

2020-2021

ANNUAL REPORT

Safe, secure and affordable
homes for Victorian renters
in a fair housing system



Tenants
Victoria





About Tenants Victoria

Tenants Victoria is the peak body for the state's renters, who number more than 2 million people. Our vision is for a safe, secure and affordable home for every Victorian renter in a fair housing system. For many renting is a permanent situation rather than a transition from the family home to home ownership. We believe all renters should be able to afford a home that allows them to live full lives and contribute to their communities.

Founded in the 1970s by renters, we aim to empower all renters and make sure their voices are heard in our advocacy. We work in partnership with other community legal centres and housing sector organisations, and strategically with government to inform policy development and enhance service delivery.

Our services include information, legal representation and advice, financial counselling, and outreach. We aim to make the housing system fairer in several ways. We advocate for practices and attitudes that respect renting and for policies and laws that support the rights of renters. We increase the skills of the community workers who assist renters. We provide information that encourages rental providers and real estate agents to act responsibly.

Tenants Victoria acknowledges the Wurundjeri people of the Kulin Nation as the traditional owners of the land on which we practise. We recognise that sovereignty was never ceded and pay our respects to their Elders past, present and emerging.



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‘It’s important to have a service advocating for tenants especially in the property market where many will be tenants for life.’

- Comment from client survey

As an organisation that has a long history of serving Victorian renters, the 5-year Strategic Plan, from June 2021 to June 2026, is our ambitious vision for the future.

Our vision

A safe, secure and affordable home for every Victorian renter in a fair housing system.

Our role

Empower renters and make the housing system fairer.

Strategic goals

Service Excellence

Renters and their support workers are emboldened by the knowledge, support and training we provide.

System Impact

Our casework and policy advocacy create system-wide change.

Business Transformation

We have the systems, processes and culture that supports us to pursue excellence.

Organisation Sustainability

We are effectively governed and managed using sound practices and principles.

As I reflect on the ongoing pandemic and its disruption to life and work during the 2020–2021 year, I am proud to acknowledge that Tenants Victoria has strengthened its efforts to support Victorian renters. Through our daily contact with individual renters and community organisations via our advice lines, our social media programs and our casework, we understand the challenges renters face. We are able to use our expertise in tenancy law to inform, educate and represent individual renters and to advocate for reform and legislative protections. We welcomed the introduction of emergency protections for renters in 2020 and continued to advocate to government to re-introduce targeted support in the wake of further lockdowns.

Demand for our services escalated during the year and we took up the challenge to trial new ways of meeting renters' needs. We were fortunate to receive funding from the Victorian Government's Working for Victoria program and this enabled us to trial initiatives including hiring a team of multilingual Community Engagement Officers who reached out to renters in emerging communities.

Organisational renewal continued during the year. In particular, in July 2020 the Board instigated a strategic planning process. Over a period of several months, Directors, in collaboration with the CEO and the senior

leadership team, engaged in some deep thinking about the vision and work of Tenants Victoria. We acknowledged our history with respect and worked hard to think broadly about our future in advancing the interests of Victorian renters. In this process we welcomed the thoughts of our staff and key stakeholders.

In May 2021, the Board approved a draft 5-year strategy (June 2021 – June 2026). It speaks to the positive impact we will deliver, to our priorities, and to the actions the organisation will take to deliver our services more efficiently. Our vision of a 'safe, secure and affordable home for every Victorian renter in a fair housing system' re-affirms our purpose and informs our work.

The strategic plan positions Tenants Victoria as the peak body for renters and the specialist community legal centre for tenancy in Victoria. It is an ambitious plan because the demand for support is extraordinary. It sees us continuing to be creative, coming up with solutions that help more people and finding ways to build our resources so we can provide services to those who most need them.

I am pleased to report that our financial position continues to be strong. The Board is

'Demand for our services escalated during the year and we took up the challenge to trial new ways of meeting renters' needs.'

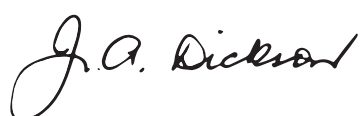


very grateful to our funders this year, namely, Consumer Affairs Victoria, the Department of Families, Fairness and Housing, Victoria Legal Aid, the Department of Jobs, Precincts and Regions, Study Melbourne and the Financial Counselling Foundation. We thank them for their generous support of our work for Victorian renters.

My colleagues on the Board of Tenants Victoria have devoted many hours of their time and expertise this year to the sound governance of the organisation. In addition to the strategic planning work, the Board maintained its focus on continuing improvement with a review of all policies and procedures, and our annual self-appraisal and review of the Action Plan. I thank every director for their strong commitment to Tenants Victoria and its work.

Our CEO Jennifer Beveridge has ably led Tenants Victoria in another challenging year of changes. On behalf of the Board, I thank her for her energy and commitment to the journey of transformation we have embarked on in order to make a difference for renters. I also thank the staff of Tenants Victoria, who adapted to remote work while working together to meet the needs of the people we help directly, and of all Victorian renters.

The Board, management and staff of Tenants Victoria moves forward with determination to assist renters; with imagination to find new and more ways to assist renters and with a deep commitment to incorporating the voices of renters in our work



Judith Dickson
Chair, Tenants Victoria



Victorians have all been in the same storm this year, and so this annual reflection has an all-too-familiar flavour. The storm may have been the same, yet the boats used to weather the storm have been unique to each of us. Renters as a cohort have felt the storm more severely as the impact of successive lockdowns was very hard and led to huge demand for our services. The end of government payments and supports remained as pressure points for many renters and so demand for Tenants Victoria's legal and information services was magnified beyond expectations. We anticipate that need will continue to be high as we move into 'COVID normal', with a long recovery for those most severely impacted.

Scarcity has been the basis of innovation at Tenants Victoria during the year. We had to find ways to help more people, and so implemented an intake and triage process. This freed our lawyers to focus on legal work and enabled the arrival of our talented and compassionate intake team. As we focus our efforts in the years ahead, we intend to provide renters with what they need at the right time by the right person.

