

PUBLIC ACCOUNTS AND ESTIMATES COMMITTEE

Inquiry into the 2023–24 Budget Estimates

Melbourne – Friday 9 June 2023

MEMBERS

Sarah Connolly – Chair

Nicholas McGowan – Deputy Chair

Michael Galea

Paul Hamer

Mathew Hilakari

Lauren Kathage

Bev McArthur

Danny O’Brien

Ellen Sandell

WITNESSES

Ms Jaclyn Symes MLC, Attorney-General,

Ms Kate Houghton, Secretary,

Mr Ryan Phillips, Acting Associate Secretary,

Mr Toby Hemming, Deputy Secretary, Integrity, Regulation and Legal Services, and

Ms Marian Chapman, Deputy Secretary, Courts, Civil and Criminal Law, Department of Justice and Community Safety; and

Ms Louise Anderson, Chief Executive Officer, Court Services Victoria.

The CHAIR: I declare open this hearing of the Public Accounts and Estimates Committee.

I ask that mobile telephones please be turned to silent.

On behalf of the Parliament, the committee is conducting this Inquiry into the 2023–24 Budget Estimates. The committee's aim is to scrutinise public administration and finance to improve outcomes for the Victorian community.

I advise that all evidence taken by the committee is protected by parliamentary privilege. However, comments repeated outside this hearing may not be protected by this privilege.

As Chair I expect that committee members will be respectful towards witnesses, the Victorian community joining the hearing via the live stream this afternoon and other committee members.

Witnesses will be provided with a proof version of the transcript to check. Verified transcripts, presentations and handouts will be placed on the committee's website.

I welcome the Attorney-General the Honourable Jaclyn Symes and officers from the Department of Justice and Community Safety. Attorney, I am going to invite you to make an opening statement presentation of no more than 10 minutes. This will be followed by questions from the committee.

Jaclyn SYMES: Thank you so much, Chair, and good afternoon, everyone – good to see you. As we have said, I am appearing in my capacity as Attorney-General, and I am joined by officials from the department of justice but also Louise Anderson from Court Services Victoria.

I certainly would like to begin by acknowledging the traditional owners, paying respect to elders past, present and emerging.

I have got a bit of a presentation that I will get through in 9½ minutes for you.

Visual presentation.

Jaclyn SYMES: A critical part of the role of the Attorney-General is improving access to justice for all members of the community, which we do by investing in our amazing legal assistance sector. And this year's budget was no exception, with \$13.95 million over two years for a wide range of programs across the community legal sector and for the public advocate, whose role is to support people with disabilities.

The funding will primarily go towards continuing early intervention programs delivered by CLCs. That includes CLCs that deal with family violence and also other integrated programs. There is a fund that goes to 18 integrated programs this year across 15 CLCs, which go towards delivering vital legal services to Victorians, particularly those with complex legal needs, including women, young people and children experiencing family violence, people experiencing homelessness, people on temporary visas and indeed new arrivals. The funding will also support vulnerable Victorians with the continuation of the Office of the Public Advocate's independent third persons program, which provides critical support for people with cognitive impairment to participate in police interviews. \$5.48 million has also been provided to help justice community sector

organisations support their workforce through indexation increased to meet the cost pressures that they are experiencing, and we are also investing \$1.9 million to continue VLA's Help Before Court program, which supports court users to resolve criminal law issues ahead of hearings.

We know that there is more to do to improve victim-survivor experiences in the justice system, and I certainly hear this time and again with the interaction I have with victims and those that support them. So this year's budget provides \$19.47 million over four years to VIFM, which is the Victorian Institute of Forensic Medicine, to continue implementing a new clinical forensic medicine service model that better meets the needs of victim-survivors and ensures that the service is sustainable and efficient and reaching those most in need. It will do this by ensuring that victim-survivors of sexual assault have more choices, including about when and where the examination will take place and the gender of their examiner, for example. Forensic medical examinations will be available across Victoria in a timely and equitable way and be available to victim-survivors of sexual assault even if they do not want to proceed to a police report.

Just touching on some of the therapeutic court programs – it continues our focus on these justice investments. The courts continue to help the most vulnerable in our community access justice services in the safest and most accessible way possible. The 2023–24 budget invest in programs that target the causes of offending – the Drug Court program, for example, in Shepparton and Ballarat, as well as the County Court. In addition, the budget continues funding for the court integrated services program. The budget also provides funding to support operations and enhance security at the new Bendigo Law Courts, which I opened with the Premier in February, I think – a fantastic building if anybody happens to be in Bendigo. We are also continuing to support the rollout of the new courts case management system for the Magistrates' Court and the Children's Court. It will deliver stronger information sharing and improve court processes, ultimately enhancing access to justice.

So far more than 25,000 frontline workers, including court staff, lawyers, VicPol and justice agencies, are making use of the new system.

Touching on outcomes for Aboriginal Victorians, you will have heard from other ministers that a focus of this year's budget is directed to Aboriginal Victorians, with a record investment of \$475 million. It spans across justice, health, education, land justice and other sectors, including to support the First Peoples' Assembly of Victoria in treaty negotiations and additional funding to continue the important work of the Yoorrook Justice Commission. In May I gave evidence to the Yoorrook Justice Commission, taking the opportunity to reflect on and acknowledge the hard truths and reality of the nearly two centuries of dispossession and colonisation of Aboriginal people. At the hearing I took the opportunity to confirm our government's commitment to the principles of self-determination and shared examples of how we are currently working in partnership with the Aboriginal community to address what is frankly a shameful over-representation of Aboriginal people in the Victorian justice system. The government certainly eagerly awaits Yoorrook's critical issues report on the criminal justice and child protection systems, which is due to us in August. In the meantime we are progressing key reforms and investment priorities, and this budget in the justice space includes \$16.79 million to improve justice outcomes for Aboriginal Victorians under the 'Reducing future justice demand and keeping the community safe' initiative. A particular highlight for me is the funding for VALS. The 2023–24 budget provides over \$7 million for this organisation to expand its regional hubs model by establishing offices across five new sites, mainly in regional Victoria or on the outer edges. The investment will support them to deliver culturally appropriate legal services, community-based education and advocacy for Aboriginal people in regional towns and communities. This funding follows years of advocacy and hard work from VALS to transform its workforce to better meet the growing needs of culturally appropriate legal support in regional areas, which is already seeing really good results in Bendigo and Warrnambool. We are also supporting the Aboriginal community justice panels workforce with some pilots in relation to stronger support for those agencies.

I might skip ahead to specialist family violence courts. We are continuing to better support victim-survivors of family violence through initiatives across government. There are now 13 specialist family violence courts operating statewide, including at the new Bendigo Law Courts that I referred to earlier. These involve dedicated magistrates, police prosecutor support services and remote witness services, and the 2023–24 budget provides \$22.83 million over four years to deliver specialist family violence legal assistance at the seven specialist family violence courts that were recently gazetted in around October last year. The funding also supports ongoing delivery of the pre-court engagement service, which sees victim-survivors better supported through the court process and perpetrators have a better understanding of what the process is as well and also to understand

the court outcomes. These initiatives together promote enhanced safety outcomes for victim-survivors and certainly take into account the specific needs of children. There is also funding to continue remote hearing services across the state, which have been an invaluable tool for many victims who want to choose to access the court that way.

As I indicated, we did open the new Bendigo Law Courts in February, and it is a state-of-the-art building delivering on the government's election commitment but also taking the opportunity to celebrate Bendigo's unique culture. As well as Bendigo, Court Services Victoria have been working in other critical court developments, including the new Dandenong Children's Court, Sunshine Law Courts and the new Wyndham Law Courts. Wyndham is on track to be open by early 2025, and it is going to be an amazing facility for the west. It is going to provide a multijurisdictional court service. Court Services Victoria are working closely with the local community and key stakeholders, as well as Wyndham's traditional owners, to provide a fit-for-purpose court, and if it is anything like Bendigo it is going to be a great asset for that community.

I wanted to touch on backlog recovery. The Victorian courts and VCAT are continuing to make strong progress in this regard. Overall, pending cases continue to reduce, including criminal jury trial backlogs in the Supreme and County courts. Our courts are working together and with the rest of the justice sector to really embed some of the innovative practices, like active case management and remote hearings, and hear more cases sooner to reduce burdens on victims who might be waiting to have their matter heard. The Magistrates' Court and VCAT have increased case clearance rates close to above targets in 2022–23, certainly with the support of initiatives from the government that they sought and promoted. Things like the online Magistrates' Court and the service centre are really good examples of how they are tackling the backlog.

My final slide is just a bit of a run-through of some of the legislative priorities. Many of you would be aware that we are working on raising the age of criminal responsibility. Bail reform legislation is well advanced and will come to the Parliament shortly. Anti-vilification reform consultations are underway, and I know there is much interest from many people across the political spectrum. So I will certainly have more engagement with members in relation to that, but I wanted to make sure that I brought it to your attention that it is well and truly a priority and on the agenda. With that, I am happy to talk about what your priorities are, committee.

The CHAIR: Thank you, Attorney. For the first 12 minutes I am going to hand over to the Deputy Chair.

Nicholas McGOWAN: Thank you. Thank you, Minister, for the presentation. I just wanted to ask about net additional judicial officers. If you wish to direct it to anyone else, by all means. But I will just direct the questions to you today, Minister, if that is okay.

Jaelyn SYMES: Yes, sure.

Nicholas McGOWAN: Specifically, I am talking about the Court of Appeal, Supreme Court, County Court, Mags Court and Coroners Court – and VCAT are obviously members.

