RMIT UNIVERSITY | Centre for Innovative Justice

Strategic Review of the **Mabels Program**

Final Report — September 2026

Mabels | eastern community legal centre | mfc malleefamilycare | community legal centre

FINAL REPORT · SEPTEMBER 2026

Acknowledgement of Country

The Centre for Innovative Justice acknowledges the people of the Woiwurrung, Boonwurrung, and Wadawurrung language groups of the Eastern Kulin Nation, and the Traditional Owners of the Mallee region, including the Ngintait, Latji Latji, and Nyeri Nyeri peoples, and Wotjobaluk Nations Peoples, on whose unceded lands this project has been undertaken.

We pay our deepest respects to their Elders, knowledge holders and leaders – past and present. In undertaking this work, we acknowledge the ongoing leadership of Aboriginal people, communities and organisations striving to build social and legal systems that are genuinely just and to keep Aboriginal families and communities strong.

Content warning

This report contains detailed discussions and analysis of family and domestic violence. Some readers may find the content distressing or triggering. Reader discretion is advised.

Support resources

Support resources are available for those affected by or at risk of using family violence. These are listed below. If you or someone you know needs help, please contact one of these services:

- National Sexual Assault and Domestic Violence hotline

  1800 RESPECT (1800 737 732)
- Safe Steps 24/7 family violence response line

  1800 015 188
- Victims of Crime helpline for men experiencing family violence

  1800 819 817 (8am-11pm)
- Rainbow Door specialist LGBTIQ+ support, advice and referral line

  1800 729 367 (10am–5pm).

If you are concerned about your behaviour and its impact on your family, contact the Men's Referral Service on 1300 766 491 (24/7 service).

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Acronyms

ACCO	Aboriginal community-controlled organisation
AOD	Alcohol and other drugs
CIJ	Centre for Innovative Justice
CLC	Community Legal Centre
ECLC	Eastern Community Legal Centre
FVIO	Family Violence Intervention Order
HJP	Health justice partnership
MARAM	Multi-Agency Risk Assessment and Management
MCH	Maternal and child health
MFC	Mallee Family Care
MFCCLC	Mallee Family Care Community Legal Centre
VLA	Victoria Legal Aid
VLF	Victorian Law Foundation

Notes on terminology

'Aboriginal' and 'Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander'

In line with the approach adopted in Phase 4 of the Aboriginal Justice Agreement, the term 'Aboriginal' is used throughout this report in reference to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people living in Victoria. 'Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander' is used when referring to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people across Australia.

'Family violence'

The Victorian Family Violence Protection Act 2008 defines 'family violence' as:

(a) behaviour by a person towards a family member of that person if that behaviour—

(i) is physically or sexually abusive; or

(ii) is emotionally or psychologically abusive; or

(iii) is economically abusive; or

(iv) is threatening; or

(v) is coercive; or

(vi) in any other way controls or dominates the family member and causes that family member to feel fear for the safety or wellbeing of that family member or another person; or

(b) *behaviour by a person that causes a child to hear or witness, or otherwise be exposed to the effects of, behaviour referred to in paragraph (a).*

'Multi-Agency Risk Assessment and Management (MARAM) Framework'

The 'Multi-Agency Risk Assessment and Management (MARAM) Framework' establishes a system-wide shared understanding of what family violence is and how to respond to it. It aims to increase the safety of victim survivors, as well as to keep perpetrators in view and accountable for their actions.

'Person using violence' and 'perpetrator'

The term 'person using violence', rather than 'perpetrator', is generally used throughout this report to refer to individuals using family violence against victim-survivors, consistent with MARAM practice guides and terminology recommended by the family violence sector.

Practitioner titles

The Mabels sites have practitioners with varying roles and role titles. This report uses the following for consistency:

- 'Aboriginal Engagement and Liaison Workers' provide a culturally specific service response, including by connecting families with culturally appropriate services.
- 'Family Violence Advocates' engage in integrated practice to provide advocacy, safety planning and support using a trauma informed and strength's-based approach and support a client's engagement with her legal options and the legal system in seeking safety for herself and her children. Family Violence Advocates may be called 'social workers', depending on the titles used in different organisations and contexts.
- 'Legal practitioners' engage in integrated practice to provide legal advice, support and advocacy to assist clients in navigating their legal options and the legal system and support clients being empowered to make decisions that will help keep themselves and their children safe. Legal practitioners may also be called 'solicitors' or 'lawyers', depending on the titles used in different organisations and contexts.

'Victim-survivor'

The Centre for Innovative Justice recognises the diversity of people who have experienced family violence and that their preferences in terms of the language used to refer to themselves can vary. In this report the term 'victim-survivor' is used to refer to people who have experienced family violence. This term is intended to acknowledge the resilience, strength and lived and living experience of people who have had violence used against them.