The community engagement team launched our new website during the year to better inform renters on their rights. The team

continued to broaden the knowledge base about renter rights by training community workers online, while our multilingual community engagement officers reached out to people in emerging communities through publications in community languages, online workshops and other means. The innovation continues.

Our Board and staff scarcely missed a beat as they found ways to work from their homes across Melbourne. There was a flurry of excited activity in between lockdowns as we packed up the old office in Fitzroy and headed to our new premises in the city. Our new location, in the heart of Melbourne's CBD, promises better amenity for our staff and aids our advocacy on behalf of renters to government by putting us within walking distance of both the State Parliament and government departments. With Tenants Victoria based in the geographic centre of Melbourne we hope that this symbolism also places renters in the philosophical centre of many public policy and law reform decisions.

A significant achievement for the year has been the formation of our new Strategic Plan: 2021-2026 – A time to transform. This has seeded other projects including a Theory of Change and Outcomes Framework, and a new set of organisational values. Combined with operational improvements, these



‘The storm may have been the same, yet the boats used to weather the storm have been unique to each of us.’

collaborative processes ensure the foundations for our future are strong and sturdy as we begin to use evidence to inform how we focus our activities and key messages. From here we will embark on ensuring that Tenants Victoria provides appropriate tenancy support and services to people who most need them. We look forward to reporting against this plan to you over the next few years.

A big thank you to our staff and volunteers who have worked with knowledge, tenacity, and kindness in difficult times. Every day our people work to support renters with great skill and sensitivity. They are valued people who bring both passion and intelligence to their work.

Finally, my sincere thanks to Judith Dickson, the Chair, and other Board members for guiding our transformation journey while still in the midst of the pandemic. I commend their staunch, and voluntary, work for Tenants

Victoria during the year and into the future as we pursue our vision of a safe, secure, and affordable home for every Victorian renter in a fair housing system.

I invite you, our supporters, to help as we embrace our role to empower renters and make the housing system fairer. Keep up to date with our work through our website, newsletter and social media in the coming year and join us on our mission to change the experience of renting in Victoria.



Jennifer Beveridge,
Chief Executive Officer, Tenants Victoria



Landmark rental laws introduced as pandemic protections ended

The date 29 March 2021 marked both the end of emergency pandemic measures for renters and the implementation of regulations that completed the landmark reforms to the Residential Tenancies Act 1997 (RTA). The reforms provide more ongoing protections for renters in Victoria than anywhere else in the country. Yet, many renters who had already shouldered great burdens in a tough 12 months still needed help as the health, financial and social consequences of the pandemic continued to play out. Tenants Victoria strengthened its pivot to online activity by maintaining information about Victoria's emergency measures up to March 2021, including a guide to applying for a rent reduction and the rent relief grant in English and 5 community languages. The 2020-2021 year ended with the impacts of the pandemic and the new laws still unfolding. Also see page 22 for more on these momentous developments.

New strategy and a new office

In a year dominated by COVID-19 and the public health restrictions in place to combat it, we kept our 'eye on the prize' to finalise the organisation's ambitious Strategic Plan 2021-2026. Our vision is for a safe, secure and affordable home for every Victorian renter in a fair housing system. Our role in achieving that vision is to empower renters and make the housing system fairer. To deliver on the Strategic Plan we began work on better ways to measure our impact, to identify and quantify what we know is the considerable unmet need for our services and to provide services to those who need them most.

Amid the ongoing challenge of social distancing during the pandemic, our staff worked harder, and more strategically, from home for much of

2020-2021. Near the end of the 12 months, we moved back to the office but in a new location in the heart of Melbourne's CBD, following more than 25 years in Johnston Street, Fitzroy. Our premises in Bourke Street offer better amenity for our staff and aid our advocacy on behalf of renters to government by putting us at the centre of the CBD and within walking distance of Victoria's decision makers.

COVID-response funding enabled new approaches

We were able to trial new approaches to our work thanks to funding from the State Government's Working for Victoria employment initiative in response to the pandemic crisis. This enabled us to employ new staff to strengthen our own response to the crisis, including four multilingual community engagement officers who helped us reach emerging communities. Between them speaking Arabic, Dinka (South Sudan), Kiswahili (East Africa), Dari (Afghanistan), Mandarin, Cantonese and Malay, they hit the ground running to improve access to online resources, boost awareness of Tenants Victoria's legal services and collect insights into challenges faced by renters from diverse backgrounds. They also collaborated with 96 community organisations, which included leveraging the expertise of our legal staff for online information sessions.

Tenants Victoria's legal work also benefitted under the same initiative through the employment of paralegals to support our lawyers as the impacts of the pandemic increased demand for legal advice. The paralegals were able to provide support for legal casework, research for our policy and advocacy efforts, and assistance to prepare materials for the launch of the RTA reforms at the end of March. The systems and processes

that were established to include paralegals in our workforce have been used to introduce the Practical Legal Training (PLT) program for new graduates at Tenants Victoria. There is now a committed group of PLT volunteers providing paralegal support to the organisation.

Managing extra demand for tenancy support due to COVID-19

Continued demand for our advice and casework services from renters experiencing hardship required us to think about how we deliver services more effectively and efficiently to people. One of the challenges is a clunky service system that is not well integrated, sometimes creating more problems for people as they seek help. The Tenancy Referral Project was established to help understand the service system and aims to improve the quality and efficiency of referrals for renters to other services across Victoria. The research project aims to coordinate the work of tenancy support organisations in Victoria to make it simpler and more efficient for tenants to get the support they need, and to provide them with access to advocates and lawyers. It is mapping the state's tenancy support services and facilitating discussion towards establishing a state-wide system of referrals. This project has been endorsed by Victoria Legal Aid and other community legal centres that provide

tenancy services, paving the way for change to be embedded across the system.

Family Violence Protection Tenancy Kit relaunched for community workers

We relaunched our Family Violence Protection Tenancy Kit, incorporating the strengthened measures for those affected by family violence in Victoria's new tenancy laws. The completely updated kit was a timely development, as most community agencies that deal with family violence experienced a surge in demand for their services during the pandemic, at a time when the home as a sanctuary was never more important. Prepared inhouse by an expert team of lawyers and editors, the kit is a comprehensive and highly practical guide to help community workers assist people in rental housing affected by family violence to know their rights, have a secure home, and limit any financial loss.

