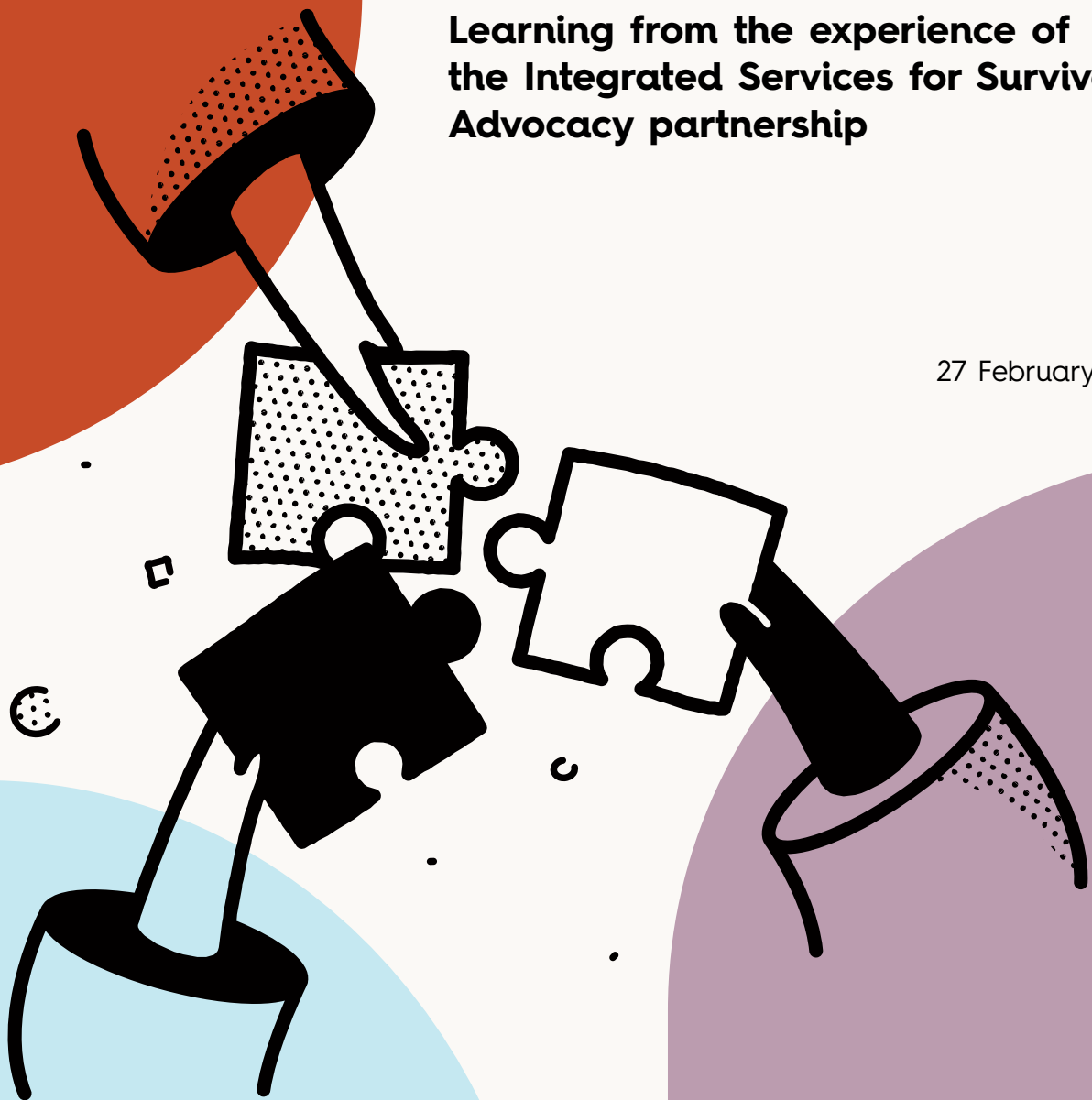




# Sustaining Health Justice Partnerships:

Learning from the experience of the Integrated Services for Survivor Advocacy partnership

27 February 2024



SECASA 



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Any errors are ours.

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Health Justice Australia is the national centre of excellence for health justice partnership, supporting collaborations between services to achieve better health and justice outcomes for vulnerable communities.

Health justice partnerships (HJPs) integrate legal help into services that support people's health and wellbeing. HJPs assist:

- individuals, through direct service provision in places that they access
- partnering practitioners and services by integrating service responses around client needs and capability
- people and communities vulnerable to complex need through advocacy for systemic change to policies and practices that affect the social determinants of health.

# Contents

<b>Executive Summary</b> .....	<b>4</b>
Value of the partnership for clients .....	5
Value for partner services and staff .....	7
What has sustained the partnership .....	7
<b>Introduction</b> .....	<b>9</b>
Methodology .....	10
Overview of the ISSA program .....	12
<b>Findings</b> .....	<b>15</b>
Value for clients .....	16
Value for partner services and staff .....	28
Value for students .....	32
Value for legal system .....	33
What has sustained the partnership? .....	34
Challenges .....	41
<b>Conclusion</b> .....	<b>43</b>
Outcomes identified .....	44
<b>Appendix 1: Interview schedules</b> .....	<b>45</b>
<b>Appendix 2: Case studies provided during interviews</b> .....	<b>48</b>
<b>Appendix 3: Summary of outcomes, indicators and contributing factors</b> .....	<b>51</b>

# Executive Summary

The Integrated Services for Survivor Advocacy (ISSA) is a [health justice partnership \(HJP\)](#) between South-East Monash Legal Service (SMLS) and the South Eastern Centre Against Sexual Assault and Family Violence (SECASA) in Victoria. SMLS solicitors work closely with SECASA counsellors to provide legal advice, assistance, and representation to victim-survivors of sexual assault, non-offending family members and any other person affected by the assault other than the offender. The partnership supports clients to navigate the justice system, particularly for victims' compensation, and provides help for a range of other legal issues such as fines. ISSA has assisted 3,448 clients since it was established in 1995, 56% of whom were female. ISSA specialises in applications for assistance to the Victims of Crime Assistance Tribunal (VOCAT). For example, in 2022 alone, 41 ISSA clients were awarded over \$121,000 from VOCAT in compensation for a variety of expenses to assist recovery including retraining, sports membership, music lessons and education programs.

The ISSA partnership has been running for over 28 years and is one of the longest running health justice partnerships in Australia, in a context where the sustainability of partnerships is a key challenge. The aim of this exploratory study is

to gather insights from ISSA clients, health and legal staff, and partner services about:

- what 'value' or success looks like from each of their perspectives
- what they identify as contributing to these outcomes
- what they feel has sustained the partnership for 28 years.

The primary data source was interviews with a small purposive sample of 14 managers, lawyers, counsellors and clients. This research was undertaken as part of a broader project to identify the outcomes that are commonly expected from working together in health justice partnership and to develop shared indicators for the impact of this work. This will help further evolve a theory of change about what types of activities, processes or relationships support different outcomes and what happens when these are not present.

Health justice partnerships support people with complex intersecting health and legal issues. ISSA works with clients who have experienced and live with severe trauma, as well as the stress and anxiety that a range of complex legal and non-legal problems bring to their lives. ISSA often supports people with historical cases of sexual abuse. For some, previous experience of the criminal justice system may have further

compounded that trauma, where abuse may not have been recognised, people's experiences questioned, or there was insufficient evidence for their case to go to court.

Together, these experiences can challenge people's confidence, trust and capability to meet the significant demands of legal processes. These demands may include the need to attend multiple appointments, revisit the trauma, share personal details with a range of professionals, and stay engaged in what can be an invasive and protracted process. Willingness to engage with these processes speaks to the strength and courage of

these clients, together with the need for ISSA's trauma-informed approach. For services, trauma can manifest as people taking time to trust the service, or disengaging when there is a setback or change in lawyer or psychologist. People may be balancing a range of other issues in their lives (e.g. housing, money, relationships) or managing health issues, resulting in missed appointments and other challenges in engaging in the processes.

This client group often needs long-term and intensive support and may drop out of the legal process for extended periods of time. The findings need to be understood in this context.

## Value of the partnership for clients

A primary value of the program identified by the three clients interviewed was that it made them feel safe and supported, heard and believed, and that it gave them back control or agency. They identified that this led to an increased sense of self-worth. This finding needs to be viewed in the context that two of these clients had not yet had their VOCAT matters heard, and the third one had been unsuccessful. Interestingly, the client whose application had been unsuccessful still spoke very highly of the value of the process for them.

... I know some days I wasn't in a good frame of mind and [the lawyer] was so patient. The patience was the one that got me and that she actually believed me and supported me and gave me hope with all I've been going through. ... She gave me back my self-worth. You know you do deserve this. ... The biggest thing that made it stand out was I was actually believed. I felt that no one would believe what happened to me. My counsellor did – she was also like [the lawyer].

*Client 2*

In speaking with staff, a striking feature of the ISSA partnership was the clear and shared focus of each partner service and their staff on client recovery as the shared purpose of their work together. All other desired outcomes, including the legal outcomes, were in support of this shared end goal. Both lawyers and SECASA counsellors described the value of their work in terms of recovery for clients who have experienced sexual abuse and domestic violence.

We're looking for an opportunity for clients to be put in a place where they can potentially move forward with their lives in a constructive or stable way, whatever that looks like to the client. And I think the real impact from a social justice perspective is much more attainable when you're using an integrated service model.

*SMLS Manager 2*

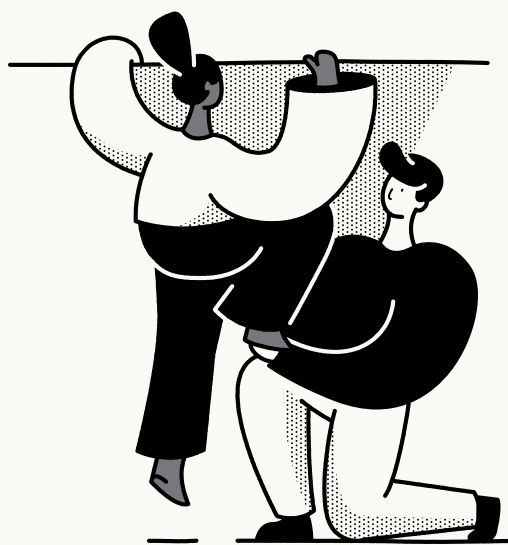
A primary value of the program identified by the three clients interviewed was that it made them feel safe and supported, heard and believed, and that it gave them back control or agency.

In speaking with staff, a striking feature of the ISSA partnership was the clear and shared focus of each partner service and their staff on client recovery as the shared purpose of their work together. All other desired outcomes, including the legal outcomes, were in support of this shared end goal.

Practitioners from both services identified similar types of value of the partnership for clients – the value of feeling safe and supported, the value of feeling heard and believed, and the value of having agency over their matter. They also identified the value of a positive VOCAT outcome and the value of addressing additional legal issues. Each of these can independently or in combination contribute to the ability of a client to recover and move forward with their lives.

Based on many years of experience, staff of both services could see these benefits in the legal outcomes they were able to achieve for clients, in the feedback from clients about the difference the service has made to them, and in how clients were able to move on following the assistance.

Contributing to these outcomes, the partnership provided a safe and supportive environment for clients through trauma-informed practice including establishing a pathway of trust through warm referrals, minimising the need for a client to re-tell their story, providing services on site at SECASA, having a SECASA counsellor attend interviews with the lawyer and managing client expectations. This safe and supportive environment facilitated clients telling their story and remaining engaged with the VOCAT process. Clients, lawyers and counsellors all spoke of the importance of being heard and believed as part of the journey to recovery for victim-survivors.



Counsellors identified that there is additional value for clients in being heard and believed by professionals in the legal system including judges and lawyers.

Supporting clients' agency over how their matters proceeded was an important element in assisting recovery, through giving back a sense of control over their lives and keeping them engaged with the VOCAT process. Clients were supported with making choices, such as where they saw the lawyer, whether to have the counsellor at their interview, timeframes for dealing with the matter, and whether they wanted to retell their story.

**Take your time – they were saying this is a process that doesn't need to be done in a week. That really helped. It was like I didn't feel under the pump, pressured. If there was something else more pressing for me to be addressing like I had other things going on at the time they said put this aside, this can wait. The understanding was fantastic. Thank you.**

**Client 1**

Clients valued being kept updated about their matters in a timely way, as well as being provided with structure, particularly if their lives may lack structure.

Separate to the importance for clients of being heard by VOCAT, successful VOCAT outcomes were seen by lawyers and counsellors as having the potential to assist with a client's recovery, through providing funding for awards to assist their recovery such as counselling, and in exceptional circumstances re-skilling, gym membership or computer equipment.

The quality of SECASA reports was seen as being a key factor in achieving a successful VOCAT outcome, particularly for exceptional circumstances. The quality of these reports was enhanced through the SMLS lawyer and SECASA counsellor working in tandem with the client throughout the process. This was contrasted to examples of VOCAT reports where there was no partnership with the psychologist who was preparing the report, which did not contain all the information required by VOCAT.

The lawyers reported being able to get better instructions from the client because of the trust that was cultivated through the three-way relationship between the lawyer, social worker and client. Clients were often willing to divulge information they had not divulged to the police, and the presence of their SECASA counsellor reduced the risk of re-traumatisation.

The partnership was seen to contribute to the client remaining engaged with the VOCAT process, which was often a challenge due to the ongoing effects of trauma. SECASA counsellors were able to re-connect the lawyers to clients if they stop attending appointments, and lawyers can alert a counsellor if the client is experiencing issues they may be able to assist them with.

