

WEstjustice



2022

Annual
Report

2022

Westjustice acknowledges the Peoples of the Kulin Nation as the Traditional Owners of the lands and waters of our region. We acknowledge the Kulin Peoples' ongoing connection to Country, and we pay our respects to Elders past and present. As we work to achieve a just and fair society, we acknowledge the fundamental role of First Peoples in the life of this region, as Custodians of the world's oldest living Culture.

Westjustice provides free legal help to people in the Western Suburbs of Melbourne. We help with advice, representation and systemic advocacy for a broad range of everyday problems.

Please call (03) 9749 7720 to find out more about our services or to make an appointment.

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Annual Report



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Executive Summary

Westjustice has continued to evolve and grow under the leadership of a highly skilled Board, formidable executive team, and excellent group of staff and volunteers.



Growth in size and reach

Our overall revenue has increased which has enabled Westjustice to extend our delivery of services and programs across the West. However, the demand is far exceeding our capacity, and this has been challenging for our communities and staff. We will continue advocating with our key partners and stakeholders to ensure that, as a society, we address the shortage of social, economic and transport infrastructure in the West.

We have also continued to improve and develop our internal systems, including a complete transformation of our Digital Management System, funded by William Buckland Foundation over the past three years. We have also upgraded our Financial Management System and annually review our Strategy, Impact Areas, Structure and Programs. We have introduced a Learning and Development Program. Our focus for the next year will be on a transformation of our People and Culture function and a refinement of our operations and practice management.

Prevention and early intervention

We have sharpened our capacity to evidence human and cost benefits of deliberate and effective strategies to prevent and intervene early with regard to complex societal issues. This is one of the great strengths of Community Legal Centres. Our close contact with local services and communities provides the context and understanding to ensure that we get to the issues at the earliest opportunities and support people to overcome their legal and other problems.

Refined specialisation and skills

We continue to attract high quality experienced staff, which has enhanced the development of specialisation across many areas of law including criminal, children and young people, insurance, tenancy and mortgage, consumer, family violence, debt, fines, employment, and more recently, discrimination and family law. This means we can approach justice issues from the prevention and early intervention lens but also take clients through the full spectrum of the legal process, including appeals and complex multi-legal subject matter cases. We are building our workforce capabilities through professional development opportunities and encouraging our more experienced staff to join Boards, Committees, Councils, and Ministerial Advisory Committees to deepen our influence and impact.

Systemic impact

We have been involved in several inquiries and reviews to assist the various governments and decision-making bodies to better understand the issues experienced by people in the Western Suburbs. We continue to advocate for a seat at the table to assist government/s with the design of policies, not just the implementation.

Highlights

Each of the nine Westjustice Directorates

- Operations
- Employment and Equality Law
- Youth Law
- Family Violence and Family Law
- Economic Justice
- Policy and Innovation
- Community Development Education and Engagement
- Learning and Development
- Mortgage Stress Victoria

have enjoyed much success and we hope that you enjoy reading each Directorate's highlights which have been included throughout this Annual Report.

Farewell

Sadly, we lost a very special member of our team. Pa Hmun. Pa was a highly regarded member of the Westjustice community and a leader of the Chin community. He will be missed by many, particularly his wife and children. Read more about Pa's enormous contribution on page 29. We also farewelled Meredith Blackstock who resigned from the Westjustice Board at the end of 2022. We pay tribute to Meredith on page 14 in recognition of her significant contribution.

Thriving not just surviving

Our organisational mantra this year has been to thrive not just survive. At times this has been challenged by significant workloads and high demands on our services and programs.

However our high performing team has continued to show resilience, empathy, and an uncompromising commitment to our clients and communities throughout this past 12 months. We are well placed to take on the challenges for the coming years.



We have sharpened our capacity to evidence human and cost benefits of deliberate and effective strategies in order to prevent and intervene early with regard to complex societal issues.



2022

Contents

2021–2022	8
Message from the Chair and CEO	10
Board members	12
Farewell to Meredith Blackstock	13
Finance report	14
Collective Impact Statement	16
THE Westjustice Team	20
Learning and Development Program	22
Economic Justice Program	24
Family Violence and Family Law Program	26
Employment and Equality Law Program	28
Youth Law Program	30
Community Development, Education and Engagement Program	32
Policy and Innovation Program	34
Operations Program	36
Mortgage Stress Victoria Program	38

2021- 2022



2021- 2022

Message from the Chair and CEO

Our Vision

Our Vision is for a just and fair society where the law and its processes don't discriminate against people, and where those in need have ready and easy access to legal education, information, advice, casework services, systemic advocacy and reform.

Our Mission

Our mission, to service the legal needs in the West in a way that addresses the systemic nature of disadvantage, has been proven to be even more relevant as we process the impact of the pandemic and the effect that this has had on our communities in the West.

Our Values

We have revised and redeveloped our Westjustice Values:

Courage – providing creative solutions and fearless advocacy;

Community-led – accessible and meaningful engagement towards empowerment;

Real Impact – targeted and holistic outcomes through collaboration;

Respect – continuing commitment to inclusion and cultural safety;

Kindness – dedication to helping people; and

Trust – act with integrity and renowned for producing high quality results.

Our Strategy

The COVID pandemic has left a profound imprint on our state. In particular, the West, which was arguably the hardest hit. Our communities are still trying to ascertain what this next phase will look like. Rate rises and the cost of living are putting added pressure on many families that can barely make ends meet. Population growth is at an all-time high in the West and social and economic infrastructure is struggling to keep up with the urban sprawl. Never have our services at Westjustice been in greater demand.

So, while we slowly re-establish our workplaces and return to our placed based delivery models, we are yet to really understand and address the profound impact this past two years has had on the Western Suburbs and our team.

In order to take on the challenge, we have sharpened our focus with regard to the services we deliver and the reform that we activate. We acknowledge that we can't do this alone, so much of our time has been spent networking and drawing strength in numbers from our many multidisciplinary partners who share this challenge and bring years of experience and expertise. We have commenced some fairly bold and audacious projects, but we are confident that with the right support from community, stakeholders and governments, we will be able to deliver over the coming years.

Despite the impact of the pandemic, we have been able to make significant progress in implementing our 2020-23 Strategy, which largely involved introducing new systems, refining and improving the manner in which we work, and how we support each other. We have tried and tested new service delivery models and new ways of connecting externally (clients, communities and stakeholders) and internally (our teams and Board).

Our Impact

We continue to refine our impact across four groups:

- People experiencing economic injustice
- Young People
- People experiencing gender based violence
- People from culturally and linguistically diverse communities

By delivering services in placed based settings, we aimed to save people the fatigue of multiple story telling and referral merry-go-rounds. This also enabled our team to build closer relationships with key community partners and stakeholders.

