

# CASE STUDY



## ACCESSIBLE AND INCLUSIVE SERVICES

Gender and Disability Experts by Experience  
Advocates & Victoria Legal Aid (VLA).

A case study for professionals in the specialist family violence, disability and social services sectors demonstrating the importance of continual consultation with lived experience experts to enhance access and inclusion in legal services for women and gender diverse people with disabilities.

"We are so fortunate to talk to and learn from the Experts. We find our interactions invaluable for our learning and development"

(VLA staff member).



# Overview

The Gender and Disability Experts by Experience Advocates (the Experts) are a team of women and gender diverse people with disabilities who use their diverse lived experience, knowledge and skills to consult with organisations on how their projects, programs and services can be more gender and disability inclusive.

Victoria Legal Aid has consulted the Experts for advice and feedback on four projects and client services (August 2023–September 2024).

## Consultation 1– Help Before Court Online Form

### Purpose

In line with their Disability Action Plan that commits to improving the different ways people with disabilities access information and services, VLA consulted the Experts on the online form clients use to get access to legal support before going to court in August 2023.

### Outcomes

Consulting the Experts allowed VLA to understand the emotional impacts and barriers that are created when engaging with legal services, and how they can improve access to their services so that people with disabilities can have a better experience.

For example, when accessing a service for the first time, the uncertainty around accessibility can amplify emotions for users. Resharing traumatic lived experiences can impact mental health.

As a result, “Our webform is (now) easy to access and we are more upfront about our service (who is eligible, what the process looks like) so it’s easier for people to navigate the form.”

The contribution from the Experts helped VLA streamline and simplify the online form. The consultation also helped improve the language on the webpages.

“We were so grateful for the wisdom and insights from the Experts. Their feedback helped shape our online form and the webpages. It also helped us understand the diverse experience of people with disabilities and how they use and access our website.”

(VLA staff member).

### Closing the Loop

VLA returned to the Experts to provide feedback on actions taken to improve the online form in April 2024. It is good practice for consultants to close the loop with the lived experience experts they consult.

“

***“It was great to hear from VLA and [...] see how we can make an impact, those closing the loop sessions are really important.”***

***(Expert).***

## Consultation 2– Access and Referral Policy (Access, Intake and Referral [AIR] Project)

### Overview

Following this successful collaboration, VLA consulted the Experts again in June 2024 to examine best practice access and referral pathways for clients through different channels.

### Purpose

The first point of contact a person has with VLA is pivotal to their ability to access support. VLA consulted with Experts on effective communication, delivering a welcoming and inclusive service, and responding to clients safely and respectfully. These conversations have shaped VLA's approach to connecting help-seekers and clients with the right information and services, and amplifies the message that there is no wrong way to seek legal help.

### Outcomes

VLA has worked on a consistent set of Guiding Principles that client-facing staff can use regardless of their point of first contact.

The AIR Project is built on a set of Guiding Principles that shape how VLA engages with help-seekers, ensuring that services are welcoming, inclusive, safe, and effective. These principles apply across all intake channels, offices, and service areas and reinforce our commitment to consistent, person-centred, and trauma-informed legal assistance.

### Why This Matters

Embedding these Guiding Principles into VLA's intake and referral systems ensures that help-seekers experience a consistent, respectful, and effective service, regardless of how or where they seek assistance.

It also strengthens VLA's client-centered approach, ensuring that lived experience insights and best practice service design inform how we connect people with legal support.



The Experts played a key role in shaping these principles by providing critical insights into the lived experiences of women and gender diverse people with disabilities navigating legal systems. Their feedback helped identify key barriers to accessing legal assistance, such as the emotional impact of retelling traumatic experiences, the need for clear and respectful communication, and the importance of accessible and culturally safe referral pathways. Through their expertise, VLA was able to refine its approach to intake and referral, ensuring that processes are more inclusive, trauma-informed, and responsive to diverse client needs.