The partnership assisted clients to address other legal issues which may be a barrier to recovery. SECASA staff, who receive regular training from SMLS on spotting legal issues, refer clients with legal issues to SMLS who will then assist them with these or provide a warm referral.

## Value for partner services and staff

The fundamental value of the partnership for both SMLS and SECASA was that it improved outcomes for their clients. There was mutual respect for the skills of lawyers and social workers, and what each of them brought to the partnership.

The partnership was seen to improve the capacity of each organisation to provide services in a more efficient way through streamlined referral and communication, including having lawyers on site at SECASA. SMLS valued the ease with which reports could be requested from SECASA, and the fact that the high quality of SECASA reports meant that they did not need to go back to them to request changes.

These efficiencies were contrasted with the inefficiencies of working with lawyers and psychologists where there was not an ongoing partnership.

Both SMLS and SECASA staff identified ways in which their capability was enhanced through the partnership. SMLS staff identified that working with SECASA counsellors improved their ability to understand the broader issues facing their clients and the services available to assist them, provide trauma-informed legal services, and better recognise a high quality VOCAT report. SECASA counsellors valued the knowledge they gained about VOCAT from the SMLS lawyers, and that SMLS pushed the boundaries of what could be awarded through VOCAT.

Both counsellors and lawyers valued the sense of work satisfaction that resulted from being part of a trauma-informed service assisting clients to successfully navigate the legal system.

## What has sustained the partnership

This was at the heart of the strength and longevity of the partnership: both services could see that it resulted in improved outcomes for their clients and contributed to their recovery from the trauma of sexual assault and family violence.

Being in it for the client outcome. Being client focused is what makes the partnership work from my perspective. They're doing their thing. We're doing our thing and we come together because we know it's going to get a better outcome for the client. We don't come together because the government told us to, we don't come together because

it'll look good on our annual report. We don't come together because we want to position ourselves in a certain way. The only reason that we've worked in partnership for this long is because we recognise the outcomes that it achieves for clients.

**SMLS Manager 1**

Linked to this was having a shared set of values, common goals and a clear understanding of the purpose of the partnership. These common values included understanding what clients had gone through and the consequent need to minimise re-traumatisation of clients and to be flexible.

Having firm foundations was also identified as key to the success of the partnership. These firm foundations were in large part due to the commitment and investment of the staff who established and built the partnership over a long period of time. This commitment and championing of the partnership at an executive

level and among the staff has continued after these founding staff left and the service is now viewed as core business for both organisations. The success of the partnership and length of time it has been running contributes to the desire to ensure that it continues.

Several features were identified as core to a sustained partnership, including that the partnership was client centred with clear outcomes for clients. It also had firm foundations with executive support and champions, relationships and communication were strong, there were systems in place to support the partnership, there was regular training, and it was financially sustainable.

A fourth key factor in the success of the partnership was strong relationships. Having clarity around roles and responsibilities, having lawyers on site at SECASA, and having clear lines of communication and ease of access were important elements in maintaining these relationships. The importance of face-to-face communication between SECASA and SMLS to the effectiveness of the partnership was demonstrated by the fall off in referrals during COVID. This was exacerbated by high levels of staff turnover and increased demand. The lesson here is that even a long-established partnership with clear joint aims needs ongoing work to ensure that relationships are maintained. Having clear contact points, regular communication and training, and employing staff with skills in relationship building are important in maintaining relationships.

While the partnership did have some formal processes in place, such as a steering committee, designated staff to manage the partnership in both organisations, and joint referral and authority to act forms, systems did not emerge as a central feature of what sustains the partnership. They were important, but the fact that systems were not too rigid or overly bureaucratic was seen as more important to the strength of the partnership.

Linked to this was the fact that the partnership had a level of financial sustainability through legal costs from VOCAT<sup>1</sup> and SMLS allocating generalist

funds to the partnership. This was seen to give the partnership the flexibility to design services to maximise value to the clients, in contrast to grant-funded programs which may have more rigid guidelines on what can or can't be done.



While the partnership has faced challenges over the years, the shared values and commitment of SMLS and SECASA to obtaining the best outcomes for clients meant that there was a willingness to find solutions.

In the words of one of the SECASA counsellors:

It's a wonderful service. It's really valued by SECASA, by the clinicians and it's certainly valued by the clients, and I hope it continues for another 28 years plus. I look forward to the relationships getting bigger and better now that we're coming out of COVID.

**SECASA Counsellor 2**

1. This is changing with the introduction of the Victim's Legal Service.



# Introduction

The Integrated Services for Survivor Advocacy (ISSA) is a health justice partnership between South-East Monash Legal Service (SMLS) and the South Eastern Centre Against Sexual Assault and Family Violence (SECASA). SMLS solicitors work closely with SECASA counsellors to provide legal advice, assistance and representation to victim-survivors of sexual assault, non-offending family members and any other person affected by the assault other than the offender. The partnership supports clients to navigate the justice system, particularly for financial assistance provided through Victims of Crime Assistance Tribunal (VOCAT) and provides help for a range of other legal issues such as fines.

The ISSA partnership has been running for 28 years and is one of the longest running health justice partnerships in Australia, in a context where the sustainability of partnerships is a key challenge to the model. Many health justice partnerships are still funded as though they are pilots or via year-on-year grants which undermine their ability to sustain the partnership. Much of the foundational activity of a partnership (e.g. developing relationships and coordination) is rarely funded at all.

The aim of this small-scale exploratory study is to explore with those involved:

- what 'value' or 'outcomes' look like to the clients, as well health and legal partner staff of a long-term health justice partnership
- what indicators are being used (formally or informally) to determine if these outcomes are being achieved
- what factors they identify as contributing to these outcomes
- what they feel has helped sustain this long-term partnership.

This study did not attempt to evaluate the partnership, measure success, or quantify benefit against the identified outcomes.

Health Justice Australia supports a network of health justice partnerships across Australia. This research was undertaken as part of a project to identify shared outcomes and develop indicators for health justice partnerships. As well as providing insights back to the ISSA team and their partners, the insights from this research will be shared across this network to build understanding of factors that contribute to sustained and successful health justice partnerships.

## Methodology

This is a qualitative exploratory study to gather insights from staff from both agencies working in the partnership and people who have been served by the partnership. The aim is to understand how the value of this long-term partnership is seen from different perspectives and what features of the partnership have contributed to its longevity. The aim is not to quantify value or to evaluate the partnership, but to identify different ways that success is understood and identified. This will help inform the development of outcome measures for the partnership and for health justice partnerships more broadly.

A steering committee with representatives from SECASA, SMLS and Health Justice Australia oversaw the design and implementation of the research. Monash Health Ethics Committee provided ethics approval for the project 18 April 2023 (HREC/90945/MonH-2023-361443(v1)). Site specific approval was granted 27 July 2023.

The primary data source was interviews, supplemented by service data and existing client case studies. Within the resources of the project, interviews were carried out with a small purposive sample of 14 managers, lawyers, counsellors and clients. People were not randomly selected, but approached for their connection to the program and willingness to reflect on its impact and longevity.

Table 1: People interviewed for the study

INTERVIEWEE	ROLE	NUMBER
Clients		3
SECASA	Managers	2
	Counsellors	3
SMLS	Managers	2
	ISSA Lawyers	4*
<b>TOTAL</b>		<b>14</b>

\* One of the ISSA lawyers was also an academic who at different times had worked as a lawyer or volunteer at ISSA and had supervised student placements at SMLS.

We were not able to obtain an interview with a VOCAT member, or with the founders of ISSA. However, two of the respondents had been working in ISSA when it was established and another had 20 years' experience working in the partnership.

The three clients who agreed to be interviewed for the study were women. The voices of male clients, as well as clients not in a position to be interviewed, are not included. The views of the clients interviewed speak to their own experiences, rather than the experience of all clients. Similarly, individual practitioners bring their own experiences and insights about the program.

The interviews were carried out via Teams, Zoom and phone, and were recorded and transcribed with participant consent. The recordings were deleted once the interviews were transcribed. All participants were provided with an information and consent form prior to the interview.

Staff from each of the partner services were selected for their involvement in the program and their willingness to participate in the research.

SMLS contacted clients who had previously indicated they wished to be interviewed. They

confirmed that the clients were not currently experiencing risks to their safety and were able to provide free and informed consent to participation. Clients were given the option to be interviewed by an SMLS staff member or a health justice partnerships researcher and were offered follow-up referral and support if required.

The interviews were semi-structured based on a set of open questions (Appendix 1), with the aim of understanding the experience and perspectives of those interviewed.

Interviews were transcribed and deidentified before being analysed. The interviews aimed to identify:

- what 'success' or 'value' looks like from different perspectives, including clients and staff of each partner service
- the factors that participants identified as contributing to that value
- the factors that participants identified as contributing to the sustainability of the partnership.

A set of de-identified case studies were provided by staff from each service to illustrate the nature of the work and how it supports clients.



## Overview of the ISSA program

The Integrated Services for Survivor Advocacy (ISSA) program supports victim-survivors to recover from sexual assault and/or family violence by supporting them to navigate the legal system. The program is a 28-year-old partnership between South-East Monash Legal Service (SMLS) and the South Eastern Centre Against Sexual Assault and Family Violence (SECASA).

South-East Monash Legal Service (SMLS) is a community legal centre providing free legal assistance to disadvantaged people across the southeast of Melbourne. SMLS has significant experience and expertise in providing legal support for individuals who have experienced sexual assault and domestic violence. SMLS employs a trauma-informed, holistic method of service delivery, where legal assistance is partnered with other social services to provide wrap-around support to address legal and non-legal issues.

SECASA is a specialist sexual assault and family violence service assisting people in southeast Melbourne. Trained counsellor advocates work with clients over an extended period to provide therapeutic intervention, counselling and crisis response. They receive brokerage funding to assist with other client needs such as housing. There are SECASA counselling locations at Dandenong, East Bentleigh, Sandringham, Seaford, McCrae, Pakenham, Hastings and

Cranbourne. The Dandenong and Seaford SECASA offices are in Multi-Disciplinary Centres (MDC) which also house police Sexual Offences and Child-abuse Investigation Teams (SOCITs). SECASA has a memorandum of understanding with the MDC that allows SOCITs and SECASA to share information about a client.

The ISSA program provides legal advice, assistance and representation to victim-survivors of sexual assault and family members affected by the assault other than the offender. The sexual assault may be recent or have occurred sometime earlier, including in childhood. The service is supported by SMLS staff, volunteers and clinical placement students from Monash University Faculty of Law. An SMLS lawyer provides on-site legal assistance at the Dandenong, East Bentleigh and Seaford SECASA offices on a regular basis. ISSA has two lawyers and, since it was established in 1995, has assisted 3,448 clients, 56% of whom were female.

ISSA specialises in applications for assistance to the Victims of Crime Assistance Tribunal (VOCAT). In 2022, ISSA clients were awarded over \$121,000 from VOCAT in compensation and for a variety of expenses to assist recovery including counselling, and in exceptional circumstances, training, sports membership, music lessons and education programs.



## How ISSA works

A significant proportion of SECASA clients need legal advice, either for VOCAT matters or other legal issues, such as a fine, tenancy matter, or family law problem. While working with a client, a SECASA counsellor will identify that they may need legal assistance. If they are not sure, they can have a secondary consultation<sup>2</sup> with an ISSA lawyer by phone, email or in person.

Once the SECASA counsellor has identified a legal issue, they provide a referral to SMLS through a warm referral pathway.<sup>3</sup> This includes filling out a referral form, an Authority to Act form, and providing additional information to the ISSA lawyer if necessary, such as whether the client is experiencing a mental health issue or requires additional support.

SMLS undertakes a conflict check and sets up an appointment for the client. The lawyer may be supported by final year law students undertaking their professional legal training. The client can choose to see the SMLS lawyer at the Springvale office, at a SECASA location or remotely. The SECASA counsellor will attend the appointment with the client if the client wants them to. When required, a member of the SMLS social support team contacts the client before the first appointment to ensure they feel supported and to provide information about what to expect when they meet with the lawyer.

The ISSA lawyer primarily assists clients with VOCAT applications, which itself aims to be a process of redress and recovery. They may also provide preliminary advice about other legal issues the client is experiencing and then refer them to another lawyer at SMLS or to an

external service. This will generally be done as a warm referral.

ISSA assistance with VOCAT applications includes:

- assisting clients to identify awards available under VOCAT that will assist with their recovery
- filing applications with VOCAT including interim applications and applications for variation
- writing detailed submissions in support of a client's application
- when needed, assisting clients to prepare victim impact statements
- assisting clients to prepare statutory declarations
- liaising with psychologists and counsellors to obtain psychological reports and records
- liaising with GPs, dentists, and other medical practitioners to obtain medical reports and records
- collecting supporting material from social and personal supports
- corresponding with Victoria Police and Office of Public Prosecutions to help clients understand which stage their matter is at
- preparing clients for VOCAT hearings
- advising on other avenues for redress, including Sentencing Act Applications, the National Redress Scheme or other civil claims, and making warm referrals where appropriate.

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2. Secondary consultation refers to communication and information sharing between partnering practitioners that helps them to support their patients and clients.

3. Warm referrals are those where staff in one service contact another service for or with the client, rather than just providing contact information and recommending that the client contact the service themselves.

SMLS liaises with SECASA throughout the VOCAT matter to ensure the client is supported through what is often a difficult and overwhelming process. Much of the evidence required for VOCAT requires SMLS and SECASA working together to prepare psychological reports and assessments. SMLS keeps SECASA staff informed of the process and outcomes of the VOCAT application.

