

COTA Victoria and Seniors Rights Victoria

Annual Report 2023-2024



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Acknowledgement of country

We acknowledge the Traditional Owners and Custodians of the lands on which we work and pay our respects to Indigenous Elders past, present, and emerging. Sovereignty has never been ceded. It always was and always will be, Aboriginal land.

Thank you to our supporters

We are a not-for-profit organisation reliant on funding and assistance from a variety of government, philanthropic, and corporate funders and supporters. We are very thankful for the assistance we receive. [Visit our website](#) to view an up-to-date list of our generous supporters.

Our vision, purpose, and values

Ageing in Victoria is a time of possibility, opportunity, and influence.

COTA Victoria and Seniors Rights Victoria advance the rights, interests, and futures of Victorians as we age.

We value respect, diversity, collaboration, and integrity.

About Council on the Ageing (COTA) Victoria

COTA Victoria is the leading not-for-profit organisation representing the interests and rights of people aged over 50 in Victoria. For over 70 years, we have led government, corporate, and community thinking about the positive aspects of ageing in the state.

Today, our focus is on promoting opportunities for and protecting the legal rights of people 50+. We value ageing and embrace its opportunities for personal growth, contribution, and self-expression. This belief drives benefits throughout the nation alongside communities, families, and individuals.







cotavvic.org.au

About Seniors Rights Victoria

Seniors Rights Victoria (SRV) is a program of COTA Victoria and the only state-wide community legal centre dedicated to advancing the rights of older people and the early intervention into, or prevention of, elder abuse in our community.

SRV has a team of experienced advocates, lawyers, and social workers who provide free information, advice, referral, legal advice, legal casework, and support to older people who are either at risk of or are experiencing elder abuse. SRV supports and empowers older people through the provision of legal advice directly to the older person.







seniorsrights.org.au

Message from the President

COTA Victoria and Seniors Rights Victoria (SRV) have continued to deliver impact and outcomes for older Victorians across the last year. We have entrenched our financial position, leadership, and connections as the peak body for ageing in Victoria and the leading voice against elder abuse.

We continue to be in a strong financial position despite a tough fiscal environment. We are reporting a \$200,000+ surplus for the 2023/2024 financial year, building on our great financial performance from the previous year. This puts us in a strong position to handle future economic headwinds in a constrained funding environment that is unlikely to change in the near future. We also managed to secure new funding for projects this year, including from the Transport Accident Commission and AusNet.

This is all underpinned by the successful delivery of our programs and services. In particular, SRV continues to play a key role in the state’s response to, and prevention of, elder abuse. We are proud to deliver this essential service; it is vital that we drive the agenda around elder abuse, especially as the state faces an ageing population and increasing demand for elder abuse support.

To consolidate our leading position, we made changes to our membership model and constitution earlier this year, which were then approved at a Special General Meeting in April 2024. This was an important change, for which we deeply appreciate the support of our members.

These changes – especially the provision of free individual membership – will put us in a stronger position to leverage our position and members to deliver impact for older Victorians. We look



Robert Caulfield
President, COTA Victoria and SRV; Board member

Board members, 2023-2024

Peter Condliffe
Deputy President



Kathryn Brown
Treasurer



Mary Downie
Director



Hayley Hunter
Director



Message from the President

forward to growing and strengthening our connection to members through our membership offering.

As President, I owe my gratitude to the Board – who are all volunteers – and to the dedicated team of 30 staff at COTA Victoria and SRV for the successes we’ve achieved over the last 12 months.

As part of this, I would like to extend my thanks to Peter Condliffe, who is not seeking re-election as a Director. Peter has played a key role in leading and positioning the organisation as the peak body for older Victorians, including as Deputy President. I deeply appreciate his skill, knowledge, and dedication over the past 3 years.

We’ve also welcomed two new members to the Board this year: Gerard Mansour and Ray Cummings. I’m very pleased that both have quickly taken on key roles in supporting COTA Victoria and SRV.

Chris Potaris left his role as CEO of COTA Victoria and SRV in May of this year. We underwent profound change during Chris’ tenure, and are now in a strong and stable position to continue our important work. We wish Chris well and thank him deeply for his efforts and leadership.

Ben Rogers stepped up to lead the organisation as Acting CEO, and now CEO, in the latter part of 2023/24. Ben’s leadership has ensured that our organisations continue to provide premium services, assistance, support – and most importantly, a voice for those we represent – that reflect the high standards expected by our community.

The Board is excited to work with our new CEO and staff across the coming year to cement our leading position. Together, we are excited for the direction of COTA Victoria and SRV as we continue to lead the sector and refine our strategy and approach in 2025.

Board members, 2023-2024

Tanya O’Connor
Director



Mark Stokes PhD
Director



Gerard Mansour
Director



Ray Cummings
Director



Message from the CEO

In 2023/24, facing a challenging funding environment and internal changes, I am proud to say that we continued to deliver on our values and promises, and for our members.

As an organisation, we delivered an incredible amount of quality work and services across state for older Victorians. This includes our broad program range, such as our community education events, our Employment Support program, and our Care Finder program servicing the City of Kingston. We directly supported hundreds of older people to help them to age well in Victoria.

We also continued to support older Victorians at their most vulnerable moments. Seniors Rights Victoria has a vital and varied role in responding to elder abuse across our state. We helped thousands of older Victorians this year, including information provision, legal advice, and non-legal advocacy support – there were over 12,000 calls to our Helpline, demonstrating the ongoing high demand for our services.



Ben Rogers
CEO, COTA Victoria and SRV

Our ability to meet this demand, and drive the policy agenda around ageing in this state, is because of our strong foundations. It is important to acknowledge the role and impact of my predecessor, Chris Potaris. I am honoured to take on the leadership of the organisation and I am excited at the direction of COTA Victoria for 2024/25, building on our 2023/24 successes.

We cannot wait to deliver on the potential of the recent changes to our membership and constitution, as it is vital that we leverage and listen to our membership and the ageing-related sector to deliver impact and change for older Victorians.

As we look back at the last year, it is important to say thank you to so many who made our achievements possible.

Firstly, I want to thank our funders. I am grateful for our enduring relationship with the Victorian Government, particularly with the Department of Families, Fairness and Housing. We continue to consolidate and strengthen these relationships, and it was an honour to welcome the Victorian Minister for Ageing, Ingrid Stitt, to launch our World Elder Awareness Day Warm Safe Home campaign.

I also deeply appreciate the Board's support and direction during my time leading the organisation, and their ongoing commitment to support our cohort and community.

Last, but certainly not least, I want to sincerely thank our staff, valued volunteers, and members – you are all an important part of COTA Victoria and Seniors Rights Victoria. Our great work would not be possible without your efforts, talent, and passion.

Changes to our Board

In October 2023, we welcomed both Gerard Mansour and Ray Cummings to our Board of Directors.

For four terms over a period of ten years, Mr Mansour served as the Commissioner for Senior Victorians. Some of Mr Mansour's countless achievements whilst in the role include the launch of the Ageing Well in a Changing World report in 2020 alongside service as Ambassador for Elder Abuse Prevention.



**Gerard Mansour (left) &
Ray Cummings (right)**

Admitted as a Barrister and Solicitor of the Supreme Court of Victoria and with formal qualifications in law, accounting, and economics, Mr Cummings brings a wealth of legal and financial experience to the board. He has proficiency in a wide range of commercial and legal issues including regulatory requirements, corporate governance, and legislative policy.



