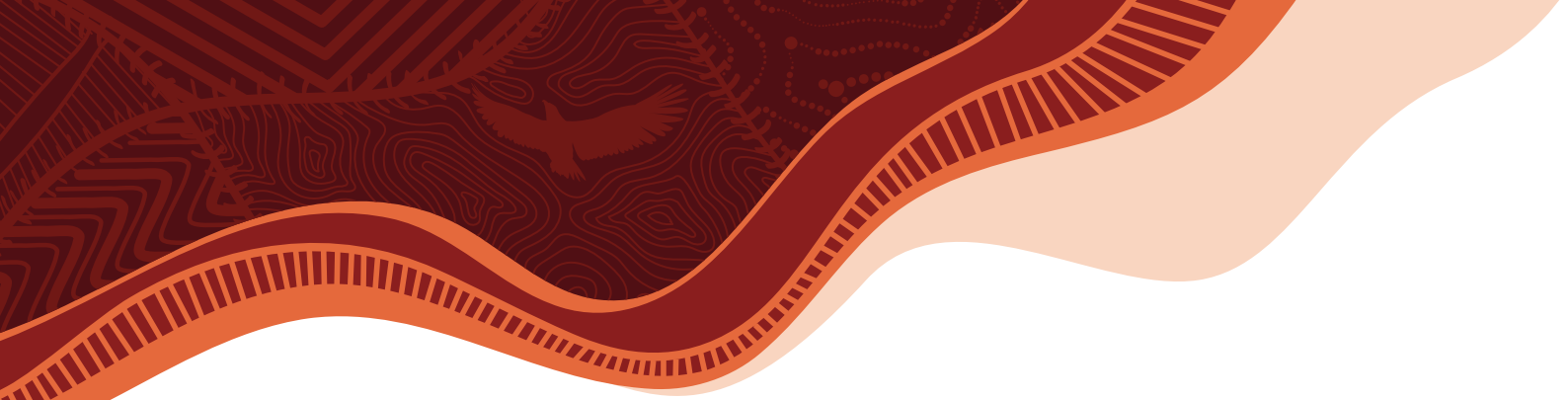
A massive achievement this year was finishing our head office renovations and getting everyone back into the office. Our Preston office is now completely transformed into a culturally safe environment featuring decals across the walls and windows designed by Yakuwa Designs, Aboriginal art from the Torch, and upgraded facilities and technology that reflect our values. These upgrades strengthen our capacity to provide high quality legal services and supports to our community, and providing a workplace that reflects who we are as an ACCO.





Aunty Bunta Room

The Aunty Bunta Room has reopened following its refurbishment as part of our head office renovations. This flexible conference space, named after the proud Gunditjmara Elder who helped establish many Aboriginal Community Controlled Organisations (ACCOs) across Victoria, can now accommodate 50+ people in various configurations. The refreshed room serves as both a valuable community resource and additional revenue stream, whilst strengthening our connections with ACCOs and local community organisations. It's fitting that this space carries forward Aunty Bunta's legacy of creating places where culture, connection and advocacy can flourish.



Human resources

Our HR team has grown to keep up with our increasing staff numbers and help make VALS an even better place to work. The big project this year was starting our Subscribe-HR upgrade, which should be finished by the end of 2025. This new system will make HR processes much smoother, improve things for staff, and give better support to both corporate services and frontline teams as we keep growing.

Having Community Service Officers working across our legal teams has really strengthened cultural mentorship and community connections. We're also focused on trauma-informed practices and managing workloads properly because we know that looking after our staff is essential for delivering justice for our communities. Our volunteer programme keeps creating great pathways into employment, showing our commitment to developing Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander legal professionals.

Information technology

We've made real progress on our IT roadmap through the BHUP, with some major wins this year. Supporting the return to our renovated head office required an enormous amount of IT work behind the scenes—setting up infrastructure, reconfiguring networks, and ensuring everything worked seamlessly when staff moved back in. The biggest

achievement was launching the VALS organisational intranet, which has completely changed how we work, communicate, and manage our systems and processes. Staff now have everything they need in one place, which makes everyone more efficient and improves how we communicate internally.

We've also done a lot of work streamlining our IT contracts, which makes managing our IT services much easier and cuts down on admin work. All our technology improvements focus on cultural safety and making sure communities can access our services easily.

Quality and information systems

We're working towards becoming a data-led organisation that puts community voices at the centre of everything we do. We've done significant work consolidating our ActionStep client management system, which has improved how we capture and manage client information across all our practice areas. Improvements like stronger security and improved features mean we can cut down on manual work and track service outcomes, client results, and meet our funding requirements.

This approach to quality means we can show our impact and advocate properly for the resources our communities need, whilst keeping client information safe and culturally appropriate.

Looking forward

As we keep rolling out the BHUP, we're focused on making sure VALS can respond to what communities need and identify strategic opportunities. Over the next 12 months, we're planning on delivering governance improvements, looking at new office spaces, improving our current regional sites to better serve Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities across Victoria, and reviewing our telephony systems to improve how clients can reach us.

Our goal is straightforward: when corporate services work is culturally safe, efficient and supports frontline work, we create the right conditions for real justice. By continuing to invest in our people, processes, and technology, we're building the organisational foundation we need for a legal system that effectively serves Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities in Victoria.

Volunteers

During the 2024/2025 period, volunteers have contributed over 150,000 hours to VALS' crucial program across the five legal teams, as well as the non-legal departments.

We have continued supporting youth student's placement, showcasing them the diversity of roles and tasks possible in the field. In this period students completed their work experience with VALS, diving in the functions of the community legal centre.

Our infrastructure supports increased with two HP laptops being purchased by Australian National University. This has increased our capacity in having volunteers.

This financial year we have also acknowledged the volunteers' efforts during the National Volunteer Week.

The volunteer program continued and expanded its relationships with Indigenous Hubs of Victorian Universities and TAFEs, as well as Worawa Aboriginal College with the goal of supporting Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students in completing their course requirements and gaining practical experience in the field.

In January 2025 VALS had a VIP Day at HoMie. HoMie host VIP Days with NFP organisations, working for and supporting young people. VALS' young people (from Balit Ngulu and the Volunteer Youth Program) were pampered with food, drinks, opportunities to get their nails done, haircuts, along with choosing several items of high-end streetwear. All up, 11 of VALS young people came away with new wardrobes, some of which were customised onsite with Clothing The Gap decals.

We have hosted around 270 volunteers since 2022, with most assisting the Criminal Law, Civil Law and Human Rights, and the Client Advocacy Program.

We have offered professional development opportunities for the past and current volunteers, with four people completing VACCHO Cultural Safety Awareness Training.

Looking Forward:

Looking forward, we are hoping to expand the Youth Volunteering program to ongoing opportunities to Aboriginal students throughout the year and work more closely with University Indigenous Hubs directly. Another goal is offering career-ready workshops to all interested volunteers to increase their employability skills. In the next period, one of the targets for the volunteer program is to find reliable funding sources to be able to support the volunteers throughout their time at VALS.



VALS Volunteers attend VIP Day at HoMie





SOUTH EAST AUSTRALIAN
ABORIGINAL JUSTICE SERVICES LIMITED

Financial Report

FOR THE YEAR ENDED 30 JUNE 2025

DIRECTORS' REPORT

Your Directors present this report, together with the audited financial statements of the South East Australian Aboriginal Justice Services Limited for the year ended 30th June 2025.

DIRECTORS

The names of the Directors in Office at any time during or since the end of the year are:

Crystal McKinnon (Chairperson)	Cienan Muir
Apryl Day	Tarneen Onus Brown
Robert Nicholls	Tiana Koehler (commenced 22/11/2024)
Sarina Gentile (commenced 22/11/2024)	Holly Charles (commenced 22/11/2024)
Luke Martin (resigned 22/11/2024)	Erin Rose (resigned 22/11/2024)
Lisa Briggs (commenced 22/11/2024, resigned 04/08/25)	

Directors have been in office since the start of the financial year to the date of this report unless otherwise stated.

The following person held the position of company secretary at the end of the financial year:
Tarneen Onus Brown.

OBJECTIVES

Meet the legal needs of the Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait islander community in Victoria through legal services:

- Undertake related Services which may help Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people;
- Run VALS Legal Services effectively, efficiently and strategically; and
- Work co-operatively and collaboratively with other organisations for the benefit of clients.

