# An illustration of a video conference. Text reads 'Midyear Update Corporate Plan 2020–21'

# Acknowledgement of Country

Victoria Legal Aid acknowledges the Traditional Custodians of the land where we work and pays respect to their Elders both past and present. We recognise their continuing connection to Country and the resilience and strength of Victoria’s Aboriginal communities.

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## Corporate plan mid-year update

We committed to update our 2020–21 Corporate Plan once the State Budget was delivered and this update reflects that commitment. It includes information on our budget and financial projections for 2020–21, as well as service delivery targets and projections.

VLA welcomes the announcement in the Victorian State Budget of funding for the next two years. These funds will enable us to meet the increased demand from the growing number of eligible clients, manage the growth in family violence, summary crime and child protection matters, and improve client outcomes. This is particularly so for Aboriginal children and young people. VLA also welcomes the subsequent funding through the Investing in court recovery and family violence support as part of the government’s plan designed to address delays in the justice system as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic. VLA will use these funds to support pre-court initiatives across family violence (FV) that expands legal advice to resolve FV intervention order matters before the court hearing. In criminal law, the funds will support Help Before Court service to assist people to better prepare for their online court date. This investment into the legal assistance sector will also support VLA and our practice partners to continue to provide services that adapt and evolve to community needs throughout the pandemic both online and in person as things transition towards a hybrid model of legal assistance service delivery.

## Our 2020–21 budget (post-budget update)

Like many things in 2020, our financial processes have been a little different this year. We developed the 2020–21 budget in June 2020 consistent with our usual processes, but the postponement of the State Budget and the COVID-19 pandemic brought about some uncertainty in our funding. With the release of the Victorian State budget in November 2020, we are now able to update our financial position.

Following the State Budget announcement, we expect to deliver a balanced budget in 2020–21. Overall, VLA will receive approximately $39.2 million over 2020–21 and 2021–22. This funding will address increasing pressure on the justice system and the backlog of matters arising from the shifts in practice due to the COVID-19 pandemic. However, the timing of this expenditure will depend on how quickly the courts can resume operations and will be incurred across the next two years. Consequently, some of the 2020–21 funding may be deferred to 2021–22 to meet the timing of the demand backlog.

While the funding in the State Budget provides us with relief in the short- to medium-term, we continue to forecast significant long-term financial pressures. Our ability to meet our clients’ legal needs and remain financially sustainable will be constrained in the absence of sufficient long-term base funding.

## Our revenue

Table 1 shows that VLA’s overall revenue will increase in 2020–21 in line with State Budget outcomes. However, it also highlights the funding pressures experienced in the Public Purpose Fund. In 2020–21 we have budgeted $281.3 million in revenue, an increase of 5.2 percent from 2019–20. The increase in revenue is due to additional funding provided from the State Government to address the backlog in the courts. The backlog is a result of changes to court processes because of the COVID-19 pandemic. This funding will also offset a $10 million reduction in the Public Purpose Fund allocation, which has been impacted by lower interest rates and is expected to continue in future years. Commonwealth Government revenues also increased in line with the latest National Legal Assistance Partnership Agreement, including additional funding for our Community Legal Centre partners.

### Table 1: 2020–21 revenue by source ($m)

|  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
| **Source of revenue** | **2019–20 (Actual)** | **2020–21 (Budget)** | **Growth percentage** |
| **State Government** | 150.3 | 170.3 | 13.3% |
| **Commonwealth Government** | 75.8 | 80.4 | 6.1% |
| **Public Purpose Fund** | 31.5 | 21.5 | (31.7%) |
| **Case revenue (including client contributions) & other income** | 6.2 | 5.6 | (9.7%) |
| **Operating Revenue** | **263.8** | **277.8** | **5.3%** |
| Digital Legal Aid income | 3.5 | 3.5 | 0.0% |
| **Total Revenue** | **267.3** | **281.3** | **5.2%** |

## Our expenditure

Overall budgeted expenditure is expected to increase by $30.9 million, from $250.4 million in 2019–20 to $281.3 million in 2020–21. This increase is largely related to the additional expenditure required to address the backlog in the courts.

Table 2 shows a breakdown of budgeted expenditure by type. The increase in case expenditure of 4.8 per cent to $106.3 million is related to reductions in 2019–20 due to changed court practises from COVID-19 and additional expenditure in 2020–21 to address the resulting backlog. VLA is working closely with the courts and other justice sector partners to implement strategies to address the backlog. The final timing of the expenditure will be determined by court operations and the impacts of any further COVID-19 restrictions, which will impact VLA’s financial position for 2020–21.

Employee costs are expected to increase 4.6 per cent to $85.2 million, primarily due to annual salary increases. Depreciation will increase 22.9 per cent to $2.2 million, reflecting the increased asset base from Digital Legal Aid.