An SMLS social worker or social work student provides follow up support for clients to access their awards. These awards are financial assistance for a range of expenses to compensate the client and to assist with recovery. The social worker may also help with issues such as housing and financial counselling.

### **Victims of Crime Assistance Tribunal (VOCAT)**

VOCAT assists victims to recover from a violent crime committed in Victoria, by providing financial assistance for expenses incurred as a direct result of the crime. An application for assistance may be determined at a hearing, which provides an opportunity for victims to give voice to the impact of the crime and to receive acknowledgement and validation of their trauma.

The tribunal may award financial assistance for a range of expenses. The types of assistance available include assistance for counselling and medical expenses, safety related expenses, loss or damage to clothing, loss of earnings, loss of money expected from the deceased and assistance for funeral expenses. In exceptional circumstances, the tribunal may award an amount for other expenses to assist the applicant in their recovery from the act of violence. This might include financial assistance for education, gym membership or computer equipment.

Solicitors' costs and counselling expenses, including report writing, can be reimbursed at the discretion of the tribunal.

# Findings

The insights reported here should be read through a trauma-informed lens.<sup>4</sup> The clients who access ISSA have experienced and live with severe trauma, as well as the stress and anxiety that a range of complex legal and non-legal problems bring to their lives. For some, previous experience of the criminal justice system may have further compounded that trauma, where abuse may not have been recognised, people's experiences were questioned, or there was insufficient evidence for their case to go to court.

Together, these experiences can challenge people's confidence, trust and capability to meet the significant demands of legal processes. These demands may include the need to attend multiple appointments, revisit the trauma, share personal details with a range of professionals, and stay engaged in what can be an invasive and protracted process. Willingness to engage with these processes speaks to the

strength and courage of these clients, together with the need for ISSA's trauma-informed approach.<sup>5</sup> For services, trauma can manifest as people taking time to trust the service, or disengaging when there is a setback or change in lawyer or psychologist. People may be balancing a range of other issues in their lives (e.g. housing, money, family relationships or managing health issues), resulting in missed appointments and other challenges in engaging with the processes.

Case studies which demonstrate how the partnership works are provided in Appendix 2.



- 
4. Trauma-informed practice is guided by a set of principles: safety, trustworthiness, choice, collaboration and empowerment. These principles provide a framework to support healthy healing relationships.
  5. The story of a former ISSA client told by Gideon Haigh in *This is how I will strangle you* is a graphic and moving account of the effects of long-term abuse and the role of ISSA and other services in assisting with recovery.

## Value for clients

The three clients interviewed all identified the value of the service in helping them feel safe and supported, heard and believed, and giving them back control or agency. They identified that this led to an increased sense of self-worth. This finding needs to be viewed in the context that two clients had not yet had their VOCAT matters heard, and the third one had been unsuccessful. Interestingly, the client whose application had been unsuccessful still spoke very highly of the value of the process for them.

I remember getting the first phone call [from the lawyer] and finally being heard. Finally had someone who felt warm and understanding. Appreciated the position that I was in and that it was really tough to talk about so they gave me the time, and just sort of pretty much allowed me to tell my story enough so that they could get a get a picture of where I was at. ... The biggest thing that made it stood out was I was actually believed. I felt that no one would believe what happened to me. My counsellor did – she was also like [the solicitor].

*Client 2*

Practitioners from both services identified similar types of value of the partnership for clients – feeling safe, supported, heard and believed and this in turn supporting clients to have increased agency over their matter. They reported the value for clients of a positive VOCAT outcome, and the value of addressing additional legal issues. Each of these can independently or in combination contribute to the ability of a client to recover and move forward with their lives.

Both lawyers and counsellors saw the primary value of their work in terms of **recovery** for clients who have experienced sexual abuse and domestic violence.

It's about recovering more than about compensation because I think people get very confused with this whole need for compensation. That's not what VOCAT has ever been. It's never been a compensatory system. It's always been for recovery and sometimes it's hard to get people to come to terms with what recovery means.

*ISSA Lawyer 3*

It is not about compensation. It is about that someone might have a right to something to help them in their healing journey away from the crime or the alleged crime.

*SECASA Counsellor 1*

## Feeling safe and supported

She [the lawyer] was so patient, so supportive, and the difference she's made to me in my life, she gave me back my self-worth ... that it is important as the police couldn't do anything.

*Client 1*

Clients, lawyers and counsellors all spoke of the importance of feeling safe and supported. This has the potential to increase a client's sense of self-worth, which is an important element of recovery. This was seen to be particularly important in the context of victim-survivors as they often did not feel safe and supported in other aspects of their life, including in their experiences of the justice system.



When they made the referral and explained to me what your service was all about, I was cautious. ... There was another matter to do with protecting my little grandson. I went to the free legal advice in [a nearby location]. They couldn't do anything. And he gave me a referral for a barrister that cost \$2,500 a day. And they're all males too.

*Client 1*

Several features of the partnerships were seen to contribute to the feeling of safety.

Legal partners spoke about the **pathway of trust** that is established because the client has already built a trusting relationship with the counsellor.

SECASA is providing that pathway of trust. So the clients start with us at a higher level of trust and engagement than they would otherwise.

*SMLS Manager 1*

... a direct referral so that the client knew that information was being handled confidentially and with care and passed on to people that SECASA knew and would be actioned very quickly.

*ISSA Lawyer 4*

Having the ISSA lawyer **on site** at SECASA was also seen to help to build the **trust** of the client in the lawyer which was seen as important as they may have had previous negative experiences with lawyers.

We would also offer that they could come into East Bentleigh [SECASA office] when we were next there, which a lot of people would often take, I think because it's a comfortable environment and I'm a stranger to them. It's a very sensitive topic. It's also somewhere that they know how to get to, so that would really benefit the client as well.

*ISSA Lawyer 2*

Being on site is invaluable because when they come the representatives from SMLS don't dress like solicitors, they just dress like normal people. They're not corporate. You cannot get around the impact of being able to speak to someone face to face. This is a human being. I can see that this person recognises that what I went through was horrible. And I'm talking to someone who's human, who gets it, and a lot of our clients didn't have access to this.

*SECASA Counsellor 2*

This was contrasted to referrals to ISSA from a legal referral service.

The clients know far more about what to expect from SMLS when it's a SECASA referral rather than the [referral service] referral, who have no idea about us.

*ISSA Lawyer 2*

Lawyer responsiveness to clients helped to build trust.

They're very prompt. I'll email them and I know I'm going to get something back. So I've trusted that process.

*Client 1*

The partnership provided an environment where clients can **safely disclose relevant information** about their matter.

So, for me with [the lawyer] I felt very comfortable because of her patience and her manner. I felt very comfortable to open up to her, even though it was on the phone. And that has made a huge difference. All these women around me that believe me because I never thought anyone would believe my story.

*Client 2*

Seeing SECASA and SMLS work closely together to support them was seen to be of benefit for a **client's sense of self-worth**.

I think the partnership also helps the client move forward and package up their experience with that healing lens process. And I think when we model good communication between the two agencies and the client can see that you are helping me and working with me and for me, that's such good repair for clients when they see that because they really see their worth.

**SECASA Counsellor 1**

Working together assisted clients to feel safe as it helped them to **navigate the legal system** which can be traumatising for victim-survivors.

Being able to have simultaneous service delivery is really important because the legal system is often very traumatising for victims of sexual assault and family violence. It's not necessarily designed to be therapeutic. It's harmful and so being able to get counselling support, social work support at the same time as addressing your legal issue is really helpful.

**SMLS Manager 1**

It's not like the client coming in from the cold having to navigate the whole legal system. ... There's that really nice connection already established between SECASA and the legal service.

**SECASA Manager 1**

Referrals between SECASA and SMLS are carried out in a way to **minimise the client needing to re-tell their story** which some victim-survivors find traumatising. The counsellor provides relevant details to ISSA using a joint referral form, supplemented by additional information from the counsellor. This approach was beneficial for this client.

Well, it didn't stress me out. So that's really the main thing. When I get stressed out it's because I'm needing to repeat myself or go over old ground or something like that. So I think they had a pretty good understanding ... I don't like talking about the crime for obvious reasons. Even with my counsellor now it's difficult.

**Client 3**

**Warm referrals** were beneficial in giving the lawyer information to help them deal with a client appropriately.

It's really important when you have that warm referral discussion [with the lawyer] because we can inform how the client's best learning is. For example, if the client is on the autism spectrum, the way that they might benefit taking in the information.

**SECASA Counsellor 1**

Warm referrals were facilitated by the **lawyers being on site** at SECASA.

The beauty of this service is having that lovely relationship where the SMLS representative is based on site ... because you can have those warm referral conversations.

**SECASA Counsellor 1**

The ISSA lawyer might speak to the SECASA counsellor prior to the interview to find out more about the matter.

The other option is to say if the SECASA case worker is very familiar with the background to this matter and you'd prefer us to speak with them to get a bit of a sense about what's going on we could do that as well.

**ISSA Lawyer 1**

The counsellor will **attend the initial interview with the lawyer** if the client wants them to.

I have seen ... how clients rely on the SECASA counsellor being there to feel confident that they can tell their story or the counsellor is able to gently encourage them to share things that the counsellor knows will be important for us as lawyers to hear but the client doesn't know we need to hear or doesn't feel confident in sharing – that is happening all the time.

*ISSA Lawyer 4*

The two agencies have developed **protocols for contacting clients** to ensure the clients knew when they were going to call.

We had a system of protocols for ensuring that all happened very smoothly. ... It's planned and predictable. ... That's really important for people who are traumatised, to know that the professionals who are working together will call them at particular times, are working together to ensure that they're working around them. And what works best for them, we will call them at particular times of the day, these kinds of details were often worked out through a direct referral, and I think that matters quite a lot.

*ISSA Lawyer 4*

The SECASA counsellor and ISSA lawyer **work together during the VOCAT process** to support clients and make sure they feel safe and are not retraumatised and are therefore able to stay the course of the legal process. This includes attending VOCAT with the client if required.

We agreed to do a VOCAT application and obtained a police report, but her memory was vastly more extensive than what was on the police report. I ended up speaking to her in depth and drafted a statutory declaration. It was deeply difficult for her to hear that information back. She felt more comfortable with us if we did a three-way consultation where, instead of giving the client the draft directly, I gave it to the SECASA counsellor to review first and to have a discussion with us if she noticed any discrepancies. After that, point by point, we read through the statutory declaration with the client, stopping at appropriate points and having the counsellor assist on the client's behalf if required.

*ISSA Lawyer 2*

There was a shared understanding of the personal issues that client was experiencing, which were a direct result of what had happened to her. And people working together over a long time to ultimately get her case all the way through to the end.

*ISSA Lawyer 4*

The ISSA lawyer can **touch base with the SECASA counsellor if a client is having issues**.

This allows the lawyer to modify their approach to accommodate the needs of the client and to alert the counsellor to the need for additional support for the client. Having this psychological support facilitates the client remaining engaged with the legal process.

If we think that the client is struggling, we can go back to SECASA and say, hey, she's not reacting well at this point. When's your next appointment? Should we hold off from this?

*ISSA Lawyer 3*

This was contrasted with access to a private psychologist who may only see a client on a one-off basis.

It's not like we can email the private counsellors. They wouldn't have any idea.

*ISSA Lawyer 3*

The ability to work together to support the client was not always possible with a private solicitor.

The one time I was asked by a client to support them with their private solicitor I was asked by him [the private solicitor] to not engage in any conversation. I was pretty much given the hand and dismissed. She wanted me there. He didn't want me there. But within the ISSA partnership, there is the ability in some way, shape or form for you to have a three-way interaction.

*SECASA Counsellor 3*

**Managing client expectations** and explaining the process assists with making clients feel safe and supported. The SECASA counsellor will give the client preliminary information about VOCAT, the VOCAT process and possible outcomes before they refer them to the lawyer.

I think that the partnership helps to give clearer communication to the client about what this VOCAT pathway is and what it means and the practicalities of that. ... I think it's about us both as organisations setting up expectations at the start.

*SECASA Counsellor 1*

## **Feeling heard and believed**

Clients, lawyers and counsellors all referred to the value for clients of having their stories and their trauma heard and acknowledged as part of the VOCAT process.

It's not necessarily about the outcome, the monetary outcome ... it's having a platform to be heard and acknowledged that they have sustained a trauma. ... and it makes a great difference.

*SECASA Counsellor 3*

The value of **being heard and having their trauma recognised and believed** was central to this client's positive experience of ISSA:

... The biggest thing that made it stand out was I was actually believed. I felt that no one would believe what happened to me. My counsellor did – she was also like [the solicitor].

*Client 2*

... preparing the statutory declarations to supplement police reports... to give voice to who people are today. I find when I send those to clients and they read over ... the feedback is – 'oh my God. You've actually heard my story,' or 'you've captured this perfectly, I'm so grateful for you listening in this way.'

*ISSA Lawyer 1*

Because of their positive experience with SMLS, this client has referred other people to them, which is an indication of the value of the service.

I've referred a couple of people now myself. Advised them to get help from Springvale. So that's really good and positive for me that I can do that to help other people too.

*Client 2*

Being **heard by actors in the legal system** – whether this be the ISSA lawyers or VOCAT – was viewed by counsellors as being important for ISSA clients, particularly as there has often been no criminal prosecution.

If us [the counsellor] hearing it isn't enough, seeing a legal representative gives them that next level of what a lot of people see as authority. It gives them that further assurance that they are being heard and acknowledged.