STRATEGY FOR ACHIEVING OBJECTIVES

Provide high quality legal representation to every Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander person who seeks our assistance and fits the criteria for Service – in relation to Civil, Criminal and Family Law matters:

- work with key people such as members of the Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander community, ministers, Government departments and Government committees through submissions, face to face meetings and hearings, on current and proposed legislation and policy and conduct proactive advocacy.
- make sure that our staff feel valued, supported and well informed through regular staff meetings, training, study assistance, policies that encourage work-life balance, mentoring opportunities and induction programs; and
- work with a range of mainstream and Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander controlled organisations, with a focus on ensuring clients receive holistic support and assistance as required.

PRINCIPAL ACTIVITIES

Deliver a 24 hour, 7 days a week legal service to the Victorian Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander community and promote social justice, policy/law reform and community legal education.

PERFORMANCE MEASURES

Provide highly efficient legal and related services consistent with contractual obligations, legal professional, practical and ethical obligations and the relative needs of individual clients.

SURPLUS/(DEFICIT)

For the year, the entity earned a net surplus of \$3,071,750 after a depreciation charge of \$690,205.

SIGNIFICANT CHANGES

No other significant changes in the company's state of affairs occurred during the financial year.

AFTER BALANCE DATE EVENTS

No matter has evolved since 30 June 2025 that has significantly affected, or may significantly affect:

- (a) the entity's operations in future financial years, or
- (b) the results of those operations in future financial years, or
- (c) the entity's state of affairs in future financial years.

FUTURE DEVELOPMENTS AND RESULTS

Likely developments in the operations of the company in future financial years and the expected results of these developments have not been included in this report as the inclusion of such information is likely to result in unreasonable prejudice to the economic entity.

OPTIONS

No options over issued shares or interest in the company were granted during or since the end of the financial year and there were no options outstanding at the date of this report.

INFORMATION ON DIRECTORS

Crystal McKinnon: Chairperson

Dr Crystal McKinnon is a Yamatji person and is an Associate Professor in History, Law and Justice at the University of Melbourne. Crystal is an extensively published academic and expert speaker and presenter on subjects related to critical Indigenous studies, Indigenous People's histories, social movements, sovereignty and justice. Crystal is a member of various academic bodies and is involved in academic administration, university governance and wider participation in the Boards and steering committees of various not-for-profit and community organisations.

Cienan Muir: Deputy Chairperson

Cienan Muir is a Yorta Yorta, Taungurung and Ngarrindjeri man who grew up in Northcote, Echuca, Moama and Mooroopna. Cienan has held numerous roles within the Victorian Government from Department of Justice to Homes Victoria, stepping away temporarily to work at the Koorie Youth Council in advocating for our young peoples' voices, a time he is most proud of. He now works in the natural resource management space of the Victorian Government as a policy officer. Cienan has completed the Company Directors Course through the Australia Institute of Company Directors (AICD) and completed a similar course through the Institute of Company Directors Australia (ICDA). Cienan delivered Australia's first ever Indigenous Comic Con in 2019, founded his company INDIGINERD, creating space for Indigenous representation across the popular culture area and has written for the Australian Centre for the Moving Images (ACMI)

Apryl Day: Secretary

Apryl Day is a proud Yorta Yorta, Wemba Wemba and Barapa Barapa woman. She is a community organiser and campaigner, and a member of both Warriors of the Aboriginal Resistance Victoria and Pay the Rent. She is the daughter of Tanya Day – a proud Yorta Yorta woman who died in custody in 2017. Apryl and her family successfully led the campaign to end the criminalisation of public drunkenness in Victoria and is at the forefront of the fight for police accountability and justice matters. Apryl is the Executive Officer and Founder of the Dhadjowa Foundation which provides culturally safe and strategic guidance and support to families whose loved ones have died in custody in hopes to amplify the campaigning of families and end Aboriginal deaths in custody. Apryl Day is co-owner of Interlude Bar, a cocktail bar and restaurant. She has won many awards, including Voltaire Human Rights Award (Jun 2021), Liberty Victoria, Civil Justice Award (May 2021), Australian Lawyers Alliance, Women of the Year Recipient (Nov 2020), Marie Claire, and the Tim McCoy Human Rights Award (Nov 2019).

Sarina Gentile. Treasurer

Sarina Gentile is a proud Aboriginal woman from the Wollithiga clan of the Yorta Yorta Nation. She brings over two decades of leadership and advocacy experience across government and community sectors. Her career has been grounded in a strong commitment to justice reform, culturally informed practice, and the empowerment of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities. Sarina has held senior roles in both government and community-led organisations, where she has led initiatives focused on **improving justice outcomes, building culturally safe**

systems, and strengthening accountability to Aboriginal communities. Her work spans policy development, program design, and strategic leadership — all with a focus on addressing the systemic challenges faced by Aboriginal people within the justice system. With a proven ability to influence change at both operational and strategic levels, Sarina is deeply committed to building partnerships, embedding cultural integrity, and promoting long-term, community-led solutions. Her appointment to the Board of VALS reflects her enduring dedication to equity, justice, and self-determination.

Holly Charles. Director

Holly Charles is a Yorta Yorta and Gunai woman who grew up on Waddawurrung country and spent several years living in Geelong and Melbourne before recently returning to Yorta Yorta country. She is a Research Fellow at the University of Melbourne and has worked across government, education and community advocacy roles. Holly previously worked as a lawyer in Commonwealth agencies and now focusses on community-led research and justice reform. Her work centres on race and the law, and the role of First Nations knowledges in challenging colonial systems and creating self-determined futures.

Tiana Koehrer

Tiana is a proud Yorta Yorta and Wurundjeri woman. Born and raised in the eastern suburbs of Melbourne, Tiana has actively contributed to her community through volunteer work and advocacy. Tiana has worked for several years in a number of high-level roles across the health, Treaty and justice spaces. She also has a wealth of governance experience through past and current board member opportunities. Currently working as a Manager in the Justice sector, Tiana is passionate about ensuring all Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander Victorians have access to culturally safe supports and services, especially those in contact with the justice system. She is passionate about working with young, incarcerated mob to build tools with them to ensure they do not return to custody.

Robert Nicholls: Director

Bobby Nicholls is a proud Yorta Yorta, Dja Dja Wurrung, and Wadjabalok man and the nephew of Sir Douglas Nicholls. He is the Chairperson of Yorta Yorta Nations Aboriginal Corporation YYNAC. Bobby was a Director of VACCA for 10 years, first joining in 1981. Bobby has worked in community run organisations such as the Aborigines Advancement League, Victorian Aboriginal Child Care Agency, and the Aboriginal Housing Board of Victoria. Bobby is one of the founding members of Yarnin' Pictures, formed by his passion to document Elders stories whilst training Aboriginal youth in the art of filmmaking. To this end, he helped create an App called "Yalinguth" a Woiwurrung word meaning 'yesterday' which echoes the sentiments of many Elders that "we need to go back, before we can go forwards". The Yalinguth app can be used for many educational and cultural applications, including efforts towards greater cultural awareness within schools for teachers and students, and in particular as a resource for the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Histories and Cultures cross-curriculum priority.

Tarneen Onus Brown

Tarneen Onus Williams is a proud Gunditjmara, Yorta Yorta person through their mother and Bindal and Meriam person through their father. Tarneen is living on the unceded land of the Wurundjeri peoples. Tarneen is a community organising lead at Australian Progress, previously VALS community legal educator, a community organiser for Warriors of the Aboriginal Resistance working on Invasion Day, Black Deaths in Custody and Black Lives Matter. They're also a writer and filmmaker that has been published in IndigenousX, The Urban List, Crikey, NITV and RightNow. Tarneen's film "young mob questioning treaty" has been screened internationally at Imagine NATIVE in Toronto and Tampere Film Festival in Finland

Luke Martin: Director

Luke is a community solicitor who is studying medicine. Luke is a Member of the Clinical Council, South Eastern Primary Health Network and has extensive governance experience and as an Aboriginal congressman, advisor, lecture and negotiator. Luke was a co-founder and former head of the Indigenous Health Research Unit, Indigenous Health Translation Unit, University of Melbourne, Monash University, Victorian Institute of Forensic Medicine.