Jaelyn SYMES: Yes, I have got that information for you, Mr McGowan. There was a net increase of five judicial officers appointed across all courts and VCAT over the year as of 30 April, which takes into account replacements and reappointments. This was made up of 16 new appointments, less 11 positions being vacated – so a net gain of five, to specifically answer your question. The 16 new appointments included one Supreme Court associate judge, one Supreme Court judicial registrar, 10 magistrates, two magistrates assigned from the Magistrates to the Children's Court and two additional VCAT non-sessional members.

I will take the opportunity too to just acknowledge the reserve judge program. When judges reach the age of retirement and want to continue on, they can opt to be a reserve judge. Many judges have done that and really have been a great asset to the courts, particularly to drive down some of the backlogs and particularly in some of the higher courts. That experience and expertise has been invaluable to keep chipping away at the cases and make sure that they are going in the right direction.

Nicholas McGOWAN: Can you give me some idea of how many have participated in that previously and how many you have forecast for the next 12 months? I mean the retired judges in particular.

Jaelyn SYMES: I can get you those figures. I do not think I have the reserve judges on hand, in terms of the numbers. Do you have how many were flicked to reserve judges?

Louise ANDERSON: Louise Anderson, Court Services Victoria. There are 13 reserve judges currently within the County Court of Victoria and eight working supporting the Supreme Court of Victoria. But with the reserve judges it does not mean that they are always full-time commitments either, and they are usually six-month appointments renewed through the head of jurisdiction.

Nicholas McGOWAN: I appreciate that. Thank you. Minister, do you know how many additional judicial officers have been funded for the next 12 months, for 2023–24?

Jaelyn SYMES: We continue to appoint judges as the need arises and as people retire. We are continually putting in new judges.

Nicholas McGOWAN: Sorry, it might be the way I asked it. I am trying to understand the vacancies. How many vacancies still remain across all the different courts and the tribunal?

Jaelyn SYMES: How many vacancies?

Nicholas McGOWAN: Yes.

Jaelyn SYMES: Look, the heads of jurisdiction give me a timetable of when people have indicated that they would like to retire – not many people actually leave unless they are retiring – so I have a good lead-up time to when people are going to vacate the bench, and we seek to put in processes of reappointment to line up with those vacancies.

Nicholas McGOWAN: Do you know how many at VCAT are coming up for reappointment in the next 12 months?

Jaelyn SYMES: How many?

Nicholas McGOWAN: How many at VCAT are coming up for reappointment or appointment consideration?

Jaelyn SYMES: VCAT is probably less predictable than the other jurisdictions in terms of the sessional and non-sessional people coming and going. Usually with the judicial appointments it is at retirement. You start to ask people, ‘What would you like to do?’, and they have got options. Whereas with VCAT it is not so much that it gets to a term; people sort of come and go a bit more regularly at VCAT.

Nicholas McGOWAN: It might have been my misunderstanding. Are they not appointed for a fixed term, like a three-year appointment, or are some sessional? Is that the way it works?

Jaelyn SYMES: Some sessional and some permanent – that is right.

Nicholas McGOWAN: And are they all fixed? For example, if I am appointed tomorrow, I am appointed for a three-year term notwithstanding whether I am sessional or full-time. Is that how it works?

Jaelyn SYMES: How many years is the VCAT appointment each time we appoint?

Louise ANDERSON: Seven years.

Jaelyn SYMES: Seven. A seven-year term.

Nicholas McGOWAN: Are they all seven-year appointments? Because I know federally it can vary. There is usually scope for any Attorney-General to do three-year, four-year, five-year, seven-year appointments.

Louise ANDERSON: My understanding is the legislation requires seven-year terms, but I am sure I can clarify that if need be.

Nicholas McGOWAN: Thanks. That would be great. Attorney-General, could you advise how many fines were issued for breaches of COVID-19 directions and their value?

Jaelyn SYMES: My advice is 50,150 COVID fines have been issued.

Nicholas McGOWAN: And do you know what the value of those fines is?

Jaelyn SYMES: Just over \$100 million.

Nicholas McGOWAN: And do you know how much we, the government, have collected to date?

Jaelyn SYMES: Of the fines paid in full or in part – and you would appreciate that a lot of people take up payment plans and the like – we have had more than 5500 fines paid in full. Nearly 3500 are on ongoing payment plans. There are some stats here; I think you would probably be interested in all of them. 14,319 have had enforcement warrants issued after being unpaid beyond their due date, and there are further applications for fines for the concession scheme, and a lot of those applications have been accepted. So they are all in various stages of management.

Nicholas McGOWAN: Any withdrawn – do you have a figure for that?

Jaelyn SYMES: I do not have responsibility to withdraw fines, so that is not something that I can provide you detail on.

Nicholas McGOWAN: Okay. Thank you. Attorney-General, could you advise us in respect of the budget allocation for the Dispute Settlement Centre of Victoria, 2022–23 and 2023–24, the number of full-time equivalent – FTE – positions in that organisation? Or for anyone else.

Jaelyn SYMES: We will see if we have got that on hand.

Nicholas McGOWAN: Sure. And while you are just looking for that, on the fines do we, the government, know how many of those infringements are now in the courts or before the courts?

Jaelyn SYMES: We do not have that data on hand. I can have a look and see what we can get you in relation to the data that is collected to identify the various types of matters that have been advanced to the court. Where I know I can get the data quite well is the Children's Court. In relation to specific fines and what they are for, in terms of the court data it might be a little bit more complex.

Nicholas McGOWAN: Thank you.

Kate HOUGHTON: We will take on notice the dispute settlement sums.

Nicholas McGOWAN: Okay. Thank you. Are there any infringement notices that have yet to be issued for any infringement previously? Is there any active consideration of any infringement notices that might still be issued? I would suspect the answer is no.

Jaelyn SYMES: For COVID?

Nicholas McGOWAN: For COVID.

Jaelyn SYMES: I would suspect the answer is no as well.

Nicholas McGOWAN: Could we confirm that? Is that possible?

Kate HOUGHTON: We can take that on notice and confirm.

Nicholas McGOWAN: Minister, anti-vilification reform – I am just keen to get a bit of an understanding of the time line. I know that the Speaker has spoken about this in the house, and many of us are passionate about the issue. Anything you can share with the committee would be much appreciated.

Jaelyn SYMES: I can. Where we are up to in relation to the elements of anti-vilification reform, a lot of it is off the back of the really good work that the parliamentary committee did last year, and that is where we acted quickly to ban the public display of the Nazi hate symbol, which we have done. Following some pretty atrocious behaviour earlier this year we announced that we would expand that to cover the Nazi salute. The Nazi salute was under active consideration in relation to the advancement of our anti-vilification reforms anyway, but we have brought that forward to respond to, frankly, community concerns about that type of behaviour. So we are looking at fast-tracking that particular legislative reform.

When it comes to the broader anti-vilification reforms in relation to who would be protected and how, both civilly and criminally, that is complex legislation. The existing framework is not providing the level of protection for those that it already covers, so if you speak to people from the Jewish community or the Muslim community, for example, who are currently covered by the *Racial and Religious Tolerance Act*, they would say that they do not feel that there is adequate protection or avenues already in the framework. Not only are we looking at broadening the scope of who the legislation covers – and in particular wanting to pick up the LGBTI+ community and potentially others to ensure that their rights are protected and they have got avenues – we also want to make sure of not just having access to a scheme but making sure that scheme is more robust, so looking at thresholds for criminal and whether we can make it easier for civil behaviour. I think I am on the record as saying I would prefer that no-one has to embark on seeking their legal protections under law for being subjected to hate and awful speech, but because it is not working and because we want to get it right, it is going to take some time to consult with all of the people that have an interest in this. So we are embarking on that consultation now with a view to legislation next year.

Nicholas McGOWAN: Okay. Thank you for that. Does that include conversation, I guess, with the federal government too in respect of their laws?

Jaclyn SYMES: Yes. Look, I welcome the federal government's laws that they announced yesterday or the day before in relation to the banning of some memorabilia and similar things to what we have done here. It will complement our legislation. We are obviously going one step further in relation to gestures in relation to the Nazi salute, and we are currently formulating how that law can be crafted. It is difficult. As I said, you are trying to apply laws to hand gestures, and you can imagine that making sure you get that right and that the courts are able to apply that is something that we are playing close attention to at this point in time. I note that the federal government have not sought to cover gestures, but they are catching up with some of the other laws that we have already introduced.

Nicholas McGOWAN: Thank you, Minister. Attorney-General, I saw in your slide you referred to the Victorian Aboriginal Legal Service and new hubs – and you mentioned a few of them – but I was wondering whether you have the locations yet for the regional and suburban hubs –

The CHAIR: Apologies, Deputy Chair. We will now go to Mr Galea for 12 minutes.

Michael GALEA: Thank you, Chair. Good afternoon, Attorney and officials. Attorney, I am actually going to start on the same subject, the Victorian Aboriginal Legal Service, VALS. I am referring to budget paper 3, page 87. Could you please explain how this investment in these VALS regional hubs will impact community justice?

Jaclyn SYMES: Thank you for your question, Mr Galea. VALS has been a really fantastic organisation to work with since my time as Attorney-General – a real passion for ensuring that we are supporting the lives of Aboriginal Victorians. This is an organisation that are at the forefront every day of really standing up and bringing to my attention the needs of Aboriginals in our state. They are a unique organisation because they provide safe and just access to a wide range of legal services specifically for our First Nations community. They cover criminal, civil and family law, and they also spend a lot of time on community education and advocacy. Certainly they are in my office regularly when there is something that they would like my attention on. But they have been really invaluable in sitting down and going through our policy development and making sure that we have got a lens on how anything we do might impact or have an effect on Aboriginal Victorians.

