

Victoria Legal Aid

# Cultural Diversity and Inclusion Strategy

2020–23

## Yearly progress report

The first 12 months



Victoria Legal Aid

## Acknowledgement of Country

This report was written on the land of the Wurundjeri and Boon Wurrung people of the Kulin Nation. We acknowledge and pay our respects to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples and Traditional Custodians throughout Victoria, including Elders past and present.

Cultural diversity can only be acknowledged within the context of recognising our First Nations people as the oldest living culture in the world, having existed for at least 65,000 years. We are committed to ensuring that the starting point of any conversation about cultural diversity is centred around the broader conversations of the rights of First Nations people and their continual fight for justice and equality.

© 2021 Victoria Legal Aid. Reproduction without express written permission is prohibited. Written requests should be directed to Victoria Legal Aid, Corporate Affairs, Level 9, 570 Bourke Street, Melbourne Vic 3000.

Disclaimer. The information contained should not be relied upon as legal advice, and should be checked carefully before being relied upon in any context. Victoria Legal Aid expressly disclaims any liability howsoever caused to any person in respect of any legal advice given or any action taken in reliance on the contents of the publication.

## A message from our Executive Champion

As Victoria Legal Aid's (VLA) Cultural Diversity and Inclusion Executive Champion, I am pleased to share our yearly status report to measure progress toward our goals, hold ourselves accountable, and communicate priorities and actions for the year ahead.

In March 2020, we launched a three-year strategy that commits to a safe and inclusive workspace and service for staff and clients from culturally diverse backgrounds. The year of 2020 presented many challenges, learnings, and reflections for our organisation to consider. The Black Lives Matter movement, systemic racism and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander incarceration rates reminds us how much work we still need to do to achieve inclusion and equality in society, including our workplace.

Our employee diversity networks create opportunities for our staff to have a say and play a part in advocating for inclusion and diversity. In August, VLA's Cultural Diversity Consultative Committee (CDCC) communicated to senior leaders the need for a stronger organisational response and more visible leadership in the face of racial injustice. The Committee embodied our values of courage and care by voicing their feelings of exclusion and safety and advocating for many of our staff members.

As an organisation whose vision is to advocate for a fair and just society where rights and responsibilities are upheld, we recognise that we have not been as



effective as we could be in terms of advancing racial equality and anti-racism both internally and externally. VLA has the opportunity and responsibility to leverage our platform to make lasting and meaningful change towards eliminating systemic racism for the benefit of our clients, staff, and partners.

This call to action from the Committee has helped to motivate and inform additional actions to tackle racial justice and anti-racism in our workplace, services, and justice system.

As we begin our anti-racism journey and implement these additional actions, we will continue to hold ourselves accountable and measure the progress we are making towards achieving racial justice and inclusion for our organisation.

**Louise Glanville**  
Chief Executive Officer (CEO) and  
Executive Champion

# A timeline of our cultural diversity and inclusion journey

2018

## March – Call to action

A staff post on [Yammer](#) (our internal social network platform) sparks a call to action for cultural diversity and inclusion at VLA.

## May

VLA commissions [Change Architects](#) to conduct a workshop for staff to share their experiences and perspectives of VLA's approach to cultural diversity and identify gaps.

## June

VLA agrees to undertake recommendations from the workshop including the creation of a staff Cultural Diversity Consultative Committee (CDCC) and a Cultural Diversity and Inclusion Strategy.

## July

Our Corporate Plan 2019-20 includes a goal to prioritise the development of a Cultural Diversity and Inclusion Strategy.

## December

VLA conducts our first [Gender, Diversity, and Inclusion Staff Survey](#).





2020

## March – Launch of Strategy

A senior executive champion and a staff champions network for the strategy is established.

[The CDIS is launched.](#)

## April to May – Racial justice events and issues, including Black Lives Matter

COVID-19 and the public health response intensifies racial discrimination and abuse experienced by specific minority ethnic communities.

The Black Lives Matter movement is reignited and, once again, calls to end systemic racism against First Nations, Black and Brown communities.

