



Evaluating the Outcomes of First Step Legal's Health Justice Partnerships

December 2024

Foreword

First Step Legal has been pioneering health justice partnerships since 2008. We are committed to assisting some of the most disadvantaged and disenfranchised members of the community and bringing legal help to them wherever they present for support.

We do this by partnering with services across the mental health, addiction, family violence and homelessness sectors. Working hand in glove with our client's clinician or case worker, we provide an integrated legal service that supports the whole person, breaking down traditionally siloed services.

Unfortunately, while integrated legal services are accepted as best practice, there's limited empirical data regarding their effectiveness.

To address this deficit, in 2021 First Step Legal committed to building the evidence base regarding health justice partnerships. This required heavy investment in our internal capabilities. It involved design of data collection tools; implementation of an electronic file management system; integration of data collection processes into daily workflows, and skilling and motivating our staff to value data collection and dedicate time and effort accordingly.

This report is the culmination of these efforts.

We thank our partners at the School of Population and Global Health, University of Melbourne for their efforts and staying the distance with us as we became a research literate legal practice.

At a time when government is searching for solutions to complex, intersecting human problems across multiple service domains, this research provides clear evidence of the value of justice partnerships. It affirms their benefits for clients, not only in accessing legal help but in improving overall health and wellbeing. It also talks to the enormous advantages that both health and legal staff derive from integrated ways of working.

This report is dedicated to all those people with complex needs who have struggled to get the legal help they need, when and where they need it. We hope that the learning it generates will make a tangible difference.



Tania Wolff, Director Legal Services
First Step Legal

Acknowledgements

This work was made possible by a generous grant from the Victoria Law Foundation.

It draws on the outcome evaluation conducted by First Step Legal in partnership with the University of Melbourne's School of Population and Global Health. We are deeply grateful to Dr Jesse Young and Alex Campbell for their research expertise and rigour.

Independent researcher and criminologist, Dr Karen Gelb, was responsible for the secondary analysis and commentary provided in this report: her ability to make complex data readily accessible and communicate headline findings was invaluable.

Many people assisted with the research reported here, in particular, the staff of First Step Legal who committed to rigorous data collection processes over several years. We thank you. We also appreciate the efforts of our health justice partners who reflected so thoughtfully on the impact of our integrated model.

We would like to thank Suzie Forell from Health Justice Australia for her insightful contribution to early research design; Lisa Rebecca and Hannah Barker for their research assistance; Thomas Ponissi, Alex Rhodes and Suhyun Park for administrative support; Laura Brennan for championing the project and building enthusiasm when energy was flagging and Lisa Ward for initiating and overseeing the project throughout.

Finally, we would like to acknowledge the First Step Legal clients who, despite many competing needs, gave generously of their time and themselves to capture and quantify the impact of integrated legal help.

Funded by

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Foundation

*This report was written on the unceded lands of the Yalukit Willam clan of the Boon Wurrung people.
We pay our respects to all Aboriginal elders, past and present.*

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Summary of key findings

This evaluation found that engagement with First Step Legal's health justice partnership service model is associated with increased:

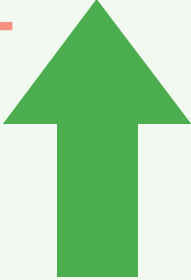
- client health and wellbeing
- client capability and confidence to address their legal issues
- client access to justice
- client satisfaction with legal outcomes
- professional capability among health, housing and legal staff.
- job satisfaction and reduced stress among health, housing and legal staff.

Client health and well being

The evaluation captured changes in clients' subjective assessment of their personal wellbeing over the life of the study using the Personal Wellbeing Index -Adult, a validated 8-question tool. This tool is used to measure the wellbeing of the general community, enabling First Step Legal to benchmark its client cohort against the Australian population.

The evaluation found that clients' average score for personal wellbeing increased by 21% over the life of the study from 56 (out of a possible 100) at intake, to 68 at the 12-month survey period. Increases were reported at varying levels across all eight sub domains of wellbeing. This improvement brought First Step Legal's client group 12 points closer to the average wellbeing score of the general community of 75.

Clients' average score for
**PERSONAL
WELLBEING**
increased by
21%
over a 12-month period



Regarding other determinants of health and wellbeing, engagement with First Step Legal was associated with reduced financial vulnerability and substantially reduced vulnerability with respect to family violence and homelessness.

While the reported prevalence of mental and physical health conditions did not change substantially over the study period, clients' use of medication for both mental and physical health conditions increased, perhaps reflecting their high level of engagement with treatment services. The proportion of clients with one or more hospital emergency department visits decreased over the twelve-month period of the study, as did the proportion of clients with one or more acute mental health admissions.

Client capability and confidence to address legal issues

First Step Legal's clients consistently reported improvements in their confidence and capability to address their legal issues. This was particularly so for clients who had recurring legal problems and/or for those with particularly complex personal needs. Further, many clients valued being more engaged in the legal matters and more active in their legal processes. There is evidence that the HJP model instilled client trust in legal practitioners and legal processes more generally.

Access to justice

Both clients and partner staff reported that the HJP model significantly improved client access to legal support. There was broad consensus that having legal services co-located with health services was the key reason that people accessed legal help. Many clients noted that they had more trust and confidence in a lawyer who was recommended by a health partner. The simple and convenient referral to on-site legal staff meant that many clients who otherwise would not have been able to access legal services were able to benefit from First Step Legal's support.

Legal outcomes

Clients were particularly impressed with their legal outcomes under the health justice partnership model when compared with their previous experiences with other legal practices. Clients talked about the clear communication that legal staff used to explain complex legal terminology and processes. This was seen as a point of difference for First Step Legal's model in so far as it improved client engagement, and ultimately, client satisfaction with the legal outcome. Staff repeatedly identified how the inherently close relationship between health/housing and legal staff contributed to positive legal outcomes at court. For health staff, the impact of the partnership was felt to extend beyond the fact of the legal outcome to procedural justice aspects as well: they felt their clients had a voice in the legal process in ways they hadn't previously, creating a sense of trust and safety.

Professional capability

Partner health and housing staff identified many ways in which the partnership model had enhanced their ability to identify legal issues and to make referrals to appropriate legal services. They commented on the importance of the training that First Step Legal had provided, and the value of secondary consultations. Legal staff reported increased capability to identify the impact of health and social issues on their clients and their legal matters and to communicate this to the court. Legal staff also noted that their ability to discuss the clients' range of non-legal needs had improved considerably.

Job satisfaction and stress reduction

Partner health and housing staff reported that being able to help their clients with a wider range of issues improved job satisfaction. Legal staff reported that the more intensive, holistic and relational approach of the integrated model meant that their job satisfaction was far higher than in a more traditional legal service. Both staff groups reported increased job satisfaction arising from cross disciplinary collaboration and the acquisition of new skills. Cross discipline differences were noted, but generally perceived as creating a positive tension and enhancing client outcomes.

With greater job satisfaction and perceptions of genuine partnership, levels of work-related stress were reported to be lower in the health justice partnership model. Health staff in particular reported finding it valuable to be working alongside legal staff as it made it easier and faster to access informal advice on minor legal issues, reducing their anxieties about their work and freeing them up to focus on their core business.

Conclusion

This evaluation found strong evidence to support the efficacy of integrated legal help. Given the prominent intersection between legal need, poor health and social disadvantage, the evaluation indicates that health justice partnerships can advance both health and legal equity among people with complex needs.

1. Introduction

First Step Legal

Health justice partnerships (HJPs) are collaborations that embed legal help within healthcare services to deliver an integrated response to people's health and legal needs. First Step Legal was established in 2008 as a health justice partnership embedded within First Step, a mental health and addiction services hub in St Kilda, Melbourne, Australia.

First Step Legal is an accredited community legal centre, with a primary focus on criminal law, family law, family violence, fines and victims of crime assistance matters. In recent years, First Step Legal has expanded its service offerings and now delivers integrated legal services in five different service settings:

- First Step, a community based mental health/addiction hub
- Better Health Network's family violence program
- Alfred Health's community care outpatients' service (the St Kilda Road Clinic)
- Windana's residential drug treatment therapeutic community in the regional town of Maryknoll
- Launch Housing's crisis service for women at East St Kilda and transitional housing for families at South Melbourne.

“First Step Legal's approach aligns with international best practice models that dictate 'whole of person', cross-discipline responses for people with complex needs”

First Step Legal's location within these settings enables it to find and connect with people whose often serious legal needs may otherwise go unmet. The practice specialises in client complexity, supporting people with multiple and intersecting problems. First Step Legal's approach aligns with international best practice models that dictate 'whole of person', cross-discipline responses for people with intersectional needs.

The University of Melbourne evaluation

First Step Legal has partnered with the School of Population and Global Health, University of Melbourne to conduct an academically robust evaluation of the impact of its five health justice partnerships. This was conducted over a two and a half-year period from July 2021 - December 2023.

Collecting both quantitative and qualitative data, the evaluation was primarily designed to test the assumption that improved access to legal assistance has a positive impact on clients' health and wellbeing, as well as their legal outcomes.

The quantitative data measured clients' socio-demographic characteristics, the outputs of the service referral pathways to and from the HJP, and the impact of the HJP in terms of clients' health, wellbeing and legal outcomes. The data were collected via First Step Legal's electronic file management and data collection system, Actionstep, which was implemented at the same time as the evaluation began. Three sources of quantitative data were included in the evaluation:

- Client triage and extended baseline surveys, administered by lawyers during initial meetings with clients.
- Client exit surveys, administered by other staff once clients had ended their engagement with First Step Legal services.
- Follow-up surveys, administered by other staff at 3, 6, 12 and 24 months after baseline.

Quantitative data were collected in respect of a baseline sample of 161 clients, all of whom received ongoing legal representation from First Step Legal. Clients who received information and referral and/or one- off advice were not included in the study sample.

The qualitative data captured client and staff perceptions of the impact of the HJP. The data were collected via interviews with a small group of clients from each partner service (17 in all), clinical staff and senior managers from each partner (14 in all), and First Step Legal's legal staff working in each HJP (six in all). Interviews were conducted towards the end of the evaluation period.

Impact outcomes

First Step Legal has identified a number of intended areas of impact for its clients and practitioners (health/housing partner staff and legal staff) that drive its work and that are referenced throughout this report.

For clients, the impact of First Step Legal's work is intended to be seen in the following areas:

- access to justice
- legal outcomes
- health and well-being
- capability and confidence to address legal issues
- future contact with the justice system

For staff, areas of impact are intended as follows:

- health and housing staff capability to identify legal problems and refer clients to appropriate legal services
- legal staff capability to assess the impact of health issues on clients and the progress of their legal matters
- trust and sharing of multidisciplinary knowledge between health, housing and legal staff
- job satisfaction among health, housing and legal staff

This report

This report presents key quantitative and qualitative findings regarding First Step Legal's intended impacts.

