



# *Visible and Vocal*

THE LEGAL NEEDS AND ISSUES FACING YOUNG WOMEN IN VICTORIA

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*Victorian*

WOMEN'S @ TRUST

*making a difference*

A Youthlaw project funded by the Victorian Women's Trust

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Please use this report in whole or part. We ask you to acknowledge Youthlaw.

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Ariel Couchman  
Director – Youthlaw 2008

# THE PROJECT

## Why we did it?

At Youthlaw we see more young men than young women. In 2007, 65% of the young people who sought legal advice from Youthlaw were male and only 35% were female. This has been a consistent pattern since we started up in 2001. We wanted to know why.

Do young women

- need the law less?
- not know about the law enough to use it?
- have bad experiences when using it?
- get put off using the law?
- get put off by the location of our service or how we run it?

We also wanted to find out what young women's legal issues are and how these might differ between groups of young women.

The results of this project will be used to change our service so hopefully more young women use it. We will also be sharing our findings with other community youth and legal services and lawyers such as Victoria Legal Aid and those who do pro bono work in private law firms.

## Who we talked to?

We set up 8 focus groups of young women (42 young women in all)

- A group of young women with disabilities
- A group of young women accessing family support services and others attending local schools, in rural and regional Victoria
- A group of young women accessing post release services and with an experience of youth justice centres
- A group of young women connected with multi-cultural youth services. This group included many newly arrived refugees.
- A group of same sex attracted young women from regional and rural towns in Victoria.
- A group of young women with a history of mental health and/or substance abuse issues.
- A group of young women accessing a CBD youth hub that provides support to homeless and at risk young people.
- A group of indigenous young women.

We also conducted an on-line survey and hard copy survey through youth services. In total, 71 young women and 15 people working with young women (youth workers, teachers etc.) completed the survey.

## More about those we talked to...

The focus groups were chosen by Youthlaw and the advisory group on the basis that they represented young women who would most likely have differing experiences of the law and have insight into the barriers facing a broad range of young women in the community. Some were chosen because they also represent young women who are generally more vulnerable, disadvantaged and discriminated against. The voices of these young women are often not heard and they frequently face greater difficulty accessing services than other young people.

The survey was promoted to young women through youth and community networks, as well as on our website. Overall, those in the survey group tended to be older, more likely to be employed and have higher education levels than those from the focus groups.

# WHAT WE HEARD?

## The Issues

- “Knowing your rights especially for people under 18”*
- “My rights as a young person”*
- “Where to go about what”*
- “Not knowing my rights in dealing with Police”*
- “Knowing my rights – the law can be full of legal jargon which can make it confusing!”*
- “Safety in a rooming house”*
- “The lack of regulation that goes on these networking sites”*
- “Drug issues”*
- “Those who need the most help do not have access to it”*
- “Knowing my rights!!! (I only know some)”*
- “Stopping people talk about my private stuff”*
- “Stop people saying stuff about my background like racism stuff”*
- “Not sure”*
- “How to make a complaint”*
- “Rental properties to help me move away from an unfavourable family environment”*
- “Knowing ones rights in situations – police/ticket inspectors/shop assistants & security”*
- “Car searches (being pulled over by police for no reason)”*
- “Your right with Job Network/Centrelink”*
- “Public transport fines”*
- “Not knowing my rights within a same sex relationship”*
- “Videos or pictures that get taken without consent in public places”*
- “Sexism / sexual discrimination / different treatment”*
- “Conditions in rooming house”*
- “Being able to pay for car to get around in”*
- “Personal protection and the operation of intervention orders”*
- “Knowing what can be done if you think the law itself is unjust”*
- “My mum getting help cos people rip her off cos she’s deaf”*
- “Medical privacy / access to contraception / morning after pill / abortion”*
- “The effect of criminal conviction on future chances of employment”*
- “I think police officers should patrol nightclubs much more frequently”*
- “Knowing how to make someone recognise your legal rights (eg. tenancy rights)”*
- “Renting/tenancies”*
- “Safety”*

The legal issues raised by young women related to the various parts of their lives including education, family, work, housing and relationships.

The majority of legal issues identified by young women and workers alike were what we would describe as civil law. These include such problems as rights and responsibilities when accessing health and other services, concerns with school, renting or accessing housing services, applying for jobs and negotiating work conditions, as well as sexual harassment and discrimination in school, work and when using various services. They also include sorting out of family and relationship issues such as contact arrangements on parents separating, being a young parent, or abuse by a family member or partner.

The criminal law issues identified mainly involved young women as victims rather than as offenders. Criminal legal issues where they were the offender included shoplifting, drug issues, underage drinking; graffiti, theft and fake IDs.

Civil law requires action to be initiated as compared to criminal law where young people respond to police action or a court summons. Civil law requires an understanding of the law and one's rights. The predominance of these civil law issues highlights the importance of young women being aware of the law in order to assert their rights and pursue legal action when necessary.

The young women interviewed and surveyed showed a lot of initiative in trying to resolve issues themselves (e.g. consumer and Centrelink problems). However more awareness of the law, where to take complaints and how to get help would assist these young women with dealing with the situation themselves, or with deciding how and where to get legal assistance.

## Common legal issues for young women

Those legal issues most consistently identified as important across the focus groups were:

- **Lack of equal rights**
  - accessing services
  - housing
  - jobs
  - in the home
- **Discrimination**
  - because of age
  - also socio-economic background, mental health, sexual preference, disability and cultural background
- **Safety and violence**
  - in the streets,
  - in institutions
  - at home
  - abusive treatment by authorities
- **Police and other authorities**
  - Knowing your rights
  - What to do about inconsistent treatment
  - Abusive treatment
  - How they can assist
- **Family relationships / Family law**
  - Having a say in family law access arrangements
  - family abuse
  - relationship abuse
  - being a young parent
- **Debts and fines**
  - Public transport fines
  - Loans and credit cards
  - Mobile phones
- **Knowing Legal rights**

The five legal issues considered **most important** to the young women surveyed were:

1. **Education and awareness of legal rights**
2. **Access to and knowing where to go for legal help**
3. **Equal rights**
4. **Discrimination**
5. **Family law/Relationships**

Legal issues identified as being a 'big problem' or to 'some degree a problem' were:

1. Health rights (eg breach of confidentiality by professional)
2. Landlord/tenancy issues
3. Violence (eg. seeking an intervention order )
4. School bullying
5. Debts and fines
6. Being a victim of theft
7. Abortion

Other legal problems they had experienced were:

- Drug and alcohol convictions of friends
- Physical and sexual abuse in the home
- Visiting rights for siblings in out of home care
- Limited say in contact and residence arrangements between parents
- Inadequate disability support at university
- Insurance and motor vehicle accidents
- Unwanted disclosure of medical information
- Sexual harassment and discrimination in the workplace

## **FOCUS GROUPS**

Some legal issues were of specific relevance to one particular focus group or had a particular impact on this group. Some were only raised by a few young women in a group but appeared to be common issues.

