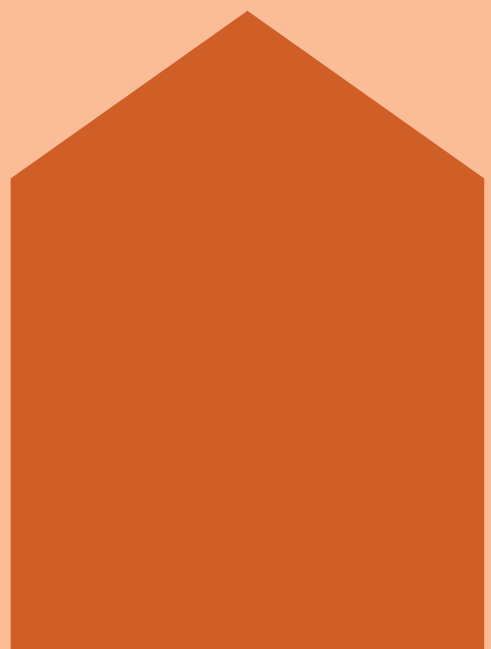


3-year Impact Report

Southside Justice's Sex Worker Legal Program

2022 - 2025



About Southside Justice

For over 50 years, Southside Justice (formerly St Kilda Legal Service) has worked to increase access to legal support, promote fairness and advocate for social justice for people living in Melbourne's inner southeast. Our commitment to supporting sex workers spans this entire period, and since 2022, we have run a statewide legal program specifically for sex workers known as the Sex Worker Legal Program (SWLP).

Acknowledgements

Southside Justice acknowledge all sex workers who have engaged with our services. Whether accessing support, contributing lived experience, shaping service delivery, or advocating for systemic change, your voices are central to this work. We especially honour those whose tireless activism and collective strength made decriminalisation possible and who continue to advance the rights and safety of sex workers into the future.

We also acknowledge the Bunurong people of the Kulin nation, the Traditional Owners of the lands on which we work and pay our respects to Elders past and present. We recognise that this land always was and always will be Aboriginal land because sovereignty has never been ceded.

Key Funding Partners

Victorian Legal Services Board Grants Program
Victorian Department of Justice and Community Safety



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Key Partners and Collaborators

Vixen
RhED (Better Health Network)
St Kilda Gatehouse

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1. Executive Summary

This report marks the culmination of three years of work by Southside Justice’s Sex Worker Legal Program (SWLP) – Victoria’s first funded, specialist legal service for sex workers. Established following the passage of the *Sex Work Decriminalisation Act 2022 (Vic)*, the SWLP was created to ensure sex workers could access the legal protections and rights introduced by this legislative reform.

Over the reporting period (July 1, 2022 – June 30, 2025), the SWLP delivered **454 legal services** to **130 clients**, supported by strong partnerships with peer-led and community organisations. The program has provided legal advice, representation, and advocacy across a broad range of civil and criminal matters, strengthening the legal framework to protect and uphold sex workers’ rights.

The SWLP’s work has demonstrated that legislative reform is just the first step in ensuring sex workers can live and work with safety and dignity in Victoria. Sex workers continue to face **entrenched stigma, discrimination**, and **systemic bias** – particularly in the policing and prosecution of crimes committed against them.

One sex worker described this reality as being akin to the **“canary in the coalmine”**. This reflection underscores the broader societal cost of failing to take crimes against sex workers seriously. When discrimination and violence against sex workers is minimised or ignored by communities and institutions, it sets a dangerous precedent, one that tolerates harm and emboldens people who perpetrate violence.

This report calls for a **cultural shift** in how institutions respond to sex workers. It highlights the vital role of trusted, peer-informed legal support, while calling for systemic accountability across Police, courts, and government agencies. The SWLP has started to bridge the gap between law and lived experience, but **sustained investment** and **cultural reform** is essential for sex workers to not only enjoy equality on paper, but in practice.

As Victoria prepares for the **statutory review** of the decriminalisation legislation, the SWLP stands ready to contribute insights, amplify sex worker voices, and advocate for a justice system that is equitable, inclusive, and responsive to the realities of sex work.



Mel Dye
CEO, Southside Justice



Emily Smith
Program Manager, Sex Worker Legal Program

2. Introduction and Context

Southside Justice is uniquely positioned to deliver a specialist community legal service for sex workers, drawing on decades of trusted legal support and advocacy for street-based sex workers in the St Kilda area. Working closely with Victoria's peer run sex worker organisation, Vixen, the program has grown in expertise and reputation to become an integrated part of the sex work industry landscape in Victoria.

The context in which SWLP operates is one of significant transition. The decriminalisation of sex work in Victoria represents a major shift in legal and social recognition of sex workers' rights. The **Sex Work Decriminalisation Act 2022 (Vic)** introduced legal reforms that dismantled the previous licensing and criminalisation framework. Key changes included the repeal of the **Sex Work Act 1994**, the removal of public health offences specific to sex workers (such as mandatory STI testing, management of which now appropriately sits with individuals and their health professionals) and the abolition of the sex work licensing system. Sex work businesses are now regulated like any other business under standard planning and workplace laws. Importantly, **anti-discrimination protections** were strengthened, recognising sex work as legitimate work and affirming sex workers' rights to safety, dignity, and equal treatment under the law. These reforms were implemented in two stages across 2022 and 2023 and represent a foundational shift toward a rights-based, public health-informed approach to sex work in Victoria.