*SECASA Counsellor 3*

The client feedback was that the joint support of SECASA and SMLS service was an extremely caring and supportive experience, and importantly where she felt her experience was believed and validated through the VOCAT process, which was crucial for this client due to the criminal process being closed to her. The client's family, affected over the years as a direct result of the triggering and upsetting symptoms associated with the alleged crime, felt the efforts made by SECASA and SMLS to give the client 'voice' to her years of suffering was powerful and healing to the client, and more broadly, to the family.

*SECASA Counsellor 1*

Not all services are open to hearing the stories of victim-survivors.

A lot of the time ... if they've tried to engage with previous counselling services, they've been told we don't deal with sexual assault or we don't deal with family violence. We can't talk to you. You can't say that here. Or psychologists that scrunch up at hearing of a sexual assault victim and they are dismissed. You can't come back here, or we can't talk about that here.

*SECASA Counsellor 3*

### **Agency, through client centred and client-led service provision**

A consistent theme in the interviews was the importance of the client having agency or control in how their matter proceeds. This ranged from giving clients a choice over where they saw the lawyer, to whether to have the counsellor at their interview, to the time frames for dealing with a matter, to whether they wanted to retell their story. This was seen as an important part of rebuilding agency and supporting recovery, where clients have not had control in their lives.

How that initial appointment goes about really depends on the needs of the client. ... Some people really want to talk and want to tell their story. Other people are still quite raw in their trauma and would prefer you to speak to a SECASA counsellor.

*ISSA Lawyer 1*

Allowing clients to pursue their legal matters in their **own time** was an important part of supporting their control of the situation. This is particularly important for survivors of sexual assault and domestic violence who often have multiple other issues they are dealing with.

Another thing is flexibility. Adopting trauma-informed principles, sometimes our clients might disappear for a little while because they're getting a bit overwhelmed. Some other practices might close off their files in that time, we are more open to keeping things on foot, following up, and then often making it clear, say, if it has got to a point where we do perhaps need to look at closing this file. We will still make it really clear to our clients that they are welcome to reengage when they feel ready to do so.

**ISSA Lawyer 1**

The value of this approach was confirmed by this client:

Take your time – they were saying this is a process that doesn't need to be done in a week. That really helped. It was like I didn't feel the under the pump pressured. If there was something else more pressing for me to be addressing like I had other things going on at the time they said put this aside, this can wait. The understanding was fantastic. Thank you.

**Client 1**

SECASA and SMLS work in tandem to facilitate this.

... it's OK if the client's not ready. We've booked an appointment. The client rings up and says I just can't do it. That's OK. The beauty for the client is it's SECASA and SMLS working in tandem. We're working together to get the best outcome for the client, and I think that's OK. So, if we're saying that's OK, you can't come in today. The SMLS representative would also say that's fine. We'll try again next month or in a fortnight. I'll get them to reach out when they're ready. We're not going anywhere.

**SECASA Counsellor 2**

This contrasts with how these matters are sometimes dealt with in legal practices.

What often happens in victims of crime cases, is that there's a series of deadlines, like in any legal matter, various statutes of limitations and often if you haven't heard back from the client or a deadline is looming and nothing happens, the lawyers just close the file, write to the client, we didn't hear from her and that's the end of it. And that's often appropriate because you don't have the resourcing to do otherwise. But in the victims of crime space, particularly with the clientele that ISSA is dealing with, extremely prolonged and egregious child sexual abuse, there is a need to be much more sensitive and compassionate to clients and to be proactive about their cases and to do things like proactively apply for an extension of time from the tribunal to buy you more time while you try to track the client down. And when you have somebody like SECASA who knows what's happening they can tell you to hold off. Be patient. They're going through a rough patch. These things make you feel like you're part of a team working together.

**ISSA Lawyer 4**

A client identified that being given **structure** and being regularly **updated about their matters** helped them feel they had a sense of direction.

The interview with the lawyer was very well structured. I'm someone who needs structure. I need a list because with everything that's happened my memory has not been that great, it's been a struggle. To have them after a conversation email me with dot points and what we discussed and what they needed was so helpful. I had direction. For a while there I had no direction at all, and I felt lost, and I felt I don't know where this is going, overwhelmed. Whereas when I had that list to follow, I could actively do that. If I wasn't sure about something, they always said just call us back ... It wasn't like I had to wait a week.

**Client 1**

A lawyer noted that ensuring clients know it's their right to **choose whether to report their crime to the police** was another way to ensure they were in control.

We encourage our clients and help to support them [with police reporting], even facilitate an appointment for them to make a statement and make sure the counsellor is there, whatever is going to make them feel confident and comfortable. However, we are never going to say if you don't do this, we're not going to take this any further or we're just making it a black or white decision as it's much more complex than that. Never minimising how complex actions which may be perceived by other legal practitioners as simple but are not often simple for our clients who are highly traumatised.

*ISSA Lawyer 1*

## **Trauma-informed practice**

Both counsellors and lawyers used a trauma-informed approach to ensure clients felt safe and supported, were heard and believed, and had agency.

The trauma-informed component can't be overstated in this space. I think anything you can do to make this journey easier for individuals who have already gone through so much. I think that the benefits of the partnership really do assist to make this less traumatic for the client because sometimes even looking for a new psychologist can be the point where people get overwhelmed and disengage.

*ISSA Lawyer 2*

This approach requires a specific set of skills and aptitude.

I strongly believe that you can't just have any lawyer. ... Sexual assault and family violence and sexual abuse matters are often complex, marginalised groups, often vulnerable. You need people who understand the particular vulnerabilities that might be experienced by those groups and can deal with them sensitively, patiently, carefully, with compassion, etc. And I think the service has provided that kind of care and support to people for a really long time and that's quite unique.

*ISSA Lawyer 4*

Private lawyers did not always use trauma-informed practice.

And they would refer out to private practitioners. Many times, it was terrible. The opposite of trauma informed. One-hour increments, minimal effort put in.

*SMLS Manager 1*

## **VOCAT outcomes**

As outlined in the overview of the ISSA service, VOCAT can award victim-survivors financial assistance for a range of expenses including assistance for counselling and medical expenses, safety related expenses, loss or damage to clothing, loss of earnings, loss of money expected from the deceased and assistance for funeral expenses and awards for exceptional circumstances. Primary victims may also make a claim for special financial assistance, which is a lump sum payment for significant adverse effects suffered.

VOCAT awards can assist with the recovery of a client, as demonstrated by this case study:

Ultimately, she was very happy with her outcome – we were able to get her counselling, a loss of earnings of \$20,000 as she was a social worker and was unable to return to the field as she had become triggered by family violence, and funding to reskill in a new education pursuit. I think the nicest thing was when I called her recently, she was reflecting on how this was the last piece and that she had otherwise closed off her supports from drug and alcohol counselling, child protection had closed their matter. She was really in a good place, and it all had come full circle at the right moment. So, it was a really positive outcome.

*ISSA Lawyer 1*

ISSA will often focus on awards for exceptional circumstances, which are for expenses to assist the applicant in their recovery from the act of violence. Applicants must satisfy the tribunal that the expense claimed is unusual, special or out of the ordinary, and that the expense will go to the heart of assisting them in their recovery from a crime. This might include financial assistance for education, gym membership or computer equipment. Exceptional circumstances awards can be difficult to obtain.

The **quality of the SECASA reports** was identified as being an important factor in getting successful VOCAT outcomes, particularly in relation to exceptional circumstances. This included that the reports spoke to the specific circumstances of an individual client and the impact of their trauma across multiple life domains.

Why SECASA reports can be so meaningful is that the conversation really looks at the impact across multiple life domains. It's not just a medical diagnostic view of PTSD. It's in a real-world way, how has this impacted their specific life and what does it look like for them?

*ISSA Lawyer 1*

SECASA are the patients' lifeline with the report ... because the reports are what make the difference between getting exceptional circumstances and not getting exceptional circumstances.

*ISSA Lawyer 3*

VOCAT reports from SECASA counsellors tend to be the strongest, and I can't overstate how important those reports are and how minded the tribunal members are to follow what's in the report. If it's not there in the report, as a lawyer, you're really pushing an uphill battle.

*ISSA Lawyer 2*

While the lawyers recognised that some private psychologist reports were high quality, they noted that this was not always the case, particularly if they have less experience in doing VOCAT reports or do not have an ongoing relationship with a client.

SECASA knows when they do their reports that they'll have to outline everything; why they want these particular things under exceptional circumstances. Whereas a counsellor who is not used to VOCAT ... will come up with, I think it would be good for my client to have this. ... You can't go back and say can we have another report because VOCAT won't pay for it.

*ISSA Lawyer 3*

In contrast, when we work with individual psychologists who a person is linked in with, that always runs the risk of those reports being very scant, not speaking to those higher-level things that we really need to achieve good outcomes.

*ISSA Lawyer 1*



You can always go back to the SECASA counsellor and say, look, they're disputing A, B and C, what have you got to say about it? And we could ask for supplementary reports. Whereas you can't do that with a private or you can, if you want to pay for it, and no one's going to pay for it. So, it's always been a better outcome in those situations.

*ISSA Lawyer 3*

The quality of SECASA reports appears to be due to several factors.

- **The commitment of SECASA counsellors to get the best outcomes for their clients**

The mindset and interest and investment that we have at SECASA is that we're here to get the client's voice heard and a positive outcome for the client. We go over these reports with the clients.

*SECASA Counsellor 3*

I think they're more invested in their client, more invested than well, obviously than someone we send you to for one counselling session so we can get a report. There are a few private ones that are invested in their clients, but for most of them it's an in and out thing.

*ISSA Lawyer 3*

- **The expertise and experience of the SECASA counsellors in doing VOCAT reports.** SECASA have a bank of gold standard reports that staff can draw on. Senior counsellors check the quality of reports. This expertise is enhanced by regular training and communication from SMLS about the outcomes of applications and changes to VOCAT guidelines.

- **The in-depth knowledge SECASA counsellors have about their clients** because they see them for an extended period. This means they can identify which awards would have the greatest impact for the recovery of their clients.

Because they've often [worked with] them for quite a while, they'll have all this information. ... it's a much more complete report, which in turn makes our job so much easier.

*ISSA Lawyer 3*

- **ISSA solicitors working closely with SECASA counsellors to ensure all relevant information is included in the report.** This includes the lawyer sending the counsellor a letter that outlines the recovery needs and awards that would assist with this recovery and discussing these with the counsellor if required.

When we make that referral letter about the report that we're requesting we will outline what our client has so far flagged as their recovery needs or things we've explored. But we'll also ask the counsellor, particularly as some clients don't know what would help their recovery. And then we'll have a chat with the counsellor – has the client mentioned anything during their sessions about something they previously liked to do that they couldn't afford anymore or something they've given up as a result ... and ask them, maybe during your next session, could you have a chat with them around this kind of stuff and get back to us?

*ISSA Lawyer 1*

Another factor that was identified as leading to improved VOCAT outcomes was the **specialist expertise of the ISSA lawyers** in working in VOCAT and their ability to get **better instructions** from the client because of the relationship with SECASA.

[The input from SECASA impacts the quality of the VOCAT work] in all the ways I've already described, everything from telling clients that there are lawyers who can help them, helping to introduce them to the service directly, referring them, coming with them. All of these things are really important to the quality of instructions you're able to get as a lawyer. The extent to which a client is willing and able to open up to you often depends on those relationships and the time spent to build those relationships.

*ISSA Lawyer 4*

There was concern that some private lawyers place more emphasis on the financial benefits for the client rather than recovery.

Making sure it's not pitched as this is a pool of money that you can get some funds from ... I think the recovery lens can get lost if it's just a quick phone conversation as a referral intake or a lot of the private firms which are working on billable hours as opposed to being able to dedicate a long time to the clients.

*ISSA Lawyer 1*

ISSA lawyers spoke of the role of the partnership **in keeping clients engaged with the VOCAT** process because of how both the counsellors and lawyers supported clients through trauma-informed practice. Without this support they felt that some clients would drop out of the VOCAT process.

Those kinds of relationships were really important to helping see clients all the way through a process right to the end, because we did have a lot of clients, understandably, who dropped out of things, who weren't responding to correspondence ... because they had so much going on. I can think of individual clients who we got really good results for, and it was very much testament to those personal relationships and connections between the organisations.

*ISSA Lawyer 4*

SECASA counsellors could re-connect the lawyers to clients if they had stopped attending appointments.

Counsellors at SECASA could help reconnect you with a client when they'd fallen away.

*ISSA Lawyer 4*

This was contrasted with private psychologists.

You couldn't ... do that with a private psychologist, you just turn around and say, 'Oh well, the client hasn't contacted us. Close the file because there's no one to talk to.'

*ISSA Lawyer 3*

Having SECASAs located in multidisciplinary centres with police Sexual Offences and Child-abuse Investigation Teams [SOCITs] facilitates lawyers working with police, which potentially improves VOCAT outcomes.

We can obtain the police report because we've got a memorandum of understanding within the building to share and release information and we could feed that back to ISSA. Or have the ability to engage SOCIT on their behalf or to get on the same page.

*SECASA Counsellor 3*

in Dandenong we can pop upstairs and have a chat with the police, which is another really helpful thing to have. Everything in one stop. In one place. So then we can just pop up, have a chat and say, hey, we've just met with this client. We've got assigned authority. Can we have a chat?

*ISSA Lawyer 1*

SMLS social workers and social work students will work with clients after they receive an award to assist them with accessing these awards, which helps to increase uptake of the awards.

## **Assistance with other legal and other issues**

SECASA clients will often experience a range of legal issues in addition to their victim's compensation needs including family law, issues associated with their criminal law case, debt and housing. Identifying and addressing these can assist with a client's recovery.

