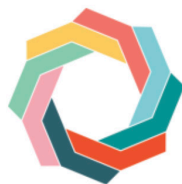


FIRST STEP LEGAL

Annual Update
2024 – 2025



This Centre is accredited by



Community Legal Centres
Australia

WE'RE PROUD TO BE A MEMBER OF THE



FEDERATION
OF COMMUNITY LEGAL CENTRES VIC

Our Approach

First Step Legal's mission to increase access to justice for particularly vulnerable people by bringing integrated legal help to them, wherever they present for support. Since 2008, initially through its work with First Step – a medical, mental health and addiction hub in St Kilda – First Step Legal has intuited the benefits of a triangular, therapeutic model of care and observed the strong sense of trust this model facilitates with clients to ensure their legal issues do not derail their efforts, towards their recovery, or to meet even their most basic needs – stable housing, improved mental health, and positive human connections.

In recent years, First Step Legal has embedded its legal services in health, housing and human settings to build evidence of the impact of scaffolding legal and non-legal support around the most marginalised people in our community, and remains committed to its health justice partnership the First Step Program, Windana Residential Rehabilitation, Alfred Health (St Kilda Road Outpatient Client), Better Health Network and Launch Housing – East St Kilda and South Melbourne. First Step Legal assists people accessing these services with their criminal charges, family violence intervention orders, parenting and property disputes, as well as any debts resulting from infringements.

This year, First Step Legal has articulated the evidence that bringing integrated legal help to particularly marginalised, vulnerable people wherever they present for help, increases their subjective assessment of their personal wellbeing by 21% over a 12-month period. First Step Legal is proud to articulate that our work brings our clients 12 points closer to the general population's average personal wellbeing score of 75, and reduces experiences of unemployment, financial disadvantage, family violence, homelessness, and acute mental health admissions.



Overview of Operations



303

clients were referred to First Step Legal



292

clients assisted



292

court appearances



43

secondary consultations



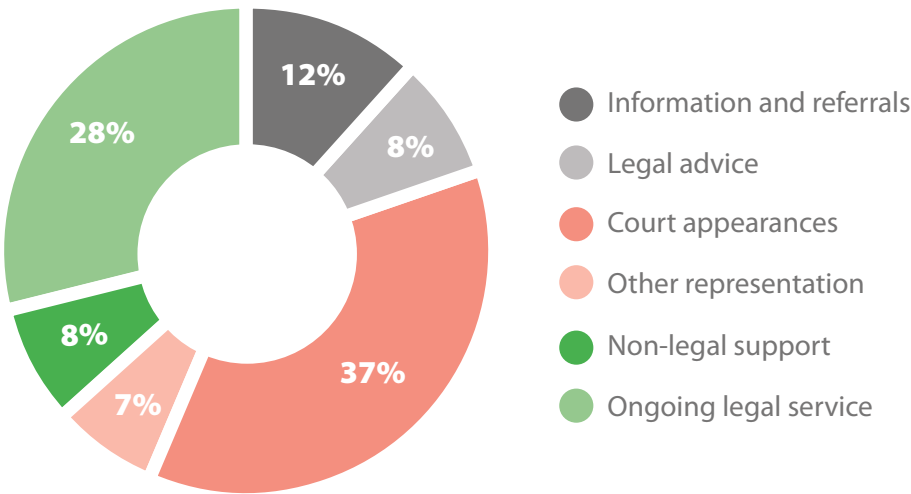
172

instances of non-legal support

Our Impact

In 2024-2025, First Step Legal provided the following services:

Services provided

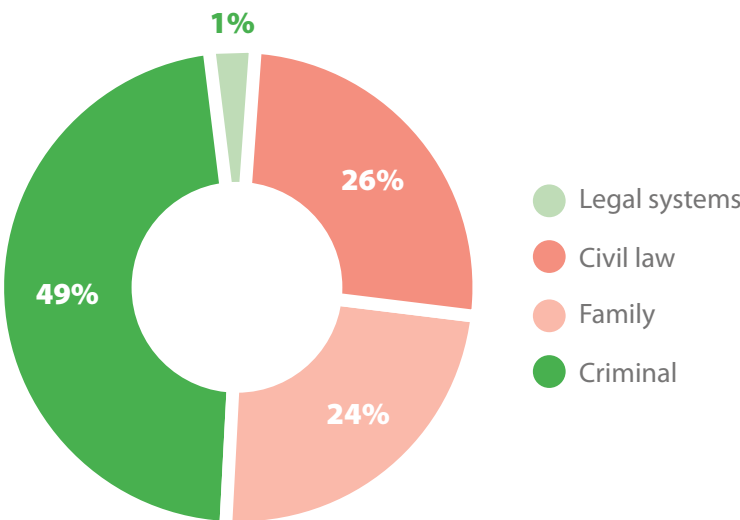


Criminal law continues to represent the largest percentage of services provided accounting for 49% of our total matters. This increase is partly driven by our Men Who Use Violence program (SWAP), which continues to generate important referrals in this area and comprises a significant share of the 37% of our total court appearances.

