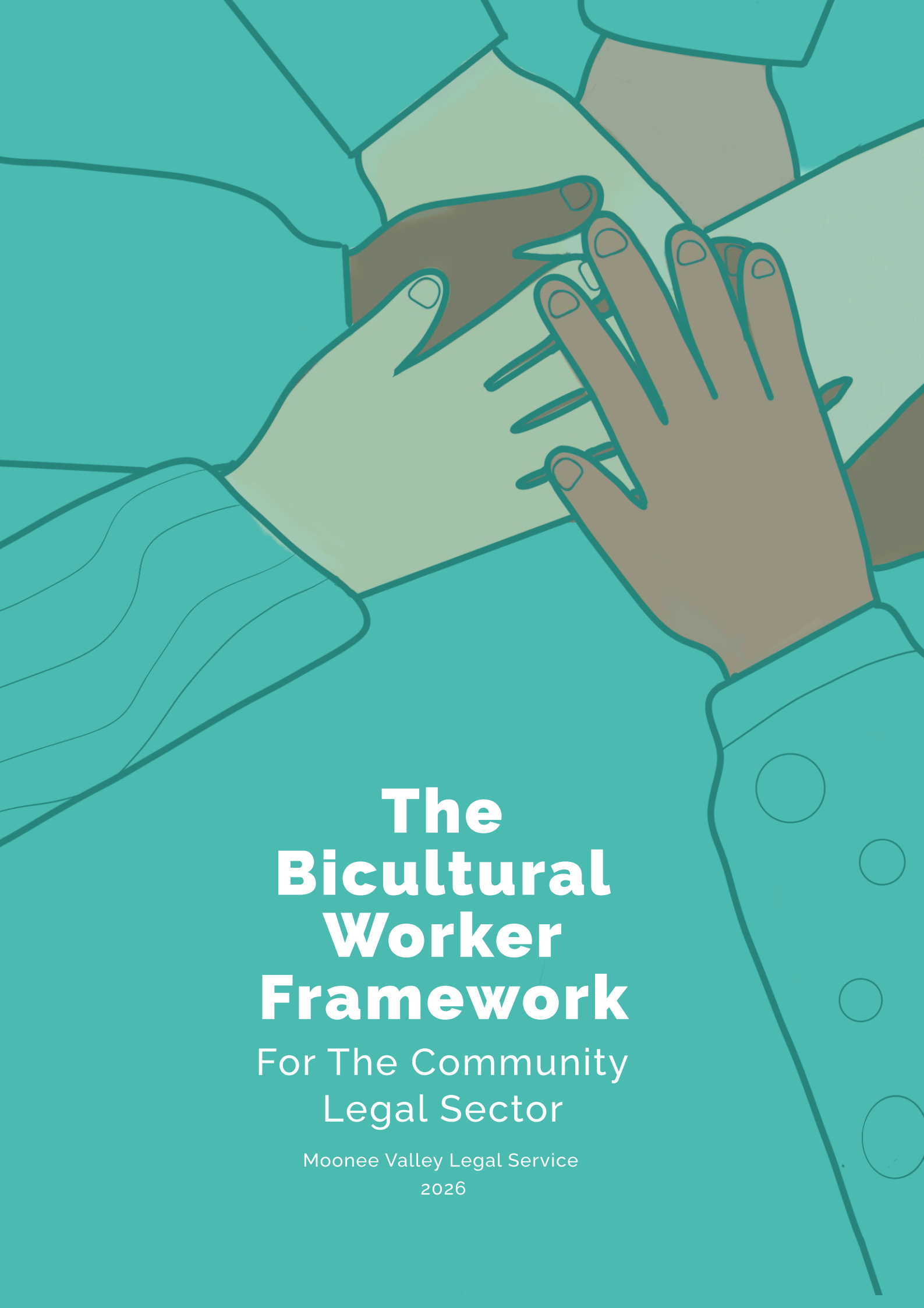


The Bicultural Worker Framework

For The Community Legal Sector

Moonee Valley Legal Service

2026

Acknowledgement

Moonee Valley Legal Service acknowledges the Wurundjeri Woi Wurrung people of the Kulin Nation as the perpetual custodians of the lands, waterways, and skies across which our service operates.