### **Young women with disabilities**

- Unequal treatment and access in regard to education and public and emergency services
- Breaches of confidentiality by medical practitioners and other professionals
- Difficulties proving identification (eg. a key pass is not accepted everywhere and some impairments prevent young women from driving)
- Not having equal rights:
  - to manage one's own financial affairs
  - to manage one's own health
  - to have personal assistance at home

### **Young women accessing post release programs having been in juvenile detention**

- Battles to have children reside with them in or after leaving detention
- Rights in Youth Justice centres. Young women felt that their physical safety was frequently jeopardised by other inmates and they were reluctant to lodge complaints as they feared that this would put their safety at further risk.

- Limited access to legal advice in detention.
- Post release issues
  - Lack of support when over 18
  - Centrelink issues such as reinstatement and compliance
  - Sex discrimination in applying for jobs, eg. apprenticeships
  - Guardianship and custody issues
  - Police and authority interventions on the streets
  - Police -unresponsive and rude response to complaints of abuse
  - Public transport fines and ticket hassles – debts leave little to live on

### **Young women accessing a CBD youth hub that provides support to homeless and at risk young people**

- Violence in home and on the streets and barriers to reporting abuse (won't be believed )
- Sexual harassment on the street
- Public transport fines
- Family (eg. not getting on)
- Housing issues – getting housing, conditions of, boarding house issues (abuse, stealing of property)
- Police and other authorities -rude, unresponsive and judgmental

### **Young rural women accessing family support services and attending local schools**

- Medical treatment e.g. not being given sufficient information about options
- Underage drinking and police
- Car issues (eg. speeding and car accidents)
- Centrelink entitlements and issues because of need to caring for family members
- Family law (e.g. being required to go on access visits)
- Consumer issues (e.g. following up problems is difficult, recovery of money, etc.)
- Issues about quality and cost of legal advice and where to get free advice
- New driving laws (eg. P-plate laws) – make it hard to meet up with friends and more information needed
- Employers discriminate against young mothers – difficult to find jobs
- Assistance and information when a family member / friend has mental health issues

### **Young women from Culturally and Linguistically Diverse (CLD) backgrounds including those newly arrived**

- Fines (e.g. public transport fines) – don't know who to get help from
- Whether you can get legal help with housing issues or whether you have to go to the Housing Commission.

- Wanting to understand the legal system better (e.g. how much evidence do police have to have)
- Want to know more about what police can and can't do and what to do when they are misusing their power.
- Having rights respected when going for jobs
- Officers of authority (police, ticket inspectors etc) are sometimes rude, don't care and won't listen and feel unfairly targeted.
- Harassment issues – are hard and they are time consuming to take up with police
- Rights in regard to citizenship test (e.g. whether can have an interpreter)
- New P-plate laws – make it very difficult to get around
- Need more information on rights in regard to being arrested and information on the terrorism laws
- Physical violence and harassment particularly from young male friends

### **Same sex attracted young women living in regional / rural Victoria**

- Police – lack of responsiveness to complaints ( e.g. about a burglary and rape )
- Cyber and school bullying
- P-plate laws – too expensive not to car pool with friends when travelling from town to town; will result in being unsafe
- Discrimination
- Unequal rights in community housing
- DHS – foster care issues

### **Young women with a history of mental health and substance abuse issues**

- Having complaints taken seriously
- Domestic violence
- Sexual harassment and assault and unhelpful police in dealing with assaults
- Discrimination in employment
- Homelessness and its ramifications
- Being denied access to public spaces and being kicked out of squats
- Being harassed and disrespected by police and ticketing officers. Try to avoid police or not look suspicious.
- Unable to assert rights e.g. disputing a charge and/or reason for arrest; assumed to be the perpetrator of offences.
- Public transport (e.g. ticket fines and safety on public transport)
- Loss of personal belongings if imprisoned
- Being taken seriously by police, landlords and anyone
- Compensation issues
- Children taken out of their care

## Indigenous young women

- Discrimination
  - eg. more rental house inspections than neighbours
  - eg. less likely to be promoted in jobs
- Safety concerns
- Debts (including credit cards and personal loans)

### THE PROJECT FINDINGS SUGGEST:

- *Young women need to know more about the laws most relevant to them so they can assert their rights and pursue legal action where necessary.*
- *A high priority for young women is to have more information about their legal rights and where to get legal help.*
- *Key legal issues for young people include equal rights, discrimination, safety and violence, family law, relationships, debts and fines.*
- *Young women of differing background and circumstance often experience the law in different ways and they also have specific legal needs. Legal information/education delivery needs to take this into account.*

## What young women know about the law

Generally the surveys indicated a good awareness of the law. However there was less certainty about details of the law and there was a desire to have more information about the law and how to access legal help.

The focus groups were asked about a number of rights in the context of police interactions to test their general knowledge. Their understanding about this aspect of the law was generally quite good, although they were less clear about specific details.

With other areas of the law the young women involved in either the survey and/or focus group needed quite a bit of prompting and guidance to identify their own legal issues.

This is consistent with the experience of the Youthlaw. We find that young people often don't identify what is happening to them is a legal issue. When they come to us for say a fine, lots of other issues come up like having been a victim of crime, having other debts etc. Young people often come to Youthlaw after other services (eg. housing and youth services) assist them to identify legal issues and support them to attend.

In this project the young women also came up with issues that were often much broader than just legal problems – e.g. getting on with family, having enough money and finding accommodation.

