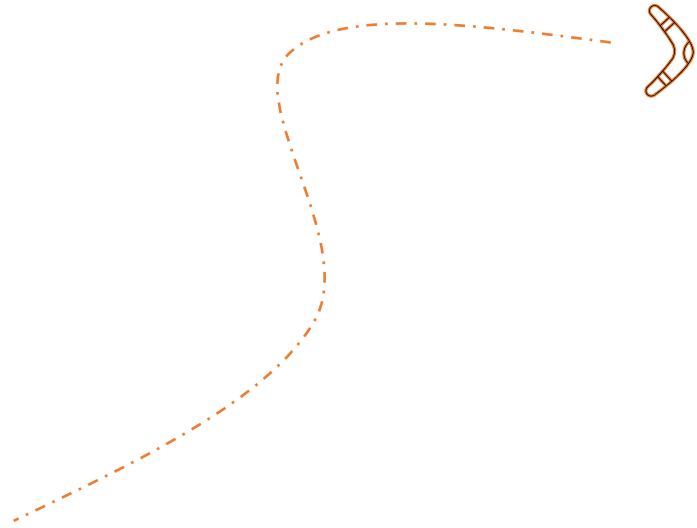



Strategic

Plan

2024-2027

Legal Aid ACT



Acknowledgment of Country

Legal Aid ACT respectfully acknowledges the traditional landowners whose land we are working on today and pay our respects to Elders past and present. We also acknowledge and pay our respects to the Aboriginal people who draw their ancestral lines from this land.

CEO Report

Legal Aid's 2024-2027 Strategic Plan, like our previous plan, sets out what we want to achieve and how we propose to do it. Changes to the layout of the plan bring a renewed focus to these fundamental characteristics of a good strategic plan to improve services on the ground to our clients. The new plan directly addresses strategic objectives and the actions we will take to achieve them.

The Plan also sets up measures that will let us track our progress through the life of the plan and understand the effectiveness of our efforts.

I am particularly proud of the achievements of Legal Aid during the currency of the previous plan. Despite its coincidence with the entirety of the COVID 19 pandemic, Legal Aid's staff found ways to work together, to work with other legal professionals and the courts, and to deliver legal services to those in need. In the midst of this Legal Aid responded quickly and constructively to a cyber security incident. Assisted with expert advice, the scope of the incident was managed and our staff excelled in transitioning rapidly to systems offering increased security.

Legal Aid's corporate and client services staff performed in an exemplary way, they are too often the unsung heros who, through their daily work, keep Legal Aid running smoothly and efficiently. Our legal staff, lawyers and paralegals, continued to deliver their crucial work in representing and supporting the representation of clients in courts and tribunals in the ACT and our role as the heavy lifters in the family violence space has become increasingly apparent.

The professionalism of our legal staff extends to the way outreach services have been taken out into the community, usually in partnership with agencies and NGOs. The Health Justice Partnership and the Colleges Program are clear examples of Legal Aid ACT's ability foster productive relationships with other organisations to best reach and meet with people in need of legal assistance. Linked to this outreach is The Community Legal Education and Client Liaison Unit—both examples emphasise the holistic character of our work and show how we are achieving best practice in the delivery of legal aid.

As in previous years our staff were involved in the creation of this plan and I thank everyone who contributed to its development. I also thank out staff for responding constructively to the previous strategic plan and look forward to seeing this new plan being integrated into the work being done across Legal Aid's practice.

Who we are

The Legal Aid Commission (A.C.T.) ('the Commission') is an independent statutory authority established by the Legal Aid Act 1977 (ACT) ('the Act'). The Commission provides legal assistance to the most disadvantaged and vulnerable members of the ACT community as they navigate the justice system.

Often our clients experience intersecting disadvantage, with their legal problem being entwined with additional social or economic hardships. In response, the Commission provides a holistic and client-focused approach to what is an essential service.

Our Vision is to be a leading legal aid services provider in achieving just outcomes for vulnerable and disadvantaged people.

Our Mission is to promote a just society in the Australian Capital Territory by:

- Ensuring that vulnerable and disadvantaged people receive the legal services they need to protect their rights and interests;
- Developing an improved community understanding of the law; and
- Seeking reform of laws that adversely affect those we assist.

We achieve this purpose by delivering a range of high-quality legal services through our staff and professional partners in a manner that respects diversity and promotes confidence in the legal system.

Our Values in our relationships, service delivery, business processes and decision making are:

Excellence

We strive to deliver legal aid services of the highest standard with compassion and understanding, and to continually improve ourselves and the organisation.

Respect

We respect the inherent dignity of those we assist and those we work with and are always culturally empathetic.

Innovation






We always seek new and innovative ways to improve the quality of our services and the effective use of our resources.

Dedication

We are dedicated to helping disadvantaged people achieve justice and to upholding the rule of law and the highest ethical standards.

Our 2024-2027 Strategic Plan will consolidate and build on our transformation to date.

