



VALS' PATHWAY TO A JUST JUSTICE SYSTEM

2026 ELECTION PLATFORM

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT OF COUNTRY

VALS pays our deepest respects to the Traditional Owners of the lands, seas and skies across Victoria. We acknowledge our Elders both past and present as our storytellers, knowledge holders and cultural teachers. We also acknowledge all Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people in Victoria and pay respect to the ongoing resistance, strength and connection to the oldest continuing culture on earth.

We pay respects to all Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Elders and people 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.****

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people should be aware that this document contains the names and images of people who have passed away.



YOUR VOTE HAS IMPACT MAKE IT COUNT

The Victorian State Election will be held on
Saturday 28 November 2026.

We all have the responsibility to make informed voting choices as those in power have a direct impact on the lives and justice outcomes of Aboriginal people in Victoria.

We are approaching a critical election in this state, one that will shape the future of truth, justice and Treaty in Victoria.

To allies and supporters; **there's a role for everyone to stand with First Peoples when we go to the polls in November.**

After decades of staunch leadership, advocacy and resistance, we cannot allow that to be abandoned.

We urge you to engage with the Aboriginal Community Controlled sector, listen to their key reforms, their funding asks and consider which political parties and candidates are genuinely committing to advocate for First Peoples.

Aboriginal people know what's best for our communities. Through self-determined solutions, we can change the lives of our future generations and allow them to thrive in this new Treaty era.

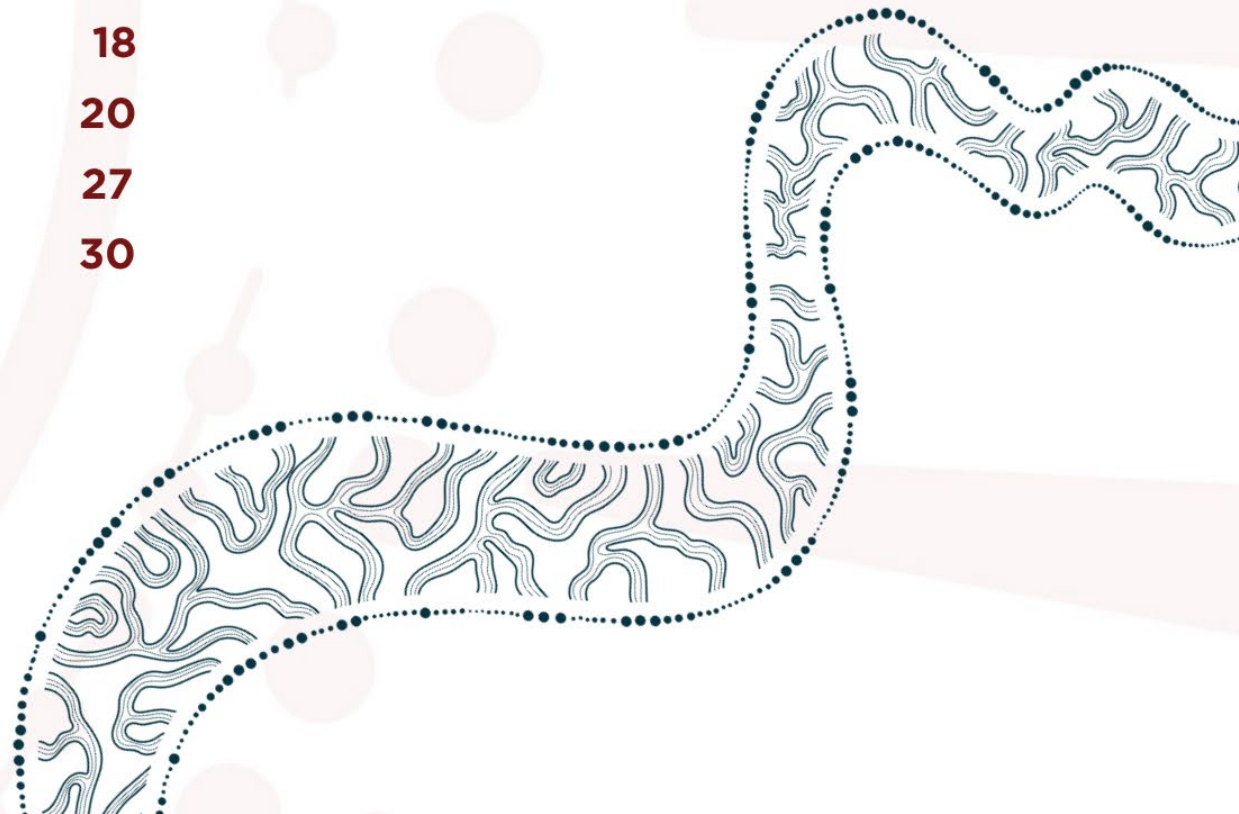
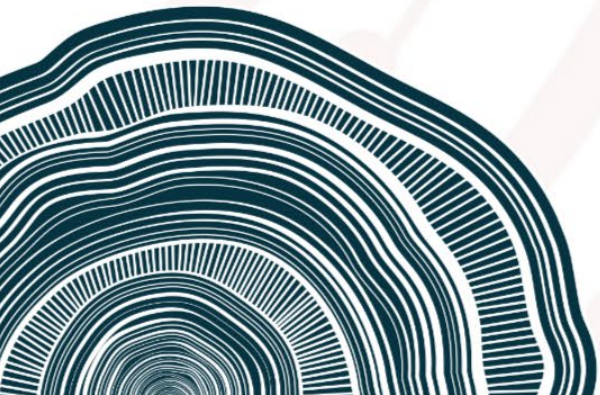
We encourage our community to be enrolled to vote in Victoria. Your vote matters because our lives matter.

NO JUSTICE, NO PEACE



CONTENTS

Message from CEO Nerita Waight	5
About VALS	6
Our Service Footprint	7
Impact on our Community	8
<u>Pathway to a more just justice system</u>	9
Key Policy and Reform Asks	10
<u>Self-determination Matters</u>	18
Key Funding Asks	20
Defend & Uphold Treaty	27
Your Vote has Impact Make it Count	30



PATHWAY TO A JUST JUSTICE SYSTEM: WALK WITH US

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people maintain the oldest continuing culture on earth.