Of concern was a **consistent low confidence in being assertive** despite an awareness of rights.

### THE PROJECT FINDINGS SUGGEST:

- *There is a need for young women to be more aware of the law so they are in a position to identify legal issues.*
- *Young women will often seek assistance from non-legal services and people (eg generalist youth services, school teachers, family, friends). These services and people can play a very important role in assisting young women to identify legal issues and support them to obtain legal assistance*
- *Young women are often deterred from pursuing legal action because they lack confidence, are intimidated or feel disempowered. Support and assistance to pursue legal action is very important.*

# USING THE LAW

## What are young women's experiences of using the law?

In the survey young women were asked about their past experiences of using the law.

They described the legal issue:

*"The way in which a male teacher had treated me"*

*"I had a car accident and was going to be charged with careless driving".*

*"Applying for compensation "*

*"Applying to see my sisters"*

*"When the doctor refused to see me without my parents because I had a disability"*

*"I was assaulted "*

*"I had a problem with one of my housemates"*

*"It was for a friend – we needed to know information about our lease and what our rights were"*

*"Not being able to provide enough ID to get into places"*

*"I was unfairly dismissed"*

*"I called a tenancy rights number that I found in a book my previous real estate agent gave me that told me my tenancy rights. I then went to VCAT but I didn't have any advice on what to do at my VCAT hearing"*

*"Child custody"*

*"Money"*

*"When I wanted to write a Will when I inherited some money"*

*"Living with dad when mum's away cos of court papers"*

They were asked about their experiences of legal assistance.

*"They were very helpful though there was not much that could be done"*

*"I would have liked someone to talk me though the process of going through VCAT"*

*"They could have explained what all the options where. They usually just tell me what I should do and then watch for me to sign the paper work on it. If I go with my parents, they speak to my parents a lot, and often include me at the end when I have to do something (usually sign)".*

*"The information I was told could have been given to me over the phone I found it a waste of time"*

*"More youth language"*

*"More follow up support"*

Focus group participants experience:

*"Most young women accept things, like sexual harassment at work, as just "everyday" b/c their parents never told them about it – and people are not aware about what experiences they can complain about."*

*"When I get fines, I just put them away in my drawer. I hope that if I leave them there for long enough, they will go away."*

*"There is no point telling my landlord or police things because no-one takes young people seriously anyway."*

In almost all groups, there were young women who had sought help with some of their legal issues. A significant number of the young women reported that they tended not to take action particularly in regard to fines and debts. Some had been encouraged by youth workers, for example, to write letters (eg about public transport fines in order to waive fines) however the young people indicated this was often too hard.

While some young women were eager to be proactive about their legal issues there were a number of young women who expressed feelings of disempowerment. They also did not feel they could approach people such as the police, the Department of Housing and landlords about their legal concerns either because they were fearful of these authorities or because they felt powerless to effect change.

The young women in the focus groups were asked about their experiences in dealing with police. Some had positive experiences to share, such as a young woman from regional Victoria who spoke of how police had helped with homophobia at school by giving a legal information session on discrimination and bullying. Other young women reported the police supporting them by intervening in family violence.

A significant number of young women gave examples of negative experiences, which ranged from inaction, such as police ignoring or not following up their complaints about abuse, to misuse of power, such as direct verbal and physical abuse by police.

The groups where young women reported mostly negative experiences with police included the group of young women with a history of mental health and drug issues, the 'at risk' and/or homeless young women and the group of same-sex attracted young women.

#### **THE PROJECT FINDINGS SUGGEST:**

- *Young women experience treatment of them by the law and legal services as very inconsistent. Negative experiences can strongly deter them from pursuing future legal action.*
- *Authorities including police have an important role in demonstrating to all young women that police can be protective and positive in addressing their legal issues.*
- *Some groups of young women (eg. those with a history of mental health and drug issues, 'at risk' and homeless young women and same –sex attracted young women) experience very negative treatment by police. They are also often very vulnerable young women and experience high levels of victimisation.*

## **Where do young women go for legal help? What obstacles do they face?**

A significant number of young women sought help with a legal issue from non-legal professionals, such as parents, peers, family friends and youth workers. This pattern was more pronounced in survey responses, as the most common point of contact for seeking help on a legal issue was friends (54.4%), with youth and community workers also recording a high response rate (43.9%).

Very few young women reported being likely to approach a private lawyer for legal assistance.

Many young women said they would prefer to get legal assistance with someone assisting them, such as a support worker.

In the survey young women were asked about legal assistance they had used in the past. In some instances legal assistance had been initiated by members of their family (e.g. separating parents seeking Family Law advice).

Those surveyed described the legal help:

*“A family friend of the family who is a Barrister”*

*“I called a tenancy rights number that I found in a book my previous real estate agent gave me that told me my*

*tenancy rights. I then went to VCAT but I didn't have any advice on what to do at my VCAT hearing"*

*"Private law firm our family uses"*

*"Community legal Service"*

*"Youthlaw"*

*"Victoria Legal Aid"*

*"Women's Legal Aid"*

*"Family Court"*

*"Disability Discrimination Legal Service"*

*"VCAT"*

*"Uni legal service"*

*"Legal Aid when inside"*

## **FOCUS GROUPS**

Many in the focus groups indicated they had not sought legal help with legal problems. Some did describe dealing with the issue themselves, for example by approaching the company or department concerned (eg. Telstra or Centrelink). When they had little success in dealing with the issue they were often unsure of what to do beyond this.

Many of the young women were unaware of, or felt too intimidated to approach formal complaint bodies themselves to make complaints or pursue legal actions (e.g. Victorian Equal Opportunity and Human Rights Commission).

Police were identified as a point of contact for legal issues. However, as was mentioned above, a significant number of young women gave examples of police inaction or negative treatment when they made complaints, reported crimes or sought assistance to deal with harassment or abuse.

Private lawyers were generally not raised as an option apart from those paid for by family members. Cost was raised as an obstacle to using private lawyers.

Many young women stated that they sought assistance from non-professionals such as parents or family friends.

The group of young women who had experienced a mental health, drug and/or alcohol issue often raised their legal issues with a youth worker in the hope that the worker would either chase the matter up on their behalf or refer them to an appropriate legal service.

