



Great Southern
**Community
Legal Services**



ANNUAL REPORT
2024

VISION

Our Vision is **informed, empowered, and resilient** Great Southern communities.

MISSION

Our Mission is to be an **accessible, trusted, and reliable** source of information, advice, and advocacy.

We acknowledge the traditional custodians of the land on which we live and work throughout Noongar Country and pay our deepest respects to Indigenous Elders, past, present, and emerging. We are committed to learning from their wisdom and working towards meaningful reconciliation.

This year, our most visible change has been our new name – Great Southern Community Legal Services – introduced as part of our 30th anniversary celebrations. This new name symbolises our ongoing commitment to serving the entire Great Southern region.

We marked the milestone with a small event at the Albany Library, attended by The Honorable John Quigley MLA, Rebecca Stephens MLA, Mayor Greg Stocks and other key supporters, including leaders and colleagues from partner organisations, past and present staff, and our invaluable volunteers. We take this opportunity to once again pay tribute to the many individuals who, over the last thirty years, have made equal justice a reality throughout our region.

Building on our new name, we embarked on a strategic planning journey to define our future direction, revitalising our vision and mission to better address the evolving needs of our community.

Over the year we had a strong focus on innovative initiatives. A standout achievement was receiving a transformational grant from Impact100 WA for our “Breaking Barriers to Justice” project. This 18-month project aims to enhance access to justice in smaller communities throughout the Great Southern and Southern Wheatbelt regions through place-based advice, upgraded digital infrastructure, and partnerships with local community organisations. We are partnering with select regional communities to pilot an efficient and effective model that can be adopted more broadly our region in the future. Early indications show positive signs – our communities are embracing the model, and we are seeing slow but steady increases in access to legal help.

We are also excited about the “Better Together” project, a collaboration with our regional Community Legal Centre colleagues. Together, we are developing a robust, integrated, and resilient model to improve and enhance access to legal and advocacy services throughout regional WA. This initiative seeks to create a seamless support network, ensuring that no one in our community is left behind.

Reflecting on our impact, we assisted over 1 500 individuals through our various programs and services. We are proud to report exceptionally high client satisfaction rates, with 98% of our clients recommending our services and around two-thirds noting that our assistance improved their circumstances. This report highlights some of the stories of our positive impact through the last year and is a testament to the dedication of our team and the unwavering support of our community.

Thank you for your ongoing support and commitment. Together, we can ensure that our Great Southern communities are informed, empowered, and resilient.

Brodie Lewis
CEO

Tameka Brown
Principal Lawyer

Michael Cripps
Chairperson



Finance

The past year has been pivotal for our organisation, marked by strong financials and strategic initiatives. Despite a modest \$6,512 deficit, we achieved notable revenue growth, and our net assets stand at \$389,106. This solid foundation allows us to continue our mission and adapt for the future.

We secured funding to drive regional projects with innovative concepts that will shape our future operations and enhance our outreach in regional areas. These efforts demonstrate our willingness to adapt and grow as an organisation, always striving to better serve our community. One highlight is the Impact100 WA initiative: an 18-month project “Breaking Barriers to Justice” designed to boost access to justice in the Great Southern and Southern Wheatbelt regions

for those marginalised by financial and geographical barriers. Through place-based advice, enhanced digital infrastructure, and partnerships with local community organisations, we aim to reach up to 500 individuals in selected towns, proving the concept for further expansion.

This year, we also took part in significant strategic planning sessions, uniting the board and staff to refresh our vision, mission, and values. This plan will guide us over the next 3-5 years, ensuring we remain aligned with the evolving needs of our community.

Lastly, the organisation has rebranded from Albany Community Legal Centre to Great Southern Community Legal Services to reflect its expanding presence across the region.

Cameron Andrich
Treasurer

Our Board

We're deeply grateful to all our past and present board members for their invaluable contributions, time, and insights over the past year. Their commitment, along with the incredible support from our community, keeps us connected and responsive to the needs of our communities across the Great Southern region. As a community-owned and led organisation, we're very pleased to be firmly established in the region we serve.