Erin Rose: Director

Erin Rose is the Budj Bim World Heritage Executive Officer at Gunditj Mirring Traditional Owners Aboriginal Corporation. Erin has extensive professional experience in the delivery of Aboriginal community engagement programs and within the Victorian justice system. This includes in program management and within Corrections Victoria.

Lisa Briggs. Director

Lisa Briggs is a proud Gunditjmara woman from the western district of Victoria with connections to Framlingham and Lake Condah Mission. I live off country in Naarm Wurundjeri country and pay my respects to their Elders, past and present. Lisa holds a Masters in Public Health and an Aboriginal Health Worker by Trade. Lisa has over 40 years' experience working at executive level in public policy for Aboriginal Affairs at the national, state, regional and local level within the Aboriginal Community Controlled Sector. Lisa currently the Executive Director for Ngaweeyan Maar-oo which means "Voice of the People" in Gunditjmara dialect and recognised partner with the Victorian government on the National Closing the Gap Agreement. Lisa is also a metropolitan member for First Peoples Assembly in working towards Australia's first ever Treaty.

MEETING OF DIRECTORS

During the financial year, eight meetings were held. Attendances were:

	No. of eligible to attend	No. attended
Crystal McKinnon	7	7
Cienan Muir	7	6
Luke Martin	4	2
Erin Rose	4	1
Apryl Day	7	5
Robert Nicholls	7	4
Tarneen Onus Brown	7	3
Lisa Briggs	3	2
Tiana Koehrer	3	3
Sarina Gentile	3	3
Holly Charles	3	3

INDEMNIFYING OFFICERS OR AUDITOR

No indemnities have been given or insurance premiums paid, during or since the end of the financial period, for any person who is or has been an officer or auditor of the company.

PROCEEDINGS ON BEHALF OF THE ENTITY

No person has applied for leave of Court to bring proceedings on behalf of the entity or intervene in any proceedings to which the entity is a party for the purpose of taking responsibility on behalf of the entity for all or any part of those proceedings.

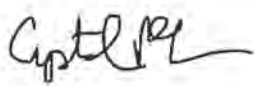
The entity was not a party of any such proceedings during the year.

AUDITORS INDEPENDENCE DECLARATION

The auditor's independence declaration for this financial year has been received and can be found on the following page of this report

Signed in accordance with a resolution of the Board of Directors:

Signed at Preston on the Day of November 2025



Director



Director

TOWARDS A VISION SHARED



**Collins & Co
Audit Pty Ltd**

127 Paisley Street
Footscray VIC 3011
Australia

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Fax (03) 9689 6605

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**AUDITOR'S INDEPENDENCE DECLARATION
TO THE DIRECTORS OF
SOUTH EAST AUSTRALIAN ABORIGINAL JUSTICE SERVICES LIMITED
A.B.N. 45 926 675 900**

I declare that to the best of my knowledge and belief, in relation to the audit for the financial year ended 30 June 2025 there have been:

- i. no contraventions of the auditor independence requirements of the *Australian Charities and Not for Profits Commission Act 2012* in relation to the audit; and
- ii. No contravention of any applicable code of professional conduct in relation to the audit.

**Frederik Ryk Ludolf Eksteen CA
ASIC Auditor Registration Number 421448**

**Collins & Co Audit Pty Ltd
127 Paisley Street
FOOTSCRAY VIC 3011**

Dated this 27th day of October 2025

**STATEMENT OF PROFIT OR LOSS AND OTHER COMPREHENSIVE INCOME
FOR THE YEAR ENDED 30 JUNE 2025**

		30 June 2025	30 June 2024
	Note		
Revenue including Government Grants	2	26,007,381	19,691,180
Auditors' remuneration	3	18,276	19,351
Depreciation and amortisation expenses		690,205	623,038
Employee benefits expenses		17,740,614	13,210,573
Outside briefs		102,416	144,149
Other expenses		4,281,267	3,091,893
Finance costs – interest		102,853	107,730
Total Expenditure		22,935,631	17,196,734
Surplus /(Deficit) before income tax		3,071,750	2,494,446
Income Tax		-	-
Surplus/ (Deficit) after income tax		3,071,750	2,494,446
Other comprehensive income		-	-
Total comprehensive income for the year attributable to members of the entity		3,071,750	2,494,446

No income Tax is payable by the Entity.

As members have no right to share in profit, no earnings per share information is presented.

The above statement should be read in conjunction with the attached notes to the financial statements and the audit report.

STATEMENT OF FINANCIAL POSITION
AS AT 30 JUNE 2025

	Note	30 June 2025	30 June 2024
		\$	\$
CURRENT ASSETS			
Cash and cash equivalents	5	43,970,642	41,830,539
Trade and other receivables	6	7,229,908	913,891
Other current assets	7	224,643	129,213
TOTAL CURRENT ASSETS		51,425,193	42,873,643
NON-CURRENT ASSETS			
Property, plant and equipment	8	10,572,253	8,472,487
TOTAL NON-CURRENT ASSETS		10,572,253	8,472,487
TOTAL ASSETS		61,997,446	51,346,130
CURRENT LIABILITIES			
Trade and other payables		1,936,847	914,192
Grant income carried forward	10	40,796,206	34,015,174
Other borrowings	13	203,416	186,283
Short-term provisions payable	9	1,324,154	1,051,970
TOTAL CURRENT LIABILITIES		44,260,623	36,167,619
NON-CURRENT LIABILITIES			
Other long-term borrowings	13	707,243	1,299,581
Long-term provisions payable	9	1,034,615	955,715
Long-term contingency provision	14	181,973	181,973
TOTAL NON-CURRENT LIABILITIES		1,923,831	2,437,269
TOTAL LIABILITIES		46,184,454	38,604,888
NET ASSETS		15,812,992	12,741,242
MEMBERS EQUITY			
Reserves	11	6	6
Accumulated funds		15,812,986	12,741,236
TOTAL MEMBERS EQUITY		15,812,992	12,741,242

The above statement should be read in conjunction with the attached notes to the financial statements and the audit report.

**STATEMENT OF CHANGES IN EQUITY
FOR THE YEAR ENDED 30 JUNE 2025**

	Share capital \$	Accumulated funds \$	Reserves \$	Total \$
Balance at 1 July 2024	-	10,246,790	6	9,704,020
Surplus attributable to the company for the year ended 30 June 2024		2,494,446	-	2,494,446
Balance at 30 June 2024	-	12,741,236	6	12,741,242
Surplus attributable to the company for the year ended 30 June 2025	-	3,071,750	-	3,071,750
Balance at 30 June 2025	-	15,812,986	6	15,812,992

The above statement should be read in conjunction with the attached notes to the financial statements and the audit report.

**STATEMENT OF CASH FLOWS
FOR THE YEAR ENDED 30 JUNE 2025**

	Note	30 June 2025	30 June 2024
		\$	\$
<u>CASH FLOW FROM OPERATING ACTIVITIES</u>			
Receipts of government grants		20,306,855	33,859,081
Legal costs recovered		202,931	152,769
Other income		6,102,960	4,437,945
Donations		245,064	285,586
Interest received		1,525,921	1,333,713
Payments to suppliers, employees & disbursements		(22,898,358)	(19,803,725)
Net cash generated from (used in) operating activities	12	<u>5,485,373</u>	<u>20,265,369</u>
<u>CASH FLOWS FROM INVESTING ACTIVITIES</u>			
Sale of property, plant & equipment		50,455	61,985
Purchase of property, plant & equipment		(3,395,725)	(1,358,682)
Net cash generated from (used in) investing activities		<u>(3,345,270)</u>	<u>(1,296,697)</u>
Net Increase (decrease) in cash held		2,140,103	18,968,672
Cash at the beginning of the financial period		41,830,539	22,861,867
Cash at the end of the financial period	5	<u>43,970,642</u>	<u>41,830,539</u>

The above statement should be read in conjunction with the attached notes to the financial statements and the audit report.

NOTES TO THE FINANCIAL STATEMENTS FOR THE YEAR ENDED 30 JUNE 2025

The financial statements cover South East Australian Aboriginal Justice Services Limited (SEAAJSL) as an individual entity. It is a company incorporated and domiciled in Australia.

