



ANNUAL REPORT

2023

### Welcome

**Our Vision** is a just, fair and supportive community empowered through equitable access to legal rights for individuals and communities in the broader Great Southern region.

**Our Mission** is to provide quality legal, advocacy and education services to assist disadvantaged community members in our region.

As we reflect on the past year and look forward to the future, we pause to acknowledge the traditional custodians of the land on which we live and work throughout Noongar Country.

We express our deep respect and gratitude for our Indigenous elders, past, present, and those who are emerging. Their wisdom, resilience, and enduring relationship with this land inspire us and guide our actions.

We are privileged to share this land and strive to honour the care it has been given since time immemorial. Together, we continue to learn, grow, and work towards reconciliation and mutual respect.



## Chainperson's Report

Delving into the past year, I am honoured to present the Chairperson's report, acknowledging the efforts and achievements of our centre. In the face of challenges stemming from the residual impacts of COVID-19, economic uncertainties, and the national housing crisis, our team has shown an unwavering commitment continuing to provide essential services. The demand for legal advice, disability advocacy, and tenancy support has increased, resulting in a substantial workload for our team.

Throughout this period, the Board has continued to work to adapt to the evolving needs of our community. This work, involving collaboration with government, other regional Community Legal services, and peak bodies was instrumental in navigating ongoing funding reforms of our legal services. To meet these challenges, we have enlisted the expertise of consultants, and I extend my gratitude to ACLC Business Manager Brodie Lewis and Principal Lawyer Tameka Brown, whose invaluable contributions have guided the Board through this process.

The ACLC team, under the adept leadership of our senior management, continues to shine as the true stars of the organisation. Their focus on supporting the community in the Great Southern region remains our core, and their positive attitude and commitment is respected and celebrated.

We are proud to announce that we will shortly change our name to Great Southern Community Legal Services.

This change, reflecting our longstanding commitment to providing support, advice, advocacy, and legal education across the broader Great Southern region, will be rolled out in early 2024.

I would be remiss not to acknowledge the indispensable role of our Board. The addition of new members with diverse skills, knowledge, and experiences, has been instrumental in making strategic decisions and ensuring robust governance throughout the year. My heartfelt thanks go out to each Board member for their time, expertise, and dedication, which have undoubtedly made challenging decisions easier.

As my tenure as Chairperson and Board member comes to an end, I take a moment to reflect on the privilege of working with the exceptional people who have served on the Board, staff, and volunteers. I have learned valuable lessons from each of them and developed a deep appreciation for the Community Legal sector and ACLC's vital role in supporting our community. My gratitude extends to all staff, volunteers, and Board Members who have made my time enriching and positive. I am confident that under the continued leadership of the Board and the dedication of our outstanding team, the organisation will continue to grow from strength to strength.

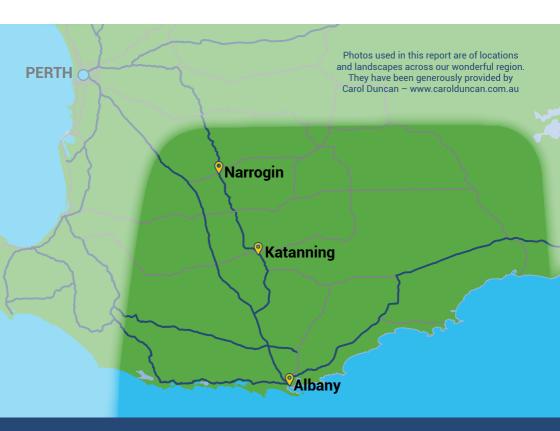
Angela Bristow-Baohm Chairperson

# Our Region

Great Southern Community Legal Service is a community led independent not for profit that provides legal and advocacy services across the broader Great Southern region of Western Australia.

This region includes approximately 100,000 people, spread across 100,000 square km, 25 local government areas and over 40 townships.

We assist this region through regular face to face services in Albany and Katanning, alongside hybrid services in partnership with Community Resource Centres across the region.



### Executive Report

One of the important tasks of writing this report is reviewing the last few reports to find new ways of telling readers how busy our team has been, how many people we have helped, and the ways in which we are changing lives in our community.

Through the pages of this report, you can find those very people's stories (deidentified) showing the impact our incredible team of lawyers, advocates and support staff have had for people across the Great Southern this last year. We're going to let those stories speak for themselves.

