

South West Sydney LEGAL CENTRE

ANNUAL
REPORT
2019-2020



www.swslc.org.au



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South West Sydney Legal Centre acknowledges the traditional owners of country throughout Australia and their continuing connection to land, waters and community. Our head office is located on land that is traditionally the home of the Cabrogal Clan of the Darug nation. We pay our respects to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and their cultures, and to their elders past, present and future.

South West Sydney Legal Centre
Level 1, 98-100 Moore Street
Liverpool NSW 2170

Tel: 02 9601 7777
Fax: 02 9600 6244
info@swwslc.org.au
www.swwslc.org.au

ABN: 91 991 317 875



This is the annual report of South West Sydney Legal Centre. South West Sydney Legal Centre is a member of Community Legal Centres NSW and is accredited as a community legal centre by Community Legal Centres Australia. The organisation is a registered charity with DGR1 status and meets core governance standards provided by the Australian Charities and Not-for-profits Commission.



Message from President and CEO

It's always an honour to work alongside our dedicated and compassionate staff and board members, but during the last six months we have felt especially privileged. All staff and board members have shown an unwavering commitment to providing the best possible support for clients and for each other, despite the restrictions of the global pandemic. Thank you in particular to our leadership team and their assistant managers who have adapted our services and supported staff to continue delivering effective advice, advocacy and referrals.

All staff have been absolute 'legends' this year, finding ways of working from home, adjusting to ongoing changes in safety requirements, and prioritising clients' welfare.

Thank you also to Legal Aid NSW and the Department of Communities and Justice managers, who support our work and oversee the funding of our legal and domestic and family violence programs. We are grateful for the temporary extra funding received in 2020 to support services during this unprecedented public health crisis.

We face the same challenge together every year – providing more services to more clients with much the same funding levels, and we always rise to meet this challenge. However, during 2020, staff have reported an increase in complexity of clients' legal issues and in the needs of clients who are affected by domestic and family violence. The number of clients we are supporting has grown, but numbers alone don't reflect the depth and breadth of the services we provide.

During crises, people who already experience multiple levels of disadvantage face the most adversity. We work in some of the state's most disadvantaged local government areas and support women and children affected by the trauma of violence, so we know that the pandemic and recession is likely to increase the need for our services. The population of South West Sydney is predicted to grow at a rate of 2.1% over the next 10 years (compared to 1.6% in Sydney overall) so South West Sydney Legal Centre will need more resources to meet a growing need for services. It's therefore timely that our board is developing a new strategic plan for 2021-2024. A summary of the new plan will be available on our website in early 2021.

Our vision is a future in which there is equality of access to justice and women and children are free from domestic and family violence.

In Ashcroft, Busby, Miller and Fairfield the number of children living in poverty is among the highest in the state, at the confronting levels of 41-42% – some of these children will be our future clients. In addition, women and children from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds including First Nations people who have experienced domestic and family violence,



Naushee Rahman,
President

Yvette Vignando,
Chief Executive Officer

face many barriers to accessing services. Our South West Sydney region is characterised by its diversity, as is much of the community supported by our Central Sydney WDVCS team. So, as part of our strategic plan, we aim to develop a deeper understanding of the needs and optimal outcomes for clients we support, including more capacity to support the needs of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people.

To achieve this vision, we aim to access more financial and in-kind support to continue developing and supporting our staff, while providing services to more clients. We hope that the NSW and Federal governments will recognise that socially just outcomes require increased investment but we will also reach out to our local community and partners to support our vision.

In 2020, we were fortunate to receive a three-year grant from the Financial Counselling Foundation to provide services to women affected by domestic and family violence. Financial abuse occurs in 99% of domestic violence cases so this service will increase opportunities for women to achieve economic independence. From September, this specialist financial counselling service now complements the casework, advocacy and legal support already offered to our female clients.

Looking ahead, we feel optimistic about our capacity to support those who are most in need in our community. Our expertise in responding to domestic and family violence and our experience providing legal services to South West Sydney since 1986 will enable South West Sydney Legal Centre to continue playing a key role in enhancing people's wellbeing, safety and human rights.

We are grateful to our funders, our donors, our local community partners, local government, our board and our wonderful staff for making the work possible that we describe in this report. Thank you – we look forward to working with you again over the coming year.

Naushee Rahman
President

Yvette Vignando
Chief Executive Officer

SWSLC overview

About us

Since 1986 when we were first funded by a small grant from the Legal Services Commission, South West Sydney Legal Centre has empowered people to understand and protect their legal rights. In 1992, the first domestic violence court assistance worker was appointed and since then, our empowerment of the community has extended to a deep expertise in supporting and advocating for women affected by domestic and family violence. Our vision statement looks towards a future that will enable women and children to thrive, safe from violence, and a future in which everyone in South West Sydney is provided with equitable and accessible legal services.

Our legal team is based at Liverpool, together with our head office staff, and provides outreach legal services at partners' offices and at courts around South West Sydney. The legal team consists of nine solicitors, one of whom manages our community legal education and engagement programs, and two professional support staff. Our four domestic and family violence

teams are located in South West Sydney and Sydney city and total over 40 staff. Our operations and finance teams consist of four professional staff. In 2020, we recruited a specialist domestic and family violence financial counsellor.

Staff in all our programs collaborate to provide a holistic service to clients, which includes internal and external referrals, extensive use of interpreters and participation in community education events. Our comprehensive vision for services recognises that women experiencing domestic and family violence are 10 times more vulnerable to legal problems than the general population. Our legal team advises in the areas of criminal, family, civil and employment law and includes specialist lawyers to advise victims-survivors of domestic and family violence.

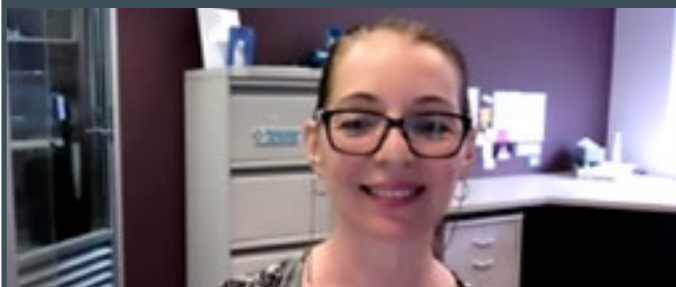
Our new strategic plan will be available on our website early in 2021. The vision and purpose statements on the following page are extracted from our new strategic plan.



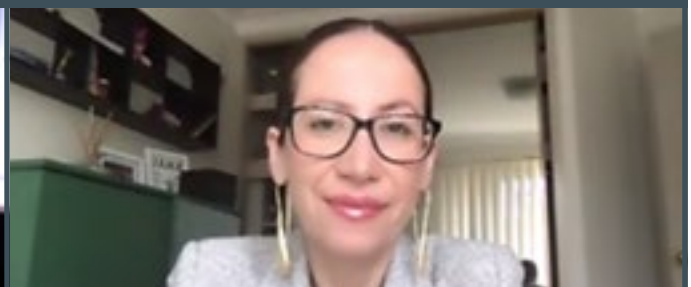
Yvette Vignando, Chief Executive Officer



Peter Multari, Principal Solicitor



Effi Vassiliadis, Operations Manager



Farah Assafiri, Manager, South West Sydney Women's Domestic Violence Court Advocacy Service



Elly Raffo, Manager, Domestic and Family Violence Casework Services



Susan Smith, Manager, Sydney Women's Domestic Violence Court Advocacy Service

Our vision

A future in which there is equality of access to justice and women and children are free from domestic and family violence.

Our 2021–2024 strategic pillars

- » Increase capacity to meet demand for legal services
- » Strengthen domestic and family violence programs
- » Make SWSLC an even better place to work
- » Increase revenue and in-kind support to deliver services to more people
- » Define our clients' key needs and measure our impact

Our purpose

Providing equitable and accessible legal services to our community and empowering women and children to break the cycle of domestic and family violence.

Our key services

- » Legal advice and community education in South West Sydney
- » South West Sydney and Sydney Women's Domestic Violence Court Advocacy Services
- » Bankstown Domestic Violence Service
- » Liverpool and Fairfield Staying Home Leaving Violence Service