The report is designed to complement the academic paper published by the University of Melbourne's School of Population and Global Health.¹ It is written for First Step Legal's health partners, current and future government and philanthropic funders and other service providers who are interested in the evidence regarding integrated practice.

The report is structured as follows:

- **Section 2** provides an overview of the key features of the client group with whom First Step Legal works to show the complex challenges facing the cohort.
- **Section 3** forms the crux of the report, presenting findings on the impact of First Step Legal's work on clients' health and wellbeing and those aspects of the service model which are most valued by clients, partners and First Step Legal staff.
- **Section 4** offers insight into clients' previous use of legal services and the impact of these experiences on people's sense of agency, capacity and confidence to address their legal issues.
- **Section 5** presents findings on the impact of the health justice partnership model on health service and legal service staff.

1. Alexander Campbell, Lisa Ward, Laura Brennan and Jesse T Young (2024) *Health justice partnerships and health, social, and legal outcomes in Melbourne, Australia: A mixed-methods study*. University of Melbourne.

2. Key features of the client group

During initial meetings with First Step Legal lawyers, 161 clients took part in triage and extended baseline surveys during the evaluation period. This section presents an overview of their key socio-demographic and health and wellbeing characteristics at that first contact.

Socio-demographic characteristics

The clients who participated in this evaluation were more likely to be female (56%) than male (44%), with an average age of 43 years.

Clients were experiencing significant financial disadvantage, with almost two-thirds (63%) being unemployed at the time of their first contact with First Step Legal (Figure 1) and most with low incomes: one in three (35%) earning less than \$400 per week and a further 43% earning between \$400 and \$799 per week. Only one in five (22%) reported earning above the median weekly Victorian income of \$800 per week (Figure 2).

Figure 1: Employment status, all clients at baseline (n=161)

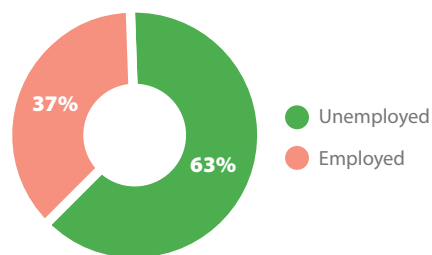
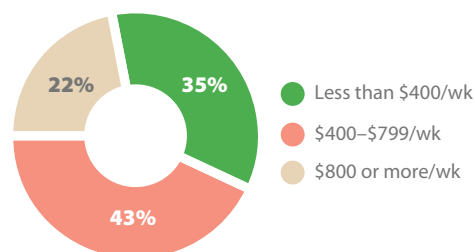


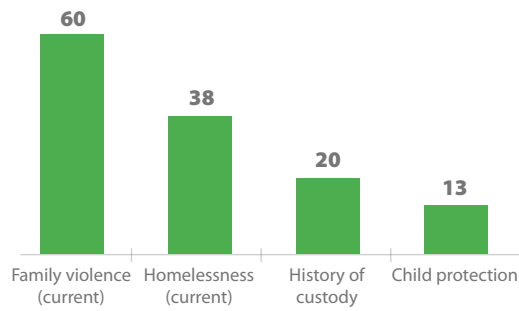
Figure 2: Weekly income, all clients at baseline (n=161)



“First Step Legal’s clients experience significant disadvantage across multiple life domains”

High levels of vulnerability were also reported by First Step Legal clients during their initial intake and baseline surveys. Six in 10 (60%) reported current experiences of family violence, and almost four in 10 (38%) were currently homeless or at risk of homelessness. Clients also reported negative experiences in their backgrounds, with one in five (20%) having spent time in youth or adult custody and one in eight (13%) having been involved with child protection during childhood (Figure 3).

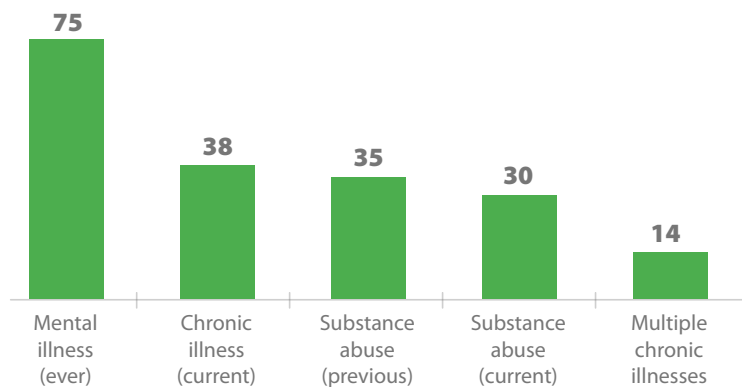
Figure 3: Reported vulnerability, all clients at baseline (%) (n=161)



Finally, high levels of medical vulnerability were also reported among clients at baseline: three-quarters (75%) had been diagnosed with a mental illness at some point, around one in three reported a current chronic illness (38%), prior substance use (35%) or current substance use (30%), and one in seven reported having multiple chronic illnesses (14%) (Figure 4).

Each of these areas – mental health, physical health and substance use – is examined in more detail in the sections that follow.

Figure 4: Reported medical vulnerability, all clients at baseline (%) (n=161)



“Three-quarters of First Step Legal’s clients had been diagnosed with a mental illness”

Mental health characteristics

Compared to the general Australian population,² First Step Legal clients were substantially more likely to report a history of mental health challenges. The 161 clients who completed a baseline survey reported substantial mental health challenges:

- Three-quarters (75%) had been diagnosed with a mental illness at some point in their lives.
- More than four in 10 (45%) reported multiple mental illness diagnoses.
- Almost three-quarters (73%) reported being in mental health treatment at the time of the baseline survey, with 55% reporting being on mental health medication.
- Thirty people (19%) reported at least one inpatient admission for a mental health issue in the previous 12 months.

² Australian Bureau of Statistics (2023). *National Study of Mental Health and Wellbeing, 2020-2022*. Table 1.3.

Physical health characteristics

First Step Legal clients also experienced more physical health issues than the general population:

- More than one-third (38%) reported having a chronic physical illness.
- One in seven (14%) clients reported having multiple chronic illnesses.
- The most common illnesses were chronic pain (11%) and back pain (7%), with 27% on medication for their current illness.
- More than one-third (37%) reported at least one emergency department visit in the previous 12 months; 12% reported three or more visits.

Substance use

Levels of substance use – both licit and illicit – were fairly high among First Step Legal clients. Of the 161 clients who completed a baseline survey:

- Almost one-third (30%) were currently using some form of licit or illicit substance. Alcohol and tobacco were most commonly being used by clients, with the most common illicit drug being cannabis, used by 10% of clients.
- One in four (24%) reported that they currently or previously injected drugs.
- One in seven (14%) were receiving medication-assisted treatment for opioid dependence.
- Those who reported current substance use were more likely to use only one type of substance: 17% of clients used only one substance at baseline, while 14% reported poly-drug use. Among the 27 people reporting single-drug use, 12 were using alcohol only and nine tobacco only. Four people used only cannabis and two only methamphetamines/amphetamines.
- More than one-third of clients (35%) reported that they were abstinent at the time of the baseline survey.

Comparing First Step Legal clients to the general population

First Step Legal clients face far greater disadvantage and complex challenges than the general population. They are 1.4 times more likely than the Victorian population to have no more than a Year 12 education, 1.6 times more likely to earn less than \$800 per week, 8.8 times more likely to have received Jobseeker or Jobkeeper benefits, and 12.6 times more likely to be unemployed.

Clients' physical and mental health is worse and presents more complex challenges. Clients are 1.8 times more likely than the general population to have a history of mental illness. They are 1.4 times more likely to smoke, 1.7 times more likely to use illicit drugs and 3.6 times more likely to report current alcohol use. While there is no difference between First Step Legal clients in current chronic physical illness, clients are 1.6 times more likely to report having multiple such illnesses.

The most significant differences are seen in two indicators of extreme social disadvantage: First Step Legal clients are 81 times more likely than the Victorian population to be homeless or at risk of homelessness and are 169 times more likely to have a history of incarceration as a youth or adult.

Figures 5 and 6 summarise the level of disadvantage and complexities faced by the clients of First Step Legal by comparing their socio-demographic characteristics and experiences of illness with those of the general Victorian population. It is clear from these figures that the First Step Legal client cohort faces significant issues, beyond their legal matters.

Figure 5: Socio-demographic characteristics: clients versus general population (%)

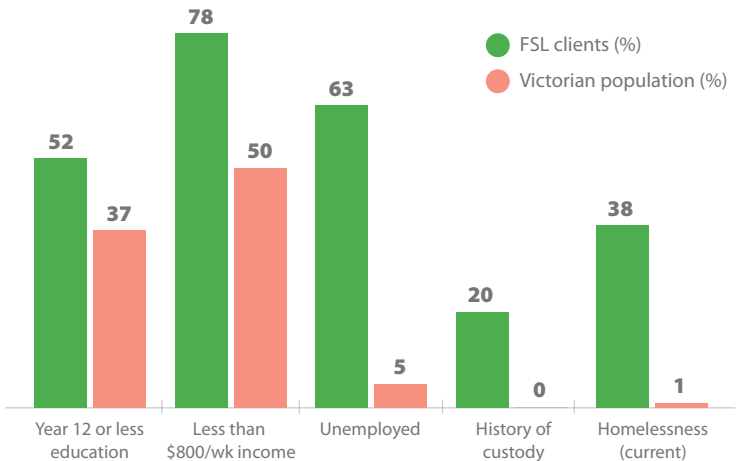
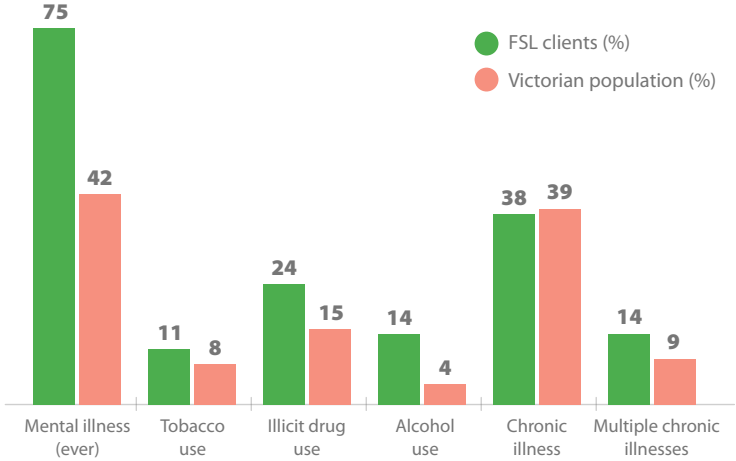


Figure 6: Illness and substance use: clients versus general population (%)



3. The impact of First Step Legal's work

Working in tandem with partner organisations, First Step Legal aims to make a positive contribution to clients' health and wellbeing that extends well beyond resolution of their legal matter. Capturing this impact was the primary focus of the current evaluation. Follow-up surveys, administered by First Step Legal staff at three, six, 12 and 24 months after the baseline survey, allow for the measurement of key indicators of client health and wellbeing. By examining changes over time across the different surveys and combining the quantitative data with the rich qualitative data gathered through client, partner and staff interviews, this section presents key findings regarding the impact of First Step Legal's work.