Our 2024 Board members are:

Michael Cripps
Chairperson

Jenny Page
Deputy Chairperson

Cameron Andrich
Treasurer

Cory Warren
Board Member

Helen St Jack
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 of our association, you join us in advancing our vision throughout the Great Southern.

We encourage you to connect with our team to discover how you can contribute to our mission.

Visit our website at gscls.com.au

Throughout this report, we include stories of people we have assisted over the last twelve months. Names and other key identifying information for each of these have been changed to ensure anonymity.

Images used in this report have been supplied by Carol Duncan Photography, Freepik, Vecteezy and Pikwizard.

How we help when you call

We know that making a call to us can be a big first step for someone in need. Our Client Services Team is the welcoming, first point of contact for community members who may need legal or advocacy assistance. They are essential to our service delivery, ensuring that calls and in person enquiries are addressed, messages are followed up, and people are connected to the appropriate services and general legal information.

The Client Services Team manages the scheduling of appointments with our lawyers and advocates, taking into account the nature of the required assistance and the availability of appointments. They also support the caseworkers with ongoing client communication.

Based on the information provided by callers, we may gather additional details to potentially schedule an appointment with one of our lawyers or advocates. Alternatively, we may assist the caller in connecting with other suitable agencies, or we will provide relevant information or resources to address their concerns.

This year, the Client Services Team has focused on building stronger relationships and improving referral pathways with other organisations. This ensures both parties are equipped with the latest, most accurate information to better support our respective clients. Additionally, the team has undertaken targeted training in areas such as de-escalation techniques, trauma-informed care, and confidentiality protocols.

These efforts have:

- Strengthened trust, communication, and collaboration with a valuable network of partner agencies. This enables both our organisation and theirs to provide clients with reliable, up-to-date information and services.

- Created a safer, more supportive environment where people feel understood, respected, and empowered to seek help.
- Enhanced our ability to connect clients with specialised services to address underlying needs that may be evident.
- Enabled us to share and provide timely, critical information that supports early intervention and prevents issues from escalating.

Through these initiatives, we are not only improving service delivery but also strengthening community engagement. By building a reputation as a trusted, approachable organisation, we aim to encourage community members to seek assistance sooner rather than waiting until they reach a crisis point. Our commitment to fostering trust and collaboration ensures we are better positioned to help people when they need it most.

Alongside this, we've worked hard to streamline our intake process to ensure that those seeking assistance receive the best possible information quickly and efficiently. It now takes on average, 5-7 minutes of interaction to fully understand a person's legal or advocacy needs and schedule an appointment. Our approach reflects the complexity of managing risk and ensuring client privacy in a small regional community.

Throughout the year, we helped many individuals get support or access information through education sessions, our website, and interactions with our Client Services Team. Engagement levels remained consistent with previous years.

Unfortunately, this year we had to turn away more than 970 people because we couldn't provide any help at all. This usually happens when they haven't met the strict criteria for our intake such as:

Income thresholds – some of our services have income rules that mean we can only help individuals or families below a certain income level. This means some people may just miss out despite being on what is considered a low income. The levels are set by demand and available funding.

Jurisdiction – a person may live outside our funded service area or their legal issue is based in another state.

Conflict of interest – ethics rules require legal services to avoid assisting both parties in a dispute or acting against a past client.

Type of issue – we are funded to handle particular matters and can only assist within our expertise.

When we can't assist, we endeavour to guide individuals toward resources or other services that can provide the help they may need.

Our team typically
handles around
400 CALLS
each month



MONDAYS

are often our
busiest days
for calls

On average, calls are
answered within

**TWENTY TWO
SECONDS**



Intake calls
take on
average 5-7
minutes

2,091
Intakes processed

1,641
Info or referrals
provided



Katrina's Story

Katrina lived with her maternal grandparents after a traumatic childhood. Diagnosed with CPTSD, depression, anxiety, and later Autism, she was socially withdrawn and relied on her grandmother to speak for her. Katrina's sole income was from Centrelink student payments, requiring her to engage in training, but finding suitable, low-stress options was difficult.