‘You feel like someone is on your side. Most times the landlords have most of the cards, and it can feel overwhelming dealing with them.’

- Comment from client survey



Kelly's long wait for redress

Kelly Chan, an international student from Hong Kong studying for her PhD in Melbourne, had just signed a lease when the pandemic started in March 2020. In September her university told her that her casual part-time research job was finishing, leaving her with only her PhD stipend to live on. She notified the rental provider (landlord) in writing that she needed to end her lease early due to severe hardship, under the emergency COVID-19 provisions for renters.

Kelly vacated the property 2 weeks after giving notice, but the rental provider told her she must continue to pay rent and advertising costs until a new renter was found.

Kelly then asked for her \$2220 bond back from the rental provider – 3 times. In November she applied to the Victorian Civil and Administrative Tribunal (VCAT) for its return. She was only able to move because her new housemate kindly covered her share of the bond, which she gradually repaid. 'It was a very difficult time,' she said.

Then, in January 2021 the rental provider applied to VCAT for compensation from Kelly of \$5500 for the costs of finding a new renter.

Preparing for that hearing on top of study, moving and the pandemic, was hard. Kelly

'She was really detail oriented and thinks ahead for me and the case ... We were really prepared.'

tried other avenues for help and was about to give up when a friend suggested she contact Tenants Victoria.

Tenants Victoria helped Kelly seek an urgent hearing, given her financial hardship. 'It was timely, helpful advice,' she said. However, the date she received was not until September 2021. In another setback, the day before that hearing all non-urgent matters were adjourned because VCAT was an exposure site for COVID-19.

Aware of the importance of promoting renters' voices, Tenants Victoria also put Kelly in touch with a journalist from The Age, who told her story in an article about delays at VCAT. The article was published before the VCAT hearing, and while she waited Kelly was delighted by

the many supportive messages she received from friends and colleagues.

Meanwhile, Tenants Victoria lawyer Jacqui Solomon was helping Kelly get ready for VCAT. 'She was really detail oriented and thinks ahead for me and the case ... We were really prepared,' said Kelly.

In October, 11 months after Kelly applied for her bond back, Jacqui appeared on behalf of Kelly at VCAT. The tribunal determined that she was experiencing severe hardship when she gave notice to the rental provider, was entitled to a full refund of her \$2220 bond and the rental provider was not entitled to any compensation costs.

'I'm really grateful for the help from Tenants Victoria,' Kelly said.

Judith's journey to a safe home

Judith, in her 50s, became homeless 4 years ago, after an occupational injury stopped her working. Trying to get by on Jobseeker, she ended up in rent arrears and was evicted. Judith couch surfed before a homeless service placed her in a rooming house, where she expected to live for 6 months. She would stay for 3½ years.

'At the beginning it was okay – mostly women I shared with. It was clean.' That changed. 'Lots of people came and went and I was never told when a new person was moving in. The managers didn't care about who moved in.' She ended up feeling 'like I was treading on eggshells a lot of the time Everything you can imagine went on in that house. So much abuse.'

'It got to the point where I was scared to leave my room ... I had night terrors and flashbacks,' she said.

Catherine, our Outreach Worker, first met Judith 2 years ago while visiting the rooming house. Catherine referred her to a support service that had the authority to apply for priority public housing. Judith was placed on the priority list, but no properties were available, despite her age, distress, and unsafe living conditions.

When the State Government announced its From Homelessness to a Home (H2H) initiative in February 2021, Catherine advocated for Judith to receive assistance and helped her attend an interview at the local homeless service. Judith did receive an H2H assistance package, and has moved to a subsidised, privately rented unit, which she calls 'heaven'. 'Such a big relief to have my own kitchen, my own bathroom, my own lounge room.' In 18 months, she will move to a local social-housing property – her 'forever home'.

Single parent Amy protected from eviction

In late 2020 Amy (not her real name), a single parent of two children aged under 10, fell behind in her rent. Although she had never had trouble paying rent before the COVID-19 pandemic, in May 2020 she had lost her part-time job and was relying solely on Centrelink income. Her relationship with her ex-partner had broken down due to family violence – he left the home and refused to provide any financial support. Amy advised the real estate agent of her circumstances but received no response.

Amy received counselling from a family violence service, and an offer of \$2000 from a support service for rent arrears payment if a payment plan was set up. However, the rental provider (landlord) would not agree to a payment plan. Amy was also unable to access the Victorian Government's Rent Relief Grant subsidy scheme. Her rental provider would

only offer her a rent deferral rather than a rent reduction, which was a requirement of the subsidy. Even the offer of a rent deferral was made on the condition that she would sign a fixed term rental agreement (lease) for an additional 12 months.

Amy's rental provider applied to VCAT, the Victorian Civil and Administrative Tribunal, for a possession order to evict her and her children on the basis of the rent arrears. The day before the hearing she contacted Tenants Victoria's VCAT Lawyer, Bill Maloney. He assisted her to arrange and file her evidence with VCAT, then appeared on her behalf at the hearing.

He successfully argued that the application should be dismissed because her failure to pay rent was due to a COVID-19 reason. One of Victoria's emergency pandemic measures to protect renters was a moratorium on evictions of people behind in rent because of financial hardship as a result of COVID-19.

Amy and her children were able to remain at the property as a result. The emergency measures, including the eviction moratorium, ended on 28 March 2021, despite the continuing impacts of the pandemic.





Volunteer paralegal wants to help people overcome barriers to justice

Law graduate Shehara Skilbeck is a volunteer paralegal in Tenants Victoria's Practical Legal Training program, which provides law graduates with real-world work experience.

She brings more than her law degree to her work, with a double degree in health sciences and social work and a master of counselling also under her belt.