1. Summary of Significant Accounting Policies

Basis of Preparation

The general purpose financial statements have been prepared in accordance with the Australian Charities and Not-for-profits Commission Act 2012 and Australian Accounting Standards and Interpretations of the Australian Accounting Standards Board. The Entity is a not-for-profit entity for financial reporting purposes under Australian Accounting Standards.

Material accounting policies adopted in the preparation of these financial statements are presented below and have been consistently applied unless otherwise stated.

Reporting basis and conventions

The financial statements, except for the cash flow information, have been prepared on an accrual basis and are based on historical costs, modified, where applicable, by the measurement at fair value of selected non-current assets, financial assets and financial liabilities. The amounts presented in the financial statements have been rounded to the nearest dollar.

Accounting Policies

Revenue recognition

Revenue is recognised when it is probable that the economic benefit will flow to the entity and the revenue can be reliably measured. Revenue is measured at the fair value of the consideration received or receivable.

When the entity receives operating grant revenue, it assesses whether the contract is enforceable and has sufficiently specific performance obligations in accordance to AASB 15.

When both these conditions are satisfied, the Entity:

- identifies each performance obligation relating to the grant
- recognises a contract liability for its obligations under the agreement
- recognises revenue as it satisfies its performance obligations.

When the entity receives a capital grant, it recognises a liability for the excess of the initial carrying amount of the financial asset received over any related amounts (being contributions by owners, lease liability, financial instruments, provisions, revenue or contract liability arising from a contract with a customer) recognised under other Australian Accounting Standards.

Revenue from the rendering of a service is recognised upon the delivery of the service to the customers.

NOTES TO THE FINANCIAL STATEMENTS FOR THE YEAR ENDED 30 JUNE 2025

Revenue recognition(continued)

Interest income is recognised using the effective interest method.

All revenue is stated net of the amount of Goods and Services Tax (GST).

Cash Flows

Cash flows are presented in the cash flow statement on a gross basis, except for the GST component of investing and financing activities, which are disclosed as operating cash flows.

Comparative Figures

In accordance with the Accounting Standards, comparative figures from the previous audited financial report for year ended 30 June 2024 are provided where appropriate.

Critical Accounting Estimates and Judgments

The directors evaluate estimates and judgments incorporated into the financial report based on historical knowledge and best available current information. Estimates assume a reasonable expectation of future events and are based on current trends and economic data, obtained both externally and within the group.

Key estimates – Impairment

The entity assesses impairment at each reporting date by evaluating conditions specific to the entity that may lead to impairment of assets. Where an impairment trigger exists, the recoverable amount of the asset is determined. Value-in-use calculations performed in assessing recoverable amounts incorporate a number of key estimates.

No impairment has been recognised in respect of this reporting period.

Income Taxation

The entity is endorsed by the Australian Charities and Not-for-profits Commission as a Public Benevolent Institution. Therefore no income tax is payable by the entity.

Property, Plant and Equipment

The entity has chosen to adapt the Cost Model under paragraph 30 of AASB 116 therefore property, plant and equipment is maintained at cost in the accounts less accumulated depreciation.

Property

Freehold land is reported at cost.

NOTES TO THE FINANCIAL STATEMENTS FOR THE YEAR ENDED 30 JUNE 2025

Leased Assets

For any new contracts entered on or after 1 July 2019, the Company considers whether a contract is, or contains a lease. A lease is defined as 'a contract, or part of a contract, that conveys the right to use an asset (the underlying asset) for a period in exchange for consideration'. To apply this definition the Company assesses whether the contract meets three key evaluations which are whether:

- the contract contains an identified asset, which is either explicitly identified in the contract or implicitly specified by being identified at the time the asset is made available to the Company
- the Company has the right to obtain substantially all the economic benefits from use of the identified asset throughout the period of use, considering its rights within the defined scope of the contract
- the Company has the right to direct the use of the identified asset throughout the period of use.

The Company assess whether it has the right to direct 'how and for what purpose' the asset is used throughout the period of use.

For any new lease type contracts, the entity considers whether a contract is, or contains a lease.

A lease is defined as 'a contract, or part of a contract, that conveys the right to use an asset (the underlying asset) for a period in exchange for consideration'. To apply this definition the entity assesses whether the contract meets three key evaluations which are whether:

- the contract contains an identified asset, which is either explicitly identified in the contract or implicitly specified by being identified at the time the asset is made available to the entity
- the entity has the right to obtain substantially all the economic benefits from use of the identified asset throughout the period of use, considering its rights within the defined scope of the contract
- the entity has the right to direct the use of the identified asset throughout the period of use.

The entity assess whether it has the right to direct 'how and for what purpose' the asset is used throughout the period of use.

NOTES TO THE FINANCIAL STATEMENTS FOR THE YEAR ENDED 30 JUNE 2025

Initially, the lease liability is measured at the present value of the lease payments still to be paid at commencement date. The lease payments are discounted at the interest rate implicit in the lease. If this rate cannot be readily determined, the Entity uses the incremental borrowing rate. Initially, the lease liability is measured at the present value of the lease payments still to be paid at commencement date. The lease payments are discounted at the interest rate implicit in the lease. If this rate cannot be readily determined, the Entity uses the incremental borrowing rate.

Lease payments included in the measurement of the lease liability are as follows:

- fixed lease payments less any lease incentives;
- variable lease payments that depend on an index or rate, initially measured using the index or rate at the commencement date;
- the amount expected to be payable by the lessee under residual value guarantees;
- the exercise price of purchase options, if the lessee is reasonably certain to exercise the options;
- lease payments under extension options if lessee is reasonably certain to exercise the options; and
- payments of penalties for terminating the lease, if the lease term reflects the exercise of an option to terminate the lease

The right-of-use assets comprise the initial measurement of the corresponding lease liability as mentioned above, any lease payments made at or before the commencement date as well as any initial direct costs. The subsequent measurement of the right-of-use assets is at cost less accumulated amortisation and impairment losses.

Right-of-use assets are depreciated over the lease term or useful life of the underlying asset whichever is the shortest. Where a lease transfers ownership of the underlying asset or the cost of the right-of-use asset reflects that the Entity anticipates to exercise a purchase option, the specific asset is depreciated over the useful life of the underlying asset.

NOTES TO THE FINANCIAL STATEMENTS FOR THE YEAR ENDED 30 JUNE 2025

Financial Instruments

Recognition, initial measurement and derecognition

Initial recognition and measurement

Financial assets and financial liabilities are recognised when the Entity becomes a party to the contractual provisions to the instrument. For financial assets, this is the date that the Entity commits itself to either the purchase or sale of the asset (i.e. trade date accounting is adopted).

Financial instruments (except for trade receivables) are initially measured at fair value plus transaction costs, except where the instrument is classified "at fair value through profit or loss", in which case transaction costs are expensed to profit or loss immediately. Where available, quoted prices in an active market are used to determine fair value. In other circumstances, valuation techniques are adopted.

Classification and subsequent measurement of financial assets

Trade receivables that do not contain a significant financing component are measured at the transaction price, all financial assets are initially measured at fair value adjusted for transaction costs.

For the purpose of subsequent measurement, financial assets other than those designated and effective as hedging instruments are classified into the following categories upon initial recognition:

- amortised cost
- fair value through profit or loss (FVPL)
- equity instruments at fair value through other comprehensive income (FVOCI)

Classifications are determined by both,

- The entities business model for managing the financial asset
- The contractual cash flow characteristics of the financial assets

Financial assets at amortised cost

Financial assets are measured at amortised cost if the assets meet the following conditions (and are not designated as FVPL):

- they are held within a business model whose objective is to hold the financial assets and collect its contractual cash flows
- the contractual terms of the financial assets give rise to cash flows that are solely payments of principal and interest on the principal amount outstanding.

NOTES TO THE FINANCIAL STATEMENTS FOR THE YEAR ENDED 30 JUNE 2025

Financial Instruments (continued)

After initial recognition, these are measured at amortised cost using the effective interest method. Discounting is omitted where the effect of discounting is immaterial. The Entity's cash and cash equivalents, trade and most other receivables fall into this category of financial instruments as well as long-term deposit.

Financial assets at fair value through profit or loss (FVPL)

Financial assets that are held within a different business model other than 'hold to collect' or 'hold to collect and sell' are categorised at fair value through profit and loss. Further, irrespective of business model financial assets whose contractual cash flows are not solely payments of principal and interest are accounted for at FVPL. All derivative financial instruments fall into this category, except for those designated and effective as hedging instruments.