Access to justice

Communities we serve

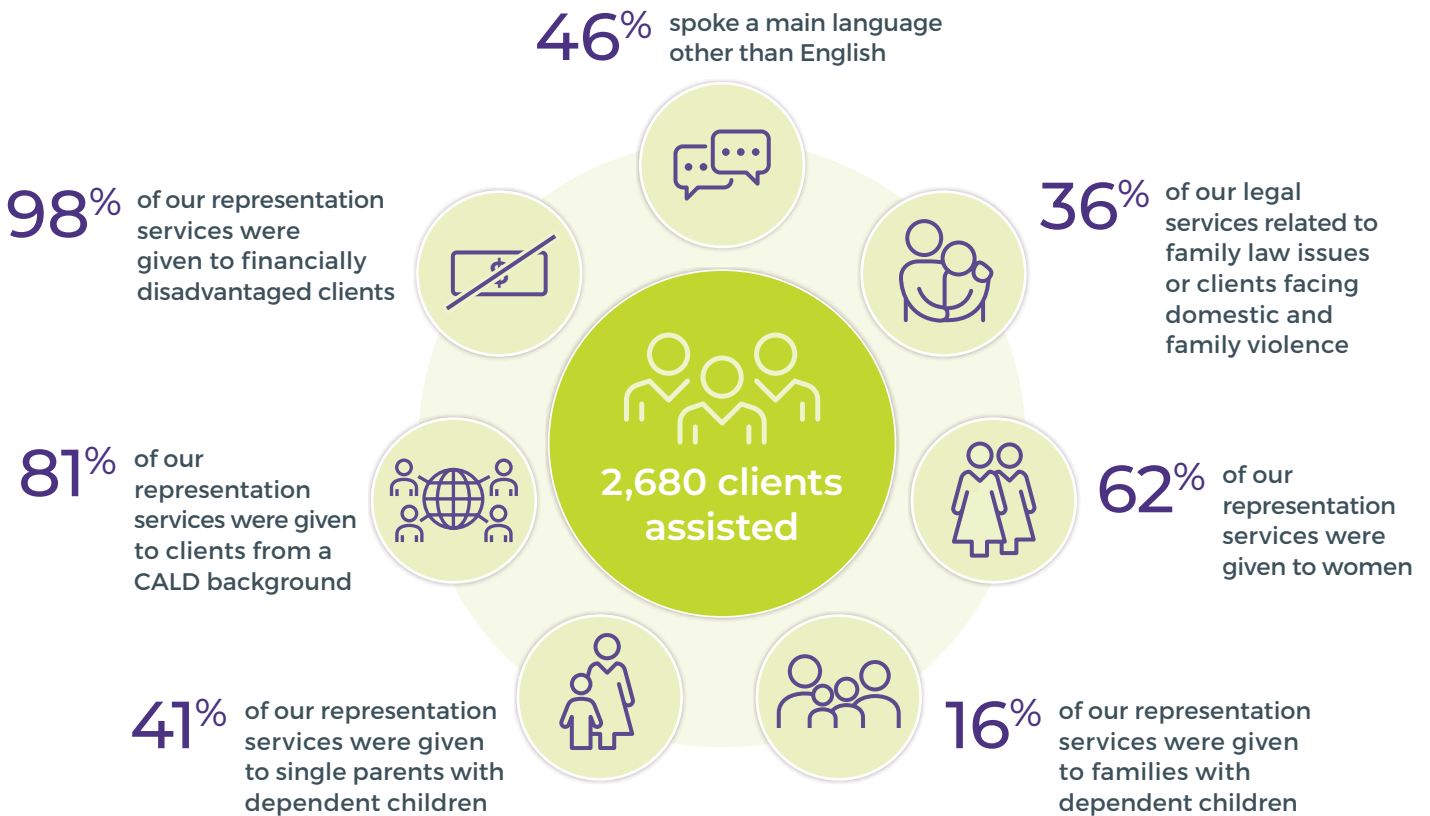
Our legal service is funded by the Community Legal Centre Program, Legal Aid NSW and operates in some of the most disadvantaged local government areas in Sydney: Canterbury-Bankstown, Fairfield and Liverpool. Home to new arrivals under humanitarian settlement initiatives and emerging communities, South West Sydney is one of the most culturally diverse and fastest growing regions of Australia.

When faced with legal problems, our community members experience a range of disadvantages and

barriers to accessing justice. We work alongside Legal Aid NSW, courts and tribunals, and other community organisations to provide access to justice, addressing a gap in the provision of legal services for those who cannot afford private lawyers and who don't qualify for Legal Aid.

For many of our clients, access to free, timely legal advice can reduce the devastating effects of joblessness, homelessness, licence disqualification, separation, and domestic and family violence.

Our clients at glance



* Representation services means when we represent a client in a legal matter. It is different to a single legal advice.

“I would just like to say big thank you for the presentation. I am a civil outreach lawyer who wants to identify Family Law issues correctly. This was one of the best overview trainings I've been to during COVID.”

Attendee - online Family Law presentation

Our service reach

During the past year there was some staff movement in and out of our legal team, including the creation of a new position of Assistant Principal Solicitor. The global pandemic in 2020 required agility, flexibility and creativity for the delivery of legal services and staff moved to working from home to increase safety for them and for our clients. Face to face services were suspended and court attendances restricted. Although there were restrictions on client contact, our team was able to counter those limitations by using technology for greater reach and connection – we significantly increased our use of telephone and computers for client advice and representation.

While numbers alone don't accurately represent the depth and complexity of work over the past year, they tell the story of our team's achievements through a time of adversity and uncertainty.

Highlights

2,680 clients assisted	269 duty lawyer service events
3,519 legal advices	260 legal tasks
2,161 information and referral events	30 community legal education sessions
345 cases opened	2 law reform/legal policy activities
161 cases completed	

In October 2019, we launched an online referral facility for community workers and promoted its use among our stakeholders. One advantage of this referral pathway is it's enabling our lawyers to use an interpreter to call clients who have limited English, avoiding the need for them to make initial contact via the usual phone advice channels. Online referrals are growing and now account for over 16% of referrals from new sources.

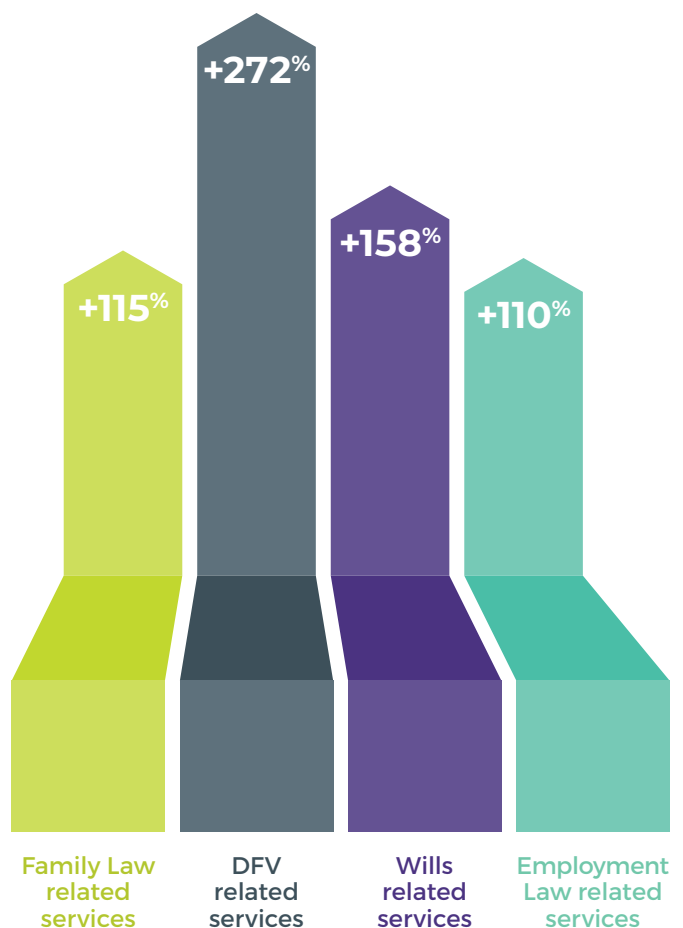
Although we were without a Community Legal Education and Engagement Officer for five months, we were still able to deliver 30 legal education sessions during the year. During the lockdown period, all legal education sessions were delivered remotely.

In the last quarter of 2020, we delivered 967 telephone advices, representing a 23% increase on the previous year's corresponding period. Some of the trends during this period reflect the wide-ranging impact of COVID-19 on health, employment, finances and relationships. Our staff have particularly noted the

effects of COVID-19 on the incidence of Family Law disputes and domestic and family violence; restrictions on work and movement from home have resulted in heightened financial and relationship pressures.

The increase in our domestic and family violence related services was also attributable to the strengthening of referral pathways between our own DFV services and our legal service and the launch of our online referral pathway in 2019. It is most likely that the additional wills-related work arose from clients living with underlying health conditions who were concerned about susceptibility to COVID-19 and were therefore motivated to put their affairs in order. Forced closures of businesses generated myriad employment issues leaving clients confused and seeking our assistance about their rights in relation to redundancies and stand downs as well as JobKeeper entitlements.

Service trends*



* compared to last year's

Legal services for victim-survivors of violence

Our Centre received additional funding to address the complex legal needs of people affected by domestic and family violence (DFV), resulting in a significant increase in our capacity to deliver services to this client group. Some of this funding was devoted to resourcing the delivery of our existing Family Law services, with the majority applied to delivering Victims Support services. Our data showed that almost half of our clients affected by domestic and family violence needed assistance with Family Law issues.

In 2019, we trained all legal staff in the Victims Support Scheme and provided training in trauma-informed practice and self-care to reduce the risk of vicarious trauma.

In November 2019, we launched an outreach service at Liverpool Local Court on its AVO list days and noted an immediate and significant uptake for this service. Working closely with our domestic and family violence support teams and Legal Aid's Domestic Violence Unit, our lawyers assisted women with legal advice and follow up case work relating to their rights under the Victims Support Scheme. We also promoted the use of our online referral facility for community workers and established internal referral processes from our domestic and family violence support services.

In the first half of 2020, we were able to substantially increase service delivery to clients affected by domestic and family violence:

- » 276% increase in number of DFV clients compared to the same period last year
- » 302 DFV client referrals from 33 sources, (over 20% of overall referrals), compared to 96 DFV client referrals from 10 sources (8.5% of overall referrals) in the same period last year
- » 54.6% of DFV referrals from our own DFV support services, compared to 35.5% in the same period last year

We delivered over 450 legal advices and provided 170 representation services relating to the Victims Support Scheme during the past year. The increase in referral of clients impacted by violence, particularly from our own domestic and family violence support services, highlights the value and need for a wrap-around service approach for these clients. The addition of a specialist domestic and family violence Financial Counsellor in 2020 for female clients has further enhanced our capacity to support victim-survivors.

Our Community Legal Education and Engagement Officer has been strengthening our partnership network to promote legal services for clients affected

by domestic and family violence. In 2020 we ran community education sessions for community workers on victim-survivors' rights and support under the Victims Support Scheme and how they might be impacted by other legal needs such as Family Law and Immigration Law concerns.