## June to July

Mandatory diversity and inclusion e-learning introduced for all staff.

The CDCC establishes a forum for culturally diverse staff to provide a space for support and connection in light of racial justice events and issues.

## August – anti-racism at VLA

The CDCC communicates the need for a stronger organisational response and more visible leadership.

## September

A subcommittee is created to engage in constructive dialogue on how systemic racism, racial bias and microaggressions continue to be issues which VLA must consider both internally and externally.

## December

An additional action plan to tackle cultural diversity and anti-racism is developed.

2019

## January to September – CDCC is established

Workshops convene with the CDCC to commence the development of a three-year strategic action plan focused on cultural diversity and inclusion.

## October – African Australian Clerkship Pilot

Our pilot [joint clerkship program](#), run in partnership with the African Australian Legal Network (AALN), launches.

VLA employs a dedicated diversity and inclusion consultant.

## December

The Cultural Diversity and Inclusion Strategy 2020–23 (CDIS) is endorsed by our senior executive team and Board.

## About the Cultural Diversity and Inclusion Strategy

In March 2020, we launched our inaugural [Cultural Diversity and Inclusion Strategy 2020-23](#). The strategy commits to practical actions to create and sustain a safe and inclusive workplace and service for staff and clients from culturally diverse backgrounds.

## Strategy Goals

GOAL  
01

**Workforce Diversity**

GOAL  
02

**Workforce Capability**

GOAL  
03

**Organisational Capability**

GOAL  
04

**Reporting and Evaluation**

23%

of our clients  
are from CALD  
backgrounds<sup>1</sup>

42%

of our staff are from  
a culturally diverse  
background<sup>2</sup>

## 2020 – Year in review

The launch of our strategy coincided with the introduction of COVID-19 restrictions. As the pandemic unfolded, it was apparent that the goals of the strategy were inextricably tied to the impacts of the pandemic, particularly during periods of increased health responses directed towards specific minority ethnic communities.

Despite the challenges during this time, there has been steady progress in the goals and actions in our strategy. However, we acknowledge that the COVID-19 restrictions disrupted some of the key activities of the strategy.

These included:

- Non-urgent recruitment was put on hold, impacting VLA's ability to maintain our Pathway Programs in the remote working environment. This also had an impact on activities in our Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Employment Strategy 2020-25.
- Our all-staff Cultural Diversity Week event was cancelled and plans to mark the week moved to an online format.
- The VPS People Matter Survey was postponed.

In addition, 2020 saw major social upheavals on diversity, inclusion, and social justice issues. The Black Lives Matter (BLM) movement exposed gaps in our responsiveness to staff's experience of individual and systemic racism in the workplace. It sparked reflections and learnings for us to consider how we can drive meaningful change to support racial justice and anti-racism in our workplace, service, and the justice system for the benefit and safety of our clients, staff, and our community.

This year's report begins with an update on the additional actions that were developed to tackle cultural diversity and anti-racism before reporting on the progress made in the first 12 months towards achieving the goals and actions in the strategy.

## A plan of action for an inclusive and anti-racist workplace

In May 2020, the Black Lives Matter movement sparked global protests around the world and resonated with many Australians, including VLA staff members. People described holding conversations about social justice and racism in their personal circles, on social media and in the workplace as the global protest movement took hold.

The Cultural Diversity Consultative Committee (CDCC) drafted a memo to Louise, VLA's CEO and Cultural Diversity Champion, to raise awareness of the informal and challenging conversations staff were having in the workplace around the pervasiveness of racism in Australia. This included the sense among some staff that conversations about racial justice and anti-racism were not encouraged at VLA, both in terms of how we engaged with each other internally, and externally in VLA's work in the wider justice sector. The memo communicated the need for a stronger organisational response and more visible leadership in the face of racism and racial injustice. Louise initiated a series of workshops with a subcommittee that included members of our Senior Executive Team (SET) and the CDCC, which included a First Nations voice.