The SWLP received seed funding from the **Victorian Government** in 2022 and later secured a three-year grant from the **Victorian Legal Services Board Grants Program**. We extend our thanks to both funders for investing in the establishment of the SWLP, which has not only enabled the delivery of hundreds of legal services but supported the strong foundations upon which we intend to scale our impact. We are pleased that the Victorian Government has recognised the significant role of the SWLP and recommitted to funding the service for a further three-years, commencing in July 2025. We also extend our thanks to our pro bono partner, **Clayton Utz**, whose expertise and commitment have strengthened the capacity of the SWLP.

This report reflects on the program's achievements, challenges and learnings from 2022 to 2025. It draws insights gathered through our **Monitoring, Evaluation and Learning (MEL) Framework**, co-designed with Vixen. It also highlights the urgent need for continued investment in specialist legal services for sex workers, especially as Victoria prepares for the statutory review of the decriminalisation legislation.

The SWLP's work is grounded in a belief that sex work is work, and that sex workers deserve access to justice, safety, and dignity.

Over the past three years, we have seen firsthand how timely, peer-informed legal support can offer not just practical assistance, but a profound sense of **validation** and **hope**. Our work reinforces the determination of many sex workers who are actively striving to make their work safer and more equitable - not only for themselves, but for their peers and the broader community.

This report is a testament to their resolve and courage.

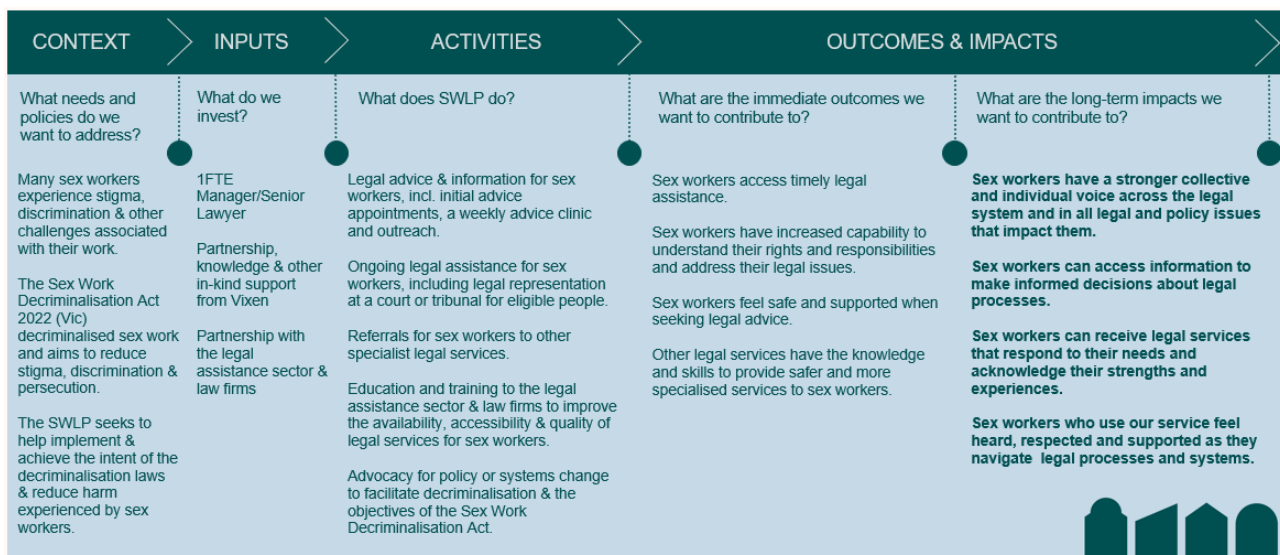
3. Program Logic and MEL Approach

The Sex Worker Legal Program is guided by a program logic and a Monitoring, Evaluation and Learning framework that underpins how we assess outcomes, remain accountable to our clients and stakeholders, and continuously improve our work.

3.1 Program Logic

The SWLP's program logic outlines how our core activities - **specialist legal services, community education, and systemic advocacy** - contribute to a fairer, safer, and more respectful justice system for sex workers in Victoria. It recognises that legal reform alone is not enough; meaningful change requires accessible, trusted services and sustained efforts to shift systemic behaviours, policies, and practices.

Figure 1: SWLP Program Logic



3.2 Monitoring, Evaluation and Learning Approach

Our MEL framework was developed in collaboration **Vixen** with support from **Nous Group**, whose expertise helped shape a structured, outcomes-focused approach to measuring impact and embedding continuous learning across the program. This framework enables us to track what we deliver, assess how well we deliver it, and understand what changes result from our work. We use a **results-based accountability approach**, guided by four key questions which form the basis of this report:

What are we delivering?
How well are we delivering it?
What is changing as a result?
What are the opportunities for improvement?

To answer these questions, we draw on a **mixed-methods approach**, combining both **quantitative and qualitative data**:

Quantitative	Qualitative
Client demographic data	Client feedback surveys
Legal service data	Thematic case studies
Referral data	Stakeholder and referral surveys
Training participation and feedback metrics	Internal reflections and learning workshops with Vixen

Embedding MEL practice

While Southside Justice’s strong culture of data management provided a solid foundation, embedding MEL practices into the SWLP required **sustained effort** and **prioritisation** by legal staff. One of the key challenges was the need to dedicate time away from direct legal practice, particularly at the commencement of the program. However, this investment was considered essential for the long-term sustainability and impact of the program.

Now, MEL is embedded in our practice, not just as a reporting tool, but as a mechanism for reflection and adaptation. We conduct regular internal reviews and reflective workshops with Vixen to identify what’s working, where we can improve, and how we can better respond to emerging legal needs. These insights inform our service design, advocacy priorities, and engagement strategies.

4. What We Delivered

Over three years, the Sex Worker Legal Program delivered 454 services to 130 unique clients.

Figure 2: Number of Legal Services delivered each year



4.1 Legal Services

The SWLP experienced consistent growth in service delivery over the three-year period. This upward trajectory reflects the program's expanding reach and improved visibility and trust within the sex worker community.