An Indigenous young woman indicated she preferred to go to an indigenous service because she was put off going to a mainstream service because of the lack of cultural knowledge.

The young women in the survey and in the focus groups were also asked about Youthlaw. About half of the focus group women had heard of Youthlaw. A smaller number of surveyed young women had used or indicated they would be likely to approach Youthlaw for legal help.

In the survey young women were asked how they knew about Youthlaw.

*"Through another community legal centre"*

*"Year 11 legal studies guest speaker"*

*"I only just heard about them though 'word of mouth'"*

*"My mum told me"*

*"Youth workers"*

*“Hostel told me when I needed help.”*

*“Was referred by support worker”*

*“Internet”*

*“Advocacy organisation ”*

*“Council youth services”*

*“University”*

### **Confidence in seeking legal help**

In the survey the young women were asked whether they would know what to do if they had a legal problem.

Just over half of those surveyed felt confident about what to do:

*“Because of past experiences.”*

*“My uncle is a police officer so he would be able to point me in the right direction.”*

*“I would go to a lawyer.”*

*“Because I’ve done a bit of advocacy work I would know what to do”*

*“I’d do some internet research and then go to Youthlaw if I needed more information.”*

*“I wouldn’t know what to do, but I do know who I could turn to lead me in the right direction for help.”*

The other half were much less confident about what to do:

*“I’ve never been in a situation where I’ve needed legal advice, so I wouldn’t know where to start looking.”*

*“I would research on the internet and find out who to contact for free advice but this won’t always necessarily work and I can’t afford legal advice.”*

*“Feeling of panic, anger or guilt when a victim of crime.”*

*“Depends on what it is about and what I have to do.”*

*“Youth legal help is not advertised at most youth services.”*

*“I have a general knowledge but am not particularly sure.”*

*“I get most of my advice from my parents but if it was a problem with them or one I didn’t want to tell them, I wouldn’t know who to talk to.”*

*“Don’t know if I qualify for help at some places.”*

*“I would know where to find help, but for the issue I just described it all seems pretty hopeless so I don’t seek legal action in this area.”*

**THE PROJECT FINDINGS SUGGEST:**

- *Many young women seek help with legal issues from non-legal professionals, such as parents, peers, family friends, youth workers and teachers. This raises the importance of education and resourcing of these non-legal professionals about the legal needs of young women so they are better able to assist young women to identify their legal needs and seek appropriate legal assistance.*
- *Young women are unlikely to utilise formal complaints bodies on their own and may require support and assistance to do so. Such bodies need to be made aware how inaccessible they are.*
- *Young women need to be encouraged and assisted to approach legal services and utilise complaints procedures if they feel police have not responded appropriately to legal issues which have been brought to their attention.*

## **What might encourage young women to get legal help?**

*“The lawyer I saw [at Youthlaw] was really helpful, nice, and not intimidating, and not like the normal ‘lawyer-style’.”*

*“I would want somebody who would not degrade me or make me feel embarrassed, for asking for help and who knows what they are on about.”*

*“It is hard sometimes to talk about things, so I need somebody who I can trust.”*

*“Nothing is more stressful than being endlessly referred and then having to tell your story a million times!”*

Overall the strong message that came across was that young women want to access to high quality legal information and be respected, empowered and guided to make their own legal decisions.

In the survey young women were asked about the important qualities that a person or service providing legal assistance must possess.

Key qualities identified were:

- Respectful and not patronising
- Patient and a good listener
- Accessible –easy to contact
- Knowing the information
- The ability to talk to young people
- Having good people skills
- Taking young people seriously

The surveyed young women were asked what important qualities they would look for in a person they sought legal assistance from.

*“Know their stuff – Inform me of my options, but let me decide what I want to do about it  
– Good people skills – Be available to follow up things over email – Be able to make appointments  
so I don’t have to spend forever in a waiting room – Respect my privacy  
– Talk to me directly (rather than through my parents).”*

*“Give me their time and not try to rush me though, try to understand the situation fully, not judge me,  
not refer me to someone else (nothing is more stressful than being endlessly referred and then  
having to tell your story a million times).”*

*“To be good at listening but also to be good at directing the story”*

*“To know how to help & be practical with their solutions”*

*“To be accessible to me – return calls, be available for appointments when I am free.”*

*“Trust”*

*“Not patronising me. Giving me as much information as possible and being totally honest.”*

*“To be friendly, to not judge me or act like they are above me, to make an effort to keep in contact and actually return my phone calls and messages.”*

*“I would want them know information and be able to quote legislation and defences”*

*“To be honest with me; consider my best interest; to share their extensive and accurate knowledge of the topic with me, so I can be empower to make an informed decision based on a range of possible solutions/options.”*

*“Know the information – know someone in a similar situation or even just get there opinion”*

*“To know a lot of information and be friendly – easily contactable”*

*“Know a lot of information, caring, not judgmental”*

*“Know a lot of information and be able to fix the problem”*

*“Not yell at me or think I’m dumb”*

*“Not to degrade me or make me feel embarrassed, for asking for help. To know what they are on about.”*

*“Be friendly, have knowledge, not be discriminative”*

*“Be understanding. Understand the processes and explain to me. Answer my questions. Be patient.”*

*“Give me time to talk, give me answers, be friendly and compassionate to my issue.”*

*“Guide me through the process in a friendly manner. Not to be treated like an idiot, or spoken down to.”*

*“Understanding, to know what they are doing and talking about, so as not to explain everything to the point where it is uncomfortable – for them to know how to solve the issue.”*

*“Caring, knowledgeable about situation, practical”*

*“Listen and understand!”*

*“Information and Confidentiality”*

*“Be clear, practical and not patronising – have the ability to get justice or some results and correction of complaint/legal problem.”*

*“Professional, information, providing option for me to CHOOSE, understanding, language I can understand”*

*“Friendly, knowledgeable, accessible”*

*“Have information – especially in writing that I can take away, but also clearly know it inside and out be reassuring, friendly and calming”*

*“To tell me what I can do & what I should do – To believe me”*

*“Concise – Easy to understand – Direct”*

*“Know lots of information, actually help me – not just say they were going to – be proactive”*

*“Actually be available and actually give me information or give me a helpful guide”*