Family law services make up 24% of our matters, including divorce, parenting agreements and property settlement, with an expanded effort to influence accountability amongst men who use violence.

Civil law accounts for 26% of the assistance we provide, with a substantial portion dedicated to supporting people experiencing homelessness through our ongoing partnership with Launch Housing.

Areas of law





Fran

Family Violence and Homelessness

Fran was referred to FSL from Launch Housing. She is a single mother of 2 children and at the time of the referral, Fran was 8 months pregnant with her third child. Fran was a victim of significant family violence perpetrated by her ex-partner, the father of her children.

To meet Fran's immediate needs, and taking a trauma informed, multi-disciplinary approach, the support from Fran's housing worker at Launch Housing and lawyer at First Step Legal was immediately bolstered by First Step Legal's social worker who provided support by instigating a care coordination plan with Fran's support workers, and pursuing funding opportunities.

An application for funding via the Council for Single Mothers meant Fran and her children could receive \$580 of funds, which went toward paying for pre-made meals and a new car battery for when Fran's third child arrived. Further applications for NPS FFB funding secured enough funds for one month's rent which enabled Fran to also furnish her home to meet the needs of her new baby.

As Fran re-established herself to meet her young family's essential needs, First Step Legal assessed the family violence intervention order in place to protect Fran and her children. It prevented Fran's ex-partner from contacting her and the children, and because Fran was supported by Launch Housing, her ex-partner did not know where she was residing. As such, Fran's ex-partner had not had contact with his children for months and pursued legal action. FSL supported Fran in response to her ex-partner's application for parenting orders. Within six months (a brief period with respect to family law matters) Fran's legal matters were resolved, and orders were made by consent between Fran and her ex-partner.

The collaboration between First Step Legal's lawyer and social worker in these circumstances efficiently and effectively addressed Fran's practical need to formalize a workable parenting plan with her ex-partner and reestablish herself in a very practical sense with accommodation, transport, and food. Given Fran was about to become a mother for the third time, such tangible support structures proved critical to reshaping Fran's future and that of her three young children.



Our Specialist Approach to Men who use Family Violence

Safety, Wellbeing and Accountability Program

First Step Legal has received four-year funding under the National Partnership in Domestic, Family and Sexual Violence Response to design and deliver a specialist legal assistance program addressing male family violence. Centred around our core objectives of Safety, Well-being and Accountability, this program is known as SWAP.

Rationale

Contact between the justice system and perpetrators of family violence presents an opportunity to hold individuals to account while providing treatment and support to address the underlying drivers of their behaviour. However, an increasing body of research indicates that many adult respondents to intervention orders simply do not understand the conditions that orders contain and that breach rates are particularly high among respondents with mental health conditions and cognitive impairment, including acquired brain injury.

FSL believes that engaging with men to build an understanding of and compliance with family violence related orders is vital to the safety of victim survivors. This need is most acute where there are intersecting family violence and family law matters.

The SWAP model has been designed with two distinct components: legal education for men participating in a Men's Behaviour Change program and specialist legal assistance for men who use family violence. Our work with men is informed by seven core, evidence-based principles, including promoting insight and accountability, adopting trauma-informed approaches and ensuring victim survivor safety.

“I had this very strong feeling that my lawyer was really trying to help me, really trying to help.”

Legal Education

FSL's initiative to embed legal education in the Men's Behaviour Change Program flourished in 2024-25 as we refined the content and delivery of materials based on participant feedback and expanded the program to include additional Men's Behaviour Change Program partners. Aside from our foundation partnership with Better Health Network, we now work with Anglicare, Gateway Health in rural northeast Victoria and Meli in Geelong.

The broad purpose of the legal education session is to provide an accurate description of how the legal system works and to develop realistic expectations of court and legal processes. More specifically, the legal education session aims to:

- increase men's understanding of **court and legal process** (including the concept of systems abuse)
- increase men's understanding of **compliance with restrictive orders** and what constitutes breach
- increase men's understanding of the **family law system** and its focus on the best interests of the child, rather than a rights-based approach to parenting
- address **myths and misconceptions** regarding court and legal processes (as risk to victim survivors can increase when unrealistic expectations aren't met).