The sharp rise between the first and second years reflects the firm establishment of operations, referral pathways and outreach efforts, which sustained into year three. This is despite the conclusion of Victorian Government funding in year two, which reduced staffing capacity.

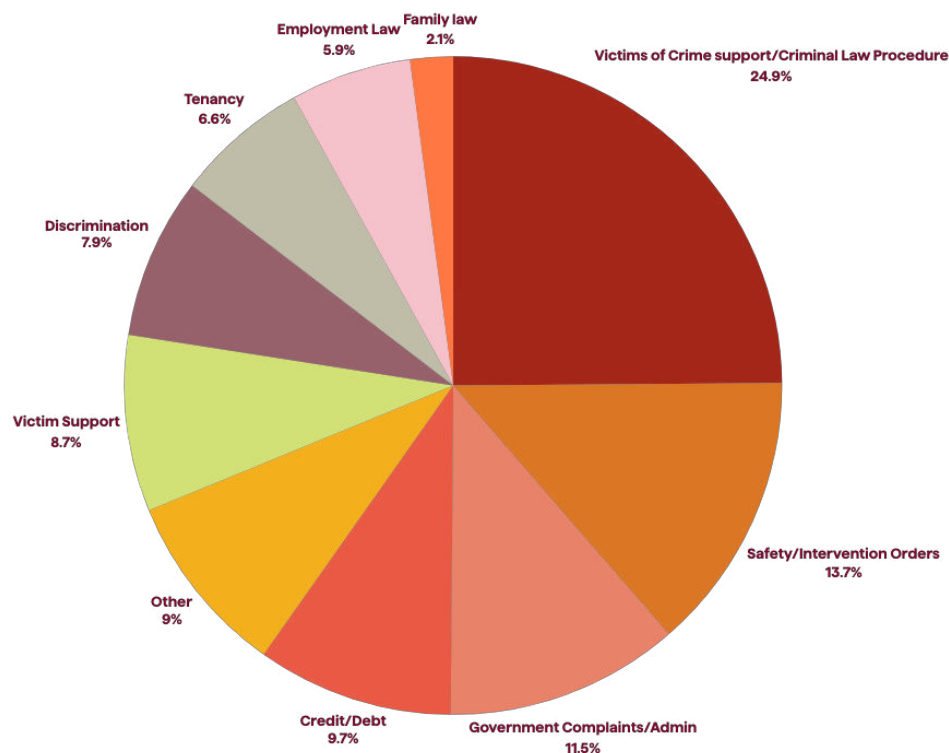
Legal Advice was the most common service type, comprising **53%** of all services. **Legal Tasks** accounted for **29%**, while **Legal Representation** grew steadily to **11%**, indicating more clients requiring ongoing or complex support. **Court/Tribunal services** were less common at just 5% of all services.

"The rising demand for the Sex Worker Legal Program doesn't necessarily reflect an increase in legal issues – those have always existed. What we're seeing is a cultural shift. Sex workers, armed with a deeper understanding of their rights, are feeling more confident to come forward and seek justice. This increase in engagement is a testament to the impact of decriminalisation, peer-led education, and the strength of community support."

– **Mel Dye, Southside Justice CEO**

4.2 Legal Problems

Figure 3: Top 10 Legal Problem Types 2022-2025



In lieu of safe and equal access to public institutions, the SWLP provides an affirming entry point to the legal system. This often evolves into a ‘shepherd’ role as clients navigate system options which include both civil and criminal avenues. SWLP clients report value in a lawyer listening to them, believing them and arming them with tools that make access to justice more likely and less traumatic.

Problem Type Spotlight: Victims of crime support/Criminal law procedure

Sexual assault is the most common criminal law issue faced by SWLP clients. Under affirmative consent laws, consent can be conditional upon the use of personal protective equipment, and in commercial sexual services, on payment.

Many sex workers attempt to report sexual offences to Police but encounter barriers and re-traumatisation in the process, often due to misconceptions that non-payment is a civil matter rather than a serious criminal offence. The SWLP helps clients identify when their experience may constitute criminal conduct, empowering them to assert their right to have Police take a statement. We provide advice on criminal procedure, assist clients with materials and understanding evidence requirements, support clients to exercise their rights under the **Victims Charter Act (2006) Vic**, pursue complaints, and access compensation through the victims of crime **Financial Assistance Scheme**.

Client story

The SWLP supports clients navigating multiple, intersecting legal issues - like Maryanne*, who sought justice for sexual assault while also facing housing insecurity.

Maryanne was sexually assaulted at work by a client who engaged in sexual acts without her consent. She reported the assault to Police and later sought support from Southside Justice.

In addition to the criminal process, Maryanne applied to the **Victims of Crime Assistance Tribunal (VOCAT)** for funding to access counselling and cover other costs related to her recovery. After numerous delays, Maryanne's case finally reached a hearing. During the proceedings, the Tribunal Member made derogatory remarks about Maryanne's occupation, including unfounded claims that her work posed health risks to the broader community. These comments reflected harmful stigma and victim-blaming attitudes that sex workers routinely face.

The hearing was ended by Maryanne and her lawyer due to its retraumatising impact. Her lawyer later submitted written arguments to VOCAT, and the case was resolved without requiring Maryanne to attend another hearing. The application was deemed eligible, resulting in the awarding of financial assistance to Maryanne.

Determined to prevent others from experiencing similar treatment, Maryanne asked her lawyer to lodge a formal complaint against the Tribunal Member. Southside Justice actively pursued this complaint, aiming to educate the Member and advocate for fairer treatment of sex workers in the legal system.

