



Grants Program Strategy
2023 – 2028





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ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

We acknowledge Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples as the Traditional Custodians of the land, and pay respect to their Elders past, present and future.



Background image: Melissa Bell (Gunditjmara/Yorta Yorta) The Dreamtime Murray River #2, 2022. Acrylic on canvas.





INTRODUCTION

Recent global disruption has caused upheaval and uncertainty, requiring us to all rapidly adapt. These adaptations have had – and will continue to have – significant impacts for all Victorians. We know that many of the adverse impacts have been felt most keenly by those already vulnerable and have caused others to slip into disadvantage. This has placed additional pressure on social and legal services – at a time when our justice sector was already coping with increasing demand and complexity.



This period of upheaval is set to continue. Responding to these ongoing challenges requires new flexible ways of working and a willingness to address the systemic drivers that lead to people's engagement with the legal system. The challenge is to ensure that the legal system adapts to these upheavals in ways that protect and promote justice for all. It is therefore opportune to assess our role and the contribution we can make specifically to improving access to justice and to the legal sector generally. Through the Grants Program Strategic Review (Strategic Review), we have taken this moment to reflect on the challenges as well as the opportunities – and to seek to understand where we can be most effective in this altered, uncertain landscape.

The findings of the Strategic Review were clear: we have an important role to play through our Grants Program in improving access to justice for Victorians, especially for those most disadvantaged. This is not only because we are one of the major funders in this space but because our approach and ways of working are effective and valued by the sector. The Strategic Review found that we are a credible funder that is highly regarded for our understanding of the sector and its needs, as well as for our focus on and commitment to funding areas where there have been significant funding gaps.





We have learned that supporting innovation is critical and requires the funder to understand what worked and recipients adapting their approach.

We heard from grant recipients, who identified programs that have achieved significant outcomes for people thanks to our support. We heard from stakeholders across the justice sector, who welcomed our appetite for innovation to date and who encouraged us to do further systemic work addressing causes of injustice; and we heard from other philanthropic organisations, who identified the changing nature of funding. We also heard of the value of a funder like us stepping into new spaces, taking risks with funding and trying new approaches. In particular, the Strategic Review highlighted the many outcomes that our Grants Program has contributed to through our willingness to focus on areas where need was identified by research or demand. We have learned that supporting innovation is critical and requires the funder to understand what worked and recipients adapting their approach.

Finally, the Strategic Review underscored that there is a need for us to play to our strengths and maximise our position as a highly respected funder and stakeholder, in the interests of improving access to justice. Indeed, the Strategic Review brought into focus something that we already knew: that it is not just about the amount of funding we provide, but how we provide it – the ways in which we support organisations to do their work more effectively. To do this, there is a desire for us to step more boldly into some of the roles we already play, not just as a funder, but as an innovator, connector and collaborator, advocate and partner.



HOLISTIC FUNDING MODEL

Building on our 15 years of experience in delivering grants, we are determined to use what we have learned and continue to improve our work – to support and improve access to justice outcomes for all Victorians. In doing this, we particularly want to focus on people who are at a disadvantage when in contact with the legal and justice system: to find ways to centre their voices and experiences in the delivery of initiatives and to better support the people who are working with them. By building on what we know works, this strategy has been developed to ensure that our Grants Program is set up to do just that.

Our Strategic Review identified the following barriers:

- + lack of funding for core work available to organisations and services seeking to improve access to justice outcomes
- + limited options in terms of ongoing, sustainable funding opportunities for services and programs seeking to improve Victorians' access to justice
- + the competitive nature of grant funding, whereby applicants – who could benefit from collaborating and working together – are required to compete with other applicants to secure funding
- + some stakeholders having a limited sense or understanding of our organisation in its role as a funding body.

We cannot overcome all of these challenges on our own.

However, this strategy recognises that we can do better. We need to adopt a multi-pronged approach that targets funding where it is not only most needed but most effective.