Community groups have shown great interest in our domestic and family violence-specific education sessions – as a result, we have presented to the Liverpool, Fairfield and Bankstown Child and Family Services interagency groups. We are currently developing new content in partnership with the Immigration Advice and Rights Centre and Legal Aid NSW to promote awareness of the complex needs of clients experiencing domestic and family violence, especially as they relate to their rights to remain in Australia.



Case Study

Support for recovery from violence

Priya* suffered extreme physical, sexual and psychological abuse at the hands of her husband for many years. Her husband was charged and convicted of numerous serious offences, including multiple counts of sexual intercourse without consent and was sentenced to a long term of imprisonment. Throughout the criminal proceedings against her husband, Priya was supported by our Staying Home Leaving Violence (SHLV) team.

When SHLV referred Priya to our legal service, she had already lodged Victims Services applications in relation to domestic violence and received approximately \$10,000 in recognition payment and assistance for immediate needs and economic loss. She had lodged a separate application in relation to the sexual assaults and was invited by Victims Services to make two further applications.

We assisted Priya to appropriately identify the other acts of sexual violence and to obtain further recognition payments of \$30,000.

Priya's two young children witnessed much of the abuse, and at times, were subject to abuse directly. As a result, Priya and her children require ongoing medical and counselling assistance to overcome the trauma they have experienced. We continue to work with Priya to ensure her family receives assistance to work towards rehabilitation, healing and recovery.

** identifying details have been substantially changed to protect client confidentiality*

Criminal Law

Eligibility for Legal Aid help in criminal matters is mainly restricted to clients who face a real possibility of a term of imprisonment. The Legal Aid eligibility test results in a significant gap in legal services for less serious charges, which can result in unrepresented clients receiving onerous and unfair outcomes, including imprisonment. In South West Sydney, the impact of this eligibility test is compounded by the fact that many defendants are affected by multiple forms of disadvantage that further limit their capacity to represent themselves at court.

With our enhanced expertise and capacity in domestic and family violence related law, we were able to increase services to more victim-survivor defendants who had been charged with common assault against their perpetrators. Working with our domestic and family violence support teams, our legal service helped many clients to either successfully defend charges or secure sentences without convictions.

Some of our criminal law clients in the past year were identified as having mental health issues that we identified as being connected to the alleged offences. We assisted these clients by obtaining psychological reports either at reduced fees or funded by Legal Aid NSW. Where it was not possible to have these clients diverted from the criminal law system under mental health provisions, we successfully raised mental health factors in mitigation on sentence.

In the context of COVID-19 restrictions, our lawyers flexibly used available methods to assist clients in court, including audio-visual link appearances and submissions sent to the court by email. Use of technology to facilitate court appearances enabled our lawyers to appear when necessary in courts outside our service area, such as at Picton and Parramatta Local Courts.



Case Study Victim of domestic violence found not guilty

Amrita* moved to Australia with her husband so she could study. Due to a domestic violence incident, she was forced to move out of their home. Amrita was referred to us from South West Sydney Women's Domestic Violence Court Advocacy Service.

Police attended the couple's home following a 000 call about a domestic incident. Amrita's husband was arrested and charged with assaulting her. Amrita's husband claimed it was in fact Amrita who had assaulted him. Police subsequently arrested and charged Amrita with Assault Occasioning Actual Bodily Harm. If proven guilty, it was possible Amrita could go to prison. A criminal conviction would have also affected her ability to work and remain in Australia to complete her studies.

Amrita maintained she did not assault her husband. We entered a not guilty plea on Amrita's behalf. Upon review of the evidence prior to the hearing, we found inaccuracies and inconsistencies in the husband's statement so we approached the prosecution to request the charge be withdrawn. The prosecution refused.

During the hearing, we cross-examined the husband and ultimately the court found his evidence was inconsistent and insufficient to support a conviction. Amrita was found not guilty and the matter was dismissed. Amrita is now focusing on her studies and rebuilding her life following her separation.

** identifying details have been substantially changed to protect client confidentiality*

We assisted almost

700 clients

with criminal law
problems during 2019-20.

Driving offences legal service

Our driving offences legal service offers legal advice and representation at court for those who don't qualify for Legal Aid or cannot otherwise access legal services. In South West Sydney, where English is a second language for over 58% of residents, there is low capacity for self-representation resulting in a disproportionate burden for our culturally and linguistically diverse driving community and their families.

In addition to the financial impact of fines, a valid driver's licence can mean the difference between maintaining secure employment or not. A loss of licence can exacerbate the already significant economic and social disadvantage facing many in our community, where a high proportion of workers rely on cars for travel to and from work. About 70% of people in our South West Sydney region drive to work, compared to about 58% for the greater Sydney area.

The driving offences legal service operates weekly at Bankstown and Fairfield Local Courts on traffic list days. Our lawyers work closely with Legal Aid duty solicitors and court personnel to ensure nobody misses out on necessary legal advice and representation.

During the initial stage of the COVID-19 pandemic, we followed NSW Health and Department of Justice protocols to ensure the safety of our lawyers and the community by suspending our face to face services. However, courts have continued to refer unrepresented defendants to our Centre for telephone advice. Where possible, we made appearances for clients by email and audio-visual link facilities, making written submissions on behalf of clients and tendering supporting material to the courts. We are currently working on a staged and COVID-safe return of our lawyers to the courts where restrictions have been eased.



Case Study

A just outcome for a pensioner with a disability

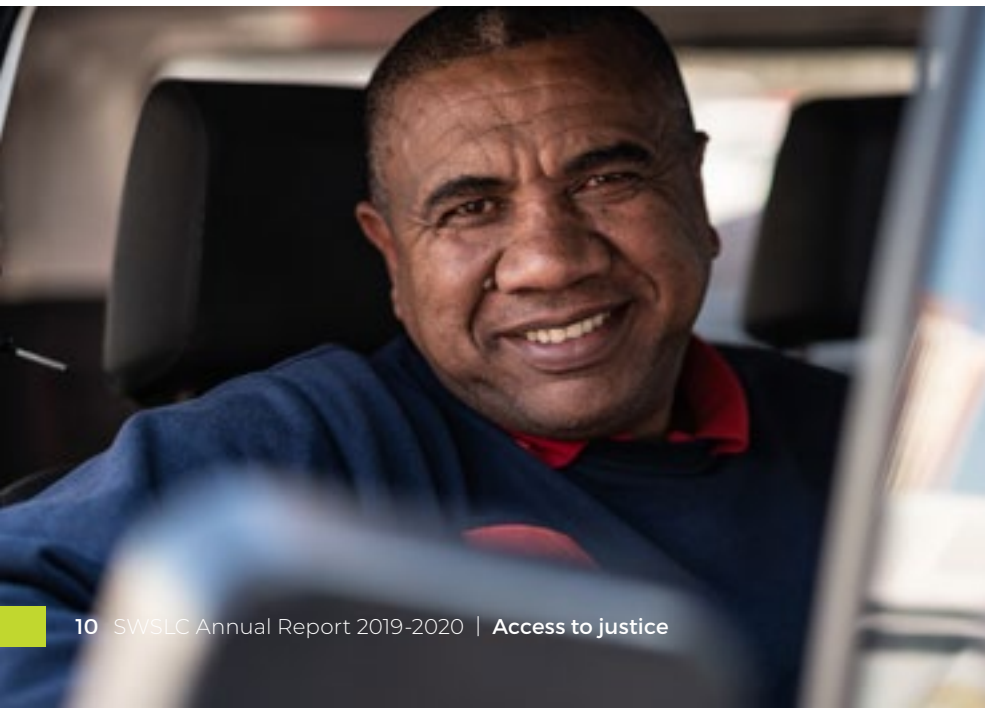
Dennis* is an elderly widowed man – his only income is the pension. He has chronic health conditions that require ongoing medical treatment, he has been diagnosed with depression and anxiety and has ongoing learning difficulties and memory loss.

Dennis was pulled over by police while driving a car that belonged to his late partner. He was charged with driving while his licence was cancelled and with driving an unregistered and uninsured vehicle. Dennis was not aware that the vehicle's registration had expired. He also held a genuine belief that he did not have to hold a current driver's licence to drive. If convicted of the first offence, Dennis would have suffered significant consequences including a criminal record and a substantial fine, which would have had a serious impact on his physical and mental health.

We prepared written submissions on Dennis' behalf and represented him in court. We also liaised with a clinical psychologist to obtain a psychological report about his mental health condition. We advised Dennis to place his now-overdue fines for the registration and insurance onto payment plans.

The court agreed with our submissions regarding penalties and Dennis was placed on a bond for good behaviour for 12 months without conviction. Dennis was able to afford the payment plans and could focus on his health and wellbeing.

** identifying details have been substantially changed to protect client confidentiality*



Our duty lawyers helped over

260 people

with driving offence charges during 2019-20.

Employment Law

A high proportion of our region's workforce is employed in temporary and/or low-skilled jobs. Coupled with a community profile of high cultural and linguistic diversity and low English proficiency, much of the workforce in South West Sydney is particularly susceptible to unfair treatment, discrimination and exploitation in the workplace. This situation of relative disadvantage is complicated by low union membership and limited Legal Aid availability for Employment Law matters.

Recognising the growing need in this area of law, we continue to participate in the Workplace Advisory Service, an assistance service coordinated by the Fair Work Commission. Our participation involves the provision of legal advice and assistance for self-represented employees in the Fair Work Commission.

The COVID-19 pandemic had a particularly negative impact on employees and businesses within our region. Many clients sought legal advice about the impact of COVID-19 on their employment rights, given the public health alerts in the community and the serious concern for health and safety. Clients also sought legal advice on the Federal government's new JobKeeper scheme, which was introduced to support businesses significantly affected by the pandemic and help keep more Australians in jobs. To increase community knowledge of the impact of COVID-19 on employee rights, we presented online community legal sessions on employee rights, including an online session for general members of the community that was co-hosted with Liverpool City Council Library.