We have drawn upon the day-to-day client experiences and issues to identify the systemic issues and reform opportunities. This has resulted in a record number of submissions to government inquiries and commissions, along with some extraordinary reforms and system improvements.

Finally, through testing, trying, evaluating, and codifying our programs, we are now scaling some of our projects through recent government and philanthropic support, including Mortgage Stress Victoria, the Travel Assistance Program, Mercy Hospital Health Justice Partnership, Youth Employment Justice Program, School Lawyer Program, and the Restoring Financial Safety Program. We are hopeful that we can do the same with several others that are currently being incubated and evaluated. All of these initiatives have not only evidenced the important human benefits, but also significant cost savings to government.

We are therefore pleased to be able to highlight many of these key outcomes and impacts throughout this report.

Our People

Whilst our team have all been affected in some shape or form (personally and professionally), there remains a constant passion and commitment to our Western Suburbs communities to ensure that they have access to justice and overcome the cycles of disadvantage that many get caught within.

Our team has grown by 25% and yet we are still clearly not meeting the demand for our services. With the current speed of population growth and the new justice precinct under development, we will continue to advocate for more legal, and other resources, for the West.



Our communities

We have learned a great deal from our communities during the pandemic through their resilience and determination. We have also witnessed the devastating effects of financial disadvantage, post code poverty, lack of effective and culturally appropriate support, over policing, housing insecurity, workplace exploitation, poor health, increased mental ill-health and many other issues. Therefore, it is our hope that we learn from these experiences and increase community services, along with social, economic and transport infrastructure in the West to reduce further risk of disproportionate suffering and disadvantage in the future.

Final words

It's both a pleasure and a privilege to hold these roles as Chair and CEO at Westjustice and we hope to build on the learnings of the past 12 months to ensure that we continue to improve the manner in which we support our staff and the wider community.

We hope you enjoy this 21/22 Annual Report.



Dana Nelson
Chair of the Board



Melissa Hardham
Chief Executive Officer

Board Members



1 Dana Nelson
Chairperson, Director

2 Sarah Jane Strapps
Secretary, Public Officer, Director

3 Meseret Abebe
Director

4 Stuart Brown
Director

5 Meredith Blackstock
Former Director

6 Melissa Hardham
CEO and Director

7 Greg Levine
Director

8 Patricia Crossin
Director

9 Susie King
Director

10 Annamarie Rooding
Director

Farewell to Meredith Blackstock

Meredith Blackstock recently resigned from the Westjustice Board in February this year. She has been a dedicated and outstanding member since Westjustice's inception in 2015. Meredith was one of the founding Board Members and seminal to our development and success. Prior to that, she was a Board member and Secretary of one of the three original legal services that merged to form Westjustice, Wyndham Legal Service.

Meredith is an experienced HR professional with an innovative approach to organisational development and employee relations. She has worked hard over the years to provide sound advice particularly regarding people, risk and safety.

Meredith led the process to recruit the new CEO position in 2019. She also oversaw the recruitment and appointment of our new Board Members. She joined our first Financial Risk and Audit Sub-Committee in early 2020 and, more recently, led our first Westjustice People, Culture and Nominations Committee.

We thank Meredith for over 10 years of dedicated service to the community legal sector and Western Suburbs communities, more broadly.



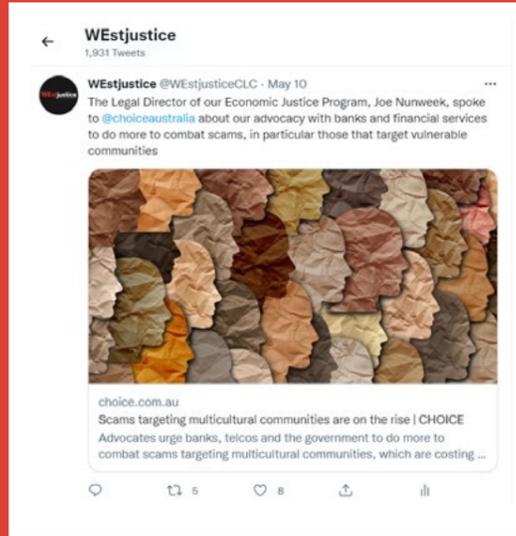
Finance Report

STATEMENT OF PROFIT OR LOSS AND OTHER COMPREHENSIVE INCOME

	2022	2021
	\$	\$
Revenue and other income		
Revenue from contracts with customers	6,244,034	4,465,708
Other revenue	7,927	705,629
	6,251,961	5,171,337
Less: expenses		
Depreciation and amortisation expense	(59,974)	(51,659)
Employee benefits expense	(4,877,389)	(4,185,989)
Occupancy expense	(68,901)	(183,029)
Lease expense	(224,574)	(121,243)
Organisational expenses	(261,185)	(133,380)
Employment expenses	(85,281)	(37,395)
Other expenses	(411,410)	(170,293)
	(5,988,714)	(4,882,988)
Surplus before income tax expense	263,247	288,349
Other comprehensive income for the year	-	-
Total comprehensive income	263,247	288,349

BALANCE SHEET

	2022	2021
	\$	\$
Current assets		
Cash and cash equivalents	4,334,889	3,185,341
Receivables	279,271	39,468
Other assets	173,184	105,041
Total current assets	4,787,344	3,329,850
Non current assets		
Lease assets	298,488	423,324
Property, plant and equipment	228,484	278,023
Total non current assets	526,972	701,347
Total assets	5,314,316	4,031,197
Current liabilities		
Payables	570,578	396,391
Lease liabilities	160,609	183,156
Provisions	688,733	585,893
Other liabilities	2,139,645	1,312,178
Total current liabilities	3,559,565	2,477,618
Non current liabilities		
Lease liabilities	158,748	249,503
Provisions	73,730	45,050
Total non current liabilities	232,478	585,893
Total liabilities	3,792,043	1,312,178
Net Assets	1,522,273	1,259,026
Equity		
Reserves	140,000	
Accumulated Surplus	1,382,273	1,259,026
Total equity	1,522,273	1,259,026



COLLECTIVE IMPACT STATEMENT

COLLECTIVE IMPACT STATEMENT



2226

clients assisted with legal and financial issues



498

clients were referred to other services



Our advocacy for victims of a serious investment scam affecting a refugee community led to over

\$64,000

compassionate refunds from banks

We provided 1165

duty lawyer services

in family violence intervention order hearings at the Sunshine and Werribee Magistrates Court

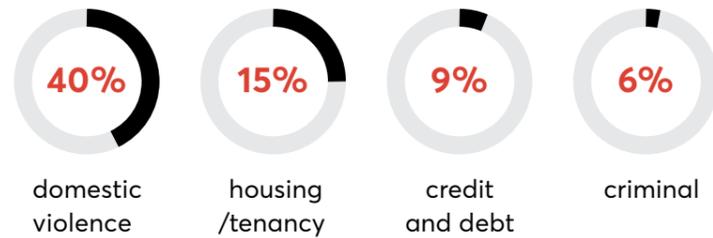


1121 clients

received family violence and family law assistance



The top 4 legal matter types in which we assisted with in 2021-22 were:



We provided legal advice services to

226 clients

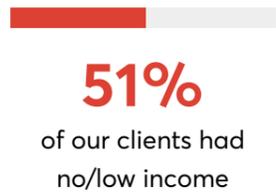
in our day and after-hours family law and family violence appointments



We delivered 110 CLE sessions

4x

Provided four rounds of a comprehensive online 3-day train the trainer program to 36 CECs and VACAP-EBs about work rights and responsibilities



We assisted 433 young people:



We achieved a record number of diversionary outcomes or withdrawal of charges in

59%

of the criminal matters



\$75,248.94

recovered in unpaid wages, entitlements and compensation

28 staff hosted



Combined, our Consumer, Settlement Justice, Motor Vehicle and Restoring Financial Safety programs assisted in



57 Victoria University students who contributed over

\$137,833 in debt and fine waivers

+

\$166,844 in compensation



We hosted 14 consultations on the Wyndham Community Hub



21

We made 21 submissions to state and federal government inquiries

6,840 hrs



towards Westjustice

THE WESTJUSTICE TEAM



THE WESTJUSTICE TEAM

Learning and Development Program

Victoria University Clinical Placement Program

Over the last year we have continued to provide internship opportunities to students undertaking a law degree in partnership with Victoria University. We strive to provide a organisation-wide experience for students. Throughout placements, students are offered a range of experiences including:

- client observation and interaction
- legal file work and administration
- policy and law reform opportunities
- team experiences
- professional development and training

Each year we sponsor two awards to recognise exceptional contribution to the organisation. This year the award recipients were:

- Anu KC - Victoria University 2021 College Award for Leader in the Community
- Vladan Slagalo - Cindy Farran Award

In relation to her placement, Anu reflects that

"undoubtedly the highlight of the placement has been the practical experience. I got the opportunity to gain firsthand experience related to legal work, from drafting a letter of demand, engagement letter, closing letter, affidavit, and legal research... as well as getting proper guidance and constructive feedback from my supervisor... I am very excited to apply the skills I learned at WJ in my professional life. I am also thankful I that I have had the opportunity to build a good network as a student."

Her supervisor, Thea, says

"a highlight was watching Anu use her own life experience and journey to put a lens on the issues she saw that was both considered and insightful. It was incredible to watch Anu thinking of client centred solutions that had both practical and systemic outcomes..." She also reflected that "supervising the VU interns has helped me to grow my leadership skills."

57

Victorian University students hosted



In the last financial year:

- We hosted 57 Victoria University students who contributed over 6,840 hours towards the community legal centre.
- At least 28 staff members have supervised students, contributing a combined total of over 6,840 hours of supervision.

We would like to thank our program funder, the College of Law and Justice at Victoria University, the students, our Westjustice supervising staff and our Clinical Placement Staff, Annie Davis, Anna Nguyen, Sarah Breen, and Vu Kim.

We value our relationship with Victoria University, as it provides an opportunity for our team to support the professional development of future community lawyers, deepens our understanding of mentoring and supervision, and provides a career pathway into Westjustice for Victoria University graduates, many of whom we have employed over the years.

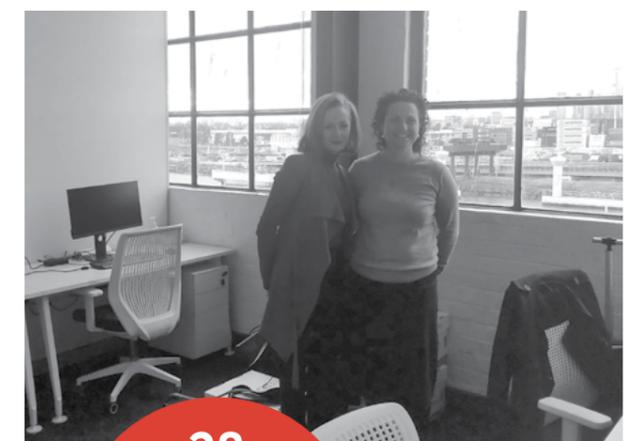
Learning and Development

We have continued to deliver an organisation wide training program for all staff focused on:

- strengthening our skills and cultural competency when working with people from Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities (with thanks to VACCHO)
- building our skills and cultural competency when working with people from culturally and linguistically diverse communities
- growing our skills in trauma informed practice (with thanks to David Cherry and Dr Sue Green)

We have developed online learning tools to ensure that all staff have access to, and understanding of, our policies and procedures.

We have also commenced work across our organisation to identify areas for growth and development as we strive to create a culturally safe and inclusive workplace for all employees. This will become a significant focus over the coming months and years.



28
staff members supervised students
6,840
hours

Economic Justice Program

375
clients assisted with
tenancy advice and
representation

Summary

The Economic Justice team's vision is a Western Melbourne community in which people can access their essential needs through fair systems and services. We are split into three teams, each with its own Program Manager: Consumer & Settlement Justice, Financial Safety, and Tenancy.

In 2021/22, the EJP welcomed Sarah Duane, Alex Kersey, Mary Kozlovski, Tayla Nguyen and Maree Vasilopoulos to the team. Chris Carr and Tess Matthews stepped up to the plate as Program Managers, and Joseph Nunweek assumed the role of Legal Director. We said a fond farewell to Ebony Bake, Trang Chau and Hannah Shedden who joined Mortgage Stress Victoria.

Across our three teams, we delivered the following programs, constituting legal advice, assistance and education:

- A debt and consumer law clinic for disadvantaged people (or people impacted by Covid) in the West;
- The Settlement Justice Partnership, an in-situ project in conjunction with Wyndham Community & Education Centre and MiCare where recently-arrived refugees can access legal help through their local settlement agency;
- The MyName project, assisting members of the Burmese community to process change of name applications;
- The Restoring Financial Safety Clinic, where victim-survivors of partner economic abuse are assisted by a lawyer and financial counsellor to rebuild their independence and resolve legal and debt issues that would otherwise jeopardise this.
- The Motor Vehicle Accident Clinic, where low-income drivers in the West who become involved in car collisions can obtain timely debt and insurance advice.
- Our Tenancy Advice and Advocacy (TAAP) program for renters in Hobsons Bay, Maribyrnong and Wyndham, buttressed by our accommodation advice and representation service for Melbourne's international students, and a new project investigating income and housing precarity for Victoria University students.

'Huge win for renters' – landlord insurers change policies following CHOICE campaign

Renters will no longer be pursued over accidental property damage after investigations and a campaign by CHOICE and WEstjustice.