We have now delivered multiple legal education sessions across our partner organisations and received positive feedback regarding their value. This information is being fed into a process evaluation led by external men's behaviour change expert, Rodney Vlasis.

There has been significant interest in the legal education initiative from a range of agencies. FSL has showcased the model via joint presentations with Better Health Network at the National Stop Violence Conference and the International Conference on Social Work and Mental Health.

Legal Assistance

FSL provides discrete legal advice, and ongoing legal casework and representation to male respondents of family violence intervention orders and/or men charged with family violence offending. Importantly, we also offer a specialist family law service to assist with family law related matters where family violence is present.

Priority access is given to individuals with complex needs including mental health conditions, cognitive impairment and/or active substance use. The service model leverages FSL's partnerships with mental health, alcohol and other drug services and family violence providers to offer an integrated legal response that holds men visible and accountable, while ensuring their engagement with necessary interventions.

SWAP at Court

Feedback from both clients and partner services is that FSL's specialist, high accountability model of family violence lawyering is needed much earlier in men's contact with the justice system. Consequently, in the past year FSL has designed a new SWAP service component for men appearing at the Specialist Family Violence Court (SFVC) of the Melbourne Magistrates' Court.

SWAP at Court aims to address several critical gaps in existing services for male respondents within the Victorian courts, most notably, the absence of a therapeutic model providing access to targeted interventions.

Consultation with a range of key court stakeholders including Victoria Police and Victoria Legal Aid provided strong in principle endorsement of the SWAP at Court concept and an appetite to test it in practice. We are currently piloting the model and engaging with key stakeholders to inform its ongoing delivery.

“I wouldn't be here now if I had not found First Step Legal. I wouldn't be here and in the position I am now, seeing my children, on good terms with my ex-partner, working a full-time job, very stable doing well.”

●●● Client Story – Alex

Alex was referred to FSL through our health justice partner Meli where he had been intermittently involved with individual and group Men's Behavior Change interventions.

Alex presented with multiple, complex needs. He had a significant trauma history involving early child abuse, extended periods of rough sleeping during adolescence and significant physical health issues. Alex had a borderline personality disorder and ADHD. He struggled to regulate his emotions and often manifested sadness as anger.

In June 2024 Alex sought FSL's assistance in relation to multiple breaches of a FVIO and related serious criminal charges. Alex agreed to accept FSL's unique model of legal help that required him to address the drivers of his offending. However, around this time Alex's mental health deteriorated rapidly: he was actively self-harming and committing further offences. Alex was remanded in custody in August 2024.

FSL agreed to provide Alex with ongoing representation and began the long and intensive process of building Alex's insight into his behaviour and his motivation to reconnect with treatment. Though bail was rejected due to the history of offending, over multiple contacts with Alex in custody and several court appearances, FSL and Meli worked in partnership to help Alex develop some real insight into his relationship with ex-partner and the causes of his use of violence. Alex agreed to reconnect with his psychiatrist.

Throughout the court process, FSL drew on their deep knowledge of Alex and made submissions regarding his upbringing as a victim of family violence, his history of severe mental illness and his current commitment to treatment. Ten of 15 charges were withdrawn. Alex plead guilty to the remaining five received an imprisonment term of 75 days and a 12-month Community Corrections Order.

FSL and Meli continued to support Alex as he transitioned from prison to the community. He is currently engaged in treatment, attending the Men's Behavior Change program and, importantly, has moved away from the geographic area in which his ex-partner resides. Alex has not committed further offences.



What our clients say

Throughout 2024 - 2025, Laura Brennan and a team of dedicated staff and volunteers have collected feedback on clients' experience of First Step Legal. This work allows us to promptly address any legal issues that arise and ensure our clients are connected to the relevant Health Justice Partnerships, or elsewhere, if they are struggling with underlying issues.

Humbling anecdotal feedback from our clients motivates us in this work.

As part of our ongoing commitment to improving our service, we ask all clients about their experience with First Step Legal once their legal issues have been resolved.

91% understand their legal issues

91% agreed FSL were easy to contact

99% agreed FSL listened to their problems

99% said they feel safe and welcome

99% said they felt FSL met their cultural needs

100% were satisfied with FSL outcomes

99% would recommend FSL

92% were satisfied with their legal outcome

What made the most difference?

“Nicole took the time to listen to my entire story, **my perspective** and how I felt about it.”

“It made it **less stressful** because I had no idea, so I was able to be advised on things that I had no idea about. Having someone to speak on my behalf in the actual court appearance made a difference.”

