

Restricted, resilient, resourceful: Legal help- seeking among single-parent renters



Overview



→ Why we spoke to single-parent renters

→ Research design

→ Key insights

→ Conclusion



About Tenants Victoria

- Statewide community legal centre
- We assist Victorian renters through legal support, financial counselling and social work
- Community education
- Research, policy and advocacy

→ Why we spoke to single-parent renters

High levels of legal need, low levels of service satisfaction



Lower rates of service satisfaction

Tenants Victoria service data showed that single parents:

- Reported lower levels of satisfaction with our services
- Accessed our services at a lower rate
- Overrepresented in matter types more likely to affect housing security

High levels of legal need

Higher overall rates of legal problems that are often multiple and persistent (Public Understanding of Law Survey [PULS] & Legal Australia-Wide Survey [LAW Survey]).

Difficult for single parents to address renting issues due to limited:

- Time
- Resources
- Appropriate alternative housing options

Acknowledging our shortfalls

Research emerged at the intersection between:

- Broader findings on legal need among single parents
- Acknowledging our own shortfalls to meet their service needs

Looking through service data and finding out which groups you are underserving is a beneficial exercise for services.

We wanted to understand...



How rental disadvantage can impact single parents

The factors that make seeking assistance when faced with a legal problem more challenging

How we can better meet their needs as a renter support service

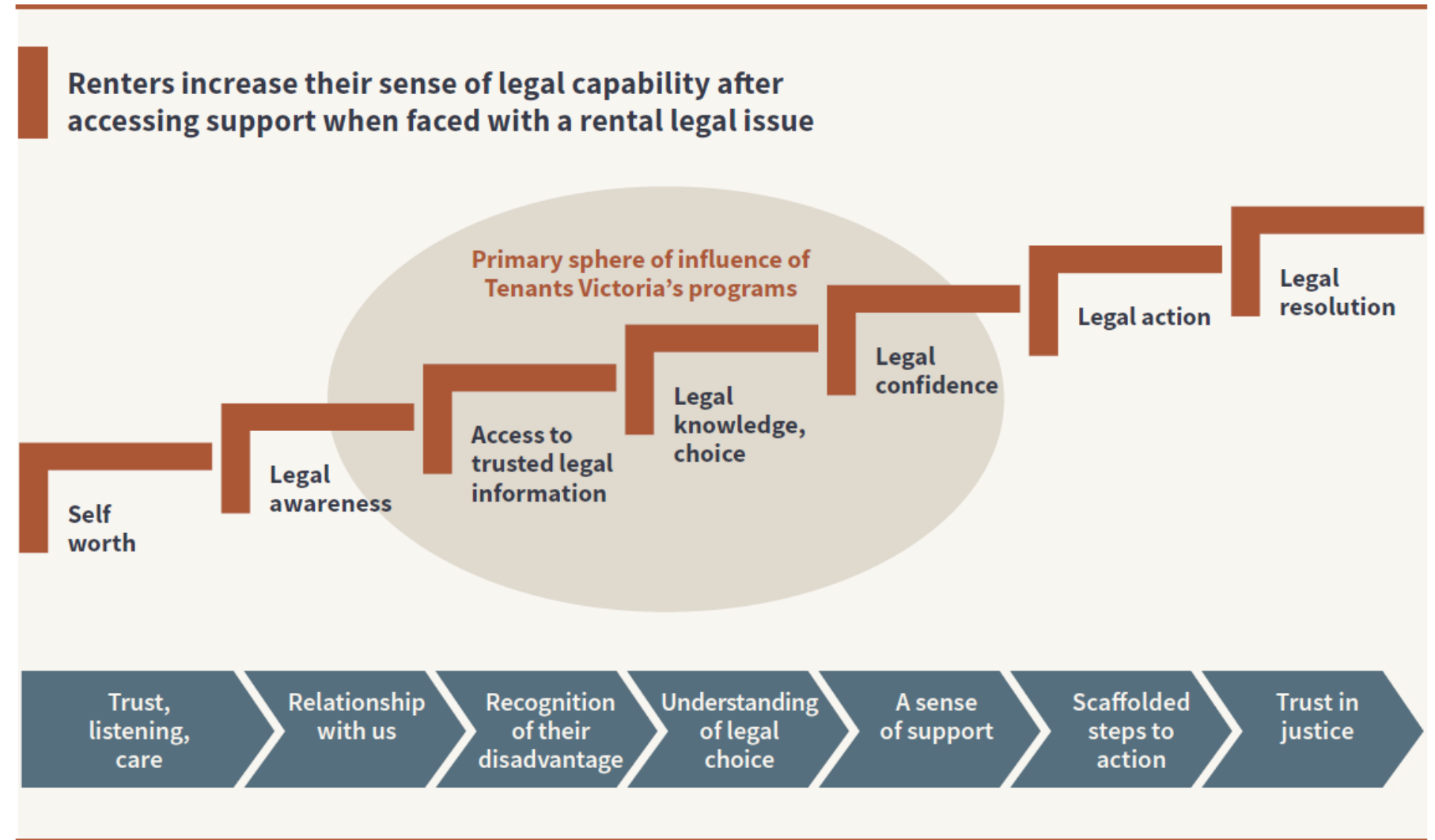
Share insights to improve future service engagement for single parents and other groups of renters who are faced with similar challenges