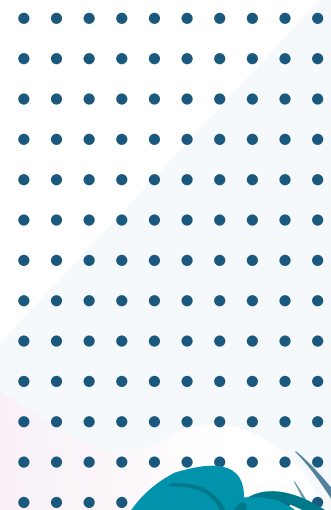
The subcommittee workshops focused on understanding what we need to do to become an anti-racist organisation and the role senior leaders play in demonstrating and implementing anti-racist practices. Discussions identified steps for initiating internal and

external actions to understand and address cultural diversity, anti-racism, and racial justice in more meaningful and intentional ways at VLA. Whilst our client related work at VLA addresses racial equality and inclusion at different levels and in different ways, we were not explicit about the additional step of taking an anti-racist stance. The subcommittee felt there was a strong need for us to move racial justice and inclusion from the periphery to the centre of our work.

In December, we released a set of additional actions to tackle cultural diversity and anti-racism as a direct result of the workshops. These actions, along with the actions in our CDIS, will support us to embed the necessary foundations to progress VLA towards becoming an anti-racist organisation.

The additional actions specifically focus on improving our strategic advocacy work to be inclusive of structural racism to drive better reform within the justice sector, increasing senior leaders' cultural competency in responding to issues of racial justice and anti-racism. It will also take a deeper dive into our workforce data to better capture and understand the experiences of our staff through an intersectional lens.

[See the full list of actions to tackle systemic racism here.](#)





# Progress on our four goals

GOAL  
01

## Workforce Diversity

### The African Australian Clerkship Program

VLA partnered with the African Australian Legal Network (AALN) to pilot the first African Australian Clerkship program. The pilot ran between October 2019 and February 2020.

The clerkships aims to provide practical and meaningful experience to AALN members to support their career development and provide opportunities to gain valuable skills, knowledge, and a network within the justice sector.

Overall, participants reported great satisfaction in the program, particularly in relation to, client and court interactions and opportunities to work closely with a range of experienced lawyers. Two of the four participants applied for VLA's New Lawyers Program (NLP). Both candidates were successful in their application.

Another intake was due to commence in 2020, however, this has been postponed as a result of COVID-19 restrictions reducing our ability to provide participants with the court and client-facing experiences the program is intended to deliver.

In August 2020, VLA participated in a virtual careers event hosted by AALN. The event included providing advice to AALN law student members on recruitment and selection processes. As a result of this event, an AALN member was appointed for a short-term position in our Child Protection Team.

VLA's legal clerkships is a small but important step in improving our cultural diversity. It is also a mechanism for supporting the African Australian Legal Network's (AALN) efforts in promoting African cultural diversity more broadly within the Victorian legal profession.

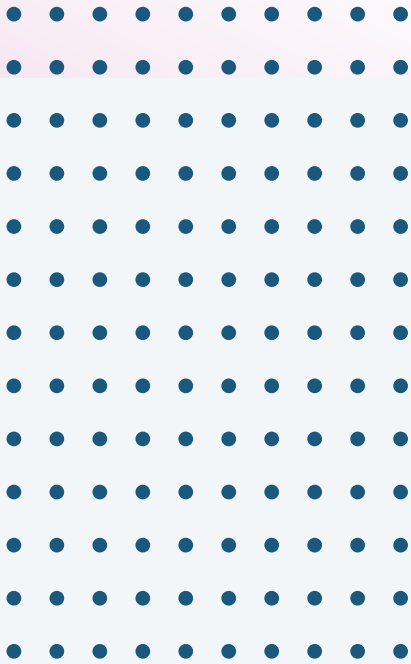


As a person with a keen interest in social justice, I was deeply humbled to have been a recipient of the AALN program as it provided me the opportunity to shadow and engage proactively in the provision of VLA's services. I was exposed to various stages of in court and out of court client advocacy, that enabled me to consolidate my knowledge in a more practical sense. It was also an excellent opportunity to cultivate friendships and networks within the legal system, thereby alleviating the dreads of being a newly admitted lawyer. Since completing the clerkship program, I have recommenced my employment with VLA as part of the New Lawyers Program (NLP). And it is fair to say I do not feel like a fish out of water because of the experienced gained on the clerkship program.