Under our previous strategic plan 2020-2023, the Commission focused on meeting the evolving needs of our clients, while supporting the safety and wellbeing of our staff. In a snapshot, we:

-  Delivered legal education seminars within the community to educate vulnerable peoples on their rights and how the legal system could assist them. These included visa information sessions for Afghan Refugees following the 2021 Kabul evacuation, Family Law sessions on divorce, property and children, and sessions for Older People navigating Elder Abuse.
-  Strengthened our working relationship with the health sector via the 'Health Justice Partnership'. Legal Aid lawyers now offer onsite legal advice to patients at Canberra Hospital, North Canberra Hospital and the Centenary Hospital for Women and Children.
-  Expanded our Lawyers in Colleges Program. A Legal Aid lawyer is now stationed at each ACT public College one day per week, providing free and confidential legal advice to students and their families on a drop-in basis.
-  Improved infrastructure processes and consolidated corporate services, including IT and case management systems. This was fast-tracked in the face of Covid-19 and cyber security challenges.
-  Strengthened our partnership with private legal practitioners, including the ACT Bar Association and ACT Law Society.

Emerging trends for the Legal Assistance Sector

This Strategic Plan is created in the context of current and emerging trends for the legal assistance sector, which guide Legal Aid ACT's strategic objectives and actions. This document seeks to engage with and respond to the current challenges facing the justice system/legal assistance sector.

Some of those challenges are:

- Population in the ACT is projected to grow to approximately 784,000 by June 2060 with a 1.3 percent overall increase in proportion of people aged over 65.
- Women in Australia continue to be disproportionately impacted by family, domestic and sexual violence.
- The labour market is becoming increasingly competitive. Recruiting and retaining staff in the justice sector will require extra attention.
- Government funding is tending to be shorter-term and project specific. The legal assistance sector will need to embrace collaboration to support specialist services.
- Technology is rapidly evolving including the continuing emergence of artificial intelligence. This provides, within proper limits, new opportunities in how we can deliver services and operate the organization, while creating new challenges around cyber security.
- Social and economic environments are increasingly uncertain. A cost-of-living crisis, housing crisis and growing 'missing middle' in accessing justice are increasing the complexity of issues faced by our clients.
- Access to justice for people whose means place them in the lowest two economic quintiles is increasingly difficult or impossible. Eligibility for legal aid needs to be expanded to include these people.

Strategic Objectives for the Commission

These broad goals are how we will identify our progress and successes

1. Our Clients

- Extend our assistance to as many people in need as we possibly can including through effective outreach activities.
- Foster culturally safe and supported services for all, including culturally and linguistically diverse peoples, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples, the LGBTQIA+ community and those living with a disability.

2. Our Impact on the Justice System

- Actively participate in legal assistance strategy development and implementation.
- Collaborate with government stakeholders and legal assistance providers in the sector, both locally and nationally.
- Continue contributing to legislative and policy reforms, via submissions to Cabinet and Government committees and inquiries.
- Contribute to the efficiency of the Courts.
- Assist in reducing the over-representation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people in the ACT justice system.
- Improve community outreach services.
- Revise our corporate and legal practice infrastructure.
- Promote a vibrant and efficient legal practice.
- Further develop a sustainable and high-level duty and litigation service.

3. Our People and Processes

- Support staff wellbeing and job satisfaction.
- Develop and retain a skilled and engaged workforce.
- Progress with digital advancements, both in organizational management and service delivery.

Actions we will take to achieve our Strategic Objectives

1. Increase access to quality legal assistance services

1.1 Review our means test, to better align those eligible for a grant of aid with growing cost of living pressures and optimise application assessment processes This is a necessary step towards addressing ‘the missing middle’ in the legal assistance sector.

1.2 Foster culturally safe and supported services for all:

- Continue to employ CALD and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Liaison Officers to provide holistic ‘wrap-around’ non-legal support for clients.
- Employ a LGBTQIA+ officer to ensure our services are sensitive and reflective to the needs of the LGBTQIA+ community.
- Expand the Migration team to increase our capacity to assist in refugee law and immigration matters. This will be particularly helpful during times of international conflict or humanitarian crisis, where large numbers of vulnerable peoples need timely assistance.
- Provide more community legal education aimed at targeted groups and their specific needs. Including more regular outreach services at relevant community hubs.
- Raise the skills and awareness of our staff to possible cultural barriers for clients by internal training opportunities.

1.3 Accessible services for all

- Create a Disability Action and Inclusion Plan to identify and action improvements for supporting clients with disability.
- continuing to employ a Community Liaison Officer to provide holistic ‘wrap-around’ non-legal support for clients with disability..
- Strengthen ‘warm’ referral pathways between our Client Liaison Unit and non-legal supports in the community to provide wrap-around care.
- Enhance digital outreach services, and access to online and social media services.
- Raise the skills and awareness of our staff to possible barriers for clients accessing services by internal training opportunities.
- Consolidate and expand outreach programs in the ACT by drawing on partnerships with non-government organisations and community legal centres.
- Review access to flexible work policies.

1.4 Quality of both in-house and private practitioners and the Commission’s practice management:

- Foster training and career development opportunities for in-house practitioners.
- Review and update scale of fees for private practitioners to enable consistent availability and quality of those who take on legal aid matters.