We pay our respects to all Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Elders and recognise the immense cultural and linguistic strength and diversity that has existed on this land for tens of thousands of years. We welcome Australia's first treaty with First Peoples here in Victoria, which was signed during the completion of this guide. We hope this treaty signals the way to a future of empowerment and justice for Aboriginal peoples in Victoria.

CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION

This framework was developed by Moonee Valley Legal Service (MVLS) and drawn from the lessons from the Bicultural Worker Program (BWP) implemented in 2025. The program had as its objective:

WORK-READY BICULTURAL WORKERS

To develop confident and skilled bicultural workers ready for employment in the legal and community sector.

AN UPSKILLED SECTOR

To develop and share a "Bicultural Worker Framework" for the CLC sector, creating more culturally informed and safe work environments for bicultural staff.

COMMUNITY-LED SOLUTIONS

To provide an opportunity for the community to voice their needs and design their own solutions.

By creating this framework, we hope to provide guidance and lessons to other community legal services, and the legal sector in general, in how to develop a bicultural worker program to remove barriers to communities who have historically been underserviced by the law.

MVLS BACKGROUND

The Bicultural Worker Program is an evolution of the Legal Concierge program that MVLS initiated during the COVID-19 pandemic. This program was a response to the breakdown of trust and access to institutions in the Flemington area during the 'hard' lockdown in July 2020. It was also out of an understanding that there was a high number of racially marginalised communities, living particularly in Flemington public housing, who were likely not having their legal needs addressed by MVLS. Incorporation of the Legal Concierge saw the percentage of clients coming from racially marginalised communities rise to two thirds of our total service delivery.

The success of the Legal Concierge program led to the development and design of the Bicultural Worker Program, to embed the lessons from the Legal Concierge model. This BCW program looked to intentionally employ bicultural workers at MVLS and the CLC sector in general, as the cohealth model has done in the community health sector. Given this history, the model was iteratively built on, and refined by the previous legal concierges, and with communities they worked with.

Moonee Valley Legal Service

FRAMEWORK AT A GLANCE

VISION

Bridge the gap between community legal services and racially marginalised communities by embedding the expertise of bicultural workers.

THE BCW ROLE

A distinct professional position (not an internship) with specialised skills in language, culture, community engagement and navigation.

THREE CORE FUNCTIONS

1

EDUCATE

Deliver accessible community legal education in culturally appropriate ways

2

NAVIGATE

Act as a trusted first point of contact and facilitate warm referrals

3

ADVOCATE

Support individual clients and identify systemic barriers for law reform

FIVE PILLARS OF ENGAGEMENT

Bicultural Workers' Inherent Value

trust, lived experience, linguistic/cultural expertise

Strong Services Network

quick connections to trusted support

Supported Workplace

scaffolding, supervision, clear boundaries

Place Based Services

meeting community where they are

Flexible Approach

adapting to community needs

1 CORE CONCEPTS

Bi-cultural workers are employed to work with individuals and communities with whom they share similar cultural experiences and understanding. They consult with and share information in relevant languages and in culturally appropriate ways. They are employed to use their cultural knowledge or lived experience to negotiate and communicate between communities and their employing agency; acting as a bridge, they facilitate mutual understanding of stakeholder's interests and needs. Bi-cultural workers are also advocates. They speak out about barriers, challenges and discrimination faced by their communities and advocate for change.

cohealth's position description
on Bicultural Workers

VISION AND PURPOSE

The vision of this framework is to bridge the gap between the community legal sector and racially marginalised communities by embedding the expertise of bicultural workers.

This framework aims to create more accessible, culturally safe, and responsive community legal services, empowering communities to understand and exercise their rights, while building the capacity of the sector to embed community voices into their service.

