



# **Eastern Community Legal Centre**

Submission to the Second Action Plan  
(National Plan to End Violence Against Women  
and Children 2022–2032)

July 2026

# Eastern Community Legal Centre (ECLC)

## Submission Summary

ECLC's response to this consultation is grounded in the experience gained from over a decade in establishing a strong multidisciplinary organisation that brings together primary prevention, early intervention and crisis response specialists who work alongside each other with a shared vision to address the complex social and legal problems experienced by the communities it works with, with a major focus on addressing violence against women and their children.

It is also informed by the specific expertise gained in designing, governing and delivering multidisciplinary legal programs and health justice partnerships for women, children and older people experiencing family violence. That experience shows that victim-survivors' safety, wellbeing, healing and recovery are strengthened when legal assistance is embedded early within trusted service settings, rather than treated as a separate response that people must navigate only after crisis escalation.

In ECLC's experience, for women and children experiencing family violence the fear of coming into contact with authorities and the legal system is intimidating, confusing and unsafe. For women and children who face disproportionate barriers to accessing the legal system, and increased discrimination when they do, the legal support they receive at this time can be life-changing for them and their children.

ECLC also recognises the importance of building further knowledge around the interconnected drivers of family violence, including the growing impacts of climate change, disasters, housing insecurity and economic disadvantage. Community legal centres can play a vital role in bridging the gap between education and access to justice.

### ECLC Recommendations

**Recommendation 1:** Integrate legal services as part of the broader systemic response to family violence, including prevention, early intervention and response to improve victim-survivors' safety, wellbeing, healing and recovery.

**Recommendation 2:** Fund community legal services to provide early intervention multidisciplinary legal assistance and health justice partnerships to support women and children to access legal support earlier.

**Recommendation 3:** Fund community legal services to provide multidisciplinary support to women and children experiencing increased barriers to accessing support, particularly through their interactions with the legal system where the barriers are often more pronounced.

**Recommendation 4:** Increase investment in community legal centre-led prevention and education as part of a comprehensive approach to preventing violence against women and children.

**Recommendation 5:** Fund research and evidence development on the intersection of gender and ageism to strengthen understanding of violence against women and its drivers across the life course.

**Recommendation 6:** Establish mechanisms for cross-sector learning and collaboration across the prevention, early intervention and response continuum.

**Recommendation 7:** Strengthen primary prevention workforce sustainability through funding certainty, wellbeing supports and recognition of prevention workforce impacts.

**Recommendation 8:** Embed and invest in community-led, culturally responsive services delivered through trusted local organisations.

**Recommendation 9:** Embed multidisciplinary family violence legal programs and health justice partnerships within universal health services that are already providing services to women and children.

**Recommendation 10:** Expand the Mabels program in additional local government areas and regions across Victoria.

**Recommendation 11:** Identify expansion sites for the Mabels program nationally, to trial the viability of the program across varied local partnership options, using a broader range of universal health settings.

**Recommendation 12:** Explicitly recognise the relationship between climate change, disasters and family violence within the Second Action Plan, including the role that climate-related stressors such as housing insecurity, displacement, financial hardship and social isolation can play in increasing family violence risk.

**Recommendation 13:** Invest in integrated prevention and early intervention models that bring together family violence services, community legal services, housing providers, local government, health services and emergency management agencies to support communities before, during and after disasters, drawing on place-based approaches such as ECLC's Yarra Ranges Climate Partnerships project.

**Recommendation 14:** Implement Recommendation 22.5 of the Royal Commission into National Natural Disaster Arrangements through the establishment of pre-agreed recovery programs that include family violence support, legal assistance and other psychosocial recovery services that can be activated rapidly following disasters.

**Recommendation 15:** Increase investment in safe, affordable and climate-resilient housing as a key prevention measure that supports victim-survivors' safety, recovery and long-term resilience.

**Recommendation 16:** Support ACCOs and ACCHOs working in family violence, community wellbeing and disaster resilience to lead prevention and early intervention initiatives through long-term, sustainable funding and decision-making authority within partnership models.

**Recommendation 17:** Incorporate a gender-responsive climate adaptation approach that recognises the disproportionate impacts of disasters on women, children and other groups experiencing systemic disadvantage, informed by community-based resilience and adaptation initiatives.

**Recommendation 18:** Adopt the intent of Women's Environmental Leadership Australia's Recommendation 5 by supporting research, data collection and evidence-building on the gendered impacts of disasters and by investing in preparedness and recovery initiatives that address these risks.

**Recommendation 19:** Identify measurable outcomes that increase the visibility of children and young people and that demonstrate the impact of early intervention family violence programs.

**Recommendation 20:** That the Second Action Plan identify mechanisms that support cross departmental collaboration and funding to adequately facilitate integrated models of practice.

**Recommendation 21:** That all family violence reforms should integrate the legal assistance sector and consider the implications and training needs of the legal assistance workforce.

**Recommendation 22:** Establish formal coordination mechanisms between family violence, legal assistance, housing, health, ACCOs, ACCHOs, emergency management and disaster recovery sectors to support integrated and culturally safe responses before, during and after disasters.

**Recommendation 23:** Ensure family violence specialists and community legal centres are represented within state and local emergency management, resilience and disaster recovery planning structures.

**Recommendation 24:** Implement pre-agreed service coordination arrangements, consistent with Recommendation 22.5 of the Royal Commission into National Natural Disaster Arrangements, to enable rapid activation of family violence, legal assistance, housing and psychosocial supports following disasters.

**Recommendation 25:** Develop and fund climate- and disaster-informed training across family violence, legal assistance, housing and emergency management workforces, informed by lessons from community-based climate resilience and disaster recovery initiatives.

**Recommendation 26:** Provide sustainable funding for community organisations – including community legal centres – to ensure:

- a. services can respond effectively to increasing demand due to family violence exacerbated by climate-related disasters; and
- b. cross-sector capability and referral pathways are strengthened so that practitioners can provide coordinated and holistic responses that address family violence and other legal, social, housing and safety needs simultaneously.

## 1. Background

ECLC acknowledges the Wurundjeri peoples of the Kulin Nation, the Traditional Custodians of the land on which the Centre communities live and work and pays deep respect to Elders past and present. ECLC deeply appreciates and celebrates the people, stories, traditions, culture, knowledge and strength of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples and recognises the learning that comes from listening.

ECLC is a multidisciplinary legal service that works to prevent problems, progress fair outcomes and support the wellbeing and resilience of communities and community members in Melbourne's East.

ECLC has a longstanding commitment to addressing family violence, particularly through working in partnership with family violence services, health services, community organisations, Aboriginal Community Controlled Organisations, local councils and community groups. This has enabled ECLC to ensure that people and communities are at the centre of service design and to explore opportunities across the prevention, early intervention and response continuum to provide holistic responses that divert people away from the legal system.

This has included:

- providing legal advice and assistance for family violence matters, for victim survivors of sexual violence and a range of related legal problems to people across the Eastern Metropolitan Region;
- providing assistance as part of the Intervention Order Support Service at the Ringwood Magistrates' Court four days a week;
- developing resources to support people engaging with the Family Violence Intervention Order process - [Steps2Safety](#) – an informative [video](#) and collection of multilingual resources for people (2010, 2013);
- leading the [Family Violence Integration Project \(FVIP\)](#), which made significant improvements to the co-ordination and integration of legal and support services for family violence victims/survivors attending Ringwood Magistrates' Court (2011 – 2014). The Royal Commission into Family Violence endorsed a number of key outcomes of the FVIP as recommendations; and,
- delivering the Matter of Respect and Matter of Trust Projects, which partnered with culturally and linguistically diverse communities across the EMR – to deliver workshops and resources in the prevention of family violence and elder abuse.

Since 2014, ECLC has developed more formalised health justice partnerships and multidisciplinary practice programs in order to better address the intertwined legal, family violence, social and financial needs of women, children and older people experiencing family violence.

## 1.1. Family Violence Programs

### Mabels

A Health Justice Partnership with Boorndawan Willam Aboriginal Healing Service (BWAHS) and three local councils, which provides early intervention legal, family violence and social support to women experiencing family violence within the Maternal and Child Health context. The program has also been expanded to a regional area and is led by a partnership with a Community Legal Centre and their local council.

