



Central Highlands
**Community
Legal Centre**

Striving for Community Justice

Royal Commission into Family Violence Response

Central Highlands Community Legal Centre commends the work completed to help understand and improve upon the ongoing crisis that is family violence. The issue is complex and the work of the commission demonstrates the diversity of families experiencing family violence irrespective of social, economic or cultural status.

We endorse the recommendations of the Commission and welcome the response of the Victorian Government in accepting and committing to action all of the recommendations put forward.

The recommendation to support the use of Specialist Family Violence Courts is well received. As a partner in the Ballarat Family Violence Court program in Ballarat, we are aware of the benefits a specialised program can have for ensuring maximum outcomes for clients.

Court Safety	We are pleased to see acknowledgement of one of the ongoing concerns at court, namely the current inadequacies in providing a safe distance between affected family members and respondents. The recommendation by the Commission to improve victim safety through works to the Magistrates' Courts is a positive step towards ensuring the court process is less stressful for victims.
Magistrates Court <i>Inc. recommendation 68, 70</i>	The recommendations for changes to the operation of the Magistrates' Court (no. 68) represent a positive change towards gaining maximum outcomes for clients. These recommendation encourage capping lists of family violence matters, staggering lists, increasing the number of days dedicated to listing family matters

	<p>and introducing benchmarks for maximum times waiting at court for listed matters to heard. It is necessary to acknowledge, however, that the recommendations are labour intensive and require a fundamental shift in the way duty lawyer services operate. There is a need for funding to be maintained and in some instances increased to meet the need in and out of court. The growing numbers of unrepresented parties result in extended court hearings, adding to the family violence lists of already overburdened courts. Where clients are forced to represent themselves, they can be subject to significant inequities, resulting in potentially detrimental results for parties.</p> <p>It is our position that the suggested cuts to CLCs by the current federal government will make it harder for CLCs to perform the necessary front line legal work that they currently provide. We gratefully acknowledge the state government's efforts in increasing funding for duty lawyer services, however, as the Federation of Community Legal Centre's has previously flagged, the state government cannot be responsible for filling the gap created by federal funding cuts.</p> <p>In regional Victorian Courts many clients are currently unrepresented and often intimidated by the court environment. Small country courts such as Ararat, Stawell and St Arnard are inadequate in providing a safe space for aggrieved family members (AFM's). The court's do not provide separate waiting areas for AFM's and Respondents nor do they provide security. The lack of security is problematic not only for clients but for staff such as solicitors and court staff. With the lack of safe waiting spaces for people involved in family violence cases and the reduced level of security screening compared to metropolitan facilities AFM's can be forced to sit within metres of the perpetrators or alternatively wait outside with no protection at all. In regional courts such as Ararat there are no rooms available for visiting solicitors therefore client instructions are being taken out the front of the Courthouse. This causes issues of client safety, confidentiality and privacy just to name a few.</p>
Education	<p>Commitment to education programs for children in schools and the broader community more generally are a welcomed recommendation. Our experience demonstrates that a number of</p>

	<p>perpetrators have a limited understanding of family violence beyond physical abuse. This limited understanding demonstrates a lack of respect but also the change required for ongoing, future generational change. We also welcome recommendations which will demonstrate to the community that FV is not limited to specific socioeconomic groups, ethnicities or abilities.</p>
<p>One stop safety hubs <i>Inc. recommendation 37</i></p>	<p>We support the recommendations of the Commission in creating safety hubs for victims of family violence. We support the recommendations for changes to privacy which will see the safety of victims become more important. The safety hubs should allow for the increase in information sharing, with victim’s safety becoming apparent. The safety of children should be improved with recommendations to include children on orders and having greater access to support and counselling services. The State Government commitment to altering laws to reflect this is encouraging.</p>
<p>Rural, Regional, Remote <i>Inc. recommendation 182</i></p>	<p>CHCLC supports the consideration and implementation of videoconferencing options for residents living in regional, rural and remote areas. We have initiated a pilot program offering video link services which is slowly growing to meet the needs of Horsham residents. This is a slow process and we believe the Commission's focus on this, combined with additional funding and campaigning can make video link services a way for people to seek assistance more readily.</p> <p>Regional and remote communities must be considered when discussions around these hubs take place. Funding to community organisations such as community legal centres and welfare organisations must be provided to assist with the technology required to provide successful and meaningful video conferencing. We support the recommendation for a more targeted campaign towards community outside major metropolitan areas. A well-structured media campaign, focusing specifically on the problems of social isolation and small towns should help encourage this.</p> <p>CHCLC emphasises the need for a collaborative approach to implement the necessary changes designed to alter community attitudes. The use of Safety and Support Hubs should provide a</p>

	<p>more collegial environment, which will need to be fostered and continually developed.</p>
Recognition for CLCs	<p>Although overall we are pleased with the recommendations, there are some areas of concern for our organisation and the community legal sector more generally. We are disappointed by the limited recognition of community legal centres and the important role they play as front line services for parties involved in a family violence hearing. It is our view that community legal centres need to be given greater recognition for the work they do in court and beyond, where family law matters, child arrangements and Victims of Crime applications become concerns for clients following the trauma of their initial family violence matter.</p> <p>Community legal centres often see victims of family violence for the first time on their court date. Involvement in Support and Safety hubs is crucial to maximising the benefits for client and developing a rapport. As a front line service, we believe that CHCLC will need to have a dedicated involvement in the Ballarat Support and Safety Hub, along with other social welfare providers.</p>