Through this strategy, we are excited that we can determine shared priorities and continue to work with organisations who have innovative, evidence-based ideas for initiatives or projects. We can continue to address particular issues such as targeting access to justice for First Nations people. But we can also step into new spaces by providing more than just project funding. We can help organisations build capacity and identify where targeted support could assist with the building of their own initiatives.

As such, this strategy recognises that funding innovation and advancement requires support in three critical areas:

- + An ability for VLSB+C to **test and try new ideas** and/or support collaborations and partnerships: this means undertaking research, bringing people together, developing shared priorities and identifying ways we can strengthen the capacity of organisations to effectively undertake the work.
- + Implementing **longer term projects** that can target identified gaps or particular issues to improve access to justice.
- + **Sustaining organisations** that deliver on outcomes.

By providing support through a holistic model that supports these three key areas, we believe that our Grants Program will significantly increase our impact in achieving access to justice outcomes. We are committed to implementing this strategy to ensure that our funding continues to contribute to the evidence base as to what works, as well as contribute to improved outcomes for Victorians who need it most.



WE ARE

Committed to improving access to justice for Victorians through targeted funding for improved laws and services.

WE BELIEVE

With the right support, the community and legal assistance sectors can drive and deliver strategic change that improves access to justice for Victorians.

OUR VISION

Is of a justice system that:

- + enables people to exercise their rights
- + continues to reform to address systemic injustices
- + implements evidence-based, holistic responses
- + works to divert people away from the justice system.

OUR APPROACH

We are authorised to provide funding to improve the administration of laws, increase access to justice, improve legal services, pilot innovations and inform and educate the wider community about legal services.

We do this by funding and partnering with organisations to:

- + support initiatives to address systemic disadvantage
- + develop holistic responses to legal need
- + implement and demonstrate the effectiveness of early intervention models
- + achieve positive change through targeting identified issues of concern
- + respond to emerging needs or trends.

Our program includes:

- + financial and non-financial support to identify priorities, develop partnerships and build organisations' capacity to achieve impact
- + project funding that may span multiple years
- + general funding for organisations supporting our priorities.