Significant outcomes for our clients included:

- Tenancy advice, assistance and representation to over **375** renters across our services, with approximately **45** households assisted to avert homelessness.
- Our advocacy for victims of a serious investment scam affecting a refugee community led to over **\$64,000** in compassionate refunds from banks back to low-income families.
- In partnership with Wyndham CEC, over 300 people from the Burmese community had change of name applications lodged with the Registry of Births, Deaths and Marriages.
- Combined, our Consumer, Settlement Justice, Motor Vehicle and Restoring Financial Safety program assisted in **\$137,833** in debt and fines waivers, and **\$166,844** in compensation.

We advocated visibly and publicly for economically just outcomes in the media, in the corridors of power, and public forums:

- Dacia Abela and the work of the Restoring Financial Safety program were [showcased on the ABC website](#)



Refunds of
\$64,000
in scam
compensation

- Westjustice presented on the scams crisis at the National Financial Counselling Conference in Cairns, and hosted Stephen Jones MP and Tim Watts MP at its Footscray office where they heard first-hand about its impact on culturally and linguistically diverse communities;
- Westjustice guested on ABC Melbourne's The Conversation Hour to discuss the Buy Now Pay Later debt spiral and the impacts of economic abuse;
- We received media coverage for our joint call with Consumer Action and Victorian Aboriginal Legal Service for an accessible ombudsman service for used car disputes.



We advocated for systemic change through:

- A successful campaign with CHOICE asking Australia's insurance industry to stop pursuing renters for accidental damage;
- Sustained advocacy to the State Government on hardship reforms to the Local Government Act;
- Joint submissions to the Federal Government on changes to the e-Payments Code, unfair contract term reforms, and expansion of consumer guarantee protections;
- Our positions on the Victorian Commissioner for Residential Tenancies' Stakeholder Group, the Australian Communications and Media Authority's Consumer Consultative Forum, and the Essential Services Commission's Stakeholder Roundtable.

We collaborated with peers and stakeholders by continuing to co-convene the Victorian Infringements Working Group, and participating in the Tenants' Working Group, the Thriving Communities Partnership One Stop One Story Hub, the Economic Abuse Reference Group, and the Western Settlement Outcomes Network.

Acknowledgements

We would like to thank our funders the Victorian Attorney General's Office Consumer Affairs Victoria, the Federation of Community Legal Centres, the Department of Jobs, Precincts and Regions, the Ecstra Foundation, the Collier Charitable Fund and Victoria University, our partners Consumer Action Law Centre, Wyndham Community & Education Centre, Thriving Communities Partnership, MiCare, McAuley Community Services for Women, and Study Melbourne, as well as volunteers and staff for their ongoing commitment and support.





1256
early intervention pre-court
advice and negotiation services
delivered through the Early
Resolution Service

Family Violence and Family Law Program

Summary

We recognise that family and gender-based violence are serious community concerns that disproportionately affect women, gender diverse people and children.

We understand the important intersection and crossover between family violence, family law, crime and child protection, especially in reaching families at the earliest opportunity to assist in creating life outcomes, not just legal outcomes. We pursue excellence for clients, and we learn through our client stories and data to advocate for systemic change.

Our vision is for our clients to feel safe and secure. We do this by representing clients in family violence intervention order proceedings, family law (parenting, property division disputes and divorce), criminal proceedings where they have been misidentified as the primary perpetrator and providing early intervention legal advice to clients being investigated by the Child Protection.

This has been achieved by:

- early intervention & trauma informed holistic support through multifaceted legal services and warm referrals to support agencies.
- client-led practices by working alongside and with clients to assist them to get the outcomes most suited to their needs, rather than for them.
- learning and listening to our clients and partners to ensure that our services meet their needs in the most effective manner given our limited resources.
- targeted, strategic and client centred service design with family violence victim survivor stories forming a key part of the design process.
- investing in key stakeholder relationships to ensure we are reaching clients in the West who need our help the most.
- reaching out to clients in places where they need us to be: courts, hospitals, integrated health services, community hubs, and through referrals from the Orange Door.
- delivering high quality legal services across family violence, family law, child protection, MisID criminal law, and related economic and housing legal issues.

1121
clients
received family violence
and family law
assistance

Our people

In November 2021 we welcomed Cleona Feuerring as the new Legal Director replacing Annette Au Yeung who has transitioned into a new role at Westjustice as the Learning and Development Director. We also expanded the management team by employing an additional Program Manager, Neshi Sooknandan. Neshi's family law expertise has contributed to the growth and development of our key family law programs and policy work. Saba Butt also joined as a graduate lawyer in April 2022. We farewelled lawyers Stephen Bruce, Caroline Atkinson and Kate Robinson.

Our Impact

Of the 1121 unique clients assisted by the Program during this period:

- 81% identified as female;
- 88% experienced, or were at risk, of experiencing family violence;
- 67% experienced financial disadvantage, with more than two thirds of clients receiving Centrelink payments;
- 14% disclosed that they had a disability;
- 9% required an interpreter;
- 8% were homeless or at risk of homelessness; and
- 3% identified as Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander

We delivered:

- 1,256 early intervention pre-court advice and negotiation services in family violence proceedings through the Early Resolution Service.
- 1,165 duty lawyer services in family violence intervention order hearings at the Sunshine and Werribee Magistrates Court.
- legal advice services to 226 clients in our day and after-hours family law and family violence appointments.
- family law parenting and property division casework and litigation services to 18 clients accepted into our Family Law Access Project in conjunction with our Women's Legal Service partner.
- divorce outcomes to 12 clients of culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds
- withdrawals and diversion outcomes to six female clients in criminal proceedings who had been mis-identified as primary perpetrators by the police

- Court ordered further and better particulars for 10 clients who faced significant barriers in preparing these documents without legal assistance from our team. community legal education to key groups who face additional barriers in accessing the justice system and understanding legal processes.
- legal supervision and mentoring to 9 Victoria University Law Students.
- systemic law reform and advocacy through our response to the National Plan to End Family Violence and other key family violence submissions to Ministers.

Highlights

- Designed and implemented new systems, processes, data analysis, monitoring and evaluation to support the growth, expansion and diversification of practice to better respond to the needs of our clients.
- Expanded the size and legal expertise of the team.
- Became s29A VLA panel certifiers in family violence, family law and child protection.
- Successfully secured new funding streams from Clayton Utz and the Department of Justice and Community Safety to expand and broaden our health justice partnership impacts.
- Upskilled our team in Maram Risk Assessment, child protection, family law litigation (parenting and property division) to broaden and expand our trauma-informed and holistic client services.
- Partnered with La Trobe University and Fitzroy Legal Service in a research project funded by the Victorian Law Foundation to see if the way family violence intervention order applications are written has an impact on the outcomes for victim survivors of family violence.