With the end of 2023, however, we enter a new chapter. Following consultation, to best communicate our commitment to the broader Great Southern region, we will be known as Great Southern Community Legal Services.

This change is a long time coming – our first appointments outside of Albany were held in 2001 – in Gnowangerup. However as early as 1999 we were providing phone

based legal services to people throughout the region – from Narrogin to Nornalup, Hopetoun to Hyden. The broader Great Southern region has been our focus from the very start.

Thanks to a stellar effort by our team, we have had an outstanding year of impact for this region. We've been able to provide direct assistance to over 2200 people throughout the year, a significant increase on last year. More details, including a breakdown of services provided, is contained later in the report.

We have the privilege of working with an incredibly capable and compassionate team that strives to achieve justice for their community. The remainder of this report is a testament to their impact here in the Great Southern.

**Brodie Lewis**Business Manager

**Tameka Brown**Principal Lawyer



## Our People

We express our profound gratitude to past and present board members for their significant contributions, time, and insight throughout the past year. Their dedication, coupled with the sustained support from our community, ensures our continued connection and responsiveness to the needs across the Great Southern region. As a community-owned and led organisation, we are deeply embedded in the local region we serve and take immense pride in this.

#### Our 2023 Board members are:

**Angela Bristow-Baohm** 

Chairperson

**Carryn Hills** 

Treasurer

**Cameron Andrich** 

**Board Member** 

**Helen St Jack** 

**Board Member** 

**Cory Warren** 

**Board Member** 

**Jenny Page** 

**Board Member** 

**Kenneth John** 

**Board Member** 

**Michael Cripps** 

**Board Member** 

**Peter Brown** 

**Board Member** 

#### Want to join us?

Your support can make a significant difference in our community. By volunteering at our office or becoming a member, you join us in advancing our vision throughout the Great Southern. We encourage you to connect with our team or visit our website at www.albanyclc.com.au to discover how you can contribute to our mission.

## Finance Report

The last year has seen a strong financial result for our organisation. While a small financial deficit of \$9,330 was delivered, it was on the back of continued year on year growth in revenue and significant investments in our organisation.

This year we have seen an increase in the total FTE of our team, through increased investment from both our legal and advocacy program areas. These increases have grown our total staff FTE to 10.4 at end of financial year, an increase of 0.7 FTE.

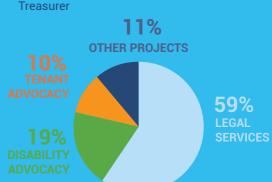
Through this year we have also continued our investment in operational capacity, with ongoing investments to maintain high quality ICT systems and databases as well as upgrades to our phone and videoconference systems. Due in part to the ongoing impacts of the pandemic, we have also added virtual receptionist services to our administrative capacity to support our client services team.

Alongside this, through 2023 we largely saw a return to pre-pandemic service

models across the organisation – resulting in significant increases in travel and related costs through the year.

Finally, with upcoming changes in the regulatory environment we have made further investment in our financial provisions. Such provisions are crucial to ensuring our ongoing strength as a service in a high demand and increasingly volatile operational environment.

#### Carryn Hills





# Disability Advocacy

Our Disability Advocacy program assists people with disabilities to access their rights in society through information & referral, community and group advocacy, systemic advocacy and individual advocacy.

Over the last year, we continued to provide individual advocacy on a number of issues, but most commonly around:

- Disability Support Pensions
- Issues with National Disability
   Insurance Scheme access or plans
- Applications to the State Administrative Tribunal relating to the Guardianship and Administration Act 1990
- corresponding with the Offices of the Public Advocate and Public Trustee

In 2023, we also delivered the Peer Support for Self Advocacy project, an innovative program supported by the Department of Communities. This was a community advocacy project that linked our Advocates with a range of disability peer support groups through the region, assisting with education, group and community development, as well as referrals and connections with appropriate other supports.

We continue to strengthen our relationships with local non-legal organisations, working collaboratively on all appropriate matters. This increases positive outcomes for both clients and the community.

Our Advocates are actively involved on a number of committees, including the Shire of Plantagenet Disability Advisory Group and Great Southern Disability Network. We nourish communications with stakeholder agencies to ensure best results for clients in the region.