Katrina and her grandmother initially sought an Autism assessment in Perth at a high cost and a long wait, but our advocate located a local assessor and secured funding for the assessment.

The Autism diagnosis led our Disability Advocate to help Katrina apply for the Disability Support Pension, which was granted, allowing her to continue her studies without any pressure around her student payments. Our advocate also successfully submitted an access request to the NDIS, with Katrina now awaiting her first planning meeting.

Katrina expressed a desire to live independently with her brother, and our advocate was also able to assist with a housing application. Katrina is now on the priority waitlist.

Her grandmother, concerned about the strain of caregiving, is relieved that NDIS support will ease her role, and the family's home life is less stressed.

When Katrina received her DSP, her grandmother said:

"So glad, so happy, so relieved. I'm so exhausted. Thank you."

How we helped people with disabilities

Our Disability Advocacy program helps people with physical and mental health conditions access their rights through information and referral, community and systemic advocacy, and individual advocacy.

Over the past year, our individual advocacy efforts focused on issues such as:

- Disability Support Pensions
- National Disability Insurance Scheme (NDIS) access or plan issues
- Access to services
- Housing
- Discrimination
- Liaising with the Public Trustee and Office of the Public Advocate

A key achievement, that we've worked on over the last two years, has been establishing local dental services for people with disabilities needing general anaesthesia. We worked with WA Country Health Service (WACHS), I-Med Radiology and families to create this service. Initially trialled with one individual, WACHS is now able to provide monthly theatre, anaesthetic, and dental resources, offering extractions, fillings, and preventive care for people with

disabilities. X-ray facilities were also added at Albany Health Campus for dental assessments under anaesthesia. WACHS then developed a system to prioritise people with disabilities on the public dental waitlist, reducing the financial, physical, and emotional strain on families who previously had to travel to Perth for treatment.

Top 3 problem types we assisted with this year:

- Government payments
- NDIS Access / Planning
- Housing / Homelessness

We continue to build strong relationships with non-legal organisations, working collaboratively to improve client and community outcomes. We also remain dedicated to celebrating all abilities through our involvement in organising the Great Southern Ability Festival.

People
assisted
directly



227
Problems
assisted



Client interactions

71
Info or
referrals
provided



Joel's Story

Joel was referred to us by his Job Network provider as he was unable to work due to chronic and acute physical disabilities. He had applied for and been denied the Disability Support Pension three times by Centrelink. Despite medical certificates from his doctor, Centrelink required him to apply for jobs or risk losing his JobSeeker Payment.

Distressed and feeling hopeless, Joel had expressed his belief with our advocate that taking his life was the only solution to the problem.

Our advocate helped Joel gather evidence for a new DSP application and connected him with mental health and financial support.

When this application was again denied, our advocate worked with Joel and his GP to gather targeted evidence for a review. Our advocate accompanied him to Centrelink assessments, and eventually, the DSP was granted with back pay dating 16 months to his original application.

Joel no longer has to look for work or report to an employment service, and both his mental health and financial security have improved.

Grateful for our support,
Joel said:

*"I am so thankful to you
as I could not have done
this without your help,
and I really appreciate it."*

How we're driving innovative concepts in our region

This year we secured funding, through donations and grants, to pilot some innovative projects aimed at shaping our future operations and enhancing our outreach in regional areas.

One such project “Breaking Barriers to Justice” has been made possible through the philanthropic group of donors of Impact100 WA. The project is working to build partnerships with the Community Resource Centres (CRC) and some other community organisations in select small towns across the region. This way we can improve justice equity across the region for those who face financial and geographical challenges.