As you have identified, the budget year this year, excitingly, has \$7.1 million to expand the regional hubs into country and outer suburban locations, and we are working with them – just to answer Mr McGowan's question; he ran out of time – in relation to finalising some of those locations. But off the back of successes in both Bendigo and Warrnambool, having place-based local services that are really tailored to each community is – frankly, the evidence suggests that is how you get better results for people. This is a build on the investment of \$2 million previously, which piloted the two Aboriginal ones. I think I alluded to in the presentation that there has been long-term advocacy for this model, so being able to test up the first two to effectively make the case that this is a great model to expand to other parts of regional Victoria was an important step, but they were over the moon when we could confirm that the next step is going to be facilitated by substantial funding in the budget. I did get the opportunity to open the Bendigo office, and it was fantastic. I think they said they expected 40 people to turn up to the opening, and it was 120 people that turned up. It is in the main street, or the main

mall part of Bendigo, so a lot of like-minded agencies, legal services and even businesses just turned out to support them. It was wonderful. They have got a really passionate CEO in Nerita Waight, and her fantastic staff that I got to meet in Bendigo are really committed to the services for that local community.

The expansion of VALS to move into outer suburban and regional areas will just mean that that particularly dedicated service can be rolled out to more and more people. Importantly, it means less people having to travel to Melbourne to access services and the like. It is really plugging an unmet need and will really help, hopefully, to respond to over-representation of Aboriginal people in the justice system, because not only are they getting a legal service, quite often when you get a local service you can be hooked into other supports that you might need.

Michael GALEA: Thank you, Attorney. Could you please also expand on why having culturally safe legal services is so important?

Jaclyn SYMES: I think it is not only about the presence being culturally appropriate, but you get better quality, timeliness and competency in relation to local people delivering local issues when they understand the clients that they are servicing. Aboriginal people have often unique needs, so having a dedicated service that is provided by VALS is shown to produce better outcomes for those people. It recognises that holistic and culturally informed legal services as well as well-developed networks and supports are just key to providing those wraparound services for people that have frankly found themselves with legal problems, and often with that dedicated service it reduces future encounters with the justice system.

Ultimately the model means that more First Nations people will feel safe in accessing legal services, so not ignoring things that sometimes build up, particularly like unpaid fines and the like. Having a place that you feel comfortable to go to seek help is actually going to be a good early intervention measure to prevent further legal issues. And as I said, the experiences from both the staff and the clients that I have had the pleasure of hearing their stories in relation to Warrnambool and Bendigo really showcase the excellent results that these dedicated services can produce. I certainly want to acknowledge that VALS have client service officers who are Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander, and they are staff that are vital to the offices being so effective. Some of the feedback is that clients wait to know that they are going to be on because it is a friendly face, someone that they know understands their particular culture and the issues that they might be facing, so the particular relationship that these client services officers form with the local community is really building the trust and effectiveness of those local offices, and that is something we want to replicate in the new models.

Michael GALEA: Thank you, Attorney. Could you outline as well why this investment is considered to be part of the early intervention investment framework, and also do you expect this to save costs across the system?

Jaclyn SYMES: Yes. Thanks, Mr Galea. You will see from the budget papers that the early intervention investment framework is where this funding is reported and where it is being drawn from. It is for good reason, because the regional model certainly aligns with the principles of the early intervention investment framework and supports an integrated level of service. What it will do is it will be more balanced. Aboriginal Victorians will have access to a continuum of services from early intervention through to acute care. It allows more Aboriginal Victorians to get effective help early before problems escalate, as I indicated before, and it just really fosters strong collaboration with the service sector. The regional model is expected to have significant benefits that go beyond just people being able to deal with their legal issues, such as helping with better health and mental health outcomes for Aboriginal clients. So if you are looking at the principles of early intervention through a justice lens, it is about identifying issues that may in turn contribute to someone's offending behaviour or indeed mental health issues, housing issues and the like. It can lead to a range of civil matters as well. I think unpaid fines is very much an example of where if you deal with them early, there is a much better outcome for people, and that can provide a greater opportunity so that there are not further issues in the legal space.

Michael GALEA: Thank you, Attorney. If I can draw your attention to budget paper 3, page 89, on the question of community legal services. There is a line item referring to community legal centre initiatives which also include CLC Family Violence Assistance Fund and early intervention health justice partnerships. Could you please expand on these two initiatives?

Jaelyn SYMES: Yes, absolutely. And I think it is a good segue from where you were going with your questioning about early intervention and how you can use the justice system and supporting services to really help people ensure that their lives stay on track and that crime is not an option for people when they have got the better support to divert them from potentially that type of option, I guess. As I indicated in my presentation, I love CLCs. They do an exceptional job in providing legal services, and they certainly provide accessible services irrespective of what your salary is, for example. There is significant investment in this budget. We would always like more, but they do an amazing job with the support of the government. There is almost \$14 million for 19 critical legal assistance programs. As you have identified, the Family Violence Assistance Fund is something that, unfortunately, is required. The most work that our CLCs do is in the family violence space, so ensuring that we have got dedicated support and funding for early intervention in that space means with that legal assistance you get better outcomes by being able to identify people's issues in relation to that.

The other good example is the early engagement of those who are at risk of homelessness, which may be due to experiences also, very often, with family violence or financial insecurity. But again I think it is not necessarily rocket science. When you have a legal service or other services that are attuned to the vulnerabilities in people's lives, being able to address those and assist with those very, very often is all about ensuring that those interventions mean that you are not having those acute interventions at the end, which have worse outcomes for individuals and also worse outcomes for the state, whether it is in terms of community safety or indeed just the bottom line. It is obviously a lot more expensive to deal with people through a corrections lens than it is through a health lens earlier on, when a lot of these programs are targeted. So I am a big supporter of early intervention – always have been. I would much prefer my colleagues in other portfolios to be receiving funding for education, jobs and health rather than us having to continue to invest in prisons, for example. That is pretty much the fundamental basis of early intervention.

Michael GALEA: Yes, absolutely. Thank you for that, Attorney. On a related subject, not so much early intervention, I understand that funding for the community legal centres has sometimes gone to help disaster victims, such as with the floods last year. Is that correct?

Jaelyn SYMES: Yes, it has. They do a fantastic job. They pop up where the need is, don't they? I guess particularly as a local member who has had disasters impact their electorate for some time, I certainly am very grateful for the legal services that are provided to the communities that have been impacted by fire, floods and storms. You have a lot of issues to contend with when your community has been hit by an emergency, and having timely access to legal services just takes a little bit of that stress off, because it is quite challenging dealing with rebuilds, insurance companies and the like. So if you have got that on-the-ground support for legal, it is invaluable to the recovery of those communities.

The CHAIR: Thank you, Attorney. We are going to go to Mr O'Brien.

Danny O'BRIEN: Thank you, Chair. Good afternoon, Attorney.

Jaelyn SYMES: Hello, Mr O'Brien.

Danny O'BRIEN: I hate to be a pain, but having asked you to bring the microphone forward, it is quite echoey with it forward. Can you put it back a little bit and just speak up? That would be great. It must be this end. It is definitely not me getting old and deaf. Can I go back to the issue of the COVID fines. You gave us some data there – was it 50,150 fines? I think it was.

Jaelyn SYMES: Yes, that was the data I gave you.

Danny O'BRIEN: Yes. But then what you said was: paid in full, 5500; 3500 on some sort of payment plan; and 14,319 warrants issued. That comes to about half of that 50,000. What is happening with the rest of them?

Jaelyn SYMES: I have just got a little bit more on figures here. I have got, for all COVID fines: 3716 individuals have elected to take 4052 fines to court, I think which was one of the questions Mr McGowan was asking; 11,800 fines have been cancelled by enforcement agencies; and 152 fines have been registered with the Children's Court for enforcement. In my capacity as Attorney-General, Fines Victoria does not enforce kids' fines, so that is a matter for the Children's Court. There are a range of fines that people are yet to deal with.

Danny O'BRIEN: Either way.

Jaelyn SYMES: Like all unpaid fines, I would encourage people to engage with agencies early so that you know what your options are. There are plenty of options in relation to helping you clear your fines. But they do not go away generally, so you should take action in relation to dealing with those.

Danny O'BRIEN: You have indicated there are about \$100 million in fines. Of the ones that are paid, how much does that account for in dollars?

Jaelyn SYMES: Of the fines that have been paid in full or in part, there are \$9.36 million that have been paid in full and \$5.76 million that are subject to payment plans.

Danny O'BRIEN: So they are ongoing, in effect. It is \$5.76 million on a payment plan, so some of that might be paid and some still to come.

Jaelyn SYMES: Correct.

Danny O'BRIEN: But \$9.36 million is paid in full.

Jaelyn SYMES: Correct.

Danny O'BRIEN: Okay. Thank you. We had significant discussion on this in previous hearings with the former secretary of the department. What is the process? Will the government continue to pursue all those ones that have not been responded to at all?

Jaelyn SYMES: Yes. As I said, fines do not go away unless you take action for them. There is a variety of ways that you can seek to engage with the department to deal with your fines, whether it is through payment plans or whether people have got grounds to have them withdrawn. I think the last thing I would want is for people just to ignore them, because they can build up and become subject to –

Danny O'BRIEN: Court action.

Jaelyn SYMES: order and the sheriffs. There are certainly grounds for internal review. As I said, I would just prefer people to seek to engage and find out what the best option is for them, particularly if you are not in a position to just pay it. If you think you have got grounds for a review, then we have processes to accommodate that.