While navigating VOCAT, Maryanne also revealed she was under immense stress due to her housing situation. She and her children were **at risk of homelessness** due to dangerous, overdue repairs in their rental property, which had become uninhabitable. With the support of her lawyer, Maryanne was able to have her case for urgent repairs heard at **Victorian Civil and Administrative Tribunal (VCAT)**, resulting in a repair order to fix the issues. Her lawyer then sought compensation, resulting in over \$8000 awarded to Maryanne.

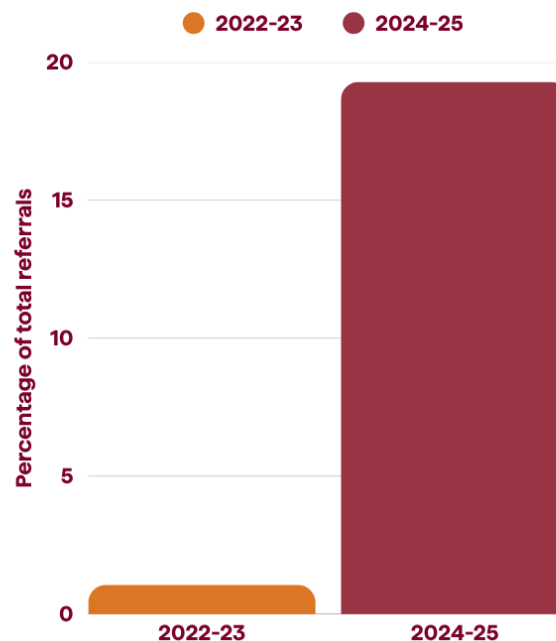
"Without the help of Southside Justice, I just could not have achieved what we did on my own. I wouldn't have been able to get my home repaired. My children and I would have been homeless because the house was not liveable. I wouldn't have been able to speak for myself at VOCAT and my experience would have fallen through the cracks without help. The entire process at VOCAT has been going for so long, but I'm grateful for the support of Southside Justice to finalise it so I can close that chapter and put it behind me." - **Maryanne**

4.3 Referral pathways

“[Southside Justice] are not only our most trusted referral for legal matters but also engage in critical advocacy work with Victoria Police and other institutions where sex workers still face stigma, disbelief, and dismissal.” -**Alana, Case Manager, RhED**

The dominant referral pathway across all three years was the Resourcing health and Education Services, better known as **RhED**. RhED accounted for nearly half (**47%**) of all referrals into the program. **Vixen** was the second most prominent referrer, contributing over a quarter (**26%**) of referrals.

Figure 5: Self-referral as a % of total referrals

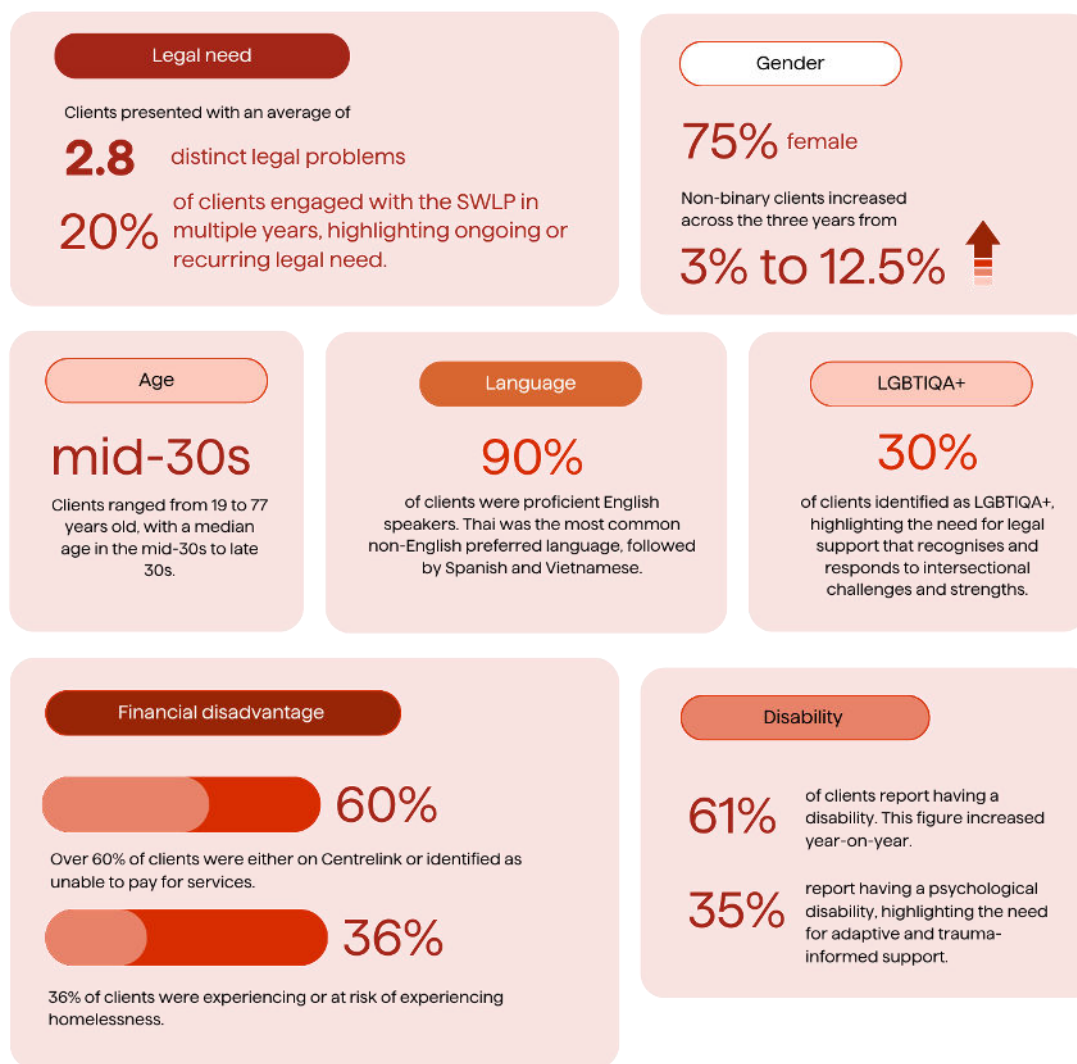


The most significant change came from **self-referral**, which grew from just **1%** of clients in year one, to **19%** of clients in year three.