*“A lot of information and options”*

*“Privacy knowledge”*

*“Know the information. Be ready to listen to me. Be friendly.”*

*“Friendly, helpful, non-judgmental ”*

Key qualities and practices considered important were:

- Knowledgeable about the law and informative
- Good people skills
- Contactable and accessible
- Guide through processes
- Provide practical solutions
- Non-judgmental
- Respect privacy
- Empower me to make my own decisions
- Have information I can take away
- Good at using the law to advocate on my behalf
- Be proactive
- Talk to me directly (not through my parents)
- Not refer me on

The particular characteristics identified as being important by young women were:

- Trustworthiness
- Honesty
- Friendliness
- Patience
- To be caring and understanding, reassuring and professional
- To ‘have time for me’ and to be a good listener
- Take time to understand my situation
- Treat me respectfully

### **Workers’ Responses**

Workers were asked for their ideas regarding the ways in which young women can be best assisted with their legal issues. An outline of their ideas is included below:

- Heighten awareness of what legal services are available. This information should be made accessible to young women with poor literacy skills.
- Phone and internet-based legal services would make services accessible, particularly for young women in regional and rural areas.
- Outreach services for young women in rural Victoria.
- Promotion of legal services through schools and local government services.
- Provide training to police officers regarding the legal needs of young women.
- Inform young women of their legal options and empower them to make their own legal decisions.
- Provide training to Victorian Legal Aid on the legal needs of young women.
- Increased training for Centrelink staff around how to respond more appropriately to the needs of young women.
- Clear referral mechanisms for cases involving a conflict of interest so that the young woman is still able to easily obtain legal information.

A number of workers identified the inadequacy of legal services for young women in rural Victoria as a significant issue.

**THE PROJECT FINDINGS SUGGEST:**

- *Young women want access to high quality legal information and to be respected, empowered and guided to make their own legal decisions*
- *The qualities and practices of those providing legal services is an important consideration in delivering legal services to young women*
- *There is a need for better promotion of legal services to young women*
- *Legal services and centres targeting young women should promote their services emphasizing qualities of lawyers and services identified as being important to young women –eg respectful and informative, good people skills and able to make appropriate referrals when necessary.*
- *Training and education for legal and other services (eg Victoria Legal Aid, Centrelink, schools, local government and police) will enable them to respond more appropriately to the legal needs of young women.*

## Improved legal service delivery

The young women commented on the type of service they would like:

*“It would be fine if it was in the city”*

*“Prefer a female rather than male”*

*“Easy to approach, informal”*

*[young women survey respondents]*

*“If they would come to near to where young women live – this would be easiest”*

*[Focus group participant]*

Ideas for improvements in service delivery included:

- Geographically accessible
  - For young women living in metropolitan regions outreach services would be ideal but a central location such as the city would also be suitable.
- Phone contact
- Some young women were happy with a drop-in service and others expressed a strong preference for the option of making appointments
  - Hours spent in a waiting room can be a strong deterrent to accessing a service again.
  - Would prefer waiting lists if this meant that they could definitely see somebody at a given time.
  - Young mothers explained that it is very hard to bring children so they wanted assurance that if they did see a lawyer they would definitely be able to do so that day. Children also get restless when waiting in a waiting room for long periods of time.
- Be able to have an appointment or drop in if preferred
- Be more visible and accessible in rural and regional Victoria
- A non-intimidating environment
- A space where the young women feel comfortable
  - Some young women reported feeling uncomfortable waiting alongside other clients accessing

co-located services as some of the people were aggressive.

- A child friendly space
- A well-networked organisation or co-located service to enable appropriate referrals to be made when necessary
  - A number of young women rated highly the need for holistic support for young women regarding multiple issues (both legal and non-legal).
- Some young women preferred face to face consultations, others were happy to contact a lawyer over the phone or email.
  - Some young mothers reported that phone conversations were much easier than organising and supervising children.
  - Email is a good method of communication for some young women including those with speech impairments and mobility issues.
- Option of seeing a female lawyer
  - Some young women from a newly arrived and refugee background expressed that they would feel more comfortable speaking to a female. This is presumably the case for some other young women as well.

Supportive referral to legal help was often raised. An example of this was during the focus group for young women with mental health and substance abuse issues. The young women largely agreed that the first point of contact should be a youth worker. The youth worker would then refer young women to youth legal services or other appropriate services.

Some of the focus groups commented on the lack of ability to make appointments at Youthlaw which has a drop in legal service, and the time spent in waiting room and experiences with other young people in the waiting room.

One young woman explained that she found the waiting difficult because it meant she would spend the whole time worrying and this put her off using Youthlaw. She explained that she thought the wait for young women was often harder than for the young males because young women often sought help because they had been a victim of crime as compared to many of the young men. She would prefer an appointment time even if she had to wait for a few weeks.

**THE PROJECT FINDINGS SUGGEST:**

- *The environment and practices involved in legal service delivery are important considerations in delivering legal services to young women.*
- *The needs of young women vary and there may need to be a flexible approach adopted in regard to individual clients or groups of clients and referral practices.*

## What laws are unfair?

*“Not all P-platers are bad drivers and shouldn’t be punished because of others.”*  
[Focus group response]

*“Mostly I feel that my legal issues arise when people do not adhere to laws that already exist rather than unfair laws that exist.”*  
[survey response]

*“If they’re going to give us ticket fines at least make them cheaper coz they’re way too expensive.”*  
[Focus group response]

The young women surveyed and in the focus groups were asked about current laws that they thought were unfair or had a negative impact on them. Some of the issues that came up included:

- Eligibility for Centrelink benefits
  - Guidelines too stringent
  - Definition of independence
- New P-plate laws
  - Is a safety issue for young women with limited access to public transport particularly at night time.
  - Decreasing the number of passengers per car will increase the numbers driving cars at night and may increase accidents.
- Public transport fines
  - Young people pay the same fine as adults
- Laws that discriminate on the basis of sexuality
- Young people being paid less for the same work
- Impartial role of complaint handling bodies (eg. HREOC, VEOHRC)
  - These complaints bodies can't act for you and can't give you advice on what to do

Other laws identified as being unfair were of particular relevance to one of the groups of young women.