Peter Condliffe

Peter Condliffe joined our Board in 2021 and will not be seeking re-election this year.

Mr Condliffe practices as a Barrister and Mediator. His practice centres on conflict management interventions, including mediation, facilitation, investigation, restorative justice conferences, complaints management, and conflict coaching.

We thank Peter, Gerard, and Ray for volunteering their time to our Board, and for their outstanding service.

Farewell to Chris Potaris

In May 2024, we farewelled Chris Potaris as he stepped down from his role as CEO.

"I've decided to leave COTA Victoria after a successful period of revitalisation, unparalleled organisational change, and focus," said Mr Potaris at the time.

"I'm proud to have achieved a financial surplus during my tenure, alongside four years of confirmed funding from government and philanthropic bodies," he continued.

We thank Chris for his dedication and commitment.



Chris Potaris

Changes to our Constitution

In April 2024, members of COTA Victoria and Seniors Rights Victoria voted to adopt a new COTA Victoria Constitution that included significant changes to the COTA Victoria Membership Framework.

While a larger explanation of changes can be found on our website, the successful vote means our members and supporters were able to take advantage of a series of exciting changes to our membership services, benefits, and categories effective July 2024.

Individual membership

We offer free individual membership for those who wish to support and enhance our work.

Benefits include:

- A subscription to our monthly COTA Connects email newsletter.
- Access to exclusive individual member events and networking opportunities.
- Access to discounts through our partners at COTA Insurance and COTA Travel.
- The opportunity to give back to the community and inform, influence, shape, and impact the lives of older Victorians, including participation in the development of our policy, advocacy, and volunteer programs.

Our new membership flyer and sign up form, which is offered alongside an online form



- Voting rights at events including our Annual General Meeting and Special General Meetings (for individual members over 50 years of age).

As of 17 September 2024, COTA Victoria and Seniors Rights Victoria have 1,395 individual members, up approximately 500 members since free membership was rolled out in July 2024.

Organisational membership

We plan to offer organisational memberships for community organisations, corporate bodies, government authorities, and educational and research entities that wish to support our work.

We plan to roll out memberships of these types in 2025. In the meantime, organisations are invited to register interest on our website. Those that do so will receive our monthly newsletter alongside future updates.

The Policy and Advocacy team continued its efforts in 2023/24 to ensure that ageing issues and older Victorians were considered and addressed at the local, state, and national level. This included many submissions and meetings, and the development of a range of resources and products for the sector and our cohort. The team did this all while facing personnel changes and a dynamic policy environment.

As the peak body for older Victorians, it is vital that we are driving change and improvements across the wide range of issues that impact how we age. This meant the team was engaged on a wide variety of topics, including aged care reform, housing, and cost of living pressures. Ultimately, our efforts led to key successes that will help to benefit older Victorians.

Broader activity

Engagement

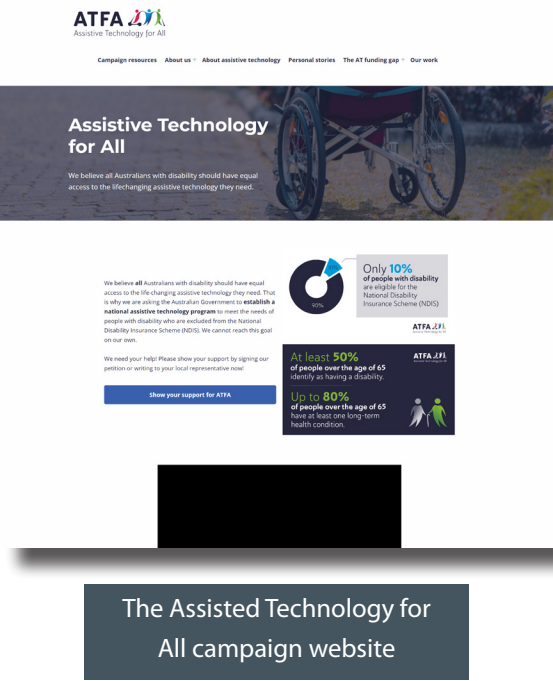
As the peak body for older Victorians, we made sure that key stakeholders were aware of the issues impacting our cohort. This included multiple meetings with the new Victorian Minister for Ageing, resulting in the minister accepting our invitation to launch our World Elder Abuse Awareness Day campaign in June 2024. We remain committed to working with the minister to ensure that ageing is appropriately considered at the state level across the coming year.

We have also engaged extensively across a range of departments including meetings

with officials in the Department of Families, Fairness and Housing; the Department of Health; the Department of Transport and Planning; the Department of Justice and Community Services; the Department of Government Services; Consumer Affairs Victoria; and the Department of Energy, Environment and Climate Action.

Our engagement extended into the broader ageing sector, with close partnerships and alliances with a range of different relevant organisations. This includes (but is not limited to) establishing and convening the Victorian Elder Abuse Strategic Alliance, convening two roundtables on disability supports for older Victorians, and continued leadership of the Assistive Technology for All campaign.

We deeply appreciate being able to work with our partners in the sector, leveraging our collective size and impact to deliver benefits for older people.



Submissions

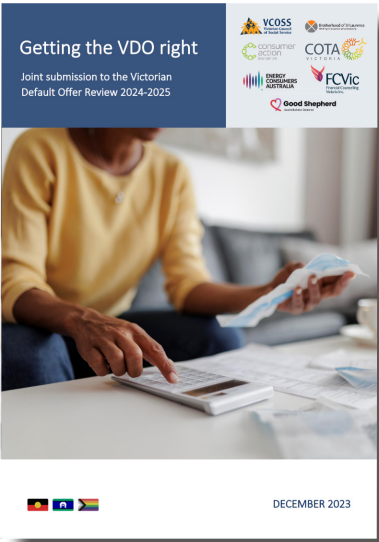
We made sure that key stakeholders were aware of the issues impacting our cohort, such as aged care reform, elder abuse, and healthcare experiences. [We developed submissions on a range of consultations and issues pertinent to older Victorians](#), including the draft Transport Accessibility Strategy, the Victorian State Budget 2024/25, the Victorian cancer plan 2024-2028, the Victorian Default Offer Review 2024-2025, the next stage of Victoria’s work to end family violence, and many, many more.

This ensured that older people were being considered in decisions and processes that would impact how they live. For instance, the final reports from parliamentary inquiries into the rental and housing affordability crisis in Victoria and the impact of road safety behaviours on vulnerable road users both referenced issues, evidence, and recommendations raised by our submissions.

We will continue our advocacy around these issues – beyond submissions – to drive practical improvements for older Victorians, particularly regarding aged care reform and the health system’s approach to ageing.

Connection

All our activity in 2023/24 was underpinned by our connection to our community and members. Over 240 volunteers and members were engaged through processes that were used to inform our policy and advocacy, including consultations, surveys, and our new Peer Advisor model.



Our joint VDO review

We consulted with members on a range of issues, including the Victorian State Budget 2024/25, older women and pain, and the experiences of older people regarding the energy transition.

We also fed back to our members to support their understanding of key policy developments, and developed and distributed four unique member briefings.

Key activity

Victorian State Budget 2023/24

The state budget offers a key opportunity to drive investment and change on issues impacting older Victorians. However, older people are not seen as a cohort that requires priority

support and funding at the state level, while the Victorian Government is facing well-known financial constraints.