Recovery can't be achieved when there are other legal issues that are still unmet. Particularly what comes to mind is if there's a family violence intervention order matter where someone is seeking protection. You can't fully turn your mind to recovery if you're still looking at safety and staying with family law matters. You can't achieve any sense of recovery, knowing that there's overlapping matters going on.

**ISSA Lawyer 1**

SECASA staff receive regular training from SMLS on spotting legal issues and will note these on the referral form. A SECASA counsellor noted how useful this was.

But the beauty is, in the last three years with SMLS, we have all these other categories that they could potentially help the client with. ... And so that's been a real bonus. I want you to give thanks from us to them about that.

**SECASA Counsellor 1**

The partnership recently extended this training to SECASA intake staff so that clients who were not seeing a counsellor could still get a referral to SMLS for their legal issues.

ISSA staff will provide preliminary advice about the legal issue if possible and then do a warm referral to an internal or external lawyer. But they acknowledged the difficulty it can cause for their clients if they have to re-tell their stories and engage with another lawyer.

You have to have a different lawyer so that in itself is traumatising because you have to engage with another person that you have to talk to, and we try to minimise that so that they don't have to retell their story again and again. There's always going to be an element of it, though, because each program needs different information.

**SMLS Manager 1**

One of the clients interviewed spoke of the trauma of trying to find assistance with her family law problem which SMLS had not been able to assist her with.

It's hard jumping from lawyer to lawyer to lawyer because they go 'Well we don't deal with that... Oh sorry we can't take it.' It's really hard when you've poured your heart and soul into seeing someone. They've gone, 'We have to shut your file because we can't represent you in court now.' So you need to go find someone else. The hardest part is that I've got no idea. And I've been trying to source [a lawyer] and it's all on me, I'm trying to sort someone who can go, okay, this is how the law works. I want an advocate, I want someone to go, 'This is the next step. You need to focus on this. You need to now do this. You need to have this ready.' I've had to engage with three different lawyers and I'm still no closer to where I want to be and I've still got no one and that road is hard because it's not black and white.

**Client 1**

Both SECASA and SMLS support clients with non-legal issues such as housing and debt. This contributes to the ability of the partnership to provide a wraparound service to support a client's recovery.

## Value for partner services and staff

It's just important to keep the clients in focus. The ultimate benefit of this partnership and working in this collaborative way is to ensure that our clients are heard and positioned in the centre of this whole process.

*ISSA Lawyer 1*

It helps to have my staff know that there is that relationship there already as a referral point instead of them having to go and do the groundwork to find a suitable service to link legally with ... We've got a referral platform. It's streamlined. It's easy. It's accessible.

*SECASA Counsellor 3*

The fundamental value of the partnership for both SMLS and SECASA was that it **improved outcomes for their clients**, by enabling the two services to work together in support of their shared clients in the ways described above. This is also discussed in more detail in the following section on what has sustained the partnership.

This SECASA counsellor valued that the **legal knowledge of the ISSA lawyers** and ease of communication assisted them to get better outcomes for their clients.

I think it makes things easier and more streamlined. Usually, communication is very good between the counsellors.

*ISSA Lawyer 2*

**SMLS** efficiency was improved through the **ease with which reports could be requested** from SECASA counsellors compared to requesting reports from private psychologists.

... the knowledge about the legislation and the oversight from the supervisors. The ability to communicate with us more easily because they knew us and we got to know them.

*SECASA Counsellor 1*

It is quite difficult linking clients in with psychologists and having to explain – you'll be paid for this report after it's written and then it might take six months for the funding to come through. It can be difficult trying to persuade private psychologists to get on board with this process. And there's quite a lot of scepticism and cynicism regarding the VOCAT scheme amongst private psychologists, because of how slow it can be.

*ISSA Lawyer 1*

This was contrasted with the legal knowledge of private lawyers who do not specialise in this work.

A lot of the other ones out there who don't do much VOCAT are a bit useless in the sense of they don't know the legislation, they don't know the breadth of what they can ask for and it's not great for the client.

*SECASA Counsellor 1*

But when you get a private person or someone that's been referred from somewhere else, they want their money up front. I have just had to do an interim application to VOCAT for \$495 before I can get the report and that could take months. And then I'll be running out of time.

*ISSA Lawyer 3*

Both partners valued the **efficiencies the partnership provided** which improved their capacity to provide services. Having streamlined referral and communication systems increased efficiency for SECASA and SMLS.

Detailed SECASA reports in the tribunal mandated formats improved SMLS efficiencies. This was contrasted to needing to get large amounts of additional support material for a client whose private psychologist did not have expertise in writing reports for VOCAT.

I have had the file going on nearly the whole time I've been in SMLS simply because the client has an excellent relationship with her private psychologist. But it's probably the worst report I've ever seen. ... What we're doing instead is getting a massive amount of support material that's taking a long time and unfortunately having the client do multiple statutory declarations ... That is something that can absolutely be avoided when you've got a SECASA counsellor who knows what is required in this space.

*ISSA Lawyer 2*

SECASA **referrals to SMLS** were more likely to be **appropriate**, saving time for SMLS.

The SECASA referrals are better because they know what we want because we're always doing legal education there and we're telling them exactly what we want, what information we need. So it's less back and forth about other party details or whatever else ... That's because we co-developed the tools together like the referral form.

*SMLS Manager 1*

SECASA counsellors can do a **secondary consultation** with an SMLS lawyer to get advice about whether to refer a client. This assists with ensuring that referrals from SECASA are appropriate. SMLS doesn't generally do secondary consultations with other service providers.

That's why we brought in the secondary consultations. ... It also makes our workload better because we don't end up with a million referrals that aren't worth us looking at.

*ISSA Lawyer 3*

Secondary consultations were facilitated by the lawyer being on site.

If we've got the door of the office open and somebody walks by and goes. ... 'Could I grab you for a moment just to have a chat about this client I'm working with and trying to assess whether they can apply the VOCAT?'

*ISSA Lawyer 1*

The experience in establishing and running the ISSA partnership has given SMLS the skills, experience, and knowledge to **establish and run other successful health justice programs**.

We've looked at it and said, 'This is a great program. We need to do more programs like this. We want to mirror the integration and the partnership of this.' We used this as a model to set up Mother's Legal Help with maternal child health. Because we've seen the success, we can set up new health justice partnerships.

*SMLS Manager 1*

## **Improved staff capability**

Both SMLS and SECASA staff identified ways in which their capability was enhanced because of the partnership.

**SMLS staff** identified several benefits in working with SECASA counsellors including improving their ability to understand the broader issues facing their clients and the services available to assist them, to provide trauma-informed legal services, and to recognise a high quality VOCAT report.

I've been in the sector a long time and I think lawyers, particularly, can be very myopic. So it's a wonderful opportunity to see that we can't exist in a silo and that legal outcomes don't just come from the practice of law.

*SMLS Manager 2*

Working in close partnership with SECASA counsellors facilitates the lawyers' ability to provide **trauma-informed practice** through being exposed to the work of the counsellors on a regular basis. This happened more by osmosis than formal learning and was enhanced by lawyers being onsite at SECASA offices.

Knowing that we are affiliated with a counselling-based, trauma-informed service encourages us to keep these concepts in the forefront of our mind.

**ISSA Lawyer 1**

Keeping us tethered to changes in health and therapeutic practice. ... Otherwise, we're in the law loop, but we hear the terms the counsellors are using, we hear the strategies. It is not the formal structures we have set up that highlights that, just a lawyer sitting in a room full of social workers once a week for two years – you sponge information and it will alter the language you use and being aware of the trends that emerge in best practice in counselling strategies. Definitely by osmosis.

**SMLS Manager 1**

This lawyer felt that the trauma-informed approach used by ISSA lawyers had a **flow on effect to the rest of SMLS**.

I think trauma-informed practice does extend more broadly to the organisation as we will often share outcomes that we achieve through VOCAT and working with SECASA. I tend to choose ones that aren't always tangibly outcome-driven, but more about the impacts for the client. And then that sentiment trickles down to other staff members.

**ISSA Lawyer 1**

The high quality of SECASA counsellor reports increased this lawyer's skills in recognising what to expect from a high-quality report.

SECASA counsellor reports tend to be the strongest, and so seeing them has taught me what is needed in terms of the quality of reports, because we have unfortunately had too many examples where we have private psychologists who often charge vastly higher than SECASA for unusable reports. Had I not had that contrast and I'd only ever seen a badly written private report, I could have thought without better training, this is what's involved in this.

**ISSA Lawyer 2**

The partnership has also assisted the lawyers to better **understand and respect the role of counsellors and social workers**.

I definitely think it helps lawyers understand the role of counsellors and social workers and what they're there to do or not do, which is something that I would say your run of the mill lawyer, who's not part of one of these partnerships, would not know. And they might be like, just get your social worker to do that, not understanding what the scope of their role is. Perhaps just being dismissive of that role, rather than I think at SMLS we have a high respect for social workers and the work that they do.

**SMLS Manager 1**

It also helped lawyers to see the **broader social services sector** that their clients often need to engage with.

I think community legal services sit between two worlds because they're both law firms and they're also part of the community services sector, which is a big sector that not every lawyer fully comprehends the scope of. They are not necessarily as connected as other professionals that deliver community services such as caseworkers. It's their job to know who everyone is, whereas it's not necessarily a lawyer's job.

**SMLS Manager 1**

Lawyers spoke of the partnership providing them with the opportunity to develop **in-depth legal skills** in victim's compensation.

There's so much demand, it's not always easy to develop in-depth expertise in one or two areas of law, because you need to be a generalist. It is very valuable for staff to have that opportunity.

**ISSA Lawyer 4**

The partnership has increased the **skills of SECASA counsellors** to identify if clients would be eligible for VOCAT awards and the use of VOCAT as a recovery tool.

The biggest feature for us is learning updates. The legislation changes. Where that fits from our point of view, how we need to be writing our reports. Keeping that fresh and up to date because there's quite a few changes happening out there.

**SECASA Counsellor 1**

... Educating people around victims of crime and their eligibility for clients. There are a lot of myths out there in this space about who can and who cannot and what you can claim and what you cannot claim. By working with these counsellors you are getting that information out there to other people. Even if we don't have capacity to assist any given client, the SECASA worker could still encourage that person to reach out to another service.

**ISSA Lawyer 1**

One SECASA counsellor spoke of how **SMLS pushed the boundaries of how VOCAT could be used** to assist clients in their recovery, which in turn informed her practice.

SMLS were always a bit of a trailblazer to really look at what could be applied for – SMLS really tried to stretch that for the client, and I think that was really great. I liked being part of, alongside that process.

**SECASA Counsellor 1**

SECASA counsellors spoke of a sense of **well-being for staff** to see the recovery that is possible for clients when they have a positive experience with the legal system.

It makes us feel good because we're connected to something that is advocacy, that is human rights, that is justice seeking in a sense, is the voice of the client. Because the criminal pathway can be so harsh and punitive even towards the victim and to be able to have this sense that there is another way that the client's experience can be heard and that lovely thing that the magistrates or the registrars say, you know obviously we can't take away what's happened to you but we can give you the healing and for the survivors that hear that – they can be little hard nuts sometimes before going into that process – they don't really know what VOCAT's about but being in the courtroom ... the power of that client hearing the voice of the magistrate or the registrar saying those words – the amount of crying and whatever happens from the most hardened client is so powerful and so moving and that ends up sometimes being more powerful than the things that they're awarded for. And then for us it's equally as therapeutic because we can see what it does for the client, how powerful it is. We feel good and it's a bit about spreading the love in the role because it makes you want to offer that to other clients too that are deserving through no fault of their own because of the crime they've experienced.

**SECASA Counsellor 1**

It works well in benefiting us as a service to know and demonstrate to our client that there is hope, something positive that can come out of the trauma that they've sustained.

**SECASA Counsellor 3**

This feeling of well-being was reinforced by the agencies celebrating the work of the partnership.

We're cheering each other on. SMLS and SECASA both cheer each other on in different ways. We promote each other's work. We pat each other on the back.

**SMLS Manager 1**

## Value for students

Final year law students from Monash University can do advanced professional practice in the ISSA program after they have done a generalist legal placement. They do a range of tasks.

One student could be opening letters, one could be reading statements and doing notes on the side like coming back and telling me what the statement is. We try to get them to interact in the whole process, so they get to do everything. We get them to call the client occasionally with an update or do an update letter, contact the counsellor, Victoria Police FOI, they do all the running around.

*ISSA Lawyer 3*

The placements provide an **opportunity for students to learn** about an issue in depth, and to gain skills in victims compensation law and working with clients who have experienced trauma.

I think from the perspective of students it provides them with a valuable opportunity to learn about a set of issues in depth rather than what often happens in the clinical program. ... If you're going to work with clients who have been affected by family violence, sexual abuse and sexual assault, you need a lot of time and immersion in the subject area and with the clientele to fully understand how to provide legal advice and support to the requisite degree. I have always thought that students having that opportunity to really do a deep dive in this area of law has been very, very important.

*ISSA Lawyer 4*

Working in ISSA assists students to have a **better understanding of the complexity** of some people's lives and how to carry out trauma-informed practice in a legal setting.

[Working in the program helps] people understand the complexity of the lived experience of human beings. A lot of our law students ... have very little understanding or comprehension of the layers of horrific disadvantage that our clients and our communities face.

*SMLS Manager 1*

This understanding can then be taken into their work as lawyers in a range of areas, which contributes to a more systemic understanding of trauma and disadvantage and ways to deal with it in a legal setting.