**Sara Mac, Lawyer, Family Law**





Offering these programs at an early stage is vital in supporting participants to build foundational skills and experience required to progress their legal career. I'm pleased we've partnered with the African Australian Legal Network to establish the AALN and VLA Clerkship. Collaborating with the network and meeting so many talented members has been a highlight for me. It's been wonderful to witness a number of members progress into legal roles and watch their confidence grow.



**Lauren Steers, Talent Acquisition Consultant**

### **Improve recruitment processes and protocols**

A working group was established to support our recruitment and resourcing team to enhance VLA's recruitment processes and protocols. In August, a consultation session, focusing on the attraction and selection phase of the recruitment cycle, was conducted with the CDCC. This provided an opportunity for staff with lived experience of cultural diversity to share feedback, learnings and information about best practice recruitment and selection approaches.



## Foundational suite of diversity and inclusion e-learns launched

In July 2020, we launched our foundational diversity and inclusion e-learnings:

1. [Diversity and Inclusion \(D&I\) in the Workplace](#) (60 mins)
2. [Unconscious Bias Awareness](#) (45 mins)

The e-learnings are mandatory for all staff to complete in their 2020–21 VLA & Me cycle (performance development process). New staff are required to complete the e-learns within three months of commencing at VLA.

VLA's Corporate Plan 2020–21 includes a goal that at least 85 per cent of our workforce complete the e-learnings by 30 June 2021.

As of 1 March 2021:

- 483 staff (approximately 54 per cent) have completed the D&I in the Workplace e-learn
- 479 staff (approximately 53 per cent) have completed the Unconscious Bias e-learn.



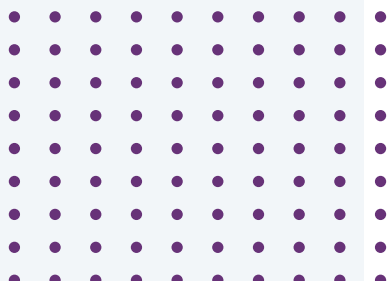
It makes me feel really proud to work for an organisation that actively seeks to challenge and decentre modes of oppression that have resulted in a situation whereby the 'other' is ordinarily seen as occupying the role of client and the person with privilege occupies the role of solicitor/saviour. It's incredibly encouraging to see VLA attempt to disrupt this dichotomy with this learning, particularly in the legal sector which can be incredibly archaic in this respect.

**Staff Member**



It's a broad focus on the different types of diversity. Encouraging a culture of staff to speak out about microaggressions and that it is all staff member's responsibility to promote inclusive workspaces.

**Staff Member**



### A dedicated role within People and Culture (P&C)

In October 2019, VLA has employed a dedicated consultant within P&C to progress work on VLA's Cultural Diversity and Inclusion Strategy. The role is also responsible for a number of other strategies and learning initiatives which aim to building an inclusive and supportive culture that respects and values the diverse backgrounds and lived experience of our staff.

### Cultural Diversity Consultative Committee (CDCC)

The Cultural Diversity Consultative Committee (CDCC) is a VLA-sponsored employee network. It was formed in 2018 to centre the voices of staff with lived experience of cultural diversity. The Committee provides a breadth of experience, knowledge and expertise related to cultural diversity, anti-racism, and racial justice to support inclusion and safety in the workplace.

The Committee provides a range of consultative advice on policies, programs, and initiatives.

In 2020, the CDCC provided advice on:

- Family Violence Community Engagement Framework
- Mental Health Royal Commission Policy Submission
- Victoria Ombudsman Public Housing Lockdown Submission
- Employee Supervision Framework
- Respectful Workplace Behaviours Framework.