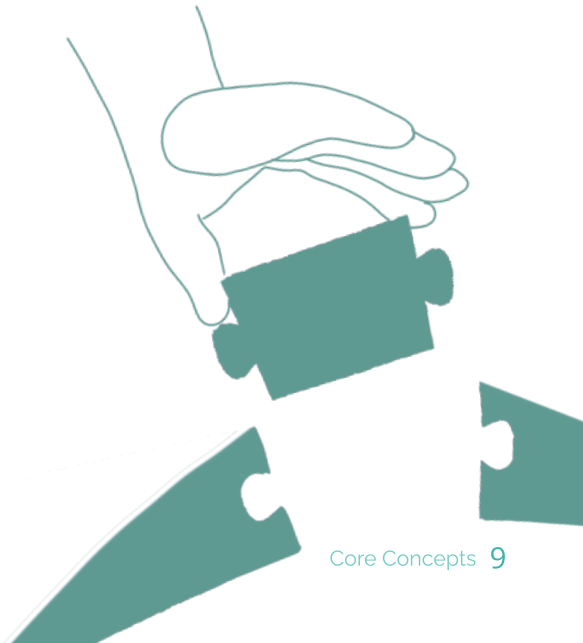
A JOB, NOT AN IDENTITY

One of the most important lessons from our program (informed by cohealth) is the difference between "a worker who happens to be bicultural" and a "Bicultural Worker."

A worker who is bicultural might be a lawyer or admin staff who speaks another language.

A Bicultural Worker is a distinct professional role with its own pedagogy, specific position description, and unique skillset in bridging cultural gaps.

Note for CLCs: *Do not treat this program as a temporary "internship" for diverse candidates. It is the creation of a specialised role within your legal practice.*



VALUES AND PRINCIPLES

The Bicultural Worker role is built on a foundation of core principles that must guide its implementation. These values and principles are drawn from the professional standards and code of ethics developed by cohealth for their bicultural worker programs.

These are non-negotiable ethical foundations of the program:

ETHICAL AND BOUNDARIED

The role operates within a clear ethical structure that respects client confidentiality, manages conflicts of interest, and establishes clear professional boundaries to ensure the wellbeing of the worker and the integrity of the service.

EMPOWERMENT-FOCUSED

The goal is not just to provide a service, but to build community capacity. The work aligns with the Legal Empowerment Cycle—helping community members to Know the Law, Use the Law, and ultimately Shape the Law.

CULTURALLY SAFE PRACTICE

Safety is twofold. It means creating a safe environment for clients to share their stories and seek help, and a safe, supportive, and respectful workplace for the bicultural workers.

COMMUNITY-LED

The role is defined by and for the community it serves. Bicultural workers are trusted members of their community, and their work should be responsive to identified community needs.

STRENGTHS-BASED

The framework recognises that "lived experience" is a form of professional expertise. It leverages the bicultural worker's lived experience, language skills, cultural knowledge, and community trust as essential assets.

CASE STUDY

We learned through community conversations that many residents were confused about local parking signs and what they meant. This often led to fines and frustration. To address this, **one of our bicultural workers partnered with a social work student to create small, accessible cards explaining common parking signs.** These cards were translated into community languages and designed to be kept in the car for easy reference.

OUTCOME

Community members reported that the cards were helpful. One person said, “I finally know what the Clearway sign means—and I’ll keep this card in my car.” This simple initiative reduced confusion and empowered residents to avoid fines.

FIVE PILLARS FOR ENGAGEMENT

BCW program is built for community engagement and is fundamental to a program's success. The foundation for building positive engagement with community through a Bicultural Worker Program is summarised in these five key concepts:

BICULTURAL WORKER'S INHERENT VALUE

Leveraging the trust and inherent understanding that workers with lived experience, linguistic and cultural expertise bring.

PLACE-BASED

Bringing services and programs to the community, rather than requiring residents to navigate unfamiliar settings and pathways.

SERVICES NETWORK

Connecting residents quickly to a broad and trusted network of services, including a Community Legal Centre's own lawyers, social workers or community development teams.

FLEXIBLE APPROACH

Adapting strategies for engagement to meet the specific and evolving needs of the community.

SUPPORTED AND SAFE WORKPLACE

The CLC must have enough internal support from staff for a bicultural worker program to be an effective program. Scaffolding the bicultural workers with existing supports like social workers, and lawyers while also training staff on how to work alongside BCW is fundamental in its success.