Acknowledgements

We thank and acknowledge our Program's key funders and administrators including State and Commonwealth governments, Victoria Legal Aid, Department of Justice and Community Services, Victoria Law Foundation, Hobsons Bay Council and Clayton Utz. We also acknowledge our partners Mercy Hospital and La Trobe University.

Employment and Equality Law Program

Summary

In August 2021 the Employment and Equality Law Program (EELP) welcomed Jennifer Jones as the new Legal Director to lead the team and Nilanka Goonetillake as Program Manager. We farewelled Senior Lawyer Tess Matthews in January 2022, who took a promotion to Program Manager in the Economic Justice (EJ) team.

Strategy, Vision and Purpose

In 2021/22, we focussed on building relationships with stakeholders (internal and external) in and working on plans to grow our services to reach more workers experiencing disadvantage in the Western Suburbs. We revised our vision and purpose, which is now for decent, safe and fair work for all, and our team's purpose is to address systemic injustice at work by learning from, empowering and advocating for communities in need.

Integrated legal services

We delivered five integrated legal services and education programs:

- 1. International Students' Employment and Accommodation Legal Service:** We continued to provide an employment law service to international students through Study Melbourne Student Centre, in partnership with JobWatch and South-East Monash Legal Service, funded by the Victorian Department of Jobs, Precincts and Regions.
- 2. Youth Employment Project:** We continued to provide employment law services to young people under 25, primarily high school students in the West, including in person at The Grange school. This project was unfunded in this financial year.
- 3. Settlement Justice Partnership:** We expanded our employment law services to help clients or former clients of MiCare and WCEC.
- 4. Restoring Financial Safety:** We expanded our employment law services to clients or former clients of McAuley Community Services for Women.

\$75,248
recovered in
unpaid wages

34
CLE delivered
reaching more than
630
participants

- 5. Work Rights and Responsibilities Legal Support Service (WRARLSS):** We established a 12-month State-wide legal advice clinic for clients of Community Employment Connectors (CECs) and Victorian African Community Action Plan – Employment Brokers (VACAP-EBs), run in partnership with South-East Monash Legal Service (SMLS) and funded by the Department of Families, Fairness and Housing.

We had some great outcomes across these five services:

- 1. 96 instances** of legal advice and assistance to workers
- \$75,248.94** recovered in unpaid wages, entitlements and compensation.
- 34 CLE** delivered, reaching more than **630** participants.
- Four rounds** of a comprehensive online 3-day train the trainer program to 36 CECs and VACAP-EBs about work rights and responsibilities for WRARLSS.
- 26 CLE** delivered independently by WRARLSS graduates to **108 attendees**, using training material that we developed.
- We designed a work rights and responsibilities module for VCAL students and piloted it at Tarnet Senior College and Wyndham Central College.

We were successful in receiving new funding from the National Legal Assistance Partnership 2020-25 to expand our frontline workplace sexual harassment and discrimination law services. We also received funding from WorkSafe Victoria to investigate a tailored and culturally responsive workplace health and safety service model for multicultural workers in the West.

Systemic Impact

We advocated for systemic change through **eight legal policy submissions, survey responses and participation in consultation forums**, including on:

- Protecting migrant workers' rights
- Workplace Sexual Harassment and Anti-Racism, at both State and Federal level
- The proposed "Fair Conduct and Accountability Standards" for the On-Demand Workforce

Other advocacy work included:

- Working with WorkSafe Victoria to reform the way that PIAWE calculations are made and update the guidance provided in their claims manuals
- Participating in the WorkSafe Psychological Health Code Stakeholder Reference Group to provide feedback on the proposed Compliance Code.

We continued to co-convene the Victorian Employment Law Working Group and participated in a range of CLC and employment law networking groups, including the Fair Work Ombudsman/CLC forum, the Discrimination Law Service Providers Network; and the WorkSafe Vulnerable Workers Stakeholder Working Group.

Through these groups we contributed to joint advocacy with other CLCs by signing open letters regarding migrant workers and implementation of the *Respect@Work* recommendations through the "Power2Prevent Coalition" Joint statement.



Highlights

A key highlight was the launch of our report "Ignorance is NOT Bliss": The barriers to employment outcomes for young people in Melbourne's West and how to overcome them", at the conclusion of our Youth Employment Justice Project in September 2021. Minister Natalie Hutchins, MP, presented our keynote address, and we heard from Colleen Bergin, CEO of YouthNow and EELP Program Manager and report author, Francesca Lai.

One of our clients, a young worker who had lost his job after an argument with his employer, had this to say about our YEP lawyers:

"In the first year, I didn't have my head screwed on and didn't always come to work on time. I had pretty much no idea about my work rights. I read a couple of pamphlets about my apprenticeship, but none of that impacted me as much as receiving legal advice from Westjustice..."

"My lawyer opened my eyes to a lot of things, my decision making and my awareness. It taught me a lot of things for later on in life. It was something good that happened."

"My message to other young workers is: seek advice, it's the best way to go. It will help with decision making and will help with your future potential."

Acknowledgements

- We would like to thank our funders: Helen McPherson Smith Trust; the Victorian Department of Jobs, Precincts and Regions; the Victorian Department of Families Fairness and Housing; and WorkSafe Victoria.
- Thank you to our pro bono partners, secondees and volunteers, including Maddocks, Corrs Chambers Westgarth, Clayton Utz, Slater and Gordon, Maurice Blackburn, Gordon Legal, Vialto Partners (formerly part of PriceWaterhouseCoopers), and Phoebe Churches.





Youth Law Program

Summary

We assisted 433 young people across Westjustice during this financial year. The majority (85%) were aged 18-25 years old and the remainder 10-17 years (15%).

The top five legal problems experienced were family violence, criminal charges, tenancy, employment, fines and consumer & debts.

Our people

We promoted Nadia Baldassi Winderlich and Josephine Choimes to Senior Lawyers. We were also pleased to give Nadia extended leave to take up an opportunity with SA's Children's Commissioner and fortunate to welcome April Voigt as her backfill. Thanks to Angus Woodward, Vinnie Shin and the rest of the team for their dedication and spirit over the year and taking on extra responsibility whilst we recruited.



Our programs and projects

We returned to onsite delivery of our Lawyer in School Program at Wyndham Central College, Tarneit Senior College and The Grange. We also started at Hester Hornbrook Academy Sunshine Campus in January 2022.

We helped waive \$52,776 worth of fines and debts for youth clients and achieved a record number of diversionary outcomes or withdrawal of charges in 59% of criminal matters. We also delivered 63 community legal education, information sessions and educational posts.

