

NORTH EAST VICTORIA - THE FORGOTTEN REGION

Victim survivors and perpetrators of violence in North East Victoria do not have the same resources that are available in Victorian Metropolitan or most other Regional areas.

We are calling for a Specialist Family Violence Court and Victoria Legal Aid Office for our Region

North East Victoria continues to record significantly high levels of family violence in the community.

The most recent Crime Statistics (as at 15/9/2022) report the rate of family violence incidents per 100,000 head of population, as **Benalla 81% higher**, **Wangaratta 50% higher** and **Wodonga 52% higher**. The Victorian HRCLS catchment sits **9% higher** than the State average.

In 2021/2022 HRCLS data revealed that almost **82% of our clients** (representing 982 of 1198 clients) indicated that they had experienced or were experiencing family violence.

A national law survey* data showed women experiencing family violence are **10 times** as vulnerable to legal problems as the rest of community. In a 12-month period, survey respondents who had experienced family violence had **20 legal problems** on average, including family civil and criminal, compared to **2 legal** problems for rest of community.

Why do we need a Specialist Family Violence Court?

The first Specialist Family Violence Court (SFVC) was launched at Shepparton in October 2019. Since then, SFVCs at Ballarat, Moorabbin, Heidelberg and Frankston have opened. Planning is currently underway for Melbourne, Broadmeadows, Dandenong, Geelong, Latrobe Valley, Ringwood and Sunshine to become SFVCs. Bendigo is expected to open in January 2023 and Wyndham in 2025.

In addition, the Mildura Magistrates' Court (not a headquarter court) currently has specialist family violence staff, including Koori Men's and Women's practitioners and some enhanced safety features.

There are numerous benefits to a SFVC including:

- Targeted infrastructure - purpose-built environment to maximise safety and choice e.g., use of **separate entrance/exit for victim survivors, safe waiting areas and interview rooms, remote witness facilities and child friendly spaces**
- Specialised family violence team - specially trained Magistrates, Court Registrars and Family Violence practitioners.
- Consistent listing policy and practices across courts, including list capping
- Court ordered men's behaviour change programs to hold perpetrators accountable

*<https://lsj.com.au/articles/domestic-violence-victims-10-times-more-likely-to-suffer-multiple-legal-problems/>

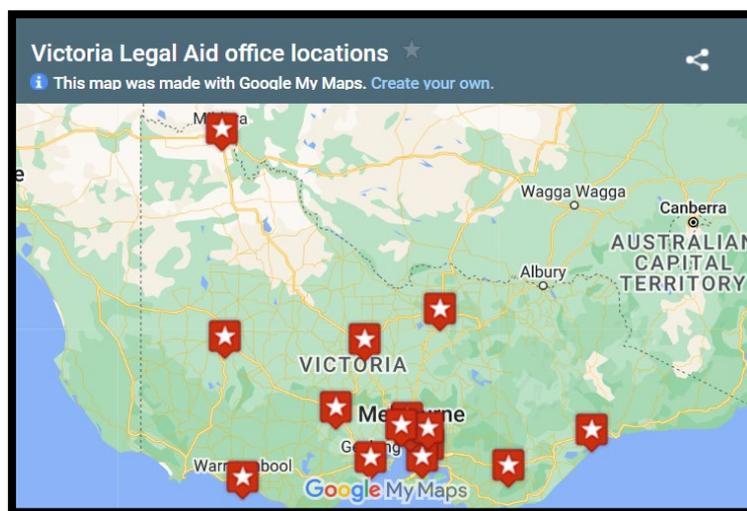
- Enhanced learning and development programs for staff
- Integrated team of Court staff, Agencies and Court based services

Our Magistrates Courts do not have these benefits. Specifically, there are no applicant and respondent family violence practitioners. The current system relies upon Court staff, police and duty lawyers to work within the limited resources available.

Clients who have experienced trauma value and deserve placed-based assistance with trusted local services. Remote access to specialist family violence resources are insufficient.

Why do we need a Victoria Legal Aid (VLA) office?

There are 15 VLA locations across Victoria, but no office in Wodonga or Wangaratta.



HRCLS is the only free legal service in NE Victoria, with the closest being Shepparton.

HRCLS is under-resourced to provide services to clients.

There is a widely acknowledged lack of private family lawyers undertaking legal aid work in NE Victoria.

In 2021/22 HRCLS turned away 1471 clients, and assisted 1198 clients.

Turn-aways were primarily due to:

- lack of appointments available
- conflicts of interest – increasing with each year
- casework guidelines excluding certain areas of law (e.g. criminal, employment)

There are far too many people missing out on services that are available in other areas of Victoria.