FIVE PILLARS IN ACTION: MVLS CONNECT

As the project built on its previous successes, the model evolved to include more support for Bicultural Workers. **The work shifted from education to navigation support and, at times, advocacy.** To strengthen this approach, we integrated a social worker and a social work student into the established outreach at our local community centre. **This became known as MVLS Connect.**

Every week, three bicultural workers, a social worker, a social work student, and the Community Lead are based at the centre. The bicultural workers sit in the foyer, greeting and interacting with people as they arrive. They help clients identify legal or social issues and support them in navigating systems—often in one of the seven languages they speak. This demonstrates the principle of leveraging bicultural workers' inherent value through their cultural and linguistic expertise.

MVLS Connect is a place-based response. Rather than asking residents to navigate unfamiliar settings, services are brought to the heart of the community. When issues are complex, bicultural workers collaborate with the social worker or Community Lead to find appropriate referrals—either internally to lawyers or social workers, or externally to trusted services. This reflects the principle of building a strong services network for quick and effective connections.

Having the social worker and Community Lead in the same space ensures bicultural workers feel supported and not isolated, aligning with the principle of a supported and safe workplace. Finally, the program's evolution—from education to navigation and advocacy—illustrates a flexible approach that adapts to the community's changing needs.

CASE STUDY

During a weekly visit of a mobile adventure play group on the Flemington estates, our bicultural workers engaged a parent and identified that they had very high bills. The parent said that they had not been able to access the concession rates.

OUTCOME

Our social work student was on hand to call the energy provider on the spot and get the parent onto a concession account.

CASE STUDY
Bring Your Bills Day (BYBD)

CONTEXT

MVLS is co-located at Wingate Avenue Community Centre in the heart of the Ascot Vale Estates. Through early engagement, our bicultural workers identified that fines and overdue bills were a major concern for residents. This insight led to the creation of Bring Your Bills Day (BYBD)—a practical, community-led solution.

PLANNING

We partnered with our services network and set a date for the event. Invitations were sent to 10 different utility providers and other support services. Bicultural workers designed flyers in five languages and promoted the event through:

- Outreach visits
- Flyer drops
- Local mosque visit
- Community-run WhatsApp groups

ON THE DAY

Bicultural workers staffed the triage desk, welcoming clients and assessing their needs—often in community languages. A social worker and lawyer worked alongside them to provide quick advice or book follow-up appointments. Bicultural workers offered cultural context and navigation support, ensuring clients connected with the right service. After each interaction, BCWs checked in with clients to confirm they received the help they needed and scheduled follow-ups if required.

IMPACT

Our first BYBD attracted over 100 people. The model was so successful that we've since run additional BYBD events and Victorian Ombudsman complaint clinics.

WHY IT WORKED

Community-led design: The event responded to issues identified by bicultural workers during outreach.
Language access: Flyers and triage were delivered in multiple languages.
Integrated support: BCWs worked alongside legal and social workers, creating a culturally safe and responsive environment.

CASE STUDY

At a Bring Your Bills Day (BYBD), a Somali woman needed support with her bills. During the conversation, our bicultural workers identified a long-standing electricity infrastructure issue at her home. We called the supplier, and they came to her house that same day to fix the problem. She explained that she had been living with this issue for years because she didn't know how to communicate it to them. All of this was done in language.

OUTCOME

The client finally received a solution to an issue that had impacted her for years. This case highlights how bicultural workers can uncover hidden problems and resolve them quickly through culturally safe engagement and language support.

2

THE BCW ROLE IN PRACTICE

The Bicultural Worker performs three interconnected roles, acting as a vital link between the community and the community legal centre team.

1.

EDUCATE

Deliver Community Legal Education (CLE)

Develop and run workshops in a culturally appropriate and accessible manner in collaboration with legal staff.

Raise Awareness

Identify and share information with residents on common legal issues affecting the community.

Translate Concepts

Bridge language and cultural gaps by explaining legal concepts in plain, understandable terms. In language when required.

Secondary consults

Provide CLC staff secondary consults on cultural expertise on cultural norms that may impact their legal or social issues.

CASE STUDIES

At a community playgroup at Djerring Hub, our bicultural workers explained MVLS services in four different languages. Many young mothers were curious about employment opportunities and free education for their children. During the conversation, our team also shared information about the Utility Relief Grant —a resource most of the mothers had never heard of.

