

Victoria Law Foundation
Knowledge Grants
program review

Five years
of funding:
What have
we learnt?

Our vision

Fair, equitable and accessible justice for all Victorians

Established under the [Victorian Law Foundation Act](#), Victoria Law Foundation has served the Victorian community for over 50 years. While our role has evolved, our vision remains the same.

We are committed to making a significant contribution to raising awareness of our law, and to provide evidence and insight to improve justice for all Victorians.

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The office of Victoria Law Foundation is on the traditional lands of the Wurundjeri people of the Kulin Nation. We acknowledge their history, culture and Elders both past and present.



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Introduction

Understanding the value of our work

Victoria Law Foundation is committed to understanding the value of our work. Grants are a key part of this, and a review of our Knowledge Grants was included in our Business Plan activities (FY21/22). This document outlines how we went about the Review and what we learnt. The Review was to be undertaken after three rounds, collating data and information from funded organisations which had completed a grant project. The information examined was primarily collected from existing reporting mechanisms and grant applicant data.

The purpose of the Review was to understand how our grants have contributed to enhancing data quality, capability and use in community legal assistance organisations, and to inform our own processes and/or identify areas for further support.

Grant project delays due to COVID-19 lockdowns meant that there were limited completed projects after three rounds, and the Review was delayed. The review was further delayed to incorporate findings from our 2024 Impact Study, an organisation-wide exploration of our activities and impact.

We continuously review our processes and make changes based on feedback or identifying better ways to work. Consulting with funded organisations through the Impact Study has provided an opportunity to strengthen relationships and gain deeper insight into the outcomes of our activities and how we might be more responsive to sector need.

Knowledge Grants have now been merged with Community Legal Grants to become one Major Grant round. Major Grants continue to fund legal research and data projects to enhance data collection systems and processes. Grants have doubled to \$100,000 to better reflect the true costs to undertake these types of projects.

About Knowledge Grants

Knowledge Grants were introduced in 2019 following amendments to our legislation, redirecting grants to support our other functions — research and education.

Our research report, *Apples, Oranges and Lemons*¹, examined how administrative data is collected and used in the legal assistance sector. Findings identified that there is variation in data quality and inconsistency in how data is collected, counted and measured. In response, Knowledge Grants aimed to improve the legal assistance sector's capability to collect and use information and data to better understand and respond to legal need.

Knowledge Grants provided funding for Victorian community legal organisations to undertake a research project to build data capability and research skills to better understand and respond to community need. Grants of up to \$50,000 were offered annually for five years, with a total of 19 grants awarded to 15 organisations to a value of \$942,667.

In addition to funding, VLF also offered in-kind support through our Research and Communications teams on research methodology, data analysis and dissemination.

Key objectives of the program were to:

- develop a new understanding of the legal needs of Victorians through collection of data and information
- build capability to collect, analyse and use data and information
- share information with other organisations or agencies which results in a better understanding of the target group and ways to address need effectively.

¹ McDonald, H.M., McRae, C., Balmer, N.J., Hagland, T., & Kennedy, C. (2020). *Apples, oranges and lemons: The use and utility of administrative data in the Victorian legal assistance sector*. Melbourne: Victoria Law Foundation.

Review methodology

How we went about the Review

The Review examined key themes from grant reporting and a small number of interviews with organisations completed as part of our Impact Study.

Information was drawn from acquittal reports for completed projects and progress reports with current research projects. These reports captured project activities and reflections on outcomes and insights, as well as key findings and how new information and/or practices might be used in future.

The questions extracted responses about changes to data capability and use, and included:

- Would you do anything differently next time?
- What were the key insights for the organisation? What did you learn from undertaking the project?
- In what ways was the project considered a success?
- What difference has this project made to your organisations data and research capacity?
- How might you continue to use project outcomes, findings or insights in your organisation?