“Tom was absolutely fantastic, Hannah was absolutely fantastic, everyone was very helpful I felt very **cared for and understood**. I didn't feel judged and I would recommend it to anyone.”

“First Step Legal always looked after me and I am always **happy to refer others** because of my experience.”

“I am **grateful a service like this exists** because I do not know what I would have done, so I really appreciate having this kind of support.”

“I really want to give praise First Step Legal for your advocacy and sensitivity to my legal matter, really appreciate all the support during a stressful time it gave me a **peace of mind**.”

In keeping with our long-term commitment to whole of life improvements for our client, we also keep in regular contact once their matter has resolved by obtaining feedback at the close of their matter and at 6 and 12 months afterwards.

70% of client surveys as part of this initiative did not report any new legal issues.

Our people

In support of our Director **Tania Wolff**, First Step Legal has appointed **Laura Brennan** as Deputy Director of Legal Services. As Practice Manager, Laura led the daily effort to evaluate our service and brings her intimate knowledge of the impact of integrated legal services in different contexts, to her role as Deputy Director.

First Step Legal continues to benefit from the significant justice, human services, policy and program design expertise of consultant **Lisa Ward**. As well as spearheading our academic evaluation, Lisa continues to identify and pursue innovative ways for First Step Legal to reach priority cohorts, including those experiencing homelessness and those perpetrating family violence.

Morgan Adams has led the practice as Principal Lawyer, bringing his extraordinary compassion, character and criminal law expertise, to the achievement of high-quality legal resolutions that assist in reducing our clients' further contact with the justice system, and gives our clients a voice in decisions regarding the conduct of their legal matter and building their capability to deal with future matters.

In a newly created role as Health Justice Partnership Lead, **Tom Mainwaring** has led First Step Legal's efforts to build the capacity of our practitioners and distil and document our modes of practice. Tom brings his extensive experience in working collaboratively across disciplines to our commitment to ensure our legal staff have increased capability to assess the impact of health issues on clients and the progress of their legal matters, and our partner staff have increased capability to identify legal problems and refer clients to appropriate legal services.

First Step Legal has been bolstered by our second secondee from Victoria Legal Aid **Jess Dean**, who is an accredited specialist in criminal law who spent eight years working in the community sector prior to becoming a lawyer, where she has practiced at both Victorian Aboriginal Legal Service and Victoria Legal Aid.

Jess joins our dedicated team including **Monica Ghobrial** (Family Lawyer) **Nicole Kohn** (Generalist Lawyer), **Will Dirckze** (Generalist Paralegal) and **Claudia Brophy-Odgers** (Social Worker), **Kiran Sandhu** (Administrative Legal Services Manager) and **Karina Cerff** (Practice Coordinator) in service of our clients, and we are grateful for their commitment and dedication to our vision.

Our thanks

We extend our heartfelt thanks and appreciation to our long-standing partners, supporters, and friends: Jane Tewson and the Igniting Change family; Virgin Unite; Susan Ball, Katrina Webster and the team at VLSB+C; Trish Edwards and the Portland House Foundation; Emma Harrison and the Gourlay Charitable Trust; Anita Hopkins in her various roles; Laini Liberman; Suzi Carp and Modara Pines; Talya Masel at Humanity Foundation; and Dahlia Fried and everyone at the Spotlight Foundation. We remain deeply indebted to each of you for your enduring commitment to our work.

We are delighted to welcome Fiona Germinder and the Pratt Foundation to our community. We are truly grateful for your belief in and support of what we do.

We also acknowledge with gratitude and appreciation Sean Selleck and the pro bono team he leads at Baker McKenzie for their invaluable support of First Step Legal not only this year but over many previous years.

We thank and appreciate Rodney Vlasis and Effy Lagos for the skill and expertise they have demonstrated in designing and delivering innovative legal education into men's behaviour change programs, alongside our valued partners in this important work: Better Health Network, Meli, Gateway Health, U-turn, and Anglicare.

We also wish to thank Darryl Annett for his care, generosity, and comradery as a criminal law consultant, guiding and supporting our emerging criminal lawyers.

Our ongoing success would not be possible without the dedication and generosity of all our clinical partners across every one of our health and housing partnerships. We thank and acknowledge each and every one of you for the vital role you play.

Finally, and most importantly, we thank our clients. You inspire us every day with your courage, resilience, and determination. Thank you for placing your trust, your stories, and your lives in our hands.



Tania Wolff,
Director
First Step Legal





**FIRST
STEP
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LEGAL**