1. Introduction

1.1. Background

1.1.1. The Mabels program

Mabels is a Health Justice Partnership (HJP) which provides early intervention, integrated support to women experiencing family violence who seek support via Victoria's universal Maternal and Child Health (MCH) service. Through collaboration of legal, specialist family violence, and Aboriginal community-led services, Mabels aims to provide women with legal advice, safety planning, and culturally safe support, information and referrals.

Eastern Community Legal Centre (ECLC), in partnership with two local councils, commenced Mabels in Melbourne's eastern metropolitan area in 2015 as a pilot, with funding from the Victorian Legal Services Board Grants Program and the Phyllis Connor Memorial Trust. Further funding from the (then) Victorian Department of Health and Human Services enabled the partnership to expand to include Boorndawan Willam Aboriginal Healing Service (Boorndawan Willam). In 2019, the Victorian Government provided funding to continue the program and in 2021, funding from the Victorian Department of Justice and Community Safety enabled expansion to a third local government area ('Mabels in the East').

In 2023 ECLC commenced a partnership with Mallee Family Care Community Legal Centre (MFCCLC) and a rural city council to expand Mabels into a regional and rural area ('Mabels in the Mallee'), funded through philanthropic support provided by the Cybec Foundation.

1.1.2. Victoria's Maternal and Child Health Service

The MCH service in Victoria is a free, universal primary care service which provides inclusive, community-based support to all Victorian families and carers with children from birth to school age. In 2024-25 the MCH service had almost 100 per cent engagement with children aged 0 to 1 month.[1]

The MCH service offers 10 free check-ins at key stages of child development, with qualified MCH nurses. MCH nurses are registered nurses and midwives with additional qualifications in child and family health. They are employed by local councils, health services or Aboriginal Community Controlled Organisations.

The *Royal Commission into Family Violence* highlighted MCH services as a key platform for identifying and responding to family violence.[2] Recognising the universal nature of the MCH service, the MCH workforce is a prescribed workforce at the 'Screening and Identification' level of Victoria's Multi Agency Risk Assessment and Management (MARAM) framework. MCH nurses are required to screen all women for family violence at the 4-week maternal health and wellbeing consultation, if it is safe to do so, and at other times if professional judgement warrants.[3]

Nurses use the 'Model of Structured Professional Judgement' set out in the MARAM to assess safety based on victim-survivor self-assessment, evidence-based risk factors, information sharing, professional judgement and intersectional analysis.[4]

MCH nurses are required to provide information about services and options available; refer to and collaborate with an appropriate service or response, including support and safety hubs (known as The Orange Door in Victoria); and to report to Victoria Police if there is immediate danger.[5]

1.1.3. Health Justice Partnerships

HJPs are an established model of service delivery that integrate legal assistance into services supporting health and wellbeing.[6] HJPs provide coordinated, person-centred care by addressing legal and social issues that affect health, including housing, family violence, employment, debt, disability, migration and interactions with the justice system.[7]

HJPs often support people who are under-served or not well-served by service systems generally or who may face particular barriers to accessing support. This includes people who are particularly at risk of poor health and unmet legal need, such as people experiencing family violence, people experiencing mental ill-health, people at risk of elder abuse, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, culturally and linguistically diverse communities, and people experiencing poverty. [8]

HJPs also build health and legal practitioners' capacity to provide care that is holistic and person-centred through interdisciplinary training; secondary consultation; and collaborative, coordinated care [9]

1.1.4. Early Intervention in family violence

Continuum language is often used to describe responses to family violence. This language – shared with public health models – describes approaches from primary prevention, early intervention and response to recovery. While there is no formal definition of these categories, they are broadly understood as the following, including in the National Plan to End Violence against Women and Children 2022-2032: [10]

Primary Prevention: Whole-of-population initiatives to stop family violence occurring in the first place, by addressing the primary or underlying drivers of gender-based violence.

Early Intervention (or Secondary Prevention): Identifying and supporting individuals and families experiencing, or at higher risk of experiencing, gender-based violence in order to stop violence from escalating, protect victim-survivors from harm and prevent family violence from reoccurring.

Response (or Tertiary Prevention): Efforts and programs to address existing family violence, including preventing the recurrence of violence, holding people who use violence to account, and supporting victim-survivors.

Recovery and Healing: The ongoing process that enables victim-survivors to find safety, health, wellbeing and resilience, and to thrive in all areas of their lives.

1.2. Aims and Scope of the Strategic Review

Mabels has achieved impressive success through its establishment and expansion and has undertaken independent evaluations of both the initial and expanded model, which have documented outcomes and impacts of the program. Ten years into implementation, opportunities now exist to scale the reach of this demonstrated model further by expanding to additional sites across Victoria, with opportunities identified by Community Legal Centres (CLCs) and local government partners in additional regional and metropolitan areas.