→ Research design

Interviews with single-parent renters



- We spoke to 19 single parents renting in Victoria, who had experienced a rental legal problem in the past 5 years
- Documented the help-seeking pathways of these renters
- Tested our legal capability framework
- Found journeys to legal resolution are **not as linear** as these steps would suggest



Demographics



Gender

17 women (90%)
and **2 men** (10%)



Average age

45 (between the ages
of 30 and 58)



Number of children living with them

1 (53%); **2** (21%);
3 (16%); **4** (5%); **6** (5%)



Reported median weekly household income before tax

\$1,069



Rental type

15 in private rentals,
2 in an informal rental agreement,
and **2** in public or affordable housing



Prevalence of rental stress

87% of the 15 participants who
reported both their income and
rent were in rental stress



→ Key insights

Unpacking our core finding



Access to trusted legal information
is important

Levels of legal capability fluctuate
overtime

Intersecting restrictive external
factors make it difficult for single
parents to engage with their rights,
absorb legal information, and take
legal action

A multidisciplinary service
approach can be beneficial to help
renters address interconnected
legal, financial, health and housing
issues

Three key factors impacting legal capability among single-parent renters



1. Power imbalance in the rental market
2. Restricted access to free legal services
3. Challenges retaining and actioning advice

Power imbalance in the rental market



- Hyper-competitive rental market, a lack of affordable private rentals and insufficient social housing stock
- Renters burdened with responsibility to take action in a system where they feel disempowered
- Often have to weigh-up multiple factors before deciding what steps to take, if any
- Fearful of taking action, as it may put their families housing security at risk
- Concerned about potential retaliation and don't want to be labelled a 'problematic tenant'

13 single parents described instances where they had raised an issue but as it was not acted on, **they did not push it further**

Restricted access to free legal service



- Difficulties finding support in an under-resourced and over-extended sector, including long wait times and limited help available
- Help-seekers often need strong self-advocacy skills as they repeatedly ‘knock on the door’ of services and doing so takes a toll
- Described being redirected to numerous services, having to repeat their story, and occasionally still not finding the help they needed
- Some single parents are now hesitant to reach out for help with rental issues

Existing service models can deter people who:

- Have a diminished capacity to self-advocate
- Are already hesitant to access support during a rental crisis
- Lack the necessary time, skills or resources to navigate across the renter support sector

Challenges retaining and actioning advice



- Helping people develop their legal knowledge, confidence and literacy is an important aspect of service delivery
- People don't always have capacity take on information about their legal problem when they get through to a service
- Managing issues that could impact their family's housing security can be very distressing for single parents
- Difficult for people to hear unfamiliar information and translate it into action when they are in a heightened emotional state

Challenges retaining and actioning advice (cont.)



*Bronwyn's experience navigating a rental issue:

- Strong legal literacy skills and an understanding of legal frameworks and regulatory bodies gained through working in the legal sector
- Described feeling quite helpless when it came to navigating a rental issue
- Concerned that her family could be at risk of homelessness if she wasn't able to resolve the issue or find another rental in a short period of time
- Clouded her ability to decide which steps to take

What works well for single parents:

- Having multiple solutions offered
- Being able to talk through those options with a service worker
- Having someone reach out after initial contact, with follow-up information

*Bronwyn (a sole parent of 2 children)

Conclusion



- Findings demonstrate how complex it is for single parents to address rental issues
- When renters don't have adequate structural supports available to them their ability to engage with their rights as renters and seek legal resolution is severely diminished
- Greater government investment in legal services is needed to better meet the growing demand for integrated legal assistance through the creation of more legal and non-legal positions
- Taking a multidisciplinary approach to legal service provision is key to reimagining what a successful outcomes look like for renters facing housing issues

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