We developed our budget submission, Investing in an Ageing Victoria: Submission for the Victorian State Budget 2024/2025, which identified five key areas where targeted investment and changes can improve ageing in Victoria and deliver real-world benefits. These pillars are:

- An informed plan for older Victorians.
- Expanding our integrated response to elder abuse.
- Improving the health and wellbeing of older Victorians.
- Addressing housing and cost of living issues for older Victorians.
- Increasing opportunities for economic participation.



Our State Budget 2024/25 submission

These priorities, with corresponding targeted asks, guided a whole series of engagement with the Victorian Government. The majority of these asks continue to be relevant and part of our ongoing advocacy and engagement.

We were, however, extremely pleased to see our efforts result in renewed four-year funding for SRV’s Planning Ahead program in the 2024/25 Victorian Budget as part of the broader renewal of the Integrated Services Fund program, which was a key ask in our advocacy.

We will continue to advocate on the need for the Victorian Government to invest in ageing and older Victorians, including the benefit for the state as well as on the lives of individuals.

Building healthy ageing into Municipal Public Health and Wellbeing Plans

We are funded by the Department of Families, Fairness and Housing to deliver on key activities associated with the Ageing Well in Victoria Action Plan 2022 – 2026. We committed to deliver on a key commitment from the Action Plan: the need to incorporate evidence-based elements of ageing well in guidance to councils for their Municipal Public Health and Wellbeing Plans.

Municipal Public Health and Wellbeing Plans (MPHWP) are how local councils address and support public health issues in their catchment. With Victoria’s population ageing and some councils moving away from aged care, we saw it as essential to support councils on how they can include steps to support older people and address age-related public health issues in their forthcoming 2025-29 plans.

In partnership with the Municipal Association of Victoria, and with input from leading councils and older Victorians, we developed a resource guide: Building healthy ageing into Municipal Public Health and Wellbeing Plans.

The resource is designed to stimulate discussion within councils and with partners as they embark on planning. It highlighted how councils can engage with and support older people to feed into the development of their plans, as well as practical steps and areas that these plans could address to support ageing in local government areas on key public health topics.

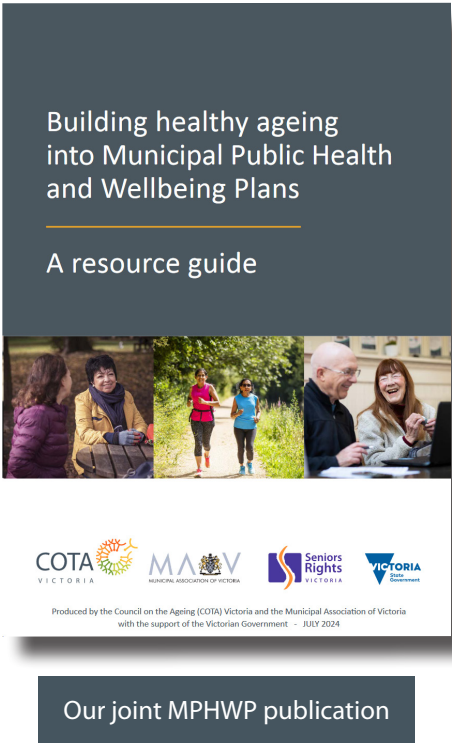
The resource guide was launched in July 2024, while we are planning a range of activities to continue our work and involvement in supporting councils to consider how they support ageing.

Aged care reform

Reform of the Australian aged care system has been ongoing for a number of years, following the Royal Commission into Aged Care Quality and Safety. We have been heavily engaged on this over that period, ensuring that the voices of older Victorians are reflected at the national level.

In 2023/24, there was significant activity regarding this reform, in particular the development of a new Aged Care Act and proposed changes to aged care funding.

We have been carefully watching and engaging with this process, including



working with COTA Australia and the wider COTA alliance. As well as contributing to joint-submissions, we developed four of our own submissions, highlighting the Victorian perspective and impact of these reforms, particularly in regard to the development of the Act.

Victoria is already facing repercussions from the aged care reform, including councils stopping their provision of aged care services and assessment, with knock-on effects as to how older people are experiencing and accessing care.

We will continue to engage with the reform process over the coming year, including working with other COTAs, and advocate for changes that should support the experiences of older Victorians within aged care.



Information Lifelong Learning

This program is funded by the Victorian Government Department of Families, Fairness, and Housing.

Community education

We have had a busy year in community education, providing information and education sessions to over 1,200 older Victorians in their local community.

As well as providing bespoke sessions to groups and organisations, we have revamped our existing roster of key topics for the 23/24 period which were: introduction to My Aged Care, scams and financial matters, memory and ageing, and positive ageing.

This year we've made great efforts to expand the reach of these sessions to vulnerable and diverse communities resulting in significant increases to the number of CALD, ATSI, and LGBTQI+ older people receiving the information they need as they age.

The success of this program can also be measured via the feedback we have received from our sessions with an average rating of

98% in terms of improved knowledge, and 97% for satisfaction with the session.

As well as our direct delivery education program, we've also helped older people to get their hands on the information they need through our attendance at various events including Midsumma Carnival Day, Council-based expos, community connections events, and carers forums.

We also engaged in community consultations to better understand the information needs of older Victorians. Insight from these consultations has taught us how to best present information, and supports the development of our larger education program and resources.

COTA WISE information line

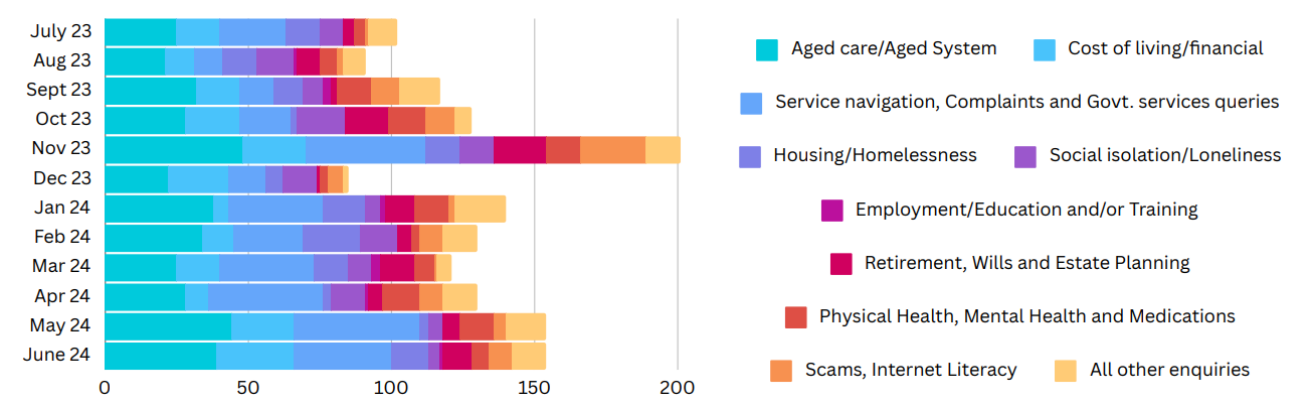
Our phone and email info service has continued to help older Victorians to access the information and support they need with approximately 120 enquiries resolved each month.

We've worked hard this year to improve our data collection practices to help inform our knowledge of the most pressing issues

identified by the older community, with key topics being identified throughout the period.