## Consultation 3– Assessment and Referral Court (ARC)

### Overview

VLA consulted the Experts again on ARC in August 2024.

ARC is for people charged with a criminal offence who have a mental health issue or cognitive disability. ARC aims to support them to improve their health and wellbeing, and get the support they need. VLA assists people in ARC.

### Purpose

VLA wanted to know how to improve the way lawyers support people with disabilities in ARC.

### Outcomes

#### Centering of Lived Experience

The Experts advised on the gendered and disability barriers to seeking legal assistance. In particular, they recommended the gender of the lawyer to be a choice for VLA clients, present on intake forms, as the overrepresentation of male lawyers can increase the fear of not being believed.

#### Further to this consultation, VLA committed to:

- Recruitment of women and gender diverse people from marginalised cohorts for ARC Advisory Group.
- Ongoing incorporation of lived experience advice into developing a training toolkit for lawyers.

#### Staff Capability and Capacity Building

The Experts also advised on ways to enhance organisational gender and disability inclusive practice. They recommended:

- **Peer led disability awareness training for magistrates, lawyers and professionals in the justice system.**
  - Strengthening of ARC lawyers' understanding of family violence and trauma-informed practices.
  - Developing systemic advocacy skills to effectively support clients with disabilities, such as asking during pre-court engagement if they have care responsibilities, support networks or support needs.
- **Employing a person with disabilities to be a Disability Liaison Officer that would use their lived experience to create a safe space and assist in navigating the legal system.**
  - Making clear that clients with disabilities can have support people present at court.
  - Influencing court practices so that more people with disabilities can participate in ARC.



# Consultation 4– Inclusive Language Guide and Video Conferencing Use

## Overview

VLA consulted the Experts again in September 2024, on VLA staff use of inclusive language when they communicate with clients, and about video conferencing whose popularity increased since the pandemic.

## Inclusive Language Guide

### Purpose

VLA consulted the Experts on appropriate language to use when working with clients with disabilities experiencing domestic and family violence. They were consulted on a variety of disability-related words.

### Outcomes

There was a clear consensus that experiences of ableist and gendered violence are specific to each person. Experts recommended that it should be left to the client how they want to identify and whether they want staff to use or not use certain words.

Experts also indicated that providing staff with explanations behind using certain words would be beneficial. General guidelines to prevent gendered violence included; not to victim blame, and to shift accountability back on the perpetrator.

## Video Conferencing Use

### Purpose

VLA also consulted the Experts on what front-line staff should keep in mind when setting up video conferencing such as Zoom or Teams.

### Outcomes

- Increased consideration of access and safety prior to meetings.
- Being mindful that new technology being introduced when speaking to someone for the first time about personal legal issues can be stressful.
- Being aware that using video conferencing can heighten emotional reactions due to the lack of face-to-face interactions.

As a result of the consultation a video conferencing guide was created to provide staff with guidelines when video conferencing is the best communication option for the clients. This was something that was missing at VLA. Live captions should also be enabled when video conferencing as this is an accessibility requirement for some clients.



# Future Considerations

## Closing the Loop

VLA returned to the Experts to provide feedback on actions taken to improve the online form in April 2024. It is good practice for consultants to close the loop with the lived experience experts they consult.

## Ongoing Consultations

VLA intends to keep consulting the Experts on gendered and ableist violence, and access and inclusion to continually improve service design and delivery.

## Centering of Lived Experience

VLA is committed to engaging with Experts in paid lived experience opportunities. They have recently established their Lived Experience Advisory Group in February 2025.

"[We appreciated] The openness of the Experts to embrace us and share their knowledge and experiences with us. We really value our opportunities for connecting with the Experts."

(VLA staff member).

If you or your organisation is interested in learning more about the Experts, please contact on the Gender and Disability team at [GandD@wdv.org.au](mailto:GandD@wdv.org.au)