Sex worker communities rely strongly on word of mouth and peer recommendations. The growth in self-referral is a powerful indicator of the program's increasing visibility, credibility, and trust among sex workers.

Additionally, it may point to a more systemic shift amongst sex workers in the wake of sex work decriminalisation. Growing education around sex worker rights and increased confidence to assert these rights may be driving more workers to independently seek out legal support.

4.4 Demographic Insights



On average, each client presented with **2.8 distinct legal issues**, highlighting the multifaceted nature of the legal challenges faced by sex workers and the importance of holistic, multi-issue legal support. Additionally, **20%** of clients accessed the SWLP over **multiple years**, indicating a significant cohort with ongoing or recurring legal issues.

The program serves **predominantly female** clients but is increasingly accessed by **non-binary** and **trans** individuals. 30% of clients identified as **LGBTQIA+**.

Clients span a wide age range and come from varied cultural and linguistic backgrounds, with representation from over **20 countries** including New Zealand, Thailand, USA, Canada, India, Peru, Poland, and the United Kingdom. English was the dominant language spoken, with some representation from Thai, Spanish, Vietnamese and other language speakers.

Most clients live **outside traditional family structures**, often in single or shared accommodation, and face **significant financial hardship**. This underscores the importance of access to free legal support, with most clients indicating that they are unable to pay for services.

4.5 Community and Professional Legal Education

Workshops

The SWLP has engaged in targeted education through workshops that address the unique legal challenges faced by sex workers. One community workshop, co-presented with **Bigger Sister Channel** and **RhED**, focused on **venue-based workers' rights**, offering practical legal information in a community setting. In another professional setting, the SWLP contributed to a specialist workshop on **workplace sexual harassment**, hosted by **Victoria Legal Aid**. During a panel presentation, we introduced the program's role within the broader decriminalisation landscape, shared a case study of sexual harassment in sex work, and called for collaborative strategic litigation to improve safety standards across the industry.

Translated resources

A Victorian Law Foundation Grant enabled the translation of key information about the SWLP into four community languages: **Korean, Thai, Simplified Chinese** and **Vietnamese**. We worked with the Asian Migrant Sex Worker Advocacy Group (**AMSWAG**) to identify priority language groups, review content and approve translations. Translated material is now available on our website and through flyers distributed by Vixen/AMSWAG and RhED.

Secondary consultations

A total of **51 secondary consultations** were recorded across the three years. **Vixen** was the most prominent source of secondary consults, followed by **RhED** and **Gatehouse**.

Secondary consultations are a critical component of the SWLP. They enable workers to access legal information without needing to refer clients directly. This is especially valuable when:

- The legal issue is complex or unclear making it difficult to identify the nature of the legal need and appropriate referrals.
- The client is not ready or able to engage directly with legal services but needs information about a legal issue.
- The worker needs legal context to better support or advocate for the client.

“...whether assisting peers in VOCAT applications, safety planning in situations of violence, informing peers of their rights in situations of discrimination, or liaison and advocacy with Police where their inaction has put peers at risk, knowing these lawyers have sex worker best interests at heart and are well versed in appropriate support of peers has been vital to the work of the Street Project”

- Vixen Street Project Peer Worker

4.6 Advocacy efforts and submissions

We have drawn upon our case work in our submissions and inputs to government and stakeholder consultations including:

- Victoria's Spent Convictions Review (2023)
- National Legal Assistance Program Review (2023)
- Department of Justice and Community Safety Stalking Inquiry (2024)
- Victims of Crime Commissioner Roundtable (2025).

The SWLP played a consultative role in the development of **Sex Work Decriminalisation Guidelines**, engaging with both **WorkSafe** and the **Victorian Equal Opportunity and Human Rights Commission (VEOHRC)**, and provided feedback to the **Sex Work Decriminalisation Reform Unit** on Police training implementation.

In partnership with the **Federation of Community Legal Centres**, the SWLP helped shape sector-wide policy priorities in response to the **Australian Law Reform Commission's final report on Justice Responses to Sexual Violence**, ensuring that sex worker experiences are represented in broader reform agendas.

Additionally, the SWLP has engaged with the **accredited third party (ATP)** framework under the **Migrant Justice Visa Pilot**, which can validate employment law claims for visa holders, strengthening workplace protections for migrant sex workers.

5. How Well We Delivered the Sex Worker Legal Program

The following section draws on 31 client feedback surveys and 20 stakeholder/referral partner surveys. The surveys are designed to assess service quality and accessibility and changes that occur because of the SWLP.

5.1 Client Experience



Clients overwhelmingly reported feeling safe, respected, and supported when accessing SWLP services. **94%** of respondents **strongly agreed** that they felt welcome and safe, and the same proportion said their personal, cultural, and communication needs were met. This reflects the program's commitment to trauma-informed and peer-informed practice.

"I had such an amazing experience talking to [the lawyer]! So informative and kind and non-judgemental."

- Client feedback

Emotional support was another key theme. **87%** of respondents **strongly agreed** they felt less stressed after speaking with a lawyer, and **100%** said they would recommend the service to other sex workers, an indicator of trust and community support.