Shehara previously worked as a social worker in the homelessness sector. Supporting clients dealing with issues including mental illness, disability, and family violence, she learned firsthand about the complexity of homelessness. Part of her role was going to court with her clients, where working alongside lawyers sparked her interest in pursuing a career in law.

At university, Shehara's extracurricular activities focused on human rights, social justice and the law, so the Tenants Victoria placement, which began in May 2021, fitted her interests. She said it was an exciting time to start, with recent changes to rental laws, and with renters' rights at the forefront of people's minds due to COVID 19. 'I enjoyed having the opportunity to learn more about the rights of renters and how the law had changed to offer more protection to renters during the pandemic.'

A highlight has been working with the duty lawyer who represents renters at Victorian Civil and Administrative Tribunal (VCAT) hearings. She's finding out about VCAT and how it operates, which was not covered in her law degree, and seeing how the duty lawyer advocates for renters who are unable to advocate for themselves. Shehara's experience at Tenants Victoria also includes legal research and finding out about the systemic issues affecting renters. Her career goal is to combine her legal and social work expertise by working in the community legal sector, assisting people who need access to justice.

With her background Shehara is particularly mindful of how mental illness, trauma and other issues affect a person's ability to reach out to a community legal centre. 'As lawyers we need the skills to empower our clients and to provide people with a safe place to share their stories.'

'I enjoyed having the opportunity to learn more about the rights of renters and how the law had changed to offer more protection to renters during the pandemic.'

Our Client Services team offers free and confidential advice, support and advocacy for renters with rental law disputes in Victoria. Renters usually contact our team through our telephone Renter Support Service, email advice service or through referral from other community service organisations. This enables renters who can handle their own issue with support from our intake workers or lawyers to take action. Eligible renters experiencing hardship and disadvantage who have more complex issues can be progressed through to more intensive assistance or legal representation.

This year, we boosted our legal team capacity through establishing a Practical Legal Trainee (PLT) program for volunteer paralegal positions, which provide law graduates undertaking this training with real world work experience while making a difference in renters' lives.

We also established a financial counselling service during the year. This service and the PLT program aim to reach renters in our community who are most in need.

Our Rooming House Outreach Program was complemented by a pilot International Student Rooming House Outreach Program. International students were among the first to be hit hard by the pandemic – the pilot program focused on students living in rooming houses or similar accommodation in Melbourne's north-west, thanks to a Victorian Government grant.

Overall, our team continued to respond to high demand due to the impact of COVID-19 public health restrictions, while also pivoting to the end of emergency pandemic protections for renters in March 2021 as major reforms to the Residential Tenancy Act 1997 came into effect.

Over the 2020-2021 year, our team responded to 13,516 enquiries from people needing advice and guidance and handled 381 legal cases. We also provided secondary consultation on 1832 cases through tenancy and community service partners.

New roles reach renters most in need

In 2020-2021 we created 3 new roles to better target our services to those most in need. Tenants Victoria's VCAT Lawyer represents renters who are in financial hardship and experiencing disadvantage at urgent, forthcoming hearings at VCAT, the Victorian Civil and Administrative Tribunal, when they face losing their rental property. The lawyer also represents renters in urgent matters related to health or safety, including due to

Provided advice or
information to
13,516
renters

318 legal cases
handled by our legal
team

63 rooming house
residents supported
through **84** referrals

family violence and unsafe living conditions. Over the first 12 months of that program, we assisted 203 renters, including representing 84 renters in VCAT proceedings. Of these 84 matters:

- 63 involved possession order hearings where the renter was successful and able to remain at their rented premises
- 6 involved urgent repairs where the renter was successful
- 6 involved stopping an illegal eviction
- 4 involved ending or creating tenancies due to family violence
- 2 involved compliance orders

Our Outreach Lawyer helps renters experiencing disadvantage with rental law disputes, in particular family violence survivors, people with disabilities, international students and older tenants. To do this, our Outreach Lawyer establishes partnerships and works closely with community organisations assisting these renters to target our services to them. One example is the active referral relationship we have established with the Family Violence Support Workers at VCAT. Their quick referrals to the Outreach Lawyer have led to matters being finalised faster, which can reduce the risk of family violence continuing and escalating. Feedback received from family

violence survivors who had been referred to the Outreach Lawyer include that they feel safer and are better able to move on with their lives. The Outreach Lawyer also facilitates a community of practice for lawyers from other community legal centres.

The third role established is our Special Projects Lawyer, who is coordinating our Tenancy Referral Project.

Tenancy Referral Project

A variety of organisations provide rental support services, but there is minimal apparent coordination between them, particularly in relation to referrals. We established the Tenancy Referral Project to find out how our referrals of clients to other community organisations that support renters can be improved, to make it easier for renters to get the support they need, and to provide renters' advocates and lawyers with clear guidelines for better referrals between organisations. The pandemic, and its impact on the personal, social, and financial wellbeing of renters, makes this project even more important. Interim findings include:

- Many programs appear to rely heavily on direct referrals by lawyers and advocates



to their professional contacts within other organisations

- Some services make it very easy for renters to self-refer by displaying contact information and eligibility criteria on their websites
- Our survey of clients found that for ‘cold’ referrals, where the client is left to follow up themselves, only half did so

Outreach partnerships promote health for rooming house residents

Tenants Victoria’s Rooming House Outreach Program visits registered and unregistered rooming houses and aims to help residents exercise their legal rights and if possible, to move to more secure housing. The longstanding service has gathered evidence on poor quality rooming houses, especially

84% of clients would recommend Tenants Victoria to their friends

78% of clients were satisfied with access to services

84% of clients were satisfied with the assistance received

Source: client survey

‘The information [Tenants Victoria intake worker] gave us was really helpful and he was always really prompt when calling back. I really appreciated his effort in helping us. What was happening to us was stressful, but he helped us to manage it. He's awesome!’

- Correspondence from renter

‘I was having a very difficult time. [Tenants Victoria intake worker’s] advice fixed everything, and I just wanted to say thank you for the work she does, and everyone does at Tenants Vic. Its appreciated.’