The CDCC plays a leadership and strategic role and is considered a trusted advisor to guiding our senior leadership team.

### Culturally Diverse Staff Forum

In July, the CDCC established a regular forum for culturally diverse staff. The forum is a space to connect, debrief and seek support on issues related to cultural diversity, anti-racism, and racial justice. The Committee has held eight forums thus far and will continue to run forums in 2021



I have had the privilege of facilitating a few of the forums. It is a great opportunity to meet more staff from across VLA and also utilise our collective experiences to support each other with how to address issues of racism in the workplace and to discuss what it is like being BIPOC in Australia in 2020.

For me personally, having the space to connect, grow and support each other through the challenges of COVID and beyond was essential for my wellbeing. While there was often heavy topics discussed, I always left feeling strengthened by the resilience and support of the other staff who attended and shared their experiences.

**Abigail Sullivan, Senior Strategic Advisor and CDCC member**



## Cultural Diversity Champions Network

A Cultural Diversity Champions Network was established to support the implementation of the Strategy. The Champions promote awareness, and drive meaningful change around cultural diversity, anti-racism and inclusion in their respective teams and directorate.

The network meets bi-monthly and contains approximately 15-20 staff members (culturally diverse staff and allies) from a cross-section of roles across VLA. For many Champions, conducting additional activities for the strategy proved challenging due to COVID-19's impact on workload demands. Despite this, every effort was made to support the strategy and drive cultural change through existing and planned projects, initiatives, and programs.



VLA's Cultural Diversity and Inclusion Strategy (CDIS) has come a long way and in a short time. It's been fantastic to see how rapidly VLA has responded and supported cultural diversity and inclusion initiatives since a 2018 Yammer post. I'm seeing a positive shift in attitudes where staff are gaining a better awareness. As a Champion, I have the opportunity to broadly engage with staff within and outside my directorate. I integrate CDIS and RAP priority actions and weave it into the evaluation support I provide, because cultural diversity and inclusion does, and should intersect with our everyday work at VLA. In practice, this may look like developing and reporting against indicators to keep us accountable and progressing forward, or a reflective session looking at how far we've come, what we need to improve on, and where we need to be aiming next.

**Kira Lee, Senior Evaluation Advisor**



Being a Champion has been equally about self-discovery and reflection, as it has been about creating awareness and change. Striving to become a better ally has involved lots of reading, workshops, sharing learnings, and having uncomfortable conversations. Learning to sit with the discomfort I have learnt is profound. The workshop I attended by Democracy of Colour helped me reflect on my levels of comfort for intervening when witnessing racism. It provided a simple framework to follow for intervening a racial abuse situation which I shared with the Corporate Services Managers Team

**Danielle Motton, Change and Engagement Manager**



We had a section in our team planning day to reflect on our commitment to cultural diversity, inclusion, and anti-racism. The discussion generated a high level of engagement from staff. My team is taking steps to review our processes and create a space for regular reflection, discussion, and learning. It has been immense to see the steps taken in a short time towards achieving cultural safety. More personally, being able to drive the implementation of the strategy through the Champions Network has been very empowering.

**Rochelle Francis, Lawyer, Economics and Social Rights Team**



## 04 | Reporting and Evaluation

VLA conducted three staff pulse surveys focusing on staff wellbeing and inclusion during COVID-19 and work from home arrangements. The surveys were completed by a high proportion of staff (73 per cent to 83 per cent).

The survey results showed that:

- 79 per cent of our staff said that ‘the person I report to actively listens and responds to the diverse perspective and experiences of team members’,
- 76 per cent said that ‘I feel included, valued and respected within my team at this time’.
- 75 per cent said ‘I feel confident that any concern I have in relation to inappropriate behaviour (bullying, sexual harassment, discrimination or racial vilification) will be addressed at this time’.