To further explore lasting outcomes from undertaking a Knowledge Grant project, we engaged with past project recipients. Five organisations, which had completed projects two to three years previously participated in the 2024 Impact Study. In interviews we explored whether the grant experience had had a lasting impact on their work — any service, practice or system changes, or changes to the organisation's capability since completing the research. Further questions explored whether the grant had benefited clients and if there were any outcomes, insights or benefits for the wider sector, and if they had been shared.

Outcomes of Knowledge Grant projects

Alignment with Knowledge Grant objectives

Key outcomes for recipients generally aligned with Knowledge Grant objectives — improved data and research capability, new knowledge about Victorians need, and enhanced data collection processes. Impact Study results supported this and found that funded organisations benefited from enhanced capability in research, a better understanding of the value of data, its use in service design, and insight into client outcomes.

Below are the key outcomes as reported by recipients with quotes demonstrating the benefits for specific organisations.

Increased data and research capability

Many funded organisations identified that they had greater understanding of research design and processes, including ethics approval, trauma-informed research practice and research methods.

All funded organisations which had completed a Knowledge Grant project reported that the grant improved their ability to use data.

Methodologies in collecting and using data were also noted as an area of increased organisational capacity. Improvements across a range of data skills were recognised across all completed projects including data collection processes and data

entry, ethics documentation, use of administrative and casework data, analysis, synthesis of service data with other sources, and use of data software programs.

Several organisations also cited improved attitudes towards data as a result of undertaking the research project.

“Staff and volunteers have received comprehensive training ... to support their collection, entry and analysis of client data.”

“Staff reported an increased confidence and capacity to engage in research, in particular in relation to administrative data.”

“This project has improved our capacity to undertake trustworthy qualitative research data collection, and data analysis.”

New knowledge and evidence-based practice

Each Knowledge Grant project collected data and information on legal needs and/or the legal capability of Victorians providing an evidence base for further interventions.

Many of the funded organisations identified data and findings they would use to inform service delivery and practices, further research and future funding applications, referral processes, government submissions, and in law reform and advocacy activities.

“We were able to generate a profile of our clients based on the administrative data.”

“... the findings will also be used to provide holistic support to clients”

“[The project] provided a local evidence base for us to utilise for funding and advocacy purposes.”

Enhanced systems, processes and practices

A range of improvements were made to data systems and processes, intake and triage processes, and implementing digital technologies and software to enhance data collection. Others identified classification of legal problems, data entry and practices to prompt data collection at key points of contact with clients.

"The process of developing methodology for using [our] data has highlighted the capacity and limitations of [our] data collection practices. Using this information, [the organisation] has adapted its data collecting tools to enable easier and more consistent data [collection]."

"Legal assistance service data now able to be collected and reported ... will significantly contribute to building the legal assistance evidence base."

Partnerships

VLF encourages partnerships, particularly in Knowledge Grant projects, to share expertise, data and information to extend reach and impact.

The extent to which relationships with academic partners and stakeholders had a significant impact on success of the project was unexpected. Most funded organisations reflected that through the research, relationships and engagement with academic partners, research networks, key stakeholders and local agencies were strengthened.

"This collaborative approach has contributed to consolidating and enriching our understanding of systemic issues ... and research methodology."

"The project partnership strengthened the relationship between the two organisations and subsequently more efficient referral pathways and cross-organisation training occurred."

Additional outcomes

Other areas where funded organisations reported improved capacity included research report writing, preparing research proposals, budgeting, using data collection software, use of the Freedom of Information process and improved legal practice through targeted training such as data collection or legal training for lawyers.

Challenges

Identifying barriers to undertaking research

As part of final reporting, Knowledge Grant recipients were asked if any changes were made to the project and to reflect on things that they might do differently in future. Time, resourcing and ethics approval processes were the main issues identified by most recipients. COVID-19 lockdowns affected many grant projects, particularly where data collection involved participants.

Other challenges included recruiting participants, engaging linguistically diverse participants, fraudulent responses, obtaining non-publicly available data, and managing partnerships.