- Correspondence from renter

‘Thank you to [Tenants Victoria lawyer] for helping me. I have contacted you guys many times over the years – you are fabulous. Always feel empowered and I’m doing the right thing.’

- Correspondence from renter

‘I just wanted to pass on some feedback about how great the community of practice [Tenants Victoria lawyer] has organised is. It’s been so fantastic so far both in terms of practical support and also for junior tenancy lawyers to get to know and support each other.’

- Lawyer from community of practice

those in Melbourne’s north and west. Our work enables us to gain an understanding of the systemic issues affecting these renters, which feeds directly into our policy work.

As part of the Victorian Government’s High-Risk Accommodation Response (HRAR) program during the pandemic, the then Department of Health and Human Services (DHHS) established several HRAR teams to focus on renters in accommodation with common spaces and high-density living, including rooming houses.

Tenants Victoria’s Outreach Worker worked with multiple HRAR teams during 2020-2021 and shared best practices across teams. The best outcomes occurred when information for rooming house residents was clear and HRAR teams and local community health centres formed ongoing relationships with residents.

The teams delivered care packs of reusable masks, hand sanitiser and other hygiene items, and focused on testing for COVID-19 and vaccinations. Residents were prioritised early for access to vaccinations because of the safety issues they face and not being able to isolate because they live in crowded housing.

Sometimes getting to vaccination centres was difficult as many rooming house residents do not drive, so the HRAR teams arranged transport via cab vouchers and minivans.

The teams also focussed on access to primary care at community health centres including dental services, counselling, general practitioners, physiotherapy and podiatry. Many residents did not know they could get affordable care at community health services. The agencies involved in the HRAR program are advocating for continued funding for health promotion after the pandemic subsidies.

Our Outreach Worker also referred a dozen residents of rooming houses for assistance packages from the Victorian Government’s Homelessness to a Home (H2H) initiative to help them move into stable housing. Former rooming house resident Judith, whose story is on page 12, received one, but many who needed them missed out and will remain in rooming houses or be referred from the streets and temporary hotel accommodation back into unsafe rooming houses in coming months despite the risks during the pandemic.

Top 5 reasons for enquiries

2020-21

1. Repairs
2. COVID-19 – general
3. Lease breaking
4. Compensation claim by renter
5. COVID-19 – eviction

2019-20

1. Compensation
2. Repairs
3. Lease breaking
4. Bond refund
5. COVID-19 – general



The Community Engagement portfolio includes multiple strands: training, strategic and digital communications, research and policy work as well as public advocacy and community outreach to key stakeholders.

A feature of our work is providing helpful information on tenancy issues to renters, government, the legal sector, community organisations and the public via our website, training, media, social media, policy submissions and other means. We engage with the broader community and individual renters about renters' rights and concerns, whether they live in houses, apartments, rooming houses or student accommodation.

Much of our work this year was framed by the economic and social impacts of the continuing COVID-19 crisis for renters amid public health restrictions and lockdowns. The introduction of sweeping and long-awaited reforms to Victoria's rental laws in March 2021, which had been delayed by the onset of the pandemic, also added an entirely new lens to our core activities.

We provided instructive training, guidance and other supports to 180 community leaders and organisations that work with people facing greater barriers to accessing decent and affordable rented housing, including Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, members of emerging multicultural communities, those experiencing homelessness and people seeking safety from family violence.

We worked on completely updating all the key information for renters on our website to account for the new laws. In response to the pandemic, we pivoted our training sessions for housing workers and tenancy lawyers entirely to online platforms and focussed on increasing broader public outreach to renters

via targeted social media, including introducing regular interactive Facebook Live sessions with renters as an ongoing feature of our public engagement.

In recognition of the pandemic hardships faced by multicultural communities in our state, for the first time we also established a dedicated multilingual team of community engagement officers speaking 7 community languages to help us liaise with culturally diverse renters and leverage new relationships with representative grassroots community groups. This key work, empowering multicultural communities, has helped to improve access to Tenants Victoria's practical resources and increased awareness of our legal services.

Our website received

1.65 million
page views

We ran **46**
training sessions,
reaching more than

1750
participants

we provided services
to **180**
community leaders
and organisations

Website

Our helpful website is often the first port of call for people needing answers to queries and was relaunched with a new and accessible design in late 2020. It was visited by 610,000 people over 878,000 sessions with 1.65 million page views over the year.

Tenants Victoria maintained the extensive guide for tenants on the restrictions to help stop the spread of COVID-19 and the temporary emergency rental measures in response to the pandemic until the measures ended in March 2021. At the same time work was well under way on updating the website to account for Victoria's new rental laws.

Social and mainstream media

Our social and mainstream media engagement remained strong. All our social media platforms, Facebook, Twitter, Instagram and LinkedIn, proved to be valuable tools in distributing information to renters and referring them to information on our website.

Over the year our total reach on Facebook was 302,338 viewers – a 181% increase from the previous year – while on Twitter our posts were seen 622,800 times. We established a presence on the youth-oriented Instagram in June 2020, where our reach over 2020-2021 built up to 35,038 viewers. The largest age group comprised 25-34 year-olds at 38% of our audience.

The most viewed video post on Facebook was a 'Q&A' video in August 2020 during Melbourne's second lockdown on topics relating to emergency pandemic protections for renters. It reached 14,900 people. The most viewed post

was in April 2021, soon after the emergency protections ended, with tips for renters who had received a notice to vacate. It reached 16,300 people.

On Twitter the tweet with the most impressions – seen the most times – was in July 2020 on the lockdown of tenants of public housing towers in Flemington and North Melbourne, with 13,100 impressions. The second most viewed tweet, with 11,200 impressions, was in June 2021 on our survey finding that respondents lost an average of \$817 in Melbourne's fourth lockdown.

On Instagram, the most viewed posts were both on better rights for renters in Victoria's new rental laws, in March 2021 (5400 reach) and April 2021 (6300 reach).