Financial liabilities

Non derivative financial liabilities, such as trade and other payables, are initially measured at fair value, and, where applicable, adjusted for transaction costs.

Subsequently, financial liabilities are measured at amortised cost using the effective interest method except for derivatives and financial liabilities designated at FVPL, which are carried subsequently at fair value with gains or losses recognised in profit or loss.

Derivative instruments

Derivative instruments are measured at fair value. Gains and losses arising from changes in fair value are taken to the income statement unless they are designated as hedges.

Impairment

Under AASB 9, impairment requirements use more forward looking information to recognise expected credit losses - the 'expected credit losses (ECL) model'. Instruments within the scope of the new requirements include loans and other debt-type financial assets measured at amortised cost and trade receivables.

The Entity considers a broader range of information when assessing credit risk and measuring expected credit losses, including past events, current conditions, reasonable and supportable forecasts that affect the expected collectability of the future cash flows of the instrument.

NOTES TO THE FINANCIAL STATEMENTS FOR THE YEAR ENDED 30 JUNE 2025

Impairment of Assets

At the end of each reporting period, the entity reviews the carrying amounts of its tangible and intangible assets to determine whether there is any indication that those assets have been impaired. If such an indication exists, the recoverable amount of the asset, being the higher of the asset's fair value less costs of disposal and value in use, is compared to the asset's carrying amount. Any excess of the asset's carrying amount over its recoverable amount is recognised in profit or loss.

Where the assets are not held primarily for their ability to generate net cash inflows – that is, they are specialised assets held for continuing use of their service capacity – the recoverable amounts are expected to be materially the same as fair value.

Where it is not possible to estimate the recoverable amount of an individual asset, the Entity estimates the recoverable amount of the cash-generating unit to which the asset belongs.

Where an impairment loss on a revalued individual asset is identified, this is recognised against the revaluation surplus in respect of the same class of asset to the extent that the impairment loss does not exceed the amount in the revaluation surplus for that class of asset.

Employee Provisions

Short-term employee provisions

Provision is made for the Entity's obligation for short-term employee benefits. Short-term employee benefits are benefits (other than termination benefits) that are expected to be settled wholly before 12 months after the end of the annual reporting period in which the employees render the related service, including wages, salaries, sick leave and annual leave. Short-term employee benefits are measured at the (undiscounted) amounts expected to be paid when the obligation is settled.

Other long-term employee provisions

Provision is made for employees' long service leave and annual leave entitlements not expected to be settled wholly within 12 months after the end of the annual reporting period in which the employees render the related service. Other long-term employee benefits are measured at the present value of the expected future payments to be made to employees. Expected future payments incorporate anticipated future wage and salary levels, durations of service and employee departures, and are discounted at rates determined by reference to market yields at the end of the reporting period on high quality corporate bonds that have maturity dates that approximate the terms of the obligations. Upon the remeasurement of obligations for other long-term employee benefits, the net change in the obligation is recognised in profit or loss as part of employee provisions expense.

The Entity's obligations for long-term employee benefits are presented as non-current employee provisions in its statement of financial position, except where the Entity does not have an unconditional right to defer settlement for at least 12 months after the end of the reporting period, in which case the obligations are presented as current employee provisions.

**NOTES TO THE FINANCIAL STATEMENTS
FOR THE YEAR ENDED 30 JUNE 2025**

Cash and Cash Equivalents

Cash and cash equivalents include cash on hand, deposits held at call with banks, other short-term highly liquid investments with original maturities of three months or less, and bank overdrafts. Bank overdrafts are shown within short-term borrowings in current liabilities on the balance sheet.

Goods and Services Tax (GST)

Revenues, expenses and assets are recognised net of the amount of GST, except where the amount of GST incurred is not recoverable from the Australian Taxation Office (ATO).

Receivables and payables are stated inclusive of the amount of GST receivable or payable. The net amount of GST recoverable from, or payable to, the ATO is included with other receivables or payables in the statement of financial position.

Cash flows are presented on a gross basis. The GST components of cash flows arising from investing or financing activities, which are recoverable from or payable to the ATO, are presented as operating cash flows included in receipts from customers or payments to suppliers.

Provisions

Provisions are recognised when the Entity has a legal or constructive obligation, as a result of past events, for which it is probable that an outflow of economic benefits will result and that outflow can be reliably measured. Provisions recognised represent the best estimate of the amounts required to settle the obligation at the end of the reporting period.

Unspent Grant Funds

Unspent Grant Funds available as revenue or liable to be returned to the grant provider in the following year are recognised as a current liability in the balance sheet. They are not treated as an operating surplus or profit.

Current and non-current classification

Assets and liabilities are presented in the statement of financial position based on current and non-current classification. An asset is classified as current when: it is either expected to be realised or intended to be sold or consumed in the entity's normal operating cycle; it is held primarily for the purpose of trading; it is expected to be realised within 12 months after the reporting period; or the asset is cash or cash equivalent unless restricted from being exchanged or used to settle a liability for at least 12 months after the reporting period. All other assets are classified as non-current.

A liability is classified as current when: it is either expected to be settled in the company's normal operating cycle; it is held primarily for the purpose of trading; it is due to be settled within 12 months after the reporting period; or there is no unconditional right to defer the settlement of the liability for at least 12 months after the reporting period. All other liabilities are classified as non-current.

**NOTES TO THE FINANCIAL STATEMENTS
FOR THE YEAR ENDED 30 JUNE 2025**

Comparative Figures

Where required by Accounting Standards, comparative figures have been adjusted to conform with changes in presentation for the current financial year.

When the Entity retrospectively applies an accounting policy, makes a retrospective restatement or reclassifies items in its financial statements, a third statement of financial position as at the beginning of the preceding period, in addition to the minimum comparative financial statements, must be disclosed.

Critical Accounting Estimates and Judgments

The directors evaluate estimates and judgements incorporated into the financial statements based on historical knowledge and best available current information. Estimates assume a reasonable expectation of future events and are based on current trends and economic data, obtained both externally and within the Entity.

Key estimates – Impairment

The entity assesses impairment at each reporting date by evaluating conditions specific to the entity that may lead to impairment of assets. Where an impairment trigger exists, the recoverable amount of the asset is determined. Value-in-use calculations performed in assessing recoverable amounts incorporate a number of key estimates.

No impairment has been recognised in respect of this reporting period.

New, revised or amending Accounting Standards and Interpretations adopted

The entity has adopted all of the new, revised or amending Accounting Standards and interpretations issued by the Australian Accounting Standards Board ('AASB') that are mandatory for the current reporting period.

Any new, revised or amending Accounting Standards or Interpretations that are not yet mandatory have not been early adopted.

New Accounting Standards for Application in Future Periods

The AASB has issued new and amended accounting standards and interpretations that have mandatory application for future accounting periods. The entity has decided against early adoption of these standards.

**NOTES TO THE FINANCIAL STATEMENTS
FOR THE YEAR ENDED 30 JUNE 2025**

2 Revenue	30 June 2025	30 June 2024
	\$	\$
Operating Activities		
Grant income		
Attorney General Department		
VALS	5,921,055	2,843,068
OTHER NLAP	1,880,956	2,046,757
NATSILS	-	(1,001,186)
	<u>7,802,011</u>	<u>3,888,639</u>
NIAA	<u>859,793</u>	<u>838,750</u>
	859,793	838,750
Victoria		
Department of Justice and Community Safety	13,302,784	9,168,413
Other Departments	2,561,944	2,511,877
	<u>15,864,728</u>	<u>11,680,290</u>
- plus unspent grants brought forward	34,015,174	31,263,000
- plus grants received in advance	758,268	243,000
- less unspent grants carried to future period	<u>(40,796,206)</u>	<u>(34,015,174)</u>
	(6,022,764)	(2,509,174)
Grant income	<u>18,503,768</u>	<u>13,898,505</u>
Legal aid income	179,220	136,064
Legal costs recovered	5,263	2,817.00
Total revenue from operating activities	<u>18,688,251</u>	<u>14,037,386</u>
Other Revenue		
- Other income	5,548,145	4,034,495
- donations	245,064	285,586
- interest received	1,525,921	1,333,713
Total other revenue	<u>7,319,130</u>	<u>5,653,794</u>
Total revenue	<u><u>26,007,381</u></u>	<u><u>19,691,180</u></u>