Navigating aged care continues to be the most requested topic of support (25% of total). General service navigation and cost-of-living issues are hot topics, along with strong representation of issues relating to health, retirement, and housing.

An emerging issue from this financial year has been social isolation and loneliness, particularly through our phonline.



Employment Support program

The latest iteration of our Employment Support program is funded through the Stronger and more Resilient Communities program.

It supports women aged 50-64 in Melbourne’s south-east and west to gain employment, a volunteer position, or engage in training or education.

We supported 32 women over this period, with many of the participants experiencing long term unemployment prior to engagement.

Program model

All participants go through an induction process that ensures their support is tailored to them. It covers barriers to employment, an exploration of skills and aptitude from a strengths-based perspective, and a circumstances and goals review.

We provide supports including resume writing and review alongside in-depth service navigation that ensures participants’ needs are addressed holistically.

Our experience is that success for over-50s in employment is more sustainable if employment is viewed as ‘just one piece of the puzzle’.

Mentoring helps with much of the pre-positioning work needed before a participant can fully engage in employment support. This work includes confidence building, emotional support, and practicing of soft-skills.

Participants also rate the social connection and ‘even playing field’ element of the mentoring relationship as a contributing factor for satisfaction with the program.

Results

As well as achieving our goals in terms of participation and supporting people to gain employment, volunteering positions and/or engagement in training or education, we have had significant results in terms of the impact on other areas of participants’ lives.

Many participants come into our program with concerns about community connectedness, wellbeing and self-esteem and rate improvement in these areas during, and post-program.

Case study: Women Working Together

Alberta (whose name has been changed) is a 50-year-old female from a migrant background, experiencing long-term unemployment (over 13 years) relating to having a role caring for her children and a physical injury that has left her with a disability that precluded her from returning to her pre-parenting role.

Alberta engaged with COTA for support to rejoin the workforce, having little idea of what area of work she was interested in. She had no resume and had not applied for a job since she had had children. She reported feeling “frustrated” at herself and “not confident” she had skills or abilities that would enable her to gain employment. She was particularly focused on the barriers that impacted on her ability to return to work, and said her self-esteem had been affected by her circumstances.

We worked with Alberta to build self-confidence through understanding her strengths, and helped highlight what abilities she had gained through her life experiences. We then supported her to explore some areas of work she would be interested in, aligning with her skills and long-term career goals.

We helped Alberta identify that she was a very effectual communicator, had excellent organisational skills and was adept at finding information to support herself, her

family and friends. We suggested that these skills would be beneficial to someone working in service navigation, a term that she had not heard of before. With this new information, Alberta was proactive for searching for roles in this area, finding an open position at an organisation that shared her values and fit in with her lifestyle.

COTA Victoria supported Alberta to prepare a resume and cover letter that resulted in her being selected to move onto the psychometric and task-based testing phase of the recruitment process for the role. Alberta worked with COTA Victoria to prepare for these phases and was successful in gaining a position.

Alberta provided feedback that “without COTA’s support, I wouldn’t know what my options were”. Alberta stated she was “...so happy I can work again and show my children what I am capable of.”

Alberta feels confident she will continue on in this position and hopes it is “something I can do until I retire”.

Volunteer programs

This year saw immense changes in our volunteering program with the implementation of two key pieces of work: our Volunteer Framework and the rollout of our new volunteer management system, as powered by Better Impact.

With many of our volunteer programs under review, we engaged in a stepped approach to see our volunteers onboarded via Better Impact, with our Older Men: New Ideas (OM:NI) group contacts and Employment Support mentors being the first cabs off the rank.

We have also changed our mechanism of advertisement of volunteer positions in order

to support best practice processes. Now, new volunteers apply to an identified opportunity rather than expressing general interest.

Our hope is that this will have a positive effect on our overall volunteering program in terms of satisfaction, allowing for our volunteers to engage in work that is important to them and the organisation.

Our OM:NI program has also been in a process of refresh, with the former OM:NI Advisory Committee put on pause to allow us time to improve the program’s governance.

However, OM:NI groups continue to take place, providing a safe and supportive environment for older men to come together and discuss issues important to them.



What is Care Finder?

Our Care Finder program helps the most vulnerable older people who would not be able to arrange aged care services without intensive support, and who do not have a carer or support person who can help.

We help with support to register with My Aged Care, assessment supports, helping to find aged care providers, solving other challenges and connecting clients to other supports in the community, and much more.

Care Finder assists those residing in the South East Melbourne Primary Health Network region, with a focus on those living within the City of Kingston.

Referral sources

18% of referrals came directly from the individual and 12% from family and friends, and the remaining 70% of referrals came through professionals.

We use a referral network that draws on effective relationships with intermediaries such as health and aged care professionals and community organisations, to actively identify those with potential to benefit.

The vast majority of referrals from professionals related to individuals who had commenced engagement with the aged care system. Those referred by themselves or family members were generally not yet assessed for aged care services.

 **29**
Assertive outreach
activities

79
Care Finder
clients from referrals 

Who was referred

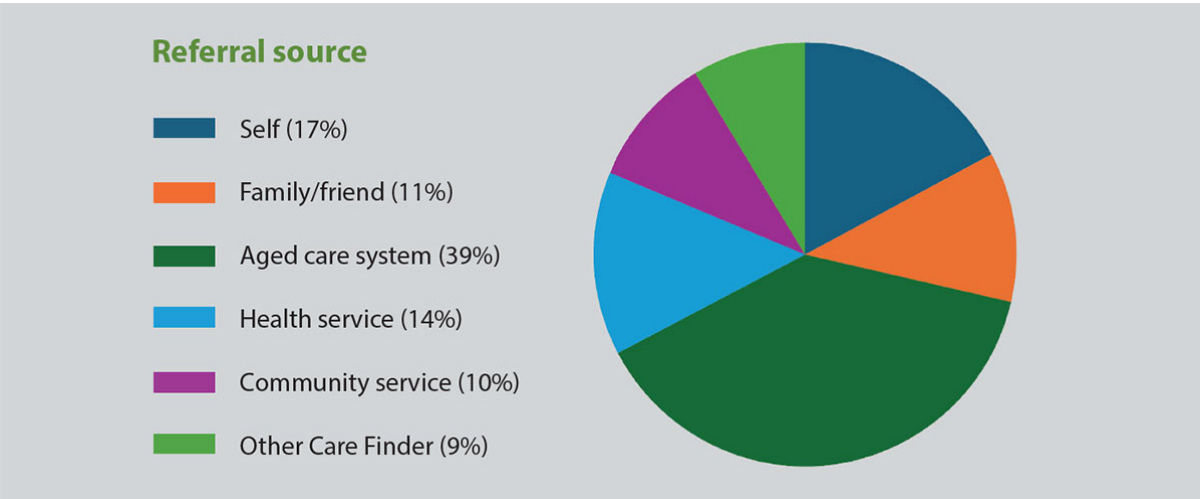
Our team recorded information on 130 individuals referred to the program since its inception. Overall, two-thirds of those referred were female, and one-third male.

The individuals referred showed a range of social and health related concerns.

Nearly two-thirds (64%) of those seeking help were between 70-89. Almost a quarter of those referred (23%) had culturally or linguistically diverse backgrounds and one percent were Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islanders.

More than half of referrals lived by themselves and were reliant on support outside the household. Four in five had no regular support person. The remainder were not comfortable or did not trust potential carers.