Alongside this, we continue to provide targeted disability advocacy to Aboriginal people in the region. These services focus on ensuring distribution of appropriate, targeted information and referral through community groups; as well as assisting people to access appropriate local support services where needed.

Finally, we continue our commitment to celebrating all abilities through our ongoing involvement in the organisation and coordination of the Great Southern Ability Festival.



213
MATTERS
ASSISTED



141
PEOPLE
ASSISTED

Peggy, battling severe health issues and undergoing medical treatment, sought our help to apply for the Disability Support Pension. Facing eviction with her caravan, she was distressed and uncertain about her future.

Our advocate quickly arranged temporary accommodation at a local caravan park, secured subsidies for site fees, and successfully advocated for Peggy's priority housing application. Within three months, she moved into a Department of Housing unit in the region.

Understanding Peggy's ongoing needs, we connected Peggy with Amity Health's Care Finder program, securing a support package that included meals, therapy, home modifications, and domestic support. This proactive approach ensured Peggy could maintain her home and manage her health more effectively.

Brian, struggling with chronic pain and mental health issues, reached out to us for help applying for the NDIS. Upon learning that Brian was breaching his lease due to poor property upkeep, we negotiated a stay on any lease-related actions while we arranged support services. We secured quotes from cleaning companies for a deep clean of Brian's property and successfully applied for funding from the Albany Community Foundation.

Our advocate discovered Brian couldn't afford medical appointments. We successfully arranged for Brian's GP services to be bulk billed & although Brian's NDIS application was unsuccessful, his need for regular support was recognised. Consequently, we arranged for Brian to receive aged care services after his property was cleaned. This proactive approach ensured Brian could maintain his home and manage his health more effectively.

### Legal Assistance

Our Legal Assistance program provides legal advice, duty lawyer support, and ongoing casework to a range of people identified as facing a high risk of issues in the justice system.

We aim to empower people by advising them on their rights and the workings of the justice system. To do this, we have an integrated approach to legal assistance – working across a range of intervention and prevention focussed services.

Over the last year, we have delivered a range of legal assistance services directly to vulnerable people in the Great Southern. The most common legal issues our clients have faced are –

- · Family Law Parenting
- Family Violence
- Family Law Property

Our services are a mix of one-off legal advices, as well as more intensive ongoing legal support and some representation where a client faces a particularly high risk of injustice. Over the year, we have continued to see an increasing complexity of legal need – with many of our clients facing three or more legal issues in combination. Prevalence of this has increased year on year – one of the most notable trends in the last decade.

Augmenting these direct to client services,

we continue to deliver our prevention and early intervention work. These services are designed to educate and empower people otherwise likely to need legal advice, as well as ensure early legal assistance can be provided wherever it may be needed.

Our Family Safety Project and Youth Law Connect are two specific examples of such services we will discuss later in the report. Alongside these, we continue to provide regular targeted education programs direct to the public on Wills & Estates, Access to Justice and Employment.

Over the last year, we have also developed key stakeholder relationships with social and health sector partners. This helps ensure an early referral for any legal assistance is prioritised.





Harry, living alone in a remote town and battling multiple health issues, found himself the sole beneficiary of his relative's estate. With no experience in legal processes and limited to phone and snail mail for communication, Harry was unsure how to apply for probate to release the funds from the estate.

Our team provided Harry with comprehensive support, guiding him through the application for probate. This included addressing a requisition application and securing the grant of probate, even involving the complex task of locating witnesses of the will who had moved overseas.

With our assistance, Harry understood the probate process and felt empowered to provide the grant of probate to relevant services, successfully accessing the estate funds without further help. He expressed gratitude for our support, which not only eased the probate process but also boosted his confidence in managing his own affairs.

I felt so powerless to defend myself. I didn't know how to respond. You helped me grasp the situation and I feel so relaxed and happy now.

Harry's future plans remain unknown, however the funds from the estate have provided him with a level of financial security he might not have achieved alone.