1.2.1. Aims of this Strategic Review

ECLC approached the Centre for Innovative Justice (CIJ) at RMIT University to undertake a Strategic Review, with a view to guiding the growth and expansion of Mabels and identifying core enablers to ensure that fidelity to the model is maintained during expansion.

The Strategic Review, therefore, seeks to:

- *identify the core components* which enable the integrity and uniqueness of the Mabels model and deliver its outcomes;
- *inform the expansion of Mabels* so that it can be delivered by other organisations or in other settings while maintaining integrity to those core components; and
- *influence the broader family violence system* by demonstrating the importance of early intervention legal support for victim-survivors.

As a Strategic Review, rather than an evaluation, consultation and analysis has not focussed on the outcomes achieved through Mabels, noting the existing evaluation work undertaken in recent years.

1.2.2. Data sources

A summary of all data collection tools and key data sources utilised through the Strategic Review is provided at Figure 1, with further detail outlined in the following subsections.

Figure 1: Strategic Review data sources

Qualitative case file review

Mabels practitioners extracted data relating to 12 legal case files of Mabels clients using a structured case file review tool developed by the CIJ. The completed case file tools were then provided to the CIJ for analysis, to inform understanding of the contexts in which family violence is occurring, the legal needs of program clients, and outcomes being achieved through the program.

Client interviews

Six clients of Mabels were interviewed for the Review, using stringent eligibility criteria to ensure participant safety, including management of any ongoing family violence risk, informed consent and minimal risk of re-traumatisation. Recruitment was informed by practitioners' knowledge of dynamic risks and readiness to participate. Interviews were conducted using semi-structured topic guides, audio-recorded, transcribed and thematically analysed, with participants provided with debriefing support if required, and recognition for their participation provided through reimbursement.

Stakeholder consultation

The CIJ conducted interviews and focus groups with Mabels practitioners (legal practitioners and Family Violence Advocates), practice leads, MCH nurses, as well as stakeholders involved in leadership and governance of Mabels, including local government and Aboriginal organisation partners.

Program and other relevant data

The CIJ analysed deidentified aggregate program data and other data relevant to the delivery of Mabels to identify trends or patterns across the implementation, delivery and expansion of Mabels.

Desktop review

The CIJ reviewed Mabels program documentation and conducted a literature scan focused on the value of legal assistance and early intervention respectively for victim-survivors of family violence, as well as the role of partnership approaches, including HJPs, in responding to legal and interconnected support needs. The literature scan incorporated peer-reviewed and grey literature, with a focus on Australian evidence.

1.2.3. Ethical review and approvals

The CIJ received approval for this project from the RMIT University Human Research Ethics Committee (CF/29945).

1.3. Structure of this report

The remainder of this report is structured along four key lines of enquiry, plus recommendations:

What need does Mabels respond to describes the safety, support and legal needs with which women have presented to Mabels.

How does Mabels address need and achieve outcomes describes the Mabels model, Mabels in practice; and identifies the core features which maintain the integrity of the Mabels model.

What does Mabels achieve outlines the impacts that Mabels has on women who have engaged with it, drawing primarily from interviews and qualitative case file data, as well as the role Mabels plays within the broader family violence system.

How can Mabels impact be strengthened explores what is required to enable the expansion of Mabels to new sites while retaining fidelity of the model, as well as other system level reflections.

Recommendations are proposed to strengthen the current implementation of Mabels, support expansion and inform broader family violence system reform.

2. What need does Mabels respond to?

This section describes the legal, support and safety needs that women have presented to Mabels with.

2.1. Family violence risk during pregnancy and at postpartum

Women who are pregnant or within the early postpartum period with a child up to 12 months of age are at increased risk of family violence, with family violence often intensifying before and after the arrival of a new child.[11] In 2021-22 the Australian Bureau of Statistics found that more than one in ten (12.8 %) women who experienced violence by a current partner since the age of 15 experienced the violence for the first time during pregnancy.[12] Data referenced by the *Royal Commission into Family Violence* found that, of the women who did experience violence during pregnancy, three out of five experienced the violence for the first time when they were pregnant.[13]

While family violence risk in the postpartum period remains under researched, the Murdoch Children's Research Institute's *Mothers' and Young People's Study* (formerly the *Maternal Health Study*) suggests its prevalence, with one in five (20%) of over 1500 first time mothers experiencing emotional and/or physical abuse in the first 12 months postpartum.[14]

Women who have experienced family violence during postpartum report worse health across a number of domains, including increased risk of depression, anxiety, posttraumatic stress disorder, and suicide.[15] Infants who experience family violence have increased risk of trauma, depressive and anxiety symptoms, aggression and conduct problems.[16]

Risk factors for family violence during postpartum, identified across a growing body of domestic and international research, can include maternal isolation, financial difficulties, low levels of maternal education, younger parental age, poverty-related impacts, pregnancy intention, a history of maternal childhood maltreatment and marital status.[17]

Australian research has also found demographic factors of relevance, with women born overseas who don't speak English as a first language more likely to have experienced physical or emotional violence from a partner in the first 12 months following the birth of a child than women born in Australia.[18] The drivers behind this statistic include this cohort of new mothers often being separated from family and wider community networks, and facing barriers to accessing support services (including MCH and family violence services), due to visa status and limited service awareness.[19]

Both client interviews and case file data undertaken for this Review supports this evidence, with many women experiencing significant and/or escalating family violence in the pregnancy and the postpartum period and, accordingly, presenting with a wide range of safety and legal needs.