The increase in Project and Other Expenditure to $38.4 million is largely due to the timing of one-off COVID-19 and Bushfire recovery expenditure, as well as specifically funded initiatives including Family Advocacy and Support Services and Youth Diversion Program.

### Table 2: 2020–21 Expenditure by type ($m)

|  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
| **Program Area** | **2019–20 (Actual)** | **2020–21 (Budget)** | **Growth percentage** |
| **Case Expenditure** | 101.4 | 106.3 | 4.8% |
| **Employee Related Costs** | 81.5 | 85.2 | 4.6% |
| **Community Legal Centre Expenditure** | 42.5 | 49.2 | 15.8% |
| **Depreciation** | 1.8 | 2.2 | 22.9% |
| **Project and Other Expenditure** | 23.2 | 38.4 | 65.3% |
| **Total Expenditure** | **250.4** | **281.3** | **12.4%** |

## Our service delivery

Our annual service delivery targets are based on year-on-year figures, adjusted each year based on our projected demand. With the delayed State Budget, the government decided to maintain the same performance targets for 2020–21.

Many of our services have been significantly impacted and, as Table 3 shows, our expected outcomes for 2020–21 are lower for most of the performance targets. These projections better reflect the impact of COVID-19 on our services and we expect this trend to continue until the courts resume operations.

**Table 3: BP3 performance targets**

|  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| **Measure** | **2018**–**19 actual** | **2019**–**20 actual** | **2020**–**21 target** | **2020**–**21 expected** |
| **Unique clients** | 100, 061 | 88, 662 | 105,000 | 89,000 |
| **Community Legal Education and Information Services (excl. family Violence)** | 97, 705 | 89, 829 | 105,000–115000 | 101,000 |
| **Community Legal Education and Information Services – family violence related services** | 25, 056 | 23,320 | 26,000–28,000 | 26,000 |
| **Duty Lawyer Services (excl. family violence)** | 72, 518 | 53, 789 | 69,000–71,000 | 42,000 |
| **Grants of legal assistance provided (excl. family violence)** | 32, 610 | 32, 046 | 32,900 | 30,000 |
| **Legal advice and minor assistance (excl. family violence)** | 39, 838 | 30, 885 | 40,000–42,000 | 30,000 |
| **Family violence legal services** | 45, 448 | 46, 115 | 45,000 | 40,000 |
| **Client satisfaction** | 70 per cent | n/a | 80 per cent | 80 per cent |
| **Average call wait time to the Legal Help phone line** | 9.7 mins | 15.3 mins | <10 mins | <12 mins |

## Our 2020­–21 priorities

The additional funding provided through the State Budget in November 2020 has allowed us to operate a balanced financial position in 2020–21. This means that we have not had to implement further savings initiatives, and we have updated our Financial Sustainability priority to reflect that several of our proposed savings initiatives have been deferred until 2021–22. We have updated the Psychological Well-being Plan to the Health Safety and Well-being plan.