OUTCOME

Several families learned about financial assistance options and how to access them, reducing stress and improving household stability. This engagement highlighted the importance of delivering legal and social information in culturally appropriate ways and in language.

A group of women outside Wingate Avenue, who were attending English classes, approached our bicultural workers asking for information about migration. The women were unfamiliar with MVLS and our services. Our bicultural workers engaged them in conversation—in their language—and provided basic information about migration support services and referrals. Through this interaction, the group learned about MVLS and local migration services.

OUTCOME

The women left with practical referrals and a better understanding of available support. This engagement demonstrated the importance of outreach and delivering information in language to build trust and awareness.

2.
NAVIGATE

Support the Client Journey
Help clients understand the legal process.

Act as a First Point of Contact
Provide a welcoming and trusted entry point for community members seeking help.

Support Client Intake
Assist with intake and assessment, ensuring the full context of a client's situation is understood.

Facilitate Referrals
Make warm, effective referrals to lawyers, social workers, and other support services within the "services network".

While there may be several ways to structure this, MVLS has found that:

BCWs provide an initial explanation of the legal system process and appointments, and are trained in ensuring the difference between that and legal advice.

BCWs do not sit in legal appointments due to considerations around legal privilege and ethical responsibilities.

BCWs may maintain some contact with a client during their engagement with a lawyer. This is primarily around continuing to link them with other supports and being a conduit to raise issues the client is experiencing around the process of their engagement (not as a conduit for the lawyer to provide legal advice or to act solely as an interpreter).

CASE STUDY

A client came to our office struggling to communicate in English. Our bicultural worker, who speaks Amharic, stepped in to assist. Through conversation in the client's language, we learned about significant personal challenges, including housing issues and safety concerns. The bicultural worker helped the client feel heard and supported, explained next steps, and arranged an appointment with a lawyer, including an interpreter for the meeting.

OUTCOME

The client left feeling reassured and connected to the right support. This interaction highlights the critical role bicultural workers play in bridging language and cultural gaps, making legal services accessible and culturally safe.

CASE STUDY

A refugee visa holder who had been in Australia for several years came to us with her child. She had no job, no Centrelink support, and was at risk of homelessness. Her visa was also close to expiring. Our bicultural workers supported her in language, contacting multiple organisations including the Red Cross, Refugee Legal, and DFFH. After persistent calls, we secured multiple services to assist her. In a follow-up, we learned that one organisation had agreed to pay several months' rent, and that she had successfully connected with a lawyer for ongoing support.

OUTCOME

Through culturally safe engagement and navigation support, the client avoided immediate homelessness and accessed legal assistance, demonstrating the critical role of bicultural workers in crisis situations.

CASE STUDY

A woman who speaks Oromo and Amharic came to MVLS with her husband. She lives in public housing with her husband and child. Her unit had severe mould, making the family sick. She explained the issues and showed photos, saying the housing office wasn't listening. Our bicultural worker spoke to her in Amharic, offering reassurance and explaining next steps. We told her about an Ombudsman drop-in session the following week. She attended, and a few weeks later shared that housing staff inspected her home and approved her move to a better place.

OUTCOME

The client felt heard and supported and ultimately secured safer housing. This case shows how bicultural workers build trust and help clients navigate systems in language.

3. ADVOCATE

Systemic Advocacy

Identify systemic barriers and recurring legal issues faced by the community, feeding this information back to the legal team to inform law reform and policy work.

Internal Advocacy

Work alongside lawyers and caseworkers to ensure the client's cultural context is understood and their voice is heard.

Individual Advocacy

BCW can support clients with one-off or single-issue matters, such as accessing Utility Relief Grants and other supports.

CASE STUDY

We met a woman at our roaming coffee cart program on the Ascot Vale estate. We spoke to her about our program. She later came with her friend to see us at the community centre. Our bicultural workers were quickly able to identify that this person had many thousands of dollars of fines.

OUTCOME

Our team was able to support the friend to find his fines online, and book him in for an appointment with our lawyers. Had we not met his friend, he may have never sought support.