We also partnered with the Migrant Employment Law Service (MELS), to provide additional access to employment law advice for culturally and linguistically diverse communities within our local area. MELS is a joint initiative of the Inner-City Legal Centre, Kingsford Legal Centre, Marrickville Legal Centre and Redfern Legal Centre and provides a state-wide legal service

to address the exploitation of migrant workers. Fortnightly clinics in Liverpool serviced by lawyers from our Centre and MELS were due to start prior to the restrictions brought about by the pandemic – we look forward to launching this outreach once the restrictions ease.



Case Study

Unlawful reduction to wages during COVID-19

Barry* worked as a yard hand in a building supplies warehouse for over ten years. He is married with three children under ten years of age and was the only one working in the family.

At the height of the pandemic, Barry's employer told him he would have to take a 50% reduction in pay as business was slowing down. The thought of a decrease in his already-low annual income caused Barry stress and anxiety, as he would not have been able to support his wife and young children.

Barry had not noticed any downturn at work and his employer had recently hired a new driver for additional delivery runs. He wanted to know if his employer was allowed to cut his hours and contacted our legal centre for advice.

We assisted Barry by drafting a letter of demand to his employer. As a result of that letter, Barry received redundancy pay and all his entitlements. This legal support meant that Barry received enough financial support during that particularly difficult period, relieving him of additional stress while he looked for further employment.

** identifying details have been substantially changed to protect client confidentiality*

We assisted over **500 clients** with employment related issues during 2019-20 – over **40%** had **English as their second language** and over **15%** were **at risk of homelessness**.

Almost **20%** of our clients accessed our Employment Law services in 2019-20.



Family Law

Separating families experience significant trauma and stress, especially when coupled with family violence. The COVID-19 pandemic compounded existing stressors facing separating families. Restrictions on movement and gatherings created confusion and uncertainty around obligations under parenting orders and whether changeover of children in public places should or could safely occur. During the year about one-third of our Family Law services related to parenting issues. Separating parties keen to finalise their property settlement faced a declining housing market, creating tension between the desire to end their financial relationship as quickly as possible and the risk of liquidating assets in an uncertain market.

Restrictions related to the global pandemic caused challenges in the delivery of some of our services. Face to face services were suspended and the courts closed. However, new procedures and technology enabled us to continue delivering Family Law advice and representation services to our most vulnerable clients. Staying abreast of changing court practice directions, we assisted clients in the preparation and filing of court documents and made court appearances by phone and online video. In partnership with Macarthur Legal Centre and the Family Relationship Centres at Bankstown, Campbelltown and Fairfield, we participated in legally assisted mediations through online video.

Our partnership with Uniting Counselling and Mediation has been extended to deliver legally assisted mediations remotely through online video to its Parramatta and Sydney clients in collaboration with Western Sydney Community Legal Centre and Macarthur Legal Centre. Through regular meetings, we have committed to exploring opportunities such as virtual outreaches and workshops to ensure that we can meet the Family Law needs of our shared communities.



Case Study

Parenting plan for a client with cognitive impairment

Raymond* immigrated from Cameroon and speaks very little English – he has cognitive and mental health issues and lives in a refuge. Raymond has two children with his wife from whom he has separated.

Raymond sought our help when his wife informed him that she intended to relocate away from the Sydney metropolitan area with their children. He was distressed by the possibility of being separated from his children and didn't know how to reach an agreement with his wife.

We worked with Raymond's case worker and interpreters to ensure Raymond could access the advice and assistance he required from us. We helped Raymond negotiate and draft a parenting plan. Raymond's wife was receptive to the parenting plan and Raymond is now able to see his children twice a week.

** identifying details have been substantially changed to protect client confidentiality*



41% of our clients were **single parents with dependent children** in 2019-20. **36%** of those needing help with Family Law issues had been **affected by domestic and family violence.**

Civil Law

Many of our clients present with multiple complex legal and non-legal issues that significantly limit their capacity to represent themselves in dispute resolution or a litigation process. Most of our clients are significantly financially disadvantaged, 22% are single parents with dependent children and over 20% live with a disability or mental illness.

The amounts involved in many civil claims are not significant enough to warrant the legal fees of a private lawyer. However, for the majority of our clients, these small claims are significant enough to potentially devastate them and their families. Without our assistance, these clients would not be able to successfully mount claims to assert their rights or successfully defend claims brought against them.

Many of our clients have been impacted financially by the pandemic, placing them in greater need of access to justice, especially when they are involved in matters putting them at risk of paying a fine or damages. During the year, our team advised clients about car damage claims, neighbour disputes, consumer rights, credit and debt arrangements, guardianship, powers of attorney and wills and estates.

Excluding Employment Law, during 2019–20 about 40% of our clients had Civil Law related problems.



Case Study Neighbourhood resolution for couple with hearing impairment

Amir and Aleen* live in an apartment complex with their two young children, and they are both hearing impaired. Their main source of income is Centrelink. They received numerous complaints from their neighbour about noise from their children. The couple tried to explain their hearing impairment, but the complaints continued and the neighbour became increasingly agitated and sent a recording of the noise to the Strata Manager. As a result, the couple were issued a fine.

We communicated with Amir and Aleen via an Auslan interpreter. The situation had taken a serious toll on them and they could not afford to pay the fine and were concerned about the consequences.

We examined the recordings and formed the view that the noise was not offensive to the degree that it warranted a fine. We examined the fine notice, which appeared to have not been issued in accordance with the relevant regulations so was invalid. We assisted Amir and Aleen by making representations to the Strata Manager who withdrew the fine and undertook to consult with Amir and Aleen and the neighbour to facilitate a fairer and more practical approach to the situation.

Amir and Aleen were relieved, as the fine would have caused a huge financial burden for their family.

** identifying details have been substantially changed to protect client confidentiality*

“I appreciate all of the support and advice you have given me in the last couple of weeks. Thank you for all of your efforts, you made the load of work that I already have so much lighter. Since you were appointed to my file, I have more knowledge and a better understanding, and after everything I’ve gone through in the past few years, you have proven that there are still honest, genuine people in the world.”

Legal service client

Law reform and policy

As a Community Legal Centre we consider it a privilege and social responsibility to participate in advocacy and law reform initiatives that seek to improve legal and social outcomes for people facing multiple barriers to social justice. While South West Sydney Legal Centre does not have a dedicated law reform and advocacy professional, we collaborate with other centres and peak bodies to make contributions to law reform.

In the wake of the horrific summer bushfires and the global pandemic, Community Legal Centres delivered legal assistance to our communities at the same time as actively working to bring their plight to the attention of our lawmakers.

Some notable work of Community Legal Centres NSW and its members over the past year include advocating for:

- » urgent reforms around accessible disaster insurance cover following the bushfires;
- » critical social policy measures to protect the community during the pandemic such as a moratorium on evictions, suspension of disconnections, debt collections and bankruptcy proceedings by utility companies;
- » additional funding to the DFV sector to increase safety through periods of isolation; and
- » legislative protection of employees stood down from employment due to COVID-19.

We continue to work with Community Legal Centres NSW and the Women's Legal Service NSW to advocate for victims' rights and support and safety first in Family Law. **This year we supported submissions made to:**

- » the Commonwealth Attorney-General raising concerns about the proposed family court merger; and
- » the NSW Attorney-General raising concerns about the proposed changes to the Victims Support Scheme.

Advocating for victims' rights and support

In April 2020, NSW Victims Services announced proposed changes to the Victims Support Scheme which would, among other effects, shift the burden to victim-survivors for gathering evidence about injuries they sustained from violence. These changes were announced about two weeks prior to the proposed implementation date without consultation.

Community Legal Centres and domestic and family violence workers moved quickly to advocate against the proposed changes. Our Centre supported submissions by Women's Legal Service NSW and Community Legal Centres NSW, which were sent to the Commissioner of Victims' Rights and to the Attorney-General and Minister for Prevention of Domestic Violence. **The submissions focussed on the disadvantaged profile of victim-survivors, such as homelessness, linguistic and technological illiteracy, lack of access to technology or stable postal address and financial hardship.**

Viewed against such disadvantage, the proposed changes effectively deny many victim-survivors from being able to access financial support.

We petitioned our local members, including the shadow Attorney General and wrote to the Commissioner of Victims' Rights. We forwarded the collective submission of CLC NSW to our MPs, adding our own concerns arising from the work we do with our local communities.

While this work was successful in delaying implementation of the changes for two months, ultimately, the changes came into effect on 1 July 2020. **Victims Services has committed to reviewing the changes in six months' time and we are continuing to advocate and communicate with parliamentary members to uphold the rights of victim-survivors and ensure that they are not diminished.** We are grateful for the continuing support we receive from members of parliament who are also advocating for the rights of our community members.



Our partners and funders

Our legal service receives funding from the State and Federal governments, administered and managed by Legal Aid NSW. Our sincerest appreciation goes to our funding bodies and financial partners.

We are grateful also to all who have contributed to the success of our legal service and whose willingness to explore and commit to innovative partnerships has provided increased opportunities to address the legal needs of the most disadvantaged in our community.