### WELS

A Health Justice Partnership with Eastern Health and BWAHS that embeds a legal program within Eastern Health's maternity services to provide legal, family violence and social support to women during and immediately after pregnancy.

### SAGE

An intensive multidisciplinary legal, family violence and social support program for women and their children who are experiencing family violence, and who also face increased barriers to accessing the legal system, including: Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women, women from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds, women experiencing mental health challenges or disability and women who live regionally or are in other ways isolated. The program also has a health justice partnership with BWAHS to improve accessibility and cultural support.

### Community Law Program - Integrated Practice Service

A service that integrates a mental health practitioner with community lawyers to better respond to the intertwined legal and psychosocial needs of people experiencing mental health challenges; a dependence on alcohol and/or other drugs; and, or homelessness, including those experiencing family violence or who use violence.

## 1.2. Elder Abuse Programs

### ELSA

A Health Justice Partnership with Eastern Health that embeds a legal program across a range of healthcare services and teams to provide legal, social and financial counselling support to people experiencing elder abuse.

### ROSE

A partnership with Oonah Belonging Place that provides legal, financial counselling and social work advice, information and case management support to older people with increased vulnerability, experiencing or at risk of elder abuse.

These programs have been extensively and successfully [evaluated](#), and have enabled a number of key lessons, evidence and practical insights to support professionals working with older people.

### 1.3. Multidisciplinary Practice Leadership

ECLC has also been intentional in establishing governance and operational frameworks and made organisational changes to ensure that the Board and leadership team are equipped with the expertise required to govern and lead a multidisciplinary legal centre. This has enabled the Centre to strengthen and expand its integrated legal programs, while also developing significant expertise in relation to family violence.

It has also placed ECLC in a unique position to establish networks, lead projects, and develop resources to support the broader legal assistance and related sectors. In collaboration with these sectors, ECLC has led some key initiatives and developed a range of resources to support the continued growth of multidisciplinary legal programs. These include:

- [ECLC's Integrated Practice Framework – Summary \(2019\)](#)
- [The MARAM Framework and the legal assistance sector – Outcomes Report \(2021\)](#)
- Integrated Legal Practice Impact and Influence (2023 – 2025)
  - o [Family Violence Roundtable](#)
  - o [Multidisciplinary Practice Forum](#)
  - o [Multidisciplinary Practice Workshop Series](#)
  - o [Integrated Legal Practice – Impact & Influence Advisory Group: Strategic Advocacy & Initiatives regarding Multidisciplinary Practice](#)
- [Better Practice Principles](#) (originally published 2021, updated in 2025)
- [Governance Framework for Multidisciplinary Practice \(2025\)](#)

It is from this unique perspective that Eastern Community Legal Centre welcomes the opportunity to contribute to the development of the Second Action Plan under the *National Plan to End Violence against Women and Children 2022–2032*.

---

## Priority Area 1 – Victim-survivors of violence against women and children and other forms of gender-based violence:

Strengthening a whole of society and life-course approach to prevention, early intervention, response, recovery and healing with a focus on victim-survivors from all communities and backgrounds.

---

### 2. Integrated Practice Service Delivery

In 2018, Eastern Community Legal Centre launched the 'It couldn't have come at a better time' Early Intervention Family Violence Legal Assistance [Report](#). Drawing on the experience, knowledge and skills developed through Mabels, particularly the voices and experiences of women who had engaged with the program, the report provided strong guidance for early intervention legal practice and system reform.

Published following the Royal Commission into Family Violence (2016) and the Victorian Access to Justice Review (2016), it reinforced calls for the Victorian Government to strengthen innovation in family violence policy, foster collaboration between service systems, address barriers created by different service models and theoretical frameworks, and support more flexible and integrated responses across justice and human services where tailored legal assistance is needed.

The report recommended that:

- the family violence reforms led by the Victorian Government recognise the value of integrating legal assistance as part of the broader systemic response to family violence.
- the Victorian Government ensures that legal assistance is expanded to be readily accessible as part of the prevention and early intervention to family violence.
- the Victorian Government recognises the value of empowering women with their legal rights and options as an integral function of the Support and Safety Hubs, known as The Orange Door.

Now, almost a decade later and despite significant reform and transformation in the way Victoria prevents and responds to family and sexual violence, legal assistance remains insufficiently integrated into the broader systemic response to family violence.

Instead, a strengthened community and police response to family violence means that now more than ever, women and children coming into contact with the legal system, are not provided with the opportunity to receive legal assistance.

In 2024–2025, the scale of family violence and related legal need in Victoria was stark:

- Victoria Police attended 106,430 family violence incidents, with children being present at 44,117 of those incidents;

- The Magistrates' Court of Victoria finalised 37,471 original Intervention Order matters; and,
- Child Protection commenced 47,183 investigations, placed 9,356 children in care and placed 9,326 children on orders.

One woman is killed nearly every week in Australia due to family violence. This rate has continued, despite efforts and reforms.

Overwhelmingly and unsurprisingly the legal and social needs and remedies in providing safety to women and children experiencing family violence are unavoidably and inextricably intertwined. However, the system and service responses continue to be siloed.

From the experience of ECLC's clients, for women and children experiencing family violence the fear of coming into contact with authorities and the legal system is intimidating, confusing and unsafe. It can also deter them from disclosing family violence and accessing the family violence service system. For women and children who face disproportionate barriers to accessing the legal system, and increased discrimination when they do, the legal support they receive at this time can be life-changing for them and their children.

ECLC continues to advocate for the integration of legal assistance, particularly multidisciplinary legal programs and health justice partnerships, within the broader family violence system.

Based on this experience, delivering evidence-based, family violence legal programs that support women to access and remain engaged with the legal system would make the biggest difference to victim-survivors' safety, wellbeing, healing and recovery. It would substantially strengthen trust, ensure equitable access to protection, improve justice responses, reduce the likelihood of re-traumatisation and assist in addressing systems abuse experienced through the legal system.

## Story

My name is [REDACTED] and I want to thank ECLC for providing me with legal help. I would like to share my story, so you understand why the help I was given has changed my life and the life of my sons.

I came to Australia following an arranged marriage and started living with my husband and his aunt and uncle. I did not know that my husband had a drug and alcohol problem and was committing crimes until the police started coming to our house. Drugs, police, crime, court and violence became a normal part of my life in Australia.

My husband's physical, emotional and mental abuse started as soon as I arrived in Australia. His aunt and uncle became part of the abuse, they controlled where I went, monitored my calls, listened to my conversations and watched over me all the time as my husband's violence increased.

I was in a new country, did not know anyone, had no money and the only people in my life were my abusers. They constantly abused me and threatened me that if I did anything against their wishes, I would be deported. I felt trapped and lost all desire to keep living. My husband's aunt and uncle were forcing me to have a baby. They told me that if I had a son my husband would change. When I fell pregnant with twins, they threatened to send me back to the country I was from and as a single pregnant woman, I would bring shame on my family.

My twin sons were born, and my husband's abuse became worse - only this time it included the twins. I was very scared for my sons and my life. He and his aunt and uncle threatened to take my sons and have me deported and that they would make sure I would never be allowed to see them again. I did everything I was asked to do, just so my sons and I could be together, and so I would not be separated from them. My life was like living in a war zone.

After my sons were born, they had health problems and I was told this was because of what happened when I was pregnant and the violence that continued afterwards. The hospital reported it to child protection. I told child protection everything and they worked secretly with me and helped me leave the house with my sons. The police got an Intervention Order against my husband. My ex-husband and his family did not give up despite the Intervention Order. They took me to court wanting contact with the twins. I had no one to support me, and everything was overwhelming and frightening.

I remember the day I came to your office and spoke to the lawyer; she told me that two people would be working on my case. I did not know at that time that these two people would help give me my life back and save my sons from something so horrible. I start shaking when I think about it.

These two people (family violence advocate and lawyer) believed in my story, they understood me like I could not even understand myself at the time. I told them

everything and they got it. I felt safe for myself and my sons, and I started to have hope for us. I listened to every word they said, I trusted every word they spoke, their voices were all I had to work with.