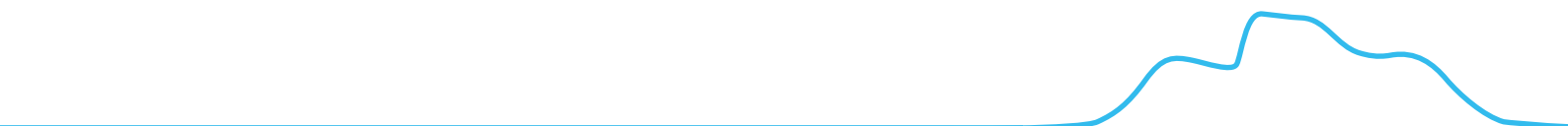
Through this new service model, eligible people will be able to approach their participating CRC to be connected to our services through a facilitated referral model. Where appropriate, that person can also attend their appointments through secure video conferencing in a safe, private room at the CRC and utilise the other resources of the CRC to support their needs (internet, printing and scanning etc). The CRCs will also serve as the hubs for community legal education.

In addition to these facilitated appointments, it is envisaged the new service model will increase our reach in general. That is, more people will know who we are, how we can help, and how

to connect with us. The community consultation and partnership building process has revealed that there is a great need for our services in the more remote parts of the region, and that many potential clients (and the community organisations who support them) were not previously aware of how we can help. There has been a great community response so far.

Our ‘DSP Information Package’, developed in 2022, is another example of an innovative idea that has become a part of our standard information services. The resource was specifically aimed at assisting people to claim the Disability Support Pension (DSP), supporting self-advocacy but allows for them to return for professional advocacy assistance should they need to.

Our drive for innovation is guided by our vision for informed, empowered, and resilient Great Southern communities. Our mission is to be an accessible, trusted and reliable source of information, advice and advocacy.



How we helped people with tenancy issues

We deliver our Tenant Advocacy Service as part of a network of community legal centres across WA, aiming to inform residential tenants of their rights and responsibilities while providing support for tenancy issues. Through education, information, and court advocacy, we empower tenants to navigate challenges, build resilience, and reduce the likelihood of future issues.

Demand for our services has remained high, continuing trends that began with the COVID-19 pandemic. Rising living costs, housing shortages, and increasing rents have significantly impacted renters, especially in the Great Southern region where emergency and transitional housing options are scarce.

With ongoing pressure in the rental market, we continue assisting with evictions, tenant bonds, and property repairs. Changes to the Residential Tenancy Act this year may see a shift in the types of issues we address

Top 3 problem types we assisted with this year:

- Termination by Landlord
- Rights & Responsibilities
- Rent Increases

We remain committed to collaborating with local and statewide partners to create a strong support system for those at risk of homelessness. Community support, such as the Albany Community Foundation's Homelessness Fund, has been vital in helping clients remain housed during these challenging times.

People
assisted
directly



129
Problems
assisted



418
Client interactions

48
Info or
referrals
provided



Jacob's Story

Jacob broke his lease at a property 6 months into a 12-month tenancy agreement.

After Jacob vacated the property, the Landlord claimed there was a cracked floor tile in the shower and believed Jacob should cover the repair costs.

Jacob believed the damage did not occur during his period of tenancy and he sought advice on his rights as a tenant to dispute the charge.

Our Tenant Advocate discussed Jacob's responsibilities as a tenant in accordance with the Residential Tenancies Act and explained the concept of 'fair wear and tear' and its difference from intentional or negligent damage.

Our Tenant Advocate then gathered building industry information on how and why tiles can crack which was provided to Jacob to support his dispute that the damage was not through recklessness or neglect.

The landlord considered Jacob's position and decided that Jacob was not liable for the cracked tile and allowed Jacob's bond to be finalised without any deductions or further delays.

"Thank you for your professionalism and courtesy"

"I feel like I'm in safe hands, thanks for your time"

Fran's Story

Fran was a long-term tenant in a private rental but fell on hard times and got significantly behind in her rent.

The landlord issued a breach notice to Fran for nonpayment, and when she couldn't pay the arrears, they issued a termination notice. After the termination date came and went, the landlord applied for a court order to terminate the lease and gain vacant possession.

After receiving the court notice Fran reached out for help to get an extension to remain in the property.

By this point there was little anyone could do to assist Fran to stay in the property. However, our Tenant Advocate linked Fran in with financial counselling and assessment for the WA Rent Relief Program.