2.1.1. Family violence risk experienced by Mabels clients

In five of the 12 Mabels cases reviewed, family violence was observed to have escalated during pregnancy or after the birth of a child. In all cases reviewed, clients experienced multiple types of family violence, with eight of the 12 clients experiencing four or more types of family violence. The types of family violence recorded in case files included physical, emotional, financial, sexual and technology-facilitated abuse, as well as coercive control.

The case file review highlighted high-risk family violence against both mothers and their children, including both younger children and adolescents. Examples of violence being directed specifically towards children include threats to kill, threats to abduct children and take them overseas, racial abuse, physical assaults, psychological abuse, and using violence in front of and/or against another child.

2.1.2. Support and safety needs of Mabels clients and their children

Clients seeking support from Mabels for the first time experienced a wide range of safety needs.

The case file review identified multiple safety needs when women first engaged with Mabels, such as a need for emergency accommodation and 'tech sweeps' to prevent surveillance.[20] At subsequent engagement points, identified safety needs included a need for tech sweeps, financial support (including access to Flexible Support Packages and financial or brokerage support for security measures such as lock changes and security cameras), support to access public housing and Centrelink, material aid, alcohol and other drug (AOD) rehabilitation, emotional and mental health support, and wider family violence support, including risk assessments, safety planning and psychoeducation.

> *"I think it's something I could cope with if I was on my own, but I've got a baby to protect here, and I don't know this whole process and the world and how it works. So, it was just sort of like, 'that can't hurt, I'm going to accept anything that's offered to me.'" – Mabels client*

Mabels clients benefitted from validation of their experience as family violence, as well as advocacy and support to engage with other relevant services and agencies (e.g. police, Child Protection).

Clients also presented with parenting support needs, with Mabels practitioners referring to relevant supports such as play therapy and an Early Years Help Program. In the case of older children, where there has been little or no service engagement until Mabels has become involved, families were routinely falling through the cracks of service provision until the youngest child has been born and an MCH Nurse has assisted the woman to identify or disclose family violence. This, in turn, can result in the safety needs of older children being recognised and responded to. Accordingly, the support and safety needs of both infants and older children were a central part of the service being provided through Mabels and informed the support and referrals offered to Mabels clients.

2.2. Legal needs

The Review found that the legal needs of Mabels clients, as identified in the case file review, cut across various areas of law, including:

- Family violence intervention orders (FVIOs)
- Family law/parenting arrangements
- Child support
- Criminal law
- Child Protection
- Birth registration and ID documents
- Victims of crime assistance
- Fines and debts
- Housing and tenancy
- paternity tests
- mediation support.

Noting that each appointment may cover multiple legal needs and areas of law, analysis of program data for Mabels in the East shows that in 2025 the most common areas of law considered in Mabels appointments were FVIOs (identified across 73% of all appointments) and parenting arrangements (80% of all appointments), while 25 per cent of appointments included discussion of separation or divorce (see Figure 2).

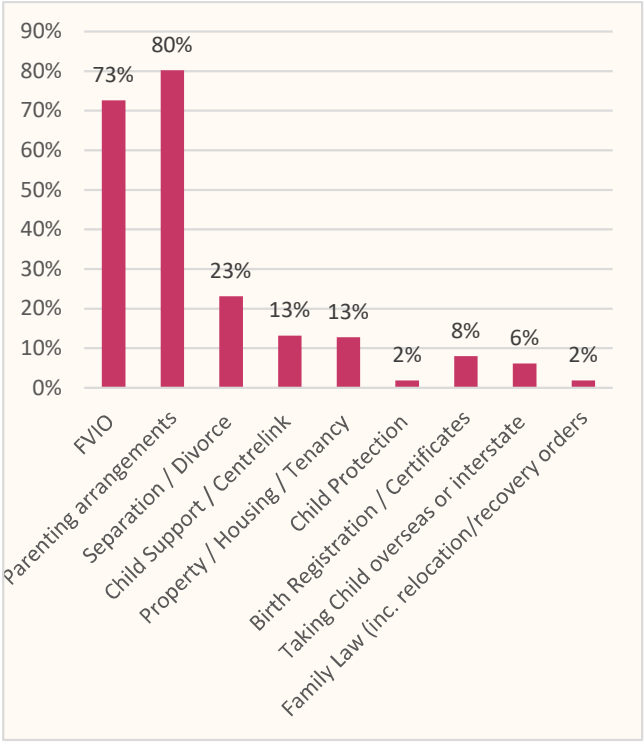

Figure 2: Areas of law discussed in appointments (East only, 2025)

3. How does Mabels address need and achieve outcomes?

This section describes Mabels in practice and identifies the core components, features and principles which contribute to and maintain the integrity and uniqueness of the Mabels model.

