Supporting family violence clients with diverse needs and experiences

A summary of the interim evaluation of Victoria Legal Aid's Specialist Family Violence Court Legal Practice Model

The model

We worked with lived experience experts and stakeholders to design and implement a new way of working at Victoria's Specialist Family Violence Courts (SFVC). Despite COVID-19 causing implementation delays, the interim evaluation by the Centre for Innovative Justice (CIJ) has found that this legal practice model has largely been implemented at the first five SFVC sites.

The model is designed to ensure people with family violence legal needs receive high quality and clientcentred services, which are easy to access, safe to use and integrated within the broader family violence services sector.

What is working well?

The interim evaluation has found that the legal practice model is being accessed by, and provides a tailored response to, people with diverse needs and experiences. Feedback also indicates clients find it easier to obtain information about the court process and legal advice than they otherwise would have.

Other strengths highlighted by the interim evaluation include:

- development of training, guidance and support for lawyers focused on trauma-informed and noncollusive practice, as well as assessing and responding to clients' broader legal needs
- continued promotion and support of Information and Referral Officer (IRO) roles, who assist clients by providing information and support and making referrals
- development of accessible, quality online information on legal assistance and the court process
- continued promotion and support of Aboriginal Community Engagement Officer (ACEO) roles, to improve access to legal assistance for First Nations peoples with legal needs.

Both the IRO and ACE officer roles funded by this project were initially pilot roles and have recently been made ongoing.

What can be improved?

The interim evaluation has made a range of recommendations to ensure all aspects of the legal practice model are working to the benefit of clients. We are working with our stakeholders to address these recommendations. They include:

- improving the visibility and understanding of different aspects of the model, particularly amongst SFVC court staff
- continue to improve the knowledge, skills and facilities for people working within the model
- ensure IROs are being used to their full capacity and duty lawyer volumes are appropriately managed
- improve the connection of the legal practice model to other parts of the system including police and family violence support services.

Conclusion

Overall, the CIJ's recommendations will help to build on the valuable work that has already occurred to further strengthen the provision of legal services at SFVC locations. The interim evaluation acknowledges the considerable challenges of the wider reform landscape, the ongoing impacts of COVID-19 on the SFVC environment and the associated increase in family violence matters.

Despite this, considerable progress has been made towards the model's aim of delivering legal and non-legal services which are holistic, client-centred and more likely to meet people's needs.

The final evaluation will be completed in November 2023.

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