Our Tenant Advocate also reviewed all of Fran's lease documentation and found the landlord had completed a form incorrectly in relation to the last rent increase.

Fran was assisted to prepare for and attend court and ultimately whilst Fran's tenancy was terminated, she was granted an additional 3 weeks to leave the property and had her rent arrears reduced by \$1,200.

Louise's Story

Louise was referred to our program by Anglicare's Albany Women's Centre following a disclosure of harm made by her children against their father.

Whilst Louise dealt with Police, the father separately made an urgent application to the Family Court.

The Centre's staff quickly facilitated a meeting between our lawyer and Louise. We assisted her in completing urgent response documents, ensuring the court was informed of the allegations under investigation. Anglicare was able to provide high level support and safety planning for Louise, as well as counselling for the children.

They also assisted with perpetrator mapping, which allowed Louise to understand the father's behaviour and see the risk he presented.

After that initial response, we provided further high volume legal advice and completed multiple court documents, which required significant time and care due to the specific allegations and the highly litigated response from the father's lawyers.

Due to the number of legal complexities in this matter, we were able to secure a pro bono barrister to provide representation at the interim hearing and the matter was mostly resolved and Louise was able to secure most of the protections she had sought for the children.

Grateful for our lawyers help,
Louise said:

"I can't thank you enough for all your help, you have been absolutely fantastic. I am still amazed by your level of dedication, care and love for your work."

How we helped people with legal issues

Our Legal Assistance program continued to help inform, empower, and build resilience within our community by providing legal advice, duty lawyer support, and ongoing casework to those at high risk of justice system involvement. Through an integrated approach, we offered intervention and prevention-focused services to equip people with a strong understanding of their rights and the legal landscape.

This past year, we saw an increase in complex cases where clients confronted multiple, overlapping legal challenges, a trend that has intensified over the past decade.

Top 3 Legal problem types we assisted with this year:

- Family Violence Restraining Orders
- Family Law - Parenting Orders
- Family Law - Property Orders

Beyond direct client support, we focus on early intervention and prevention, offering education to empower people who may need legal help in the future. Programs like the Family Safety Project and Youth Law Connect strengthen resilience in the community, as do our public education sessions on different legal issues.

Some of the programs we offered this year

Youth Law Connect – YACWA Project

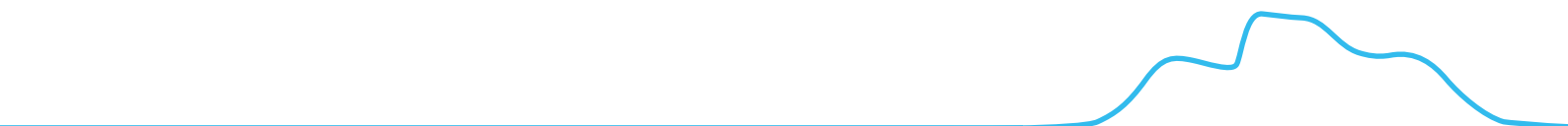
Youth Law Connect brings legal services directly to young people, particularly those at high risk of justice system involvement. Young people often delay seeking legal help, which can worsen issues like homelessness, mental health challenges, and financial distress.

To address this, Youth Law Connect provides on-site legal advice and information at Young House, a local youth refuge, and through regular drop-in sessions at Open Access, a youth centre run by Albany Youth Support Association. Common issues include tenants' rights, restraining orders, and criminal injury compensation. We continue to draw on a grant received last year from the Youth Affairs Council of Western Australia (YACWA).

Duty Lawyer Services

Over the past year we have been working alongside Legal Aid to provide duty lawyer services for the weekly Restraining Order and Protection and Care lists in the Albany Magistrates Court. In the Restraining Order space in particular, this working arrangement has enabled a higher proportion of matters to be settled by consent as in most cases both parties have been able to receive legal advice. This saves the matters needing to progress to trial, meaning less stress and trauma for the parties as well as freeing up of the Court's time.