"[the lawyer] was wonderful, answering all my questions and educating me in the areas I was unfamiliar. Would 100% recommend this legal service to other sex workers I know."

- Client feedback

While satisfaction was nearly universal (**97%** rated their experience as "**very satisfied**"), a small number of clients noted areas for improvement. This includes wait times for initial appointments and the need for more lawyers to meet growing demand. Both these points of feedback are not unexpected and reflect the reality of servicing a statewide catchment with finite resources.

Client story

Facing unlawful eviction from her home, the SWLP helped Juanita* to understand her rights, maintain her economic independence and keep her housing secure.

Juanita had recently resigned from her job at a sex service premises and started working for herself from home, when neighbours were letter-boxed with a flyer from a 'concerned resident'. The letter claimed that Juanita was operating an 'illegal brothel'. Juanita suspected it was written by her former employer in retaliation to her starting her own business.

Despite no previous problems with neighbours, the Council received complaints about Juanita and launched an investigation, alerting Juanita's landlord. Juanita's real estate agent then accused her of breaching her rental agreement, serving a formal notice and placing her housing at risk.

A referral from the RhED program put Juanita in contact with the SWLP. With the support of an interpreter, our lawyer explained Juanita's rights under discrimination law and set about the process of advocating with Council and Juanita's real estate agent.

The Council expressed thanks to the SWLP for bringing the updated legislation to their attention, understanding that it was unlawful to discriminate against sex workers due to their occupation, and that sex workers are now entitled to operate a small home-based business. The Council committed to updating their internal knowledge and information on their website.

With updated knowledge of the law, the real estate agent also stopped threatening Juanita's tenancy. Juanita can now continue to operate her business from home without threat of eviction.

Juanita reflected, "The lawyer was very helpful and fought for me a lot... I understand my rights better and feel more confident and supported. Without the [Sex Worker Legal] Program, I don't know where I could have asked for help and received it."

Stigma and discrimination against sex workers remains common. Juanita's story shows that societal understanding of the decriminalisation legislation still has a way to go.

**Name changed with permission*



*Juanita's story was reported on in the Guardian Australia in Dec 2024
Photograph: Nicole Cleary/The Guardian*

5.2 Stakeholder and Referral Partner Experience



Stakeholders - including community health workers, peer workers, and legal professionals - echoed a positive experience of the service. **94%** expressed **full confidence in referring clients to SWLP**. Of those that received training or secondary consultation from the SWLP, **91%** rated the program as **“very valuable.”** Many described SWLP as an essential part of the legal landscape, particularly in the context of sex work decriminalisation.

“Southside Justice have proven themselves to be keen allies and advocates for sex workers and have shown a commitment to providing safer spaces for sex workers to access justice.”

– Peer Worker

“The program fills a much-needed gap in the landscape, particularly in the context of the sex work decriminalisation reforms.”

– Community Health Worker

Referral pathways were praised for being timely and responsive, with **87%** of stakeholders saying the process was **“very easy and timely.”**

Stakeholders also highlighted SWLP's leadership in advocacy, collaboration, and sector education, noting its unique role in supporting sex workers with complex needs.

Reflection from Gia Manager, Vixen



“The partnership between **Vixen**, Victoria's peer sex worker organisation, and the **Sex Worker Legal Program** at Southside Justice has been invaluable in advancing justice, safety, and rights for sex workers in Victoria.

Sex workers continue to face significant barriers to accessing justice due to entrenched stigma, discrimination, and the criminalisation of our lives and work.

This collaboration creates a rare and critical point of access to legal support that is peer-informed, non-judgmental, sex work-affirming and grounded in trust.

Together, we've developed a referral pathway that is streamlined, culturally safe, and responsive to the needs of Victorian sex workers—particularly those experiencing multiple forms of marginalisation.

Beyond individual casework, our organisations work in **principled allyship**, standing together in systemic advocacy to challenge structural injustices, from workplace issues to Police interactions to the courts.

Our partnership is an important example of how peer-led support and legal expertise can come together to build a more equitable and inclusive justice system for sex workers.”

6. What Changed as a Result of the Sex Worker Legal Program

The SWLP has had a demonstrable impact on the lives of sex workers who have accessed the program, while also making progress towards longer-term system-wide improvements.

6.1 Client Outcomes

**Increased
legal
confidence**



**Improved
emotional
wellbeing**



**Enhanced
access to
justice**



94% of respondents reported feeling **more confident** to seek legal help in the future after engaging with SWLP. This suggests the program is not only resolving immediate legal issues but also building long-term legal capability and trust in the justice system.

“The service was amazing, and the lawyer helped me with everything I needed. I would come right back to SJ if I ever had any other legal issues.”

- Client feedback

94% of respondents said they **felt less stressed** after speaking with a lawyer. This reflects the program’s trauma-informed approach and its role in reducing the emotional burden often associated with legal issues.

100% of respondents agreed that their lawyer helped them **understand how to deal with their legal problem**. This indicates that the SWLP is successfully bridging the gap between legal rights and practical access to justice.

Importantly, **every respondent** said they would **recommend** the service to other sex workers, demonstrating strong community endorsement and the program’s reputation as a safe and effective legal resource.

6.2 System Outcomes

Anti-discrimination

The SWLP is currently supporting multiple matters before the **Victorian Civil and Administrative Tribunal (VCAT)**, which have the potential to clarify how **anti-discrimination protections** apply to sex workers under the decriminalised framework. These cases are not only important for the individuals involved but may also set precedents that shape future legal interpretations and institutional responses.