Communication difficulties were also common. Some 20% had difficulty with hearing, vision loss, or language and nearly one in ten reported digital literacy issues.



There was an almost even split between those who had and hadn't been formally assessed. Around half were at the very start of their aged care journey and needed advice essentially from scratch, having minimal understanding of what is involved in accessing aged care or even knowing what support is available.

Nearly 20% already had some services in place but their needs had increased or changed, so required guidance on how to go about adjusting services. Some people had previously rejected a home care package, but now felt they needed those services after all.

The remaining individuals had been assessed and accepted for aged care but had not yet engaged with providers of the services they required.

Reasons for seeking support

The main reasons people contacted our Care Finder team were broadly in line with program objectives and related to help with My Aged Care navigation, guidance on increasing existing services, and assistance with finding service appropriate providers.

Many of those referred were confused about the aged care system and needed help to understand what the system offered and how to access this. Some had been through multiple services but had not established ongoing relationships with a provider and felt abandoned.

Others were experiencing carer stress, had a need for respite care or post-hospital care, required residential care advice or social support, or assistance addressing their dissatisfaction with current aged care providers.



Once Care Finder staff began engaging with participants a wide range of other, more underlying, issues started to be identified. These included hoarding, depression, gambling, alcohol, cognitive decline, ongoing trauma, stress, and anxiety.

A small but worrying number of people were found to be in difficult family situations involving estrangement, trust issues, volatile relationships and/or domestic violence. Some experiences of elder abuse – predominantly financial abuse – were uncovered during consultations.

Case study: Sally

Sally was 64 years old when she was referred to us by a community nurse. Sally had a previous history of unstable housing and moved from a rooming house into department of housing property 12 months ago.

Sally is frail with COPD, poor vision, substance addiction, no family supports, on a disability support pension, couldn't organize medical appointments, and was in debt with her utility accounts. She was at risk of eviction due to difficulty in managing bills.

Sally has reduced insight into her care needs and will often cancel services as she believes she is managing independently. Sally often visits the neighbours to ask for food and transport to the shops. A neighbour became intolerant of Sally's behaviour, reporting Sally to local police.

Sally was receiving short-term case management but would have benefited from extensive and ongoing case management which could only be accessed via the Aged Care system. We coordinated a case conference with a community nurse, a short-term case manager and a regional assessment officer to discuss the roles each will all play in supporting Sally.

The Care Finder role enabled each professional involved to focus on their strengths; we focussed on system navigation and advocacy. We liaised with public housing to see how she could be supported as to not put her accommodation at risk. Sally's rental payments are now being taken out of her Disability Support Pension. A successful application for a utility relief grant was made; Sally was able to use the payment to pay for her power and arrangements were made pay off additional debts.

On the day of her 65th birthday, Sally was registered with MAC and we strongly advocated that she be assessed by ACAS. MAC triaged Sally accordingly and a referral was sent to ACAS.

ACAS determined Sally was a high-priority and completed the assessment within the week. Sally was given approval for a Level 4 Home Care Package (HCP) with high priority. The HCP was assigned two weeks later.

As Sally was already receiving domestic assistance with a local provider who was also an HCP provider, she decided to appoint them as her HCP provider. This enabled her to have continuity of care and retain her support workers.

The 2023-2024 operational year has been one of change, and our department has relished the opportunity presented to bolster the presence and reputation of both COTA Victoria and Seniors Rights Victoria.

Membership

Changes to our membership structure, in which responsibility was transferred from a national model to a local one, meant we led a strategy to engage members new and old, as defined by a holistic membership framework.

We successfully established a database of our members, informed them of upcoming changes, and fully transitioned to our current model in July 2024. That success meant we could once again offer free membership to the general public.

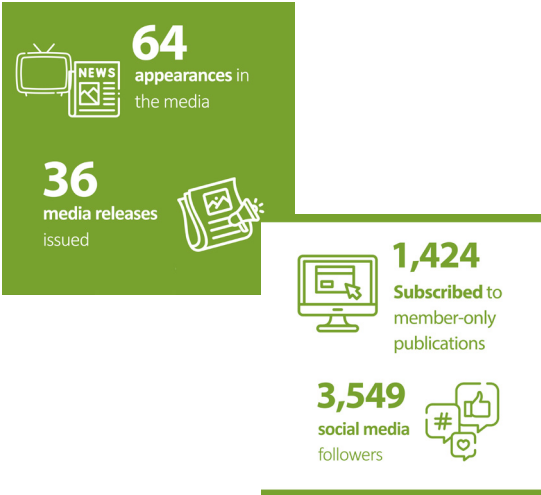
Members receive communications through email as our primary point of contact, while legacy members without a registered email address will receive select physical communications.

Media impact

We've doubled our media presence compared to last year, in terms of both press releases issued and mentions in the media by major publications and outlets.

Press releases

This year, [36 media releases were issued](#) and included info on our departing CEO Chris Potaris, the appointment of (then) Acting CEO Ben Rogers, our state-wide World Elder Abuse Awareness Day campaign, and much more.



Of particular note, we were successfully added to the CCH Parliament distribution list, meaning our media releases are now sent to a large number of high-profile media publications and organisations who are directly impacted by our work.

Media mentions

We were mentioned 64 unique times this year, though that number is based off manual monitoring and has likely missed mentions.

Topics discussed or in the news as part of our mentions included [our response to calls for mandatory testing of Victorian drivers of a certain age](#), [closures in aged care](#), [cost-of-living pressures](#), [elder abuse](#), and more.

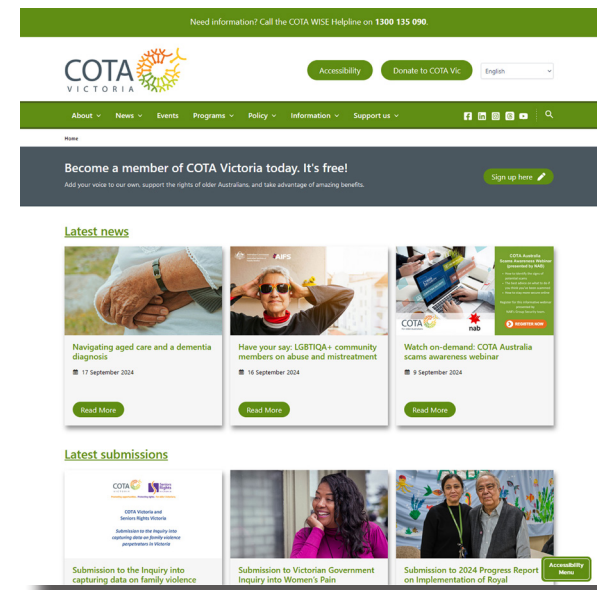
We highlighted media mentions through our social media channels, including snippets or full interviews with outlets like ABC Radio, Nine News, SBS, and the Herald Sun.

We proudly appear on Golden Days Radio every second Monday, in conversation with host Peter Thomas. The [COTA Conversations are available as a podcast on-demand](#).

Social media

We experienced exceptional growth across our social media channels, at the same time actively removing our participation on X. Like with other aspects of media, our social impressions doubled compared to last year.

We are most active with our members through Facebook and Instagram, though we’re also finding high engagement with professionals and like-minded organisations via LinkedIn.