Time and resourcing

Recipients expressed a range of issues in relation to project timeframes. This included staffing and resourcing, including staff changes, working with partners with competing commitments, establishing partnerships and working collaboratively. Ethics approval processes caused delays for some projects, as did data collection particularly with lived experience or high-risk participants, inefficiencies in data collection, extracting data from case files, and report writing.

The level of funding to undertake the research was reported as insufficient for some of the funded organisations. This was due to many of the reasons mentioned above. In some cases, data collection was reduced as a result of constrained resources.

COVID-19 disruptions

COVID-19 disruptions resulted in delays for nearly all projects funded between 2019 and 2021. Funded organisations were offered support and flexibility in modifying project plans and timelines. Recipients responded by pausing or narrowing research, extending timelines, changing or reducing data collection activities, and/or moving data collection online rather than in person.

One funded organisation experienced challenges in recruiting participants from the community sector after lockdowns due to stretched staff and the resumption of face-to-face service delivery.

Ethics approval

Recipients reported that ethics approval processes delayed data collection, required significant resourcing and sometimes resulted in revising the scope of the project. In some cases, final ethics approval of the report delayed dissemination of findings and reporting.

One recipient reflected that designing research to be low-risk allowed for ethics approval within a reasonable time. However, this meant modifying the research methodology without participants who had lived experience limiting the breadth of the research.

Strategies that contributed to project success

Reflecting on project success, funded organisations identified a range of activities and interventions that contributed to positive outcomes

Academic partners

Almost half had an academic partner. Some recipients noted that academic partnerships were key to the success of the project, particularly when the partner took on activities requiring particular expertise.

“Partnering with a university or research body is extremely useful. We learnt a lot from lead researcher ... about the ethics process, constructing interviews and about how to use data coding software ... to code to synthesise data.”

Project advisors

Many recipients reported that using a project advisory group or steering committee provided access to experts in research, policy and advocacy, in-depth analysis of systemic issues, access to a range of stakeholders and cultural groups and helped to share and distribute findings.

“The Project Advisory Group provided a valuable role in guiding our research and connecting us with potential sources of data.”

Engaging stakeholders

Engaging stakeholders was said to be ‘vital to building a sector-wide picture of legal need’ and understanding the experiences and perspective of different organisations and workers with professional backgrounds.

One recipient identified the importance of establishing collaborative partnerships, beyond the legal assistance sector, to effect change.

Research methods and data collection approaches

Funded organisations used a range of research methods and data collection approaches to explore a legal issue. Some of the successful approaches included:

- using existing publicly available data sources
- analysis of administrative data – reducing the need to formally engage participants
- developing ethical and trauma-informed policies and consent processes for collecting data from clients.

One funded organisation reflected that in addition to qualitative research they would undertake quantitative data collection in future to better visualise the data in the final outcomes.

Drawing on organisational expertise

Several recipients indicated the importance of consulting with their staff and using organisational experience, expertise and insight in relation to internal systems, practices and processes.

“These consultations have helped inform the scope of the research, the research aims and questions, and data collection tools.”

Use of media to share findings

One grant recipient developed an extensive media campaign to draw attention to the report on the day of launch. Report findings were picked up by a range of online, print and media outlets.

Role of VLF

In addition to funding, VLF’s support was said to be ‘invaluable.’ In particular, recipients appreciated flexibility in relation to changing timeframes, as well as guidance from the Research Team.

Use of findings beyond the grant project

How Knowledge Grant research will be used

Knowledge Grant recipients reported that research findings will be used to support policy, law reform and advocacy work, funding submissions and inform service planning and practice. It was also suggested that the findings would be used to support future funding applications, government submissions and inform further research.

All funded organisations with completed the research projects reported that the Knowledge Grant will lead to changes in future practice.

Several organisations indicated that their research led to a review of data collection practices and continued collection of administrative data.