They put my story to the court, and I got the strength from them and knew how to tell my story to the court. I gained so much strength and power from them. I became more determined to save my sons and myself, and I knew I had the team to help me do this.

The court process was very difficult, we had to fight for my sons, there were so many challenges, but I never felt alone in my fight. My ex-husband and his family continued to lie and deny everything and we went to trial. The orders were finally made for him to have no contact with the twins. I am glad to say that my ex-husband is now in prison for his crimes.

The team helped me build the courage and strength so I could face my ex-husband and his family at court. After the trial I was able to stand outside the courthouse with the ECLC team and breathe the Australian air, for the first time since I came here. I could feel the warmth of the sun on my skin, and I could hear people's cheerful and excited voices, as if it was the first time. I told them that I felt for the first time that Australia is my home, and I belong here. I felt that I got my life back and my ex-husband and his family had no power to control me and my sons any longer.

I feel proud that I was able to fight for myself and my sons. My sons and I are safe here and we have a future, and that day was our first day of freedom. I have so much hope and a life of freedom is something that I thought was not possible for us. I am going back to my studies, my sons are recovering slowly, it will take some time, but we have so much hope in a life of freedom.

This would not have been possible without your staff. I owe my sons' lives and my life to them. I thank you ECLC, and the team for everything.

### **ECLC Recommendations**

**Recommendation 1:** Integrate legal services as part of the broader systemic response to family violence, including prevention, early intervention and response to improve victim-survivors' safety, wellbeing, healing and recovery.

**Recommendation 2:** Fund community legal services to provide early intervention multidisciplinary legal assistance and health justice partnerships to support women and children to access legal support earlier.

**Recommendation 3:** Fund community legal services to provide multidisciplinary support to women and children experiencing increased barriers to accessing support, particularly through their interactions with the legal system where the barriers are often more pronounced.

---

## **Priority Area 2 – Prevention and early intervention:**

Embedding initiatives where people live, work, learn and connect to address the gendered drivers of this violence; address substantive influences on perpetration and risk such as harmful substance use, gambling, and adverse childhood experience; support attitudinal and behavioural change to prevent harm before it occurs; and to prevent escalation. It also requires collaboration and integration across sectors to strengthen primary prevention and early intervention approaches.

---

### **3. Prevention and Community Engagement**

#### **3.1. Primary Prevention**

ECLC recognises that achieving better outcomes for community members experiencing complex problems requires strong and purposeful partnerships. The Centre takes a collaborative approach, working closely with community organisations, governments, the community legal sector, pro bono partners and local networks to deliver co-ordinated, holistic programs and services. This enables ECLC to more effectively address the interconnected legal, social, financial and wellbeing issues many community members experience.

The Centre's Primary Prevention and Education program leads a range of diverse engagement and partnership activities, bringing a strong focus to primary prevention initiatives that help to prevent problems before they occur.

ECLC's continuum approach aims to build understanding across disciplines about the complex social and legal problems experienced by the communities it works with, including addressing violence against women and their children. The approach brings together primary prevention, early intervention and crisis response specialists who work alongside each other with a shared vision to improve outcomes for local communities and the individuals who live, work and play in those communities.

ECLC strongly advocates that the different prevention continuum areas of work are distinct disciplines – each requiring specialised training and expertise, dedicated resources and a clear focus. However, it also understands that there are significant opportunities for shared learning and strengthening of practice in creating opportunities for these disciplines to learn from and inform one another – strengthening overall effectiveness of efforts to prevent and respond to violence. While retaining their specific areas of specialisation, practitioners are supported to better understand the bigger picture, including the social conditions that allow problems to occur in the first place, the emerging issues experienced by individuals and communities and strategies for intervening early, and the realities faced by people in crisis. This reciprocal learning strengthens practice across the continuum, fostering more informed and effective approaches to addressing complex social problems at multiple levels.

### **3.2. Community Legal Centre-led prevention**

Community legal centres (CLCs) play an important role in bridging the gap between education and access to justice. Investment in community legal centre-led prevention and education should form part of a comprehensive approach to preventing violence against women and children. Place-based CLCs offer a unique combination of legal expertise, local knowledge, partnerships and community trust, enabling them to deliver programs and services that are both educational and empowering.

For example, ECLC's Consent, Cybercrimes and the Law program is led by experienced legal and community engagement practitioners. Complementing existing school-based primary prevention programs, it provides practical education on consent, respectful relationships, sexting and technology-facilitated abuse, while increasing young people's understanding of the associated legal responsibilities and consequences.

Through this approach, the program supports informed decision-making while also providing a forum to talk about the social context of gender inequality and why respectful relationships are so important. It also builds on and reinforces the Victorian government's now well-established Respectful Relationships in school's curriculum and approach.

These workshops provide a trusted environment in which young people feel safe and empowered to discuss sensitive issues and disclose experiences of harm. The confidentiality protections associated with legal professional privilege can foster confidence and trust, enabling young people to seek guidance and support at an earlier stage. Young people are not only supported to gain a practical understanding of how the law applies to their everyday lives, they also build legal literacy – encouraging help-seeking behaviour and earlier identification of harmful behaviour.

By providing clear and accessible information about rights, responsibilities and available supports, CLCs help people navigate complex issues with greater confidence and awareness. Community Legal Centres are a trusted space for people to ask difficult questions, discuss harmful behaviours and experiences, and access appropriate supports through established referral pathways. As trusted sources of information and advice, they also create important opportunities for prevention-centred discussions to address gender inequality and help stop violence before it occurs.

### **3.3. Preventing Violence Against Women Through a Life-course Lens**

It is important to recognise that violence against women is not static across a woman's life course. While intimate partner violence is often the dominant focus of prevention and response efforts, the perpetration of violence can shift through a woman's life. As women age, intimate partner violence may continue, but women are also increasingly likely to experience abuse perpetrated by adult children, other family members, carers and other trusted individuals, reflecting the changing forms and dynamics of violence in later life. As the evidence base around elder abuse continues to grow, so too does the understanding that a woman's experience of violence may change over time, shaped by factors such as

ageism, health and ability, dependency, social isolation, caregiving relationships, and the impacts of life-long gender-based inequality.

Applying a gendered lens to elder abuse enables a deeper understanding of how power, control and inequality can manifest in later life, particularly for older women. This approach reinforces the importance of addressing the abuse of older women (elder abuse) as part of broader efforts to prevent violence against women across the lifespan.

Understanding elder abuse within the broader framework of violence against women reinforces the importance of an approach that recognises women's experiences of abuse may evolve over time, and that prevention, policy and service responses must continue to adapt to the changing forms, contexts and perpetrators of violence as women age.

Regional, cross-sector partnerships such as the [Eastern Elder Abuse Network Primary Prevention Community of Practice](#) (led by ECLC) demonstrate how primary prevention practitioners can work together to address the drivers of abuse, build community awareness and strengthen workforce capacity. These collaborative models create opportunities to challenge ageism and sexism, promote respect, dignity and inclusion across the lifespan, and support co-ordinated, place-based action to prevent abuse before it occurs. Government investment in preventing violence against women should explicitly recognise elder abuse as part of the broader continuum of gendered violence. Policy, service system design and prevention initiatives that adopt a life-course approach to addresses the intersecting impacts of gender inequality and ageism, will ensure that older women are included within efforts to prevent violence and advance gender equality.

Continued investment in research and evidence is critical to strengthening understanding of the drivers of elder abuse and its relationship to other forms of violence against women, including intimate partner violence. Building this evidence base will support more effective prevention, early intervention and response efforts, while ensuring policies and programs remain responsive to the changing nature of women's experiences of violence as they age.

### **3.4. Fostering Mutual Learning Across the Response Continuum**

ECLC's experience working across the prevention continuum – particularly in elder abuse – highlights the benefits of fostering collaboration and mutual learning across the continuum. Creating regular opportunities for practitioners to share learning and expertise has enabled a richer understanding of the complex and evolving nature of elder abuse across disciplines. This exchange of knowledge has enhanced workforce capability and supported a more connected, evidence-informed approach to program planning and delivery.