The consequence of decades of governments approaching justice with a carceral approach continues to deeply impact Aboriginal people, making us the most incarcerated population of people on the planet.

We deserve a more *just* justice system and proper investment in self-determined solutions for our people.

“VALS is committed to working with the next Victorian Government to improve justice outcomes for our people”

“For too long, harmful legislation created by successive state governments has had a profound impact on Aboriginal communities across Victoria, leading to the mass incarceration of our people.

The 2026 state election presents an opportunity for a new approach to justice in this state. An approach that actually provides rehabilitation and support for people; keeping our communities safe.

VALS is committed to working with the next Victorian Government to improve justice outcomes for our people, and to uphold and defend Treaty by implementing our *Pathway to a Just Justice System*.

The following pages outline a pathway towards a more just justice system; through key policy reforms and the importance of investing in self-determined solutions for Aboriginal communities.

Nerita Waight, CEO of VALS

ABOUT VALS

Serving our community for over 50 years

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

Our organisation supports Aboriginal people of all ages and genders in the areas of criminal, family and civil law. We also have our dedicated youth practice; Balit Ngulu and our Wirraway practice, supporting clients who experience harms due to the actions of police or prison authorities.

VALS' Community Justice Programs

VALS' Community Justice Programs team is staffed by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people who provide culturally safe services including; transitional housing for women through Baggarrook, support when people first enter custody through the Custody Notification Service, culturally appropriate sentencing through our Aboriginal Community Justice Reports and a therapeutic wraparound service for the whole family; Ngang Gak.



OUR SERVICE FOOTPRINT



ACCESS TO JUSTICE

Our community should be able to access VALS' services no matter where they live in Victoria.

VALS continues to advocate for stable, ongoing funding for our Regional Justice Hub Model, including an immediate expansion to Geelong. Over half of the Aboriginal community in Victoria are living regionally; they deserve consistent access to a culturally safe Aboriginal-led legal service. We know that disadvantage, lack of housing and poverty, natural disasters and cost of living pressures are all things which impact our regional communities.

Short term funding poses a significant risk in maintaining our high standard of legal assistance, our culturally safe spaces and our dedicated workforce.

VALS has been very clear that to achieve community safety, we need sustainable investment in the social service systems, alongside access to culturally capable legal assistance.

***THIS IS AN IMMEDIATE NEED,
NOT A FUTURE ASK.***

IMPACT ON OUR COMMUNITY

Within the criminal legal system, systemic racism plays a significant role which greatly impacts the lives of Aboriginal people everyday. This can manifest in exploding incarceration rates, which is what we are seeing in Victoria, alongside harmful legislation.

ACROSS VICTORIA...

50%

of **Aboriginal people currently in the prison system are unsentenced***

22%

increase of the **Aboriginal male prison population** between July 2025 - July 2026*

81%

increase of the **Aboriginal women prison population** between July 2025 - July 2026*

15.6x

the rate **Aboriginal children are more likely to be placed in out-of-home care in Victoria** compared to non-Aboriginal children^

64%

of Aboriginal young people in the youth justice system have been **involved in the child protection system+**

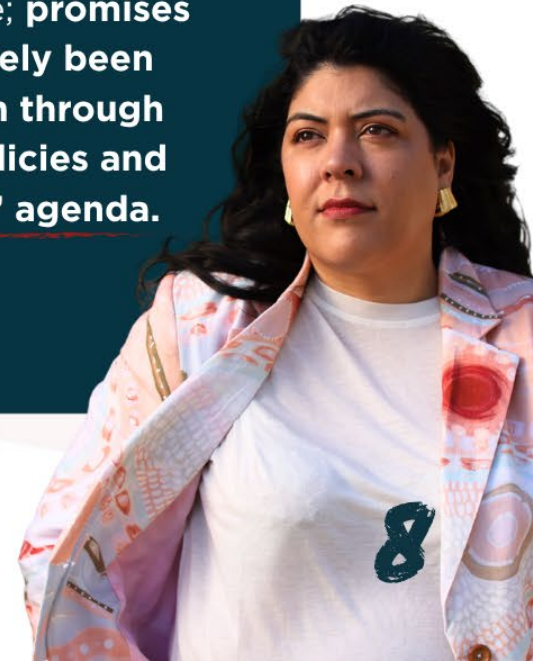
11x

the rate **Aboriginal children are more likely to be under youth justice supervision** compared to non-Aboriginal children+

“ This government has made commitments through the Aboriginal Justice Agreement and the National Agreement on Closing the Gap to reduce the incarceration rate of Aboriginal people; **promises they have actively been walking back on through their current policies and ‘tough on crime’ agenda.**

Nerita Waight,
CEO of VALS

Source: *Department of Justice and Safety Monthly time series prison and community corrections data; ^Family Matters Report 2025; +Yoorrook For Justice Report 2023





Our vision for a just
justice system begins with
a suite of **evidence-based**
policy reform asks.

PATHWAY TO A MORE *JUST* JUSTICE SYSTEM

Photo: Budj Bim, Gunditjmara Country
UNESCO World Heritage Listed Site
Photo Credit: Parks Victoria

KEY POLICY AND REFORM ASKS

**REVERSE
VICTORIA'S
DANGEROUS
BAIL LAWS**

**UPHOLD &
DEFEND
TREATY WITH
FIRST PEOPLES**

**END INHUMANE
PRACTICES &
CONDITIONS IN
POLICE CELLS**

**END
IMPRISONMENT
FOR UNPAID
FINES**

**ESTABLISH AN
INDEPENDENT
POLICE & PRISON
OMBUDSMAN**

**FIX VICTORIA'S
UNFAIR PAROLE
SYSTEM**

**SUPPORTING OUR
YOUNG PEOPLE
TO THRIVE**

**KEEP OUR
WOMEN AND
CHILDREN SAFE**

**ACCHO-DELIVERED
HEALTHCARE IN
ALL VICTORIAN
PRISONS**

SUPPORTING OUR YOUNG PEOPLE TO THRIVE

Young people deserve futures where they can thrive.

Yet Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and young people are still being incarcerated at an alarmingly disproportionate rate. Aboriginal children are overpoliced, overcharged and overincarcerated.