Together with key partners, we launched Stage 1 of the Youth Crime Prevention and Early Intervention Project (YCPEIP) in November 2021. YCPEIP aims to increase the rates of cautions and diversions for youth in the Brimbank and Wyndham Police Service Areas, particularly those overrepresented in the criminal justice system. In recognition of the calibre of the project and stakeholders involved, we were successful in receiving a \$300,000 grant through DJCS' Building Safer Communities stream (see article on our launch [here](#)). Stage 1 focuses on the 10-17 year olds and Stage 2 will focus on the 18-24 year olds.

We commenced delivery of our Out of Home Care Legal Clinic pilot to young people living in Residential Care Homes run by Anglicare in August 2021. The clinic aims to help young people in residential care homes to identify a legal problem and get help early and will be evaluated mid project and at its conclusion.



Our Impact

We made a submission to the Parliamentary Inquiry into the Criminal Justice System and gave evidence at the hearings on behalf of Westjustice and as co-convenors of SJ4YP.

We launched TARGET ZERO in November 2021 and featured on ABC Radio's Conversation Hour.

We commenced with 13 amazing founding partners (see below) and are growing, with Melbourne City Mission pledging its support during this last reporting year.



Acknowledgements

Thank you to the Centre for Multicultural Youth, Centre for Excellence in Child and Family Welfare, Co-Health, Dr Diana Johns, Dr Karen Hart, Dr Mario Puecker, Godwin Masuka, Headspace, Jesuit Social Services, Marie Pewhairangi, Junubi Wyndham, Orygen Youth Mental Health, Victoria Legal Aid, Victoria Police, Victorian Aboriginal Legal Service, Western Metropolitan Regional Aboriginal Justice Advisory Committee, Whitelion, Youth Support and Advocacy Service (YSAS), Youthlaw, VACCA, Youth Junction, Youth Now, Afro, Charis mentoring, MCM, Anglicare Victoria, Brimbank, Melton and Wyndham Councils, Newsboys, Noel and Carmel O'Brien Family Foundation, Victorian Legal Services Board, Jack Brockhoff Foundation, Kimberley Foundation, Kate Ballard, Conor O'Bryan and Kestin Mildenhall.

Community Development, Education and Engagement Program

New faces and new directions

With a renewed focus on community engagement this year, Westjustice welcomed Rita Seumanutafa into our team as a Senior Project Officer to guide our community engagement across multiple projects. Rita has provided our teams with invaluable support and expertise through our many activities over the past year to ensure our services are culturally safe and informed by community needs and perspectives.

Community having a say

Our team were very privileged to meet with so many community members and leaders in recent months to discuss the forthcoming opening of the Wyndham Justice Precinct in 2025 and the need for culturally safe and community-friendly spaces and services nearby. We give special thanks to the Wyndham CEC, including Junubi Wyndham, for assisting us to facilitate consultations and also the CMY Western Young People's Independent Network (WYPIN) and the Aboriginal Wellness Foundation for their support.

Overwhelmingly, community feedback has emphasised the need for a service hub that is proximate to, but separate from, the courts and that it can house legal and other support services for people and their families navigating the justice system. Another common theme was the opportunity for such a hub to address social issues before they lead to legal issues, such as social marginalisation, lack of community connection and access to education and employment opportunities.



Community legal education done differently

Westjustice is now on Instagram and we were very fortunate to receive funding from the Victoria Law Foundation to help us explore how we might use this platform to deliver community legal education for young people in Melbourne's west. Our 'Legal Street Smarts on Socials' project has supported us to engage a media consultant and young people through CMY's Youth Advisory Group to develop and test a social media community legal education campaign and strategy. Follow us at @westjusticeclc to see how we go!

Connected
41
community members with legal advice since re-opening in 2022

Hosted
14
consultations on the Wyndham Community Hub

Supporting community led solutions

Westjustice has been very proud to play a role in supporting the Tangata Wyndham Restorative Justice Advisory Group – a community-led initiative to address the issue of justice-involvement for young people and families from Pasifika and Oceania communities. Despite the many challenges of the pandemic continuing, Tangata Wyndham has continued to consult with community and strengthen its connections with government and other justice-related stakeholders towards the development of its first Restorative Justice Action Plan into 2022-3.

Communities of Burma Clinic

The team have persevered through what was an extremely difficult year, with the loss of Pa as a longstanding team member and the continuing pressures of the pandemic. In-person services recommenced in April and involved many changes to manage COVID risks and a new temporary office location in Footscray. Both the team and the community have adjusted well to these many changes and the clinic has been very busy from the moment it has opened its doors.

Reconciliation and cultural safety

Having completed our first Reflect Reconciliation Action Plan, Westjustice has commenced work on developing our next Innovate Reconciliation Action Plan. Our Reconciliation journey so far has brought us many important learnings and highlights, including the introduction of all-staff cultural safety training, our Cultural Safety Audit, our participation in the NAIDOC Running Festival in 2022 and our celebration of Mabo Day for National Reconciliation Week. Our Reconciliation Action Plan Working Group also led to the establishment of our Cultural Safety and Inclusion Working Group and we look forward to seeing what these groups achieve into 2022-3.



In memory of Pa Hmun

Our greatly valued member of the Communities of Burma Clinic, Pa Hmun, passed away on the 9th of February this year.

Pa worked alongside his wonderful partner Nguri at Westjustice (and previously Footscray Community Legal Centre) for over 12 years. His dedication, together with Nguri's, has been instrumental to the clinic's success and has ensured so many people in the community received the help they needed from Westjustice over the years.

Pa was born in the Siatai village, Matupi township, Chin State Myanmar. The couple's children were born in Myanmar. Pa and his family left Myanmar in 2001 for Malaysia Sarawak, so Pa could work as a lecturer in mathematics for engineering students. The family stayed in Malaysia for another 7 years. Pa and Nguri came to Australia from Malaysia in 2007. Shortly after arriving, Pa received a scholarship from Swinburne University, Melbourne. The family took up Australian residency in 2011.

Both Pa and Nguri said they were very excited about coming to Australia. In Nguri's words, when the couple and their young children came to Australia, they concluded: "We both had English speaking and writing skills and a very strong desire to help the community".

Pa had many personal and professional qualities that made him such an outstanding community leader for the Chin Community in Melbourne, as well as a valued team member at Westjustice. Many people admired Pa's personal qualities of calmness, gentleness and thoughtfulness. Pa and Nguri, together with the team, have provided so many newly arrived community members with much-needed support, leadership and guidance to ease the passage of adjusting to a new life and culture.

Pa's passing has been a big loss to the Chin Community, his family and the Westjustice team. Our condolences to Nguri, Thomas and Grace.



NAIDOC RUNNING FESTIVAL Wyndham TV
The community connects at Wyndham Vale for this year's NAIDOC running festival.