Workers' rights

In the **employment** space, the SWLP has taken steps to hold sex service premises operators accountable for exploitative practices. Through targeted legal correspondence and education, the program has put several operators on notice regarding sham contracting arrangements, highlighting the legal risks of misclassifying workers and reinforcing the rights of sex workers to fair and lawful employment conditions.

The SWLP has also delivered **Workplace Rights Workshops** designed to equip sex workers with knowledge of their occupational health and safety (**OHS**) and employment law rights. These sessions have helped workers better understand how to identify unsafe or unlawful practices and assert their rights in the workplace.

Institutional accountability

Beyond employment and discrimination, SWLP has engaged in advocacy to address gaps in institutional accountability. In the absence of an independent Police oversight body in Victoria, the program has advocated for sex workers to be able to lodge complaints directly with the **Victims of Crime Commissioner**. This pathway would offer a more accessible and trauma-informed mechanism for reporting misconduct and seeking redress.

Additionally, the SWLP has contributed to advocacy efforts aimed at strengthening protections for victims of **stalking** and **sexual harassment**. These efforts reflect the program's broader commitment to ensuring that sex workers are not only protected under the law but are able to access those protections in practice.

7. What We Learned

Over the past three years, the SWLP has delivered critical legal support to sex workers across Victoria, navigating an evolving legal landscape following the decriminalisation of sex work. Our learnings reflect both the anticipated and unexpected challenges of delivering a specialist legal service in this context, as well as the opportunities for growth and systemic change.

7.1 Key Challenges

Resource Intensity and Complexity of Legal Support

We anticipated that delivering a free, specialist legal service to sex workers in Victoria would be resource intensive. However, the labour required – particularly in initially embedding key stakeholder relationships and navigating novel legal intersections – exceeded our expectations. The combination of generalist community legal practice with emerging areas of law relevant to sex workers (e.g., discrimination, employment, and victims' rights) has required significant pro bono support and strategic collaboration.

Even with strategic resourcing in place, the work remains complex. Clients often present with multiple, interrelated legal issues, placing additional pressure on a small team. This was particularly felt when funding from the Victorian Government concluded in year two, reducing staffing capacity from two lawyers down to one.

However, the program has developed greater efficiency in identifying and responding to these legal issues. We have become more adept at issue spotting, triaging matters, and identifying when a case may have broader systemic implications. This has allowed the program to better allocate limited resources, streamline internal processes, and strengthen the use of secondary consultations and pro bono support.

“Non-payment of sexual services is a frequently raised, resource intensive issue. These matters can carry both civil and criminal implications, and the appropriate course of action depends on a range of factors. I spend considerable time outlining the available options, potential outcomes, supporting clients to make informed decisions, and acting as a buffer between them and institutions when they face poor treatment. This often involves repeated information sharing, as the emotional weight of the issue and the complexity of the legal landscape can make it difficult for clients to absorb everything in one interaction.”

- Emily Smith, Program Manager and Senior Lawyer

Reaching Underrepresented Client Groups

From the outset, we recognised that reaching certain client groups - particularly those who are underrepresented in formal systems - would require targeted, culturally safe engagement strategies. Language barriers, visa insecurity, and experiences of systemic discrimination have long contributed to reduced access to legal services for certain communities.

These challenges have been significantly compounded by the federal government's **Operation Inglebrook**, a multi-agency initiative led by the Australian Border Force. The operation, which began in late 2022, has involved raids on sex work venues, visa cancellations and deportations, primarily targeting **Asian migrant sex workers**.

Despite being framed as a response to trafficking and exploitation, the operation has resulted in widespread fear and distrust of formal systems, including legal services.

Sex workers have reported being detained without access to interpreters or legal advice, and many now avoid any engagement with government or legal institutions due to concerns about surveillance, profiling and deportation.

Within the SWLP, this has meant that outreach to migrant sex workers requires even greater sensitivity, discretion, and peer-led support. While some progress has been made through partnerships with Vixen and community health organisations, we acknowledge that more work needs to be done to enhance this referral pathway.

Furthermore, the broader policy landscape continues to undermine trust and safety for migrant workers. This reinforces the need for legal services that are not only culturally safe but actively resist the criminalisation and racial profiling of sex workers.

Under-policing of Crimes Against Sex Workers

One of the clearest manifestations of ongoing stigma is the under-policing of crimes committed against sex workers. The historical treatment of sex workers by Police and the justice system has been shaped by decades of criminalisation and moral judgment. While the legal framework has changed, the **cultural attitudes** embedded within institutions have been slower to shift.

In reporting crimes such as stalking, sexual assault, harassment, and other serious offences, sex workers report that their experiences are often not taken seriously. In some cases, they can be met with **minimisation** and **disbelief**, resulting in refusing to take statements. This is not necessarily due to a lack of training or awareness of the law reforms. It reflects a deeper cultural resistance to recognising sex work as legitimate work, and sex workers as deserving of equal protection under the law.

When sex workers are unable or unwilling to report crimes due to institutional stigma, it not only denies them justice but also allows perpetrators to **act with impunity**, reinforcing cycles of harm and undermining broader community safety.

SWLP continues to advocate for systemic change in this area, including improved Police responses, trauma-informed practices, and greater accountability mechanisms. However, progress remains slow, and the need for sustained, sector-wide cultural change is clear.

7.2 Key learnings

Legal Need Beyond Traditional Legal Services

A key learning has been the extent of legal need in areas not traditionally considered “legal” or requiring a lawyer. For example, supporting sex workers to **engage with Police in reporting sexual violence**, or navigating **victims of crime financial assistance schemes**, has revealed systemic gaps in support. These processes often require legal advocacy to help ensure safety, access, and fair treatment.