- Occupational health and safety and duty of care policies that effectively limit access for young women with disabilities. (*Young women with disabilities*)
- Government policies which prevent universities funding personal care for students with a disability. This limits access to education for young women with a disability as they cannot eat or go to the toilet while at university without using their own limited hours of support for home and recreation. (*Young women with disabilities*)
- Migration laws preventing family reunions in Australia (*Newly arrived and refugee women*)
- Citizenship test (*Newly arrived and refugee women*)
- Anti-terrorism laws (*Newly arrived and refugee women*)

## Survey Responses

The surveyed young women were asked to identify any laws that affected them that they felt to be unfair. They provided the following responses:

- Laws that discriminate on the basis of sexuality
- New P-plate laws
  - unfair to young drivers
- Family Law orders
  - Many young people raised the problem of not having a say about which parent they have to live with and being obligated to go on contact visits.
  - Some young women spoke of the pressure to go on contact visits because a parent wanted to be eligible for child support payments.

- Laws that allow bag checking in shops
  - Young people are unfairly harassed in shops and shopping centres.
- Sexism in the media

*THE PROJECT FINDINGS SUGGEST:*

- *Young women have an awareness and interest in the laws that they consider unfair and have ideas about how they should be changed. There is enormous potential in greater consultation and engagement with young women to respond to these and other issues.*
- *The issues identified are a good start but more consultation and engagement with young women would undoubtedly raise further issues to work with young women on.*

# LEGAL INFORMATION YOUNG WOMEN WANT

*“Compensation - I'd like info on what are the possible outcomes, in terms of whether you would get compensation”*

*“I think young people should be taught more about the law and there rights throughout high school or community groups. Even in resi care workshops should be held.”*

*[Focus group participants]*

In the survey young women were asked what legal issues they would like to have more information about.

*“How old must one be to have sex”*

*“Laws about being an involuntary patient (I don't have a mental illness myself, but my family members do)”*

*“Laws about accessibility – Do old public buildings have to be accessible?”*

*“What to do if you have a car accident”*

*“What are the reliable internet sites”*

*“Telecommunications rights”*

*“Living with dad when mum's away cos of court papers”*

*“Family/custody issues”*

*“Compensation claims”*

*“How old must I be to get a job”*

*“Rental issues”*

*“Disclosure for employment (re my disability)”*

*“Driving”*

*“General Information regarding my rights”*

*“If you got employed and are not given any work shifts”*

*“Rights in front of police”*

*“Abuse rights – what if you are violated – what can you do”*

*“Work cover, pay entitlements”*

*“Tenants law”*

*“My rights on the street”*

*“Victims rights”*

*“When may visitation of my father decrease or disappear”*

*“Marijuana (not that I smoke it, but my parents do and I wonder what the exact laws are about it)”*

*“Workcover and your rights at work especially cash jobs”*

*“Tattoo/piercing rights (age, illness, disease etc)”*

*“More about Centrelink availability for Uni students”*

*“Being in debt”*

*“Age discrimination – particularly when renting”*

*“How much is my father required to pay my mother in child support”*

*“Laws about domestic violence (i.e. does it only include physical violence or other forms of abuse?)”*

*“Abuse”*

*“HIV/AIDS”*

*“Tax”*

## **Survey Responses**

The surveyed young women identified the following key legal issues they would like more information on:

- Legal obligations following car accidents
- Workplace rights (especially cash-in-hand jobs)
- Family law issues (including how to have more of a say about how much time spent with each parent)
- Tenancy
- General legal rights
- Discrimination (on the basis of age and other)
- Rights and options as a victim of crime / abuse

Other topics raised were:

- Rights when dealing with police
- Legal age at which one can gain employment
- Reliable websites for legal information
- Phone contract rights
- Compensation claims
- Marijuana
- Disability disclosure (especially when seeking employment)
- Driving
- Tattoos / body piercing
- Rights on the street
- Where to go for legal assistance
- Age of consent for sexual relationships
- Centrelink entitlements
- Debts
- Whether the law recognises non-physical violence
- Disability access
- Involuntary patient rights

## FOCUS GROUPS

Legal information requested by young women in the focus groups included the following:

- General information including how the court system operates
- Discrimination, including options for legal action when discrimination is experienced.
- Time periods for reporting crimes / grievances
- Victims of crime (including legal options and information on compensation)
- Leases and tenancy issues / rights in (and obtaining) government housing
  - tenants' rights
  - how to deal with real-estate agents
  - what to do if housemates damage the property then disappear
- Sexual harassment
- Domestic violence
- Drug laws –particularly re marijuana
- Driving laws, particularly the new P-plate laws
- Mental health laws
- Citizenship test
- Police powers
- Complaint lodging procedures
- Regarding discrimination and complaints against police

### THE PROJECT FINDINGS SUGGEST:

- *The legal information requested by young women is consistent with the areas of legal need they identified during the project.*
- *Key legal information that could be targeted to all young women includes information on discrimination that particularly impacts on young women and information on violence and sexual harassment using examples of young women's experiences*
- *Legal information should be targeted to groups of young women (eg those consulted in this project) taking into account their particular legal issues and the particular impact of the law on them as a group.*

## How young women want to access legal information

*“Something “not too hard”... ”something clear”*

*“Enough to get help but not enough to ‘hurt your head”*”

*“Written in clear, plain English”*

*“With each issue, contact numbers and helpline numbers”*

*“internet ‘all the way”*”

*“A rural outreach program: lawyers travelling to rural areas e.g. monthly...”*

*“An online chat room girls could use to ask questions/receive information”*

*“Increased use of email to obtain legal advice/info about where to go to get legal help, etc..”*

*“Discussion boards”*

*“Online – accessing info is able to be done in a non-confronting way; allows you to access at any time, offers privacy of your own home, and is cheap”*

### **Legal Information – How should it be provided?**

The young women were asked how they would prefer legal information to be presented to them. Responses included:

- Face-to-face consultations are best when issues are complex and a lot of questions need to be asked
- Hard copy booklets
- Online fact sheets from a reliable source such as Youthlaw
- *‘Internet all the way’*
- The internet is non-confronting and anonymous
- All formats should contain clear and simple language
- *“Use words that I can understand, like ‘sucks’ or phrases like ‘bashed by police’ instead of ‘police harassment’”*
- Only the key points
- Clear steps to follow for taking action
- Relevant contacts
- Incorporate into the school curriculum
- *“Say, ‘It is not just happening to you.’”*
- Have it in youth services (important if not living at home) school and local libraries.
- *“Make ads and put them where young people will see them, like on the side of buses.”*