3.1. The Mabels model

The Mabels model is straightforward. MCH services, provided by local government, routinely screen for family violence during their regular postpartum consultations. When family violence or indicators of family violence risk are identified by the MCH nurses, they refer women into Mabels.

Following intake and assessment, the woman receives integrated, trauma-informed family violence and legal advice, safety planning, information and referrals in the same appointment, at the MCH service or other locations. This multidisciplinary support is provided by legal practitioners, Family Violence Advocates, and, where relevant, Aboriginal cultural support services, working in collaboration.

The MCH setting provides privacy for women and acts as a low-profile access point to a family violence response, with women typically attending these appointments with their baby alone and, crucially, without the presence of the person using violence against them. The Mabels model, therefore, offers integrated and expert assistance under one roof, at a service the victim-survivor is already attending on a routine basis. Mabels can also connect women with additional services if required.

While Mabels generally does not offer ongoing legal representation, the program does allow clients to re-engage as needed, with no limits on the overall length of engagement, number of appointments or episodes of service. In limited circumstances, however, based on client need, the program may provide ongoing assistance or representation.

Mabels practitioners also offer secondary consultation and advice to MCH nurses, enhancing nurses' capacity to respond to women and children experiencing family violence.

An overview of the Mabels program cycle is outlined at Figure 3.

1. *Low profile entry*	Women attend routine MCH appointment, a universal primary care service for Victorian families with children from birth to six
2. *Family Violence Screening*	MCH nurses screen all women for family violence at the 4-week consultation if it is safe to do so, or at any consultation if professional judgement warrants. [21]
3. *Referral*	If a woman is identified to be at risk, MCH nurse makes referral to Mabels.
4. *Intake and assessment*	Mabels contacts the woman to arrange an appointment or to make warm referral to another appropriate service.
5. *Episode of service*	Integrated and multi-disciplinary legal, family violence and Aboriginal cultural support and advice is provided in one or multiple appointments at MCH site or another safe location (including online).
6. *Referral Out*	If necessary, referrals are made to additional, appropriate services.
7. *Feedback Loops*	With consent, MCH nurses are informed of a women's engagement with Mabels.
8. *Return referral*	Woman self-refers to Mabels in future, including if needs change or escalate.
9. *Secondary Consultation*	MCH nurses contact Mabels for a secondary consultation in providing appropriate referrals and support.

Figure 3: Mabels program cycle

3.2. Mabels in practice

3.2.1. Mabels in the East

Mabels in the East is delivered by ECLC in three Eastern Melbourne local government areas, and in partnership with Boorndawan Willam.

ECLC is a multidisciplinary legal service in Melbourne's East. In addition to direct legal services, ECLC has an emphasis on community development, education and systemic advocacy. In this context, one of ECLC's main priorities is to advocate against family violence, particularly as it affects women and children. Apart from its generalist legal program, ECLC manages several family violence specific programs, including Mabels.

Resourcing structure

The legal practice component of Mabels in the East is delivered by three program lawyers (each 0.6 FTE, amounting to 1.8 FTE) who are overseen by a Managing Lawyer, reporting to a Principal Lawyer.

The Family Violence Advocate practice component is delivered by three Family Violence Advocates (each 0.6 FTE, amounting to 1.8 FTE) and two Intake Workers (1.2 FTE) who are overseen by a Practice Manager, who reports to the Family Violence Program Manager.

The Mabels resourcing model is based on a total of 2.0FTE per LGA, with some funding provided to the ACCO partner (BWAHS).

The Principal Lawyer and Family Violence Program Manager are responsible for integrated practice management, with both roles reporting to ECLC's Executive who undertake Mabels partnership coordination and strategic program leadership (see *Figure 4*).

Intake and referral

The vast majority of referrals to Mabels in the East come from universal and enhanced MCH services in the three partner LGAs (86% in 2025). Referrals also arise from within ECLC (7%), self-referral (3%), specialist family violence services (4%) and from Boorndawan Willam (1%).