While prevention, early intervention and response are distinct areas of practice with different objectives, skillsets and evidence bases, there is considerable benefit in fostering collaboration and knowledge exchange. Frontline response practitioners provide critical

insights into the experiences of victim-survivors and emerging trends, while prevention practitioners contribute expertise in addressing underlying drivers and promoting long-term social change. Early intervention practitioners play a key role in identifying risks and preventing escalation. Preserving the integrity of each discipline while creating opportunities for mutual learning strengthens both policy development and service delivery, leading to more effective outcomes for the community.

### **3.5. Workforce and Sector Sustainability**

Workforce fatigue and burnout are significant challenges for the primary prevention workforce. Despite sustained commitment and effort over many years, practitioners report feeling that progress towards preventing violence against women and their children is slow and that the cultural change required can be difficult to see in day-to-day practice. The long-term nature of primary prevention work means that outcomes are often incremental and not immediately visible, contributing to frustration, reduced morale and the risk of workforce attrition.

These challenges are compounded by funding uncertainty and short-term funding models. The reliance on short-term funding is inconsistent with the long-term nature of primary prevention work, impacting outcomes and creating additional uncertainty for organisations and practitioners,

The Second Action Plan needs to recognise the importance of supporting and sustaining the prevention workforce through a strong focus on workforce wellbeing and retention. This could include celebrating success and milestones, sharing evidence of impact, and highlighting examples of positive change that demonstrate prevention efforts are making a difference. Embedding positive narratives alongside evidence-based findings will help to reinforce the value of the work and strengthen workforce confidence.

Addressing workforce fatigue will be critical to retaining sector knowledge and expertise. Ongoing workforce sustainability requires policy certainty, backed by long-term investment. This will enable the sector to retain its skilled workforce and ensure that organisations and individuals remain engaged in the collective effort to address the drivers of violence against women and create lasting social change.

### **3.6. Multicultural and Multifaith Communities**

The Second Action Plan should place a stronger emphasis on intersectionality and the delivery of services that are tailored and culturally responsive to the diverse needs of multicultural and multifaith communities. Feedback from multicultural and multifaith representatives in ECLC's catchment consistently highlight a preference for accessing trusted local organisations that are embedded within local communities, rather than relying on generalist or statewide service models. Local services are often better positioned to build relationships, respond to emerging community needs, and provide culturally safe and accessible pathways to support.

ECLC's Multicultural Advisory Group (MAG) is an example of this approach, utilising the Centre's primary prevention workforce to engage and consult with local culturally diverse communities to inform its place-based service delivery through strong community connections and a deep understanding of the barriers faced by culturally diverse communities.

The Centre's services and advocacy are grounded in evidence and guided by the lived experiences and expertise of its Multicultural Advisory Group comprising more than 15 local community leaders. Through the group, it can identify emerging issues, strengthen engagement with culturally diverse communities, and ensure its programs, services, and advocacy efforts are responsive to community needs.

#### **ECLC Recommendations**

**Recommendation 4:** Increase investment in community legal centre-led prevention and education as part of a comprehensive approach to preventing violence against women and children.

**Recommendation 5:** Fund research and evidence development on the intersection of gender and ageism to strengthen understanding of violence against women and its drivers across the life course.

**Recommendation 6:** Establish mechanisms for cross-sector learning and collaboration across the prevention, early intervention and response continuum.

**Recommendation 7:** Strengthen primary prevention workforce sustainability through funding certainty, wellbeing supports and recognition of prevention workforce impacts.

**Recommendation 8:** Embed and invest in community-led, culturally responsive services delivered through trusted local organisations.

## **4. Early Intervention Family Violence Legal Programs**

### **4.1. Mabels**

Mabels was established in 2014, a pioneering partnership between ECLC, Boorndawan Willam Aboriginal Healing Service (BWAHS) and two local councils in the Eastern Metropolitan Region of Melbourne. Initially funded by the Victorian Legal Services Board Grants Program, Mabels then received funding from the Victorian Government to continue and later expand into a third local council (under its Early Intervention Investment Framework); as well as philanthropic funding in 2022 through the Cybec Foundation to expand into a regional area.

As one of the first Health Justice Partnerships in Victoria, the program pioneered the integration of multidisciplinary legal assistance services within the Maternal and Child Health (MCH) service setting, in order to provide an early intervention approach to addressing family violence.

After 11 years of service delivery and a series of evaluation reports (available upon request), Mabels has now evolved into a mature model that has demonstrated significant success not only in Melbourne's East, but also regionally. As of 30 June 2026, Mabels has received 1,793 referrals and provided an early intervention response for over 1,034 women and their 1,730 children experiencing family violence. From expanded data collection since 2022, almost 1 in 4 women assisted by Mabels were disclosing family violence for the first time.

This has been achieved because it has been designed to align with key early intervention principles, and to fill the gaps that often exist in crisis focused, tertiary responses of service delivery.

As outlined in the 2018 Evaluation Report 'Mabels Changes Everything - How a Health Justice Partnership is quietly transforming legal and family violence support in Maternal and Child Health services', Mabels changes:

- where and how support is provided - by embedding a legal program within the MCH service and within a safe and trusted location;
- the experience of seeking advice for women - a multidisciplinary approach that supports women to receive legal, family violence, safety and social support that is tailored to their pace and readiness;
- how the needs of babies and children are considered in an early intervention family violence partnership - through a wraparound partnership that supports women to parent safely and to keep children safe, whilst experiencing family violence;
- how quickly women receive support - by providing a program that is designed to proactively engage with women in a timely way, within the service setting they are already accessing;
- the confidence, knowledge and practice of maternal and children health nurses - through shared service delivery experience and both informal and informal professional development opportunities;
- the practice of the multidisciplinary team members - by building a shared capability across the partnership organisations;
- access to justice for women - by providing accessible and meaningful legal advice and support at an earlier time in a women's experience of family violence
- access to justice for Aboriginal women - by partnering with Aboriginal services to providing culturally safe and confidential legal information and support, particularly in relation to child protection; and,
- access to justice for culturally and linguistically diverse women - by providing culturally safe and confidential legal information and support, particularly in relation to migration concerns.

This model is well presented through a video that was developed to celebrate Mabels' 10-year anniversary – **10 Years of Mabels.**

### **Mabels Client Story**

■■■■ was referred to Mabels in February 2024 after expressing concern to her Maternal and Child Health Nurse that her partner Steven had become increasingly controlling since the birth of their child. ■■■■ originally from China, had lived with Steven in Australia since 2022.

At the start of her Mabels integrated appointment (with the community lawyer and family violence advocate), ■■■■ expressed fear about disclosing her experiences of family violence and pursuing separation, as she did not know how this would impact her ability to remain in Australia or to protect her child. She was eager to understand her legal rights and options – particularly if Steven's behaviour worsened or if she decided separation was necessary.

As part of the integrated appointment, the Mabels team was also able to support ■■■■ to develop a safety plan which included providing her with referral options and contact numbers if the violence was to escalate. Over several subsequent appointments, ■■■■ increased her trust in the Mabels team and disclosed more about the family violence she and her child were experiencing, as well as the challenges she faced in contemplating separation and pursuing her legal options. During this time, the Mabels team worked with ■■■■ to increase safety for herself and her child while she remained living with ■■■■ and provided her with legal advice and guidance to help her to prepare to separate safely.

During ■■■■ appointment, the Mabels family violence advocate was able to support ■■■■ to disclose to the community lawyer greater detail about the family violence she was experiencing. ■■■■ disclosed that as well as using behaviours to control her, ■■■■ was being verbally abusive and making threats to her safety, often in front of their child. The Mabels lawyer was then able to provide her with comprehensive legal advice on Family Violence Intervention Orders, post-separation parenting options, mediation and the legal process for separation and divorce, including separation under one roof. The family violence advocate was able to ensure that ■■■■ understood the legal advice and that the information was not too overwhelming.

Knowing she had the support of the Mabels team, in early 2025 ■■■■ was ultimately able to report her concerns to the Police who successfully applied for a Family Violence Intervention Order against Steven. She also reported her concerns regarding the impacts of the family violence on her child to her Maternal and Child Health Nurse who supported ■■■■ in accessing parenting support and resources.

■■■■ expressed gratitude for the support she received, which she felt enabled her to separate from ■■■■ much earlier than she otherwise would have, and before the violence had a greater impact on the safety and wellbeing of ■■■■ and her child.