There's a lot of evidence of those students going on to work in these areas or related areas. Which I think is a real community service to have people with the skills and aptitude and interest in working with and for victims.

*ISSA Lawyer 4*



## Value for legal system

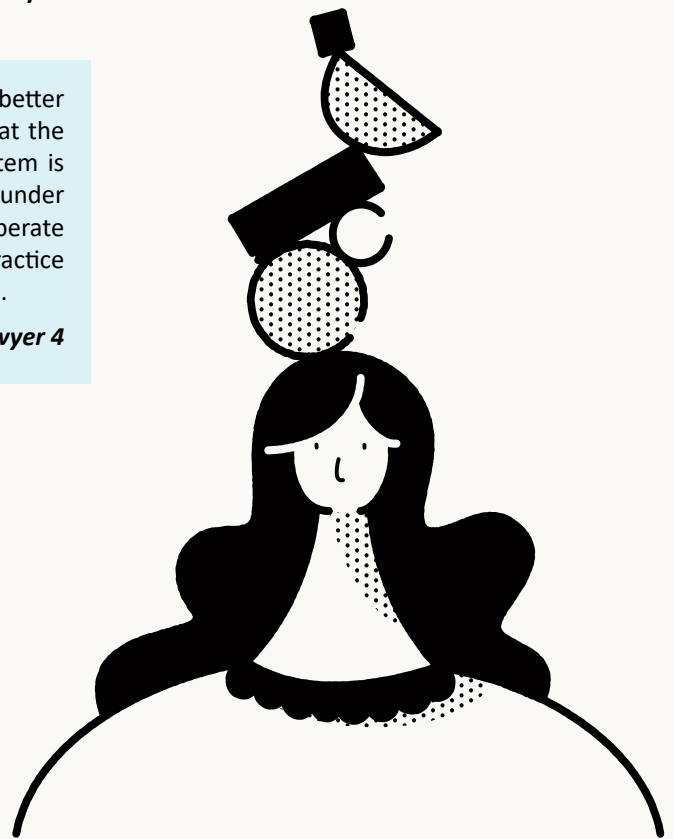
This research is primarily about the value of the partnership for clients, staff and partners.

However, some insights into the value for the legal system did emerge. The principal one was that, through facilitating access to the tribunal and ensuring the best possible outcomes for clients, the partnership contributes to the **victims of crime compensation system working as it is intended to.**

And I think ultimately that results in better outcomes for clients and means that the victims of crime compensation system is operating as it's actually intended to under statute, but often doesn't actually operate like that in practice, because it in practice is much more brutal and adversarial.

*ISSA Lawyer 4*

It might be useful to consider additional research to measure the value of the partnership in supporting the process and goals of **VOCAT**, and what factors contribute to that value.



## What has sustained the partnership?

The partnership between SECASA and SMLS is one of the longest running health justice partnerships in Australia. It was established prior to widespread awareness of the value of partnerships between health and legal services. One of the key aims of this research, therefore, was to understand better what features of this partnership contributed to its longevity from the perspective of staff who have worked in the partnership. While we were not able to interview the founders of the partnership, two of the respondents had worked in the partnership since it was established, and another had worked in it for 20 years.

Several features were identified, including that the partnership was client centred, had firm foundations with executive support and champions, relationships and communication were strong, there were systems in place to support the partnership, it was financially sustainable, and there was regular training.

### **Clear and shared outcomes for clients**

I think because it's two services who both have client outcomes in mind, both going the extra mile for clients, we get much better outcomes and there's something to be said for working towards shared outcomes.

**SMLS Manager 1**

At the heart of the strength and longevity of the partnership was that both services could see that it resulted in **improved outcomes** for their clients. This was a common theme among lawyers and counsellors.

Being in it for the client outcome. Being client-focused is what makes the partnership work from my perspective. They're doing their thing. We're doing our thing and we come together because we know it's going to get a better outcome for the client. We don't come together because the government told us to, we don't come together because it'll look good on our annual report. We don't come together because we want to position ourselves in a certain way. The only reason that we've worked in partnership for this long is because we recognise the outcomes that it achieves for clients.

**SMLS Manager 1**

Being able to see positive outcomes for clients in real time contributed to the success of the partnership.

SMLS write or email a letter that we put onto the client file as an outcome about what was awarded and that was really good because it gave us hope as counsellor advocates to keep wanting to support people to apply and the breadth of things that could be asked for.

**SECASA Counsellor 1**

We can go back and share some of these positive outcomes with the SECASA workers ... I think it gives validation to both our services.

**ISSA Lawyer 1**

As described above, these client outcomes – the **common goals** of both partner services, their staff and their clients – included progress in their recovery from the trauma of their assault, a good legal outcome at VOCAT, and increased client wellbeing and agency arising from a highly effective, supportive and trauma-informed process. In short, the partners and partnership have very clear and shared client-centred goals and can see that ISSA is achieving against those goals.

The partner services had a shared goal to improve outcomes for victim-survivors in their geographic community.

It's place based. We're neighbour organisations in this region – we care about this community. Working with other organisations or programs in the city you feel a little bit disconnected.

*SMLS Manager 1*

Linked to this was that the partnership organisations had **a shared set of values which included understanding what clients had gone through** and the consequent need to minimise re-traumatisation of clients and to be flexible.

It's knowing that there's somebody that isn't going to dismiss the fact that they've been a victim, that they'll acknowledge that victim and that trauma experience and then give them something for it, respect for it.

*SECASA Counsellor 3*

I think at a base level is also a common understanding and appreciation for the complexities of trauma. Often our legal systems overlook how this can play out in a person's life. Whereas when speaking with other people at SECASA or within our ISSA program, we have these foundational understandings of how complex trauma can be and what trauma-informed practice actually looks like on the floor as opposed to just a fancy term that gets thrown around. And I think that really builds a strong foundation between both organisations to work together.

*ISSA lawyer 1*

I think they [the lawyer] absolutely empathise with what the victim-survivors have gone through. They recognise that the nature of the assaults, it's something that's always going to be present with the victim-survivor throughout their life.

*SECASA Counsellor 2*

This was contrasted to other partnerships where common values and ways of working weren't as clear.

I've worked in partnerships where you're trying to get a referral through and it might not meet the criteria, but there's enough there and people are being quite rigid or we're not doing this. So we're not doing that with this partnership. Everyone is always on the same page and on board. We're trying to get those outcomes for the client and being really flexible with how they do that.

*SECASA Manager 1*

## **Firm foundations**

The **commitment and investment** of the people who established the service was seen to be a key factor in the success of the partnership. They acted as champions for the service and built relationships between the two organisations based on a mutual desire to get better outcomes for clients.

A lot of those [systems] were established before I started. ... really depended on the effort and persistence of individual staff who were champions of the service. Meg Butterfield, who ran the legal clinic from our end for many, many years, was largely responsible for establishing a lot of those relationships with counsellors and for maintaining them. At the SECASA end it was driven by Carolyn Worth.

*ISSA Lawyer 4*

Coming into this role, it was obviously very well established in the beginning, I came in with the understanding that it was a very embedded and well-established relationship which was fabulous for me. I didn't have to do any of that groundwork.

**SECASA Manager 1**

This was contrasted to a health justice partnership that failed due to a lack of commitment from one of the partners.

There was such resistance. We tried hard to get different allied providers to learn how to refer justice issues to us. I think it failed because people were resistant. They didn't want to add any more to their work ... 'That's not our job and we don't want to learn and we don't want to know.'

**SMLS Manager 1**

This commitment and championing of the service **has continued** after the founding staff left and the service is now **viewed as core business** for both organisations. The success of the partnership and length of time it has been running contribute to the desire to ensure that it continues.

The counsellors speak so highly of the service, so the newer staff coming in already have this really positive impression of the relationship.

**SECASA Manager 1**

That's also in their mind to make that partnership work, that we have this really good relationship and this is working really well and we want to continue that and how can we be as flexible or as helpful as possible. ... That valuing of the partnership is really helpful.

**SECASA Manager 2**

It's always been part of us anyway, I've always prioritised it that I think it's an important partnership for the clients.

**ISSA Lawyer 3**

## Strong relationships

**Strong relationships and communication** between the staff of the two organisations was identified as being central to the success of the partnership.

Having strong personal relationships and networks have sustained the partnership over a long period of time and knowing you could pick up the phone and talk to somebody at SECASA or at the SMLS if you, for instance, had a client who had not been responding for a little while to correspondence.

**ISSA Lawyer 4**

This relationship is based on **good faith** and established **trust**.

There's a good faithfulness to the partnership. We both recognise each other as acting in good faith. We're not in competition with each other.

**SMLS Manager 1**

**Mutual respect** was identified as an important contributor to the strong relationship.

And I think what's sustained it for so long is that mutual respect of the disciplines involved in managing someone's problem.

**SMLS Manager 2**

The relationship with SMLS is very respectful. It's on an equal footing. You're never made to feel silly for any questions that you ask. Sometimes I have to deal with [another partner] and I'm asking a question and I can see the answer already coming back. How could you not know that type of thing? How could you be so stupid? It comes across. I feel like with SMLS, it isn't like that. It's a very respectful relationship between them and us, because at the forefront it's about the client.

**SECASA Counsellor 2**

Having **clarity around roles** contributed to these strong relationships.

They know what they're responsible for. We know what we're responsible for. There's a very distinct understanding of each other's services and we know who's doing what. Transparency and clarity about expectations. ... At the end of the day, we acknowledge and recognise that while we're integrated, we also see where one hand stops and the other hand begins.

**SMLS Manager 1**

So SMLS have that legal lens within VOCAT and ours is about the therapeutic support lens. It's also helping the client, who sometimes can have tunnel vision about their experience and the impacts. So it's our job as counsellor advocate to help SMLS look at the broader picture for the client so that there might be things that this client might be eligible for, for example, which can bring more to the table. I think that partnership is great.

**SECASA Counsellor 1**

Having **clear and purposeful lines of communication** and **ease of access** to each other were important factors in building and sustaining relationships between the counsellors and lawyers.

So whoever's head or whoever's not, and whoever's head of us and whoever's not, it's always been a big factor that if you're part of us, then you need to be communicating with them.

**ISSA Lawyer 3**

The team [at SMLS] are very approachable. I have worked in partnerships where everyone's professional and clear about their roles and there's communications. But I think having a service that's really approachable, very much on the same page, works well.

**SECASA Manager 2**

They said if you need training we will come in and do it. They're very open and very responsive, so if we need it, we just need to ask.

**SECASA Counsellor 2**

These relationships are reinforced through more **formal networking opportunities** such as training and joint events.

We used to have a joint Christmas party where students and staff from the legal service and from SECASA would come together ... That was a way to keep up those relationships. It was really important for being able to put a name to a face.

**ISSA Lawyer 4**

Having ISSA lawyers **on-site at SECASA** was seen as a key factor in sustaining strong relationships and building trust.

I think definitely being co-located is great, in sight in mind. I think it's a lot easier for people to consult if needed.

**SECASA Manager 2**

I think having that presence in the space regularly [has helped sustain the partnership for so long]. Having had somebody on site regularly to maintain that relationship.

**SECASA Counsellor 3**

I think the counsellors have increased trust in us as practitioners when we're talking with them about these matters and they can see ... if we seem approachable or personable. And then that also encourages them to make referrals to us.

**ISSA Lawyer 1**

This importance of face-to-face contact in maintaining relationships was graphically illustrated by the negative effects of staff not being on-site or meeting each other during **COVID**.

The lawyers not being on site absolutely [led to a breakdown of effective communication]. The wish list would be that they are able to be staffed enough to be on site at the main SECASA locations to be accessible to meet with the clients to have those warm handovers and conversations to make them feel like they really understand us. And we really understand them [SMLS] and their constraints because we might be wanting them to do something for the client that is not within their remit. I think that that would help.

**SECASA Counsellor 1**

I think absolutely communication makes the partnership work. I came on board when COVID was at its height and I think that many of our partnerships on both sides were feeling tension because there was a lot of staff changeover, no one knew who anyone was anymore, and there was definitely a dip in referrals. ... And I think that the way that ended up coming back to what it is now was physically going in, meeting people, introducing ourselves, having team meetings. So I think it really, truly is all about communication and knowing the people that you're in that partnership with.

**ISSA Lawyer 2**

The after-effects of COVID on relationships are still being felt, with confusion about whether the lawyers are back on site at SECASA.

It was felt the service would be even stronger if an ISSA lawyer could be on site at each location every week.

It's not doing all of them every week, that can be a bit clunky and I think if we had more resources, I would send them one day, next day next day and then another two days back in the office. But because of the resourcing, we haven't been able to do that. But that would be the ideal.

**ISSA Lawyer 1**

Several respondents spoke of the need for relationship building to be **continuous and ongoing**, particularly if there are staff changes.

I think the baseline relationships and networking and the commitment to try to revamp things if things are dwindling off has helped to sustain the partnership. ... get to know new staff members, pop into their staff meetings to say hello, I'm the new person or thank you. All of those things are really meaningful in keeping those relationships going.

**ISSA Lawyer 1**

Having staff with skills in **building and maintaining relationships** and being **flexible** is important.

... a personal willingness about building connections with the SECASA staff, if you're going to sit at your desk and never say hi to anyone, not bother talking to anyone... Engagement and understanding that the role of the lawyer is broader than the client. ... They have to have skills in understanding [the importance of] being friendly and engaging and talking to the partners and providing outcomes, telling them we got this great outcome.