Of the 161 clients who participated in the baseline survey, 82 completed the three-month survey, 66 completed the six-month survey and 36 completed the 12-month survey. As there were only 15 clients who participated in the 24-month survey, these data are excluded from the analyses in this section. The impact of First Step Legal's work is therefore being measured up to one year following initial client intake.

Changes in personal wellbeing

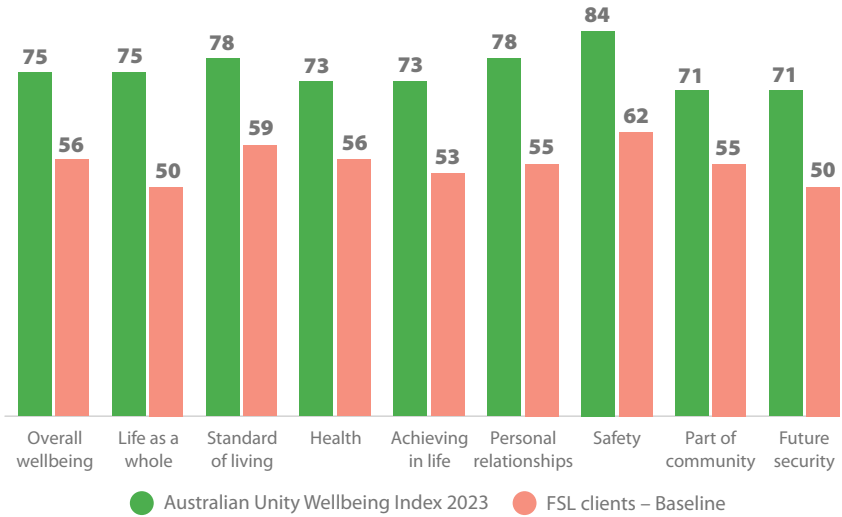
One of the primary aims of the evaluation was to identify the impact of the HJP model on client wellbeing. To measure this, First Step Legal sought a tool that would be sufficiently straightforward to be able to administer to disadvantaged clients at a particularly vulnerable and difficult time in their lives when they were in need of health and justice services, but would also allow for comparison between the First Step Legal client cohort and the broader population. The Personal Wellbeing Index – Adult (PWI-A) was chosen – a simple 8-question measure of a person's subjective wellbeing. By using a tool regularly used in the general community, First Step Legal has been able to benchmark its client cohort against the Australian population to understand the wellbeing deficits that its clients experience.

The First Step Legal client cohort reported substantially lower wellbeing than the general population when they completed their baseline survey. This wellbeing deficit was evident in their overall personal wellbeing score – 56 out of a possible 100 compared with 75 for the general population – and in every domain measured (Figure 7).

While the biggest difference (a 25 point deficit) was seen for the item measuring level of satisfaction with 'life as a whole', the three specific domains with the largest differences were satisfaction with 'your personal relationships' (23 point deficit), 'how safe you feel' (22 point deficit) and 'your future security' (21 point deficit). First Step Legal clients therefore reported far lower levels of connection, personal safety and hope for the future.

“At intake, First Step Legal's clients reported substantially lower wellbeing than the general population – and across every domain measured”

Figure 7: Levels of personal wellbeing, Australian population versus all clients at baseline (n=161)



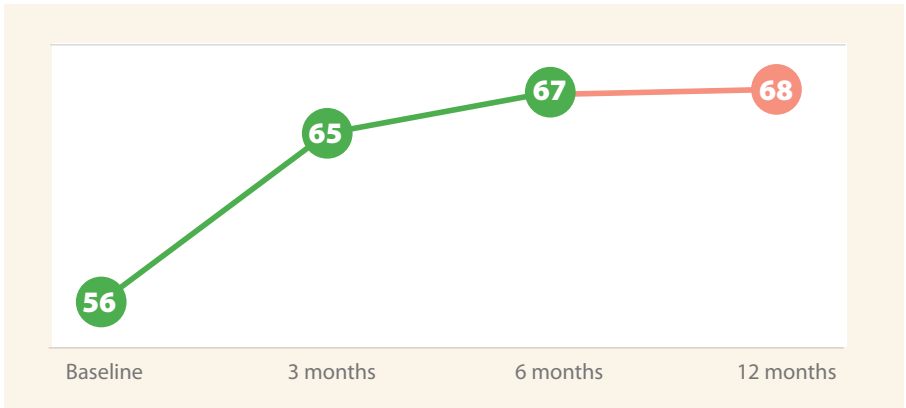
As subjective perceptions of wellbeing are fundamental to one's quality of life, changes in average PWI-A scores over time represent a key indicator in this evaluation of the impact of First Step Legal's work.

Survey results show a considerable increase in clients' average score for personal wellbeing overall – the measure that creates an average score across all of the eight domains. At baseline, the average overall score of all First Step Legal clients was 56. At the three-month survey this had increased to 65 and again to 67 at the six-month survey. By 12 months after baseline, First Step Legal clients were reporting an overall wellbeing score of 68 – still lower than the general population's score of 75, but a large improvement of 12 points (or 21%) over the course of the year (Figure 8).

“Clients experienced a 21% increase in personal wellbeing over a 12 month period”

Analysis of client characteristics and overall wellbeing across all timepoints indicated that an increased level of income was associated with higher overall wellbeing across all assessment timepoints. No other single client characteristic (e.g. age, gender, education, health status) was similarly associated with overall wellbeing scores.

Figure 8: Personal wellbeing overall – change over time



Increases in perceptions of wellbeing were seen in every one of the eight domains as well, although there was variation in the amount of change and in the point at which wellbeing reached its highest levels. For five of the domains, reported wellbeing peaked at the 12-month survey. For the remaining three – personal relationships, feeling part of a community and

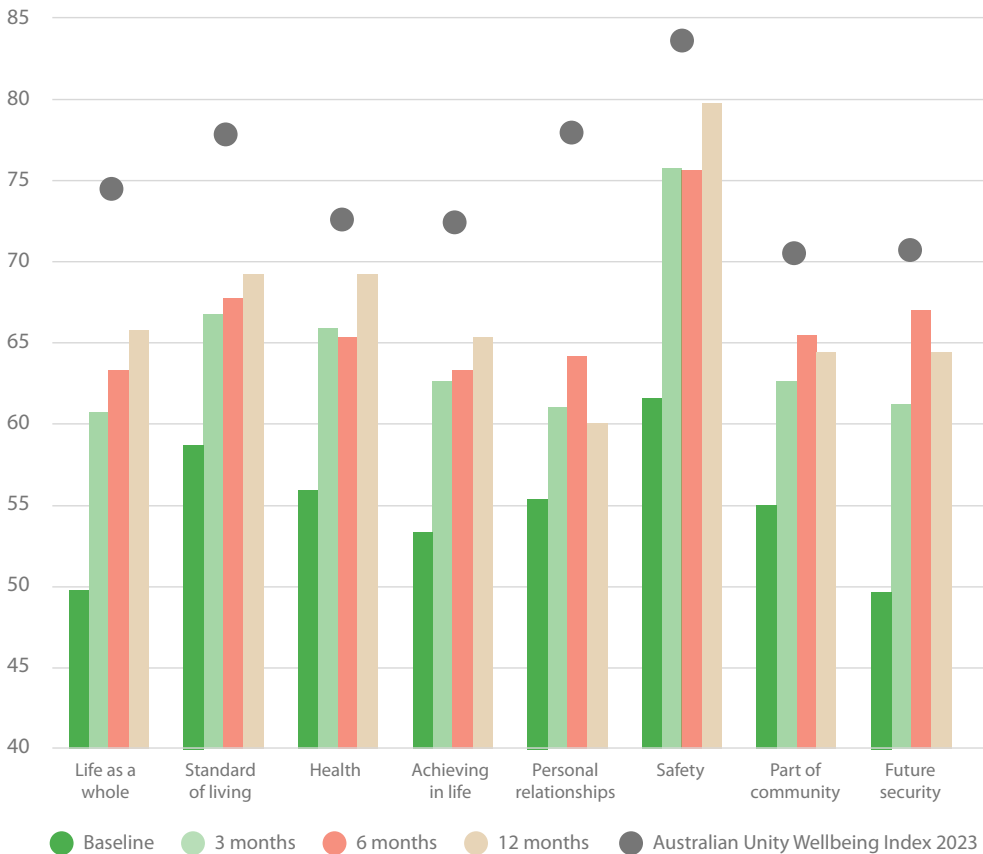
future security – wellbeing peaked at the six-month survey, then dipped slightly at 12 months. Despite these slight drops, clients’ wellbeing in these three domains remained far higher than they had been at baseline (Figure 9). The biggest changes over time were seen for satisfaction with life as a whole (increasing from an average of 50 at baseline to 66 at 12 months), future security (increasing from 50 at baseline to 64 at 12 months) and perceptions of safety (increasing from 62 at baseline to 80 at 12 months).

Figure 9: Average personal wellbeing score for each domain – change over time



Figure 10 combines the data on wellbeing for the general Australian population with data at each survey for the First Step Legal client cohort. It shows that, during the period from the baseline survey to the 12-month survey, First Step Legal clients moved substantially closer to wellbeing levels seen in the general Australian population in every one of the eight domains of the Personal Wellbeing Index (Figure 10).

Figure 10: Client wellbeing over time versus general population wellbeing for each domain



The changes recorded in the quantitative survey data are reflected in the qualitative interview data. Clients spoke of the impact of First Step Legal's HJP model on their health and wellbeing across a range of life areas, providing insight into the mechanisms that underlie the numbers in the figures above.