OUR GOALS

Accessible Legal
Services

1



Holistic and
Diversionary
Responses

2



Fairer Laws and
Processes

3

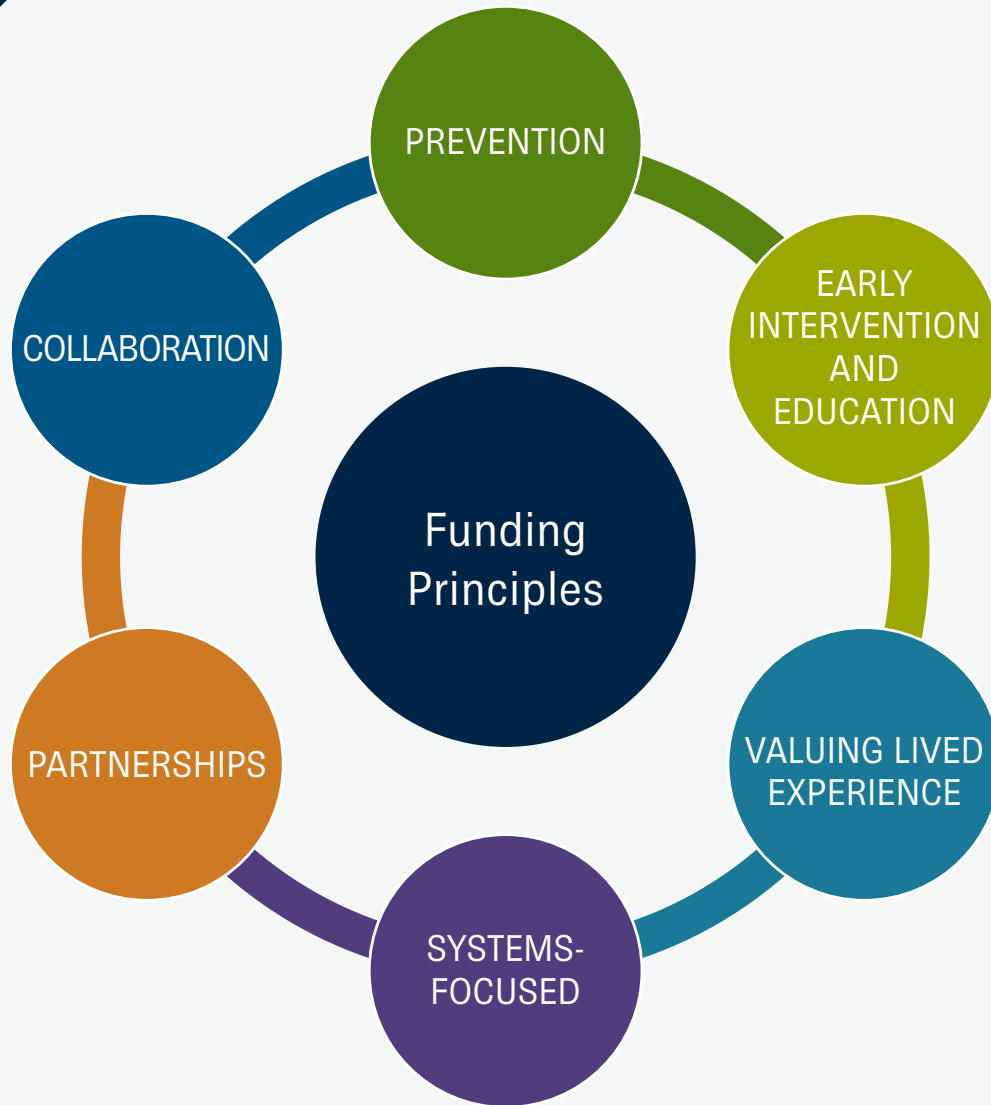


Our theory of change has three broad goals. These goals are very long term and are not the unique responsibility of our Grants Program, recognising that many other actors and initiatives will play a part in achieving these goals.

We will contribute to achieving these goals by implementing our Grants Program through three different, evidence-based funding approaches – each clearly focused on addressing a distinct need in the sector – and by stepping into our roles as funder, innovator, connector, advocate and partner.



OUR FUNDING PRINCIPLES



We are guided by six funding principles that help us to prioritise the funding of projects or organisations focused on reducing disadvantage within the justice system. We aim to support work that utilises approaches aligned to the following funding principles:

- +** **Prevention:** preventative approaches that seek to address underlying issues.
- +** **Early intervention and education:** effective approaches to building capacity of individuals and communities to prevent negative interaction with the legal system.
- +** **Valuing lived experience:** prioritising, elevating and empowering people who have had experience with the justice system and/or are experiencing vulnerability
- +** **Systems-focused:** undertaking policy and law reform work to address systemic issues identified through evidence and case work.
- +** **Partnerships:** between legal and non-legal services to address the clustering of complex social issues such as health, housing, family violence, and their intersection with the law.
- +** **Collaboration:** organisations working with community and collaborating with the sector, drawing on the principles of human-centred design.



WHAT WE WILL DO

There are three broad components in our strategy, each with its own purpose, funding priorities, operational considerations and resourcing. The strategy is comprised of two discrete funding streams, underpinned by a 'Strategic Support' component through which VLSB+C will support foundational and exploratory activities to inform and enhance the development of the two streams and the Grants Program funding priorities.