### Our Year in Numbers

#### **Services Delivered**

#### **Client Dem**



**2280** 

People Assisted



9858

Individual Services Provided



392

Outreach Appointments



30% Men <1% Non-binary 69% Women



Experi FI 32



**73** 

**Education** Sessions



99

Duty Lawyer Services



**351** 

Complex Matters
Closed



Disability 55%



Und 8



94%

Gave positive feedback



88%

Had improved circumstances



92%

Achieved their goals



Low Income 94%



CA 2

#### ographics



Experienced Homelessness 18%

#### **Most Common Problem Types**



18%

Parenting



14%

Family Property



15%

Family Violence



er 25

enced

60

Over 65 25%



15%

Access & Rights



11%

Government Services



3%

Criminal Injuries





ATSI 13%



**7**%

Future Planning



12%

Housing & Tenancy



5%

Other Matters

# Family Safety Project

The Great Southern Family Safety Project is our innovative response to the scourge of family violence resulting in a high need of legal assistance for victim-survivors across the Great Southern. This project is delivered in partnership with Anglicare WA and the Albany Women's Centre.

Over the last year, we have continued to deliver vital legal assistance services in partnership with social support services – ensuring a trauma-informed, culturally secure wrap around service to assist victim-survivors of family violence throughout the journey of recovery and healing.

Our lawyers work directly with our client and their DV advocates, financial counsellors and social workers. These services seek to deliver end-to-end legal support where possible – assisting victim-survivors to navigate a path towards safety and stability for them and their families following the impacts of family violence.

Through this project, we have been able to this year commence services in the Albany Court to provide duty lawyer support for Restraining Orders and Protection and Care matters. Through the provision of legal advice and assistance, we have

seen a marked increase in the rates of these kinds of matters being finalised by consent – something that we know improves safety outcomes and can help avoid the traumatic impacts of a trial in Court

A key focus for this project has been to improve the timeliness of legal assistance for people experiencing violence because good early advice can significantly improve legal outcomes. To achieve this, we continue to conduct training on legal issues with DV advocates, we maintain urgent appointments throughout our calendar, and regularly visit the local women's refuge. Over the year, we have maintained ongoing review and engagement of urgent matters — allowing us to provide information and advice in urgent situations without delay.



MATTERS ASSISTED



161 PEOPLE ASSISTED Mary, a young Aboriginal mother from outside of the Great Southern, found herself in a dire situation while on a holiday in Albany. After a severe assault by her partner, she was hospitalised and her children taken into care by the Department of Communities. Mary, who has autism and a history of family violence, was left homeless in an unfamiliar town with no support network.

Our team responded swiftly to referrals from the Police and Anglicare.

We met with Mary the very next day and filed an urgent affidavit with the Children's Court and secured a Family Violence Restraining Order to protect Mary and her children's ongoing safety.

Mary received additional support from Anglicare throughout the court proceedings, which meant Mary was best positioned to resume care of her children. I wanted to thank you personally for everything you managed to do for my family. It's no small feat to have had the type of victory we did and I could not have done it without you. You are amazing!

This decisive action led to Mary's children being returned to her care within a month and Anglicare were able to support Mary with this transition due to her being accommodated in the refuge. The Department also stepped in to assist with the family's return home.

### Youth Law Connect

In line with our mission to serve the most vulnerable, and implement service models that prioritise early intervention, we have continued to deliver Youth Law Connect. This initiative seeks to bring legal services directly to young people - in particular those at higher risk of engagement with the justice system.

Evidence shows that young people are less likely, and significantly slower to seek help from legal assistance services. This hesitancy and delay in seeking assistance compounds the impact of their issues – contributing to risks of homelessness, poor mental health, financial distress and other social disadvantages.

To combat this, our Youth Law Connect project provides in-situ legal information and advice at Young House, a local youth refuge in the Great Southern. We also hold a regular drop-in legal service at Open Access — a youth centre run by Albany Youth Support Association.

Since inception, we have provided a mix of information and advice to many of the young people in our partner services, helping them understand their rights and navigate the legal system.

The most common legal issues faced by these cohorts are:

- · Tenants Rights
- · Restraining Orders
- Criminal Injury Compensation

We've also provided a number of these people with ongoing assistance through our other legal and advocacy practices.

While initially commenced as an unfunded project, we have this year been successful in a small grant to partially support this work through the Youth Affairs Council of Western Australia.





35 YOUNG PEOPLE RECEIVED LEGAL HELP



38 DROP IN SESSIONS The impact of Youth Law Connect is significantly felt by both young people and our partner agencies. The program's effectiveness is best illustrated through the voices of those we've supported and those we work alongside.