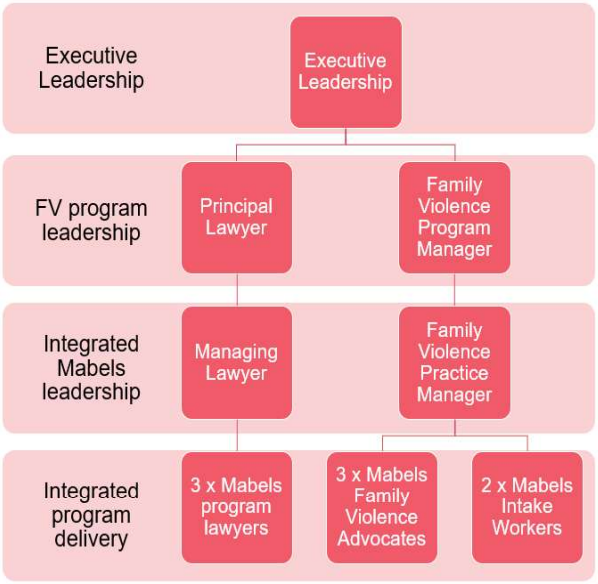

Figure 4: Mabels in the East resource structure

Colocation at MCH sites

Mabels practitioners generally attend MCH sites two days a week but are flexible to meet needs.

Appointments

All appointments offered by Mabels in the East are either integrated, or lawyer only. ECLC does not offer Family Violence Advocate-only appointments in its service delivery.

Cultural safety and support for Aboriginal women

Aboriginal women referred to Mabels can access an Aboriginal Engagement and Liaison Worker from Boorndawan Willam, who enhances cultural safety and connects families with other services offered by Boorndawan Willam or other ACCOs. Aboriginal women are also encouraged to have a trusted support worker present throughout appointments when this helps the client to feel safe.

Re-engagement

Clients are able to re-engage with the Mabels program when they need further assistance by emailing, calling or texting the program directly, or by going through their MCH nurse if they're still receiving this support.

3.2.2. Mabels in the Mallee

Mabels in the Mallee is delivered by Mallee Family Care (MFC) Community Legal Centre (MFCCLC) in partnership with a rural council.

MFC is a regional community services organisation in north-western Victoria and south-western New South Wales which delivers over 60 programs including family, disability, mental health, early intervention and community development services. MFCCLC is embedded within MFC. MFCCLC operates under an integrated practice framework - supporting a holistic approach that addresses both legal and interconnected support needs.

Resourcing structure

The legal practice component of Mabels in the Mallee is delivered by one Solicitor (0.5 FTE) who reports directly to a Principal Solicitor

The Family Violence Advocate practice component is delivered by one Social Worker (0.8 FTE), who reports to the Team Leader of Family Violence Programs.

The Principal Solicitor and Team Leader of Family Violence Programs are responsible for integrated practice management. Overarching management of the program is provided by MFC's Manager of Community Services, who reports to the Executive General Manager Community, Mental Health and Wellbeing.

Operating within a smaller resourcing model, both the Team Leader of Family Violence Programs and the Principal Solicitor occasionally fill in for the Mabels Social Worker and Solicitor respectively where needed.

Intake and referral

About half of the referrals in the Mallee come through the standard MFC intake process, while the other half come through MCH nurses.

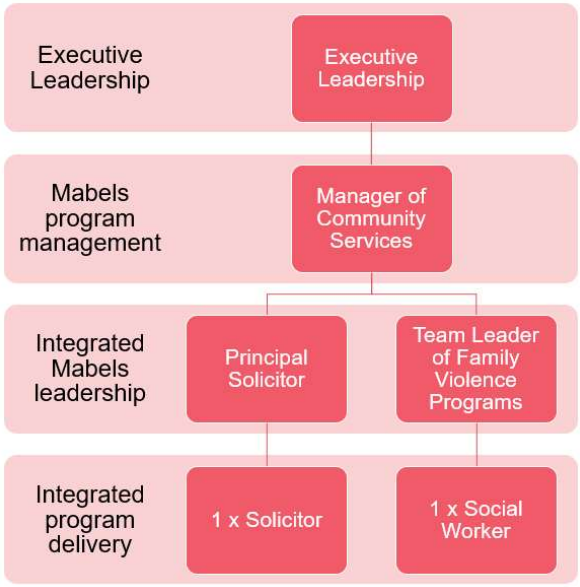

Figure 5: Mabels in the Mallee resource structure

Outreach and remote delivery

Unlike service delivery in the East, practitioners are not co-located at the MCH sites. However, the Social Worker does attend appointments at MCH sites in person with clients where space is available, while the Solicitor works remotely.

Appointments

Distinct from Mabels in the East, the Mallee Social Worker offers appointments without the presence of the Solicitor. The Social Worker also attends other locations, such as court hearings or police stations, to provide support.

Cultural safety and support for Aboriginal women

While Mabels in the Mallee does not have a current partnership with local Aboriginal community-controlled organisations (ACCOs), they use a trauma-informed, culturally sensitive and client-led approach to engagement with Aboriginal women including encouraging a trusted support worker to be present when this helps the client to feel safe.