Funding Stream 1: Change Grants

- + Issue/project-based
- + Flagship Funding: themed grants aligning with specific priorities
- + Explore emerging philanthropic trends
- + On-going commitment to First Nations work
- + Capacity to provide larger grants over a longer-term/larger grants (up to 4 years)

Funding Stream 2: Strong Foundations Grants

- + Organisations who can show how their work will contribute to our Grants Program's overarching goals
- + Organisations with demonstrated capability and capacity
- + Organisations who show potential to lead, innovate and adapt
- + Organisations who could potentially fulfil a backbone or anchor role to support others' collective impact
- + Funded for longer periods of time/not tied to specific activities (5 years)

INFORMING PRIORITIES, SUPPORTING COLLABORATION AND BUILDING CAPACITY

Strategic Support: Determining priorities, supporting collaborations and building capacity

- + Consultations and workshops
- + Research
- + Capacity building
- + Exploring partnerships and building collaborations



OUR ROLES

This strategy seeks to build on our strengths as a highly regarded funder in improving access to justice for all Victorians. It also recognises that we are more than just a funder. We have a number of different, critical roles to play in achieving access to justice outcomes, all of which need to be brought to bear in the delivery of this strategy.

Funder



- + We provide substantial, multi-year funding
- + We also provide non-monetary support
- + We are transparent and accountable
- + We are responsive, outcomes focussed and flexible
- + We utilise streamlined application and reporting processes.



Innovator



- + We support a change agenda – looking for different ways to solve a problem
- + We support the testing and trialling of new initiatives and building an evidence base of what works
- + We look to scale successful pilots
- + We respond to shared priorities/agendas identified by the sector, as well as what the evidence tells us.



Connector & Collaborator



- + We connect organisations to each other working in the same space
- + We connect organisations with government
- + We look to build relationships with other funders where there is potential alignment.



Advocate



- + We can engage with government directly about what we fund and why
- + We can advocate for good projects that government could be funding, supporting the long-term sustainability of funded projects
- + We can elevate voices that are not normally heard.



Partner



- + We build trusting relationships with grantees
- + We actively support organisations/programs to develop sustainable funding transitions out of our Grants Program
- + We have the potential to dedicate part of our funds towards supporting organisations/programs for the longer term.





HOW WE WILL FUND

Through this strategy, we have developed a multi-pronged approach that aims to achieve greater flexibility in funding and to ensure that substance is not defeated by form through the funding process. It comprises two distinct funding streams, which are supported and informed by a foundational component, through which VLSB+C will seek to purposefully support the development of shared priorities, develop collaborations and build capacity with the sector to maximise impact.

For each element, this strategy sets out:

- + purpose
- + rationale
- + funding priorities
- + operational considerations.

Strategic Support : Determining priorities, supporting collaborations and building capacity



RATIONALE:

The Strategic Review identified that the sector is keen to work with us to develop shared priorities informed by research and consultations. In doing this we will strengthen engagement and program transparency. To set new, collective responses up for success, the opportunity to explore and form partnerships prior to applying for funding could help overcome some systemic barriers to effective collaboration. Funded organisations can be strengthened through non-financial, capacity building support.

OPERATIONAL CONSIDERATIONS:

These activities will be led by our Grants Program, therefore funding for this work will be secured through the operational budget process. This component is envisaged not as a funding stream but as a foundational pillar that underpins the development of the two funding streams and Grants Program funding priorities. Whilst it is not envisaged that organisations would have the opportunity to regularly apply for funding through the Strategic Support component (as is the case for the two funding streams), it is possible that this work may involve VLSB+C providing some funds to assist organisations, conduct research or to explore the development of partnerships and collaborations where the need has been identified.

PURPOSE:

- + research new funding priorities
- + bring people together to develop shared priorities
- + foster greater collaboration in the sector by supporting the exploration of partnerships and collaborations
- + build the capacity of community legal centres, other legal and non-legal services to connect and work together in a way that best supports access to justice
- + build capacity of organisations that are seeking to fill a critical gap in improving access to justice outcomes but have limited resources.

FUNDING PRIORITIES:

Through this strategic component, we can:

- + commission research on issues
- + run consultation processes and/or workshops to develop shared priorities
- + promote early collaboration of organisations to build their capacity to pursue an idea or project.
- + support grantee capacity building needs.