Participants in the Impact Study supported these findings, noting changes in their practices, particularly around data collection. Some also reflected that Knowledge Grant projects had revealed insights into justice barriers, and where law reform is needed. Importantly funded organisations had a deeper understanding of the experience of their clients.

Key findings from the Review

Knowledge Grant objectives achieved

Findings from the Review indicate that Knowledge Grant objectives to build data and research capability, enhance data systems and processes and develop new knowledge to inform legal practice have been achieved. An unexpected benefit was the extent to which relationships with academics and not-for-profit partners strengthened.

While we no longer offer Knowledge Grants, we continue to fund this work through our Major Grants round, and results from the Review and Impact Study have informed our current approaches and processes.

Findings from the Review for VLF as a funder are shared below.

Consultation with funded organisations

Project insights are captured shortly after or at the time of project completion and as a result we have limited information about lasting or ongoing benefits. Follow-up can provide further information about how new data, systems or skills are being used, by who and for what.

We will follow up with Major Grants recipients 12–18 months post completion to determine medium-term outcomes of projects beyond the funding period. This will be done informally using key questions that relate to our grant objectives.

Ethics and data governance

This was the area that almost all funded organisations told us (and continue to tell us) is challenging. Conducting ethical research and data collection practices is the responsibility of recipient organisations. VLF provides guidance on data collection and ethics approval processes but does not have an ethics approval mechanism. We also provide information on ethics standards, confidentiality and informed consent as well as practical tools including an ethics checklist and sample consent forms.

We will review the material we currently provide and develop further information including different ways to approach ethics approval processes, data collection practices that are low-risk, governance and examples of previous approaches.

Defining outcomes

While we had explicit aims for the Knowledge Grant program, expected outcomes had not been identified.

In planning and implementing Knowledge Grants we recognised a need for funding data and research projects and were open to the response of the sector. The Review was confined to the program objectives and the information requested through our standard reporting, and expected outcomes were not considered in the outset.

In the planning for our 2024/25 Major Grant round, we have clearly identified objectives, expected outcomes and longer-term outcomes which will help us to better evaluate our work in future and how it contributes to our strategy.

Changes to projects

VLF acknowledges that projects don't always go as planned and changes in an organisation can also mean that projects take longer to complete. We are flexible about changing deadlines and the scope of work, and make funded organisations aware of this both formally and informally at various stages of the grant cycle.

We will look for further opportunities to offer support and reiterate our openness to extend timelines, explore further funding or offer in-kind support.

Appendix: Funded projects

Knowledge Grants 2019/20

Advocacy and Rights Centre Ltd (ARC Justice)

Police applications for intervention orders and women's experience of the family violence justice system in a post-Royal Commission landscape

Exploration of the impact that the increase in police-brought family violence intervention orders applications has had on women's experience of the justice process and safety and wellbeing outcomes.

Barwon Community Legal Service in partnership with Deakin University

Moving towards Evidence Based Practice – How to understand Elder Abuse as a civil law problem in the Barwon region

Investigation into the civil legal needs of older people in the Barwon region to inform service delivery, interventions and responses to elder abuse to meet the needs of a growing ageing population.

Justice Connect

User centred research of priority groups in the 'missing middle'

User research to better understand the appetite and ability of priority groups in the missing middle to engage with digital self-help resources to inform the development of best practice in resource design and deployment of digital self-help resources.

Banyule Community Health (West Heidelberg Community Legal Service)

The growth of community housing: what does it mean for tenants?

Collection of data and information about the changing composition of social housing in Victoria through observation of housing and tenancy disputes to understand whether this change has impacted tenants' rights.

Knowledge Grants 2020/21

South-East Monash Legal Service in partnership with the Australian Centre for Justice Innovation (Faculty of Law, Monash University)

Developing the evidence base on underpayment recovery and civil justice

Development of a profile of wage theft and underpayment recovery actions through analysis of administrative data, case characteristics and outcomes of South-East Monash Legal Service clients.