Danny O'BRIEN: And we do not want more ending up in the courts because we know we have already got a backlog there. On that point, can I go back to an earlier question: you gave us data on the net additional number of judicial officers that have been appointed. In the 2023–24 budget is there any finance in the budget or a net target that you are going to increase judicial officers by?

Jaelyn SYMES: There is no budget for a net increase to judicial officers for this budget, but we will continue to replace vacancies so that there is not a net loss. As I indicated, we have a cohort of reserve judges that thankfully do not want to go off and retire too early, and they are an invaluable support to many of the courts. What we are seeing – and you touched on backlogs – is that on the judicial officers, supported by the registrars and other court staff, we are trending in the right direction across all jurisdictions in relation to backlogs.

Danny O'BRIEN: I will come to that again a bit further on. Could I ask Ms Anderson, I think it is, at CSV: budget paper 3, page 369, which has the income for court services this year, shows a figure of \$820.3 million as the budget versus a budget last year of \$815.8 million, which is a variation of 0.6 per cent, when we have got inflation forecast in the budget at 4.25 per cent. That is a real cut to Court Services Victoria going forward. What services or staff positions will need to be reduced or eliminated to fund that cut in real budget?

Louise ANDERSON: Thank you, Mr O'Brien. The change to the budget that you have identified is in respect of what we call the general efficiency dividend, which was applied across all entities that receive appropriation. We were expecting that and have approached a savings regime that at this point is not addressing frontline services or reducing services or, at this point, reducing staff.

Danny O'BRIEN: How do you propose to do it, then? If you had got an increase subject to the forecast inflation rate, it would be another \$30 million basically – \$850 million. So how do you deal with effectively a \$30 million cut? Do you reduce support to judges? Do you reduce security costs? Is it public facing activities? How are you going to manage that?

Louise ANDERSON: Thank you for your question. As you would know, judges are remunerated through the special appropriations fund, and that is not something that is in our remit to change.

Danny O'BRIEN: They cannot be sacked or have their pay reduced?

Louise ANDERSON: No.

Danny O'BRIEN: No. When I said support to judges, I did not mean them personally.

Louise ANDERSON: Yes. The focus will be very much on maintaining the case load activity that is necessary to deliver justice. There will be, like other departments, a focus on reducing consultants, contractors – anything that we might be able to call out as discretionary funds. But we are looking at it at the moment.

Danny O'BRIEN: Okay. Could you provide any advice on notice – anything further on how you are going to deal with that – if you can provide anything else?

Louise ANDERSON: Of course.

Danny O'BRIEN: Because it does go to that issue of the performance of the courts. I go to page 374 and 'On-time case processing – Criminal matters resolved or otherwise finalised within established timeframes in the Magistrates' Court'. The target for 2022–23 was 85, but the expected outcome is 49. Is it an acceptable outcome to have fewer than one in two criminal cases finalised in the times that you are targeting?

Louise ANDERSON: Mr O'Brien, I do not know whether the Attorney wishes to comment. But I might just confirm that, because my understanding was, and certainly the questionnaire was showing, that the Magistrates' Court will be looking at a 105 per cent clearance rate for criminal matters. I will just pull up the budget papers. Thank you.

Danny O'BRIEN: Yes, page 374.

Louise ANDERSON: Yes.

Danny O'BRIEN: 'On-time case processing'.

Louise ANDERSON: Oh, on-time case processing. My apologies. I misunderstood the question.

Danny O'BRIEN: 'Criminal matters resolved or otherwise finalised within established timeframes in the Magistrates' Court'. And for those watching, apologies, I have to read it all out. There are several performance measures of similar title. But it is 49 per cent versus a target of 85 per cent.

Louise ANDERSON: Thank you. If I may, I will take that on notice too.

Danny O'BRIEN: Well, the question is: is it an acceptable outcome that only half of our cases are meeting their time lines? Perhaps it is one for the Attorney, if you do not have anything to add, Ms Anderson.

Jaelyn SYMES: I think in relation to our court recovery program, I have been really impressed with the dedication and work that particularly the heads of jurisdiction have embarked on. We have certainly supported new innovations and new ways of doing things so that we can deal with matters more effectively, and some of those programs have been really well embedded. We got a lot of programs that are about resolving matters before they get to hearing, and they are showing good signs as well. In relation to court figures, I would like it to be lower, but the results are good. There has been a 6 per cent reduction of the total pending case load across courts and VCAT, a 12 per cent reduction in the Magistrates' Court and a 6 per cent reduction in the Children's Court pending case loads. The Supreme Court pending criminal jury trials reduced by 19 per cent, and the County Court pending criminal trials reduced by 4 per cent, so –

Danny O'BRIEN: With respect, Attorney, that sounds good to just give us that base figure. We know from previous hearings and the facts on the table that the case load went through the roof of course through COVID, so to be saying 'We're reducing them by 6 per cent' or whatever is a bit meaningless. I mean, what is the size of the actual –

Jaclyn SYMES: No, no, compared to pre COVID though. If you look at the Supreme Court pending matters, in March 2020 the pending matters were 5165 and as at April we were at 6000, so we are coming closer and closer to pre-COVID figures. The Children's Court are below pre-COVID figures, as is the Coroners Court.

Danny O'BRIEN: Can I go to the PC's ROGS report earlier in the year. For Magistrates' Court criminal matters waiting longer than 12 months, as at 30 June 2022 Victoria was at 30.3 per cent while New South Wales was at just 10 per cent. When will we actually get back to pre-COVID levels and actually get people before the courts and through the court system in a reasonable amount of time?

Jaclyn SYMES: There is certainly no doubt that the ROGS report highlighted the impact that COVID had on our courts, including outstanding case matters, and that is why there was \$300 million in funding in relation to –

Danny O'BRIEN: The ROGS report also compares the states, and I have given you the comparison with New South Wales, where it was just 10 per cent. We were at 30 per cent. COVID did not just happen here. Obviously there is a bigger problem in Victoria.

Jaclyn SYMES: I am not disputing the data and the impact of COVID. We had to pivot to a range of innovations to ensure that we continued to deal with case loads, but particularly in relation to juries, for example, it was not safe to have a lot of people in close proximity together, so there is –

Danny O'BRIEN: The question stands, though: when will we get back to pre-COVID figures like you have just given us?

Jaclyn SYMES: I just gave you the figures that in some instances we are.

The CHAIR: Apologies, Mr O'Brien, your time is up. Sorry to interrupt, Attorney. We are going to go to Ms Kathage.

Lauren KATHAGE: Thank you, Chair. Attorney, I wanted to ask about the legal service panel. I understand that the tender was advertised earlier this year. Are you able to provide some detail about the pro bono arrangements within that and how it would benefit community legal centres?

Jaclyn SYMES: Yes. Thank you, Ms Kathage, for your question in relation to how we use government purchasing power to bring about good community benefits. Certainly the legal panel is one way of doing that, and we have been using it for some time in relation to that, particularly by encouraging and supporting firms that sign up to do government work to in turn provide pro bono benefits to Victorians who need them most.

The legal services panel is effectively the contract arrangements that the government has with private law firms, and it allows government departments and agencies to purchase legal advice for specific projects or representation at really competitive rates. Through the government contracts there are social procurement opportunities in requiring the commitment of private firms to deliver pro bono services to the CLC sector and for other causes. For example, with the current legal services panel, the firms that are on that have delivered more than \$260 million in pro bono legal services since March 2016. That is the current panel that will expire at the end of this month, so in bringing in a new panel we have had an opportunity to identify the priorities of where we think we can build on that success.

We will continue to have pro bono requirements, but we will strengthen them by having a new requirement that large law firms will be mandated to provide a legal secondee or other support to CLC staffing. It will encourage a really strong relationship between the private and community legal sectors, and certainly it is a win-win for firms, for CLCs and for clients because it is really on-the-ground work dealing with vulnerable people, so the experience that someone from a firm – a big commercial firm, for example – can bring to those areas is invaluable, and it goes both ways, the sharing of information and the like. Also, firms on the new panel will be

required to provide an increased portion of barrister briefs and counsel fees to female barristers – certainly, again, using our purchasing power as a government to bring about greater gender equality outcomes. We will have a new target of at least 50 per cent of briefs that must go to women barristers, and the firms will be required to report on diversity policy and practices as well as gender pay gaps. This is a great initiative to ensure greater support for women in the legal sector.

We are in the process of completing the open tender process for the panel, but it will be announced soon, with the contracts commencing on 1 July, and that is for three years. I am really looking forward to seeing the benefits of those contract arrangements and how they can benefit pretty much the most vulnerable people in the state who rely on CLCs in particular for their legal services.

Lauren KATHAGE: Thank you, Attorney. In discussions with Whittlesea community legal centre I know they are looking forward to the prospect of increasing their expertise in property law through these arrangements –

Jaclyn SYMES: Excellent.

Lauren KATHAGE: to benefit survivors of family violence.

Jaclyn SYMES: I do get a lot of feedback from local members across the political spectrum about how much they value their CLCs, so it is really great that we can be in a position to support them not only through the budget allocation but also through our panel. I think it will be really welcome across the board once we see some of these benefits rolling out.

Lauren KATHAGE: Absolutely. I want to take you to page 83 of budget paper 3. There is a line in the budget there ‘Supporting Community Sector Jobs’. Can you please outline what that funding is actually for?