**SMLS Manager 1**

Definitely being someone who acts in good faith, who's flexible, adaptable. Those skills have to be there because you have to understand another organisation's systems and be willing to cope with that, whereas some people are like, 'Nope, this is how I do things and I'm not going to do it.'

**SMLS Manager 1**

An example was provided of a partnership that didn't work partly because the staff didn't have these relationship building skills.

## **Training**

SMLS carries out regular training for SECASA staff about the ISSA program, VOCAT applications, and spotting legal issues.

We do regular training, so that's how they know our role, because we'll go out four or five times a year and do community legal education, ... and we would talk them through all the types of things that we do because of staff changeover and just ongoing cementing it in people's brains. And during that time, they also talk about what they do as well.

**SMLS Manager 1**

This was highly valued by SECASA staff.

So, we get all the counsellors together ... and SMLS give us training which is really good – they are the best. Absolutely the best.

**SECASA Counsellor 1**

Running training face to face was seen as important for the effectiveness of the training.

We have about 20 new staff that have started and nothing can replace that face-to-face communication. So, the staff can ask – so I have a client who's talking about homelessness or they've just been kicked out of their tenancy and now they're couch surfing, is that a legal issue? To be able to have that dialogue will be really important.

**SECASA Manager 2**

Training was seen as an important way to build strong relationships.

I find that the most common way that we built those on-site relationship is that every so often SECASA would ask if we would do an ad hoc or formal community legal education with the new intake staff.

**ISSA Lawyer 2**

## **Formal processes to support the partnership**

Various systems are in place to support the partnership including having staff in both organisations responsible for managing the partnership, a steering committee who meet on a regular basis, an escalation point for issues, and joint referral and authority to act forms.

The **referral form** was developed jointly which was felt to be a factor contributing to its success.

We co-developed the tools together like the referral form... They understand the referral form because they shared the design of it which means that they both understand what I'm talking about when I say conflict check, when I say other party details – and it's using language that they specifically requested ... There's lots of things that were shared decisions because of the partnership and so that's why it's efficient.

**SMLS Manager 1**

However, these systems did not emerge as a central feature of what sustains the partnership. While they were important, it was seen as a strength that the **systems were not too rigid** and there were not too many meetings. The following example was provided to demonstrate the flexibility of how decisions are made.

... the other day, SECASA said, can we have a new document that outlines other common legal issues faced by victim-survivors because apart from the counsellors ... there's intake workers that want to know but can't come to those trainings. Last week I developed one and sent it to SECASA and they just called me and said, there's a couple of other common legal issues that we think are coming up. And I was like, 'Yep, I'll shoot that through.' And I sat down with the lawyers and I was like, what's the legal issues facing these clients? And I wrote it up and sent it over.

**SMLS Manager 1**

This flexibility of systems in the partnership aligns with the need for flexibility in trauma-informed practice.

One respondent suggested a more structured review of cases and another suggested touching base yearly to look at what was working and not working would improve the partnership.

We could do that better... It would be nice to maybe structure in a semi review – a case management type approach. But without bogging down SMLS.

**SECASA Counsellor 1**

What would be good, maybe just once a year, is to be able to have something formal where we meet up to discuss what's worked and what hasn't and what we need from both sides – to continuously keep that dialogue and keep improving.

**ISSA Lawyer 2**

## **Financial sustainability**

Both SMLS and SECASA receive fees for work they do for VOCAT. While this does not cover all the costs of the program, having a level of financial sustainability was seen as a factor contributing to the longevity and sustainability of the partnership.

This financial sustainability was also seen to give the partnership the **flexibility** to design services to maximise value to the clients, in contrast to grant funded programs which may have more rigid guidelines on what can or can't be done.

The freedom that gives us to do the best model ever rather than having a very tightly dictated set of criteria ... we know what our community needs and can provide an evidence base of that.

**SMLS Manager 1**



## Challenges

The SECASA and SMLS managers both commented on how easy the partnership was to manage.

There hasn't been any challenges as such, I don't think there's been a single complaint since I've started. Unlike with [another partnership], where every couple of months we're talking about an issue or something that's happened, it doesn't really happen with this partnership.

*SECASA Manager 2*

It's one of my favourite programs to manage because it requires less intervention from management.

*SMLS Manager 1*

However, **resource constraints, staff turnover, organisational changes** and a **breakdown in communication due to COVID** emerged as challenges to the partnership.

Delays in providing services to clients due to **resource constraints** was seen as a significant issue by both lawyers and counsellors, because it impacted on their ability to provide a good service to their clients.

Since COVID the counsellors are out of control, busy and often really difficult to contact or get a hold of, or they don't get back to you for months.

*ISSA Lawyer 3*

Someone did say, their [SMLS] wait list is so long, it's not going to be appropriate for my client.

*SECASA Counsellor 1*

SMLS recently put referrals from SECASA on hold due to **capacity constraints** following staff leaving and the increased demand because of the new Victims Legal Service. This undermined the trust of the SECASA counsellors in the partnership.

We had an email maybe two months ago where we were told that SMLS weren't taking any more referrals and then I think within two weeks of that we had an email saying no, no, we're back to normal. It's put a few staff off and questioning what is going on. ... because in my time I've never had an email or notification that SMLS didn't have the capacity to take requests from us. That was like brand new territory. I thought we had a partnership with you guys.

*SECASA Counsellor 1*

That recent thing about the closing of the books that SMLS did, I understand why that happened but the ripple effect of that ... everybody did refer out to the private solicitors that we have either worked with in the past or know of in more recent times.

*SECASA Counsellor 1*

**Staff changes** were seen as a challenge due to loss of organisational knowledge and the need to rebuild relationships.

The difficulties arise when you've got big changes in staff. So that corporate intelligence is taken and that innate understanding about what the partnership is. And we've got to retrain and that's when it gets difficult.

*SMLS Manager 2*

I think the biggest challenge would probably be staff turnover. Since I've been here, there's a handful of staff that have been here longer than me. Losing knowledge, losing some of those relationships, because I think a big part of it is those relationships that you build. And I know that they say that partnerships should function regardless of who's in the role, but I think that the personalities and those interpersonal relationships contribute a lot. We've had so many staff turnover – the training we're requesting will be to make sure that everyone here is aware of the program and the partnership and how it works.

**SECASA Manager 2**

Changes to staff and organisational structure has meant that it is not as clear who should be contacted in each organisation.

It's a little bit confusing the way it is now. Originally you could email [the founding partner] and say I've got an issue here. Can we chat? And she'd give you a call straight away. What's happening? Yep, no worries. I'll talk to whatever. It's a little bit more difficult now. ... There's been so many changes in SECASA in the last couple of years it has been very difficult to keep up with what's going on.

**ISSA Lawyer 3**

**External changes** also pose a potential challenge for the partnership.

It's an interesting time for us because we've received funding for one part of what we do in that space, and we have this very important partnership that we don't want to destabilise because we don't have capacity. So, we're working that out at the moment.

**SMLS Manager 2**

As discussed in the section on relationships, the **lack of face-to-face contact for staff during COVID** has led to poorer communication and weaker relationships.

Several respondents noted that challenges were a normal part of a partnership, but the shared values and commitment of SMLS and SECASA to obtaining the best outcomes for clients meant that there was a **willingness to find solutions**.

So, it's not to say that things have been rosy the whole time. There's definitely been areas where we haven't agreed, but at the end of the day, we want the clients to get better outcomes and we want the clients to have access to trauma-informed service delivery and we want to support victims of sexual assault.

**SMLS Manager 1**

This counsellor sums up what has made the partnership work:

We've been on a journey together – it's a 28-year journey and no other the service could do that. You've got to respect the longitude of the service and what we've achieved, and I think it is about values. The type of work we do, you do it because you want to help people and it comes down to that. What are your values? And I feel SMLS values align very much with SECASA values – everybody's respected.

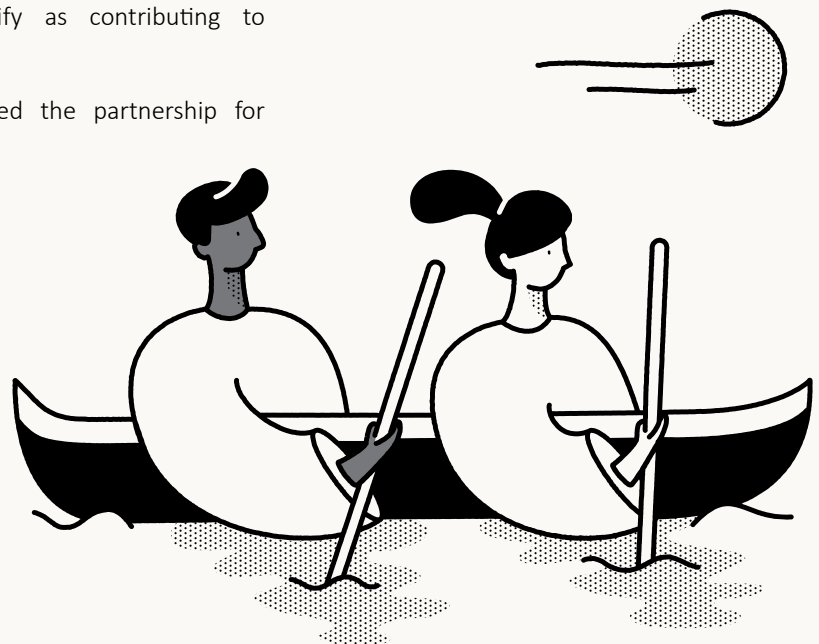
**SECASA Counsellor 2**

# Conclusion

The Integrated Services for Survivor Advocacy program is a 28-year-old partnership between South-East Monash Legal Service and the South Eastern Centre Against Sexual Assault and Family Violence. In a context where the sustainability of partnerships is a key challenge, this study sought to gather insights about

- what 'value' or success looks like to partnership clients, health and legal staff and partner services
- what they identify as contributing to these outcomes
- what has sustained the partnership for 28 years.

This research was undertaken as part of a project to identify shared outcomes and develop indicators for health justice partnerships. As well as providing insights back to the ISSA team and their partners, the insights from this research will be shared across the network to inform improved client outcomes and the sustainability of partnerships.



## Outcomes identified

The value for clients came from feeling **safe and supported, being heard and believed, having agency over their matter, achieving a positive VOCAT or other legal outcome**, and **the value of addressing additional legal issues**. Each of these can independently or in combination contribute to the capacity of a client to recover and move forward with their lives.

Key to this partnership being sustained for close to 30 years is a strong and shared focus on **client recovery as a shared goal** for both partner services and their staff.

Working in partnership using **trauma-informed practice** was seen as an effective way to improve outcomes for their clients and a central reason to support the partnership. While the contribution of each service is pivotal to this success, the sum of their work is greater than the parts. Together, the partners provide an effective, client-centred service that safely holds and provides clear benefits for the overarching goal of the client's recovery. VOCAT awards, for example, are geared towards assisting with a client's recovery through activities such as training, wellbeing, and strengthening family relationships.

Supporting the over-arching goal of **client recovery** were more specific outcomes identified for clients and for partners.

Factors, and interim outcomes identified for clients, that contribute to recovery included:

- Feeling heard and believed
- Feeling safe and supported
- Having agency in how their matter is dealt with
- A successful legal outcome
- Validation through successfully participating in the legal process
- Client empowerment/self-worth.

These outcomes are facilitated by trauma-informed practice, which underpins everything that the lawyers and counsellors do.

Factors, and interim outcomes for the partner services and the partnership, identified as important for achieving their shared goal of client recovery, were:

- High quality, client-focused service provision
- Strong partnership
- Effective referrals
- Having capable staff
- Efficient processes
- Cross-service training
- Staff wellbeing.

Further, when the partnership achieves good outcomes for the clients, this in turn leads to job satisfaction for staff and further strengthens the value placed in the partnership by practitioners and partner services.

We also explored in this study what people used – formally or informally – as identifiers or indicators of these outcomes. We will use these in the further development of outcome measures and indicators.

Finally, we sought to understand what respondents felt contributed to outcomes. This will help further evolve a theory of change about what types of activities, processes or relationships support different outcomes and what happens when these are not present.

Outcomes identified by respondents, indicators of success identified in discussions and factors seen to contribute to success are summarised in Appendix 3.

# Appendix 1:

## Interview schedules

### 1. Clients

Thanks so much for your time today.

I understand you have used the ISSA program where the SECASA counsellor works with the Springvale Legal Service to help you with legal issues such as compensation claims to the Victims of Crime Assistance Tribunal (VOCAT).

Because this partnership has been going for 28 years, we want to learn more about what it does for people, how it makes a difference and how it has lasted for so long. We are speaking to clients, staff and others who work with ISSA.

So today we would like to ask you how ISSA was helpful to you as a client, and what difference it might have made for you. We are interested in what was important to you about this service.

With your permission we will record the session today. As noted in the information and consent form, we will delete the recording once we have transcribed the interview.

This conversation and any information you share with us will be treated with full confidentiality and respect. We will not use your name or the names of your children or family members or the organisations that you will talk about. Whatever information you share will be used to design better services for people who have experienced violence.

Our conversation will last for about 45-60 minutes during which time I will ask you a few questions. You can stop this interview at any

time and decline to answer any question if you do not want to answer it.

If you are feeling upset during or after the interview please let me know and we can arrange for you to see someone.

Do you have any questions before we start?