Tenants Victoria's mainstream media presence also helped us promote issues that matter to renters. It included news reports in The Age, the Herald Sun, Choice, Domain, realestate.com.au, the Bendigo Advertiser, The Courier (Ballarat), Channel 7 news, Channel 9's A Current Affair, ABC-TV, national youth network JJJ, ABC Melbourne radio, Radio National, SBS radio, SBS Arabic radio, SBS Dari radio, the Star Weekly group, 3CR radio, Business Insider, and Arabic language news outlets El Telegraph and Middle East Herald.

The reach of our monthly newsletter, The Renters Review, increased to 8188 recipients.

Training

Due to the pandemic, training for community legal centres and community organisations and information sessions for the public continued

Most visited advice topics on website:

1. COVID-19
2. Breaking your lease
3. Repairs and maintenance
4. Bonds
5. New rental laws

to be online across the year. In the first half of 2020-2021 we focused on the emergency COVID-19 rental provisions, covering topics such as the Victorian Government's Residential Tenancies Dispute Resolution Scheme. With the end of the emergency provisions and the implementation of wide-ranging reforms to the Residential Tenancies Act 1997 in March 2021, training pivoted to the impact of the new laws on renters. Topics including family violence, repairs and evictions were explained through the lens of the new laws.

In this year of big changes to rental laws, we created the expert position of Lead Lawyer for Community Legal Education to deliver the majority of our training.

We ran a total of 46 training sessions reaching more than 1750 participants, including sessions held with the Ethnic Communities Council of

Victoria and the Victorian Council of Social Service. Participants in our training came from community legal centres and community organisations, including those that deliver the Tenancy Assistance and Advocacy Program (TAAP) for Victorians in private rentals funded by Consumer Affairs Victoria and Tenancy Plus services for renters in social housing funded by HousingVic.

Refugee Achievement Award

One of our multilingual community engagement officers, Ali Nazari, who has a Hazara-Afghan background, was awarded a Refugee Achievement Award by the Victorian Multicultural Commission for his significant contributions supporting the state's Afghan and Iranian Dari and Farsi speaking communities facing rental challenges during the course of the pandemic.

83% of clients were satisfied with information on the website

Source: client survey



Our community engagement officers: from left Ramya Assaad, Aguer Athian, Alan Loow and Ali Nazari.

In what was already a momentous year, 29 March 2021 brought sweeping changes for Victoria's renters. COVID-19 emergency protections for renters ended and landmark changes to the Residential Tenancies Act, passed in 2018, were fully implemented, strengthening tenancy rights into the future.

The emergency measures that ended included a year-long moratorium on evictions of renters in financial hardship, a freeze on rent increases, a mediation service to help renters negotiate lower rents with their rental providers (landlords) and a rent relief grant scheme to help rental providers who agreed to reduce rents. Despite the resistance of some rental providers and real estate agents, more than 70,000 reduced rent agreements had been lodged with Consumer Affairs Victoria by early March.

The end of these measures also coincided with the end of the Federal Government's JobKeeper and of the JobSeeker coronavirus supplement payments, posing more risks for people still facing tough times.

The new laws, meanwhile, bolstered the rights of renters through significant changes such as being able to have pets, the introduction of minimum standards in rental homes, and identifying those repairs that are considered urgent.

However, while very welcome, the legislation was conceived long before COVID-19 disruptions. Uncertainty remained about how renters would fare who faced continued reduced income, and who might have accumulated rental arrears or other debts. In the absence of an adequate safety net, too many people still struggled to pay their rent as stringent public-health restrictions flowing from the pandemic continued to reduce

incomes, limit mobility and change daily life. A gap that Tenants Victoria identified, and urged government to address, was that transition arrangements from the pandemic protections to the new laws did not adequately cover renters who continued to be financially hurt by the pandemic. (We later welcomed the Government's second rent relief grant scheme, introduced in September 2021, as a good first step.)

This pandemic drew attention to the tenuous nature of renting and demonstrated the vital role that a safe and secure home plays for each of us to be healthy and thrive. Since it started renters have been over-represented in those experiencing housing stress – particularly those employed in industries hit hardest, such as hospitality, tourism and leisure.

Tenants Victoria's survey of renters in November and December 2020 found the pandemic highlighted, and in some cases exacerbated, the systemic problems experienced by renters before COVID-19 arrived, such as the lack of affordable housing in good repair. In our later survey in June 2021, during Melbourne's fourth lockdown, more than half of renters who responded said the lockdown affected their ability to pay rent.

As 2020-2021 ended, demand for Tenants Victoria's services remained very high – and there is considerable unmet demand. We advanced our work to find innovative ways to meet this intense need for tenancy services, along with our community legal centre colleagues.

We also maintained our constructive discussions with the Victorian Government on framing solutions, informed by our understanding of the issues confronting renters based on years of experience and our great

knowledge of tenancy law. The organisation continued to speak up for our state's two million renters, as the challenges of the pandemic continued.

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‘Tenants may be financially restricted, and this service empowers them.’

- Comment from client survey



Tenants Victoria reported a net loss of \$74,297 this financial year, down from a net surplus of \$115,132 in the previous financial year. This was made up of:

- Revenue from ordinary activities of \$4,621,622 (an increase of \$1,783,350 on last year)
- Total expenses of \$4,695,919 (an increase of \$1,972,779 on last year)

The majority of our revenue was represented by grant monies provided by Victoria Legal Aid (32.0% – made up of both recurring funding and one-off funding for specific short-term programs), the Department of Families, Fairness and Housing (24.9% of total revenue) and Consumer Affairs Victoria (17.8%). In addition this year, we were provided with one-off grants monies from Working for Victoria (22.3% of total revenue).

We have met all of the requirements that are associated with each funding grant and we thank each organisation for their support for Tenants Victoria.

Employee benefits expenses (\$3,817,967) is our major expense item, representing 81.3% of our overall expenditure. This was up \$1,944,719 on last year's result and was predominantly due to employment of additional staff (on short-term contracts) to deliver programs for Working for Victoria and Victorian Legal Aid.

Of the remaining expenditure items, we have this year experienced higher Organisational Improvement and ICT expenses as a result of several projects which will generate ongoing benefits for the organisation in the future.