## 4.2. WELS

WELS is a Health Justice Partnership between ECLC, Eastern Health and BWAHS. The partnership was established in 2019 through the Strengthening Hospital Responses to Family Violence Project. WELS was developed from the knowledge and experience of Mabels, to provide an even earlier opportunity for intervention that would provide continuity of care through a streamlined referral pathway into MCH and Mabels after the baby was born.

Initially funded by Eastern Health for two years, the program has relied on minimal Victorian Government funding to support the partnership and provide some service delivery. There is great opportunity and need for the program to be expanded across each of the Eastern Health sites to ensure all women are provided this critical support to increase the safety and wellbeing of their babies at this critical time.

## 4.3. Mabels Strategic Review

In 2025, ECLC engaged the Centre for Innovative Justice, RMIT University, to undertake a Strategic Review of Mabels. The Strategic Review seeks to build on the evidence and experience gained by Mabels over 10 years of service delivery, expansion experience and program outcomes and impacts through comprehensive independent evaluations.

Through the analysis of accumulated data and the collection of new data through a case file review and engagement with Mabels clients, key stakeholders and broader system players the Strategic Review aims to:

- Identify the core components which maintain the integrity and uniqueness of the Mabels model, and deliver its outcomes, as these relate both to non-Aboriginal and Aboriginal women.
- Inform the expansion of Mabels while maintaining integrity to those core components.
- Influence broader family violence systemic reform, by demonstrating the importance of integrating legal support in the context of early intervention as well as by highlighting post-natal and early childhood as a particularly critical early intervention opportunity.

The Final Report is due for completion by September 2026; however, the emerging findings have proven to be extremely positive and have the potential to provide important insights into the key elements that are necessary to ensure the effectiveness of early intervention approaches, and how they can be successfully strengthened and expanded.

### **CLC Recommendations**

**Recommendation 9:** Embed multidisciplinary family violence legal programs and health justice partnerships within universal health services that are already providing services to women and children.

**Recommendation 10:** Expand the Mabels program in additional local government areas and regions across Victoria.

**Recommendation 11:** Identify expansion sites for the Mabels program nationally, to trial the viability of the program across varied local partnership options, using a broader range of universal health settings.

## **5. Climate Justice & Disaster Recovery**

Women are disproportionately impacted by climate change; they are 14 times more likely to perish in a disaster and represent 80% of people displaced by extreme weather.

Uneven climate and environmental impacts upon women and gender diverse people are a direct result of structural and systemic factors including the unjust gendered power relations produced by the overlapping forces of patriarchy, colonialism, racism, and unfettered capitalism.<sup>1</sup> Prevention efforts must acknowledge that climate-related disasters—including bushfires, floods, storms and extreme heat events—can create conditions that increase the risk, severity and complexity of family violence.

ECLC has a strong focus on prevention and early intervention approaches that recognise the interconnected drivers of family violence, including the growing impacts of climate change, disasters, housing insecurity and economic disadvantage.

This perspective is informed by its direct practice experience and sustained community engagement, including lessons learned through supporting communities affected by the 2009 Black Saturday bushfires and the June 2021 extreme storm event in the Dandenong Ranges.

ECLC's experience through the Yarra Ranges Climate Partnerships program has demonstrated that existing risks, such as family violence, can be mitigated when legal assistance, social support, disaster preparedness and local community capacity-building are approached in an integrated way. Through partnerships with women's groups, local governments, First Nations organisations, and other community service and health organisations across Melbourne's East, the partnership has observed the importance of trusted local networks in identifying vulnerability, connecting people with support and building resilience and preparedness before disasters occur.<sup>2</sup>

ECLC considers First Nations leadership to be essential to effective prevention and early intervention responses. Aboriginal Community Controlled Organisations (ACCOs) and

---

<sup>1</sup> Women's Environmental Leadership Australia (WELA), *Gender, Climate and Environmental Justice in Australia* (2024), p. iv.

<sup>2</sup> For further detail on ECLC's Climate Justice work and Partnerships, see [www.eclc.org.au/climatejustice](http://www.eclc.org.au/climatejustice)

Aboriginal Community Controlled Health Organisations (ACCHOs) possess deep community and Country knowledge, trusted relationships and place-based expertise that are critical to both family violence prevention and disaster resilience. As climate-related disasters become more frequent and severe, First Nations organisations must be recognised, supported and resourced as central partners in the design and delivery of prevention initiatives, rather than being engaged as stakeholders after key decisions have already been made.<sup>3</sup>

Evidence shows that the most effective prevention and early intervention approaches are:

- Place-based and community-led.
- Trauma-informed and culturally safe.
- Delivered through integrated partnerships across family violence, legal, housing, health, First Nations organisations, community and emergency management sectors.
- Designed to reach communities experiencing multiple and intersecting forms of disadvantage.<sup>4</sup>

ECLC's experience demonstrates the value of integrated legal and social support models that identify risk early and help victim-survivors navigate complex legal, social and financial challenges before circumstances escalate.

To strengthen and expand prevention and early intervention, the Second Action Plan should:

- Explicitly recognise the relationship between climate change, disasters and increased risks of family violence and gender-based violence.
- Support local partnerships between, family violence services, community legal centres, ACCO's/ACCHO's, housing providers, local government and emergency management agencies.
- Integrate family violence prevention considerations into climate adaptation, disaster preparedness and community resilience planning.
- Strengthen access to legal assistance as an essential component of early intervention.
- Invest in affordable, accessible and climate-resilient housing as a key protective factor against family violence.

---

<sup>3</sup> Bhiame Williamson and Dr Jessica Weir, "Indigenous peoples and natural hazard research, policy and practice in southern temperate Australia: an agenda for change", *Australian Journal of Emergency Management*, October 2021, <https://knowledge.aidr.org.au/resources/ajem-october-2021-indigenous-peoples-and-natural-hazard-research-policy-and-practice-in-southern-temperate-australia-an-agenda-for-change/>; Bhiame Williamson, "Aboriginal Community Governance on the Frontlines and Faultlines in the Black Summer Bushfires", *Centre for Aboriginal Economic Policy Research*, no.3 (2022), p. 28, <https://doi.org/10.25911/V482-AE70>.

<sup>4</sup> Robinson, S., valentine, k., Newton, B. J., Smyth, C., & Parmenter, N. (2020). *Violence prevention and early intervention for mothers and children with disability: Building promising practice* (Research report, 16/2020).

ECLC particularly supports Recommendation 22.5 of the Royal Commission into National Natural Disaster Arrangements, which calls for the development of pre-agreed recovery programs and delivery arrangements that can be activated following disasters, including programs addressing social needs such as legal assistance and family violence support. Embedding these arrangements before disasters occur would significantly strengthen early intervention and reduce barriers to safety and recovery for victim-survivors.<sup>5</sup>

### 5.1. Climate Justice Program

ECLC's Climate Justice work has highlighted that climate-related disasters are increasingly experienced not as isolated events, but as recurring and cumulative shocks that compound existing disadvantage. Communities that experience repeated disasters often face prolonged recovery periods, housing instability, financial stress and disruption to support networks—all factors that can increase risk of family violence.

ECLC's Climate and Disaster Legal Data Project (in partnership with Each and Windermere) reflects the need for greater investment in understanding the longer-term legal, financial and psychosocial impacts of climate-related disasters. As climate-related events become more frequent and severe, there is a need for better data and evidence regarding the ways disasters intersect with existing vulnerabilities, including family violence, housing insecurity, financial hardship and social isolation. This aligns closely with calls for greater research and understanding of the gendered impacts of disasters.<sup>6</sup>

The Second Action Plan should recognise that climate adaptation, disaster resilience and family violence prevention are increasingly interconnected and interdependent:

- Climate-related displacement and housing insecurity
  - o Access to safe and affordable housing is already a significant challenge for victim-survivors of family violence. Climate-related disasters can intensify housing shortages and increase displacement, making it more difficult for people to leave or remain separated from violent partners. Housing insecurity may increase dependence on perpetrators and reduce pathways to safety.<sup>7</sup>
- Financial abuse and disaster recovery
  - o Disaster recovery processes can create new opportunities for coercive control and financial abuse through the management of insurance claims, disaster recovery payments, property ownership arrangements and

---

<sup>5</sup> WELA, *Gender, Climate and Environmental Justice in Australia* (2024), Recommendation 5, p. 60.