Clients valued the way that having a lawyer to address their legal issues gave them the space and energy to focus on their health and wellbeing:

So, with FSL I think it's different to like legal experiences I've had in the past... The lawyers like they reassured me not to stress about it because they were going to work on my behalf in the background while I focus on my recovery which I think made a really big difference... it's really hard to work on yourself and then having to work with your legal issues at the same time can be really draining. So just for them to work in the background and have that trust that they're going to get the best possible outcome for me... relieved a lot of stress (Client 3)

The First Step Legal approach was particularly important for clients working to address their mental health problems:

[Legal support means...] I can do the work, continue working on my mental health without too much of an impediment... like you know it's scary. But I know, Family Lawyer Z is in the background... (Client 13)

Clients also recognised that engagement with First Step Legal had improved not only their physical and mental health, but also their broader social wellbeing. For example, they consistently reported that one of the reasons the HJP service model improved their wellbeing was by helping them to reconnect with their families, friends and broader community:

I have two children and I'm talking to them on a regular basis now... what we had, our relationship was fractured... just because of my mental illness and things I would say and do that weren't me or I'd just spit the dummy for no apparent reason. Not listening... but, yeh. I'm slowly, slowly coming back, which is good (Client 7)

In particular, the legal support offered under the HJP model was seen as crucial to support this reconnection, which was then a major factor in improving mental health:

Without their help, yeah. I wouldn't – I wouldn't be seeing my daughter now... I was very depressed when I first started seeking legal support and I would say my mental health has gone back to normal now, since seeing my daughter. (Client 10)

And in turn, improvements in health – and mental health in particular – were seen as instrumental in helping to restore positive family relationships:

My mental health and my physical health I've got back and I'm walking. I'm you know, positive with my kids and you know, cos I was trying to hide depression from them. I was trying to hide crying from them. But now it's like, come on kids! We can do this. (Client 8)

Beyond family connections, clients found that having their health needs addressed at the same time as receiving legal support allowed them to be more involved in their community. This sense of connection gave people greater satisfaction with their current resources and capacity to contribute to their community going forward:

Through my doctor's help, I've managed to change that for the better so that I can be better involved in my community and not having to sit there with nothing and make something from nothing. (Client 5)

I'm so much more happy. I – I'm able to move in the world and do the things that I want to do that make me happy. (Client 14)

Clients also reported that their engagement with First Step Legal gave them a greater sense of safety and security, knowing that there was someone 'in their corner' to support them through the legal process:

I definitely feel like now that the court's over and I had that support, I'm definitely a lot better mentally, better mental headspace... yeah I can breathe easier. I feel safer, and I feel like I haven't damaged my future with my past actions. (Client 9)

If this service wasn't available my mental health would have declined. There's no doubt, and I would be in danger and physical danger as well. From, you know, my own mental health. (Client 13)

One client succinctly expressed the value of the integrated service model under the HJP approach:

It felt like I was being guided by both you know [psychologist and lawyer], two people standing either side of me and it felt good. For the first time I felt like both my physical and my mental health were being looked after. (Client 8)

Others noted the value of a holistic approach to address a range of connected issues to achieve positive outcomes:

It was a very holistic process of changing my life for the better in so many different ways. So from the initial Partner Organisation getting me into the First Step and then First Step getting me into AOD Partner Organisation means sitting here in community housing 6 months sober and happily divorced... It wouldn't have happened if they weren't all very connected with each other, these organisations and programs... So it was seamless. It was just like, I was able to work on myself and my divorce at the same time in the same building. To be able to go from a legal appointment to a drug and alcohol counselling at that point was so necessary for me. Um, I came out of the whole process such a better person. (Client 14)

I think the model of care is brilliant. I really do, because when you've got and I do understand First Step is for addiction as well which I don't have thankfully, that problem. But when you've got addiction issues plus mental health or either or, legal issues come up. They just do, they're hand in hand. Unfortunately, you cannot manage your life. You just can't, so varying legal issues come up and they feed in on each other. So, no, um, I do think it they complement each other and there's more to the legal service than just the legal stuff. Much more, much more than the nuanced legal stuff and a bigger impact as well. (Client 13)

Two clients offered brief but powerful thoughts on the commitment and values of their First Step Legal lawyers, illustrating what might be meant by 'there's more to the legal service than just the legal stuff':

It was definitely at First Step [Legal] like a relationship rather than just a business kind of thing. (Client 9)

So definitely different to what I thought it was going to be, in the fact that it was almost like a warm hug. (Client 14)

This commitment – and its benefit for HJP clients – was revealed in the words of two legal staff members:

I think one of the things that we're heavily focused on and that really becomes into my remit is just the diligence of truly understanding the client from a holistic point of view. Not because it's just the right thing to do for the client and the right thing to do in the context of the partnership but also because we're then looking at that big picture and trying to evaluate you know, what it means for a person to meet a lawyer in this space. And how it can affect whole of life improvements over an extended period of time... You know, to think that you're planning to still be in touch with that person 2 years later. (Legal staff 2)

I don't think it's just legal help because I don't think it's just legal advice. I don't think it's just legal information. I think it's legal help within the context of an individual who genuinely cares about you, your circumstances, your wellbeing and your future and I think that is the key difference. And I think it's that individual together with other individuals who form part of that coalition of care or support for you that have your back... I think it is the coordination of parts, I think that it's the sum of parts that makes a big difference and a lot of the criticism that comes from services' response to people who are challenged in many, many ways are that it's siloed and it's not integrated. And I think that HJPs really do try to ensure the integrated response for all the benefits integration provides. (Legal senior manager)

Health staff at the partner organisations recognised the value for client health and wellbeing of having legal staff embedded via the HJP model:

It just provides that more wrap around service for residents, makes things much more smooth... it allows residents to focus on their treatment and not be distracted by having to organise lawyers and you know that contact with externals. (Health staff 3)

I can't really imagine this crisis site without FSL now, like they've just really become embedded into everything and like they have made yeah such a different to the lives of the clients who are supported by us. We are supporting more women out of homelessness and we're also supporting them from like, we are stopping them from re-entering the homelessness cycle because you know when they have those supports in place moving into their new tenancies, they're set up to really be able to maintain those tenancies. (Health staff 10)

For management staff, promotion of a person-centred, holistic approach to care and support was said to be the main aspect of the service model that sets HJPs apart from traditional approaches to legal support:

The major difference is that legal services tend to be just focused on the legal outcome. So you're providing legal advice, representation and you're dealing with those issues. HJP's require a different perspective, requires looking at the whole person, requires engaging with clinical supports and being part of that support for that client going forward, so yes it's quite a different way of engaging. (Legal senior manager)

This person-centred, integrated approach was said to allow cross-disciplinary knowledge to be applied in efforts to improve client outcomes. For example:

And I've observed the lawyers knowing that boundary when they ring the clinician and say, 'okay, I've just had this conversation, this is what I've observed, this is how it's impacting what I can do in this particular situation in the here and now. But really I need your help to try to navigate what that means in the short, medium, long term.' And again, it's just those beautiful moments of like learning between the practitioners that I think is really unique to what we do here. (Legal staff 2)

Clients saw the benefits of this sharing of knowledge, acknowledging that legal staff understood the complex interactions between mental health issues, substance use and legal problems; lawyers could then adapt their service approach to the client's current health needs:

Um well at the time [when FSL visited the client at an HJP partner organisation], I was recovering. So um, I wasn't in a very good headspace to like go out and see lawyers and they just really understood all of that. (Client 10)

Changes in social determinants of health and wellbeing

At baseline, First Step Legal clients reported substantial disadvantage and challenges in terms of social determinants of their health and wellbeing. But in the 12 months following intake, average scores on each of these key indicators showed that clients' circumstances had improved considerably.

Financial vulnerability among clients reduced over the course of the evaluation. By the 12-month survey, the proportion of clients who were unemployed had decreased from 60% to 53% (Figure 11), while the proportion reporting a weekly income of less than \$800 had decreased from 71% to 61% (Figure 12). This is important given our finding that an increased level of income was associated with higher overall wellbeing across all assessment timepoints.

Figure 11: Proportion of clients who were unemployed – change over time

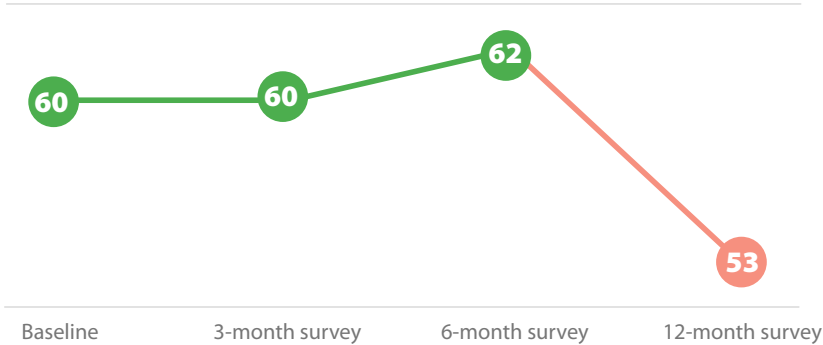
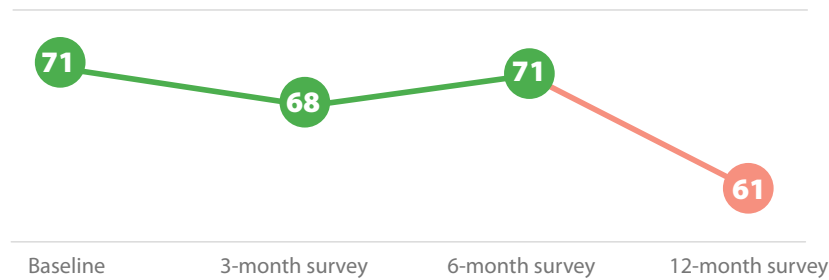
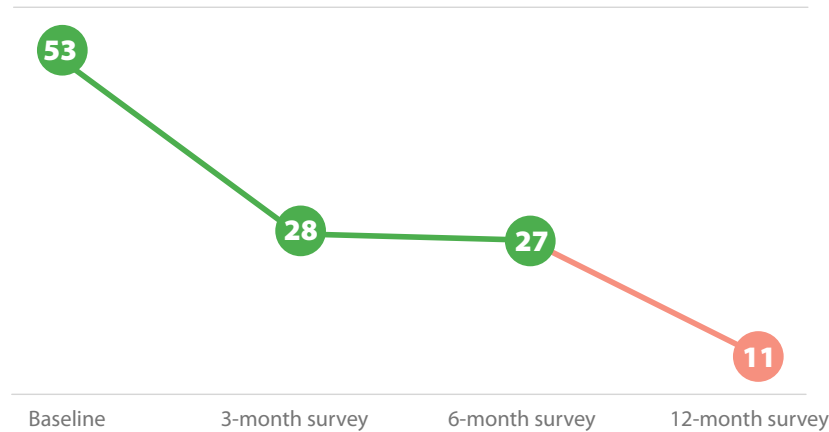


Figure 12: Proportion of clients earning less than \$800 per week – change over time



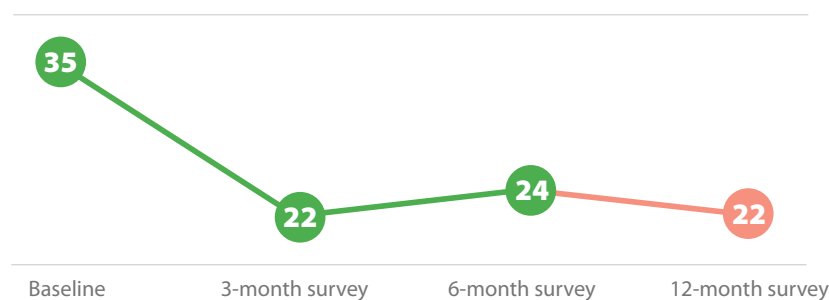
Crucially, clients' vulnerability in terms of family violence and homelessness also reduced substantially during the evaluation period. The most notable decrease was seen for clients' involvement in family violence, falling from 53% at baseline to only 11% at the 12-month survey (Figure 13). The proportion of clients experiencing or at risk of homelessness also fell, albeit to a lesser extent – from 35% at baseline to 22% after 12 months (Figure 14).