Thank you

Adam Guy, barrister

Ali Hallani, solicitor

Allan Goldsworthy, barrister

Bankstown Family Relationship Centre

Bankstown Local Court Registrars

Budyari Community Health Centre

Campbelltown Family Relationship Centre

CatholicCare Liverpool

CORE Community Services

Corrective Services NSW

David Shoebridge, Greens Member of the Legislative Council

Department of Family and Community Services

Fair Work Ombudsman

Fairfield Family Relationship Centre

Fairfield Local Court Registrars

Financial Counselling Foundation

Frisina Lawyers

Gilbert+Tobin Lawyers

Housing NSW

Hugh McDermott MP, State Member for Prospect

Human Rights Commission

Kristian Bolwell, solicitor

Law Access

Legal Aid on behalf of Commonwealth Attorney General's Community Legal Services Program

Legal Aid on behalf of NSW Attorney General's Community Legal Services Program

Liverpool Local Court Registrars

Liverpool Family Dispute Resolution Services

Macarthur Legal Centre

Marrickville Legal Centre

Marsdens Law Group

Metro Migrant Resource Centre

Michael Costello, clinical psychologist

Nicholas Lavidis, clinical psychologist

One Door Mental Health Services

Paul Lynch MP, State Member for Liverpool

Paul Madden, barrister

Peter Cook, barrister

Peter Godkin, barrister

Settlement Services International

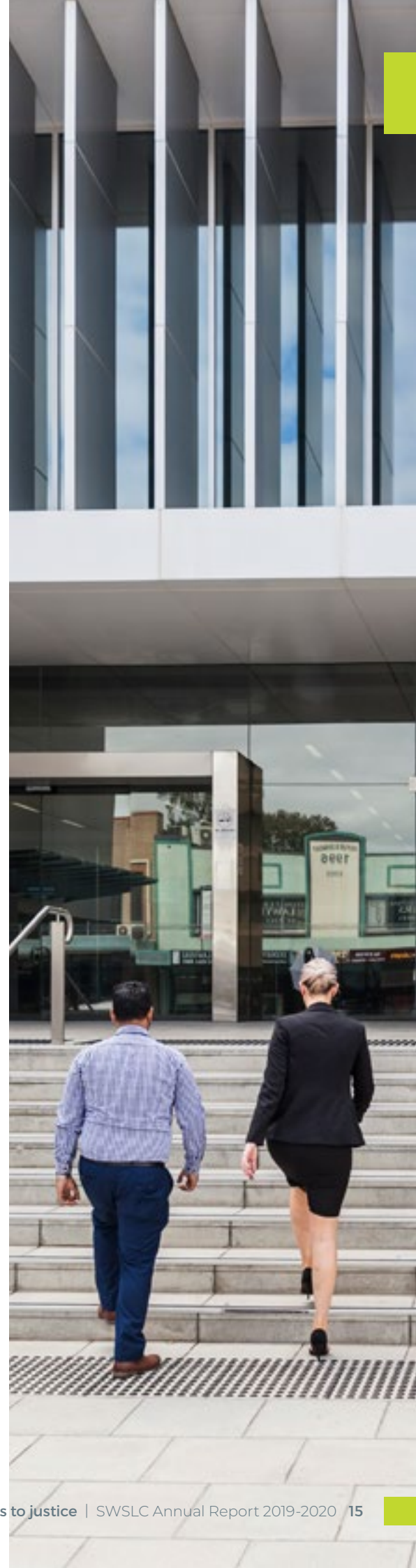
STARTTS Liverpool

Trish Doyle MP, State Member for the Blue Mountains

Uniting Counselling and Mediation

Western Sydney Community Legal Centre

Western Sydney Migrant Resource Centre





Breaking the cycle of domestic and family violence

Domestic and family violence services

Our domestic and family violence services incorporate two Women's Domestic Violence Court Advocacy Services (WDVCAS), one in South West Sydney and one in Central Sydney and two domestic and family violence case management services in South West Sydney.

Our two WDVCAS are funded by the NSW government to provide women and their children with information, advocacy, safety planning and referrals. The service aims to give victims improved access to and understanding of the Apprehended Domestic Violence Order and criminal justice process, increasing the likelihood of them being protected by appropriate orders and giving them access to support systems that can assist them with legal and social welfare needs.

Our Bankstown Domestic Violence Service and Liverpool and Fairfield Staying Home Leaving Violence Services aim to increase the safety of women and children – they are connected to appropriate services, provided safety planning and advice and supported in a holistic way to regain control over their lives.

In 2019-20 our domestic and family violence services have worked together to commission a comprehensive manual about trauma-informed practice for use across the whole of the Centre. The domestic and family violence services' teams have also organised parenting workshops for clients, and organised and attended courses on domestic violence and technology enabled crime, training on safety planning and writing file notes, 'disability ready' training, visas and domestic violence training, and training on understanding the role of law and culture in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities in response to domestic violence.

Team members from the domestic and family violence services also prioritise identifying systemic issues related to their clients' needs and make recommendations for law reform. For example, the services have continued to raise the issue of strangulation and the evidentiary requirements needed to meet the elements of the offence; and the issue of women being wrongly identified as the primary aggressor in a domestic violence incident.

Communities we serve

Since extending our services in 2018 to encompass the Sydney WDVCAS which covers the inner city, inner west and eastern suburbs of Sydney, our Centre has become one of the larger domestic and family violence service providers in NSW. We know that this responsibility is a privilege and we are always looking for ways to enhance our practice.

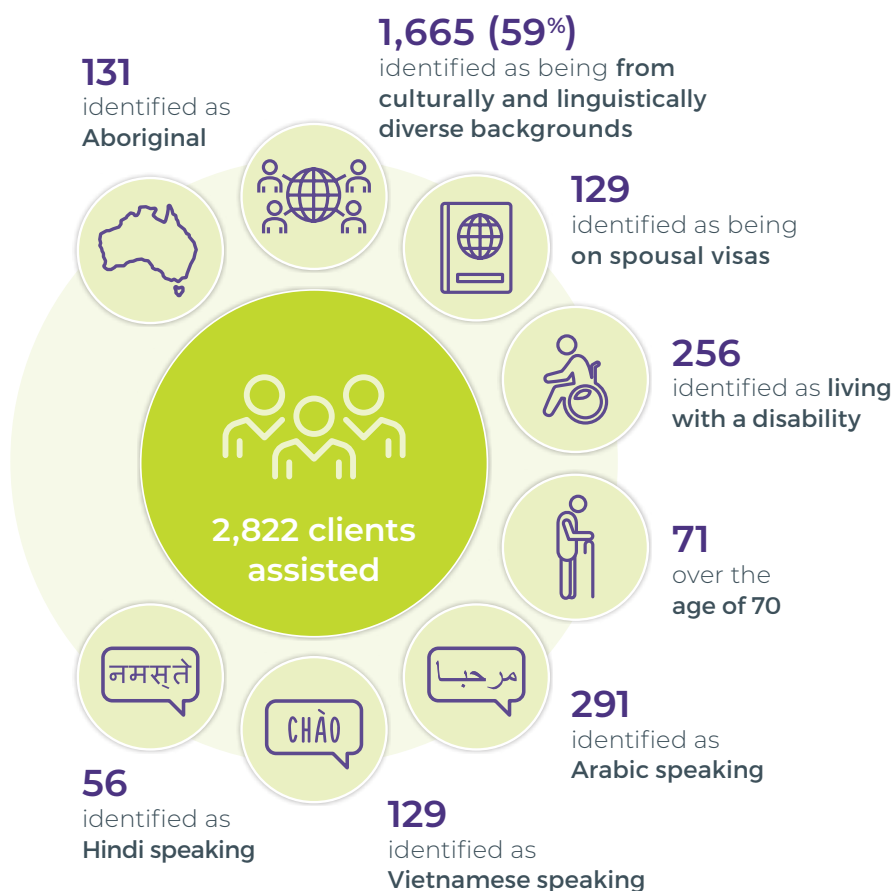
Our local area of South West Sydney is known for its cultural and linguistic diversity, and this brings strength and vibrancy to the community. Our Central Sydney WDVCAS team also works with diverse client groups, including many Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women.

Victim-survivors of violence who have cultural or language barriers that prevent them from accessing support services are at particular risk of harm so we aim to employ staff who have language and cultural knowledge to enhance our services to clients.

In 2020 the Australian Bureau of Crime Statistics provided further insight into its 2016 survey of women's experiences of domestic violence and physical assault by a partner. **An estimated one in six Australian women (17%) aged 18 years and over had experienced partner violence since the age of 15.** The findings identified social and demographic factors that are associated with a higher likelihood of violence – financial stress, unemployment, the presence of a disability or a long-term health condition, poor or fair health, and low levels of life satisfaction were associated with women's experience of partner violence. **The global pandemic is very likely to have negatively impacted all these factors for women so we anticipate a steadily growing need for our services over at least the next year or two.** Early indications from our staff about their observed increase in the prevalence and complexity of domestic and family violence since about March 2020 supports our prediction of growing need.

South West Sydney Women's Domestic Violence Court Advocacy Service

Our clients



Highlights

- 2,822** clients assisted with **11,779** service events
- 2,879** matters where there was a police or private application for an **ADVO**
- 922** legal advice/representation for clients by the Domestic Violence Duty Lawyer Scheme
- 783** final **Apprehended Domestic Violence Orders** obtained by clients
- 7,697** referrals received through the Central Referral Point
- 21** **Pre-Hearing Clinics** conducted
- 78** **Safety Action Meetings** conducted

South West Sydney Women's Domestic Violence Court Advocacy Service (WDVCAS) helps women and their children who have experienced domestic and family violence to obtain effective legal protection at Liverpool, Bankstown and Fairfield local courts and supports them to break the cycle of violence and abuse. Clients are offered risk assessment, safety planning, targeted referrals, assistance, case coordination and specialised legal advice from Legal Aid NSW's Domestic Violence Unit and solicitors from our Centre. The South West Sydney WDVCAS is funded by the Women's Domestic Violence Court Advocacy Program, Legal Aid NSW.