A young service user recounted their experience: "I'm glad you were available at Open Access that day, to give me support through what was happening with the people running my accommodation.

It made me feel empowered in a situation where I had previously felt hopeless. Thank you for all the support you've given me since, I really appreciate it."

This testimony highlights the immediate and ongoing support our program provides, transforming feelings of hopelessness into empowerment.

I'm glad you were available at Open Access that day.

It made me feel empowered in a situation where I had previously felt hopeless.

A youth worker from Young House, our partner agency, expressed gratitude for the support provided to a young person: "Thank you so much for all your support. Getting their ID and license has made so much difference. They are now able to think about their future in a positive way and with some hope."

This program not only addresses immediate legal issues but also equips young people with the tools to create a hopeful future.

## Tenant Advocacy

We deliver the Tenant Advocacy Service in our region as a part of a collective of community legal centres across WA. The role of the service is to ensure tenants understand their rights and responsibilities, and have access to assistance to help them navigate issues with their tenancy.

We do this through a mix of education, information and Court-based advocacy support – seeking to empower people we assist to reduce the likelihood of similar issues into the future.

The last year has seen a rapid escalation of demand for this program, continuing trends since the onset of the pandemic. While the increasing cost of living pressures have affected many of our clients; renters are particularly affected by housing supply shortages and related skyrocketing rents – something that is particularly acute across the Great Southern due to population increases associated with the pandemic.

One particularly notable impact to our clients over the last 12 months has been the lack of investment in adequate emergency and transitional housing in the Great Southern. This has been particularly felt since the sale of a local private backpacker accommodation, which was a commonly used alternative for many people between rentals.

Linked with this increased pressure in the rental sector, the most common issues for our clients have changed. In previous years, assistance with tenant bonds or property repair have generally been the most significant issue; with evictions being only in the top five. Over the last 12 months, eviction has been the most common issue, nearly double the second most common issue.

We have continued to work together with local and statewide partners to ensure an integrated and connected support sector for people at risk of homelessness. The support of the broader community, through initiatives such as the Albany Community Foundation's Homelessness Fund, has been pivotal in helping many of our clients retain their tenancy and navigate a difficult period.



132 MATTERS ASSISTED



126 PEOPLE ASSISTED Louise, a resident of community housing in the upper Great Southern, was on the brink of eviction due to rent arrears and issues with property access. Struggling to communicate with her housing provider, Louise was at risk of losing her home.

Our team stepped in, advocating for Louise to secure a short-term lease while arranging financial counselling to address her rent arrears and future payments.

Through regular support from our team in partnership with the financial counselling service, Louise was able to maintain

It's good to know I'm not alone in this world. I really appreciate your all your support.

engagement with her housing provider and better understand her rights and responsibilities as a tenant. This understanding and improved relationship with the housing provider led to Louise being granted a further long-term lease.

Long-term tenants Tom and Cathy faced a challenge when their landlords claimed their entire bond for property repairs at the end of their lease. The landlords cited costs for painting, repairs, and floor damage. Our team stepped in, discovering that the home had last been painted 16 years ago and the carpet was 8 years old. Using this information and consideration of likely depreciation, we drafted a response to the Property Manager. As a result, Tom and Cathy received their bond back, with only a \$110 deduction for floor covering damage.

# Community Advocacy

The Peer Support for Self Advocacy project was an 18 month innovative project that concluded during 2023. Through the project, our disability advocates sought to identify and develop a model for working in partnership with community based peer support groups for people with disability and their families.

The aim was to better integrate the efforts of community based peer groups with professional advocacy, to align efforts and reduce duplication, thereby further extending the limited resources of advocacy services in the community. The project was supported by the Department of Communities and we extend our thanks for their support.

Over the project, we partnered with eight very different peer groups. This was intentional, as we sought to identify what common strategies may be applicable for all these groups, and what supports would be best placed to extend their collective impact.

Through working with these partnerships, some of our initial presumptions were confirmed while others were challenged.

The most important confirmation we had was that where community based peer groups and professional advocacy services work in partnership, the net impact is dramatically more effective than either of these alone. The impact was most noted for matters with less complexity – which appears related to the commonality of these issues and shared experience of group members. However, as with many issues our clients face, early resolution of such matters avoids them snowballing into bigger issues.