Figure 13: Proportion of clients involved in family violence – change over time



“Clients' vulnerability in terms of family violence and homelessness reduced substantially over a 12-month period”

Figure 14: Proportion of clients experiencing/at risk of homelessness – change over time



Clients talked about the role that legal staff played in helping to address the fundamental social issues that they were struggling to resolve themselves; addressing these then led to improvements in health and wellbeing:

All I know is that I feel a lot freer than otherwise, I feel less burdened... They've made me feel comfortable. They really wanted to help and it wasn't just legal it was the whole picture. My housing, my mental state... they cared and that was the big difference. (Client 7)

Mostly it's given me my freedom back. I was very much stuck in a toxic marriage and needing to get out of it and having no resources or any idea about how – it's just given me my freedom back. And my ability to escape the marriage and in such a very supportive way. And to get it done at my speed which was very quickly.
(Client 14)

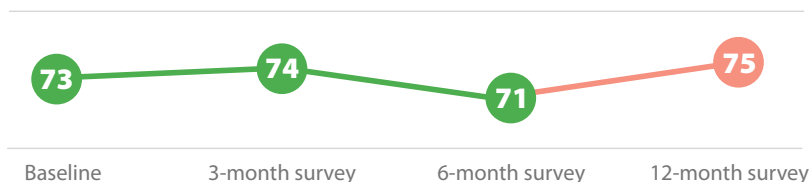
This was particularly important for clients who were facing complex issues like family violence, with legal staff providing support in a person-centred, trauma-informed way:

And [FSL lawyer] never asked a direct question about domestic violence and never asked me to explain, he just got the sense I was in fear and made those steps to make sure that not only was the process done properly but it was done with me being safe. (Client 14)

Changes in mental health

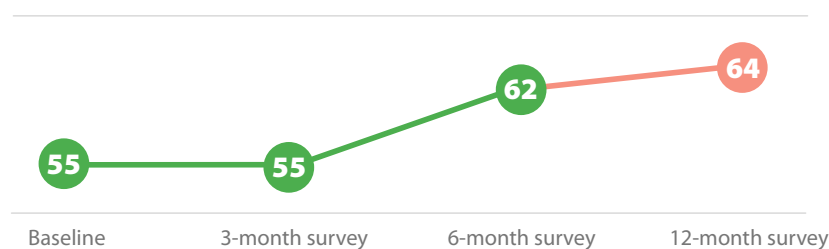
The proportion of clients reporting that they are currently in mental health treatment remained stable across the evaluation period, with approximately three-quarters of clients in treatment (Figure 15). Given the nature of the partnerships in which First Step Legal works, the stability of this proportion is not surprising.

Figure 15: Proportion of clients currently in mental health treatment – change over time



Given their participation in treatment, it is also perhaps unsurprising that the proportion of people receiving medication for a mental health issue increased, from 55% at baseline to 64% at the 12-month survey (Figure 16). While this could indicate a worsening of people's mental health, it is more likely to reflect their engagement with the mental health services on offer through the HJPs.

Figure 16: Proportion of clients currently taking mental health medication – change over time



A more telling statistic is the proportion of clients who reported being admitted as an inpatient for a mental health episode since the last survey, with a substantial and steady decrease from 19% at baseline to 6% at the 12-month survey (Figure 17). The reduced need for acute admission perhaps reflects clients' stable engagement in mental health treatment and increased use of mental health medication.

Figure 17: Proportion of clients with a mental health admission since the last survey – change over time



“The proportion of clients who reported an acute mental health admission dropped substantially - from 19% at intake to 6% at 12-months”

Clients spoke of the mental burden that was lifted by having access to legal support, and the problems that would have ensued had they not had that support:

... just having that piece of mind that things are being taken care of. So in that regard, the traffic fines they were um they were weighing on me and they were impacting my mental health. Because when I had been well in my life I would've never had that happen and um, it was adding to the burden of my already existing mental health and my sense of self and having someone take care of it and take that burden away from me was just, invaluable... I think even if I had all of the money in the world I don't know if I'd go anywhere else honestly... I think gosh If I didn't have access to the legal service I would be a mess. There is no doubt about it. (Client 13)

The importance of having access to legal staff who understand mental health issues and their impacts was highlighted by many of the clients who were interviewed. One client in particular spoke at length about the unique value of First Step Legal's service model and its impact on those with mental health challenges:

When you do speak to lawyers a lot of the time it's very procedural, it's very – this is what needs to happen etc. but just looking at it from a mental health perspective as well, and I think everyone that I've dealt with so far has also been, had that lens on, which was new, which was different, it was really good... The partnership model in and of itself – when I found out about it, it felt, it felt a great initiative... there is an immense need for people who are going through the legal processes as well as you know, ongoing

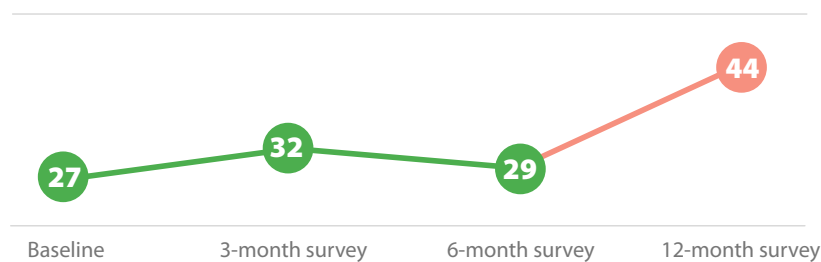
mental health issues and other issues arising from those things – so there's definitely a need for that, and the partnership that this model provides, the constant communication between what this person needs and because you're working on both aspects of things, individually working on the mental health aspect is important, is critical, you can't do just that and not have the right legal help and support. It's not gonna work. You've got, if you've got the legal help and support but not the mental health aspect of things then again this is lacking because communicating with lawyers, going through that process, it is such an anxiety inducing process, it's a very scary process to actually go through that... it could still be difficult for your mental health and your overall health and wellbeing, if things don't work out the way you wanted it to, so having that model of both those things working simultaneously and in cohesion with each other I think is really a great initiative.

I wish that the whole process would be like that, I wish the court incorporated more of that as well... I think that's the difference that I notice in the lawyers that I've dealt with on my own as well as lawyers from First Step Legal because they do have a focus on the mental health aspect of things. (Client 16)

Changes in physical health

More than one in three clients (38%) reported having a chronic health condition at baseline, with 14% reporting multiple chronic health conditions. With their engagement with health services, the proportion of people receiving medication for their health issue increased, from 27% at baseline to 44% at the 12-month survey (Figure 18).

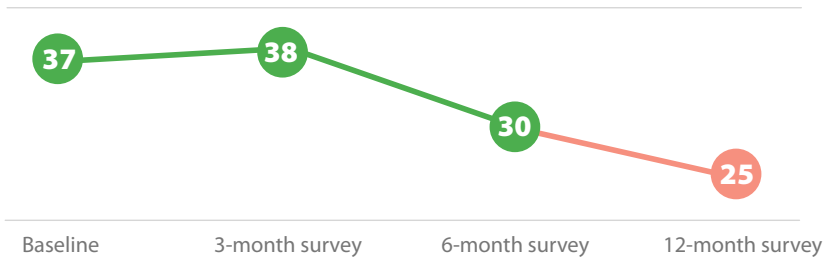
Figure 18: Proportion of clients currently taking physical health medication – change over time



“The proportion of clients who reported a hospital emergency department visit decreased over the course of the study”

There was a reduction in the proportion of clients who reported visiting a hospital emergency department since the last survey, with a substantial and steady decrease from 37% at baseline to 25% at the 12-month survey (Figure 19). The reduced need for emergency hospital visits perhaps reflects clients' engagement with health services and increased use of medication.

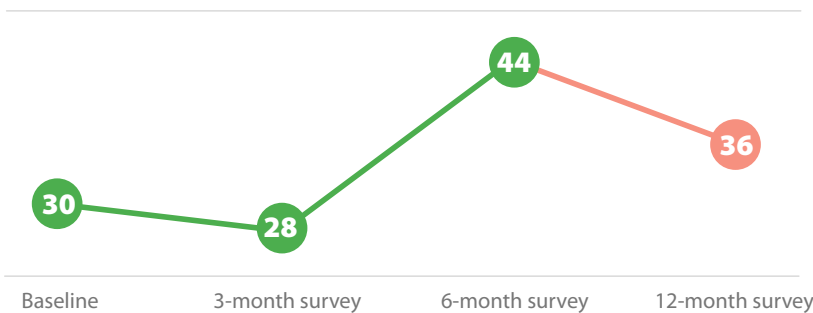
Figure 19: Proportion of clients with an emergency department visit since the last survey – change over time



Changes in substance use

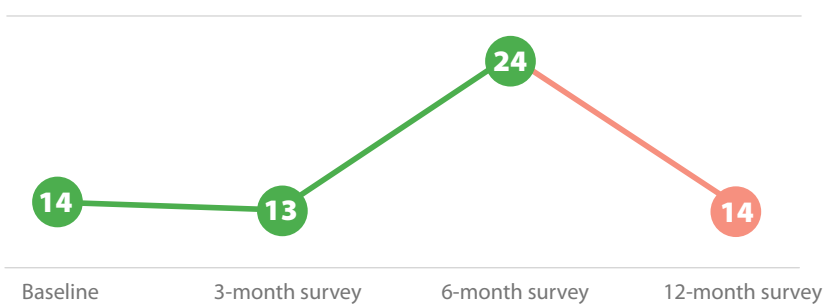
There was no clear pattern in the proportion of First Step Legal clients who reported currently using some type of licit or illicit substance at each survey, with the data fluctuating over time (Figure 20) but increasing at the six-month survey.

Figure 20: Proportion of clients reporting current substance use – change over time



The proportion involved in poly-substance use – using more than one licit or illicit substance – was largely stable, but also increased at the six-month survey (Figure 21).

Figure 21: Proportion of clients reporting current poly-substance use – change over time



While the quantitative data do not provide a clear picture of the impact of First Step Legal's HJPs, the interviews show the value of having legal support embedded within alcohol and drug services to provide immediate, ready access to legal services:

... the problems are usually not that big you know, even just transit fines and that. But they're overwhelming if you don't have any coping strategies in place, the littlest thing predisposes them to probably seek chemical ways to try and address the tension and the anxiety that deals with so um, you know I've seen a lot of clients who know that when they come here it's a one stop shop to get their treatment. (Health senior manager 3)

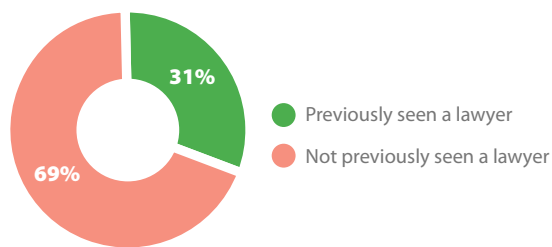
4. Access to justice – clients’ legal needs

Several areas of intended impact for First Step Legal relate to clients’ legal needs: access to justice, legal outcomes, capability and confidence to address legal issues and future contact with the justice system. This section examines a range of issues around clients’ experiences in addressing their legal problems, both in the context of contact with First Step Legal and in terms of prior use of legal services.