Jaclyn SYMES: Yes, absolutely, I can do that, because it is pretty non-descript, isn’t it, in that description, so it is a good question. We certainly value and recognise the ongoing dedication and commitment of our community services sector. This funding, as you have identified, is \$5.48 million to support those vital community sector organisations and the jobs that they contain to meet growing pressures of wages and corporate costs. Just as Victorians are feeling pressures under the current economic climate, the community service providers are struggling to keep up the service that they want to deliver. This money is in relation to ensuring that people can be supported through wage growth and indexation and really supporting those organisations to not only attract people but be able to retain them. It is a budget measure designed to help those organisations with their unavoidable rising costs.

Lauren KATHAGE: Thank you. I would like to move on now to budget paper 3, page 354, which details integrity agency funding. The figures we have got there – are they providing sufficient funds for our integrity agencies to operate effectively?

Jaclyn SYMES: The short answer is yes. I think there has been a bit of commentary in relation to IBAC funding in particular but broader integrity agencies, from this committee and outside the committee, so I would certainly like to take the opportunity to look at the funding arrangement of our independent integrity agencies. I will start with IBAC, and I will see if I can negate the need for Mr O’Brien to follow up with any questions because I know that he was interested in this as well. I also get questions a lot from Mr Davis in relation to this; he has been on the record as trying to articulate that there are cuts to IBAC, and it is just not the case.

IBAC has a base budget for the 2023–24 year of \$62.2 million, and it will have an average of around 300 staff during the year. It is a large, well-resourced organisation, and it needs to be because it does really important work. IBAC did not submit a formal budget bid for new funding as part of its 2023–24 budget cycle because their base funding effectively covers what they believe they need to do. If they do have a particular need for funding or a program or a project, they can approach government. And in this instance, for this budget cycle, they did not. If they had asked for more funding, we would have considered that at the point in time, and we have got certainly lots of examples of where we have done that.

There are three components that go towards making up budget allocations for our integrity agencies. Just looking at the table that you have referred to on page 354, of the \$60 million-odd there, some of that is made up of base funding, which in IBAC’s case is the vast majority of their funding, because we have always been

committed to properly funding all of our integrity agencies, and they certainly need stability and the ability to have long-term planning and engage staff on an ongoing basis, for example. The second component that makes up that funding is previous budgets or Treasurer's advances for new or special projects, which in many cases may have been run over two or more budgets and may lapse at some stage. The third category is new funding introduced in the current year's budget, which might either be in addition to the ongoing base funding or funding for a special project that runs over one or more budget cycles.

So in terms of some of the issues that have been raised, under the heading '2022–23 revised' there is a figure for IBAC of the \$62.9 million, which is \$1 million more than last year's budget figure and \$700,000 more than the base budget figure for this year. The '2022–23 revised' heading is, I guess, probably a bit deceiving. It could probably be titled 'Revised actuals' or 'Final budget allocation' because it includes new or reprioritised funding that has been allocated during the 2022–23 financial year by Treasurer's advances or decisions of ERC. Under this government we have a practice of, if an integrity agency identifies a genuine need for additional resources and the budget permits, then we will allocate money, and that is exactly what happened in the previous financial year and certainly may happen again. In last year's budget we provided over \$32 million in increased funding for base funding for IBAC over the forward estimates, and those already committed increases to the budget mean that their base funding for 2023–24 has actually increased from last year.

So the \$32.1 million ultimately means that IBAC has had an extra \$8.6 million in base funding ongoing from 2023–25, and by the end of the forward estimates, IBAC's funding – this is an important point to make – will be double what it was in 2014. So this is an organisation that we certainly have a strong record of ongoing support for. I have to know these figures because I have policy responsibility for the IBAC organisation, but I actually do not have budgetary responsibility for them. They are an independent agency. They prepare their budgets for DTF. But as I think you would have identified – I think you have asked a variety of ministers, particularly Mr O'Brien may have, about the details of the budget, so I certainly wanted to make sure that I was in a position to provide that detail to the committee as the minister that is responsible for the administration side of IBAC. But I do have an understanding of their figures because I have taken the opportunity to consult with DTF and make sure I really understand it so I could explain it to you guys as best as possible.

Lauren KATHAGE: Thank you, Attorney. And that funding for IBAC – how does that compare with integrity agencies in other states?

Jaelyn SYMES: Yes, I have got some figures there that will help me answer that. So funding for IBAC in proportion to the public sector workforces that obviously they hold to account is higher in Victoria than other states. For example, IBAC's budget will provide funding equivalent to \$217.30 per Victorian public servant in 2022–23 compared to \$78.40 per public servant for the New South Wales equivalent agencies, and they undertake a similar number of investigations as well. So it is certainly something that we can demonstrate received significant investment here in Victoria compared to other states. There is no question that the organisations play a really important role in the democratic process. So, as I said, the funding is there for their important work, and I continue to engage with them regularly in ensuring that they are supported as best as possible to do that important work.

The CHAIR: Thank you, Attorney. The next 12 minutes goes to Mr O'Brien.

Danny O'BRIEN: Thank you, Chair. Continuing on the court issue, Attorney, in its judgement in the 2021 case of *Worboyes v. The Queen*, the Court of Appeal said, and I quote:

Unacceptable delay in the disposition of criminal cases is endemic. Indeed, it is not an overstatement to say that the system of criminal justice in this State is in crisis, requiring a response from the courts.

As a result of the *Worboyes* precedent, courts are today giving much greater sentencing discounts to people who plead guilty than they would in any other time. When will these enormous backlogs be brought under control so that criminals no longer receive excessive discounts on a guilty plea?

Jaelyn SYMES: Well, despite the commentary that you have just provided there, Mr O'Brien, your question is the same question that you asked me before in relation to what we are doing about court backlogs. And what I can demonstrate is that the investments over successive budgets in the last couple of years, particularly in response to the problems that were unavoidable in ensuring the health and wellbeing of Victorians in dealing with the pandemic, are measures that we want to embed going forward. The figures are returning to pre-pandemic levels in some jurisdictions, and there is a continued focus in relation to the broader justice system

on making sure we are doing all we can to deal with matters expeditiously, whether it is through a final hearing or whether we can deal with those matters before they reach the court door, for example.

Danny O'BRIEN: But given the Worboyes precedent and again the statement 'requiring a response from the courts', we are now seeing more criminals, from murderers down, who are receiving discounts or higher discounts than they otherwise would have because of the backlog. How is that fair to victims of crime if we are seeing people get lesser sentences simply because they are being encouraged to plead guilty because of a backlog in the courts?

Jaclyn SYMES: I do not accept that the data leads us to a conclusion of the contention that you are putting to me. There have always been sentence discounts for people that plead guilty. To connect that to court backlogs is nonsensical.

Danny O'BRIEN: Well, I am not just connecting it to court backlogs, I am connecting it to a specific statement in the Court of Appeal.

Jaclyn SYMES: And what I am saying is that –

Danny O'BRIEN: Are you saying that that is not happening?

Jaclyn SYMES: I am saying that there has always been a range of factors for sentencing discounts, but you are connecting it to COVID backlogs. I have just answered your question in relation to that. Many of our jurisdictions are trending – well, they are all trending in the right direction. Some of them have less pending cases than they did before COVID. So what I am saying is that connecting the pandemic to sentencing outcomes is not –

Danny O'BRIEN: Well, just for the record, it is not me saying it; it is not the opposition. It is a judgement in the Court of Appeal in 2021:

Unacceptable delay in the disposition of criminal cases is endemic. Indeed, it is not an overstatement to say that the system of criminal justice in this State is in crisis, requiring a response from the courts.

And then we have seen what is happening.

Jaclyn SYMES: Well, with respect, Mr O'Brien, to the person who made the statement, that was made in 2021. We are now in 2023, and I have just taken you through the 2023 figures that are showing that in some jurisdictions we have less pending cases than we did pre-COVID, and I am really proud of the fact that the jurisdictions are focused on driving down backlogs.

I always wanted – you do not want anyone waiting for justice. Like, you do not. And the lists were long pre COVID. The fact that we are getting to a position that is less than what we had in COVID is one benefit of all of the pivoting and initiatives and innovation that we had to come up with to respond to the pandemic, to keep people safe, to keep the wheels of justice moving. So I regularly get asked, 'When will you return to pre-COVID levels in the courts?' And my answer to that is, 'I hope we do better.' And what the data is showing is that in some instances we already are.

Danny O'BRIEN: But you told me I think that the Magistrates' Court is still more than 500 above what it was in 2020 – the backlogged number of cases.

Jaclyn SYMES: Yes, but we have had a 12 per cent reduction since June 2022.

Danny O'BRIEN: So it is trending down, but it still has not even caught up.

Jaclyn SYMES: It is trending down, but there is also a range of matters – it is not as though you are just static. There are still matters coming into the courts as well. It is not as though you are only dealing with what you had pre COVID.

Danny O'BRIEN: Yes, yes. But in the context, as we have established, of a real \$30 million cut to Court Services Victoria – you have been very open, thankfully, that there is no new money for net additional judicial officers this year. We are still only just catching up, and I guess the Worboyes discounts are still being handed out. When will that end?

Jaelyn SYMES: I think you are oversimplifying how you deal with court backlogs. Just appointing –

Danny O'BRIEN: I am talking about the backlogs and the impact on actual sentencing – the result that criminals are getting a lighter sentence because judges are saying, 'Well, I'd encourage you to plead guilty.'

Jaelyn SYMES: I do not agree with the conclusion that judges are giving lesser sentences because of court backlogs. What I am saying is that lesser sentences for a range of reasons, including pleading guilty, have been a feature of our system for a very long time. You are linking sentences with what we are doing to plough through the cases, and I am giving you a lot of information about what we are doing in relation to responding to court backlogs. You are the one that is making a link to sentences, and I do not think that that stands up in 2023.