<sup>6</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>7</sup> Australian Institute of Health and Welfare (AIHW), *Family, Domestic and Sexual Violence: Housing*, 2026, <https://www.aihw.gov.au/family-domestic-and-sexual-violence/responses-and-outcomes/housing>; 1800RESPECT, *Seeking Support for Domestic Violence in the Aftermath of Disaster*, <https://1800respect.org.au/case-studies-and-articles/seeking-support-for-domestic-violence-in-the-aftermath-of-disaster>

rebuilding decisions.<sup>8</sup> These risks are not yet sufficiently recognised within disaster recovery frameworks.

- Technology-facilitated abuse during emergencies
  - o As governments and services increasingly rely on digital communications during emergencies and recovery, perpetrators may use technology to monitor, track or control victim-survivors' access to information, support and resources.
- Service disruption and access barriers
  - o Disasters can interrupt access to legal assistance, family violence services, healthcare, transport and telecommunications. These disruptions can be especially significant in regional, peri-urban and socially disadvantaged communities – including migrant communities (especially when emergency communications are not in language), people with disability and people with chronic health issues.<sup>9</sup>

ECLC supports greater recognition of the gendered nature of disasters, consistent with Recommendation 5 of the WELA report.<sup>10</sup> The Second Action Plan should incorporate a gender-responsive climate adaptation lens that recognises the specific vulnerabilities and strengths of women, children and gender-diverse communities before, during and after disasters.

#### **ECLC Recommendations**

**Recommendation 12:** Explicitly recognise the relationship between climate change, disasters and family violence within the Second Action Plan, including the role that climate-related stressors such as housing insecurity, displacement, financial hardship and social isolation can play in increasing family violence risk.

**Recommendation 13:** Invest in integrated prevention and early intervention models that bring together family violence services, community legal services, housing providers, local government, health services and emergency management agencies to support communities before, during and after disasters, drawing on place-based approaches such as ECLC's Yarra Ranges Climate Partnerships project.

**Recommendation 14:** Implement Recommendation 22.5 of the Royal Commission into National Natural Disaster Arrangements through the establishment of pre-agreed recovery programs that include family violence support, legal assistance and other psychosocial recovery services that can be activated rapidly following disasters.

---

<sup>8</sup> Financial Rights Legal Centre, *Family Violence and General Insurance* (2024), [https://financialrights.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2024/08/240802\\_GIFVDesktopAuditUpdate\\_FINAL.pdf](https://financialrights.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2024/08/240802_GIFVDesktopAuditUpdate_FINAL.pdf)

<sup>9</sup> Australian Institute for Disaster Resilience, *Migrant and Refugee Communities Strengthening Disaster Resilience* (2024); Australian Red Cross, *Emergency Resilience in Culturally and Linguistically Diverse Communities* (2021); Burnet Institute and North East Multicultural Association, *Co-designing Emergency Communications with Multicultural Communities* (2025).

<sup>10</sup> WELA, *Gender, Climate and Environmental Justice in Australia* (2024), Recommendation 5, p. 60.

**Recommendation 15:** Increase investment in safe, affordable and climate-resilient housing as a key prevention measure that supports victim-survivors' safety, recovery and long-term resilience.

**Recommendation 16:** Support ACCOs and ACCHOs working in family violence, community wellbeing and disaster resilience to lead prevention and early intervention initiatives through long-term, sustainable funding and decision-making authority within partnership models.

**Recommendation 17:** Incorporate a gender-responsive climate adaptation approach that recognises the disproportionate impacts of disasters on women, children and other groups experiencing systemic disadvantage, informed by community-based resilience and adaptation initiatives.

**Recommendation 18:** Adopt the intent of Women's Environmental Leadership Australia's Recommendation 5 by supporting research, data collection and evidence-building on the gendered impacts of disasters and by investing in preparedness and recovery initiatives that address these risks.

---

### **Priority Area 3 – Children and young people in their own right:**

Centring children and young people's voices, rights, and safety across prevention, early intervention, response and recovery, and providing tailored, age and developmentally appropriate support for children and young people. This priority includes young people who use violence (in the home and/or in intimate partner relationships, including the use of sexual violence).

---

## **6. Early intervention outcomes and impacts for children**

As illustrated in the Early Intervention Family Violence Legal Programs above, embedding multidisciplinary family violence legal programs within universal health services that provide services to women and children, particularly within the very early years of a child's life and development, can provide vital support to women and children at an earlier time.

ECLC strongly supports all efforts to ensure that children and young people are supported as victim survivors in their own right. Additionally, ECLC supports a whole of system approach that ensures that the outcomes and impacts for children are made visible through the provision of family violence services provided across the continuum from prevention, early intervention, response, recovery to healing.

Through the continued development of the Mabels program, ECLC has continually sought to explore strategies to ensure that the experience of children is held central to the objectives of the program, but also in the measurement of the impacts and outcomes of the program.

## **Mabels Program Case Study:**

### **Improving safety, recovery and wellbeing outcomes for children and young people**

The rationale for a legal service partnering with maternal and child health services has remained unchanged since Mabels development in 2014 and is based on several key elements – the elevated risk of family violence coinciding with pregnancy and the birth of a child, the fact that Victorian maternal and child services reach almost every family after the birth of a child and the value of receiving early intervention legal support, when seeking safety from family violence.

However, more recent data presented by the Australian Institute of Health and Welfare (2026, February 24) on 'Family, domestic and sexual violence for Pregnant People' paints an even starker picture:

- 1 in 7 women who experienced violence by a current partner and were pregnant during the relationship, experienced the violence during their pregnancy.
- More than 2 in 5 pregnant women who were hospitalised for injuries from assault by a partner in 2023–24 experienced injury to their trunk.
- 17% of women who experienced violence by a previous partner, experienced the violence for the first time during pregnancy.
- Studies have indicated that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people; Younger people; People with severe mental illness and Migrant and refugee people are at greater risk of experiencing family, domestic and/or sexual violence during pregnancy and following birth.
- Violence experienced during pregnancy may result in physical and psychological health problems for both the mother and fetus including low birth weight, premature labour and miscarriage, injuries, fetal stress and trauma, maternal depression, anxiety, and post-traumatic stress disorder.

Furthermore, the Family Violence Data collected by the Crime Statistics Agency, reports that from 1 July 2024 – 30 June 2025 there were 44,117 family violence incidents involving children.

#### *Mabels data*

Between 1 July 2015 and 30 June 2026, Mabels has provided an early intervention response for 1034 women and indirectly their 1730 children experiencing family violence. Data collected from July 2022 indicates that almost 1 in 4 women assisted by Mabels disclosing family violence for the first time.

| <b>Age of youngest child</b> | <b>Percentage of children</b> |
|------------------------------|-------------------------------|
| Less than 1 month            | 10.41%                        |
| 1 – 5 months                 | 31.04%                        |
| 6 – 11 months                | 15.52%                        |
| 1 – 2 years                  | 20.28%                        |
| 2 – 4 years                  | 17.28%                        |
| 4 – 6 years                  | 4.76%                         |
| 6 years                      | 0.71                          |

Traditionally legal services record data that relates directly to the client and children often remain invisible through the legal system.

From the point of program design, Mabels prioritised the visibility of children and the impacts on the health and wellbeing of children. By recording the number of children and the age of children at the point of intervention, Mabels is increasing the visibility of children and making it easier to measure the impacts of early intervention programs on the safety, health and wellbeing of children. As a result, the continued development of the program has been motivated by strategies that continue to focus on reducing the impacts of family violence on children.

#### **ECLC Recommendations**

**Recommendation 19:** Identify measurable outcomes that increase the visibility of children and young people and that demonstrate the impact of early intervention family violence programs.

---

### **Priority Area 5 – System integration and workforce:**

Safe and effective prevention, early intervention, response and long-term recovery including justice and health sector responses, drawing on an integrated system and a connected and capable workforce that utilises trauma and violence-informed approaches across multi-sector services and programs.