Raising the age of criminal responsibility to 14 without exceptions and **raising the minimum age of detention to 16** would allow children and young people to access the supports they need to address the underlying causes of offending behaviour. This is an international standard set by the United Nations.

Prisons traumatise and retraumatise our children, they are actively harmful and do not rehabilitate children. Evidence shows that the earlier a child is locked up in prison, the more they are at risk of being entrenched in the criminal legal system and re-criminalised later in life.

LOCKING UP CHILDREN DOES NOT WORK.



Our children deserve a system which isn't broken and racist. They deserve to heal. They deserve politicians that care about their futures. In order to achieve community safety there must be sustained investment in early intervention and culturally safe, trauma informed prevention. Which Aboriginal Community Controlled Organisations are best placed to provide.

We can give our children and young people the best chance at a safe, healthy and meaningful life.

Responses to concerning or risk-taking behaviours must be trauma-informed, self-determined and centred in addressing the wellbeing of the child and young person.

VALS' ASKS:

- **Raise the age of criminal responsibility to 14 without exceptions**
- **Raise the minimum age of detention to 16**

The work we do at Balit Ngulu is critical.

Our team work with the young person to change their life's trajectory, to understand what they would like to achieve and support them to make the necessary steps to start their journey to thrive. We walk alongside them, and their families, because **we believe in the capacity of young people to make good decisions with the right support.**

KEEP OUR WOMEN AND CHILDREN SAFE

The State's family violence and child protection responses have profound systemic issues that continue to harm Aboriginal women and children.

This happens through misidentification, culturally unsafe responses, racism and criminalisation of our women and young people who are already not believed, over-policed and overrepresented in the criminal legal system. Because of the harms these systems perpetrate Aboriginal women and children need access to culturally capable and Aboriginal-led legal support.

Aboriginal women are the fastest growing population in Victorian prisons.

81%

the increase of the population of **Aboriginal women in prison** between July 2025-26*

Aboriginal children are over-represented in child protection, and the latest Closing the Gap data on this measure shows this has worsened in Victoria over time.

15.6X

the rate Aboriginal children are more likely to be placed in out-of-home care compared to non-Aboriginal children^

This is the second highest rate of child removals in the country.

The response to family violence cannot solely be a punitive carceral response, it requires investments in self-determined prevention and early intervention specialist family violence services, including Aboriginal-led legal assistance.

To enable families to stay together safely and support children's connections to culture, Country and community, it is vital to give Aboriginal women and children access to culturally informed legal support as soon as their family violence and child protection matters arise.

We need the government to sustainably invest in early intervention and prevention programs addressing family violence that are Aboriginal-led, focussing on the root causes of family violence and child protection involvement.

VALS' ASKS:

- **Fund and implement a Child Protection Notification Referral Scheme** so Aboriginal Legal Services can reach out and support young people and families as soon as they enter the system.
- Require police/courts to make **automatic referrals to Aboriginal legal services** for women and young people in family violence and child protection matters.
- **Fund the expansion of VALS' Family Violence Practice** to operate statewide, so no one misses out on access to culturally safe, specialist legal support in regional Victoria.

REVERSE VICTORIA'S DANGEROUS BAIL LAWS

Victoria's punitive bail system has always disproportionately impacted Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, resulting in a dramatic increase in the number of people in prison who have not been sentenced. **Bail laws should make people and communities safer.**

Victoria's bail laws are currently the most dangerous in the country, harming vulnerable people who need support not imprisonment. The risk to life for an Aboriginal person when they are in custody is extremely high.

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.

Aboriginal people are most safe when they are connected to community, culture and Country, receiving the support they need.

We call on the government to implement Poccum's Law in full, reversing recent bad bail laws immediately.

50%

of Aboriginal people in Victorian prisons are **unsentenced***

18%

of the total remand population in Victorian prisons are Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people*

25%

the increase of the population of **Aboriginal people in prison** between July 2025-26*

VALS' ASKS:

- Implement Poccum's Law in full

POCCUM'S LAW: The Blueprint for Bail Reform

Veronica Nelson was a strong Gunditjmara, Dja Dja Wurrung, Wiradjuri and Yorta Yorta woman. Victoria's unfair and discriminatory bail laws put Veronica in prison for a minor shop-lifting related charge in January 2020. Veronica passed away in a prison cell, alone and isolated from culture and support.

Veronica's loved ones, with the support of the Aboriginal community, legal sector and experts and have called for urgent changes to bail laws - reforms referred to as **Poccum's Law**.

Reform to Victoria's bail laws must:

- 1 Remove the presumption against bail
- 2 Grant bail unless prosecution shows that there is a specific and immediate risk to the safety of another person; a serious risk of interfering with a witness; or a demonstrable risk that the person will flee the jurisdiction.
- 3 Explicitly require that a person must not be remanded for an offence that is unlikely to result in a sentence of imprisonment.
- 4 Repeal all bail offences: committing an indictable offence while on bail, breaching bail conditions and failure to answer bail.



END INHUMANE PRACTICES & CONDITIONS IN POLICE CELLS

VALS' Wirraway Practice was established to hold police and corrections authorities accountable and to protect the rights, safety and dignity of Aboriginal people in custody.

Over the past year, VALS has raised serious concerns about the treatment and conditions of people in police cell custody, particularly those with complex medical and mental health needs. There is an immediate risk to life as we continue to hear from community members who are not receiving appropriate medical care and support while in police custody.

Everyone has the right to be safe and to be treated humanely. But Victoria's criminal legal system is incapable of meeting the most basic human rights of people in custody.

Police stations were never meant to hold people for extended periods of time because it is unsafe to do so, they do not have the facilities required to meet the basic needs of people in custody.

The Victorian government must legislate the same basic rights for people in police custody as prison custody to stop enabling their mistreatment, and reduce the legal limit that police are allowed to detain people in police stations from 14 days to a maximum of 7 days.

Victoria Police are failing their duty of care to Aboriginal people in their custody.



VALS' ASKS:

- Establish an Independent Police and Prison Ombudsman
- Legislate the same basic rights for people in police custody as prison custody to stop their mistreatment
- Make the Green's Private Members Bill law: *'Corrections Amendment (Stop the Legal Loophole - Better Rights in Police Custody) Bill 2026'*

ESTABLISH AN INDEPENDENT POLICE AND PRISON OMBUDSMAN

Police and prisons investigating themselves will never deliver real accountability and justice.