Danny O'BRIEN: That is what Worboyes said. Anyway, can I move on, but still on the same theme, if you like, and that is with respect to the Dispute Settlement Centre of Victoria. Why has it stopped providing mediation services for things like fencing disputes and noise disputes, tree disputes and any of those other issues that affect Victorians when the intention of it is to try and stop them ending up in VCAT or the courts?

Jaelyn SYMES: I do not have that information, because it no longer sits with the Attorney portfolio. It moved to government services at the MOG change. Obviously there is some interrelationship with the justice portfolio, but we no longer have responsibility for that organisation.

Danny O'BRIEN: Do you still have responsibility for VCAT?

Jaelyn SYMES: I do.

Danny O'BRIEN: The website for the Dispute Settlement Centre of Victoria says:

The Dispute Settlement Centre of Victoria has temporarily closed its phone line to provide a mediation service for residential tenancies disputes lodged with the Victorian Civil and Administrative Tribunal ... during increased demand for VCAT's services.

So I understand what you are saying about the MOG changes, but it is basically saying that the DSCV's resources have been thrown across to VCAT. How is that going to deliver us better outcomes?

Jaelyn SYMES: In relation to issues that arose through COVID in particular, disputes between landlords and tenants were something that escalated massively, and so it became a priority of government to ensure that we could deal with those issues as best as possible. Using the unique experience and skills of the staff at the dispute settlement centre, an agreement was struck for them to support VCAT to deal with that list in particular – and I certainly thank them for that work. They managed to get through particularly some of the more straightforward cases to ensure that people could move on with their lives from those disputes. But in relation to the ongoing arrangements and what that agency is currently focused on, I do not have that at hand.

Danny O'BRIEN: All right. Well, I will go to VCAT, which is your responsibility. Why not just increase resources to VCAT to actually clear that backlog that has now shut down DSCV as well?

Jaelyn SYMES: It has not shut down the Dispute Settlement Centre of Victoria. They have just been of great assistance because of the similarities in the roles that they play. VCAT has been significantly supported through investments from government, particularly in relation to their IT modernisation projects. It is an organisation that was not well placed to deal with moving off in-person hearings and matters being dealt with, and so it took some time for them to be able to ensure that they could deal with their matters when people could not be in person. So we have an ongoing attention to VCAT in relation to supporting them. In terms of last year's budget, for example, I have just been reminded that it was \$20 million for additional support and indeed more members at that tribunal. That was over four years, so that money is still being spent on additional resources for VCAT.

Danny O'BRIEN: Isn't it robbing Peter to pay Paul when you stop giving people access to a phone line to resolve a dispute over an overhanging tree or whatever it might be, and so in the end they are going to end up in VCAT and just add to the workload there?

Jaelyn SYMES: Well, you have got to put your resources where they are most in need, and in relation to residential tenancies issues, that is where the need has been. When I was responsible for the dispute settlement

centre it was not as though I was getting emails every day from people saying, 'I can't have my tree dispute resolved.' I was getting numerous queries in relation to –

Danny O'BRIEN: But that is my point. Without that, they are going to end up in VCAT. Appreciating it is no longer your responsibility, can I ask: when do you expect that those resources will be able to be released from VCAT so the DSCV hotline will be open again?

Jaclyn SYMES: I will ask the minister for you and let you know.

Danny O'BRIEN: Well, no, I am asking – presumably he is going to say –

Jaclyn SYMES: 'When I don't need them anymore'?

Danny O'BRIEN: He is going to say, yes, when you do not need them anymore.

Jaclyn SYMES: I will come back to you on that.

Danny O'BRIEN: Take it on notice? Okay. Births, deaths and marriages?

Jaclyn SYMES: That is not me either.

Danny O'BRIEN: Not you either?

Jaclyn SYMES: No.

Danny O'BRIEN: Well, you got out of that one.

Jaclyn SYMES: That moved to Minister Pearson in the MOG changes as well.

Danny O'BRIEN: Okay. My time is just about out, so I will leave it at that. Thank you, Attorney.

The CHAIR: Thank you, Mr O'Brien – 20 seconds to go. We will go straight to Mr Hilakari.

Mathew HILAKARI: I do not know if I get your extra time, do I?

The CHAIR: No.

Mathew HILAKARI: Okay. Thank you, Attorney and officials, for making your time available this afternoon. I might take you back, Attorney, to budget paper 3, page 354, in relation to those other agencies, the Ombudsman and the Victorian Inspectorate. I am just wanting to confirm that they have funding to operate effectively.

Jaclyn SYMES: Yes. We have spent a bit of time on IBAC, so let us cover off the others and elaborate on some of those agencies.

Mathew HILAKARI: Because you took us to great detail before, and I really appreciate that.

Jaclyn SYMES: Yes, I know. Of course it is important to cover them all. I might start with the Victorian Inspectorate. That agency have been allocated \$8.2 million in an operating budget for 2023–24 to ensure that they are fully funded to perform their important statutory obligations and their oversight roles. In the 2022–23 budget the VI received an additional \$14.9 million over four years to provide it with substantial base funding and to ensure that it was sustainable. It also received fixed-term funding for its oversight role in relation to the Office of the Special Investigator, which was set up in response to the royal commission into police informants. There is a \$200,000 decrease from the 2022–23 budget figure, but that can be explained due to fixed-term funding that was carried over from 2021–22 to 2022–23, and that has now lapsed. The increase in the 2022–23 actuals was due to a transfer of funding for the VI's oversight functions in relation to that royal commission that I referred to earlier.

Touching on the Victorian Ombudsman: similar to the IBAC, they did not submit a budget bid for new funding for the budget cycle; however, the 2023–24 budget does provide them with an additional \$700,000 to support their operations by strengthening some of their needs for data integrity and cybersecurity matters.

Mathew HILAKARI: Great. Thank you for covering those off as well. Attorney, can I take you now to budget paper 3, pages 83 and 88, and this is related to, in particular, ‘Pre-court assistance to reduce delays and adjournments’, and Victoria Legal Aid Help Before Court. In the budget papers it suggests that it will support more than 5000 people to help reduce court delays and adjournments. Could you please go into some more detail on this?

Jaclyn SYMES: Yes. Thanks, Mr Hilakari. It is probably a good opportunity to do that, because it kind of ties into some of the questioning that Mr O’Brien was alluding to in relation to what you can do to ensure that you are continuing to deal with more matters more quickly so that there are less people on waiting lists. The initiative was from Victoria Legal Aid and is certainly a similar example of an early intervention investment program, because it is about getting in early. The Help Before Court program provides clients with access to legal support and assistance with their summary criminal matters so that they can prepare ahead of a mention in the Magistrates Court, which has numerous benefits. It results in fewer adjournments and therefore fewer delays and less court days. Prior to Help Before Court, the overwhelming majority of VLA’s clients effectively accessed the service on the day through the duty lawyer program. It meant that duty lawyers – they do an amazing job, but it is such a challenge – were having limited time to get across a broad range of matters with high volumes of people seeking support, and it also meant that clients did not feel that they were getting the attention that they deserved or they were experiencing longer wait times. That can be quite stressful because a lot of people are not used to attending court, and it can be quite overwhelming. Having earlier advice about what to expect and how your matter is going to go just makes it a lot smoother for people, both in functioning and for their mental wellbeing.

Where people are not receiving early advice and intending to seek advice from the duty lawyer on the day, there are also issues with the limited scope to investigate the core issues of offending. If you speak to anybody that works for VLA, they will tell you that they have never had a client that has just a legal issue – there is always something else. Having that early engagement and identifying people’s other matters, other concerns and other areas of need is a really valuable tool in supporting those people both in the legal system and outside the legal system, which hopefully means they are not coming back to the legal system.

The program was an initiative and was established primarily in response to the backlogs from the pandemic, which effectively was all about the fact that we could not have in-person hearings, so ‘What can we talk to people about before these matters can get to a physical hearing?’ But what we have learned is ‘Hey, this actually is quite a good initiative, irrespective of the fact that people can now go to court in person,’ so it certainly has played a critical role in reducing matters, particularly at the Magistrates Court.

At the end of last year pending matters in the criminal division of the Magistrates’ Court were down 25 per cent compared to the previous year. There are a lot of reasons for that, but this is one of the programs that we are attributing that success or that –

Mathew HILAKARI: That outcome.

Jaclyn SYMES: improvement – yes. I do not want to oversell it; we still have a lot of matters that are outstanding, as we discussed with Mr O’Brien. But when we are seeing these results, it certainly is something that we want to continue.

Effectively I guess the simple way of explaining the program is that people can receive information about their matter ahead of the hearing date. They get information about the police brief earlier when they speak to the VLA lawyer and some progress can be made so that the matter is more likely to be resolved. It sometimes results in a diversion outcome. Early engagement of legal assistance through this program has also shown that there have been actual diversions of around 5.1 per cent compared to 2 per cent of people accessing diversion programs pre pandemic. So focusing on this program and how it can keep people out of the justice system has a really welcome benefit. It is something that we have been really proud to support in an ongoing way, because frankly it is working.

Mathew HILAKARI: Great. You mentioned that it is working. Do you have some evaluations of this program from what has occurred already?

Jaclyn SYMES: I do have some preprepared information in relation to an evaluation that might help answer that question. The evaluation that was completed was in April 2022, and it outlined that between the launch of

the Help Before Court intake in October 2020 and January 2022 there were approximately 17,000 requests for Help Before Court, with 75 per cent of those estimated to have received a service, either being legal information, legal advice or in-court representation. That equated to approximately a third of VLA's summary crime program clients during that period, so there was a substantial sample to effectively evaluate the program on.