---

## **7. Integrating systems – Multidisciplinary Practice Leadership**

There have been a number of royal commissions in recent years at both the State and Federal level that have reported on ‘broken systems’ that are failing to meet the needs of the community and in many cases causing harm; and recommendations centred around ‘consumer led approaches’ and more ‘integrated service systems’ that respond to the holistic needs of people and communities.

The Royal Commission into Family Violence (2016) specifically urged the Victorian Government “to strengthen innovation in the development and implementation of family violence policy and foster collaboration between different service systems” to work through how “the distinct underlying principles, service delivery models and theoretical frameworks (of different sectors and service systems) create barriers to service integration, collaboration and innovation”.

As a result, governments have been increasingly encouraged and willing to support the idea of collaborative models as well as models which provide an ‘early intervention’ response, as can be seen through the ‘Early Intervention Investment Framework’ embedded by the Victorian Government from the 2021–2022 Budget.

However, although the themes of ‘increased collaboration and more integrated service systems’ are often a focus of public policy, they are not often explicitly defined; they can

be ambiguous in their direction; and therefore, difficult to implement. Although justice responses are often considered as part of the strategies to respond to the needs of the community, they are very rarely seen as prevention or early intervention strategies that could greatly reduce the impact of public health issues such as family violence on the community.

While the legal assistance sector has developed expertise in designing and delivering integrated practice models, many of these models have developed organically within individual centres. There have been minimal sector-wide or government-led policy frameworks within which these models have developed or been directly supported. This 'organic' development has ensured responsiveness to the client base, achieved significant outcomes and established innovative ways of working to meet client needs. However, it has made it more challenging to integrate legal services into the broader service sector due to the constraints of siloed funding arrangements and traditional service delivery models. More work is needed to advocate for changes to policy frameworks and the broader system which can:

- better support the integration of legal services to meet individuals where they are at;
- provide services that are responsive to what the community needs;
- scale up proven and effective interventions to the broader community; and
- support the workforce to deliver these services in a sustainable way in the long-term.

ECLC has led a number of projects and developed resources in an attempt to increase collaboration and fill some of the gaps that exist between policy and practice.

### **7.1. Integrated Legal Practice – Impact and Influence' Project**

Led by Eastern Community Legal Centre and funded by the Victorian Legal Services Board, the Integrated Legal Practice – Impact and Influence Project (2023 – 2026) aimed to:

1. Bring together and collaborate with key stakeholders from the legal assistance and broader sectors to inform strategies that increase the sectors' capacity and knowledge in multidisciplinary practice to meet community members' legal and related needs.
2. Utilise key stakeholders' expertise and perspectives to identify and contribute to key justice reform and service system improvements - particularly around family violence, mental health and disability.
3. Identify, develop and deliver learning and development initiatives and resources that build the capacity and expertise of the Victorian legal assistance sector workforce in relation to multidisciplinary practice, acknowledging the increasing diversity of that workforce.

The Project was supported and guided by an 'Advisory Group' that included representatives from: Centre for Innovative Justice (RMIT University), Djirra, Federation of Community Legal Centres, Health Justice Australia, Hume Riverina Community Legal Service, Justice Connect, Knowmore Legal Service, South-East Monash Legal Service, Victoria Legal Aid, West Heidelberg Community Legal Service (Holstep Health) and Women's Legal Service Victoria.

Some key resources developed through the activities of this project include:

- Family Violence Roundtable – Brought together strategic leaders in integrated practice from across the Victorian legal assistance and related sectors to participate in a Family Violence Roundtable. The Roundtable sought to address structural and systemic barriers to accessing legal assistance for people experiencing family violence.
  - o [Family Violence Roundtable videos](#)
- Multidisciplinary Practice Forum – Developed to support the growth and development of multidisciplinary practice in community legal settings, by bringing together leaders and experts from various backgrounds to share their knowledge and experience. It was designed to respond to the diverse needs of leaders, policy makers, advocates and practitioners of multidisciplinary services and practice.
  - o [Multidisciplinary Practice Forum videos](#)
- Multidisciplinary Practice Workshop Series – Included a series of workshops for practitioners and leaders in the legal assistance sector, specifically focused on skills development in multidisciplinary practice.
  - o [Workshop 1: Lessons from Practice](#)
  - o [Workshop 2: Design Your Own Multidisciplinary Practice](#)
  - o [Workshop 3: Leading change – Structures and strategies to support a multidisciplinary organisation](#)
  - o [Workshop 4: Masterclass with Michele Leering CM \(a Canadian scholar and practitioner-researcher\)](#)
- Documenting and communicating Integrated Practice – Strategic Advocacy and Initiatives that support integrated/multidisciplinary legal practice across the legal assistance sector to amplify strategic advocacy across the sector by identifying shared priorities and exploring opportunities for collaboration.

## **7.2. Multidisciplinary governance framework**

In 2025 ECLC partnered with the Federation of Community Legal Centres to develop a practical [Governance Framework for Multidisciplinary Practice](#) across the sector. The project was initiated by the Department of Justice and Community Safety and funded through the Commonwealth Department of Social Services' National Action Plan against Family, Domestic and Sexual Violence.

This framework was developed through consultation with 29 Victorian Community Legal Centres (CLCs) from across Victoria that participated in a detailed survey about their multidisciplinary practice governance experiences, challenges and needs. The consultation confirmed that for CLCs governance is both their biggest challenge and what makes partnerships succeed.

This Governance Framework for Multidisciplinary Practice shows how to build partnerships that work. It puts clients at the centre and shows how CLCs and partner organisations collaborate across disciplines, how three governance functions support that collaboration (strategic decisions, day-to-day coordination and professional practice) and how to maintain accountability to community voices, regulators and funders.

This Governance Framework builds on the Integrated Practice – Better Practice Principles. The principles describe what effective multidisciplinary practice looks like; this framework shows how to build the structures and processes that make it sustainable.

### **7.3. Integrated Practice – Better Practice Principles**

In 2019 the Victorian Legal Services Board funded Eastern Community Legal Centre to draw on its expertise in integrated services provision and to bring together other leaders in this area to develop a set of principles that could be shared with other community legal centres implementing integrated practice programs.

As a result, ECLC developed the Integrated Practice – Better Practice Principles, that outlined several key principles important in guiding integrated practice – Program Principles; Practitioner Principles and Person-centred Principles.

In 2025, ECLC (supported by the Federation of Community Legal Centres and funded by the Australian Government Department of Social Services and the Victorian Department of Justice and Community Safety) revised and updated [the Integrated Practice – Better Practice Principles guide](#) and also included ‘Governance and Sustainability Principles’ informed by the [Governance Framework for Multidisciplinary Practice in Community Legal Centres \(ECLC & FCLC, 2025\)](#).

This updated edition also draws on insights from the [Integrated Legal Practice: Impact & Influence](#) project (2022–2025), also funded by the Victorian Legal Services Board + Commissioner.

### **7.4. MARAM Training**

In June 2020, ECLC received project funding to adapt and deliver MARAM Training to community service professionals employed in the Victorian legal assistance sector, particularly community legal centres and Aboriginal legal services. This work was funded by the Eastern Metropolitan Region Regional Family Violence Partnership (EMR RFVP).

The Victorian Family Violence Multi-Agency Risk Assessment and Management Framework (MARAM Framework) was developed in 2018 for use by all services in contact

with individuals and families experiencing family violence. In collaboration with Family Safety Victoria and Domestic Violence Victoria (now Safe+Equal), ECLC adapted the MARAM Comprehensive Risk Assessment and Risk Management training to meet the specific needs of the legal assistance sector. Legal assistance services had not been included in the implementation of the MARAM reforms and therefore the workforce had not been provided any training. This was identified as a key gap in strengthening the whole-of-community response to family violence.