Workers provided suggestions regarding the ways in which legal education could be delivered to young women as outlined below:

- Step-by-step guides to taking legal action on respective issues in order to demystify the legal system
- Flyers and posters promoting young women’s legal and human rights
- Organise legal information seminars for young women and hold them in different local government regions
- Develop information packs for youth workers to help young women understand their legal rights and responsibilities
- Information booklet outlining court proceedings and what is expected of people appearing in court (include Victims Impact Statements)
- Legal education for youth workers to help young women identify their legal needs and to enable appropriate referrals to be made

- Some of this legal information could be delivered by way of life education / skills training, eg. how to resolve disputes
- Present legal information in a way that is accessible and not jargon
- A preventative rather than reactive approach to legal practice and education

*THE PROJECT FINDINGS SUGGEST:*

- *Information should be from a credible source and in language that's understandable*
- *Information should communicate to young women that they are not the only ones experiencing this problem*
- *Information needs to be in places young people will see it –eg. youth services, bus stops, school etc*
- *The format for information should take into account need for anonymity (on-line formats are a good option) and interaction (eg. online chat)*
- *The format of legal information should vary however on-line information is strongly favoured including online fact sheets.*
- *Other formats include education sessions and hard copy booklets.*
- *Information needs to be clear and simple with relevant contacts and numbers and steps for taking legal action.*

# LEGAL AND ADVOCACY SERVICES

## for young women and those assisting them

If you want to ask for legal help on any of your legal issues now or in future, ring, email or visit one of the places listed below. ALL of these services are FREE!!

We will regularly update this contact list on our website.

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### YOUTHLAW

Address: 19 King Street Melbourne VIC 3000 (At Frontyard Youth Services)

Phone: (03) 9611 2412

Email: [info@youthlaw.asn.au](mailto:info@youthlaw.asn.au)

Website: [www.youthlaw.asn.au](http://www.youthlaw.asn.au)

#### *Type of help:*

The lawyers at Youthlaw are used to talking to young people. They do it everyday. They are experts in youth law, are respectful, informative and friendly. They can help with most legal problems. It's a good idea to call and talk with first before you come in.

Youthlaw can answer questions by telephone or email about most legal issues.

The website has lots of fact sheets on common legal issues.

**Free drop-in legal clinic 2pm-5pm, Mon to Friday**

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### LAWSTUFF

The National Youth and Childrens Law Centre responds by email to legal requests from young people throughout Australia. Go to [www.lawstuff.org.au](http://www.lawstuff.org.au)

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### VICTORIA LEGAL AID

Address: 350 Queen Street Melbourne VIC 3000 (central office)

**Phone: (03) 9269 0120 (within Melbourne)**

**Phone: 1800 677 402 (rural areas)**

Website: [www.legalaid.vic.gov.au](http://www.legalaid.vic.gov.au)

#### *Type of help:*

Victoria Legal Aid can help with most legal problems.

They give free legal information over the phone (see number above) or you can make an appointment to see a lawyer. They have offices all over Victoria.

They have a 'duty' lawyers at many courts and tribunals across Victoria who help people who have a court hearing but do not have their own lawyer.

They have a range of free booklets, brochures and fact sheets on a range of legal topics including "Am I Old enough", "Police powers and your rights".

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### WOMEN'S LEGAL SERVICE VICTORIA

Address: Level 3, 43 Hardware Lane Melbourne VIC 3000

**Phone: (03) 9642 0877**

**Freecall: 1800133302**

Email: [justice@vicnet.net.au](mailto:justice@vicnet.net.au)

Website: [www.womenslegal.org.au](http://www.womenslegal.org.au)

*Type of help:*

The Women's Legal Service Victoria assists women with a range of legal problems. They specialise in relationship breakdown (family law) and violence against women. They provide face to face legal services including court representation.

**Drop in clinic Thursday 9.30am-12pm**

**Telephone legal advice line (see number above) Monday 10am-1pm;**

**Tuesday, Thursday 6.30-8.30pm; Wednesday 2-5pm.**

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### **WOMEN'S DOMESTIC VIOLENCE CRISIS SERVICE 24 HOURS**

Telephone support and information for women experiencing domestic violence. Also provide referral to safe accommodation.

**Phone (03) 9373 0123; or  
1800 015 188 (country callers)**

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### **ABORIGINAL FAMILY VIOLENCE PREVENTION AND LEGAL SERVICE**

Address: Level 1, 210 Lonsdale Street Melbourne VIC 3000

Phone: (03) 9654 3111

Free Call: 1800 105 303

Email: [information@fvpls.org](mailto:information@fvpls.org)

Website: [www.fvpls.org](http://www.fvpls.org)

Offices in Lakes Entrance, Warrnambool and Mildura

*Type of help:*

The Aboriginal Family Violence Prevention and Legal Service provides legal help to Aboriginal women, men and children who are victims or survivors of family violence and sexual assault. The main legal problems FVPLS deals with are intervention orders, family law, child protection, victims compensation. FVPLS also run wellbeing workshops for young Koori women around Victoria, "Sisters Day Out", featuring fun activities, legal and other info.

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### **VICTORIAN ABORIGINAL LEGAL SERVICE (VALS)**

Address: 6 Alexandra Parade Fitzroy VIC 3065

**Phone: (03) 9419 3888**

Email: [vals@vals.org.au](mailto:vals@vals.org.au)

Website: [www.vals.org.au](http://www.vals.org.au)

Offices in Melbourne, Shepparton, Morwell, Mildura, Bairnsdale and Heywood.

*Type of help:*

The Victorian Aboriginal Legal Service can help any Indigenous person with all kinds of legal problems.