It found that the benefits of the program have been the earlier resolution of cases, which I have referred to before, and requiring fewer court dates, so taking up less and less court time, particularly through the reduction of adjournments. What was happening, and it continues to happen but through programs like this less, is that it is not until people are engaging with their lawyer that they realise that there might be something that they have not quite prepared for and therefore a lot of adjournments are sought and they come back at another time so that it can be a fairer case. Avoiding adjournments is a really valuable tool for not just managing good outcomes but managing the financial stability or sustainability of the courts. The information I have is that 40 per cent of Help Before Court clients are having their matters adjourned, which is a lot less compared to the 62 per cent that were having them adjourned pre this program. Based on the cost-benefit analysis estimates, each avoided adjournment provides approximately \$600 in benefit to the system – something that I know Ms Anderson is fully across, because it really makes the court budgets more efficient when you are avoiding having to tie up court times unnecessarily and you can deal with matters a bit earlier.

Another positive and unexpected outcome that came through the evaluation was VLA's client data that showed a higher percentage of women, being 30 per cent compared to 25 per cent of the at-court duty lawyer service, and 42 per cent of clients disclosing a disability compared to 28 per cent of clients who were doing so through the duty lawyer service, meaning that the benefit of this program is that it is increasing access to legal support for a range of vulnerable groups – people from diverse backgrounds. Clients who may not have been previously engaging with legal assistance at the court door, we know, are getting services through this program, and that is a really encouraging result.

Mathew HILAKARI: I spent some time down at the Sunshine Law Courts observing some of the proceedings there, and I think there is some real richness in understanding the individuals that are affected by this beyond those great statistics and outcomes. Do you have examples of that?

Jaelyn SYMES: I am really glad that you do that, and I think you do identify that there are a range of reasons that people generally find themselves in court, so really having that time to understand the unique needs of people is something that is invaluable. When legal assistance is provided, individuals are much more likely to receive a favourable legal outcome than if they are left to their own devices, for example. I have got a good case study through a VLA client that I can take you through in relation to the benefits of that one-on-one type of support.

Felicity, which is not her real name, was a VLA client who lives with severe anxiety as well as ADHD. She was charged with assault at 19 years old, and the prospect of attending court was really, really overwhelming and gave her a sense of fear and dread. Her carer reached out to the Help Before Court program to discuss her case with a VLA lawyer, and her carer described Felicity as very upset if she would have to attend court and was scared that the outcome would be beyond her control and ability to cope with. She was concerned that lawyers are always in a rush on court days. However, after engaging with Help Before Court services she was able to spend enough time talking with her carer as well as the lawyer, and she stated that the Help Before Court service model allowed her carer to interact with the lawyer and to provide information about her situation in a way that she best understood. Having that support and engaging with her existing support mechanisms really was a tailored approach for her for a better outcome on the day.

Mathew HILAKARI: Thank you, Attorney.

The CHAIR: Thank you, Attorney. I will go to Ms Sandell.

Ellen SANDELL: Thank you, Chair. Good afternoon, Minister and officials. I would like to ask about raising the age of criminal responsibility. You have announced that raising the age for 12- and 13-year-olds will be implemented in 2027. You have said a lot in the past that supports need to be in place before this happens which is the reason the government has not raised the age earlier. But if we go to budget paper 3, page 82, we do see a negligible increase in funding around 'Preventing youth offending through early intervention', and for

the budget line around 'Continuing youth justice initiatives' we see funding has been significantly cut next year and then ceased altogether. So the question is: where is the money for the programs to ensure that by 2027 we have got enough support so that we can get 12- and 13-year-olds out of prison and give them the support that they need?

Jaelyn SYMES: Good question, and we are really committed to this policy reform. We certainly do not want young people in contact with the justice system. We certainly do not want them in custody, which is why we were so proud to be able to announce a commitment to raising the age of criminal responsibility – something that many people have campaigned for for some time. I know you have touched on the issues around making sure we can go to 14 years as planned. What we know is that by raising the age to 12, which will keep 10- and 11-year-olds out of the system, it will be a good opportunity to test the system to ensure that we have got the right support services in place, and that will shore up our position to be able to go to 14. We know that the complexity of particularly 13-year-olds is something that does not present in the littler kids, and we want to make sure that we are not just creating a system where we are putting young people on a waiting list to go into custody at 14. We want to make sure that we can have better outcomes and wraparound services, similar to some of the issues that we have been discussing today. But specifically to commence that work – the alternative services model, for example – the budget includes \$5 million under the supporting progressive reform in youth justice initiative. That is on page 40 of the papers:

... for early intervention, diversion and family therapy programs for –
children aged 10 and 11 –

in contact, or at risk of contact, with the justice system.

So \$5 million is a good start.

Ellen SANDELL: I appreciate that, but that is specifically for 10- and 11-year-olds. And \$5 million – obviously, you know, you would take that over nothing, but it is not a lot, and then we have had these cuts to these other programs. So I guess what is the justification for the cuts to these other programs, given we know that we will need the services in place?

Jaelyn SYMES: There is a range of services that we have to support young people, whether it is through a justice lens or whether it is through a DFFH lens or indeed an education lens. There are a range of programs and a range of ministers that are committed to having a holistic approach to raising the age of criminal responsibility. I hope that in 2027, when we go to 14, it is actually not impacting any kids because we have already demonstrated that we can divert kids, that we can have –

Ellen SANDELL: I hope that too, but I guess we need the services in place and the funding, and there have been cuts to some of these programs.

Jaelyn SYMES: Well, I think across the board, in terms of our investment in child protection, our investment in education programs and our investment that I outlined in relation to the \$5 million, there are a range of initiatives that are designed to keep young people out of the justice system. I always want more funding, absolutely. In relation to those kids that would ordinarily be picked up through a justice lens now, we are going to build the system based on raising it to 12 – build the system, continue to invest and ensure that we have got a great baseline for when we raise it to 14.

Ellen SANDELL: Okay. Thank you. Specifically for the program 'Continuing Youth Justice Initiatives', obviously it is fairly broad – it is hard for us to tell exactly what is in it – but is there a reason why that has been cut and then discontinued? What does this specifically relate to?

Jaelyn SYMES: It is a better question for Minister Erdogan. He is the Minister for Youth Justice.

Ellen SANDELL: Okay, I will take it up with him.

Jaelyn SYMES: Yes, that would be good.

Ellen SANDELL: I also want to ask a similar question about anti-vilification. You have said that you are committed to an 18-month time frame for those protections to come into legislation. I think earlier today you said 'within a year' or around about that time frame. But again, I could not see anything in the budget

specifically around funding to support expanding the anti-vilification laws. Again, obviously for this reform to come into place, we will need the money to ensure it happens and to ensure that it is effectively implemented. So I am just wondering: where in the budget do we see that, or is it not there?

Jaelyn SYMES: Again, you would appreciate, there are many ministers involved in the anti-vilification policy objectives, I guess. There is money in the budget for Minister Brooks in relation to supporting multicultural communities, for example. The amount is not off the top of my head. I am not sure if you have had Minister Brooks. Anti-vilification is a complex community issue, as you would appreciate. My responsibility is the legislation, which is currently the *Racial and Religious Tolerance Act*. We want to broaden, expand and strengthen it and probably change its name, to pick up a lot of the recommendations that were made by the parliamentary inquiry. But laws are not going to fix all of these issues; we know that. In fact I would much prefer that people are not charged with hate crimes. That is awful, and it is something that Victorians do not want to see either. So ensuring that we have good educational programs and good support for our vulnerable communities is something that we are committed to across the board, social cohesiveness programs in particular. It is working with members of the LGBTIQ+ community and particularly our trans community in relation to what we are doing to support them, and continually having the conversation about how most Victorians – nearly all – want to live in a really tolerant, peaceful, supportive community. So there is lots to be done in this space. That minority, those few people that choose to have different values to the rest of us, will be caught up by the laws when we get them done. But hopefully part of the conversation, part of the development of these laws, leads to better positive outcomes while we are undertaking that process.

Ellen SANDELL: I obviously agree with you, and that is why I asked the question around funding, given that it is not just law that will create that social change and keep people safe; it is the funding. I appreciate some of that is not in your portfolio, so I will move to another question.

Budget paper 3 looks at performance measures for IBAC in relation to police oversight. Legal experts, including VALS, which you have already talked about, and Inner Melbourne Community Legal have been advocating for independent police oversight, as we have been doing for a long time in the Greens as well, and specifically looking at a form of new body modelled on the police ombudsman for Northern Ireland, which is widely seen as the world's best practice. Will the government commit to a police ombudsman in this model?

Jaelyn SYMES: What I can say, Ms Sandell, is we have been looking at police oversight. We know that there is some community concern about the models in the past. We obviously have a system at the moment where IBAC has effectively two streams in relation to the public sector and local government, and police oversight. They have previously been criticised for perhaps not doing as many as they could do and referring more to Victoria Police. In some instances it is appropriate for Victoria Police to investigate customer service complaints and the like. There are a lot of complaints that get made about police, so determining where those should be investigated is certainly something that IBAC and police have regular conversations about.

I attended the Yoorrook Justice Commission last month and certainly had a good dialogue with the commissioners in relation to a future police oversight model. I articulated to them that, aspirationally, ensuring that you have the public confidence for people to come forward and make complaints, particularly vulnerable groups and particularly Aboriginal people, is the fundamental principle that I am interested in. Making sure that any complaints system is complainant focused – so you are really wanting the experience of the complainant not only to be able to come forward and have the confidence but to be involved meaningfully in any type of complaint process – is a thing that I am committed to improving on. We have been consulting on various issues in relation to what a future model might look like. We will not be in a position to jump immediately to a full, independent body for a range of reasons, and I have been pretty open about those conversations. That does not mean that you cannot take steps to something that might look like that, but for me what is most important – and the feedback I get from people that are advocates in this space – is having the confidence to make a complaint, knowing that it will be dealt with appropriately and not having any conflicts of interest applied to that. You can do that through a variety of ways.