These surveys did not disaggregate data based on demographic groups such as, gender, race, ethnicity, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander descent, or disability. It is possible the overall positive results may potentially be skewed towards the experience of the majority. The results overall, however, are favourable and indicate progress towards our long-term aim of building a workplace where everyone feels included, respected, and valued.

VLA will conduct our second Gender, Diversity, and Inclusion staff survey in 2021 to better understand how we are tracking with our diversity and inclusion efforts and areas for improvement.



## Intersection with our Client-first Strategy 2020–23

**Our client-first strategy aims to put our clients at the centre of everything we do.**

We know that 23 per cent of our clients come from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds. We see our work of racial justice and cultural inclusivity as a key part of our ability to work in a client first manner.

### Our submission about the public housing lockdowns

Disaster Legal Help Victoria (DLHV) made a submission to the Victorian Ombudsman's investigation into the detention and treatment of public housing residents during the COVID-19 'hard lockdown' in July 2020. The submission notes that official communications, including written and verbal directions from government, police, and authorised officers, were not made available in community languages, or with the assistance of interpreters in a timely manner. As a result, many residents did not understand the nature of the hard lockdown, the risk of COVID-19, their legal rights, or where to seek assistance. The submission included recommendations for consideration that would improve Victoria's ability to respond not just during pandemics, but to a wide variety of disasters that people face.

[Read about our submission to the Victorian Ombudsman in response to the public housing lockdowns.](#)

## Key learnings in 2020

**This 12-month progress report demonstrates that we are heading in the right direction.**

At the same time, we know that we are still at the beginning of our journey, and that we need to deepen our efforts to translate the commitments that we have set for our organisation into actions.

Our key learnings that will help us continue to build a culture of inclusion at VLA include:

- The COVID-19 pandemic and the Black Lives Matter movement resulted in a shared sense of urgency for VLA to strengthen our commitment to racial justice and inclusion, and to think differently about what is needed to make real change across VLA.
- We have more work to do to translate our commitments into everyday practice when it comes to creating welcoming, inclusive spaces where every person feels valued and respected. This includes having courageous and uncomfortable conversations about the pervasiveness of racism in society, including how it plays out in our workplace, services and more broadly within the justice system.
- Our employee diversity networks cultivate a safe space for connection and growth for staff members with lived experience. These networks play a key role in advocating for inclusion and diversity at VLA. These voices are vital in creating workplaces that are safe and equitable for all.

These learnings are reflected in our actions and activities for the 2021 year ahead.



# 2021 actions and activities

## Workforce diversity

- Continue to build the diversity of our workforce through our pathway programs, such as, the New Lawyers Program and African Australian Clerkship program.
- Ensure VLA's values and commitment to diversity, inclusion and racial justice is reflected in our recruitment and candidate attraction materials.
- Provide hiring managers with guidance to consider the unique value, insights, and experiences that candidates from culturally diverse backgrounds bring to VLA.

## Workforce capability

- Continue to improve uptake of our diversity and inclusion suite of e-learning.
- Commence rollout of our Respectful Workplace Behaviours Training for staff and managers.
- Provide targeted anti-racism training for People and Culture, Cultural Diversity Champions, CDCC and strategy and policy officers.

## Organisational capacity

- Plan for two key racial justice advocacy issues that are linked to VLA's core work in 2021:
  - The overrepresentation of people from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds in Youth Crime and Child Protection.
  - The racism experienced in Victorian courts by First Nations staff, Black and Brown staff and staff from culturally diverse backgrounds.
- Launch VLA's Diversity and Inclusion Framework in July – an overarching framework that outlines our diversity and inclusion goals, guiding principles and diversity dimensions.
- Improve pathways for staff engagement with CDCC members and Cultural Diversity Champions.

## Reporting and evaluation

- Conduct our second Gender, Diversity, and Inclusion Staff Survey in March to support us in better collecting and understanding our workforce demographic and experiences from an intersectional lens.

## More information

For more information about this report contact our Learning and Organisation Development Team

[LandOD@vla.vic.gov.au](mailto:LandOD@vla.vic.gov.au)