The South West Sydney WDVCAS team of Domestic and Family Violence Specialist Workers includes five members with a multicultural focus, one with a disability focus and we have recently appointed a worker with specialisation in assisting Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander clients.

Despite the increase in referrals and complexity of clients' needs, exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic, thanks to the hard work and commitment of staff, South West Sydney WDVCAS exceeded targets set by Legal Aid NSW for 2019-20. A particular focus during the year was increasing team members' understanding

and use of a trauma-informed framework for service delivery. The framework is based on an understanding of the impact of trauma on victim-survivors and aims to rebuild a sense of control and empowerment.

Safety Action Meetings

South West Sydney WDVCAS convenes three Safety Action Meetings (SAMs): Bankstown, Liverpool and Fairfield. The SAMs provide an integrated response to victims assessed as being at serious threat of injury or death due to domestic or family violence. The SAM includes police and other government and non-government members who work collaboratively to formulate safety action plans to mitigate the risk to these high-risk victims. In the 2019-20 period South West Sydney WDVCAS convened 78 SAMs and assessed the risk of 790 serious threat victims.

We faced some challenges with the running of our SAMs in 2020, mainly due to the concerns of government agencies about the privacy and security of certain video conferencing services as alternatives to face to face meetings. Ultimately, we worked with a combination of teleconferencing and online video conferences to host the meetings.

Service delivery during COVID-19

During the COVID-19 restrictions, the majority of South West Sydney WDVCS staff worked remotely with a small number of staff attending offices and courts as needed and where safe, to continue service delivery. We adapted to restrictions on clients attending court by obtaining clients' instructions before court, then advocating with Police Domestic Violence Liaison Officers and referring to the Domestic Violence Unit Solicitor for clients requiring legal advice or support. Where required, we follow up with clients after court.

Team members have reported an increase in the complexity of client issues, including defendants' use of the COVID-19 restrictions to excuse the breaching of Apprehended Violence Orders and Family Court Orders. We have also received more referrals for women who are on spousal and student visas and noted an increase in the number of clients needing welfare support by way of food vouchers.

Female defendants

South West Sydney WDVCS assisted female defendants in 201 Apprehended Domestic Violence Order (ADVO) and related charge matters. Of these clients, 80 received legal representation at court. Some of these defendants reported they were the primary victim in the domestic violence incident but were wrongly identified by police as the perpetrator. Others reported they acted in self-defence, or had become a defendant after police made an application for an ADVO to protect them, and the other party filed their own application.



Case Study

Hope and advice for a client with complex needs

Shareen* is a New Zealand citizen who has been living in Australia for over five years. She was involved in multiple complex legal matters including Family Law proceedings and ADVO proceedings. **Her children were relocated to New Zealand by family members without her consent. Shareen ended her marriage to leave long-term violence, fleeing from Western Australia to NSW – the marital home in Western Australia was being repossessed by the bank.**

Despite seeking help from multiple legal firms in New Zealand and Australia and various agencies including the New Zealand Ministry of Justice, Shareen was turned away because of the complexity of her matters and her resource intensive needs. The WDVCS assisted her with some immediate welfare needs and provided referrals to Housing NSW, Department of Health, Department of Human Services, counselling, legal advice and liaison with the NSW Police Force.

The majority of the violence experienced by Shareen occurred in Western Australia. Legal advice was arranged from Legal Aid NSW's Domestic Violence Unit about the possibility of a private application for an ADVO and for advice about her Family Law matters. Shareen was also referred to an immigration specialist at Legal Aid. At Shareen's request the WDVCS provided written information to help her source legal representation for New Zealand Family Court proceedings and to provide evidence of her efforts to comply with court directions.

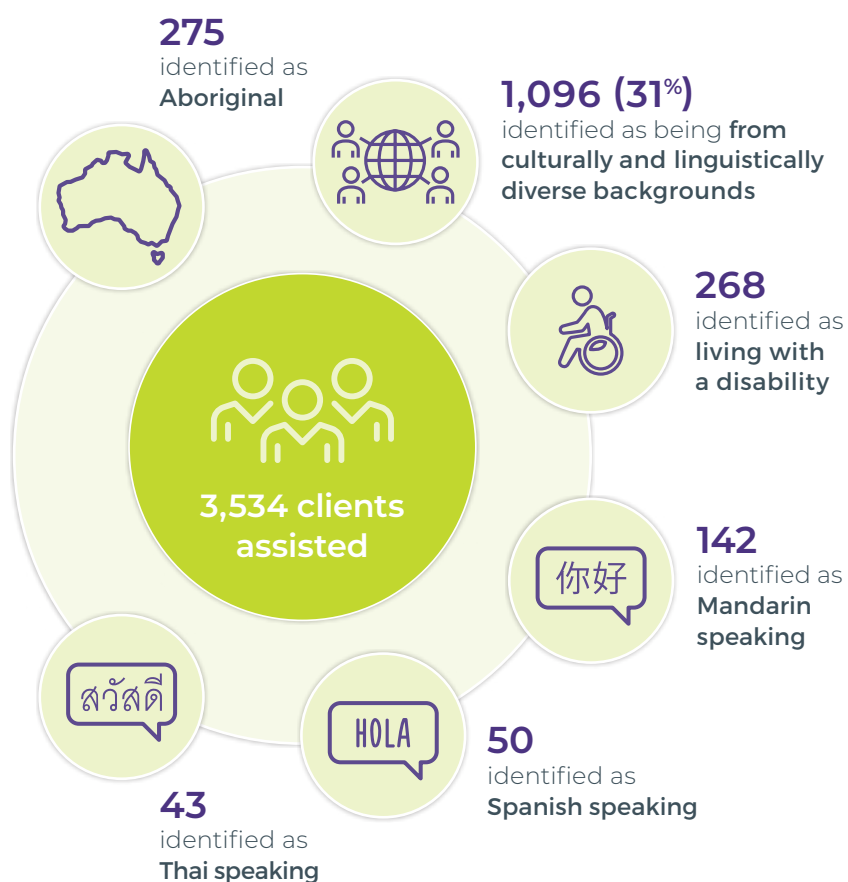
Ultimately Shareen completed a college certificate to transfer to a different field of employment and told us that *"if it wasn't for the service and the workers, I would not be here with you... for the first time I felt like there was hope"*.

** identifying details have been substantially changed to protect client confidentiality*

“*The first time I spoke with the service a few years ago, was the first time I had ever disclosed the violence to anyone. While I didn't wish to do anything at the time, that initial conversation meant so much to me, to have someone listen and understand. I am in a much better place now since leaving the relationship and thank you so much for the information you provided me all those years ago.* **”**
WDVCS client

Sydney Women's Domestic Violence Court Advocacy Service

Our clients



Highlights

3,534 clients assisted with **15,108** service events

126 clients over the age of **70** were assisted

1,217 matters where there was a police or private application for an **ADVO**

882 legal advice/representation for clients by the Domestic Violence Duty Lawyer Scheme

876 final Apprehended Domestic Violence orders obtained by clients

6,438 referrals received through the Central Referral Point

8 Pre-Hearing Clinics conducted

69 Safety Action Meetings conducted

The Sydney WDVCS covers the Central Sydney, Inner West and Eastern Suburbs, is based at the Downing Centre Court in the city and attends Newtown and Waverley Local Courts on AVO list days. The WDVCS is funded by the Women's Domestic Violence Court Advocacy Program, Legal Aid NSW.

During 2019-20 approximately 1,217 (35%) of our clients were the protected persons in police applications for an ADVO and 876 final orders were made for the protection of these clients. The majority of the remaining 2,317 clients were referred by police after a domestic violence incident where no police action resulted. All clients were offered specialist advice, referrals and assistance, and for those clients with an ADVO this assistance included advocacy, targeted referrals (including specialist legal advice) and support throughout the court process.

Safety Action Meetings

Sydney WDVCS convenes and provides the secretariat support for three Safety Action Meetings (SAMs): Central Sydney, Eastern Suburbs and Inner West. In the 2019-2020 period Sydney WDVCS convened 69 SAMs and considered the safety of 455 serious threat victims.

Like our sister team in South West Sydney, we faced some difficulties with reaching agreement with multiple agencies on the best way to conduct the SAMs, but we adapted to run our SAMs to best suit all members, offering a combination of different ways to attend. The situation improved with the relaxing of some of the COVID-19 rules at police stations and we have further adjusted our three SAMs to allow for some face to face participation combined with either teleconferencing or online video conference attendance for the balance of members.

“Thank you for always listening to me... I just want you to know that you've been the only person in the whole system I've been dealing with for years that has actually given me any faith that people care and are actually listening and that means more to me than getting any kind of justice in court.”
WDVCAS client



Case Study

Increasing safety for a client facing serious threats

Miranda* was referred to our team after an incident with her partner, Jim*. She has a two-year-old son and had been in a relationship with Jim for four months. **The incident occurred when Miranda was driving Jim and her son to various locations, and involved physical violence and abuse by Jim.** The incident only ended when Jim disabled the car causing it to stop abruptly and resulting in another car running into the back of Miranda's car. When Miranda reported the incident to police, she told them about previous incidents of abuse, including several occasions where Jim had attempted to strangle her.

Police were very concerned for Miranda and her son's safety, especially because Jim had previously been charged with committing a number of very serious offences, was said to have criminal links and was the subject of an arrest warrant in another jurisdiction.