Re-engagement

When clients are seeking to re-engage with the Mabels program and receive further assistance, they typically call MFCCLC and ask to speak to the Mabels Social Worker directly (whose role includes an intake function).

3.3. Core components of Mabels

The Victoria Law Foundation (VLF) has developed a model which outlines key elements for people-centred justice at three levels – (1) Foundational supports; (2) Design elements; and (3) Tailoring to further meet individual needs. [22]

The foundations level ('Foundational supports') of the model outlines the common foundational supports for initiating person-centred justice initiatives and maintaining such initiatives, and includes alignment with purpose, values and strategy; leadership, trust and culture; the right people; technology and infrastructure; and funding. [23] The initiative level ('Design elements') outlines the common enablers identified for designing and implementing justice initiatives for specific communities and/or legal needs, and includes purposive design; collaboration and coordination; accessible and timely pathways; embedding capability and learning and adapting. [24]

The individual level ('Tailoring to further meet individual needs') outlines common ways in which participants tailored initiatives to improve the overall experience for individual help-seekers, and includes responsive, person-led support; provision of choice; and continuity and supported transitions. [25] Trust is also a critical theme across all levels of the model, and the centre of the model features the people justice is meant to serve. [26]

This model provides a useful framework for structuring the core features which maintain the integrity and uniqueness of the Mabels model, address the need described in Section 2, and achieve the outcomes described in Section 4. The People-Centred Justice Model is set out at Figure 6, with the following section mapped against the three levels (and subsequent elements) which it describes.