Clients’ prior use of legal services

First Step Legal clients who completed the baseline survey were asked whether they had previously seen a lawyer about their current legal issue and the reasons why they had or had not. More than two-thirds (69%, or 101 people) reported that they had not previously seen a lawyer for their legal issue – First Step Legal was their first legal service for this matter. Almost one-third (31%, or 46 people) had previously seen a lawyer for the same legal issue that had now brought them to First Step Legal (Figure 22).

Figure 22: Prior access to a lawyer for the same legal issue, all clients at baseline (n=161)



“Clients reported many barriers to accessing legal help: more than two thirds of clients had not previously seen a lawyer for their current legal issue”

Among the 101 clients who had not previously seen a lawyer for their issue, the most common reasons for not having done so were the presence of more urgent matters or the matter’s recency. Other reasons included lack of knowledge that help was available, perceived difficulties or costs in accessing help, and lack of awareness that the issue was a legal one or where to find a lawyer (Table 1).

Table 1: Reasons for not previously seeing a lawyer for the current legal issue

Reason	Number of people
Already dealing/dealing with more urgent	15
Recent issue	15
Didn’t know I could get help	12
Too hard/overwhelming	12
Too costly	10
Too unwell	7
Unaware it’s a legal issue/where to find lawyer	3
Tried and failed	1
Not a big issue	1

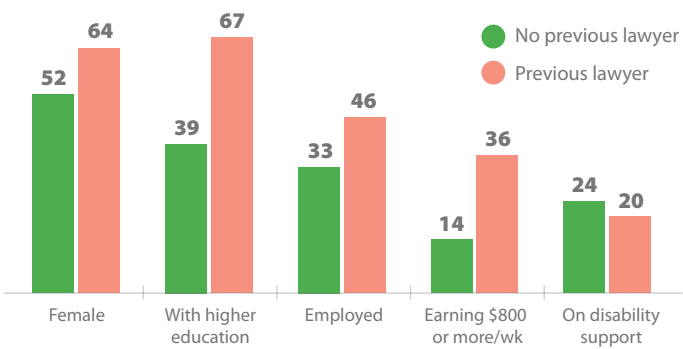
Among the 46 clients who had previously seen a lawyer for their legal issue, the most common reasons for the issue not having been resolved were the cost or poor service of the previous lawyer, or some other issue relating to the lawyer (Table 2).

Table 2: Reasons the legal issue had not been resolved for those who had previously seen a lawyer

Reason	Number of people
Cost of the lawyer	15
Insufficient service	15
Other issue about the lawyer	4
Not the right fit for me	3
Not satisfied with the outcome	2
Disengaged from service	1
Other	1

There were notable differences in some socio-demographic characteristics between people who had and hadn't sought prior legal help. People who had previously seen a lawyer for their legal issue – who were coming to First Step Legal after earlier dissatisfaction with another legal service – were more likely than those seeking legal assistance for their issue for the first time to be female, more highly educated, employed and with a higher income. The differences were most pronounced for highest educational level, with those who had previously seen a lawyer being almost twice as likely to have a university or TAFE degree (67% compared with 39%) and for income (36% earning more than \$800 per week compared with only 14% of those who had not previously seen a lawyer) (Figure 23).

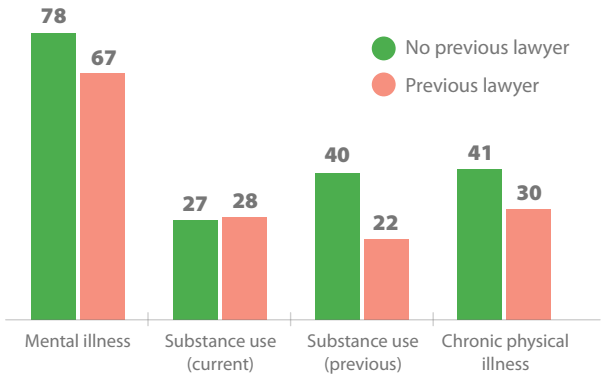
Figure 23: Socio-demographic characteristics by prior legal service access (%)



There were also differences in health and substance use experiences between the two groups, although these were smaller than the differences in socio-demographic characteristics. People who had previously seen a lawyer for their legal issue were less likely than those seeking legal assistance for their issue for the first time to have been diagnosed with a mental illness (67% compared with 78%) or to have a chronic physical illness

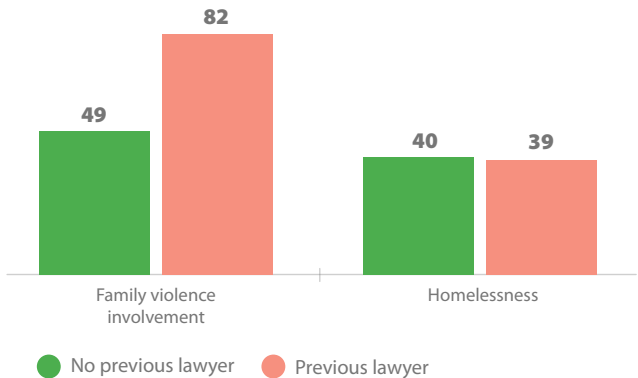
(30% compared with 41%). While they were far less likely to have used any licit or illicit substances previously (22% compared with 40%), they were slightly more likely to be using some type of substance currently (28% compared with 27%) (Figure 24).

Figure 24: Health and substance use by prior legal service access (%)



Finally, people who had previously seen a lawyer for their legal issue and were now seeking First Step Legal support were far more likely to report experience of, or being at risk for, family violence (82% compared with 49%). There was little difference between the two groups in experience of homelessness (Figure 25).

Figure 25: Social vulnerability by prior legal service access (%)



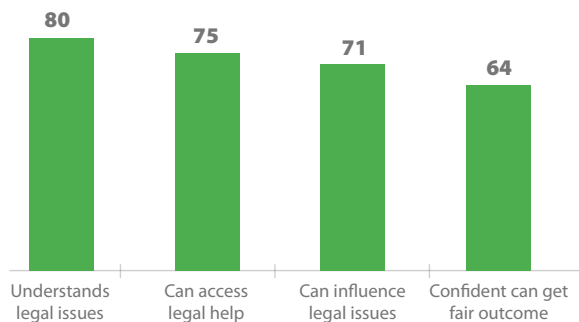
Accessing and understanding legal help

At baseline – before they had started receiving First Step Legal support – clients were asked if they strongly disagree, disagree, agree or strongly agree to four statements designed to assess clients’ sense of agency, capability and confidence to address their legal issues:

- I understand my legal issues
- I can get the legal help I need to resolve legal issues
- I can influence how my legal issues are handled
- I am confident I can achieve a fair outcome to my legal matters

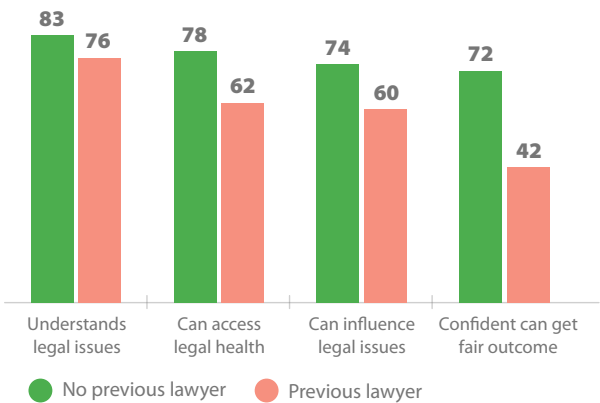
Clients were generally positive on all four of these aspects, although there were differences in people’s views of the process of dealing with their legal issues compared with the outcome of their legal issues. The highest level of agreement was seen for people’s understanding of their issue, with 80% agreeing or strongly agreeing with this statement. Three-quarters (75%) agreed or strongly agreed that they are able to access the legal help they need to resolve their issue, and 71% agreed or strongly agreed that they can influence the way in which their legal issues are handled. The lowest level of agreement was reported for outcome, with less than two-thirds (64%) agreeing or strongly agreeing that they feel confident about achieving a fair outcome in their legal matters (Figure 26).

Figure 26: Views on accessing and understanding legal help, all clients at baseline (n=161)



Perceptions of legal capacity, however, varied according to people’s previous experience with accessing a lawyer for their current legal issue. Across all four statements, people who had previously sought legal help expressed lower agreement with every statement. The difference was most stark in terms of confidence: less than half (42%) of those who had previously seen a lawyer for their legal issue reported feeling confident of achieving a fair outcome, compared with almost three-quarters (72%) of those whose engagement with First Step Legal was the first legal support they had sought for their matter (Figure 27). When this finding is viewed in combination with the reasons for people’s prior legal engagement resulting in their matter remaining unresolved (Table 2, above), their lack of confidence is unsurprising – dissatisfaction with their previous service/ lawyer does not encourage confidence in one’s ability to achieve a fair outcome with subsequent efforts.

Figure 27: Views on accessing and understanding legal help, by prior legal service access



Overall, it appears that having seen a different lawyer previously for their current legal issue left First Step Legal clients with a reduced sense of agency, capacity and confidence, giving First Step Legal staff extra work in their efforts to enhance clients' perceived legal capability and confidence.

By the time of the client interviews – held towards the end of the evaluation period – clients reported being grateful for the ease of access to legal services, that they were satisfied with their legal outcomes, and that their capability and confidence to address their legal issues had increased, thanks to their engagement with First Step Legal.