The new COTA Victoria website

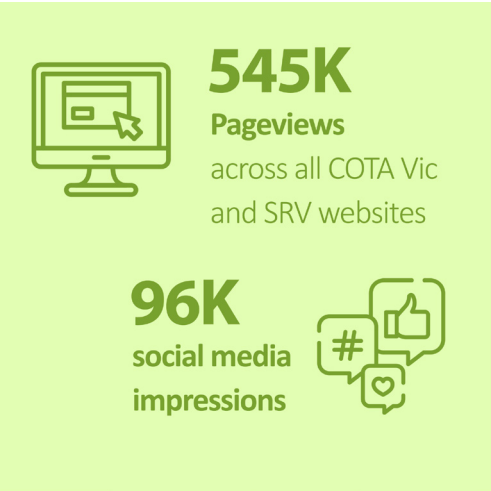
Websites

Our websites were refined throughout the operational year, with each being transitioned to a single server for ease of use and back-end maintenance.

Moreover, our COTA Victoria website was redesigned in-house at no additional cost to the business, resulting in a cleaner, easier-to-

use interface and boasting robust events and publications sections to further promote our work.

Site traffic has risen as a result.



Publications

We assisted with the production of 21 unique policy submissions, publications, and reports.

While we engaged with offsite vendors for some publications, most — including this very report — were created in-house with no additional production costs.

Outside of these large publications, we also assisted with the creation and design of many additional pieces of collateral, including PowerPoint presentations, A4 and DL posters, flyers, and other online assets.

We also provided assistance with a number of Microsoft Teams, Zoom, and WebEx webinars.

Finally, we provided support of our educational programs through the creation and administration of ticketing platforms including Eventbrite and Humanitix.



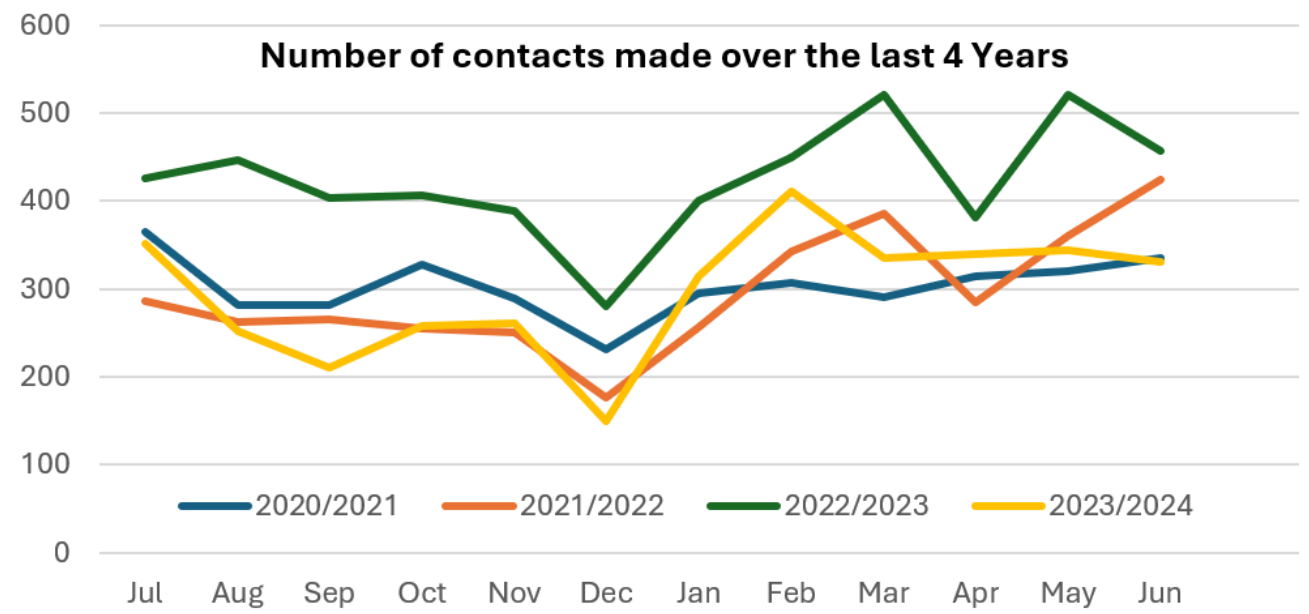
Seniors Rights Victoria
Helpline
1300 368 821

Seniors Rights Victoria (SRV) is a state-wide Community Legal Centre, dedicated to advocating for the rights and wellbeing of older Victorians. SRV staff include specialist lawyers, advocates, and educators who provide vital information, legal, and non-legal support and resources to help older people, their friends, family, and professionals navigate challenges related to elder abuse. Our mission is to empower older Victorians to live with dignity and respect, ensuring their voices are heard and their rights upheld.

Helpline

The Seniors Rights Victoria Helpline provides advice, information, and referrals to older people and professionals across Victoria.

Due to funding impacts on our capacity, we unfortunately saw a decline in the number of calls SRV was able to respond to this financial year. Nevertheless, our Helpline advocates assisted 3,556 callers with a total of 5,131 discreet issues.



Of 12,356 calls, the Helpline was only able to respond to 3,556 callers. This represents a 30% decrease in the number of contacts made compared to the previous year.

44% of callers to the SRV Helpline were experiencing or at risk of experiencing elder abuse.

Other calls relate to matters including Aged Care packages, housing, Centrelink, Seniors Cards, and wills.

Helpline advocates triage matters and prioritises speaking directly to older people who are experiencing or at risk of elder abuse and securing appropriate services for those people.

Alexi’s case

84-year-old Alexi contacted the Helpline concerned that the title to his house had been stolen and that someone had put his house on the market. He discovered this after calling the council when he did not receive his regular rates notice and later received a notice of hearing from VCAT. He was worried about being forced to leave his home of 50+ years.

The Helpline advocate asked one of the SRV lawyers to conduct a title search, which showed that Alexi’s house was sold more than 10 years ago. In further conversations with Alexi, he mentioned that State Trustees had been involved in his financial affairs, and that they held documents on his behalf, but he was unclear what these were.

With Alexi’s consent, our advocate contacted Alexi’s son, with whom he has a supportive, if somewhat fractured relationship. His son indicated that he would be able to assist Alexi to find alternative accommodation if this was required. After further conversations with Alexi and assessing that he may be experiencing some cognitive decline, our advocate made a warm referral to Dementia Australia and contacted State Trustees.

State Trustees informed SRV that they had been appointed as Administrator for Alexi several years ago. The advocate advised them of the impending VCAT hearing, and of Alexi’s concerns about being asked to leave his home. State Trustees appeared at VCAT as Alexi’s Administrator and were granted an adjournment to allow time for State Trustees, Alexi and his family members to identify alternative accommodation and discuss his plans for the future.

Advice and casework

SRV operates a multidisciplinary model where lawyers and advocates work together to provide ongoing support to those who are experiencing or at risk of experiencing elder abuse.

Many clients who receive advice from SRV want to know about their options but do not wish to start legal proceedings.

Family relationships can be complicated. Feelings of responsibility, shame, and the desire to preserve close relationships can lead to older people being taken advantage of, but reluctant to pursue legal action. In some cases, making the perpetrator aware that their behaviour constitutes elder abuse, may be enough to force them to examine their own behaviour and stop the abuse.