In Victoria, police and prisons are rarely prosecuted or disciplined for mistreating Aboriginal people, despite being disproportionately targeted within these systems.

Establishing an Independent Police and Prison Ombudsman would enhance accountability and reduce the risk of human rights abuses, ensuring the safety of our people and stopping them from dying preventable deaths in custody.

With a justice system that actually works in rehabilitating, not harming people, we can build stronger communities and stop our people dying preventable deaths in custody.

We know from Royal Commissions through to the Yoorrook Justice Commission that Aboriginal communities continue to suffer profound harm within policing and custodial systems.

There must be independent oversight that is resourced to investigate complaints from Aboriginal people in a culturally safe and supported way. History demands ongoing accountability and meaningful reform, and we will continue to advocate until those standards are met.

Pictured: Katherine Copsey - Greens MP, Marie Mitchell - Director of Community Justice Programs (VALS), Raagini Vijaykumar - Principal Managing Lawyer Wirraway (VALS)

ACCHO-DELIVERED HEALTHCARE IN ALL VICTORIAN PRISONS

Nobody deserves to die in a prison cell.

But, time after time our people are subject to inadequate and unsafe healthcare while in Victorian prisons; putting them at higher risk of serious illness or death in custody.



ABORIGINAL PEOPLE HAVE THE RIGHT TO CULTURALLY APPROPRIATE HEALTHCARE WHEREVER THEY ARE.

Privately owned healthcare providers operate in Victorian prisons within a systemically racist justice system. These systems routinely deprioritise the needs of Aboriginal people, who are overrepresented in custody.

This results in ongoing preventable harms to our community.

Decades of evidence, reviews and recommendations illustrate the need for prison healthcare to be brought back into the public hands, with Aboriginal Community Controlled Healthcare that is culturally safe and responsive, delivered to our people.

VALS' ASKS

- Fund ACCHOs to develop and implement an ACCO-led Model of Custodial Health and Wellbeing Care in prison
- Transfer governance of prison healthcare from the Department of Justice to the Department of Health.
- All custodial health services delivered by the public sector - accountable to government and community, not private corporations.

**Aboriginal
Community-Controlled
Health Organisations
should be funded to
deliver healthcare in
Victorian prisons.**

**Our people deserve to
have access high quality,
culturally safe healthcare
that is of equal standard
and accessibility to what
they receive in the
community.**



VALS is proud to be a signatory and supporter of VACCHO's *Transforming Care in Custody* campaign. We thank them for their tireless advocacy in this space.

FIX VICTORIA'S UNFAIR PAROLE SYSTEM

The dysfunction of Victoria's parole system is at crisis point and is costing people's lives.

In 2006-07
26% of women
leaving prison were
released on parole^{*}

By 2020-22 grants
of parole
plummeted to just
4% of women
leaving prison.^{*}

Urgent reform is needed to ensure people who are eligible for parole can access it and are not held in prolonged custody, where they are exposed to human rights abuses with their lives at risk.

When accessible and appropriate, parole systems provide a critical opportunity to support people who have been in prison to transition back into the community with supervision and support to reestablish their lives and avoid further contact with the criminal legal system.

Victoria's parole system must change to ensure that Aboriginal people in prison have the best chance at rehabilitation and a safe return to the community.

Heather Calgaret's story highlights the cumulative harm of the parole system on an Aboriginal woman and her four children. Through circumstances completely outside of

Heather's control, multiple failures of the parole system kept Heather in prison for almost one year longer than the courts intended for her.

VALS' ASKS:

- Remove barriers to accessing parole so that people are supported to rehabilitate.
- Allow legal representation in parole hearings.

JUSTICE FOR HEATHER CALGARET

Heather Calgaret was a proud Yamatji, Noongar, Wongi and Pitjantjatjara woman. She was a mother to four beautiful children whom she loved dearly and desperately wanted to be reunited with. Heather has been described as the rock of her family, always helping and caring for everyone.

In May 2020, a Koori Court judge gave Heather a sentence intended to give her a long parole period in the community after she'd spent time in prison. The judge recognised Heather's strong rehabilitation prospects, that she'd never been in prison before, and impact of being separated from her children including her newborn baby. During her time in custody, Heather focused on doing whatever she could to get parole to be reunited with her children as soon as possible.

From the beginning Heather's parole application was poorly and inappropriately managed by Corrections services. Heather followed all the standard administrative processes, completing her application as early as possible. It took 6 months for Corrections staff to organise Heather's first meeting with a parole officer. Corrections failed to meet their own requirements and requested 7 extensions from the parole board to complete Heather's parole suitability assessment. Heather was not given an opportunity to engage with the process, nor was she afforded any updates on the delays.

A critical barrier was that the rehabilitation program she was required to do to access parole was unavailable for months on end at the prison she was at. Heather wrote a letter, requesting that she complete the programs in the community; the letter never made it to the parole board.

Less than ten weeks from completing her full sentence and almost one year after becoming eligible for parole, Heather was found unconscious in her cell at Dame Phyllis Frost Centre by her sister Suzanne, and later passed away on 27 November 2021.

The coroner found that not only was Heather's passing preventable, but that she should never have passed in the way that she did. If Heather had been properly considered for parole when she was eligible, as her sentencing judge intended, she would not have been in this tragic situation.

Heather should have been afforded a fair chance to live in the community, with her family, and to be a mother to her four young children who have never stopped needing her.



STOP JAILING PEOPLE FOR UNPAID FINES

Jailing people for unpaid fines debt causes real harm and disproportionately affects Aboriginal people.

The current approach punishes people for being unable to pay and risks criminalising poverty. We're calling on the Victorian Government to abolish imprisonment for fines debt, because there are fairer and more effective ways to recover fines than sending people to prison.

As recently as 2023, Victorians served prison time for failing to pay fines where they were experiencing poverty and multiple intersecting forms of disadvantage, including family violence, mental health issues, homelessness, alcohol and other drug use, disabilities and trauma.