It is also worth noting the impact of the new accounting standards for Leases (AASB 16) on

our financial statements. In last year's results, the impact of this was minimal as the main lease commitment (for our offices in Fitzroy) was about to expire. As we have entered into a new premises lease (with a 5-year duration) during the financial year, this means that we have captured the full value of the lease payments as an Asset, with an equivalent amount recorded as a Liability (for the amounts payable in the future).

As at June 2021, Tenants Victoria has cash reserves of \$1,691,994, all of which is held in at-call savings accounts and on short-term deposit. This is an increase of \$339,885 on last year (\$1,352,109) and is the major asset on our Balance Sheet. Of our Total Liabilities, the key items are Lease Liabilities of \$955,956 (as noted above), Grant Monies Received in Advance of \$424,888 and Employee Entitlements totalling \$193,302.

Tenants Victoria continues to have a strong financial position, which will enable us to deliver on our key organisational objectives in the future.



Matthew Whitbread
Chief Financial Officer, Tenants Victoria

Statement of Profit or Loss and Other Comprehensive Income for the year ended 30 June 2021

	2021 \$	2020 \$
Revenue from continuing activities	4,621,622	2,838,272
Employee benefits expense	(3,817,967)	(1,873,248)
Information and communications technology expenses	(283,954)	(221,629)
Depreciation expenses	(172,527)	(165,484)
Organisational improvement and consultancy expenses	(177,338)	(140,164)
Administration expenses	(84,366)	(119,118)
Project expenses	(13,097)	(83,525)
Occupancy expenses	(76,701)	(78,874)
Library and resources	(27,704)	(37,266)
Other expenses	(42,265)	(3,832)
(Deficit)/Surplus before income tax	(74,297)	115,132
Income tax expense	-	-
Net (deficit)/surplus for the year	(74,297)	115,132
Other comprehensive income		
Other comprehensive income for the year, net of tax	-	-
Total comprehensive (loss)/income for the year	(74,297)	115,132

Statement of Financial Position as at 30 June 2021

	2021 \$	2020 \$
CURRENT ASSETS		
Cash and cash equivalents	1,691,994	1,352,109
Trade and other receivables	10,000	367,150
Other current assets	45,758	37,566
TOTAL CURRENT ASSETS	1,747,752	1,756,825
NON-CURRENT ASSETS		
Trade and other receivables	109,759	10,004
Plant and equipment	107,864	96,423
Right of use assets	923,846	115,760
TOTAL NON-CURRENT ASSETS	1,141,469	222,187
TOTAL ASSETS	2,889,221	1,979,012
CURRENT LIABILITIES		
Trade and other payables	191,633	121,662
Tax liabilities	43,577	44,162
Provisions - employee entitlements	176,519	178,041
Lease liabilities	130,392	126,541
Other current liabilities	424,888	344,916
TOTAL CURRENT LIABILITIES	967,009	815,322
NON-CURRENT LIABILITIES		
Provisions - employee entitlements	16,783	9,528
Lease liabilities	825,564	-
TOTAL NON-CURRENT LIABILITIES	842,347	9,528
TOTAL LIABILITIES	1,809,356	824,850
NET ASSETS	1,079,865	1,154,162
EQUITY		
Retained surplus	1,079,865	1,154,162
TOTAL EQUITY	1,079,865	1,154,162

Statement of Changes in Equity for the year ended 30 June 2021

	Retained Surplus \$	Total \$
Balance as at 1 July 2019	1,039,030	1,039,030
<u>Comprehensive Income</u>		
Surplus for the year	115,132	115,132
Other comprehensive income	-	-
Total comprehensive income	115,132	115,132
Transfer to (from) reserves	-	-
Balance as at 30 June 2020	1,154,162	1,154,162
Balance as at 1 July 2020	1,154,162	1,154,162
<u>Comprehensive Income</u>		
Deficit for the year	(74,297)	(74,297)
Other comprehensive income	-	-
Total comprehensive loss	(74,297)	(74,297)
Transfer to (from) reserves	-	-
Balance as at 30 June 2021	1,079,865	1,079,865

Statement of Cash Flows

for the year ended 30 June 2021

	2021	2020
	\$	\$
CASH FLOW FROM OPERATING ACTIVITIES		
Receipts from government and other sources	5,521,542	3,026,747
Payments to suppliers and employees	(4,905,413)	(2,707,907)
Interest received	2,601	8,288
Net cash provided by operating activities	<u>618,730</u>	<u>327,128</u>
CASH FLOW FROM INVESTING ACTIVITIES		
Payments for plant and equipment	(52,549)	(65,082)
Payment for rental security deposit	(99,755)	-
Net cash used in investing activities	<u>(152,304)</u>	<u>(65,082)</u>
CASH FLOW FROM FINANCING ACTIVITIES		
Repayments of lease liabilities	<u>(126,541)</u>	<u>(140,197)</u>
Net cash provided by financing activities	<u>(126,541)</u>	<u>(140,197)</u>
Net increase in cash held	<u>339,885</u>	<u>121,849</u>
Cash and cash equivalents at beginning of financial year	<u>1,352,109</u>	<u>1,230,260</u>
Cash and cash equivalents at end of financial year	<u>1,691,994</u>	<u>1,352,109</u>

Senior Leadership Team

Jennifer Beveridge, Chief Executive Officer

Jennifer has been CEO of Tenants Victoria since June 2019. A collaborative not-for-profit leader, her experience spans management and service delivery roles in housing, health, youth and community development over 25 years. Before joining Tenants Victoria, Jennifer was CEO for 7 years at Eating Disorders Victoria. She has also worked at Jesuit Social Services and Merri Health and lectured at La Trobe University. Awarded a Churchill Fellowship in 2016, she undertook a study program at Harvard University on how innovation and collaboration can improve service outcomes. Jennifer's initial training was as a clinical speech pathologist. She has 2 master's degrees – a Master of Strategic Foresight and an MBA, both from Swinburne University.