Perceptions of access to justice

For many clients, having legal services co-located with health services was the key reason that they were able to access and engage with support for their legal issues. The simple and convenient referral to on-site legal staff meant that many clients who otherwise would not have been able to access legal services were able to benefit from First Step Legal support:

“The physical co-location of legal services with health and housing services was particularly valued by clients – it removed many barriers to accessing legal help”

If I wasn't in the [Partnership Organisation] program I probably wouldn't have known about [FSL service]. So um, very lucky to have been a part of ah a great organisation that could point me in the right direction. (Client 12)

I don't think I would have accessed First Step [legal service] if I hadn't first got that referral from [Partnership Organisation] who had taken care of me. I wouldn't have found out about you guys if [they] hadn't referred you. And having their confidence and their sort of reference to say, look this is – I trust these people to take care of you and they'll be able to help you. Gave me the confidence to walk through the door. (Client 14)

The physical co-location of legal services with health services was particularly valued by clients as it allowed them to engage with a new service around challenging legal issues in an already-familiar environment:

I'm very familiar with coming to this area – to [Partner Organisation] so... for me it took a lot of extra added stresses away from it like going to a you know a new place and not really knowing anyone or anything like that and already feeling welcome and at home here. Just made it a lot easier – ah yeah – not just logistically but also just in a state of mind as well – I think it just made it a lot easier... I was coming to this building quite regularly anyway so having that – having the two things linked ah just made it a lot easier for me and a lot easier for the legal team to, to come and see me and to come and check in. (Client 12)

Staff at the partner organisations also recognised the value of having First Step Legal readily accessible for their health clients. For clients, access barriers are removed as they simply visit another service being offered in

their usual clinic. For staff, rapid referrals can be made to a service in which they have confidence; by extension, their confidence in First Step Legal gives their clients confidence as well:

There's a lot of barriers to accessing support, and it takes a lot of courage for our women to talk about what goes on for them. And I think that it kind of saves a lot of service barriers wait times, like on hold trying to wait for someone, getting transferred to a new lawyer and having to tell your story again. I think barriers like that could you know lead to clients just you know, giving up – you know just not pursuing it. Whereas we know and trust all of the lawyers at First Step. So I'm really confident that they would have a positive experience through that. (Health staff 7)

I think it significantly helps the barriers for our clients to get legal support – you know the clients are already one, familiar with the clinics so they can come to the clinic, it also means that if they've rocked up early or rocked up late – we're aware of it as well. And it just provides the case managers a lot of confidence and [assurance] that they can get some type of legal support or direction for their clients basically and it give you as the case manager the confidence when it comes to supporting your clients if they come to you with a legal issue. (Health staff 2)

I think there, it's easy access, it's not a long waitlist. You don't have to travel far, you know it's convenient – our clients don't have cars, they have to get public transport everywhere and they can't find places, and so to have the convenience of them having here but, sorry being here... in terms of access is really important for this cohort of clients and it goes with everything having FSL physically here also with the Health Partner nurse practitioner, Health Partner Clinician the counsellor, because they don't have public transport, they live chaotic lives, and just having them here makes it super easy, accessible and yeah having the legal advice there convenience is just, it just removes the obstacles. (Housing staff 9)

Legal staff also acknowledged the value of the trust and confidence that comes from working closely together, and the benefit that this brings to clients:

And in terms of the clients, the clinicians and the lawyers working together – I've actually seen over time that interplay really builds. It's quite wonderful to see a clinician say I've got this lawyer and I trust that they're going to behave in a way and navigate your matter in a way that means you can legitimately relax and focus on your rehabilitation. It's that trust that sits within the partnerships that takes time to build but once it's there it's so brilliant. You can literally see the client relax because they're being introduced to a lawyer by somebody else that they trust and that lawyer is not too busy rushing them out the door, cutting straight to the chase of guilty, not guilty, what do you want to get done today, let's get this over and done with. They're very much in sync with the clinician and you know, the amount of times I've seen shoulders drop is really I think one of the biggest strengths of the partnerships. (Legal staff 2)

Perceptions of legal outcomes

Clients reported that engagement with legal staff resulted in positive legal outcomes, even for those with significant legal issues:

I walked away with a fine rather than having any – anything hanging over my head and I was just amazed at how well she'd researched my case and everything she knew. (Client 10)

[Criminal lawyer] really helped, talked to the police and prosecutors and ah really pushed for that outcome... which was like a weight off my shoulder like really a relief to me... not having a record ah has had like a flow on effect... I've been able to keep my job – ah and I've been able to you know drive again now – it's just – so just the flow on effects that I would have had if it hadn't if it didn't go that way would have been really kinda detrimental – so just the fact that I you know can keep doing – you know living my life and not have anything stopping me has ah you know been really helpful. (Client 12)

Clients were particularly impressed with their legal outcomes under the HJP model when compared with their previous experiences with other law firms:

I just felt like for the first time, and I said this to Lawyer, it's the first time I've truly felt someone in my corner. (Client 8)

So um, the first lot of issues I had to deal with was family violence. Um I spoke to a... family lawyer who was really quite helpful and really prompt to help me out. Like with [Family Lawyer's] help I was successful in putting in a 12 month intervention order so which I wouldn't have been able to do without [Family Lawyer's] help... And then with my criminal matters I've finalised those in [month], um and I got a better outcome then the first time I ever went to court... to go to court for the second time I got a better outcome than the first – that just shows what First Step Legal have done. (Client 3)

Yeah, I did access a few other legal services in regard to my local community and I found that those were um, not half as beneficial or effective than First Step [Legal] was because they never, they'd say they'd get back to me and they didn't. Things like that. They'd tell me, I'd sort of have to book in for an appointment that would be weeks away. They'd sort of say, oh you need to do this and you need to do that but not really precisely giving me direction. (Client 15)

In terms of understanding their legal issues, clients talked about the clear communication that legal staff used to explain complex legal terminology. This was seen as a point of difference for the legal services provided under the HJPs, with First Step Legal staff perceived as more effective than at other legal services at communicating legal processes, responsibilities and outcomes in plain and accessible language:

When we went to court and I walked out going, what - what was all that? Because I'm not – I'm not familiar with the terms etc, etc... and he just um sat me down and explained everything. What happened. Whether, you know we're on the right track. Whether this is a good verdict for us and what we need to do to proceed. (Client 8)

It got finalised at the court I think and then I rang [FSL criminal lawyer] to make sure I knew what was going on. There were some emails, so I had paperwork and they, they made sure that I knew that I understood it. (Client 13)

Clients were also pleased to be kept abreast of what to expect as their legal process unfolded, which helped them to stay engaged and gave them a sense of security and agency throughout:

I was always told, we're doing this, we're asking for this from the prosecutors, like I was kinda always updated and that made me feel safe and secure. (Client 9)

[Criminal lawyer] Sort of went through steps, like the steps she went through with me the whole way – sort of outlined what the likely outcomes would be. Um and that just sort of made it a lot easier for me not going in it alone and sort of ah yeah, it's quite vulnerable. (Client 12)

Legal staff identified the value of HJPs and their inherent close relationships between health and legal service staff in achieving positive legal outcomes at court:

I had a client who was from [Partner Organisation 1] and she was up for diversion and um, usually it's like 12 months for a diversion plan but she had all these people supporting her and there were all these support materials like that were provided. As a result she only got like 3 or 4 months on a diversion plan with just like one condition... But in being able to talk about it really naturally and fulsomely and also to like tell the court, look I have an ongoing relationship with their support services so we will continue to check in with them, that leads to so much better outcomes. (Legal staff 1)

The health justice partnership really permeates through the whole relationship with the client, including even when you're in court and you're indicating your client is sitting behind you to a judge or magistrate and they're flanked by their clinical supports. So I think that the client experience is an entirely different one. And in terms of outcome, that then leads to better outcomes so leading on from that court example – you have clinicians who are very involved in their client's legal matters and um that um provides comfort to the court in relation to how they're tracking in their recovery or in their mental health journey or in relation to support around family violence whether they be victims or perpetrators. And you can access material like reports and letters of support very easily from those clinical supports because they're engaged in the legal matter. (Legal staff 4)

And for health staff, the impact of the HJPs was felt to extend beyond merely the fact of the legal outcome, but to procedural justice aspects as well – they felt their clients had a voice in the legal process in ways they hadn't previously, creating a sense of trust and safety:

And what we've seen with our clients being engaged with FSL firstly, they all love the lawyer. You know they actually speak about their experience with the legal representative in such a positive matter, hearing their voices heard, having someone stand by them and believing in them, it has just been such an enormous positive outcome for our clients. (Health staff 8)

I think the client outcome... has made a real difference in terms of their safety and their trust in the system. I think that another thing that clients pointed out is um, really feeling heard and supported by FSL which might not have happened in their experience with other legal services. So, they really made a true difference in their outcomes and yeah, like I said their trust in the system and how, yeah, they're supported. (Health senior manager 1)

Perceptions of capability and confidence to address legal issues

Clients talked about the impact of engagement with an HJP on their sense of agency, capability and confidence to address their legal issues. Some clients felt that their positive experiences within the HJP had made them feel less apprehensive of legal processes and improved their ability to take an active role in addressing their legal needs:

“ Partner staff felt that their clients had a voice in the legal process in ways they hadn't previously, creating a sense of trust and safety ”

I guess you know there's probably going to have to be a point in my future time I'm going to have to renew the family violence intervention order. I feel a lot more comfortable to seek that help myself. (Client 3)

Yes, because I feel a lot more, not so scared of legal services, and realised that they're there to fulfill a service for me and not against me. And I mean a lot of people think when they think legal, it's – it's against them. And it can be pretty daunting. That's changed a lot. And it's also changed my ability to contact who I need to contact if I need further information. (Client 15)

Certain friends/family/friends said to me, do you need me there on the day [at court]? And I said, thank you so much but I've got someone in my corner. I feel really confident. (Client 8)

Legal staff also acknowledged the importance of empowering clients by improving their understanding and enhancing their sense of agency:

Our lawyers really take the time to not only understand the mental health presentation of the client that is standing in front of them but also to really explain the system, the criminal justice system, or the system, the legal system that they are confronted with in a way that they can understand... and also, but more importantly, I think, in a way that empowers the individual to not only understand the charges but also to understand the system. And to start to feel supported in that system. And we often kind of say that the legal worry can be absorbed by the lawyer so that that person can focus on their, their therapeutic journey. (Legal staff 2)

People who had recurring legal issues and ongoing contact with legal support via an HJP reported developing strong trust with staff, which then enhanced their confidence that their legal issues will be addressed:

It has, it has, even now my attitude towards the ongoing legal – like we’ve had about 2 to 3 hearings at this point in time for the magistrates’ matter with the extension of the IVO and my confidence has improved in the way I know what I’m asking for is the right thing to do. I need this protection, as opposed to initially where I was more scared, anxious and like I don’t know what I should do I don’t know what’s going to happen – should I keep doing this – it’s like all of that, whereas now I’m like he breached the order, I need the order to be extended. I do not feel safe. It’s a lot more clearer. It’s just like, you know, that haze of umm, has been lifted and I can stand up for myself and say this is okay and this is not okay and I’ll go through the right legal and judicial processes to get what I think I need, which is safety. (Client 16)

Well I feel a lot more confident that I can have support. I feel like there’s no better feeling than being supported. Like I have – I’ve had other matters that I needed attending to. Like I contacted FSL again and they weren’t able to support me in – in what the matter was. But they outsourced me to other people and kept in communication with me and still supported me. So like, I feel like because of the outcome that I had and the support that I had, I was definitely willing to look at this other situation I was in. Like had I not had the good support and not had the outcome like I probably would have been fearful of it so I wouldn’t have addressed it. (Client 9)

Yeah I think – I think just knowing about services like First Step Legal is really helpful... so having that knowledge now I’d be very confident – you know touch wood hopefully nothing happens again but if it did that I would get the help I need. (Client 12)

Even for clients with complex challenges, access to legal services via the HJPs was able to enhance confidence:

I am so much more confident. I had never accessed legal services before and hopefully I never have to again but if I did, I would not have the anxiety and the stress that I had thinking that I would never be able to afford or no one would be able to take me on or believe my circumstances or able to do it in the time that I wanted to. So I definitely have the confidence in knowing that, no matter if I – I mean I was homeless, I had no resources at all and I thought what he would – I thought FSL would turn me away and it was quite the opposite. (Client 14)

5. Impact on health, housing and legal staff

While First Step Legal's HJP model aims to improve the health, wellbeing and legal outcomes of its clients, its intended outcomes for staff centre on improving staff capability to identify issues and cross-refer appropriately, and to enhance job satisfaction. In particular, the collaborative and multi-disciplinary approach of the HJP model aims to increase partner staff's knowledge of legal issues and legal staff's knowledge of health and housing issues. Further, it aims to increase job satisfaction by allowing staff to take a more holistic, person-centred approach than would otherwise be possible in a traditional health, housing or legal setting.