Miranda was assessed as being at serious threat of death or serious injury and placed on the agenda for the following Safety Action Meeting (SAM). Prior to the SAM, Sydney WDVCS workers made arrangements for Miranda and her son to move into a refuge and police arranged for her to be escorted back to her home to gather their belongings. Jim was arrested, charged and given strict bail conditions and a provisional AVO was made preventing contact with Miranda. At the SAM a safety plan was made and the SAM members and the WDVCS were responsible for contacting Miranda's real estate agent who agreed to terminate her lease under the domestic violence provisions, arranging storage for her belongings while she was in the refuge, making an 'Immediate Needs' application through Victims Services and organising ongoing case management for Miranda. The WDVCS will provide Miranda with court support for the duration of the AVO and charges in the local court.

** identifying details have been substantially changed to protect client confidentiality*

“Victims Services contacted me today and have given me money and I'm just so overwhelmed and grateful. I never would have applied if you didn't encourage me and it's going to help us massively. Thank you so much again for all your help and we are moving today so it couldn't have come at a better time.”
WDVCAS client



Service delivery during COVID-19

During the COVID-19 restrictions Sydney WDVCS team members have mostly worked in the office on a rostered basis and the balance of the time from home. The transition to this arrangement went smoothly and there has been no decrease in the number of clients compared to the same period last year (in fact there was a slight increase in client numbers). Due to the restrictions on clients attending court we have been obtaining our clients' instructions before court and then advocating with the relevant police Domestic Violence Liaison Officers. We then follow up with clients after court where requested and this approach has worked well.

There has been a notable increase in clients needing welfare support by way of food hampers or food vouchers, likely reflecting the financial impacts of the pandemic. Team members have reported an increase in the complexity of client issues, including defendants' use of the COVID-19 restrictions to excuse the breaching of AVOs and Family Court Orders.

Female defendants

During the past 12 months the Sydney WDVCS has assisted female defendants in 176 ADVO and related charge matters. Some of these defendants reported they were the primary victim in the domestic violence incident but were wrongly identified by police as the perpetrator, others reported they acted in self-defence, and others were the defendant in a cross application against them after police made an application for an ADVO to protect them, then the other party filed their own application.



Case Study

Breaking the cycle of violence

Sarah* is an Aboriginal woman and the mother of three children. She experienced violence perpetrated by her partner and the father of her children, Peter*. The abuse was verbal and physical, and at times Peter would intimidate Sarah and take her phone and money. Sarah decided to leave the relationship, but then experienced homelessness because her ex-partner refused to leave the property and change the rental agreement out of his name.

Sarah couch-surfed, accessed short term overnight accommodation and stayed with different family members. However, the children were becoming unsettled and her son was fighting at school. Sarah became worried for her children, as she had been removed as a child from her family and couldn't handle the thought of her own children going into 'the system'. Sarah made the hard decision to leave two of her children with her Aunty.

Police applied for an ADVO to protect Sarah after she separated from Peter. She accessed multiple service systems, including Housing, Centrelink and Family Services. Navigating these complex systems created further challenges and was traumatic for Sarah. Peter sometimes used the service system to continue his perpetration of domestic and family violence, even though police had placed an interim ADVO on him.

After a lengthy period, and with support and advocacy from the WDVCS Aboriginal Specialist worker, Sarah was provided with accommodation, counselling and support to finalise the ADVO. She was able to gain Centrelink payments for her children and finally start to feel she was heading in the right direction. Sarah also moved out of the area and changed her children's school with the help of services. Even though Sarah had left the violence, she still had to deal with her trauma while trying to gain custody of the children in the Family Court. Sarah knows she will have support from the Family Advocacy Support Service at the Family Court when her matter is listed.

** identifying details have been substantially changed to protect client confidentiality*

Working with our Aboriginal clients

During the past 12 months Sydney WDV CAS provided assistance to 275 Aboriginal women, a 20% increase compared to last year. Before the COVID-19 restrictions, our Aboriginal Specialist Worker provided face to face support to Aboriginal women at Downing Centre, Newtown and Waverley Local Courts on AVO list days, as well as providing support to Aboriginal women at the Family Court on Indigenous List Days. During the COVID-19 restrictions this support has been provided by telephone. Our Aboriginal Specialist Worker also attends the three Sydney WDV CAS SAMs to ensure culturally appropriate safety plans are made for any of her clients assessed as 'at serious threat'.

Working with our multicultural clients

Our second largest client group (after English speaking women) during the past 12 months were Mandarin speaking women – we provided assistance to 142 Mandarin speaking women. Our Multicultural Specialist Worker is Mandarin speaking, and provides culturally appropriate services to clients from all language groups. Our third largest client group is Spanish speaking women, and during the past 12 months we assisted 50 Spanish speakers – one of our Domestic and Family Violence Specialist Workers is Spanish speaking.

Hearings project

One ongoing concern for Sydney WDV CAS has been the number of matters going to a defended hearing where no ADVO is granted by the court. Although the WDV CAS cannot influence the court outcome, we play a role in encouraging and supporting our clients to confidently attend court and give evidence if their matter proceeds to hearing. Our role can sometimes be limited by other priorities including the work we do at the mention stage of proceedings where the highest number of final orders are made.

To gain an insight into our hearing statistics we conducted a 'Hearings Project'. Over approximately eight months, a full-time project worker interviewed women before and after their hearing day and obtained feedback about their experiences. Unfortunately, because of COVID-19 there were no hearings during the months of March, April, May and June but the project worker kept in close contact with women whose hearing dates were postponed during this period. A total of 16 women were contacted for the project, and although the numbers were low, we obtained helpful information from the survey to inform our future hearing support. In particular, we identified that being clear about a client's contact person in the team and providing more written information to a client well before the hearing date are important factors in supporting clients who may have to give evidence at a hearing.

Sydney Family Advocacy and Support Service

The Sydney Family Advocacy and Support Service (FASS) is based at the Family Court in the city, where a Sydney WDV CAS team member provides information, referrals, support and safety planning to women with family law matters. The FASS is funded by the Federal government and overseen by Legal Aid NSW. Usually this support is provided in person but through the restrictions of the pandemic, we have provided support by telephone. The Family Court has introduced a COVID-19 court list dedicated to dealing exclusively with urgent Family Law disputes that have arisen as a result of the pandemic.

We have continued to find that our FASS clients have very high needs, particularly those clients who have had matters in the Family Court for extended periods of time. There has been an increased number of women seeking the support of the FASS who are unaware that emotional and financial abuse also constitutes domestic violence.

The FASS is an important part of the WDV CAS service and is providing a much-needed resource for clients with matters at the Family Court and for women anticipating Family Law proceedings and seeking pre-court information and referrals. Feedback from clients and the Family Court staff about the FASS has been, without exception, extremely positive.

Our FASS support workers assisted 268 clients at the Sydney Family Court during the year.

Bankstown Domestic Violence Service

The Bankstown Domestic Violence Service (BDVS) is part of the Integrated Domestic and Family Violence program funded by the NSW Department of Communities and Justice. The integrated service aims to improve outcomes for adults and children through a coordinated response to services for those affected by domestic and family violence. The service is client-centred and responds to clients' needs, both practical and psychological. Support for clients gives them increased access to a range of services such as counselling, police, health and housing.

BDVS provides advocacy and support to those who are still in an abusive relationship or have made the decision to escape the violence. Safety of women and children is paramount. Women are most at risk when they are deciding to leave a violent relationship so we aim to empower women to keep themselves and their family safe through safety planning, risk assessments, and enhancing their capacity to make informed decisions by providing access to information and services.

In 2019, we engaged the Blue Knot Foundation to provide shared training with the Centre's other domestic and family violence teams – the training was focused on enhancing our trauma-informed practice and our group work skills. Prior to restrictions imposed by the pandemic, we also ran groups for women. The Circle of Security program is a relationship-based parenting course to enhance attachment and connection between a parent and child. Women learned more about the importance of secure attachment and their children's emotional and other needs. Our women's support group provides an opportunity for connection between women and teaches skills that support their physical, mental and social wellbeing. Sessions include art therapy and a gardening group.

Our winter school holiday program included cooking and most importantly, an opportunity for women and children to spend time together while learning new skills. Children between the ages of two and 15 participated and made some delicious creations. The Reclaiming Me program provided women with the opportunity to gain information, develop skills, find their own voice, strengthen their self-esteem and increase their sense of empowerment to overcome their trauma experience.

We recognise the importance of close support for our clients whose experiences of trauma are being compounded by frequently changing and uncertain situations during the pandemic. In some cases, we are using technology to provide that support; for example, we have attended online audio-visual meetings with women who were required to be present for the finalising of legal matters during lockdown.

At the beginning of the pandemic there was a short period of reduced demand so we used the time to review internal processes. However, client work became demanding quite quickly with more complex

referrals and more women wanting engagement with our services. We have not been able to run face to face activities but our team has devised creative solutions – for example, instead of a school holiday program, we produced a holiday activity package with products and activities for the family to complete together.



Case Study Safety planning for a young family

Gina* was referred to BDVS soon after the birth of her child. An application had been made for an Apprehended Domestic Violence Order, listing Gina and her two-month-old as protected persons. During the relationship there was a history of controlling behaviour that was psychologically, verbally and emotionally abusive. **Since their separation, Julian* had physically assaulted Gina and had made threats to kill her if she did not allow him to have contact with the baby.**

Gina was not opposed to Julian having time with the child but was worried about the safety due to the child's age, Julian's drug use and his threats to take the child overseas.

Gina was assisted with safety planning, a safety audit and a change of locks at home. We also supported Gina at court when a final ADVO was made and during Family Court proceedings. She participated in activities run by our service to help her develop supportive connections with other women. Gina started attending counselling while she was supported by the BDVS.

At the Family Court, Julian refused the court's request to participate in certain activities to have contact with the baby – he ultimately decided not to have any further contact.

** identifying details have been substantially changed to protect client confidentiality*



133 clients received case management or case coordination services.