3. ADVOCATE

CASE STUDY

A key initiative for the BCW program was the Storytelling Project with Flemington public housing communities. BCW captured powerful stories from residents and former residents of the Flemington flats, offering insight into the proposed redevelopment of public housing towers. Bicultural workers played a pivotal role in interviewing and transcribing these stories, leveraging cultural trust to gather narratives often missed by formal inquiries.

OUTCOME

The community's voice was put together into a report, "I feel safe here. This is my home", that was handed to the parliamentary inquiry. We were then called to provide evidence where we read from residents' stories, providing more opportunities to platform the residents' voices.

"The community has noticed our presence of bicultural workers. It has made a big difference in the way they receive and communicate with services, and they don't feel judged for not knowing the language. The clients feel they have unlimited freedom and a sense of belonging."

MVLS Bicultural Worker

3

IMPLEMENTATION GUIDE FOR CLCs

Putting the framework into practice

CAPABILITIES AND SKILLS

A successful Bicultural Worker team requires a blend of professional skills, lived experience and ongoing support from the community legal centre.

While some skills can be developed through induction and trainings, we've identified 3 core capabilities that have been foundational to our BCW program. Each CLC will need to identify which skills they need for the program they are hiring for. We recommend keeping the 3 essential no matter what the other skills may be needed.

ESSENTIAL SKILLS

LANGUAGE EXPERTISE

Fluency in English and identified community language(s)

CULTURAL EXPERTISE

Deep understanding of cultural norms and practices relevant to the community

LIVED EXPERIENCE

Direct experience of being from a racially marginalised community, and helping address systemic power imbalances

SKILLS DEVELOPED ON THE JOB

COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT AND FACILITATION

Design and deliver culturally appropriate workshops.

Build trust and rapport with community members.

Confidence in outreach and pre-existing networks in target community.

FOUNDATIONAL LEGAL LITERACY

Understanding the difference between legal information and legal advice.

Identify common legal issues and "red-flag" matters for referral. These issues and red-flags should be identified by the community legal centre.

Basic knowledge of the legal system, including Legal Aid eligibility and service pathways.

PRACTICAL AND PROFESSIONAL SKILLS

Client interviewing and note-taking.

Maintaining confidentiality and professional boundaries.

Conducting legal conflict checks as required.

"Reflective practice" and willingness to engage in peer debriefing.

Working effectively with lawyers and social workers.

The Phased Implementation Timeline

Our pilot revealed that a "slow and steady" approach builds stronger foundations than rushing into individual support work. The below timeline is drawn from the work MVLS did to integrate the BCW program with the broader service and ultimately be a flagship program.

Phase 1
Research & Consultation

Establish a Steering Committee comprising local services and community leaders.

Conduct a "Desktop Review" of existing bicultural worker resources relevant to your service.

Write the job description in line with the community and work your CLC has identified. Be intentional with the community you want to work with.

Consult community members before writing the final Job Description.

Phase 2
Recruitment & Team Structure

Prioritise hiring individuals from the community you work with.

Value lived experience, community trust, cultural expertise and language skills as highly as formal qualifications.

Where possible involve community members in the interview process. See cohealth's inclusive recruitment guide.

Recruit via informal channels (WhatsApp, community leaders) as well as formal job boards.

Phase 3
Internal Training & Shadowing

Provide a comprehensive induction covering the CLC's services, processes (like Actionstep), and ethical obligations.

Deliver structured training across key legal areas. You can leverage any pro-bono relationships to also run training for your BCWs.

Implement a mentorship model using "shadowing and reverse shadowing". This allows the worker to first observe, then practice skills under supportive supervision, building confidence and competence.

Tip: Do not rush them. Let them understand the legal services boundaries first.

Phase 4
Community Activities

Co-designing workshops, running events like "Bring Your Bills Day," and listening to community concerns. This phase should aim to build trust and community engagement with the service and program. This can build into other projects and events.

Phase 5
Individual Casework & Integration

Co-locating with a social worker to handle complex intakes, warm referrals, and individual advocacy. See MVLS Connect for more in-depth detail on this model.