1. Could you tell me about your experience in using ISSA. What help did you get from the lawyer? What made it a positive (or negative) experience?
  - Prompts: *How did you find out about the service?*
  - *Did you have to repeat your story?*
  - *Did the counsellor work with the lawyer to support you as well?*
  - *Did you feel supported?*
  - *Did you feel that the two services were working together?*
  - *How easy was it to get an appointment?*
  - *Did you understand what was happening?*
  - *Did you have a clear understanding of what they were doing for you?*
  - *How did you feel at the end of the experience?*
  - *Were you happy with the result?*
2. How did this experience compare to your experience with using other health and/or legal services to get help?

3. Did you go to VOCAT. If you did tell us about your experience of going to court.
  - Prompts: *Did it help you to navigate the court processes?*
  - *How was the lawyer helpful?*

- *Did the counsellor help with this process?*
4. Is there anything else you would like to add?

Thank you for your time today.

## 2. Staff

Thanks so much for your time today.

As you know the ISSA program is a partnership between SECASA and SMLS to provide legal advice, assistance and representation to victims/survivors of sexual assault and other non-offending persons affected by the assault.

The purpose of this study – and our reason for talking with you today – is to learn from this partnership which has been going for 28 years. We are curious to understand what the benefits of this partnership are to clients, to the agencies involved and to other stakeholders and what features of the service provide these benefits. We are also interested to know what has sustained the partnership over such a long time.

With your permission we will record the session today. As noted in the information and consent form, we will delete the recording once we have transcribed the interview.

Before we talk about the ISSA program, could you tell me about your role in relation to the program and how long you have been working with the program?

1. I would like to understand how the partnership works. Could you start by describing what the **client journey** looks like.
- b. Prompts: *How do clients find out about the service?*
- c. *How do clients get referred to SECASA/SMLS?*
- d. *Are there referral protocols?*
- e. *Do you regularly meet with staff from [partner org SECASA/SMLS]?*

- f. *What training do SECASA/SMLS staff receive?*
- g. *What type of issues does the legal service deal with? E.g. does it deal with broader legal issues such as housing and debt?*
2. Can you give me an **example** of how you have helped a client through the partnership?
3. What do you think makes the **partnership work**? How are **differences resolved**?
4. From where you sit, what does the ISSA program offer the **women** it supports?  
Prompts: *What benefits/value does it give clients?*
5. What are the benefits for **your ability to do your job**?
6. What **data** do you collect? How do you use that data/what does it tell you? Do you collect data on drop out; Compensation amounts?
7. How can you tell ISSA delivers value? What are the indicators to you that ISSA delivers value?  
Prompts: *Quicker referrals, getting matters on in court/orders made more quickly, quality of the material filed, clients not having to retell their story, having access to relevant documents, case conferences [prompt for both value for clients and for their own work]*
8. What data do you think it would be useful to collect to demonstrate the value of the service?

9. What are the **features** of the ISSA partnership that you feel contribute to those benefits? These features could be processes, relationships, ways of working – whatever you see as important.
10. Based on what you see, what do you think has helped to **sustain** the partnership for so long?
11. Based on your experience, what **sets ISSA apart** from other services in supporting women who have experienced sexual

violence and/or domestic violence, particularly more siloed services?

12. What are some of the **challenges** in working in partnership with another organisation? How are these challenges resolved? What have you learned from those challenges?
13. Is there anything else you would like to say about the ISSA partnership?

Thank you for your time today.

### 3. Stakeholders<sup>6</sup>

Thanks so much for your time today.

As you know the ISSA program is a partnership between SECASA and SMLS to provide legal advice, assistance and representation to victims/survivors of sexual assault and other non-offending persons affected by the assault. The work includes making compensation claims to the Victims of Crime Assistance Tribunal (VOCAT). A notable feature of this program is that it is a 28-year partnership between a health and legal service to support a shared group of clients.

The purpose of this study and our reason for talking with you today is to learn from this program. We are curious to understand what the benefits of this partnership are to clients, to the agencies involved and to other stakeholders and what features of the service provide these benefits. We are also interested to know what has sustained the partnership over such a long time.

With your permission we will record the session today. As noted in the information and consent form, we will delete the recording once we have transcribed the interview.

1. Before we talk about the ISSA program, could you tell me a bit about your own role and your relationship to ISSA/how ISSA relates to your work?
2. ISSA supports women who have experienced sexual violence, including family violence. From where you sit, what does the ISSA program offer the women it supports?
3. What sets ISSA apart from other services that women who experience sexual assault interact with?
  - What are the strengths of this program for these clients?
  - What benefits/value does it give clients? E.g. what opportunities does it provide your students?
  - How does this compare to other opportunities?
4. Why do you think this partnership has lasted so long?
5. Is there anything else you would like to add?

Thank you for your time today.

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6. Note, with no court/tribunal participants this schedule was only used with an academic participant. Questions for courts and tribunals have been removed.

# Appendix 2:

## Case studies provided during interviews

### Case study 1

The client had been engaged with a private firm for her VOCAT matter but was unfortunately not feeling very heard. They hadn't explored the full suite of awards that could potentially be available to her. At the time she was still managing drug addiction that had come out of her traumatic relationship, and this firm was asking her to do ABCD. She was expressing how this process was making her more stressed and traumatising her.

The SECASA worker mentioned our service and said we have a partnership with SMLS. I'm sure they could speak to you about it, whether a file transfer would be viable, if that's something they could explore. I remember my first appointment with this client very clearly – it was on the phone and the SECASA worker was also on the phone. The client started crying about 20 minutes in and in a very grateful way was saying to me, my previous lawyers haven't given me this much time throughout the last year. And you've done this in one appointment.

We got a transfer of her file from the private solicitor. We sat down with her and the SECASA worker then prepared the report [for VOCAT], because SECASA had not been asked to prepare a report by the private solicitor. We then worked closely alongside the client and her SECASA worker and another support who was supporting her with some drug and alcohol issues she had at the time.

It was a long road as we had to explore potential referrals for her, she wanted to do EMDR

### ISSA lawyer

therapy, and the SECASA worker helped her to get some to include in the VOCAT claim. While the VOCAT process was going on, the client still had sessions with SECASA.

We assisted her to prepare a statutory declaration, filling in some of the gaps of the narrative that had not been reported to the police. We found that was meaningful because we were very aware that she didn't have much sense of ... being heard through the previous solicitor. As some time had elapsed, the SECASA worker prepared another letter of support which provided an update as to where she was with her circumstances and her recovery.

Ultimately, she was very happy with her outcome – we were able to get her counselling, a loss of earnings of \$20,000 as she was a social worker and was unable to return to the field as she had become triggered by family violence, and funding to reskill in a new education pursuit.

I think the nicest thing was when I called her recently, she was reflecting on how this was the last piece and that she had otherwise closed off her supports from drug and alcohol counselling, child protection had closed their matter. She was really in a good place and it all had come full circle at the right moment. So it was a really positive outcome.



## Case study 2

We received a referral through SECASA [for a client who had experienced] 30 years of sexual and physical abuse by her husband. I reached out to the SECASA counsellor because I wanted to get some background prior to touching base with the client, and she assisted me to understand the triggers for this client and the approach to take.

We agreed to do a VOCAT application and obtained a police report, but her memory was vastly more extensive than what was on the police report. I ended up speaking to her in depth and drafted a statutory declaration. It was deeply difficult for her to hear that information back. She felt more comfortable with us if we did a three-way consultation where, instead of giving the client the draft directly, I gave it

### ISSA lawyer

to the SECASA counsellor to review first and to have a discussion with us if she noticed any discrepancies. After that, point by point, we read through the statutory declaration with the client, stopping at appropriate points and having the counsellor assist on the client's behalf if required.

The partnership became integral to getting everything we needed in a way that didn't retraumatise the client. I think it's a really good example of a hands-on group approach to a client.

## Case study 3

My client came via intake at SECASA. She had a young boy. The sexual assault had led to her being pregnant and she maintained the pregnancy and there was a lot of issues regarding connection with her son.

About halfway through the process we spoke about her potential to make a statement or at least to have the assault recognised and recorded because the sexual assault was several years ago and she didn't know the perpetrator's name and had vague details. We also spoke about the fact that when her SECASA journey comes to an end she might need additional support to help her carry on with everyday life. We spoke about what kind of services might be helpful not only to help her in her trauma, but to help her son and help her connect with her son. So that, moving forward, her relationship with her son would not be defined by this history.

### SECASA Counsellor

So we spoke about doing a referral to VOCAT. The first step was to talk to SMLS and to start the ball rolling. I think unfortunately the referral was made and they changed the system and the referral got lost. So I spoke to [SMLS lawyer] and said, 'I put this referral in a little while ago,' she was extremely responsive and said, 'Oh my goodness, it's one of the ones that's got lost. We changed our system and something happened,' and it was immediately put right. 'I can see your client when you tell me it's good to see your client. I can be there Monday,' and that's how it started. I'd already applied to VOCAT because I'd been waiting for the referral to be accepted, but the process was really quick and seamless once she got into the system.

## Case study 4

My client was an adult female alleging historical sexual assault by a police officer when she was a late adolescent. A formal statement was taken by the police in relation to the historical matter, however, a criminal case could not proceed. We referred the client to SMLS who put in a VOCAT application. The reports were written by SECASA.

The outcome was that the client had substantial awards including a paid meal plan, home gym equipment, and a holiday cruise for them and their family.

The client feedback was that the joint support of SECASA and SMLS service (including the barrister used by SMLS) was an extremely caring

### SECASA Counsellor

and supportive experience, and importantly where she felt her experience was believed and validated through the VOCAT process, which was crucial for this client due to the criminal process being closed to her.

The client's family, affected over the years as a direct result of the triggering and upsetting symptoms associated with the alleged crime, felt the efforts made by SECASA and SMLS to give the client voice to her years of suffering was powerful and healing to the client, and more broadly, to the family.

## Case study 5

SMLS have historically supported SECASA clients under the Making Rights Reality program – SECASA's access and inclusion support for clients with cognitive impairment or disability – to access VOCAT. An adolescent SECASA client, diagnosed with global developmental delay, alleged sexual assault as a young child by a neighbour. They made a statement to the police but the criminal process could not proceed. They were then referred to SMLS who made a VOCAT application and received an award.

### SECASA Counsellor

The client came back to SECASA as an adult following a sexual assault by a stranger at a train station as they trusted the SECASA service. SMLS assisted with a VOCAT application. The client and family are very grateful for the support offered by the SECASA-SMLS joint service.

# Appendix 3:

## Summary of outcomes, indicators and contributing factors

Outcome domains	Identifiers or indicators of outcomes	Factors seen to contribute to outcomes
<b>For clients</b>		
<b>Recovery and wellbeing</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Client reported wellbeing</li> <li>• Client reported stress</li> <li>• Other client outcomes</li> <li>• Client reported progress towards recovery goals</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• A safe and supported process</li> <li>• Skilled, trauma-informed health and legal practitioners working collaboratively to support client recovery</li> <li>• Support to achieve legal outcomes in VOCAT and in relation to other legal matters</li> <li>• Being believed</li> <li>• Control and agency in the process</li> </ul>
<b>Capacity to stay engaged with legal process and achieve legal outcomes</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Client engagement in the legal process</li> <li>• Client outcomes from legal process, including awards</li> <li>• Client uptake of awards</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Both services working towards the legal outcome</li> <li>• The complementary expertise of each service</li> <li>• A safe and supported process</li> <li>• Shared and coordinated responsibility for the client</li> <li>• Client-led timing, enabled by flexibility</li> </ul>
<b>Agency, self-worth, empowerment</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Client feedback</li> <li>• Client reported self-worth</li> <li>• Client engagement in process</li> <li>• Client reported empowerment/agency</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Being believed</li> <li>• Being supported</li> <li>• Client led/control and agency in the process, including control of the timeframe, enabled by a flexible approach</li> </ul>
<b>Client satisfaction</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Refer other people</li> <li>• Client reported satisfaction and other feedback</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• All of the above</li> </ul>

Outcome domains	Identifiers or indicators of outcomes	Factors seen to contribute to outcomes
Outcome domains	Identifiers or indicators of outcomes	Factors seen to contribute to outcomes
<b>For partner services and staff</b>		
<b>Strong outcomes for clients in VOCAT, in recovery</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Success in the client outcomes reported above</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• As reported above</li> </ul>
<b>High quality, client-focused service provision</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Quality and relevance of reports</li> <li>• Identification and referral of legal issues</li> <li>• Waiting time to see a client [ISSA]</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Cross-service training</li> <li>• Secondary consultation</li> <li>• Quality of partner staff</li> <li>• Effective communication</li> <li>• Adequate resourcing</li> </ul>
<b>Efficiencies in processes</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Appropriate referrals</li> <li>• Timeframe for reports</li> <li>• Quality and relevance of reports</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Cross-service training</li> <li>• Alignment of each service's work</li> <li>• Secondary consultation</li> </ul>
<b>Capability of staff</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Lawyer capability for trauma-informed practice and for VC work</li> <li>• Mutual understanding and respect for each others' roles</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Learning from working together</li> <li>• Cross-service training</li> </ul>
<b>Staff wellbeing</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Staff feedback</li> <li>• Potentially, burnout measures</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Shared purpose</li> <li>• Contribution of each partner to the work</li> <li>• Achieving goals</li> <li>• Quality outcomes through shared endeavour</li> </ul>
<b>Strong partnership</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Length of partnership</li> <li>• Outcomes of partnership</li> <li>• Feedback (positive and negative) from partners and clients</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Shared purpose</li> <li>• Each seeing the value of each other's contribution towards the shared purpose</li> <li>• Aligned values</li> <li>• Strong relationships sustained through purposeful effective communication and on-site service delivery and in person connection between staff of each service</li> <li>• Relationships across and at different levels of the organisations</li> </ul>



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