Ellen SANDELL: I appreciate that. I guess, is it your view that there is just a fundamental conflict of interest with having police investigate themselves?

Jaelyn SYMES: Not always. The issue that we have is that you have to have the ability – you have got to have the investigative skills to investigate a matter. You do not want a police officer investigating –

Ellen SANDELL: I am sure that they exist outside the police.

Jaclyn SYMES: Not as many as you would like. We need to build the workforce, and these are the conversations that I have with the groups that say that they want a fully civil independent model. We do not have a ready, available workforce to step into that model. For example, even the investigators across a range of our independent agencies have police backgrounds, for example, because that is the skill set that you need, often, to deal with the more serious complaints. As I said, coming back to the principles that I am interested in, it is making sure that people have confidence in a system, and I think there are a variety of ways that we can work towards that.

Ellen SANDELL: In my last remaining seconds, I just want to ask about funding for the Victorian Aboriginal Legal Service. It is good to see there is some money in here, but will the government look to a more recurrent, stable funding model given that VALS is often reliant on this year-to-year or cycle-to-cycle instability with their funding?

Jaclyn SYMES: I cannot make announcements in relation to that at the moment, except I can acknowledge that both VALS and CLCs need as much certainty as possible. And in this year's budget there is two years of funding for a range of those programs, which does help them retain their staff and get focused and deliver good outcomes.

The CHAIR: Thank you, Attorney. I am going to go for the last 12 minutes to Mr Hamer.

Paul HAMER: Thank you, Attorney and officials. My question is in relation to budget paper 3, page 83, the 'Specialist family violence legal assistance at court'. It is certainly one that the Eastern Community Legal Centre has raised with me on quite a number of occasions, and I was just wondering if you could outline to the committee what is included in that funding?

Jaclyn SYMES: Yes. Thank you, Mr Hamer. And thank you for your support of Eastern Community Legal Centre. Michael Smith and his team are very well engaged with their local members, and I thank you for your interest in the work that they do and particularly the important work they do through the family violence lens.

We, as you would appreciate, have had a real focus on family violence. We want to do everything we can to put a stop to it – to end it. But we know that it is a feature, predominantly in our legal system, and so we are working hard to tackle that and support the agencies that have a passion to do so as well. We did establish the royal commission, as you would be aware, in 2016, and we are still working through delivery of all those recommendations – there were 227. But it has attracted unparalleled investment of more than \$3.7 billion in that time. We are also the first jurisdiction to have a dedicated prevention of family violence minister, which was a great step and really showed our commitment to this issue.

This year's state budget has allocated \$22.83 million over four years and \$3.41 million ongoing to Victoria Police and VLA to deliver specialist family violence legal assistance at court, including the continuation of the pre-court engagement program for seven of the specialist family violence court locations. Those are the seven who were most recently gazetted in October.

Some of the funding will be going to court legal services delivered by either VLA or – picking up on your specific relationship with Eastern Community Legal Centre, they will be part of that funding as well. We are working through the detail with the Federation of Community Legal Centres, which is the overarching body of all of our CLCs, and VLA to settle allocation of the funding, but certainly Eastern Community Legal Centre have been very active in this space. I went out and visited them on site at the court just to talk through how they want to deliver their support for this area.

The investment does include over \$200 million in reform to improve the court's response to family violence, including not just some of the issues that were talked about in relation to CLC support but infrastructure funding for safe waiting rooms and more frontline staff. A lot of that has been provided through successive budgets, because we know that providing safe spaces for victims of family violence, particularly women and children, is imperative to making sure that you can have good safe access to courts.

The specialist family violence legal practice model forms a crucial component of the family violence courts, and it also includes that pre-court engagement program that I was referring to earlier to really help people

understand the process, and they get better outcomes when they do. So certainly, it is something that I am proud to be continuing to invest in, because we know that those that are experiencing family violence certainly need dedicated support from people who understand how best to do so.

Paul HAMER: Thank you. As the budget paper refers to, it is called a specialist family violence court, and you mentioned about the safe spaces. What are the other elements that make it specialised?

Jaelyn SYMES: Yes. Our specialist family violence courts are rolled out at our headquarter courts, so designed to cover as much of the state as possible, and the reason that they are dedicated specialist family violence courts is they just pick up all of the elements to make the experience of victims and indeed perpetrators more targeted so that you hopefully get better outcomes and particularly stop people having to return.

The features are that they have a therapeutic operating model that promotes safety and wellbeing for victim-survivors and keeps perpetrators in view as well. Safe and secure facilities, as I alluded to, are one element, but also the provision of remote witness services. Certainly I have heard from victims personally that being able to attend remotely is sometimes the only way that they feel comfortable in participating, so having that as an option is really important. There is additional resourcing for a specialist family violence team, which includes specially trained Magistrates' Court staff and family violence practitioners, so really having all of the services delivered by people that understand family violence issues, because family violence is extremely complex, as you would appreciate, when you are dealing with people that are trying to get good outcomes but have intimate relationships, often have children involved and often just want the behaviour to stop, not necessarily after criminal sanctions, for example. So really having an intimate understanding of how you respond to family violence victims is really important, particularly in light of outdated views and the like.

There is an emphasis on integrated service delivery through formalised partnerships, referral pathways and protocols to support proactive and targeted information sharing, including facilities to access specialist family violence service providers – so I guess picking up again on those wraparound services, making sure that you are addressing a range of issues that many people that come to court have. It might not just be their intervention order, for example; there may be a range of problems associated with family violence, homelessness comes up time and time again, for example, and insecure housing as well. Additional powers of a magistrate are a feature of our specialist family violence model, so they can mandate participation of perpetrators in men's behaviour-change programs as well as having the powers to make parenting and property orders – so really specific orders and really specific responses to this particular issue. And there are also dedicated police prosecutors and civil law advocates, who are a feature of our specialist family violence courts.

So it is a good model. It is really targeted. That is not to say that non-specialised family violence courts do not have special features and are not responsive to victims of family violence as well, but this is a model that is really targeted to addressing this issue and hoping that we can drive down that data.

Paul HAMER: Thank you, Attorney. You referred to trying to get an early resolution to these family violence matters, and I was just wondering if you could expand on how the early resolution service works.

Jaelyn SYMES: Yes, I can. It is very much the same principles as what I was talking to Mr Hilakari about in relation to the Help Before Court program. The delivery of early resolution services is a critical feature of the specialist family violence court model, and it is really about all of that assistance that is prior to the court day. The early service has led to legal referrals that are more likely to be finalised by consent without admissions than those that have no legal referral. The fact of the matter is respondents are usually more willing to accept orders after they have received legal advice, which may be attributed to a better understanding of the court processes and the orders themselves. It just defuses some of the conflict when people actually understand what the process is, what the orders mean and what your responsibilities might be. Consent without admissions is often a good outcome for both parties.

The data shows that matters which have received pre-court legal advice can generally be listed earlier on the hearing day and are less likely to be adjourned, similar to what we were talking about before, but it is because the parties know their positions, the legal representatives are well informed about what is going to happen and it is already known that they will be able to reduce the follow-up with legal services because they have worked out what is more than likely going to happen before it happens and there are no surprises.

The other benefits, in summary, I guess include efficiency and savings for government due to the more efficient use of court time and fewer adjournments – again, all coming down to knowledge is power. People are more likely to be able to freely participate and get outcomes if they know what to expect.

Paul HAMER: Thank you, Attorney. As you said, it is an outcome of a recommendation from the royal commission, and I think it is going to be providing a really important service across the community. If I could take you through to budget paper 3, page 112, which has the output initiatives for Court Services Victoria, there is a line item there, ‘Continuing therapeutic court programs’. In particular it mentions the continuation of the court integrated services program indictable stream pilot, amongst others, and I was just wondering why the government has chosen to continue to invest in this program. What is it going to do?

Jaelyn SYMES: The therapeutic courts and therapeutic programs that are provided by our courts are really about addressing a lot of the underlying causes of why people are there in the first place. They deserve investment because they get better outcomes for individuals and they get better outcomes for community safety more broadly and indeed often are much more efficient. The CIS program, the court integrated services program, is a pilot program run in both the Magistrates’ Court and the County Court, and it connects offenders with particular vulnerability support services, such as accommodation services and treatment support, so similar principles to what we were talking about before. If you can provide support to offenders in addressing some of the reasons that they may be offending, then they have a better opportunity effectively to turn their lives around and avoid, hopefully, coming back into contact with the justice system.

This budget, I am proud to say, continued some funding for this program, building on previous funding in budgets to ensure that we could adapt CISP to work across both the Magistrates and the County courts. The program operates at the moment across 20 Victorian court locations in addition to the County Court program that I referred to. A specific indictable stream pilot has just been commenced recently in the Magistrates Court, giving the program the opportunity to address some of the most serious crimes, which very often have some of the most complex issues that individuals are –

The CHAIR: Apologies, Attorney. I am going to interrupt there.

That is the end of questions for this session. Attorney and department officials, thank you very much for appearing before the committee this afternoon. The committee will follow up on any questions taken on notice in writing, and responses are required within five working business days of the committee’s request. The committee is now going to take a very short break before beginning its consideration of the final portfolio for today, emergency services, which will start at 3:30 pm. I declare this hearing adjourned.

Witnesses withdrew.