The second main aim of the project was the development of resources to support peer groups to better 'align' with professional advocacy services. Our findings challenged this – identifying that there was more need to introduce a model of 'community advocacy' to our programs instead, and work to ensure partnership with the community-based peer groups.

As a direct result of this project, we have worked to develop specific community based advocacy models for inclusion in our disability advocacy program. This will allow us to continue to work alongside some of these peer groups, and support others as they respond to community identified needs.

#### Who We Helped



93
People with disabilities and their families





Agencies in relation to the project

### Court & Tribural Based Work

One of the most important principles of our legal system is that each person is equal before the law, something that should be at its foremost in a courtroom. However, barriers such as literacy, language, age, trauma, or experience can cause significant injustices.

We deliver a range of court and tribunal based supports where appropriate to mitigate these barriers, as we work to achieve access to justice in the Great Southern.

On a weekly basis, we attend the Albany Courthouse to provide duty services for the Residential Tenancies, Restraining Orders and Protection & Care court lists.

Additionally, over the last year we provided court-based assistance and representation for people in the Family Court of Western Australia, the Magistrates Court of Western Australia and the Childrens Court of Western Australia.

We have also provided assistance for clients in both the State Administrative Tribunal of Western Australia, and the Australian Administrative Tribunal through our advocacy services.

These services are client-centred with the level of assistance tailored to the vulnerabilities of each client. In doing this, we seek first to empower them to speak for themselves, only speaking for them where the client is unable to.





CLIENTS

CLIENTS
ASSISTED AT
COURT OR
TRIBUNAL

135
DUTY COURT
SESSIONS
PROVIDED



## Partnership

The last year has seen another great year of legal and advocacy services delivered across the Great Southern region, however we are unable to do this alone. Our impact is made possible through a range of partnerships and collaborations. Some of these include –

#### **Great Southern Ability Festival**

Our staff work with many other volunteers and organisations from across the not for profit, government and private sector to celebrate all abilities at the now annual event. This event showcases many local artists and provides a small creative industry access to visitors and locals just before Christmas.

#### **Homelessness Connectivity Forum**

Earlier this year members of the Great Southern Homelessness Forum including our staff came together to deliver a suite of services for people living with homelessness at a drop in event. This event brought together health, social, government and community legal services to assist people to connect with agencies and work towards interim and long term housing solutions. The success of this event resulted in the Forum members agreeing to deliver it on a regular seasonal basis.

#### **Community Legal Partnerships**

The Community Legal sector is made up of members distributed across Western Australia, as well as a set of specialist legal services based in Perth, working to support people across the whole State. Throughout 2023 we have worked to improve access of our community to these services.

One example of this has been a steady growth in hybrid appointments — where our team facilitate appointments for people in the Great Southern with legal specialists in Perth. This support gives the best of both worlds to our people — ensuring a local face and team to work with and accessing the right specialist knowledge to resolve their legal matter.



#### **Albany Community Foundation**

We are proud to work closely with the Albany Community Foundation on a range of initiatives. Over the last year, ACF has supported us in a range of ways – most notably directly to our clients. Over the last year, ACF has supported more than 27 of our clients directly with payments totalling over \$20,000.

These payments have been for a wide range of different things – from payments to help get a car back on the road, down to applications for birth certificates. These payments have made a huge difference to our clients, and to our team. The inability of some clients to pay for identification, court applications and similar documents can slow or even stall matters, tie up our lawyers and advocates, and cause many hours of lost time.

The support from the ACF, especially with these small costs, saves significant time, and allows us to make an even bigger difference across the Great Southern.

#### **Networks and Memberships**

We work collaboratively in both State and Commonwealth networks to further our ability to achieve access to justice in the Great Southern. Over 2023, we have been apart of many networks and forums including:

- Community Legal Centres Australia
- \* Community Legal Western Australia
- Disability Advocacy Network Australia
- **₩ WACOSS**
- Elder Abuse Community of Practice
- Family Violence Legal Network
- \* Great Southern Disability Network
- Great Southern Family Law Network
- \* Great Southern Homelessness Forum
- \* Great Southern Relief Agency Network
- \* Legal Assistance Data Committee
- \* Tenancy Network of Western Australia







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