The legislative solution is simple and would ensure that no Victorians spend time in prison for being unable to pay fines such as toll fines, parking fines or littering fines.

VALS' ASKS:

- End imprisonment for unpaid fines

“

VALS have been advocating to abolish imprisonment as a punishment for unpaid fines and debt for decades, and this was a **key recommendation from the Royal Commission into Aboriginal Deaths in Custody over 35 years ago.**

The punitive fines system in Victoria **exploits vulnerable people.** It causes emotional and financial distress to people who do not have the capacity to pay the debt in the first place. Our clients are genuinely very stressed about the threat of imprisonment; **we know that prisons are an inherently unsafe place for Aboriginal people.**

At VALS, nearly all matters involving clients with significant fines debt relate to toll fines. **Our community should not have to choose between paying for essentials like food and rent and a toll fine which has jumped from \$10 to \$350 through the passage of time, or else face imprisonment.**

”

Nerita Waight, CEO of VALS



**Infringements
Working Group**

VALS' Civil and Human Rights Practice are proud to work alongside the **Infringements Working Group (IWG)** on advocacy and fines reform. IWG is a Victorian collaborative network of community legal centres, legal aid services, and financial counselling organisations.

SELF- DETERMINATION MATTERS

**Investing in Aboriginal-led
self-determined solutions
must be a priority for governments.**



SELF-DETERMINATION IN THE LEGAL SYSTEM

Investing in self-determined solutions must be a priority for governments.

Successive governments have failed to sustainably invest in VALS and the ACCO sector, instead pouring funds into punitive approaches; prisons and policing that end up causing further harm and costing more in the long-term.

With adequate and sustained funding, VALS could:

- **Give our people the supports they need when exiting prison to prevent reoffending**, through expansion of our Baggarrook Program
- **Stop preventable deaths in custody** through continued funding for our Wirraway police and prison accountability practice
- **Give our kids the best chance at a safe future where they can thrive**, through expansion of our Balit Ngulu service model

We have a number of key funding asks the incoming government can commit to, supporting self-determined solutions in the legal sector that will keep our communities safe.

“Aboriginal people know what’s best for our communities. Guided by our Elders, ancestors and thousands of years of cultural knowledge.

We know that self-determined models that are led, designed and delivered by Aboriginal people are the only way to ensure our safety - remaining connected to Country, culture, family and community.

Nerita Waight, CEO of VALS

OUR KEY FUNDING ASKS

Achieving a just justice system requires equitable and sustainable funding for high quality, Aboriginal-led legal services

Expansion of **Baggarrook** to include a dedicated model for young people and men leaving prison, transitioning back to community

Ongoing funding for our **Wirraway Practice** to continue their police and prison accountability work and supporting families in coronial inquests for deaths in custody

Ongoing funding for our **Aboriginal Community Justice Reports** which delivers culturally appropriate sentencing

Funding to maintain and expand our **Disaster Rights Practice & Mental Health Practice**

Statewide expansion of **Ngang Gak**, a therapeutic Community Justice Program for the whole family

Ongoing funding for the **Victim's Legal Service**, where VALS provide a trauma informed and culturally capable service for people impacted by crime

Stable, ongoing funding for our **Regional Justice Hub Model** to continue our service delivery in all areas of the state; including an expansion to Geelong

Expansion of our dedicated **Family Violence Practice** to support community statewide

Statewide expansion of **Balit Ngulu's** holistic service model for young people. Including our **Strong Voices, Strong Futures** program and **Youth Access Inclusion Service (YAIS)**



BALIT NGULU 'STRONG VOICE'

Balit Ngulu is our dedicated legal practice for Aboriginal children and young people. It was established to ensure our most vulnerable clients had access to dedicated, youth-specialised, culturally appropriate legal representation and social supports.

Balit Ngulu is designed to be trauma informed and provide holistic wraparound culturally safe support for our youngest clients.

BALIT IS A UNIQUE MODEL WHERE OUR YOUNG CLIENTS ARE SUPPORTED IN ALL WAYS THAT PROMOTE EMPOWERMENT, IDENTITY AND STRENGTH THROUGH CONNECTION WITH CULTURE.

Aboriginal Community Engagement Workers

Provide support and case management to ensure that young people feel seen, heard, connected.

Strong Voices, Strong Futures

Work with our young clients by providing personalised education and/or employment pathway planning, support and coordination.

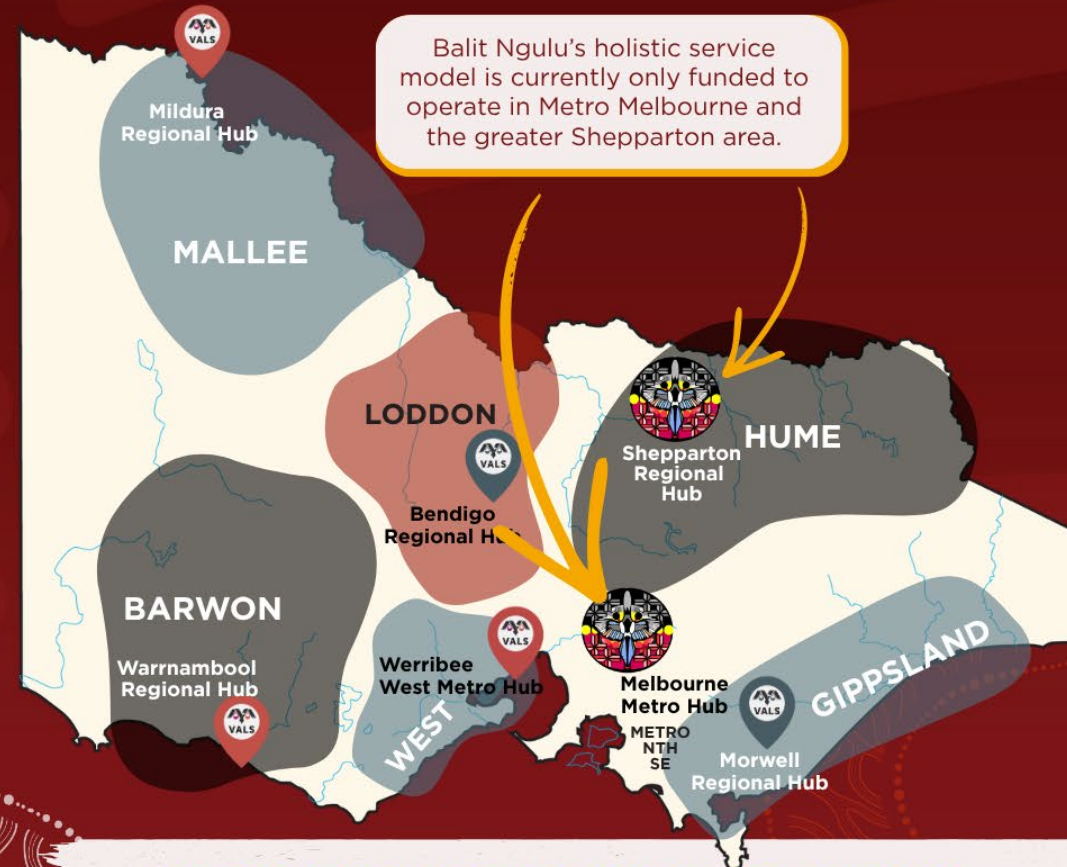
Youth Access and Inclusion Service (YAIS)