Fitzroy Legal Service Inc

Gendered injustice: Identifying the intersections between unmet civil legal and social needs and women's criminalisation

Investigation of how civil legal and social issues contribute to women's involvement in the criminal justice system, particularly how unmet civil legal and social need escalate and compound pathways to women being criminalised.

Women's Legal Service Victoria in partnership with Monash Gender and Family Violence Prevention Centre

Child Protection Permanency Research

A state-wide study of the experiences of families seeking reunification within the Victorian child protection system and the barriers faced by parents working to address protective concerns within the legislated 24-month timeframe.

Westjustice

Resistance and Agency: The Important of Language in applications for Family Violence Intervention Orders

Analysis of the language used in Family Violence Intervention Order applications to understand the relationship between the author of the application and the outcome of the application. It aims to generate knowledge to improve women's experiences of family violence legal processes.

Knowledge Grants 2021/22

First Step

Evaluating the impact of integrated, cross sector models of legal practice

Development and implementation of an evaluation framework to determine the impact of the Health Justice Partnership model for clients. The project will build organisational data collection and evaluation capability and findings will be used to improve services and outcomes for clients, with broader benefits for other health justice partnerships in Victoria and across Australia.

Eastern Community Legal Centre

Strengthening Intake Quality in Legal Assistance Project

Development and implementation of a quality and capability framework that is evidence-based, person-centred and facilitates improved access for community members by identifying gaps and systematic issues through data and end-to-end journey mapping.

Police Accountability Project a program of Inner Melbourne Community Legal

Policing health — exploring racial profiling in issuing of COVID-19 fines

Exploration of the extent COVID-19 fines were disproportionately issued to culturally and linguistically diverse communities providing a snapshot of racialised policing practices in Victoria.

Knowledge Grants 2022/23

Monash Law Clinics

Hearing our story, safeguarding our future

Exploration of how future planning and guardianship laws might be used to identify family violence and improve safety for victims of family violence by restricting coercive behaviour by the perpetrator. The research will look at the role Health Justice Partnerships play in promoting preventative legal practices.

Law and Advocacy Centre for Women

Intersections between child protection and criminal legal systems — understanding the unmet legal and other needs of criminalised women with child protection involvement

This project will collect data relating to the unmet legal and support needs for women in the criminal justice system who have child protection involvement. The project has a focus on women in custody, including Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women.

Justice Connect

Financial Legal Problems — Who needs help and how can we provide earlier assistance

Investigation of help-seeker data and referral pathways to identify earlier opportunities for legal help for Victorians with financial legal problems to reduce matters escalating to court.

Northern Community Legal Centre in partnership with the Australian Muslim Women's Centre for Human Rights

Barriers to participation experienced by culturally and linguistically diverse Family Violence Intervention Order Applicants

Exploration of issues and barriers faced by culturally and linguistically diverse women when engaging in Family Violence Intervention Order application processes. Findings will be used to develop policy recommendations that enhance justice and safety for culturally diverse women appearing before Broadmeadows Magistrates Court.

Knowledge Grants 2023/24

Monash Law Clinics

Violence and Vulnerability: Mapping the intersections between family violence and caring relationships

Build an understanding of the complexities of family dynamics, care arrangements, and family violence to inform monitoring procedures, preventive interventions, and safety planning.

Tenants Victoria

Developing an informed understanding of the needs of single-parent renters from a legal capability perspective

Develop an informed understanding of the legal needs of single-parent renters and identify factors to enhance the impact of legal assistance for this cohort.

South-East Monash Legal Service

Reproductive Coercion and Abuse: Supporting the Legal Assistance Sector to understand and respond

Exploration of reproductive coercion and abuse in the legal context as an emerging form of family/intimate partner violence, and identify effective strategies and interventions to ensure

that the legal assistance sector is able to effectively support disclosures of reproductive coercion and abuse.

Westjustice

Equality Law Capability Project

Research into the legal capability of four multicultural communities not accessing Westjustice's Equality Law Service to understand their legal needs and adapt legal services to improve access to the service.