**NOTES TO THE FINANCIAL STATEMENTS
FOR THE YEAR ENDED 30 JUNE 2025**

	30 June 2025	30 June 2024
3 Remuneration of Auditor	\$	\$
During the financial year the following fees were paid or payable for services provided by:		
Frederik R. L. Eksteen of Collins & Co Audit Pty Ltd		
Auditing of the financial statements and acquittals	18,276	19,351
Other services	-	-
4 Revenue and Expense items		
Bad and doubtful debts		
There were no bad debts provisions made for the reporting period (2024: \$Nil).		
Operating Lease expenses		
Operating lease, contracted lease payments	240,837	301,825
5 Cash and Cash Equivalents		
Reconciliation of cash		
Cash at the end of the financial period as shown in the cash flow statement is reconciled to the related items in the statement of financial position as follows:		
Current Assets		
Cash on Hand	-	13
<u>Cash at Bank</u>		
Recurrent	1,471	(36,765)
Term Deposit	34,000,000	8,000,000
Cash Management	9,969,171	33,867,291
Trust Account Funds	-	-
	43,970,642	41,830,539

**NOTES TO THE FINANCIAL STATEMENTS
FOR THE YEAR ENDED 30 JUNE 2025**

6 Trade and Other Receivables	30 June 2025	30 June 2024
	\$	\$
Current		
Trade Debtors	5,775,193	481,434
Other receivables	<u>1,454,715</u>	<u>432,457</u>
	<u><u>7,229,908</u></u>	<u><u>913,891</u></u>

Credit risk – Trade and Other Receivables

The entity does not have any material credit risk to any single receivable or group of receivables.

The following table details the entity's trade and other receivables exposed to credit risk with aging analysis and impairment provided for thereon. Amounts are considered as "past due" when the debt has not been settled within the terms and conditions agreed between the entity and the debtor party. A provision for impairment is assessed as mentioned above.

An assessment has been made that both debts within trading terms and debts that have not been impaired will be received.

There are no financial assets that would have been impaired or past due, had they not been renegotiated.

	Total	Within trading terms	Past due but not impaired <30days	Past due but not impaired 31-90 days	Past due but not impaired >90 days
	\$	\$	\$	\$	\$
2025					
Trade and term receivables	5,775,193	55,194	286,138	5,242,593	191,268
Other receivables	1,454,715	1,454,715	-	-	-
Total	<u>7,229,908</u>	<u>1,509,909</u>	<u>286,138</u>	<u>5,242,593</u>	<u>191,268</u>
2024					
Trade and term receivables	481,434	163,915	-	232,870	84,649
Other receivables	432,457	432,457	-	-	-
Total	<u>913,891</u>	<u>596,372</u>	<u>-</u>	<u>232,870</u>	<u>84,649</u>

**NOTES TO THE FINANCIAL STATEMENTS
FOR THE YEAR ENDED 30 JUNE 2025**

7 Other Current Assets	30 June 2025	30 June 2024
	\$	\$
Current		
Prepayments	224,643	129,213
	<u>224,643</u>	<u>129,213</u>
8 Property, Plant and Equipment	30 June 2025	30 June 2024
	\$	\$
Land at cost	4,117,566	4,117,566
Total Land	<u>4,117,566</u>	<u>4,117,566</u>
Buildings at cost	4,022,213	1,993,991
Less: Accumulated depreciation	(561,543)	(502,387)
Total Buildings	<u>3,460,670</u>	<u>1,491,604</u>
Total Land and Buildings	<u>7,578,236</u>	<u>5,609,170</u>
Motor Vehicles at cost	940,972	891,261
Less: Accumulated depreciation	(327,306)	(256,014)
Total Motor Vehicles	<u>613,666</u>	<u>635,247</u>
Office Furniture and Equipment at cost	1,081,782	539,903
Less: Accumulated depreciation	(76,906)	(184,066)
Total Furniture & Equipment	<u>1,004,876</u>	<u>355,837</u>
Plant & Equipment at cost	705,022	668,719
Less: Accumulated depreciation	(416,914)	(411,515)
Total Plant & Equipment	<u>288,108</u>	<u>257,204</u>
Computer equipment at cost	782,896	797,693
Less Accumulated depreciation	(538,828)	(571,945)
Total Computer equipment	<u>244,068</u>	<u>225,748</u>
Right-of-use Asset at cost	1,295,585	1,746,520
Less Accumulated depreciation	(452,286)	(357,239)
Total Computer equipment	<u>843,299</u>	<u>1,389,281</u>
Total Property, Plant and Equipment	<u>10,572,253</u>	<u>8,472,487</u>

SOUTH EAST AUSTRALIAN ABORIGINAL JUSTICE SERVICES LIMITED

NOTES TO THE FINANCIAL STATEMENTS FOR THE YEAR ENDED 30 JUNE 2025

Movement in carrying amounts for each class of property, plants and equipment :

	Land	Building	Motor Vehicle	Furniture & Fittings	Plant & Equipment	Computer Equipment	Right-of-use Asset	TOTAL
Carrying amount at 30 June 2023	4,117,566	1,430,464	342,797	70,269	309,323	266,173	1,348,078	7,884,670
New Acquisition	-	108,185.00	439,344	298,851	10,192	88,408	413,702	1,358,682
Disposal/Traded	-	-	(42,393)	(88)	0	(1,420)	(103,926)	(147,827)
Depreciation	-	(47,045)	(104,501)	(13,195)	(62,311)	(127,413)	(268,573)	(623,038)
Carrying amount at 30 June 2024	4,117,566	1,491,604	635,247	355,837	257,204	225,748	1,389,281	8,472,487
New Acquisition	-	2,028,222	139,824	726,472	124,902	145,525	230,780	3,395,725
Disposal/Traded	-	-	(25,002)	(20,552)	(29,631)	(4,717)	(525,853)	(605,755)
Depreciation	-	(59,156)	(136,403)	(56,881)	(64,368)	(122,488)	(250,909)	(690,205)
Carrying amount at 30 June 2025	4,117,566	3,460,670	613,666	1,004,876	288,108	244,068	843,299	10,572,253

	30 June 2025	30 June 2024
9 Provisions Payable	\$	\$
Short Term Provisions Payable		
Employee Entitlements – Annual Leave	1,133,417	925,724
Employee Entitlements – Long Service Leave	52,128	65,461
Employee Entitlements – Other Entitlements	138,609	60,785
Employee Benefits –Current	1,324,154	1,051,970
Employee Benefits – Non current		
Employee Entitlements – Long Service Leave	5,308	175,531
Employee Entitlements – Sick Leave	1,029,307	780,184
Employee Benefits –Non current	1,034,615	955,715
Total provisions payable	2,358,769	2,007,685
Opening balance	2,007,685	2,007,685
Net provisions raised/(reduced) during year	351,084	385,977
Balance at end of period	2,358,769	2,007,685

**NOTES TO THE FINANCIAL STATEMENTS
FOR THE YEAR ENDED 30 JUNE 2025**

	30 June 2025	30 June 2024 \$
10 Financial Liabilities		
Current – Short term financial liabilities		
Grant funds unspent	40,796,206	34,015,174
	40,796,206	34,015,174
11 Issued Capital and Reserve		
Statutory Reserve	6	6
12 Cash Flow Information		
Reconciliation of Cash Flow from Operations with Surplus/(Deficit) after Income Tax		
	30 June 2025	30 June 2024
Surplus /(Deficit) after income tax	3,071,750	2,494,446
Non-cash flows in profit after tax		
Depreciation & Amortization	690,205	623,038
(Gain) / Loss on Disposal of property, plant & equipment	29,447	(18,084)
Increase / (Decrease) in provisions	(224,121)	363,405
Increase/(Decrease) in Grant carried forward	6,781,032	2,752,174
Changes in assets and liabilities,		
Decrease/(Increase) in receivables	(6,316,017)	15,441,759
Increase / (Decrease) in payables & accruals	1,022,655	(1,459,668)
(Increase) / Decrease in prepayments	(95,430)	(35,627)
Disposal of Right of Use Asset	525,853	103,926
Cash flow from operations	5,485,373	20,265,369