Sue’s case

Sue is a 69-year-old woman living the Eastern suburbs of Melbourne. She was feeling pressured to financially support her adult son, Thomas, for years. Thomas would send Sue text messages at all hours requesting money for food, petrol, medications, and other general living expenses.

Sue suffers from depression and anxiety, and her son’s behaviour was having a significant impact on her mental health. She required inpatient care twice within the month prior to engaging with SRV.

An SRV lawyer and advocate met with Sue to provide her with advice and discuss options for moving forward. During this meeting Sue confirmed that she wanted to preserve the relationship with Thomas but also to enforce a financial boundary between them.

With Sue’s agreement, our lawyer drafted a letter to Thomas requesting that he cease asking Sue for money. It advised him that pressuring Sue to provide him with money is a form of family violence and constitutes financial abuse and that if the behaviour continued, a Family Violence Intervention Order may be sought to protect Sue.

The letter also confirmed that Sue wished to develop a more positive relationship with Thomas and that SRV would support their engagement with family counselling or mediation services if needed. The lawyer advised Sue that the letter may receive an adverse response and provided advice around safety planning if that occurred. Sue was satisfied and hopeful with this approach.

Shortly after sending the letter, Sue contacted SRV to say that the letter had worked, and Thomas’s behaviour had improved. He expressed to Sue that he understood the seriousness of the matter and apologised to her for his previous actions. She was immensely appreciative of the help from SRV and commended it as a great service for older people.

Most cases opened by Seniors Rights Victoria have more than one problem type identified. This, combined with social or economic disadvantage, disability, or other barriers to accessing justice, can make casework increasingly complex.

Seniors Rights Victoria opened 107 new cases this year.



SRV data this year indicates that 58% of alleged perpetrators of elder abuse are the adult children of the victim survivor.

Female perpetrators accounted for 66% of all perpetrators, which is an increase from previous years.

Brenda's case

In 2018, 77-year-old Brenda sold her home and moved into a granny flat on her daughter, Amy's property in the northern suburbs of Melbourne. Brenda's health and mobility were declining, and she was having trouble attending to her bills and banking. She gave her bank card and pin number to Amy so that she could pay her bills and withdraw money for Brenda's day-to-day use.

In 2019 Brenda had a fall and was admitted to hospital with a fractured hip, choosing to move from the hospital into a nursing home because of her limited mobility. Most of her personal belongings remained at home with Amy. Amy initially paid the aged care fees from Brenda's account which contained the proceeds of the sale of her home. Brenda was not receiving bank statements and was not aware of the transactions taking place.

After several months, Amy ceased contact with Brenda. The aged care facility then notified Brenda that she had fallen into arrears with her fees. Brenda was taken to the bank by a friend and obtained her bank statements which showed that her accounts had been depleted. She immediately changed her PIN so that Amy could no longer access her account. With the assistance of the nursing home staff, Brenda contacted SRV.

SRV analysed Brenda's bank statements and found that Amy and her adult children had withdrawn more than \$100,000.00 from Brenda's account without her authorisation. Brenda wanted the matter referred to police for investigation and the SRV lawyer assisted her to complete a fraud report. SRV then drafted a letter of demand to Amy, which was ignored.

SRV issued proceedings in the County Court to recover the funds withdrawn by Amy. SRV lawyers were supported by pro-bono counsel. Amy did not respond to the Writ or Statement of Claim filed with the court and SRV subsequently obtained a judgement in

default and applied for a Warrant for Seizure and Sale of the daughter's home, which was obtained and then referred to the Sherriff for execution. Upon being contacted by the sherriff, Amy volunteered to sell the home herself and the full amount taken from Brenda was recovered, plus interest from the date of judgement.

The average number of days a case remained open was 538 days.

Due to the increasing complexity of matters, we are experiencing a greater volume of cases spanning longer periods of time, with 9 matters ongoing since 2021 and 4 matters ongoing since 2020.

In some cases of elder abuse, perpetrators may attempt to drag out the legal process and unnecessarily complicate matters. Protracted proceedings can have significant adverse impact on older people who are experiencing financial disadvantage, are at risk of homelessness, or living with disability or declining health. Without appropriate support, many older people may choose not to progress legal matters.

Joan's case

Joan, an 86-year-old woman, living in regional Victoria contacted Seniors Rights Victoria after experiencing psychological and financial abuse by her son-in-law.

Joan had sold her home to move in with her daughter Sally and Sally's husband, Brian, to care for Sally, who had cancer. From the proceeds of the sale of her home, Joan gave Sally and Brian \$230,000 for the right to live with them at their home. Joan also agreed to pay for the household groceries, while Sally and Brian paid the property expenses.

Around the time that Joan moved in with Sally and Brian, she appointed them as her Enduring Powers of Attorney with immediate effect, but she continued to

manage her own finances as she maintained capacity to do so. Joan cared for Sally for eight years, until Sally passed away in early 2020.

Joan continued residing with Brian with the same arrangement, including when Brian sold the home and purchased a hotel in regional Victoria with an adjoining residential premises. Joan also made additional financial contributions to support repairing the property.

Shortly after moving into the new home, Brian met a new partner and started pressuring Joan to move into residential aged care. Brian also drank heavily and became verbally abusive towards Joan when he was drunk. Local support services became involved to support Joan. Following a public confrontation, Joan was later advised by a support worker to present at hospital as a social admission, which she did.

Two days after her admission Joan received notifications that withdrawals were being made from her bank account. Joan immediately contacted the bank and asked to put a block on the account, which they did. The following day, Brian attended the local bank branch in person, presented the Enduring Power of Attorney and told branch staff that Joan had dementia and that he needed to pay her bills, which were invoices that he had generated for his own business. The bank removed the block from Joan's account and permitted Brian to make further withdrawals.

Joan worked with a private legal practitioner, who changed her Enduring Power of Attorney, but who advised that recovering the amount taken by Brian would be costly and difficult, as he was not cooperating with their requests. Her lawyers advised her to contact Seniors Rights Victoria.

SRV first lodged a formal complaint on behalf of Joan alleging that the bank had failed to protect Joan's funds despite being requested to do so. The bank reimbursed Joan for the amount taken by Brian after the block was incorrectly removed.

SRV lawyers also sent a letter of demand to Brian for the additional funds he had withdrawn from Joan's account. When he proved uncooperative, SRV lawyers made an application to VCAT, while an SRV advocate supported Joan to make a report to the police about the misuse of her Power of Attorney. Brian was subsequently charged with offenses under the Power of Attorney Act.

Brian made numerous attempts to delay the VCAT proceedings, including by sending large volumes of irrelevant documents to SRV and requesting unnecessary

adjournments. His requests were denied by VCAT, and the matter proceeded to a conference where a settlement was reached.

After the agreement was finalised, Brian refused to comply with the terms of settlement and continued to make demands of Joan. Brian engaged in intimidating behaviour, including attending Joan's home, and delivering threatening letters of demand. With Joan's consent, SRV liaised with police who applied for an intervention Order against Brian.

As Brian was not complying with the terms of settlement, SRV applied to reinstate the VCAT application. Orders were made in line with the original terms of settlement and payments to Joan commenced, though these were complicated by Brian's continued attempts to delay payment and be obstructive. This included making his final payment of \$5,000 in \$5 notes.

The delays and abuses of process by the perpetrator led to this matter being unnecessarily protracted, spanning the course of two years and numerous VCAT appearances. Due to Joan's digital and social isolation and her driving limitations, SRV staff conducted home visits to support Joan to engage in the online VCAT hearings.