We also secured ongoing funding to continue to coordinate the Family and Advocacy Support Service during the Family Court circuits in Albany, where parties in family violence situations can access duty lawyer and support services through our service, Legal Aid and Anglicare.



Outreach

Through our outreach program we offer in person legal assistance during our fortnightly trips to Katanning on a Tuesday, conducting appointments out of the Katanning Hub Community Resource Centre and have this year expanded our outreach program to include fortnightly appointments in Narrogin on a Wednesday at the Amity Health office.

Family Safety Project – Anglicare Partnership

The Great Southern Family Safety Project addresses the high demand for legal support among family violence victim-survivors in the Great Southern. Delivered in partnership with Anglicare WA and the Albany Women's Centre, this trauma-informed, culturally secure project provides integrated legal and social support to help clients on their journey to safety and stability.

Our lawyers work closely with domestic violence advocates, financial counsellors, and social workers to offer comprehensive legal support. This year, we began offering duty lawyer services at the Albany Court, assisting with restraining orders and child protection matters. This support has increased the resolution of cases by consent, reducing the need for traumatic trials.

Focused on timely assistance, the project emphasises early intervention to improve legal outcomes. We train DV advocates, prioritise urgent appointments, and regularly visit the local women's refuge, ensuring immediate support for urgent matters.

People
assisted
directly



694
Problems
assisted



Client interactions

1531
Info or
referrals
provided



Annie's Story

Annie was involved in a motor vehicle accident a few years ago and the owners of the vehicle took her to the Magistrates Court. This was a shock to Annie as she had not heard from the insurers at any point. She came in to us in a panic as she could not afford to pay the \$35,000 claimed and she only had 14 days to respond to the Court.

Our lawyer explained the court process to Annie and helped her to fill in and file her response documents so she could meet the court deadline. We then helped Annie to compile the relevant information to demonstrate she was in financial hardship and put a time to pay arrangement forward to the vehicle owner. This was accepted and Annie was able to settle the matter, saving her a lot of stress and time.

Peter's story

Peter lost his dog from a dog attack, and contacted us for advice on recovering his vet expenses. Since the offending dog's owner was facing criminal charges, an appointment was scheduled for after that court date as in some cases victims may receive compensation (called restitution) through the criminal court sentencing process, which can negate the need to pursue a civil claim.

In Peter's case he was awarded restitution for his vet expenses. As a result, his appointment was then about enforcing the restitution order rather than filing a civil claim as initially planned. Our lawyer provided him with detailed advice about the process, the relevant fact sheets and the necessary court forms.

Shortly after, Peter informed us that the court had received the payment from the dog's owner and that he expected full reimbursement soon.

Grateful for the practical support,
Peter shared this message:

*"Can't thank you
enough and the
awesome team at the
front desk for all your
patience, help, support,
and valuable time.*

*You made me feel
heard, and I left your
office with hope."*

Sandy's story

Sandy came to us when her husband evicted her from the family home, making her homeless. Sandy was not allowed to take her child with her and was prevented from seeing or spending time with them.

Sandy disclosed she experienced family violence throughout the marriage. She was culturally denigrated and demeaned, had no access to money, was not allowed to have friends and was not allowed to parent their child.

Sandy was able to secure a job as a support worker and was able to get her own accommodation.

Sandy understandably wanted to spend time with her child and our lawyer attempted to negotiate with the father about parenting arrangements, but he was not receptive.

We then helped Sandy to file in the Family Court and after considerable correspondence and court hearings the Court made orders for the child to spend time with Sandy, which will continue to increase over time.

“Thank you so much, I don’t know what I would have done if you didn’t help me.”

Many thanks to our supporters and partners:



Australian Government
Attorney-General's Department



Department of Energy, Mines,
Industry Regulation and Safety





Great Southern
**Community
Legal Services**

4/15 Peels Place, Albany
PO Box 5205, Albany WA 6332

Phone: 08 9842 8566
Freecall: 1800 60 60 60

info@gscls.com.au
www.gscls.com.au
facebook.com/gscls