This program steps in to assist with disability screening, assessment and if needed, support through the process.

We know this approach works, **it has been successfully evaluated three times**, and yet we are still fighting for Balit Ngulu to be adequately funded so we can support all Aboriginal children who need our support across Victoria.

VALS ARE SEEKING:

- Funding for a statewide expansion of Balit Ngulu's holistic service model for young people. Including our Strong Voices, Strong Futures program and Youth Access Inclusion Service (YAIS)



OUR YOUNG PEOPLE SHOULDN'T HAVE TO FACE A POSTCODE INJUSTICE DUE TO INEQUITABLE FUNDING.

KEEP OUR WOMEN AND CHILDREN SAFE

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people impacted by family violence face significant barriers in accessing justice and support.

This is particularly true for Aboriginal women who are often misidentified by the legal system as the person using violence, rather than the person experiencing it. This misidentification causes serious harm, and can lead to criminalisation and child removal.

Family Violence practice

VALS' Family Violence Practice offers legal advice, representation and related non-legal support to adults, children and young people of all genders who are impacted by family violence. This team include non-legal support roles who provide culturally responsive support to clients by promoting safety, wellbeing, and access to services.

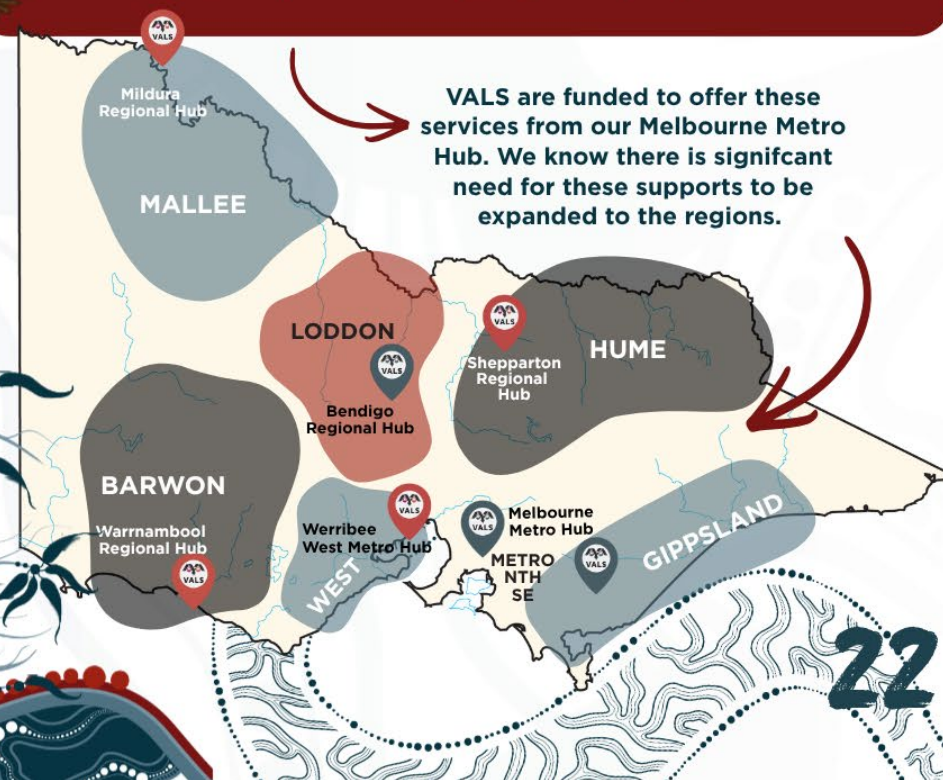
Establishing this dedicated practice is part of our commitment to provide self-determined, high quality, holistic legal assistance, when and where our community need it.

Ngang Gak Program

Ngang Gak provides intensive family-centred support to Aboriginal children and young people and their families who are experiencing complex challenges. The program works alongside families to strengthen wellbeing, education engagement, cultural connection, and access to services through advocacy, case management, and collaborative support.

VALS ARE SEEKING:

- Funding to expand our specialised Family Violence Practice statewide.
- Funding to expand our Ngang Gak program statewide.



A SAFE TRANSITION OUT OF PRISON

Everyone deserves access to safe housing as they transition out of prison.

Transitioning out of the prison system and back into community can be one of the most vulnerable times for Aboriginal people, especially women. Our Baggarrook program supports Aboriginal women during this time of transition, connecting them to support services, and offering them a safe place to do so.

Each participant of the program is provided safe, transitional housing and a model of holistic support.