The SWLP regularly tracks **criminal prosecutions** involving alleged perpetrators of sexual and physical violence against sex workers. While not involved in these cases directly, our monitoring helps ensure the sex worker community remains informed on criminal trial processes and is armed with current information to keep themselves safe. We also monitor the treatment and outcome of these matters under the criminal legal system.

Similarly, sex workers giving evidence in **criminal trials** face unique challenges, including fear of stigma, lack of support, and unfamiliarity with the legal process. Even when not directly representing a party, the program’s involvement has been critical in ensuring that sex workers are treated with dignity and that their rights are upheld throughout the process.

Importance of Strong, Trust-Based Partnerships

The success of SWLP has been underpinned by strong stakeholder relationships, particularly with **Vixen** and **RhED**. These partnerships were deeply invested in during the first year, which while initially resource intensive, has allowed for streamlined collaboration and efficient referrals. The result is more time spent delivering services and less time negotiating how to work together. This model of principled allyship - combining peer-led support with legal expertise - has proven essential in building trust and cultural safety for sex worker clients.

“Southside Justice also refers clients to Vixen in acknowledgement of the strength and value of peer support and community. The ease of this cross-referral practice ensures that there is no wrong door for sex workers who reach out to our services. As a generalist legal service, Southside Justice is proud to be developing a best practice model for working with the community of sex workers in Victoria and is privileged to be learning from Vixen and the broader community.”

- Emily Smith, SWLP Program Manager and Senior Lawyer

Embedding MEL as a Practice, Not Just a Framework

Embedding the Monitoring, Evaluation and Learning framework into the SWLP practice has required sustained effort, particularly in years one and two. Balancing direct service delivery with MEL implementation required dedicated effort, however, was significantly helped by the addition of an **Impact lead** at Southside Justice in year three. MEL is now a core part of our operations - used not only for reporting, but for continuous improvement. Regular workshops with Vixen and internal reviews have helped us adapt to emerging legal needs and refine our service design.

8. Looking Ahead

As the SWLP enters its next phase, we are focused on consolidating our learnings, strengthening our foundations, and scaling our impact. The next three years will be shaped by a refreshed strategy, innovative approaches, and a continued commitment to influence systemic policies and practices that improve the rights and safety of sex workers.

Strategy and Team

In partnership with **Vixen** and with broader **community consultation**, we will undertake a refresh of our three-year strategy to ensure our work remains responsive to the needs of sex workers and aligned with sector developments. This process will draw on insights from our MEL framework and client feedback, and will guide our priorities across service delivery, advocacy, and systemic reform.

To support this next phase, we will grow our team by introducing a **paralegal role**, with a pathway to becoming a **graduate lawyer**. This addition will help manage increasing demand, support legal education, and build continuity within the program.

Financial Sustainability

The SWLP has successfully secured government support, affirming the value and impact of our work in advancing access to justice for sex workers. However, the scale of legal need continues to outpace available resources. To meet this demand and ensure long-term viability, we will pursue a diversified funding strategy - strengthening existing partnerships, seeking new philanthropic opportunities and advocating for expanded investment.

Scaling Access to Justice

We are exploring new ways to scale our services, particularly through **digital interventions**. Many legal issues, such as non-payment by clients, do not always require direct legal representation but do require clear, accessible information. We plan to pursue opportunities to develop self-help resources and digital tools that empower sex workers to understand their options and **take action independently**. These interventions will reduce the burden on legal staff while expanding reach across Victoria.

Advocacy and Legal Reform

Advocacy will remain central to our work, with a renewed focus on Asian migrant sex workers who face heightened barriers to justice. Federal enforcement actions such as **Operation Inglenook** have created a climate of fear and distrust, making engagement with legal services more difficult.

We will also continue to pursue **strategic litigation** in areas such as discrimination and employment law. These cases have the potential to set important legal precedents and contribute to a more equitable legal framework for sex workers.

Legislative Readiness

The **statutory review** of the *Sex Work Decriminalisation Act 2022* (Vic) is expected to commence as early as December 2026. The SWLP will prepare to contribute to this review by documenting case trends, identifying gaps in implementation, and amplifying the voices of sex workers through submissions and advocacy. This review presents a critical opportunity to ensure that the legislation continues to reflect the realities and rights of sex workers in Victoria.

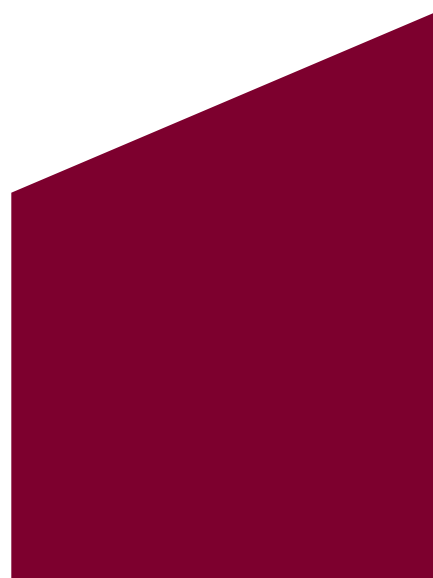
9. Conclusion

This report stands as both a milestone and a call to action.

The enormous achievement of sex work decriminalisation in Victoria, and the transformative opportunity it creates for legal rights and protections for sex workers, remains globally significant.

However, it is incumbent on legislators, institutions, legal services and the community to work together to uphold the intent of the legislation and ensure its meaningful application. This requires sustained investment in specialist services, commitment to systemic accountability, and the active dismantling stigma and discrimination.

This process must continue to be led by sex workers. The SWLP remains steadfast in ensuring sex workers lead the way, with our role being to listen, learn, and act on their priorities. We invite you to be part of this journey to stand with sex workers, amplify their voices, and ensure the promise of decriminalisation becomes a lived reality.



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