**NOTES TO THE FINANCIAL STATEMENTS
FOR THE YEAR ENDED 30 JUNE 2025**

13 Lease Liabilities	30 June 2025	30 June 2024
	\$	\$
Current		
Lease liability - leased premises & motor vehicles	203,416	186,283
Non-current		
Lease liability - leased premises & motor vehicles	707,243	1,299,581
Total	910,659	1,485,864

Capital Expenditure commitments

Capital Expenditure commitments contracted for:

- Plant & Equipment purchases
- Capital Expenditure projects

-

-

Payable

- no longer than 1 year
- longer than 1 year but not longer than 5 years
- greater than 5 years

14 Contingent Liabilities & Contingent Assets

Commonwealth Government for Caveat on property	181,973	181,973
Estimates of the potential financial effect of contingent liabilities that may become payable are:	-	-
	181,973	181,973

Indemnity to Attorney-General's Department (AGD)

SEAAJS, under the AGD acceptance of grant offer terms and conditions, has agreed that AGD will not be liable for any debts incurred or obligations undertaken by the grantee "SEAAJS" and that SEAAJS indemnifies AGD against liability for actions, proceedings, claims, costs and expenses which it may suffer, incur or sustain in connection with, or arising in any way whatsoever out of making the Grant to the Grantee, or out of the Grantee carrying out, failing to carry out or departing from Grant Conditions. This indemnity establishes a contingent liability by SEAAJS to AGD should any matter mentioned arise.

No other Contingent Liabilities or Assets exist.

**NOTES TO THE FINANCIAL STATEMENTS
FOR THE YEAR ENDED 30 JUNE 2025**

15 Events After the Balance Sheet Date

No events subsequent to 30 June 2025 that require disclosure

	30 June 2025	30 June 2024
	\$	\$
Financial assets		
Net Assets held	Nil	115,094
Total financial assets	0	115,094

**NOTES TO THE FINANCIAL STATEMENTS
FOR THE YEAR ENDED 30 JUNE 2025**

16 Economic Dependence

The entity is economically dependent on Commonwealth and State Government departments for Grant Funding. If funds are not spent in accordance with Grant Conditions the departments can suspend future grants or reclaim all or part of the grant(s).

17 Financial Risk Management

The entity's financial instruments consist mainly of deposits with banks, local money market instruments, short-term investments, accounts receivable and payable, loans and borrowings and mortgages.

The totals for each category of financial instruments, measured in accordance with AASB 9 is as follows:

	30 June 2025	30 June 2024
	\$	\$
Financial assets		
Cash and cash equivalents	43,970,642	41,830,539
Trade and Other Receivables	7,229,908	913,891
Total financial assets	51,200,550	42,744,430
Financial liabilities		
Financial liabilities at amortised cost		
- Trade and other payables	1,936,847	914,192
- Lease liabilities	910,659	1,485,864
Total financial liabilities	2,847,506	2,400,056

NOTES TO THE FINANCIAL STATEMENTS FOR THE YEAR ENDED 30 JUNE 2025

Financial risk management policies

The directors' overall risk management strategy is to assist the entity in meeting its financial targets, whilst minimising potential adverse effects on financial performance. Risk management policies are approved and reviewed by the Board of Directors on a regular basis. These include credit risk policies and future cash flow requirements.

The entity does not have any derivative instruments at the end of the reporting period.

Specific Financial Risk Exposures and Management

The entity is not exposed to any financial risk such as credit risk, liquidity risk and interest rate risk, due to its safe and sound ratio of assets over liabilities.

(a) Credit risk

Credit risk is the risk that parties that owe money do not pay it.

The maximum exposure to credit risk, excluding the value of any collateral or other security, at balance date to recognised financial assets, is the carrying amount, net of any provisions for impairment of those assets, as disclosed in the statement of financial position and notes to the financial statements.

The entity does not have any significant concentration of credit risk exposure to any single, or group, of counter-parties under financial instruments entered into by the entity. A profile of credit risk appears above under the Note 6 on "Trade and Other Receivables".

(b) Liquidity risk

Liquidity risk arises due to the possibility that the entity might encounter difficulty in settling its own debts or other liabilities. The entity manages this risk by managing credit risk on amounts owed to it, monitoring forecast cash flows and ensuring that adequate unutilised borrowing facilities are maintained.

**NOTES TO THE FINANCIAL STATEMENTS
FOR THE YEAR ENDED 30 JUNE 2025**

Financial liability and financial asset maturity analysis

	Within 1 year		1 to 5 years		Over 5 years		Total	
	2025	2024	2025	2024	2025	2024	2025	2024
	\$	\$	\$	\$	\$	\$	\$	\$
Financial liabilities due for payment								
Trade and other payables (excluding employee benefit provisions and deferred income)	1,936,847	914,192	-	-	-	-	1,936,847	914,192
Lease liabilities	910,659	1,485,864	-	-	-	-	910,659	1,485,864
Total expected outflows	2,847,506	2,400,056	-	-	-	-	2,847,506	2,400,056
Financial assets cash flows realisable								
Cash and cash equivalents	43,970,642	41,830,539	-	-	-	-	43,970,642	41,830,539
Trade and other receivables	7,229,908	913,891	-	-	-	-	7,229,908	913,891
Total anticipated inflows	51,200,550	42,744,430	-	-	-	-	51,200,550	42,744,430
Net inflow (outflow) on financial instruments	48,353,044	40,344,374					48,353,044	40,344,374

(c) Market Risk

Interest rate risk

Exposure to interest rate risk arises whereby future changes in interest rates will affect future cash flows or the fair value of financial assets and liabilities.

**NOTES TO THE FINANCIAL STATEMENTS
FOR THE YEAR ENDED 30 JUNE 2025**

Price Risk

Price risk relates to the risk that the fair value or future cash flows of a financial instrument will fluctuate because of changes in their market price.

(d) Foreign currency risk

The entity is not exposed to fluctuations in foreign currency.

Net Fair Values

The net fair values of listed investments have been valued at the quoted market bid price at balance date adjusted for transaction costs expected to be incurred. For other assets and other liabilities the net fair value approximates their carrying value. No financial assets and financial liabilities are readily traded on organised markets in standardized form other than listed investments.

The differences between fair values and carrying values of financial instruments with fixed interest rates are due to the change in discount rates being applied by the market to those instruments since their initial recognition by the entity. Most of these instruments which are carried at amortised cost (e.g. trade receivables, payables) are to be held until maturity and therefore their current net fair values bear little relevance to the entity.

As appropriate the net fair values and carrying amounts of financial assets and financial liabilities are disclosed in the Statement of Financial Position and in the notes to the financial statements.

**NOTES TO THE FINANCIAL STATEMENTS
FOR THE YEAR ENDED 30 JUNE 2025**

18 Key Management Personnel Compensation

	30 June 2025	30 June 2024
	\$	\$
The total of remuneration paid to key management personnel (KMP) of the entity during the period is as follows:	1,121,279	792,483
Short-term employee benefits	162,427	111,595
Post-employment benefits	-	-
Other long-term benefits	321,952	199,199
Termination benefits	-	-

19 Related Party Transactions

There were no transactions with related parties during the current and previous financial year. There were no trade receivables from or trade payables to related parties at the current and previous reporting date.

20 Registered Office

The registered office of the entity and the principal place of business is:

273 High Street
Preston, Victoria, 3072

DIRECTORS' DECLARATION

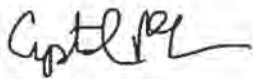
The Board of Directors' of South East Australian Aboriginal Justice Services Limited declare that in the directors opinion:

a) The financial statements and notes for the year ended 30 June 2025 satisfy the requirements of the Corporations Act 2001 and the Australian Charities and Not-for-profits Commission Act 2012.

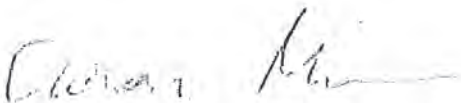
b) There are reasonable grounds to believe that the Entity is able to pay all of its debts as and when they become due and payable.

This statement is made in accordance with the Corporations Act and the subsection 60.15(2) of the Australian Charities and Not-for-profits Commission Regulation 2022.