HOW WE WILL FUND

Funding Stream 1: Change Grants



PURPOSE:

- + To continue to support funding for new ideas and innovation in the sector
- + To build on the success of our Grants Program to date, with a continued focus on longer-term projects or issues-based funding.

RATIONALE:

The Strategic Review identified that our existing Grants Program was recognised by interviewees as critical to the Victorian justice sector.

Consequently, we are committed to ensuring that we do not lose what is already working well in the program. There are few other sources of this type of flexible, substantial funding in the access to justice space. It has proven to be particularly effective in supporting innovation in service delivery, policy and law reform.

FUNDING PRIORITIES:

This stream gives people the chance to test new ways of working and advocate for systemic change by applying for longer-term project-based grants. Through this stream, we will:

- + test and try new ways of providing funding or focus on different priority areas as they emerge, as well as respond to grantee needs
- + champion themed grants aligning with specific priorities (flagship funding)
- + continue our focus on First Nations work as a funding priority
- + potentially pursue issue or place-based work as priorities for funding
- + explore emerging philanthropic trends, and
- + fund for longer-term/larger grants (up to 4 years).

OPERATIONAL CONSIDERATIONS:

Funding for this stream would be for up to a maximum of four years and – in recognition of the challenges for the sector in dealing with multiple small funding amounts – will continue to ‘fund the work properly’, to genuinely support organisations to improve access to justice outcomes for vulnerable people.

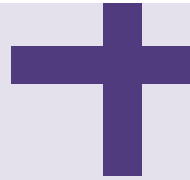


We are committed to implementing this strategy as our way of ensuring that our funding can continue to contribute to the evidence base as to what works, as well as contribute to improved outcomes for Victorians who need it most.



HOW WE WILL FUND

Funding Stream 2: Strong Foundations Grants



PURPOSE:

- + To address the challenges for funding sustainability
- + To provide a level of funding stability and certainty that gives people the opportunity to excel at their areas of expertise, and
- + To provide longer term, non-project specific support to organisations to hone their focus on the big picture.

RATIONALE:

Funding sustainability and security was a key challenge identified by all stakeholders interviewed for the Strategic Review. This funding stream responds directly to this issue. Organisational-based funding has the following benefits:

- + **Freeing and focusing:** prioritises and enables strategic focus on agreed objectives. Longer term and uncommitted money frees organisations from the uncertainty and pressure of performing

against pre-arranged targets that may no longer be relevant.

- + **Flexibility and agility:** provides organisations with the flexibility and security they need to carry out their work. They are empowered to be agile and harness emerging opportunities that will best achieve impact.
- + **Culture:** promotes an internal organisational culture orientated towards achieving strategic objectives. Trusts staff expertise and provides them with the freedom to drive and deliver strategy in the most effective way.
- + **Resourcing:** paying what it takes by supporting their work holistically and acknowledging the need for the administration and operational funding that makes it all happen.
- + **Changing the narrative:** removes perverse incentives to underrepresent indirect costs thereby working towards breaking the not-for-profit starvation cycle. Represents a move away from transactional grant making, towards funder as partner.

FUNDING PRIORITIES:

This stream provides funding to an organisation and is not project specific. Organisational-based funding through our Grants Program will:

- + support organisations to prioritise strategic objectives
- + provide organisations with the flexibility and security they need to carry out their work
- + promote an internal organisational culture orientated towards achieving strategic objectives
- + support an organisation's work holistically.

OPERATIONAL CONSIDERATIONS:

Strong Foundations funding will be for five years and at a significant level adequate to take forward strategic thinking. Given this is a new initiative, we will begin by funding a small number of organisations. Funding would be available for:

- + organisations who can show how their work will contribute to the Grants Program's overarching goals
- + organisations with demonstrated capability and capacity to achieve access to justice outcomes
- + organisations who show potential to lead
- + organisations who could potentially fulfil a backbone or anchor role to support others' collective impact
- + longer periods of time and not tied to specific activities.



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