- Create resources assisting in-house and private lawyers to offer accessible, trauma-informed legal services e.g. Disability Action and Inclusion Plan Leaflet for private practitioners.
- Update complaint process.
- Conduct independent audit of legal practices.
- Continue to conduct audits of private legal practices carriage of legal aid matters.

2. Support a fair and effective justice system

2.1 Collaboration in the sector

- Strengthen and broaden Memorandums of Understanding with local community legal centres and non-government organisations in the sector.
- Identify gaps in services available for vulnerable people in the community and work, alongside local community legal, centres to close them.
- Use results from our 2023 Stakeholder Survey in the Commission's interactions with the community and legal assistance sector, to better our communication, referrals, and working relationships.
- Be innovative in identifying service opportunities and bring them to Government for new funding opportunities e.g. Health Justice Partnership expansion.
- Facilitate secondments for government employees within Legal Aid and vice versa.
- Support data collection and reporting to better inform sector agreements and programs (like the National Legal Assistance Partnership).

2.2 Legislative Reform

- Continue contributing policy and legislative reform submissions to Government, Cabinet and committee inquiries. This is a pathway for us to advocate for how certain reforms impact vulnerable peoples in the community.
- Hold a seat on the ACT Law Reform and Sentencing Advisory Council.
- Support employees of the Commission in joining local Board and Councils to advocate for vulnerable peoples in the ACT.
- Provide senior staff to facilitate public interest litigation.

2.3 Court Efficiency

- Employ a 'Court Navigator' to be stationed at ACT Courts. This role acts as a frontline triage service, helping to direct members of the public to the relevant services and supports.
- Station criminal, domestic violence and family law duty lawyers at ACT and Federal Courts to provide on-site one-off legal advice and representation.
- Expand our Family Dispute Resolution Service, helping more family law disputes be resolved outside of the court system.
- Maintain and expand litigation services both in courts and tribunals, and through representation assistance outside formal litigation processes (early intervention).

2.4 Support the role of National Legal Aid

- Actively participate in National Legal Aid working groups and referrals
- Support nationally coordinated service opportunities and research that can improve outcomes for people in the ACT.
- Actively engage with all court user forums

3. Develop Legal Aid ACT

3.1 Staff wellbeing

- Address vicarious trauma through awareness training and the provision of support services such as counselling and de-briefing.
- Manage stress and workloads through implementing new team structures with enhanced supervision of junior employees informed by the 2023 Hudson Report.

3.2 Foster a respectful and inclusive workplace

- Use the Disability Action and Inclusion Plan to guide an inclusive and accessible work environment.
- Support flexible or alternative working arrangements for staff where compatible with productivity requirements.
- Continue to review organisational structures where needed. Reference can be taken from the 2023 Hudson report.
- Complete the refit and expansion of our accommodation to help the Commission adapt to the number of staff required to meet growing legal needs.

3.3 Develop and retain a skilled and engaged workforce

- Foster professional development through regular, high-quality training opportunities.
- Provide for career progression pathways within the organisation.
- Implement a formalised graduate lawyer program over 2 years, with rotations through different in-house legal practices.
- Invite local accomplished private lawyers to assist in the training of junior Legal Aid lawyers.
- Recruit senior lawyers to increase the availability of supervision for more junior staff throughout the Commission.
- Develop more senior litigation capabilities.
- Increase corporate and client services capacity and capabilities.

3.4 Progress digital advancements

- Hire a 'Digital Outreach Officer' to oversee our digital program including the enhancement of tools for the Commission's staff and the Commission's online presence (through web, and social media channels).
- Strengthen and maintain cyber security measures and obtain insurance for the costs of any future cyber incidents.

3.5 Create resources for staff

- Develop and maintain documentation explaining common practices and procedures.
- Develop and maintain a precedent bank to assist lawyers in each practice area, both internal and external.
- Provide structured supervision and feedback to staff across all experience levels.
- Refine internal management processes across the Commission to ensure consistency with policy and practices.
- Continue to focus on managing duty conflicts to limit their impact on service provision, including law reform.
- Redesign our communication processes, including website and intranet.

Moving Forward

This plan will cover the 50th anniversary of the establishment of the commission. The changes in the needs of people in the ACT in that time have been immense, as have the ways in which assistance is provided.

In just the first half of 2024 Australians have both marched in protest about violence against women and embarked on litigation with a global media enterprise about the availability of video footage of violent crime. At the same time, Australians have seen significant reductions in the real incomes due to rising prices including the price of rent and mortgage repayments. Internationally, conflict in Europe and the Middle East has been a source of division and grief in communities and has had, and will have, implications for immigration and refugees.

This plan, in the way it furthers the Commission's work in outreach, support for diversity and the coordination and expansion of services is both a response to the pace of change and a plan to remain relevant and ready to meet the future needs of people in the ACT. It is a plan that values Commission staff and which is committed to their professional development and supporting their personal needs.

The strategic objectives highlighted in this plan will be actioned through a series of initiatives and programs over the next 4-year period. These actions will be overseen and monitored by our Board of Commissioners and the Executive team, who will review progress twice a year. The plan will deliver, and demonstrate the delivery of, continuous improvement in the way the Commission meets its obligations.