Staying Home Leaving Violence Service

The Staying Home Leaving Violence (SHLV) Service is funded by the NSW Department of Communities and Justice (DCJ). SHLV aims to improve the safety and outcomes for women and children escaping domestic and family violence. The service provides intensive case management support to women and their children when women have separated from a violent partner or family member and want to live safely in their home or another home of their choice.

The SHLV team provides long term case management, with safety planning, risk assessment, advocacy, referrals, court support, brokerage, and security upgrades to clients' homes. We also provide women with technological security upgrades where there is significant risk – this can include closed circuit television cameras, dashboard cameras and safety watches.

Partnerships are important to the SHLV which works in collaboration with police, South West Sydney WDVCS, DCJ Housing, DCJ Child Protection, Health and/or other support providers. We develop strong working relationships with our partners such as DCJ (Housing & Child Protection), NSW Police, NSW Health and non-government organisations to ensure positive outcomes for the women and children we work with.

SHLV faced additional support challenges and uncertainty from March 2020 due to the impact of COVID-19. We have had to adjust to a new way of working in order to provide our services and be creative in our service delivery to ensure we continue to connect with our clients and partners. Although our face to face work declined during this period, our case work continued through other mediums, such as text messaging, phone and phone apps to ensure connection. We saw an increase in contacts, as clients' needs for support heightened with additional safety, emotional and welfare needs.

“*The program has been a much-needed support for me over two years. I was thrown into an unfamiliar world of the court system/police. It was a relief to have kind, encouraging people there for court support, to help make my home safer, receive information about other services and to have people that understand domestic violence as it can be crippling and affect every part of your life and your children's.*”

BDVS client



Case Study

Supporting a woman and her children transition to safety

Lourdes* was introduced to the SHLV service when she was being supported by the South West Sydney WDVCS at court in 2018. She was given information about the service and contacted us a couple of weeks later. **Lourdes needed ongoing case management support as she was overwhelmed, feeling unsafe and there had been a number of breaches of the Apprehended Domestic Violence Order (ADVO) by her ex-partner – she wanted to be away from the violent relationship.**

Lourdes then found out she was pregnant and was diagnosed with depression and anxiety – being pregnant had heightened her stress. She was also the parent of a toddler, she had no secure accommodation and was unsure of what direction she wanted to take. The Department of Communities and Justice (DCJ) child protection services were involved because of the domestic violence and concerns for her and her child's safety.

The SHLV team's approach is to empower women to make their own decisions in a safe environment and to develop a plan that will meet her and her children's needs. Lourdes worked with DCJ and SHLV to meet her goals and our caseworker helped Lourdes develop strategies to manage the challenges she was facing.

As there were ongoing breaches of the ADVO by her partner, SHLV supported Lourdes with court support, security upgrades, safety equipment, advocacy, referrals and we liaised with NSW police and their Domestic Violence Liaison Officers. Lourdes now lives with her children in affordable and secure accommodation, works part time, and is in her final year at University. She is in a new healthy relationship.

** identifying details have been substantially changed to protect client confidentiality*

116 clients received case coordination or case management services.

Our partners and funders

Our domestic and family violence services receive funding from the State and Federal governments, administered and managed by Legal Aid NSW and the Department of Communities and Justice. South West Sydney Legal Centre has been an active member of the South West Sydney Domestic and Family Violence Alliance since 2017 – the Alliance is a wonderful example of local collaboration between government and non-government organisations working together to break the cycle of violence. Our sincerest appreciation to our funding bodies and government and community partners.

Thank you

Arab Council Australia	Domestic Violence NSW	Newtown Neighbourhood Centre
ANROWS researchers: Maria Koleth and Elizabeth Orr	Downing Centre Local Court	Newtown Local Court
Asian Women at Work	Eastern Sydney SAM Members	NSW Police – Sydney City and South West Sydney
Bankstown Local Court	Eriko Kinoshita	NSW Department of Education Representatives
Bankstown Family Relationship Centre	Fairfield Council	Rozelle Neighbourhood Centre
Bankstown Women's Health Centre	Fairfield Family Relationship Centre	SDN Brighter Futures (Central and Eastern)
Bankstown Youth Development Services	Fairfield Local Court	Seconded workers from local agencies (Downing Centre, Newtown and Waverley Courts rosters)
Baptist Care	Financial Counselling Foundation	Settlement Services International
Bass Hill Public School	Foreshaw Lawyers	South West Sydney Domestic and Family Violence Alliance
Benevolent Society	Georges Hall Public School	Staying Home Leaving Violence (Redfern, Parramatta and Eastern Suburbs)
Blue Knot Foundation	Gilbert+Tobin Lawyers	St George Community Housing
Bondi Beach Cottage	Hume Community Housing	The Deli
Bonnie Support Services	Immigration Advice and Rights Centre	Uniting Fairfield
Canterbury Bankstown Council	Ingleburn Public School	Victims Services
CatholicCare	Inner West SAM members	Waverley Local Court
Central Sydney SAM Members	Junction Neighbourhood Centre	Weave
Cara House	Leichhardt Women's Community Health Centre	Warwick Farm Neighbourhood Centre
Centrelink Outreach	Lifeline Macarthur	Warringa Baiya Aboriginal Women's Legal Centre
Creating Links	Legal Aid NSW	Women's and Girls' Emergency Centre
Cumberland Women's Health Centre	Liverpool Council	Women's Domestic Violence Court Advocacy Program at Legal Aid NSW
Danny Mikati Consultancy Services	Liverpool Women's Health Centre	Women's Safety NSW
Department of Communities and Justice NSW – Sydney and South West Sydney	Liverpool Women's Resource Centre	
Department of Human Services	Liverpool-Green Valley Domestic Violence service	
Domestic Violence Duty Scheme Solicitors (Downing Centre, Newtown and Waverley Courts)	Liverpool Local Court	
Domestic Violence Unit at Legal Aid NSW	Liverpool Neighbourhood Connections	
	Lou's Place	
	Lydia Shelly, solicitor	
	Moving Out Moving On	
	Mudgin-gal Aboriginal Women's Service	

Governance and finance

South West Sydney Legal Centre continues to see year on year growth in revenue, partly due to program expansion. Gross income for the centre was \$6.811 million, representing a \$1.184 million increase from the prior year; this increase was also due to adoption of some changed accounting standards, increasing the amount of revenue recognition for the financial year. Federal and State governments' income amounted to \$6.665 million.

Total expenses for the year amounted to \$6.467 million; \$5.780 million was spent on program delivery, under our benchmark of no more than 10% of income being spent on administration-related expenses. Further details and the full audited financial report are available on our [website](#).

During 2019-20 the Centre appointed a new auditor and adopted several changes in its reporting format. The Centre also conducted a review of its key financial systems and has been further strengthening its internal controls.

The Management Committee held six meetings over the 2019-20 year. Following a board skills audit and a call for expressions of interest, two vacant positions on the Committee were filled in September 2020. Our gratitude and warmest welcome to Carmela Tassone and Joanna Abraham who have offered their time and expertise to the organisation. Management Committee members are elected annually by the Association's members and are all volunteers. More information about each member of the Management Committee is available on our [website](#).

Following the declaration of the global pandemic, the Committee and its Risk Subcommittee have met via video conference. Our 2020 Annual General Meeting will also be held online using video conference technology.

Committee members

Naushee Rahman	President	<i>appointed 13.11.14</i>
Diana Chang	Vice President & Secretary	<i>appointed 2.5.19</i>
Rakesh Raj	Treasurer	<i>appointed 2.5.19</i>
Joanna Abraham	MC Member	<i>appointed 17.9.20</i>
Caroline Alcorso	MC Member	<i>appointed 6.5.19</i>
Roohi Koya	MC Member	<i>appointed 13.5.19</i>
Carmela Tassone	MC Member	<i>appointed 17.9.20</i>

South West Sydney Legal Centre is an Incorporated Association and a registered charity. It has reporting and compliance obligations to Fair Trading NSW and the Australian Charities and Not-for-profits Commission.



Community Legal Centres Australia is our national peak body – we are accredited by them by participating in a quality assurance process to ensure that we operate according to best practice and industry standards. To maintain accreditation, the organisation must be a member of the NSW Community Legal Centres peak body, comply with the mandatory standards in the Community Legal Centres Australia Risk Management Guide and comply with the accreditation scheme that includes requirements relating to governance, financial and risk management, data management, communications, client satisfaction and cultural safety.



Contacts

Head Office

Level 1, 98-100 Moore Street
Liverpool NSW 2170
PO Box 1042 Liverpool BC 1871
Ph: 02 9601 7777
Email: info@swwslc.org.au

Legal Service

Ph: 02 9601 7777
Fax: 02 9600 6244
Email: info@swwslc.org.au

SWS Women's Domestic Violence Court Advocacy Service

Ph: 02 9601 6988
Fax: 02 9600 6244
Mobile: 0452 515 057
Email: swwsdvccas@swwslc.org.au

Bankstown Local Coordination Point

Ph: 02 9708 0903
Fax: 02 9600 6244

Liverpool Local Coordination Point

Ph: 02 9734 6642
Fax: 02 9600 6244

Fairfield Local Coordination Point

Ph: 02 9734 7107
Fax: 02 9600 6244

Staying Home Leaving Violence Service – Liverpool and Fairfield

Ph: 02 9602 7795
Fax: 02 9600 6244
Email: shlv@swwslc.org.au

Bankstown Domestic Violence Service

Ph: 02 9790 1380
Fax: 02 9600 6244
Mobile: 0426 904 771
Email: bdvs@swwslc.org.au

Sydney Women's Domestic Violence Court Advocacy Service

Ph: 02 9287 7505
Fax: 02 9287 7813
Email: slcp@swwslc.org.au

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www.swwslc.org.au