| **Priority** | **Outputs** | **Measures** | **Strategy 22** |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
| **COVID-19 pandemic response and transition**  Develop and implement strategies to respond and transition from the impacts of COVID-19. | Develop and implement response and transition strategies, including:   * Return to work * Service delivery * Practice partners   Maintain / embed COVID reforms and processes that are beneficial to VLA clients and the justice sector | 100 per cent of strategies have implementation plans  Three pulse surveys are conducted in 2020–21  Pulse survey results increase in favourability or remain consistent compared with results from June 2020 | Client  Impact  Together |
| **Financial sustainability**  Implement service delivery and administrative changes so VLA can manage and maintain a balanced operating position over time. | Develop and implement change management strategies for financial sustainability.  Advocate for funding opportunities across the government and with our justice sector and community partners | A balanced operating position by 30 June 2021 100 per cent of savings initiatives have implementation plans  100 per cent of identified stakeholders consulted before implementation of initiatives | Impact  Together |
| **Digital Legal Aid**  Leverage technology to significantly improve client services, productivity and access to justice. | Design and implement digital tools to support legal practice areas and service delivery to clients:   * Client record management system * Legal Help intake solution * Duty Lawyer triaging tool and record * Case management system * VLA website upgrade | Legal Help Intake Solution implemented by 30 November 2020  Client Management system designed and developed by 31 November 2020  Case Management – designed and developed by 31 January 2021 and implementation in progress by 30 June 2021  Duty Lawyer designed and developed by 31 March 2021 and implementation in progress by 30 June 2021  New website complete and ready for launch by 30 June 2021 | Client  Impact  Together |
| **Family violence response**  Work with our legal assistance partners, the courts, police and family violence services to improve access to legal help for people affected by family violence. | Implement new legal services in the Specialist Family Violence courts  Monitor and evaluate our Legal Help phone and webchat service’s new family violence priority call queue and webchat channel  Convert our face-to-face Client Safety Framework training into a more broadly available online learning modules | Specialist Family Violence service delivery and client satisfaction targets are met  Average Legal Help phone and webchat wait time for family violence priority clients is shorter than for other clients  50 new users have completed at least one new Client Safety Framework online module by 30 June 2021 | Client  Impact  Together |
| **Health, safety and wellbeing**  Review and manage health, safety and wellbeing activities to mitigate risk and prevent health and safety issues. | Review and update Health Safety and Wellbeing Plan (HSWP) to respond to COVID-19  Develop and implement system changes for:   * safe driving * contractor management. | VLA completes the update of the HSWP by 31 December 2020  Over 50 percent of staff participate in HSWP initiatives  60 percent of staff complete Safe Driving training module by 30 June 2021  Contractor management system is in place by 31 December 2020 | Impact  Together |
| **Enterprise Agreement negotiations**  Renegotiating VLA’s Enterprise Agreement for the period 2020–24. | Certify and implement a new Enterprise Agreement for VLA staff. | VLA completes Enterprise Agreement negotiations by 28 September 2020  VLA signs and implements the Enterprise Agreement by February 2021 | Together |
| **Legal sector service response to disasters**  Improve disaster response in the legal sector | Review Disaster Legal Help Victoria’s (DLHV) service delivery model  Coordinate legal assistance sector response  Monitor the effectiveness of the DLHV website, phoneline and communication channels during a disaster | VLA leads and completes collaborative review of DLHV  2019/20 response completed by 1 November  Average Legal Help phone and webchat wait time for DLHV clients is shorter than for other legal help clients  VLA leads and completes collaborative review of DLHV  2019/20 and update DLHV website by 1 November | Client  Impact  Together |
| **NLAP Implementation**  Implement the requirements of the National Legal Aid Partnership Agreement and develop of better understanding of legal need in Victoria | Work with the Department and community legal assistance sector to develop and introduce the necessary changes to meet new data and reporting requirements of VLA, CLCs and the Victorian Aboriginal Legal Service  Engage in Department led collaborative planning activities and continue to conduct collaborative planning activities with CLCs at a local level  Support the Victoria Law Foundation in its public understanding of law survey  Collaborate with the Department to develop the Victorian Legal Assistance Strategy and Action Plan | On-time reporting to the Commonwealth demonstrating service delivery to clients  Collaborative planning activities contribute to the legal needs evidence base  Collaborative service planning committee contributes to the development of the Legal assistance strategy and action plan in accordance with timeframes | Client  Impact  Together |
| **Cultural competency**  Continuously strive to enhance cultural competency to ensure a culturally safe workplace and service | Launch and implement the year one actions of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Cultural Learning Strategy 2020-25  Implement the actions in the Cultural Diversity inclusion strategy  All staff, SET, Board complete:   * Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultural awareness training * Unconscious bias training * Diversity and inclusion in the workplace training | 100 percent of staff include cultural learning in their performance development as part of VLA & Me.  Staff survey results report an increase in staff feeling comfortable to report physical and psychological health  85 percent of existing staff will have completed the Unconscious Bias and Diversity and Inclusion in the Workplace training by 31 December 2020  All SET and Board members will have completed the Unconscious Bias and Diversity and Inclusion in the Workplace training by 31 December 2020 | Client  Impact  Together |

# Strategic advocacy priorities

The *Legal Aid Act 1978* requires us to take steps to deliver legal services efficiently and innovatively to reduce the need for repeat, individualised legal services. One way we achieve this is by pursuing improvements in law and policy that result in better outcomes for our clients and the community.

For 2020–21 we will pursue the following strategic advocacy priorities and actions.

**Strategic advocacy priorities**

1. Responding to, and monitoring, the legal and related impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic on Victorians
2. Making sure change is shaped by the experience and expertise of people directly affected
3. Intervening early to promote social inclusion and prevent the escalation of legal and life issues
4. Contributing to a safe, fair, responsive, and accessible justice system with people at its centre
5. Promoting rights and accountability in systems and processes that affect people's lives

**Actions**

1. Advocating for fair laws and policies that reduce the negative impact of COVID-19 measures, including social drivers of legal need such as financial hardship, poverty, unstable housing and family violence
2. Advancing people’s rights and recovery, through the Royal Commission into Victoria’s Mental Health System
3. Addressing the over criminalisation of vulnerable groups, women and children and particularly Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women and children who have experienced family violence or trauma
4. Advancing reforms to the family law system to ensure a timely and appropriate response to family violence, and to ensure that it is safe, inclusive and accessible for everyone who needs to use it
5. Improving justice outcomes for vulnerable clients through Magistrates’ Court processes, summary procedure and offences reform, police cautions, diversion and charging processes
6. Increasing access to therapeutic programs such as the Assessment and Referral Court, the Drug Court and other effective non-custodial interventions to help people in the criminal justice system address their underlying issues and break the cycle of reoffending.