Policy and Innovation Program

Summary

This Financial year, Westjustice welcomed Caitlin Caruana as the Director of Policy and Innovation, joining Shifrah Blustein in a small but mighty two-person team. We have had a big year, working with all teams to achieve advocacy wins and honing our narrative of the systemic and interconnected nature of disadvantage, particularly in the West.

To help streamline, prioritise and support the organisation's policy and advocacy work, we created a Strategic Advocacy Framework, under which each team identified their advocacy priorities. We also created a Media and Communications Plan to underpin the Framework and promote our work and the lived experiences of our clients.

We have continued strong engagement with the Victorian Government and upped our Federal engagement with the election of the new Labor Government, engaging our four re-elected local members about our federal policy priorities. We have also had good engagement with the now Assistant Treasurer on scams and better regulating credit and Buy Now Pay Later schemes.

2022-23 Victorian Budget

We worked closely with the CEO and teams on our budget submission and were successful in funding 7 of the 9 programs we submitted. The highlight was three years of funding for state wide expansion of the Travel Assistance Program, which provides pre-paid travel for disadvantaged students to get to school and appointments after two Westjustice pilots. Melissa appeared on [Channel 7](#) news alongside the Honourable Ben Carroll, Minister for Transport, regarding the announcement.



ABOVE CEO Melissa Hardham and Director of Policy and Innovation, Caitlin Caruana, with Federal Member for Fraser Daniel Mulino MP

Fines reform

2022 has been a big year for fines reform. We worked with the Cross Bench to successfully amend the Justice Legislation Amendment (Fines Reform and Other Matters) Bill 2022. Shifrah was even quoted in [Hansard](#) by the Leader of the Opposition for her advocacy on the issue. We then broadened our advocacy to address the causes of people being fined and the criminalisation of poverty (for example, advocating for better public transport options so people aren't forced to drive on toll roads). CEO Melissa Hardham was featured on the [ABC News Online](#) and co hosted the ABC Conversation Hour with Richelle Hunt to discuss the issue in depth. It was then referenced again by EJP Legal Director Joe Nunweek when he featured on the ABC Conversation Hour the following month.

We made
21 submissions
to state and federal
governments



ABOVE CEO Melissa Hardham on Channel 7 News discussing the TAP announcement

Media and communications

We have had some incredibly strong media campaigns this year, sharing key issues that impact the West and solidifying our position as a trusted voice on key issues like TAP, fines reform, landlord insurance, expansion of the MSV, restoring financial safety, and addressing youth crime. Westjustice has also made multiple appearances on the ABC Conversation Hour, including EJP Program Manager, Dacia Abela, discussing [Restoring Financial Safety](#); CEO Melissa Hardham discussing [fines reform](#); Legal Director EJP, Joe Nunweek, and Legal Director MSV, Matthew Martin, discussing [cost of living pressures](#); and Legal Director and Program Manager of YLP, Anoushka Jeronimus and Angus Woodward on [youth crime prevention](#).

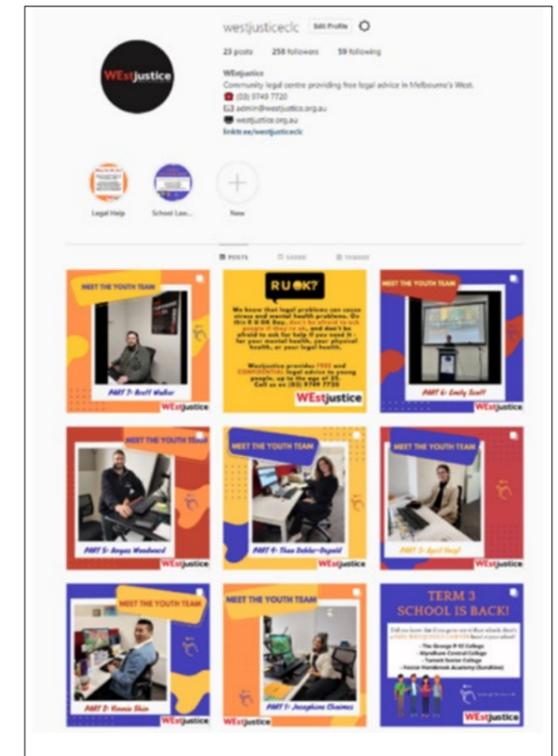
We also launched the 'WestjusticeCLC' Instagram page to engage youth and to build our presence and visibility in the community.

Submissions and inquiries

We made 21 submissions to state and federal government inquiries this financial year, including on key employment reforms and on the [Federal Government's Draft National Plan to End Violence Against Women and Children 2022-2032](#).

To support this work, we prepared a Submissions Prioritisation Process guide for staff on how to produce a strong and succinct submission and speak with a consistent Westjustice voice. This was supported by well-attended training.

Following up our input to the Criminal Justice Inquiry, the CEO and Legal Director YLP appeared in a [video](#) to highlight our evidence. The [Final Report](#) of the Inquiry was released in February, with Westjustice featured prominently.



ABOVE Westjustice's new Instagram Page

Wyndham Community Hub

Our advocacy for a multidisciplinary services Hub to support the new Werribee Courts has begun in earnest. We have closely engaged the Departments of Justice and Community Safety, and Jobs, Precincts and Regions, Courts Services Victoria, and Victorian Legal Aid, and key stakeholders including Victoria University, the Victorian Aboriginal Legal Service, the Law Institute of Victoria, the Federation of Community Legal Centers and more. We are collectively advocating for a separate but easily accessible services Hub next to the Courts to support each of the lists planned for the Courts and the broader Wyndham Community. We are preparing a business case to Government in time for the May 2023 Budget.

Successfully
received funding for
7|9
budget
submissions



Operations Program

Summary

We have achieved a considerable amount over the past 12 months, whilst juggling the impact of the pandemic and multiple lockdowns. We have almost completed the transformation of our Digital Management System and Financial Management System, and we are preparing for a significant review of our People and Culture System.

Now that our management team has grown significantly, we have expanded our 360 Review process to include middle and senior management positions. Lirata Consulting has been instrumental in setting up the systems and support. We will incorporate all feedback into future career development and leadership plans.

We have enjoyed the continued support from Christie Davis Design with reports, such as this Annual Report, but also with many other Westjustice projects, including our six monthly Systemic Impact Report and the Youth Law Program Report.

Highlights

We acknowledge the generous support of the William Buckland Foundation. The significant grant in 2020-23 has enabled the transformation of our Digital Management System, which is almost complete. InfoXchange led the development of our digital strategy and HumanIT have been responsible for the implementation.



Good Financials have assumed responsibility for our finance function which has improved our efficiencies and controls. They have worked closely with our auditors, Pitcher Partners, to ensure that our reporting and accountability is of a high standard. We are grateful to both for their expertise and patience throughout this process.

We congratulate Veronika Levchenkova, who was recently promoted to Senior Administration Officer.