**Key findings:**

- As non-prescribed services, legal assistance services are still an important component of the family violence service system and should be included in the MARAM Framework/training
- Legal assistance services play a critical role in intervening and responding to family violence and commonly identify risk assessment and management as an integral part of their role
- Legal assistance services commonly employ a range of community service professionals in roles that identify, assess and manage risk, but who are not eligible for MARAM training
- By adapting training to the multidisciplinary needs of legal assistance services, there are opportunities to improve child focused practice
- Community Legal Centres present unique opportunities and challenges in aligning their practice to the MARAM Framework

**MARAM Project recommendations:**

1. The State Government and Family Safety Victoria recognise and prioritise the MARAM training needs of legal services who employ a range of professionals in relevant roles and ensure they have access to appropriate MARAM training.
2. The State Government and Family Safety Victoria recognise the critical role of the legal assistance sector as part of the system-wide family violence reforms and prioritise working with legal services to implement the MARAM Framework (even as non-prescribed entities).
3. The State Government and Family Safety Victoria support and fund initiatives that enable MARAM training to be adapted to the multidisciplinary needs of the legal assistance sector.
4. The State Government and Family Safety Victoria work with DVRCV and the legal assistance sector to support and fund initiatives to ensure that all levels of the MARAM Training are adapted and made available to the legal assistance sector.
5. That Family Safety Victoria collaborate with the legal assistance sector to ensure that MARAM Training is delivered by professionals that can effectively support participants in how to apply the MARAM Framework within their settings.

6. The State Government and Family Safety Victoria draw upon the legal assistance sector to share knowledge and practice on how the legal assistance sector can align with the MARAM Framework whilst working within the Legal Practice Framework.

Even after 8 years of implementation, and hundreds of thousands of workers across dozens of sectors, the legal assistance sector still has not been included as part of the system-wide MARAM Framework reforms and the recommendations made in the report have not been implemented.

Instead ECLC in partnership with Safe + Equal continue to provide the training under a fee-for-service model for the legal assistance workforce, who are proactively seeking opportunities to provide training for their staff and to voluntarily align with the principles of the MARAM Framework.

#### **ECLC Recommendations**

**Recommendation 20:** That the Second Action Plan identify mechanisms that support cross departmental collaboration and funding to adequately facilitate integrated models of practice.

**Recommendation 21:** That all family violence reforms should integrate the legal assistance sector and consider the implications and training needs of the legal assistance workforce.

## **8. Climate-related disasters and disaster recovery**

Following climate-related disasters, people frequently present with complex and interconnected legal and social issues. These may include family violence, housing insecurity, insurance disputes, financial hardship, debt, tenancy problems and barriers to accessing recovery supports. Ongoing climate-related stressors can compound these challenges and create additional barriers to accessing support. Service systems must therefore be designed around the realities of people's lived experience rather than organisational boundaries.

ECLC's Climate and Disaster Legal Data Project demonstrates the value of cross-sector collaboration in building a more complete understanding of climate and disaster impacts. The project brings together legal, financial and wellbeing perspectives and reflects the reality that people affected by disasters often experience interconnected issues that require coordinated responses across multiple service systems.

Effective coordination must also include First Nations-led organisations as core partners within the service ecosystem. ACCOs and ACCHOs play a critical role in delivering culturally safe responses to family violence, supporting community recovery following disasters and addressing the broader social determinants of wellbeing. Their involvement

should be embedded within governance, planning and service delivery structures rather than treated as an external or supplementary component of the system.<sup>11</sup>

The greatest opportunity for improvement lies in creating stronger integration between family violence, housing, legal and financial assistance, health, climate adaptation, emergency management and disaster recovery systems. A more connected system would include:

- Stronger formal partnerships between family violence services, community legal centres, ACCO and ACCHOs, financial counsellors, social workers, housing providers, emergency management agencies and recovery services.
- Consistent referral pathways and information-sharing arrangements.
- Greater integration of legal assistance within family violence and disaster recovery responses.
- Inclusion of family violence expertise within disaster preparedness, response and recovery planning structures.
- Coordinated responses that address both immediate safety and longer-term recovery needs.

ECLC strongly supports implementation of Recommendation 22.5 of the Royal Commission into National Natural Disaster Arrangements. Pre-agreed recovery programs and service delivery arrangements would ensure that legal assistance, family violence supports, housing services and other social recovery programs can be rapidly activated following disasters, reducing service fragmentation and improving outcomes for affected communities.

The Second Action Plan presents an important opportunity to strengthen connections between family violence and disaster recovery systems so that victim-survivors are not required to navigate multiple disconnected service systems during periods of crisis.

### **8.1. Cross sector collaboration to strengthen community responses**

Climate-impacts and disasters place significant and often prolonged pressure on communities, increasing demand for family violence, legal, housing and social support services at precisely the time when communities are experiencing disruption and displacement.<sup>12</sup> ECLC's experience following Black Saturday, the June 2021 Dandenong Ranges storms and through its Climate Partnerships Program demonstrates that disasters frequently give rise to interconnected legal and social issues, including family violence, housing insecurity, financial hardship, insurance disputes, debt, child arrangements and access to recovery supports.

---

<sup>11</sup> *Dhelk Dja: Safe Our Way 2018-2028*; Emergency Recovery Victoria, *Strategy for Aboriginal Community-led Recovery* (2023);

<sup>12</sup> WELA, *Gender, Climate and Environmental Justice in Australia* (2024), pp. 51–53, 64–66.

The establishment of ECLC's Climate and Disaster Legal Data Project also highlights the importance of ongoing learning and capability building across sectors. Developing a stronger evidence base about disaster-related legal and psychosocial needs will support practitioners across family violence, legal assistance, health and community services to better identify emerging risks and respond in a coordinated and holistic way.

CLCs and other community-based organisations are uniquely positioned to identify emerging risks, provide early intervention and connect people with the broader supports they need. However, short-term or crisis-driven funding models can limit their ability to build and sustain the partnerships, local knowledge and trusted relationships that underpin effective prevention and recovery responses.

Sustainable funding would strengthen community resilience by enabling services to plan for and respond to increasing climate-related demand, retain skilled staff, participate in local preparedness and recovery planning, and develop stronger referral pathways across family violence, housing, legal assistance, health and emergency management sectors. This is particularly important given the growing evidence that disasters can exacerbate family violence and other forms of gender-based violence and that recovery outcomes are improved when social supports are embedded within recovery systems from the outset.<sup>13</sup> Consistent with Recommendation 22.5 of the Royal Commission into National Natural Disaster Arrangements, investment in community-based services is essential to ensuring that legal assistance and family violence supports can form part of a coordinated and effective recovery response.<sup>14</sup>

#### **ECLC Recommendations**

**Recommendation 22:** Establish formal coordination mechanisms between family violence, legal assistance, housing, health, ACCOs, ACCHOs, emergency management and disaster recovery sectors to support integrated and culturally safe responses before, during and after disasters.

**Recommendation 23:** Ensure family violence specialists and community legal centres are represented within state and local emergency management, resilience and disaster recovery planning structures.

**Recommendation 24:** Implement pre-agreed service coordination arrangements, consistent with Recommendation 22.5 of the Royal Commission into National Natural Disaster Arrangements, to enable rapid activation of family violence, legal assistance, housing and psychosocial supports following disasters.

**Recommendation 25:** Develop and fund climate- and disaster-informed training across family violence, legal assistance, housing and emergency management workforces,

---

<sup>13</sup> Women's Environmental Leadership Australia (WELA), *Gender, Climate and Environmental Justice in Australia* (2024), pp. 51-53, 64-66; Royal Commission into National Natural Disaster Arrangements, *Final Report* (2020), Recommendation 22.5, pp. 594-595.

<sup>14</sup> Royal Commission into National Natural Disaster Arrangements, *Final Report* (2020), Recommendation 22.5, pp. 594-595.

informed by lessons from community-based climate resilience and disaster recovery initiatives.

**Recommendation 26:** Provide sustainable funding for community organisations – including community legal centres – to ensure:

- a. services can respond effectively to increasing demand due to family violence exacerbated by climate-related disasters; and
- b. cross-sector capability and referral pathways are strengthened so that practitioners can provide coordinated and holistic responses that address family violence and other legal, social, housing and safety needs simultaneously.

## 9. Key Contacts

[REDACTED]  
[REDACTED]  
[REDACTED]  
[REDACTED]

[REDACTED]  
[REDACTED]  
[REDACTED]  
[REDACTED]

[REDACTED]  
[REDACTED]  
[REDACTED]  
[REDACTED]