Recommended Training Curriculum

To build a "Work-Ready" team, we utilised the following external resources which we highly recommend:

General Legal Knowledge

Law for Helpers
(Victoria Legal Aid)

Law for Community Workers
(Barwon Community Legal Service)

The Law Handbook
(Fitzroy Legal Service)

Specialist Areas

Family Violence	**Safe and Equal** *(In-house training)*
Tenancy	**Tenants Victoria** *(Workers Resource Hub)*
Debt	**Consumer Action Law Centre** *(Debt Self Help tools)*

MANAGEMENT AND SUPPORT

DEDICATED SUPERVISION

Provide regular, structured one-on-one supervision with a dedicated manager who understands the unique pressures of the role. The manager or team leader role has been identified to be important in providing the program structure and continuity. This position holds many of the 'support network' relationship, supporting BCWs to troubleshoot complex issues, and debrief with BCWs. Any team leader or manager ideally understands the challenges BCWs face living and working in their own cultural community, facing racism, and marginalisation.

CLEAR BOUNDARIES AND ROLE CLARITY

Ensure the role's responsibilities and limitations are clearly defined and communicated to the entire team to prevent burnout and role-creep. The worker is a skilled professional, not a 24/7 community contact.

PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT

Provide ongoing opportunities for training and skill development.

PEER SUPPORT

Facilitate regular peer debriefing sessions for bicultural workers to share experiences and strategies in a safe space. The Victorian BCWs network is a valuable resource for broader peer support and reflective practice for BCW across the state.

ORGANISATIONAL INTEGRATION

The Bicultural Worker should be an integral part of the community legal service, not an adjunct. BCW should be involved in strategic planning of the organisation and its programs.
Provide existing staff training on the roles and limitations of the role of a BCW. Cohealth's professional standards training was integral for MVLS program during the early phase of the program.

WORKER WELLBEING

The BCW can be demanding and has very specific challenges. Maintaining a healthy and sustainable workforce is important part of the program.

BICULTURAL WORKER PHONE

A dedicated phone for the BCW program allows for an accessible way for community to reach the team without providing any personal contact details. Many community members may already have the BCW contact, but this allows a way to separate work from personal life.

DEFLECTION TO MANAGER

There are times when a BCW cannot say no to a client. There may be community dynamics or cultural dynamics in which a BCW may not be able to answer tricky questions or say no directly to a request for support. In these instances, BCW can deflect the issue to the team leader or manager.

TEAM DEBRIEFS

Hold debriefs often and support the team to debrief amongst themselves.

LEAVE WORK LAPTOP AT WORK

Encourage BCWs to leave all work at work, if possible.

DIRECT PEOPLE TO A DEDICATED OUTREACH

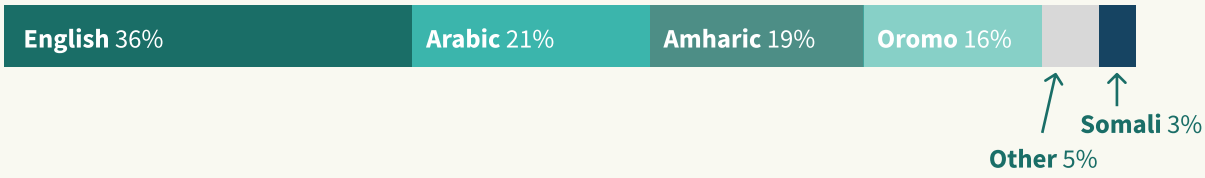
Community may ask BCWs to help them on days off. Encourage BCWs to direct them to a day they do work, preferably a dedicated outreach day, like every Thursday at a community hub.

BE AWARE OF CULTURAL CELEBRATIONS

Keep in mind any cultural celebrations BCWs may want to celebrate or if it may impact their work. E.g, Ramadan is often a time where BCW may want to work shorter hours.

Statistics (2025)

Languages spoken by residents



Referrals

743

people provided with information, referral or light touch work

Outreaches

	Ombudsman Days	Bring Your Bills Days	Housing Day
	3	3	1
attendees	33	160	35

Thank you

We are deeply indebted to cohealth and Jasmine Phillips for sharing the expertise of their Bicultural Worker program, which allowed us to learn, grow, and adapt their model for the legal sector.

We also extend a sincere thank you to the Victorian Legal Services Board for their generous support of this project.

Victorian Legal Services
BOARD + COMMISSIONER
Funded through the Legal Services Board Grants Program

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