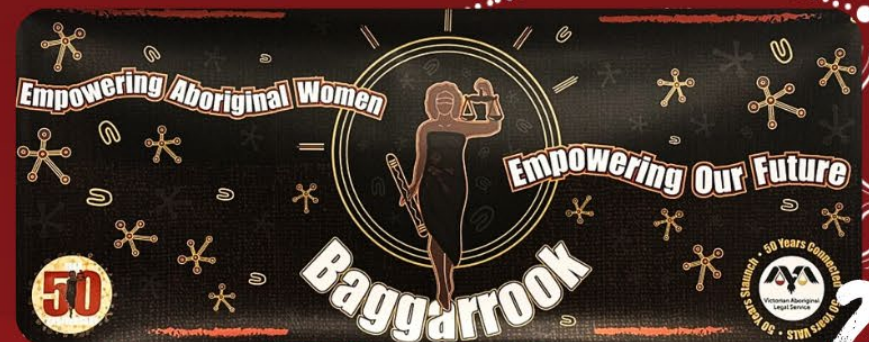
The Baggarrook model involves integrated housing support, the provision of care packages and ongoing support from justice workers, other allied professionals alongside our dedicated Baggarrook team of Aboriginal support staff. We are able to provide this with support from Aboriginal Housing Victoria.

VALS' ASKS:

- Expansion of Baggarrook to include dedicated models for young people and men leaving prison

VALS' Baggarrook program has been successfully providing support to Aboriginal women by connecting them to support services and offering them a safe place to do so – that's why we are seeking funding to expand the program to include a dedicated model for young people and men leaving prison.

We know that doing so would help countless more of our people to move forward after times of challenge, and help them to safely reintegrate back into the community.



ONGOING FUNDING FOR VALS' CIVIL TEAM

Our Civil and Human Rights Practice continues to offer support with housing, tenancy, employment issues, discrimination, fines, spent convictions, the Victim's Legal Service, end of life care and human rights matters. Through this work our team has expanded to include a dedicated Disaster Legal Rights Practice and a Mental Health Practice, both of which require ongoing funding to continue this critical work across the state.

Disaster Rights Practice

The impacts of disasters such as bushfires, floods and pandemics are an ever-increasing risk to our people. It is imperative to provide ongoing support to help our communities understand their legal rights when disasters happen. Disasters disproportionately impact Victoria's regional communities which is why we need to expand our service and grow this team.

Mental Health Practice

When someone is on a compulsory mental health order before the Mental Health Tribunal, they are incredibly vulnerable. They often go through the process alone and unsupported both legally and emotionally. **Our Mental Health Practice is critical in providing culturally capable legal advice and support during this time, helping our clients know their rights and have their voices heard on the decisions being made about them.** The cultural competency of the Tribunal is very poor as there is no dedicated Koori Support program. Support and legal representation from VALS is critical to address this gap.

VALS' ASKS:

- Ongoing funding for our Disaster Rights Practice
- Ongoing funding for our Mental Health Practice
- Ongoing funding for the Victim's Legal Service, where VALS provides a trauma informed and culturally capable service for people impacted by crime.



CULTURALLY APPROPRIATE SENTENCING

Our **Aboriginal Community Justice Reports** (ACJRs) are an Aboriginal-designed, community-led initiative unique to Victoria. They have been developed by VALS to provide information about a person to sentencing courts. Access to therapeutic, culturally safe pathways needs to be a priority for this government if they are genuine about their commitment to community safety.

The reports support judges to make sentencing decisions that reflect the strengths and challenges in a person's life, and are an opportunity for Aboriginal people sentenced in Victoria to share their story in a culturally safe environment. This journey can be deeply healing for the person involved as they are supported to reconnect with their culture and history.

We have not had funding renewed for this program in 2026, which has disappointingly meant the program is on hold.

VALS is seeking ongoing and secure funding for our ACJRs. The pilot which successfully ran from 2021-2024 showed strong evidence that with this critical Aboriginal justice initiative, we can support our people in staying out of prison where they are safe and connected to Country, culture and community.



VALS' ASKS:

- Ongoing funding for our Aboriginal Community Justice Reports which delivers culturally appropriate sentencing

A LIFE HARMED BY SYSTEMS NOT CHOICE

When Rob* was 5, he and his sisters were removed from his family, he then experienced severe physical and emotional abuse in foster care. Rob was deprived of kinship, family and his culture. By the time he was 13, Rob had begun using illicit substances to numb his pain. At 16 Rob ran away from his foster home to escape abuse. By his early 20s he had become involved with the criminal legal system.

By his late 30s he felt certain he would die in prison.

ACJRs gave Rob a chance to be seen as a whole person, rather than a list of charges. The report gave his lawyer a deeper understanding of who Rob is, and gave Rob the opportunity to reframe his life not as a list of failures but experiences 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."

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. **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.**

Rob's healing has been deeply connected to culture, particularly through painting. Rob dreams of creating a screen-printing business to employ other Aboriginal men coming out of prison.

The ACJR program didn't just provide context for sentencing, it changed a man's life. 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.

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

ONGOING FUNDING FOR WIRRAWAY

'WIRRAWAY' IS A WURUNDJERI WORD MEANING 'CHALLENGE'

Our Wirraway practice assists Aboriginal people who experience police and prison harm, challenging the systems which have long oppressed our communities through institutionalised racism and violence. Wirraway seek to champion the rights of Aboriginal people to challenge these abuses of power.

Wirraway provide legal advice, assist with complaints, and bring court proceedings against the State for wrongdoing; including negligence, excessive use of force and unlawful detention. Our Wirraway team also acts for families in coronial inquests following a death in custody. Those families deserve answers and they deserve justice which VALS is proud to walk alongside them down that path.

Time and time again we see our people being overpoliced, over-surveilled, being met with violence at the hands of authorities, putting Aboriginal lives at risk every time this happens.

VALS continues to advocate for ongoing funding for the Wirraway Practice to continue its critical work for greater accountability and justice for our people.



Dhadjowa Foundation are a critical support for Aboriginal families navigating a death in custody. It is a privilege to work alongside them in this space and we thank them for their staunch advocacy and resilience.



VALS' ASKS:

- Ongoing funding for our Wirraway Practice to continue their police and prison accountability work and supporting families in coronial inquests for deaths in custody

Over the last 12 months Wirraway has...

- Continued to strongly advocate for their clients impacted by dangerous and inhumane conditions in police cells through urgent applications for transfers out of police custody which raised significant concern for our clients welfare and safety.
- This included Supreme Court appearances, complaints to IBAC and civil litigation seeking justice and accountability for these harms.
- Represented and supported families in coronial inquests who have lost a loved one through a death in custody. The grief, trauma and suffering ripples across families and communities, having a profound impact. These losses are not just numbers, they are beloved members of our communities, our families, our storytellers and individuals who should still be alive.