Kylie Betts, People and Culture Manager

A human resources leader who has worked in Australia and overseas, her professional experience spans the corporate, disability and broader not-for-profit sectors. Kylie has worked in HR for the Energy Savings Trust in the UK, and in Melbourne for Kraft and the welfare agency Good Shepherd and places a high priority on a partnership approach within Tenants Victoria to develop staff and internal culture and shape organisational capability.

Phil Connell, Interim Corporate Services Manager

From April 2021

Following 10 years as a comedy TV producer for HBO, and 20 years as a business manager at Citigroup in New York and London, Phil moved

to Melbourne and has spent the last 8 years in management roles in the not-for-profit space. Before joining Tenants Victoria, he was general manager of the Australian American Education Leadership Foundation, and corporate services manager at Crime Stoppers Victoria. He is active on the school council at Glen Iris Primary School, and treasurer of the Aberfeldie Cricket Club.

Farah Farouque, Director of Community Engagement

Before joining Tenants Victoria, Farah was Principal Advisor, Public Affairs and Policy, at the Brotherhood of St Laurence. She was previously an Age journalist with roles including Law and Justice Editor, Social Affairs Editor and reporter from both the Federal and Victorian parliaments' press galleries. Farah is also the Board Chair of The Social Studio, a social enterprise working with young people from refugee backgrounds. Her professional awards include selection for the International Visitor Leadership Program in the United States and a recipient of the Victorian Multicultural Awards for Excellence.

Agata Wierzbowski, Director of Client Services

More than 10 years' practice experience in the community legal sector includes roles as a solicitor at the Consumer Action Law Centre, policy manager at the Women's Legal Service Victoria, and most recently as Executive Officer and Principal Lawyer at the St Kilda Legal Service. Agata's service on community boards includes at Social Security Rights Victoria. In 2015, she was awarded the Victorian Law Foundation Community Legal Centre Fellowship.

Board

Judith Dickson, Chair

Appointed: 23 January 2017

Judith practised as a litigation lawyer in Australia, the United Kingdom and the United States before moving into legal education as a clinical academic at La Trobe Law School and then as Director of Practical Training at Leo Cussen Centre for Law. She now consults in legal education and training. Judith began her involvement with community legal centres as a law student volunteer and continued as a volunteer lawyer and as a member of management committees and boards. She was an early member of the Legal Aid Committee (Victoria) and a member of the board of PILCH (Victoria) (now Justice Connect), chairing its staffing sub-committee. She was on the international steering committee of GAJE (Global Alliance for Justice Education), chairing its first nominations committee and later its conference scholarship committee. She has also been a member of the executive committee of APLEC (Australasian Professional Legal Education Council). Judith's professional life is guided by the principle that the law should support, not obstruct, practical social justice. She sees Tenants Victoria's work as also driven by that principle and is a determined supporter through her role as Chairperson of the board. Judith has a Bachelor of Arts, Bachelor of Laws, Master of Laws and Master of Adult Education (Global).

Chairperson, from 24 September 2018

Marc Kiven

Appointed: 19 August 2019

Marc is a construction and property professional with expertise across major infrastructure, transport and all sectors of property development from concept to completion. With a long history in the not-for-profit sector holding various roles at multiple organisations, including the Royal Children's Hospital Centre for Adolescent Health and multiple Jewish community not-for-profits,

Marc has enjoyed the opportunity to use his professional experience in the housing and real estate sector to contribute towards a better Victoria for all renters. Marc is immensely proud to be associated with Tenants Victoria, an exciting organisation making real change at the highest level. Marc has a Bachelor of Engineering (Hons), Bachelor of Commerce and Master of Business Administration (all Monash University). He is a Member of Engineers Australia (MIEAust) and is listed on the National Engineering Register (NER).

Jiayue Li

Appointed: 19 August 2019

Jiayue is a senior legal executive with extensive experience as a trusted advisor to senior stakeholders and company boards across a range of sectors, including financial services, commercial property and healthcare. Throughout her career, Jiayue has taken an interest in pro bono work with a focus on making legal services accessible to those who only infrequently interact with the legal and justice system.

Andrew Ogbourne

Appointed: 5 March 2018

Andrew is a respected information technology management consultant with extensive experience leading ICT and digital renewal initiatives across Australia and a passion for helping people and organisations to recognise and respond to the complex challenges and opportunities that contemporary technologies present. Andrew's expertise in IT strategy, governance, program delivery and operational management of IT functions in public, private and non-profit organisations, combined with his experience in risk management and organisational change, allow him to provide a unique and valuable perspective to Tenants Victoria's strategic direction, governance and organisational performance. Andrew founded Pentridge Community Garden as a

hub for urban residents in Melbourne's north. Andrew has a Bachelor of Science (Physics and Statistics). He is a Member of the Australian Institute of Company Directors.

Chair of the Audit, Finance and Risk Committee

Colin Prasad

Appointed: 20 April 2020

Colin is a finance professional with nearly 30 years' experience in audit, industry and corporate finance roles in Australia and abroad. His 'day job' is a Director of Moore Australia (Melbourne) where he has provided important advice to not-for-profit boards. Having lived in eastern Europe for 5 years and travelled extensively for work and fun he has seen how people and societies live and work in many developed and developing nations. Colin cares about a cohesive society and proudly contributes to this with his work at Tenants Victoria. He has a Bachelor of Commerce (University of Melbourne) and Postgraduate Diploma in Corporate Governance. He is a Member, Chartered Accountant, of Chartered

Accountants Australia and New Zealand (CAANZ) and a Member of the Governance Institute of Australia.

Sarah Young

Appointed: 19 August 2019

Sarah is an experienced public sector manager having worked for 20 years in the local and state government and higher education sectors in Victoria and New Zealand. Sarah has expertise in marketing communications, community and stakeholder engagement and policy development. Sarah is passionate about public service. Her professional and voluntary work is focused on ensuring that the voices of Victoria's diverse community are heard on issues that affect them and advocating for policy change to improve outcomes for the most vulnerable members in our society. Sarah is currently taking a break from her career to raise a family and focus on her voluntary work.

Chair of the Governance Committee





‘Thank you for the kindness. I feel respected, heard and supported. The communication was excellent.’

- Comment from client survey



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