We have seen major positive changes through the Digital Management Strategy projects. It's now easier to share information and collaborate. We have also seen a significant reduction of down time from technology and system issues.

Special mention to Brett Walker for his tremendous efforts in leading the change management program for our Digital Management System Transformation. In addition, Michelle Moone for stepping into a new temporary role as Acting Administration Manager and ensuring that the team has been well supported during the recruitment process for our new Operations and Practice Director. Finally, Theresa Mai, for covering our Human Resources function during the recruitment of our new role, People and Culture Director.

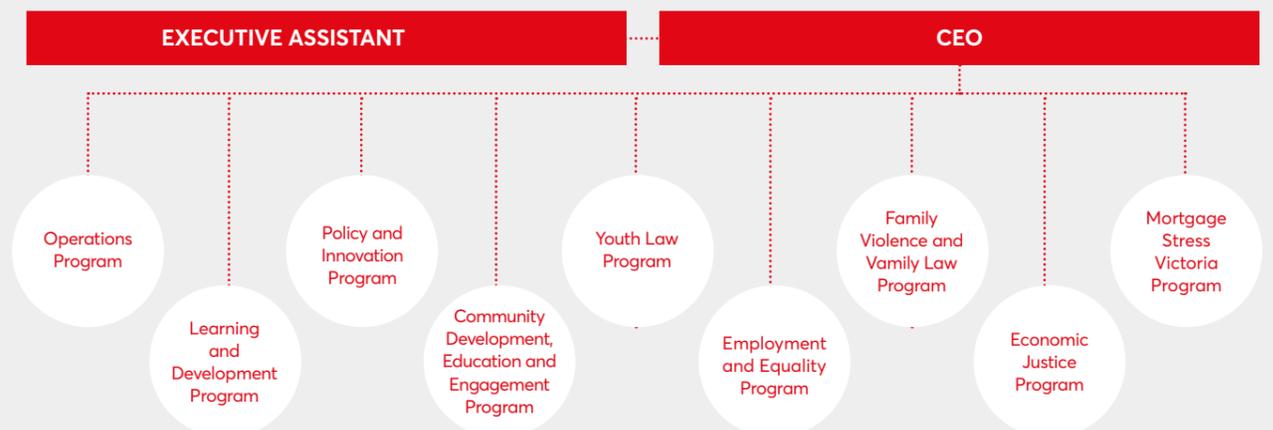
As we enter the final year of our Westjustice Strategy 2020-23, we can be proud of the extensive work of all who have assisted the improvements made across the administration, digital, compliance, policy, accreditation and data functions. We have a big year ahead as we introduce a new Data Management System, review our organisation wide practice and shift to a new telephony system and case management system.

Change has been constant over the past few years, but we have been well supported by the administration function and will continue to evolve this team over the coming year.

Acknowledgements

We would like to acknowledge the extraordinary contribution of An Huynh over the years. An commenced at Westjustice in 2008 and assisted with the merger of four legal services to form our large CLC, Westjustice. She has held several roles over this time, commencing as an administrative assistant and progression over the years to Operations Director. An's quiet and generous style of leadership endeared her to all staff. We wish An all the very best with her future endeavors.

Organisational Structure



Mortgage Stress Victoria Program

Summary

Westjustice's Mortgage Stress Victoria Service provides integrated legal, financial counselling and social work support to Victorians in mortgage stress. We help Victorians and their families to stay housed by addressing many of the drivers and impacts of mortgage stress.

With significant investment from the Victorian Government, we expanded our services state-wide from late April 2022. We recruited and on-boarded a team of 11 in FY22 and we have completed extensive work to establish Mortgage Stress Victoria as a subsidiary organisation of WEstjustice. With scaled up resources, we are scaling our impact.

People we assisted

People we assisted from 26 April-30 June 2022	Number
Number of households assisted	63
Number of people living in the households	173
Number of files opened	177



Our Impact

Since scaling to a state-wide service, we have assisted 173 people from 63 households and, to date, every client has had their housing security improved as a result of our intervention. Our wraparound services keep our clients housed sustainably.

Jona* – COVID impacts, imminent eviction prevented

** Name and all identifying information changed to protect confidentiality*

Jona had employment difficulties and COVID lockdowns meant her earning capacity disappeared. Jona was unable to pay her mortgage and her bank obtain a judgment order for repossession of her house in regional Victoria. Enforcement was then put on hold following the banks' COVID moratorium. As lockdowns eased, Jona was able to start earning a stable income.

When Jona came to WEstjustice's Mortgage Stress Victoria service, the bank's lawyers were pushing ahead with eviction. We attempted to stay the eviction to negotiate – as Jona's statement of financial position demonstrated serviceability. The bank refused to reconsider despite our involvement. After negotiations at a senior level, and after many days of incredible stress for our client, the bank agreed to consider serviceability, and ultimately agreed to a hardship/serviceability arrangement.

"Thank god I could get help"

** Affordable and available rental properties in the region are so scarce, Jona would likely have had to leave her community.*

"Jona's" case illustrates the significance of holding onto a mortgaged property. Most of our clients could not afford comparable private rental properties or secure tenancies due to the impacts of financial hardship on their credit reports.

Stress levels

On coming to our service our clients reported their stress levels from 1 (no stress) to 10 (extremely stressed), and again at the end of our service. Our clients reported the following stress levels.

Revenue and other income	Stress at intake	Stress at end of services	Average reduction
Stress Levels 1-10 average	8.7	5.6	3.1

Drivers of mortgage stress

Our clients reported the key drivers of their mortgage stress as follows.

- 58% reported mental health (and in many cases quite significant mental ill-health)
- 45% reported physical health problems
- 38% reported employment difficulty, 37% unemployment, and 35% COVID-19
- 96% of the households citing COVID-19 as a factor, also reported unemployment or employment difficulties
- 35% reported family violence

Systemic work

In just a few months of scaling our service, we have identified a number of systemic issues and unfair practices through our casework, now at a much larger volume. In FY22 we have commenced regular meetings with major banks to report and work on trends and issues arising through our casework. We have also commenced working with other key consumer sector stakeholders and financial services to find a solution to mortgages being used as tools to perpetrate economic abuse.

Our team has been regularly called upon to speak in the media about mortgage stress, our insights and our clients' experiences.

Acknowledgements

WEstjustice acknowledges the significant financial support of the Victorian Government and the following firms and barristers for their pro bono expertise provided to Mortgage Stress Victoria and our clients.

- Victorian Government for our funding to substantially expand our program.
- Pro bono firms for their support: King Wood & Mallesons, Maddocks Lawyers, Pitcher Partners, Hall & Wilcox, Clayton Utz, Lander & Rogers, Nicholes Family Law.
- Pro bono counsel: Michael Gronow, Amanda Storey, Liam Connolly, James Gray, Mark Goldblatt, Charlie Morshead.