Though Brian was uncooperative, SRV was successful in recovering the full amount he took from Joan without consent. Police charged Brian with several offences, and Joan is protected by a Family Violence Intervention Order.

SRV closed 94 cases during the year, with the longest running totalling 1,259 days (almost 3.5 years). We successfully recovered debts for 15 clients to the total of \$3,540,852.36.

At the conclusion of casework matters, most clients reported feeling listened to, heard and understood by SRV; being better equipped to control and protect their finances; that SRV had helped achieve their desired outcome; and a greater understanding of their options and where to seek further assistance.

Community education

SRV works to empower older people through leading the prevention of, and response to, elder abuse. We run education sessions focused on recognising and responding to elder abuse, and protecting one's rights and interests as they get older.

In total, 58 talks and presentations were delivered to 1,509 attendees. Of those, 8 presentations were in regional Victoria, 7 presentations were delivered in languages other than English to culturally and linguistically diverse groups. Numerous presentations formed part of our state-wide Warm Safe Home World Elder Abuse Awareness Day campaign.



A Community Education session

SRV was pleased to engage with several Men's Sheds to deliver our community education talks this year, and to encourage greater awareness and early access to supports by men, who often delay seeking help or support in instances of elder abuse, and with respect to their health needs. This engagement has mostly been organised and supported through local government.

Overall, the most popular topics for talks

during the year were Protecting Your Rights – Preventing Elder Abuse and Planning Ahead.

The reach of our program is made possible by the significant contribution of the small group of active volunteers: Dot, Gina, Jennifer, and Joe who have been part of our volunteer speaker group for over 5 years.

Coffee 'n' Chat conversations with Deaf community

To support older people in the Deaf community, the Planning for the Future program was re-designed to make individuals more aware of options for planning ahead as they age, and how this could help reduce the risk of elder abuse, especially financial elder abuse.

The program was auspiced by the John Pierce Centre (JPC) who obtained funding to engage SRV to facilitate this program through a needs analysis and co-design activities. The JPC identified that their older client group lacked knowledge and awareness of available legal and other options to plan for the future.

There were also concerns expressed that the group, known as Pankina, wasn't aware of what constituted elder abuse. Our program included elder abuse and future-planning presentations, committee consultations, SRV staff training in Deaf community awareness, JPC staff training in elder abuse, and the development of print resources.

As a flow-on from these activities, in 2024 there have been ongoing Coffee 'n' Chat

conversations once a month at the JPC on topics which were identified as relevant by the Deaf members of the JPC.

Ethnic Communities Council of Victoria elder abuse project

We continue to have a strong and active collaboration with the Elder Abuse project of the Ethnic Communities Council of Victoria (ECCV).

Raising awareness of elder abuse in different language communities requires a sensitivity and understanding of cultural nuances. Our program provides expertise in elder abuse prevention while gaining greater reach into culturally and linguistically diverse (CALD) populations through ECCV.

As CALD people 60 years of age and over make up approximately one-third of the over 60-year-old population in Victoria, this work is crucial to providing equal access to the services we offer.

To further support access to justice for CALD communities, we provided training to a group of 16 bilingual community educators from different CALD communities as part of the elder abuse project at ECCV.

This work wouldn't be possible without the significant contribution of the ECCV's Hayat Doughan, who continues to offer enthusiasm, energy, and vast cultural and linguistic knowledge.

The Planning Ahead project

This year marked the end of the first phase of our Planning Ahead project, which is funded under the Integrated Services Fund.

The project engages with community members who may not otherwise have access to information about future planning and supported decision making, as a step to safeguarding against elder abuse. Its objective is to raise community awareness in vulnerable regional communities with limited



Participants of an ECCV elder abuse education session

services by providing community education on the importance of planning ahead. Topics include Enduring Powers of Attorney, medical treatment decision-making, and advance care directives as a preventative measure against elder abuse.

In the last year, we expanded to Shepparton and offered 13 education sessions to 204 participants. Of those, 87% of participants were aged 60+, 4% were Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander, 8% were from CALD backgrounds, and 60% were female.

SRV collaborated with local stakeholders to develop tailored, region-specific resources, with local contact information and the SRV Helpline.

The sessions gave people a chance to share their personal experiences, with many expressing concerns about their own experiences of abuse or those of someone they know. Several participants later contacted our Helpline for further assistance.



A Planning Ahead session
hosted by U3A Goulburn Valley

World Elder Abuse Awareness Day and Warm Safe Home

World Elder Abuse Awareness Day (WEAAD) shines a spotlight on the critical issue of elder abuse, fostering global recognition and action against this hidden epidemic. In 2024, SRV marked the lead up to this important day with the impactful Warm Safe Home (WSH) campaign and art exhibition, designed to highlight the importance of feeling safe at home and the intersectionality of elder abuse and housing instability.

The WSH project was first conceived by Dr Becky Nevin to support the work of Elder Abuse Prevention Networks. The project uses art to promote a greater understanding of elder abuse, its causes, and the importance of a safe home for everyone.

Interactive workshops were held across Victoria in April, May, and June where attendees engaged in the creation and decoration of model houses while learning about elder abuse prevention. Over 1,000 people participated in WSH workshops across Victoria.

They included schools, community groups, multicultural organisations, and Elder Abuse Prevention Networks, and participants aged between 14-84 and were encouraged to discuss their own experiences and reflect on their own views on safety and well-being. These activities fostered a sense of community and provided a hands-on approach to understanding and addressing the issue of elder abuse and the right of everyone to feel safe at home.

The artworks produced during these workshops were shown in local exhibitions at community centres, libraries and seniors' expos, and WEAAD events across the state, and many were included in [the WEAAD website's WSH online exhibition](#).

The official campaign launch of the WSH project was held at the Melbourne Town Hall in a collaboration between SRV, Housing for the Aged Action Group (HAAG), and the City of Melbourne. It was hosted by Gerard Mansour, a COTA Victoria board member and the former Commissioner for Senior Victorians.

The campaign and online exhibition were officially launched by the Hon. Ingrid Stitt, Minister for Ageing. Her presence and opening remarks were pivotal in setting the tone for the day, highlighting the importance of addressing elder abuse and supporting older Victorians.

By combining SRV's advocacy and legal expertise with HAAG's housing knowledge and the City of Melbourne's community-focused approach, the WSH campaign became a comprehensive platform for education, support, and action.

SRV appreciates the many hours of effort put in by staff, volunteers and participants in making the WSH project so successful in raising awareness of elder abuse on and around WEAAD.



Participants of an intergenerational
Warm Safe Home workshop.



The Hon. Ingrid Stitt, Minister for Ageing, speaking
to an at-capacity crowd at our WEAAD event



Lively discussion as part of our WEAAD
event at Melbourne Town Hall

Seniors Rights Victoria is extremely grateful to our community, funders, and project partners. Our work would not be possible without the ongoing support of our student interns, volunteer educators, and our legal secondees from HWL Ebsworth. Thank you all.



COTA
V I C T O R I A



COTA Victoria

1300 135 090

askcota@cotavic.org.au

cotavic.org.au

Level 2, Suite 2.5, 424 St Kilda Road
Melbourne, VIC, 3004



Seniors Rights Victoria

1300 368 821

info@seniorsrights.org.au

seniorsrights.org.au