This section presents key findings from the interviews with staff to identify the impact of First Step Legal's HJP model on their capability and job-related wellbeing. It shows the positive impact that the HJP model is having for them. At a time when staff retention across the health and community service sectors has been particularly challenging, the traction that this model appears to have developed is encouraging.

Staff capability

Health and housing service staff discussed the various ways in which the HJP model had enhanced their ability to identify patients' legal issues and to make referrals to appropriate legal services:

I think it's had a tremendous positive impact on sort of my capacity to support my clients with their sort of legal issues. I think particularly with our demographic that we work with – legal issues are quite common and come in various forms – and it can be really tricky to navigate – it's something sort of – you don't get really taught... I found FSL to be really helpful in terms of supporting me in terms of my own knowledge but also my capacity to support my clients with their legal matters. (Health staff 2)

I think it's built my capacity in my role, to be able to communicate some of the basic legal information. So having worked with the FSL team, I think that's empowered me to... delve into the legal information giving. I possibly wouldn't have the confidence to do beforehand. (Health staff 1)

Health service staff commented on the importance of the training that First Step Legal had provided, and the way it helped them to understand how to navigate the legal framework:

... they do a lot of training with us like how to kind of navigate working in that kind of framework, the legal framework, so umm like and how to refer clients and explain what to say and not say to the lawyer, so yeah, it's been really, really helpful. (Housing staff 10)

The value of the partnership was also identified by senior health service managers, who could see its impact on the capability of their staff:

I think one of the most valuable learnings is their capacity building in terms of the legal knowledge and how the legal system works because I think that is an area that social workers are not really equipped or even taught you know during study nor the practice. So, I think the legal education has been a real critical part of their capacity building and learning. (Health senior manager 1)

Legal staff, too, reflected on the value of the HJP on their capability to identify the impact of health and social issues on their clients and on their clients' legal matters. This was said to be due particularly to sharing knowledge with health staff and the impact that had on the way they engage with their legal service clients:

So my work here has taught me a lot about all the sorts of co-occurring needs that our clients have in terms of their physical and mental health, in terms of addiction and recovery, and other sort of complex social – psycho-social needs that they might have. I'm a lot more alert and attuned to those sorts of things. The language that I use around those things that our clients face has developed hugely since I've been here. So I have a whole new language and understanding and way of engaging with the legal clients that I wouldn't otherwise have in the outside world. And I know that because I used to live in the outside world and there was very little interrogation of what's going on for a client beyond the immediate legal need that they've come to see you to address. You don't think of what else is co-occurring for this person... So it's really opened my eyes to the full range of what's going on for people as humans. (Legal staff 4)

I think one of the benefits from a legal perspective about being involved in HJPs is that transfer of knowledge between disciplines and I've learnt an enormous amount from my engagement with really skilled and really capable practitioners and clinicians and social workers and others over the years that have just helped me to have a different perspective and understanding about health issues, emotional issues... and trauma impacts. (Legal senior manager)

The sharing of knowledge not only enhanced legal staff's understanding, but increased their confidence in discussing such issues with their clients:

I feel like I have a much greater sense of how housing services and provisions actually work. Which for me makes me feel a lot more comfortable like talking about those issues with someone. Like I'm better placed to do that. Not that that's my job but like, naturally those sorts of things come up. (Legal staff 1)

Both partner and legal staff described the high level of trust that has been built as part of the partnership model:

I think there's real genuine trust through collaboration and partnership and I think that is another thing that made a huge difference in our working relationship because I think we felt that trust and also respecting each other's knowledge and where each other's coming from. Because where it came to lawyers in the legal sector, you know, had hundreds examples where they're like oh you're a social worker, you wouldn't understand our profession... and vice versa as well but I think like both parties coming from an angle of we really want to learn from you and we really want to work with you and I think that, that collaboration really made a difference. (Health senior manager 1)

I think just the fact that they come here every week and umm yeah we're all just, we kinda bounce off each other and do secondary consults and practice reflection sessions which I think... really helped to develop those relationships and get everyone talking to each other so yeah I would say there's really great trust and we really value their umm expertise in guiding us as well and I know that they also value our expertise. (Housing staff 10)

FSL are wanting to hear from us and learn from us and we want to learn from them. And so, it's that mutual respect – and the fact is we both want to learn from each other. (Health staff 8)

We trust each other in our expertise, in our fields... We refer when we don't know and we encourage our clients or from the other side, patients to defer to the knowledge of the expert in whatever it is that's actually being addressed. So I think that um I think that collegiality between the two partners is what makes the magic. (Legal staff 4)

Job satisfaction

With a collaborative work approach, sharing of knowledge and high levels of trust, health, housing and legal staff reported high levels of job satisfaction:

Unfortunately, there is a lot of issues within the family court system. And that's something that we can't change. Well me, personally can't change. But knowing you can at least get them legal advice from someone that you know who is going to, A – do their job and B – is trustworthy, compassionate with our clients and knows how to engage with them in a trauma informed way. At least knowing that you can't control the system and the outcomes but we can you know, give them a good experience of accessing legal advice and knowing their options has definitely improved my satisfaction. (Housing staff 7)

I haven't had much success with other legal services so my whole experience with First Step Legal and our justice partnership has just been such a positive and rewarding experience for me. (Health staff 8)

Their passion for an outcome that aligns with my passion for an outcome from a complete different professional perspective. Is really that – it really increases job satisfaction for me. (Health staff 4)

It feels like – like everybody here is very different at First Step Legal, but also within our partners but we're all here, I feel for the same reasons and share common values and are looking to achieve the same purpose which is really fantastic. It gives us sort of a unified direction that we're all pulling in. It's very client focused and as I said before it's radically non-judgmental. And I think it's quite exceptional and it feels special to be in amongst it with like-minded people... That lawyer-client relationship isn't an easy one and this just changes that dynamic. It frees up the relationship so much. It really is just a wonderful model of working. (Legal staff 4)

For legal staff, the more intensive, holistic and relational approach of the HJPs meant that job satisfaction was felt to be far higher than with a more traditional legal service model:

I also think that our lawyers, because they are taking a really holistic approach and because they have a genuine care in the long-term outcome as well as the legal outcome. Um, it does change the type of legal service that, that we provide... I think that's what makes it so exciting from a lawyer's point of view. That you know, whilst we are genuinely operating in the summary crimes space, you're with a clinician and with a client long enough to really play it out if they are the client's instructions. And that's, I think, probably really invigorating for a lawyer in this space. It's not a churn and burn game, which I think is unique. (Legal staff 2)

“ Given recruitment and retention challenges, the impact of the integrated model on staff wellbeing and job satisfaction is particularly encouraging ”

For most people who are dealing with people in the criminal context and particularly in the summary jurisdiction... a lot of your engagement with clients ends up being quite transactional and it also tends to be a moment in time. Someone comes to you and you engage them at a critical crisis moment for themselves when they're just about to get to court and they have criminal offending and in a short period of time you try to get your head around their legal issues... you negotiate with the prosecution and you either resolve that or you contest it and there's a court hearing outcome. And... that's the end of your engagement with that client, you say goodbye to them. There's a whole range of issues so it can be disheartening as a criminal practitioner because you end up putting band aids on, or you end up dealing with spot fires but you're never really able to address underlying causes. And you don't have the longer-term engagement with clients to be able to assist them, get to know them, see their humanity, their essential humanity and hopefully make it less likely that they have to use your services or one of your colleague's services in the future.

The benefit about being able to work in an HJP is that it is so much more satisfying because you can actually assist a client on a, firstly, a longer trajectory, a longer period of time. You engage with them, you find out a little bit more about them, you assist them in getting the supports that they need around them. And hopefully you have an ability to assist them so that their whatever issues that they have are resolved... There is a frustration for people who are engaged in normal criminal work for example, in that you're not sure if you're making any difference. It feels like a sausage factory. It feels like you're seeing the same people again and again and again and it feels like you're not being able to make any difference. So the satisfaction of not only having a client for a longer period of time but you can actually see the changes and improvements in their lives over the period of your engagement with them... So it's an extraordinary privilege that's amazingly satisfying to see the changes in the people over that journey. (Legal senior manager)

Levels of work-related stress

With greater job satisfaction and perceptions of genuine partnership, levels of work-related stress were said to be lower in the HJP model. Health staff in particular reported finding it valuable to be working alongside legal staff as it made it easier (and faster) to access informal advice on minor legal issues, reducing their anxieties about their work:

It sort of helps with the barrier of entry in terms getting our clients linked in with legal services... it sort of also helps me to help my clients. It really eases a lot of the anxiety and apprehension I would usually have around legal matters – you know – anything you sort of get anxious about I'd be like ahh I'll tend to that later but now I can kind of just be like great, I'll just call [Lawyer] or speak to someone at FSL. (Health staff 2)

... knowing that we have the support of First Step Legal, um takes a lot of stress um from my work in assisting residents manage their legal issues, um it also even just simply having whenever residents have a question about something even you know even non-criminal or family law related. (Health staff 3)

6. Conclusion

This evaluation found that engagement with First Step Legal's service model is associated with increased:

- client health and wellbeing
- client capability and confidence to address their legal issues
- client access to justice
- client satisfaction with legal outcomes
- professional capability among health, housing and legal staff
- job satisfaction and reduced stress among health, housing and legal staff

Unfortunately, there was insufficient data regarding clients' long-term contact with the justice system to draw meaningful conclusions in this regard, underscoring the need for better data linkage across the health and justice sectors.

The evaluation identified key features of integrated legal assistance that are crucial to the effectiveness of the model. These include physical colocation and consistent legal practitioner presence within the health setting; formal coordination of care and information sharing protocols; collaborative case planning mechanisms; investment in the development of cross disciplinary understanding and a shared values and practice framework.

Overall, the evaluation found strong evidence to support the efficacy of integrated legal help.

Although there are approximately 130 HJPs currently operating in Australia, this model still comprises a fraction of the legal assistance service sector. Given the prominent intersection between legal need, poor health and social disadvantage, this evaluation indicates that HJPs can advance both health and legal equity among people with complex needs.