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## DISABILITY DISCRIMINATION LEGAL SERVICE (DDLS)

Address: Level 2, 247-251 Flinders Lane, Melbourne

**Phone: (03) 9654 8644**

**TTY: (03) 9654 6817**

Email: [info@ddls.org.au](mailto:info@ddls.org.au)

Website: [www.communitylaw.org.au/ddls](http://www.communitylaw.org.au/ddls)

*Type of help:*

The Disability Discrimination Legal Service can assist you if you think you've been discriminated against because of your disability. They take legal action using the *Disability Discrimination Act 1992 (Cth)* and the *Equal Opportunity Act 1995(Vic)*

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## YOUTH DISABILITY ADVOCACY SERVICE (YDAS)

**YDAS is located at the Youth Affairs Council of Victoria on Level 2, 172 Flinders St, Melbourne** (opposite Federation Square).

**Phone: (03) 9267 3733** (for Advocacy service)

**TTY: 133 677** (TTY via the National Relay Service)

**SMS: 0412 814 851**

**Freecall: 1300 727 176** (from outside of Melbourne)

**Email: [advocate@yacvic.org.au](mailto:advocate@yacvic.org.au)** (advocacy service)

*Type of help:*

**The individual advocacy service at YDAS is open to any young person with a disability between the ages of 12 and 25.** The service can support young people with disabilities to access their rights in a range of areas including employment, education, housing, Centrelink benefits, disability services and discrimination and with a wide range of other access and equity issues.

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## MENTAL HEALTH LEGAL CENTRE

Address: 9<sup>th</sup> Floor, 10-16 Queen Street, Melbourne, 3000

**Phone: (03) 9629 4422; or  
1800 555 887 (Country Callers)**

Website: <http://www.communitylaw.org.au/mentalhealth>

*Type of help:*

The Mental Health Legal Centre can help with any legal problems relating to your mental illness. If you need to talk to a lawyer ring the **telephone advice line (number above) on Monday Wednesday and Friday between 3.00pm and 5.00pm or Tuesday and Thursday between 6.30pm and 8.30pm.**

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## WELFARE RIGHTS UNIT INC

Address: 155 Easey Street, Collingwood VIC 3066

Phone: (03) 9416 1111

**Freecall: 1800 094 164**

Email: [wru@welfarerights.org.au](mailto:wru@welfarerights.org.au)

Website: <http://www.welfarerights.org.au/offices/Melbourne.aspx>

*Type of help:*

The Welfare Rights Unit Inc can help with any legal problems about Centrelink.

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## A COMMUNITY LEGAL CENTRE NEARYOU

To find out the closest community legal centre to you contact the Federation of Community legal centres on (03) 9652 1500 or look on their website <http://www.communitylaw.org.au/>

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## VICTORIAN EQUAL OPPORTUNITY AND HUMAN RIGHTS COMMISSION

Website: [www.humanrightscommission.vic.gov.au](http://www.humanrightscommission.vic.gov.au)

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## JOBWATCH

Website: [www.job-watch.org.au](http://www.job-watch.org.au)

Legal advice about employment problems

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## TENANTS UNION

Website: [www.tuv.org.au](http://www.tuv.org.au)

Help with landlord and other tenancy problems

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## VICTIM SUPPORT AGENCY HELPLINE

Phone: 1800 819 817; or  
(03) 8684 6700  
TTY: (03) 8684 6740

If you are a victim of crime this telephone service can provide info and on support services and how to go about making a claim for crimes compensation.

## Other Helpful Contacts

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### KIDS HELP LINE 24 HOURS

Phone: 1800 551 800  
Website: [www.kidshelp.com.au](http://www.kidshelp.com.au)

Telephone and on-line counseling service for young people 5-25 years

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### YOUTH SUBSTANCE ABUSE SERVICE 24 HOURS

Phone: (03) 9418 1020  
Freecall: 1800 014 446  
Website: [www.ysas.org.au](http://www.ysas.org.au)

Confidential counseling and referral

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### FRONTYARD YOUTH SERVICES

Address: 19 King St, Melbourne (near cnr Flinders and King Sts)  
Phone: (03) 9611 2411  
Freecall: 1800 800 531  
Website: [www.frontyard.org](http://www.frontyard.org)

Free, youth friendly drop in centre for young people – Health, Centrelink, legal, housing, counselling and other services for young people who are homeless or at risk of homelessness.

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## ACTION CENTRE FOR YOUNG PEOPLE

Address: Level 1, 94 Elizabeth Street, Melbourne (also other offices, Box Hill, Werribee etc)  
Phone: (03) 9654 4766  
Freecall: 1800 013 952

Free, confidential and non-judgemental health service. General counselling available and also info about sexuality, pregnancy, sex, contraception, counselling and STDs

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## ORYGEN YOUTH HEALTH

Phone: (03) 9342 2800

Mental health service for young people. Can take calls ranging from feeling sad, depressed, anxious through to suicidal. Who can call? – Young people, workers, health practitioners, family and friends etc. Can link into other services (eg. child and adolescent mental health services)

### 9am-5pm – Monday-Friday

In urgent situations call the Triage/Intake team on 1800 888 320 or triage paging service 03 9483 4556

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## CENTRE FOR ADOLESCENT HEALTH

Phone: (03) 9345 5890

Information (including fact sheets) on adolescent health issues (12-18 yrs). For clinical services requires referral by health worker.

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## CENTRES AGAINST SEXUAL ASSAULT

Phone: (03) 9635 3610 (Melb-daytime)  
Freecall: 1800 806 292 (24 hours)  
Website: [www.casahouse.casa.org.au](http://www.casahouse.casa.org.au)

There are centres throughout Victoria. Provide confidential counselling and support for victims/survivors of sexual abuse

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## DOMESTIC VIOLENCE RESOURCE CENTRE (VIC)

Phone: (03) 9486 9866  
TTY: 9417 1255  
Website: [www.dvrc.org.au](http://www.dvrc.org.au)

DVRC website has a lot of contacts for services you can contact. You can call DVRC (above) to get this info on the phone. They also have lots of info and stories on their website for young people such as [www.burstingthebubble.com](http://www.burstingthebubble.com)

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## RECONNECT

See [www.gatewayreconnect.org](http://www.gatewayreconnect.org) for a service near you.

Service for 12-18 year olds.

Reconnect can support you and your parents to work things out, can help you return home, can help out with problems at school and give advice and support to access health, income, accommodation, training, education or employment options.





YOUNG PEOPLE'S LEGAL RIGHTS CENTRE INC