Dated on: November 2025



Director



Director

TOWARDS A VISION SHARED



**Collins & Co
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SOUTH EAST AUSTRALIAN ABORIGINAL JUSTICE SERVICES LIMITED

A.B.N. 45 926 675 900

INDEPENDENT AUDITOR'S REPORT TO THE MEMBERS

Opinion

I have audited the accompanying financial report of South East Australian Aboriginal Justice Services Limited (the company), which comprises the statement of financial position as at 30 June 2025, and the statement of comprehensive income, statement of changes in equity and statement of cash flows for the year ended on that date, notes comprising a summary of significant accounting policies and other explanatory information and the statement by the Board of Directors.

In my opinion, the accompanying financial report of South East Australian Aboriginal Justice Services Limited is in accordance with Division 60 of the ACNC Act 2012, including:

- i. giving a true and fair view of the company's financial position as at 30 June 2025 and of its performance and cash flows for the year ended on 30 June 2025; and
- ii. complying with Australian Accounting Standards and Division 60 of the Australian Charities and Not-for-profits Commission Regulation 2013.

Basis of Opinion

I conducted my audit in accordance with Australian Auditing Standards. My responsibilities under those standards are further described in the Auditor's Responsibilities for the Audit of the Financial Report section of my report. I am independent of the Company in accordance with the auditor independence requirements of the ACNC Act 2012 and the ethical requirements of the Accounting Professional and Ethical Standards Board's APES 110 Code of Ethics for Professional Accountants (the Code) that are relevant to my audit of the financial report in Australia. I have also fulfilled our other ethical responsibilities in accordance with the Code.

I confirm that the independence declaration required by the ACNC Act 2012, which has been given to the directors of the Company would be on the same terms if given to the directors as at the time of this auditor's report.

I believe that the audit evidence I have obtained is sufficient and appropriate to provide a basis for my opinion.

Responsibilities of Management and Those Charged with Governance for the Financial Report

Management is responsible for the preparation and fair presentation of the financial report in accordance with Australian Accounting Standards, and for such internal control as management determines is necessary to enable the preparation of the financial report that is free from material misstatement, whether due to fraud or error.

In preparing the financial report, management is responsible for assessing the Corporation's ability to continue as a going concern, disclosing, as applicable, matters related to going concern and using the going concern basis of accounting unless management either intends to liquidate the Entity or to cease operations, or has no realistic alternative but to do so.

Those charged with governance are responsible for overseeing the Corporation's financial reporting process.

TOWARDS A VISION SHARED



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Auditor's Responsibilities for the Audit of the Financial Report

My objectives are to obtain reasonable assurance about whether the financial report as a whole is free from material misstatement, whether due to fraud or error, and to issue an auditor's report that includes our opinion. Reasonable assurance is a high level of assurance but is not a guarantee that an audit conducted in accordance with Australian Auditing Standards will always detect a material misstatement when it exists. Misstatements can arise from fraud or error and are considered material if, individually or in the aggregate, they could reasonably be expected to influence the economic decisions of users taken on the basis of the financial report.

As part of an audit in accordance with Australian Auditing Standards, I exercise professional judgement and maintain professional scepticism throughout the audit. I also:

- Identify and assess the risks of material misstatement of the financial report, whether due to fraud or error, design and perform audit procedures responsive to those risks, and obtain audit evidence that is sufficient and appropriate to provide a basis for my opinion. The risk of not detecting a material misstatement resulting from fraud is higher than for one resulting from error, as fraud may involve collusion, forgery, intentional omissions, misrepresentations, or the override of internal control.
- Obtain an understanding of internal control relevant to the audit in order to design audit procedures that are appropriate in the circumstances, but not for the purpose of expressing an opinion on the effectiveness of the registered entity's internal control.
- Evaluate the appropriateness of accounting policies used and the reasonableness of accounting estimates and related disclosures made by the responsible entities.
- Conclude on the appropriateness of the responsible entities use of the going concern basis of accounting and, based on the audit evidence obtained, whether a material uncertainty exists related to events or conditions that may cast significant doubt on the registered entity's ability to continue as a going concern. If I conclude that a material uncertainty exists, I am required to draw attention in my auditor's report to the related disclosures in the financial report or, if such disclosures are inadequate, to modify my opinion. My conclusions are based on the audit evidence obtained up to the date of my auditor's report. However, future events or conditions may cause the registered entity to cease to continue as a going concern.
- Evaluate the overall presentation, structure and content of the financial report, including the disclosures, and whether the financial report represents the underlying transactions and events in a manner that achieves fair presentation.

I communicate with those charged with governance regarding, among other matters, the planned scope and timing of the audit and significant audit findings, including any significant deficiencies in internal controls that I identify during my audit.

Frederik Ryk Ludolf Eksteen CA
ASIC Auditor Registration Number 421448

Collins & Co Audit Pty Ltd, 127 Paisley Street, FOOTSCRAY VIC 3011

Dated this 27th day of October 2025

Funders and Supporters Acknowledgement

We would like to thank all our funders alongside individual and corporate donors who have supported the delivery and growth of VALS services and advocacy throughout the year. Your support has allowed VALS to continue to provide high-quality, culturally safe and accessible legal services and community justice programs to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples in Victoria. We would like to pay special mention to the following funders:

- Victorian State Government
- National Access to Justice Partnership
- Victorian Legal Service Board + Commission
- Victoria Legal Aid
- Oak Foundation

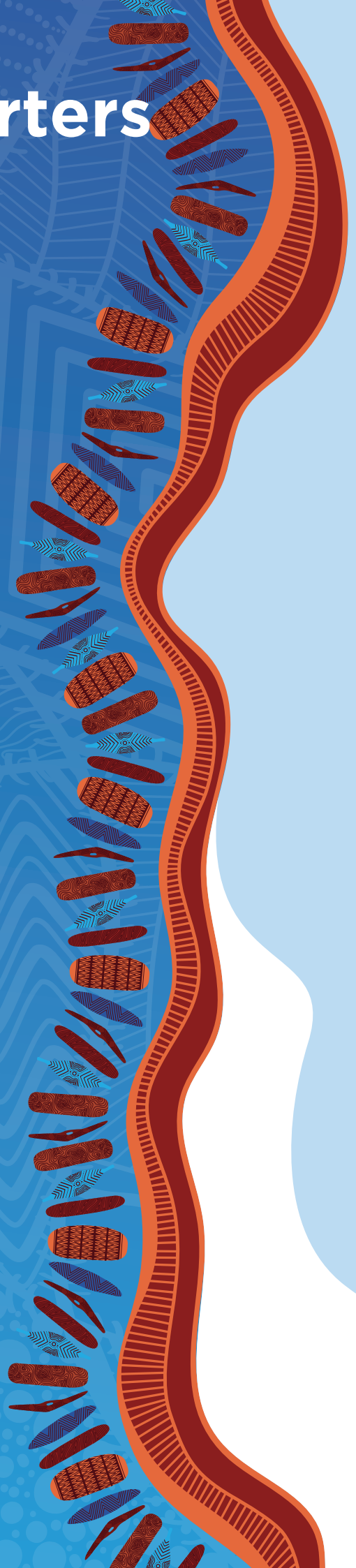
We would also like to acknowledge the pro bono support provided by the following legal firms over the past year.

- Allens
- Aptum Legal
- Ashurst
- Barry Nilsson
- Clayton Utz
- Colin Biggers and Paisley
- Corrs Chambers Westgarth
- DLA Piper
- Gagens
- Gilbert & Tobin
- Gilchrist Connell
- Hall & Willcox
- HLW Ebsworth
- Holding Redlich
- King and Wood
- Maddocks
- Maurice Blackburn
- Mills Oakley
- MinterEllison
- Norton Rose Fullbright
- O'Farrell Robertson McMahon
- Victoria Legal Aid
- Wotton Kearney

We wish to extend our thanks to the Victorian Aboriginal Community Controlled sector and community leaders for the collective pursuit of justice and advocating for the rights of Aboriginal children, young people, families and adults to be realised, protected and upheld.

To the allies who work and walk alongside us, in particular the Community Legal Sector, thank you for your continued support.

If you, or the organisation you work for would like to support VALS and the work that we do, please visit our website to make a donation.





Victorian Aboriginal Legal Service

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W: vals.org.au or scan the QR code



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