We honour the lives of proud Yamatji, Noongar, Wongi and Pitjantjatjara woman **Heather Calgaret**, proud Gunditjmara and Wiradjuri man **Clinton Austin**, Gunnai, Gunditjmara, Djab Wurrung, Yuin, Monero, Tharawal, and Wadawurrung man **Marley Wright-Martin**, proud Noongar maaman **Jeffrey Winmar**, proud Barkandji man **Adrian Payne**, proud Barkandji, Muthi Muthi, and Wemba Wemba man **Kenneth Kelly** and **Joey Thurston** as we reflect on the last 12 months.

Pictured: Shaun Austin, twin brother of Clinton Austin
Family of Heather Calgaret alongside Wirraway team members



DEFEND *AND UPHOLD* TREATY



The only path forward to true
justice for our people

TREATY
FOR VICTORIA

DEFEND & UPHOLD TREATY

After nearly a decade walking the path to Treaty with our communities, and generations of resistance and activism from First Peoples, Australia's first Treaty is here in Victoria.

Treaty is for everyone in Victoria

Everyone benefits socially, culturally and economically when we build systems and solutions that work, where people are treated with dignity and humanity.

Respectful relationships between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people builds stronger communities and opportunities. Treaty makes progress on matters affecting Aboriginal people, providing the pathway to ensure self-determination for our people.

Policies and laws must be informed by the people they impact the most. Self-determined solutions will lead to positive outcomes the government has never been able to achieve.

**Treaty is Blak Democracy in action.
It's taking pride in our strength and
participating in our peoples' collective fight.**

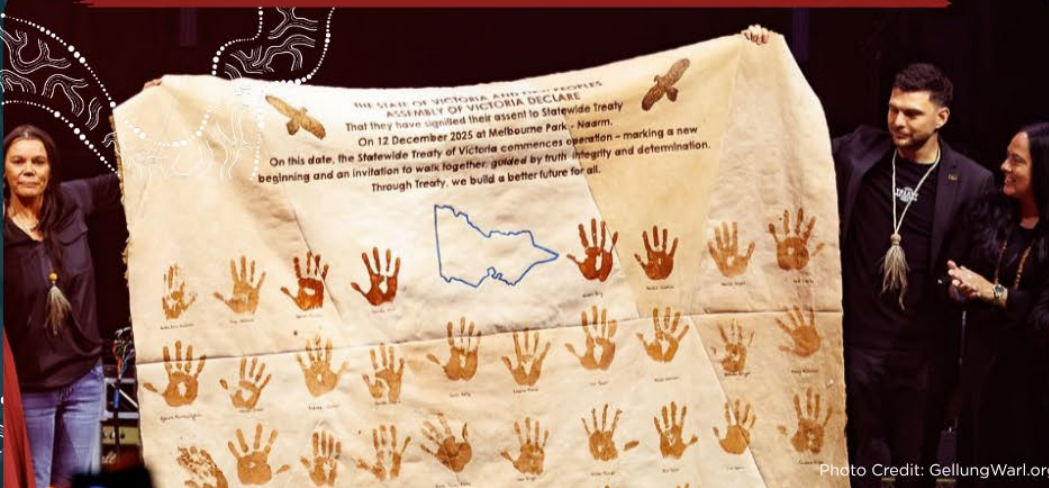


Photo Credit: GellungWarl.org



Photo Credit: Tash Khan

First Peoples' Assembly of Victoria Members - Proud Wurundjeri, Tati Tati, Mutthi Mutthi, Wadi Wadi, Wemba Wemba, Berapa Berapa, Dja Dja Wurrung, Ngurai Illum, Waywurru, Gunai, Bidwell woman **Kathleen Terrick** and proud Yorta Yorta man **Jarvis Atkinson**

DECISIONS ABOUT US, MADE BY US.

How our voices are heard, decisions that are made and how they will impact us, must not be dictated by a political party.

The first state election since Treaty

Victoria's Liberal Party have plans to repeal Victoria's Treaty within the first 100 days if they are in power, with intent to set up a government department to manage 'Indigenous Affairs' instead.

The next Victorian Government must uphold the State's commitments to First Peoples through the Statewide Treaty Act and ensure self-determined solutions are prioritised.

OUR LEGAL SYSTEM NEEDS TREATY

Treaty provides a pathway to address the systemic issues impacting Aboriginal people everyday. Our communities experience disproportionate rates of over-policing, racial profiling and abuse, higher rates of searches, fines and arrest, over-surveillance, deaths in custody, limited access to culturally appropriate legal support, unequal sentencing outcomes and shamefully high levels of incarceration.

Meaning *tip of the spear* in Gunaikurnai, **Gellung Warl** is the new body created through Australia's First Treaty. **Gellung Warl will function through 3 key mechanisms:**

1 First Peoples' Assembly of Victoria Elected members representing Aboriginal communities across 5 regions that cover Victoria.

The First Peoples' Assembly of Victoria are a democratically-elected group of Traditional Owners representing and making decisions on behalf of their communities.

2 Nginma Ngainga Wara Accountability Mechanism

Nginma Ngainga Wara means *you will do in Wadi Wadi*. Its purpose is to monitor the impact state government policies have on First Peoples, providing independent oversight and accountability for Government on behalf of First Peoples. True justice can only ever be achieved through

3 Nyerna Yoorrook Telkuna Ongoing Truth-telling

Nyerna Yoorrook Telkuna means *to sit, to listen, to hear, to remember* in Wamba Wamba/Wemba Wemba. It forms an ongoing truth-telling body with the responsibility for maintaining the public record produced by the Yoorrook Justice Commission. Nyerna Yoorrook Telkuna will continue the Truth-telling and healing process so everyone across the state can understand our shared past.

This will support us to move away from the entrenched systemic and interpersonal racism that continues to harm our people.



**Treaty is the only path forward
to true justice for our people.**

YOUR VOTE HAS IMPACT MAKE IT COUNT



vals.org.au

FOLLOW VALS ON SOCIALS:

Victorian Aboriginal Legal Service
@vicaboriginallegalservice