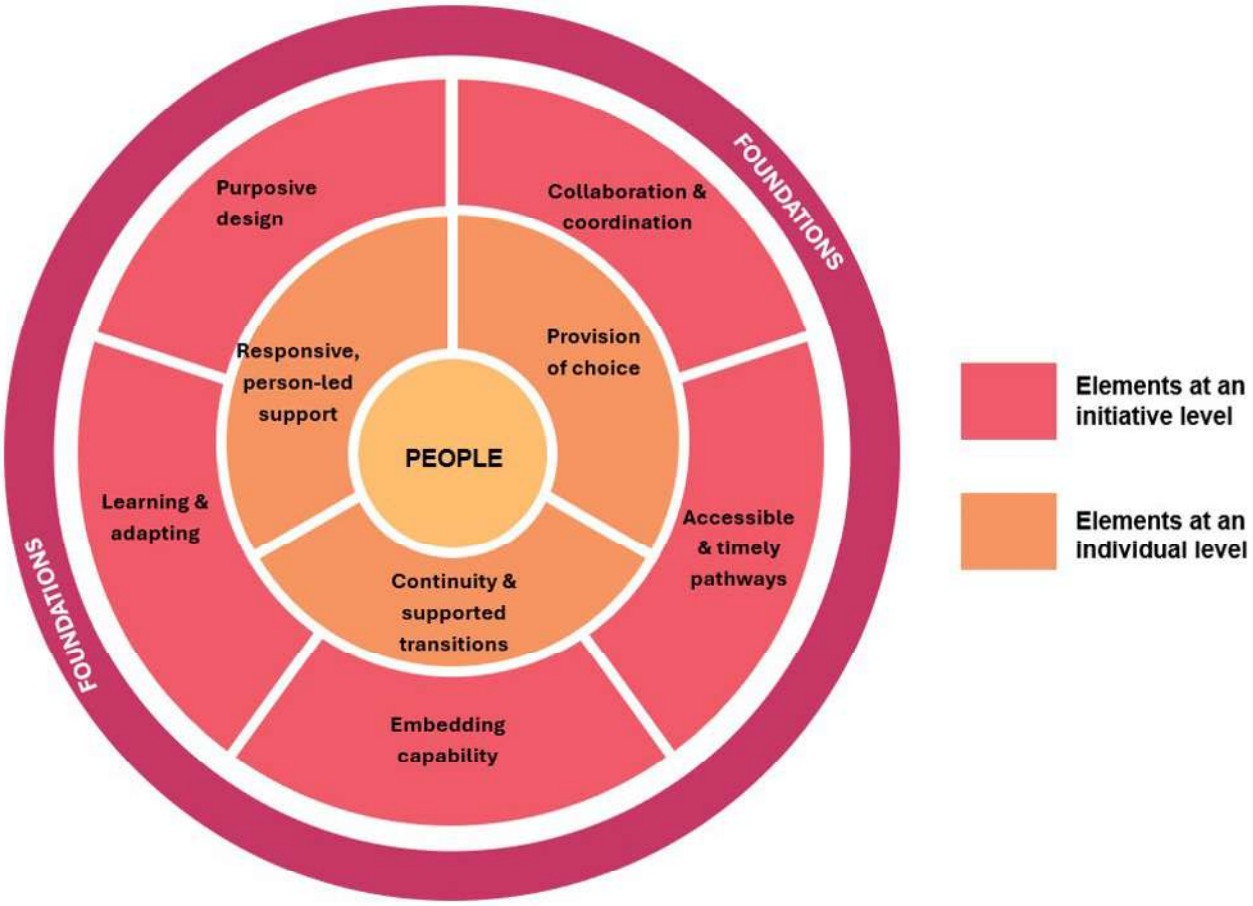

Figure 6: Victoria Law Foundation People-Centred Justice Model

VLF People-Centred Justice Model		Features which maintain the integrity of the Mabels model
1. Foundational supports for initiating and maintaining initiatives:	a. Alignment with purpose, values, and strategy.	1. Shared purpose and collective ownership through Health Justice Partnership. 2. Values-driven and values-aligned. 3. Careful, strategic growth with an eye to integrity.
	b. Leadership, trust, and culture.	4. Leadership championing and modelling. 5. Trusting rather than contractual relationships. 6. Meaningful Aboriginal partnership from the outset.
	c. Right people.	7. Careful recruitment of practitioners with unique skills and knowledge.
	d. Technology and digital infrastructure.	8. Pragmatic use of technology to enable safe engagement.
	e. Funding.	9. Resourcing for the entire Mabels model. 10. Low to no cost for local government. 11. No cost for clients to access.
2. Design elements that enable justice initiatives for specific communities and/or legal needs:	a. Purposive design.	12. Focus on the specific needs of women following the birth of a child 13. Focus on outcomes for infants and children
	b. Collaboration and coordination.	14. Genuine collaboration with Maternal and Child Health services which provides real benefit and fills a gap. 15. Multidisciplinary, integrated practice and practice leadership.
	c. Accessible and timely pathways.	16. Safe, low profile, accessible entry point through a universal service. 17. Timely and swift intake and engagement.
	d. Embedding capability.	18. Supporting new ways of undertaking roles and capability uplift. 19. Mutual learning between disciplines.
	e. Learning and adapting.	20. Continuous learning and reflection.
3. Tailoring to improve the overall experience for individual help-seekers:	a. Responsive, person-led support.	21. Flexibility to respond to a broad range of needs. 22. Ability to work at the pace of the client.
	b. Provision of choice.	23. Variety of formats and locations of appointments. 24. Choice of 'integrated' or 'lawyer only' appointment. 25. Aboriginal self-determination.
	c. Continuity and supported transitions.	26. Leveraging trust in Maternal and Child Health services. 27. Enabling women to re-engage if their circumstances or safety needs change.

Figure 7: People-Centred Justice Model and features which maintain the integrity of the Mabels model.

3.3.1. Foundational supports

a. Aligned purpose, values, and strategy.

Shared purpose and collective ownership through health justice partnership

Mabels, first and foremost, is an HJP. As an HJP, Mabels is premised upon aligned goals and mutual benefit for all partners. Health Justice Australia describe the 'attribute' of aligned goals and mutual benefit as meaning that "partners have unified or aligned goals for a common client group and working in partnership is mutually beneficial for their achievement".[27]

> *"We all want the same thing. And we're not expecting perfection, but we have all got our eyes on how we can best support these women and these families." – MCH service manager/coordinator*

Core to the Mabels model is collective ownership, which in turn enables Mabels to achieve its purpose effectively. While ECLC is recognised as having developed the Mabels concept, all partners contribute expertise and knowledge of their community's needs to collaboratively develop and implement a response.

> *"There's an element of acknowledgement that even though perhaps ECLC might take a lead ... it's a mutual respect of what each brings. ECLC may bring the model, so to speak, ... but then it partners with whoever might be looking, and then they advise on the needs that they have around making it work for their local [community]" – Mabels senior/executive leadership*

Mabels in the East grew out of relationships that already existed and, accordingly, a shared understanding of ways of working. Early meetings were used to develop the Mabels model collectively, which meant that partners co-created the model, rather than having it imposed on them.

Similarly, in the Mallee, investment in building relationships and a common agenda have been critical to longer-term success.

Again, a collaborative development process fostered collective ownership and alignment around Mabels' program goals from the outset.

> *"Initially it was just so crucial to be able to reach out and develop those relationships with the partner agencies first ... it was proven when we set up Mabels that you really need to have [the partners] on board. And it might take more than one meeting or two meetings or three meetings, but it's just so crucial to have those people on board and invested in the same goals that the Mabels wants to achieve." – Mabels senior/executive leadership*

Collective ownership doesn't just occur at a single governance layer – it is also enacted at coordinator and operational levels.

> *"The engagement at the governance meeting level, as well as at that coordinator and more operational level, has been a real strength of the program, even from a local government perspective and the other organisations too that are now engaged with Mabels, the learnings from each other and that sharing of information is vital ... having that buy-in, and that commitment to be a part of it across all levels." – Local government partner*

Values-driven and values-aligned

The Review found that being values-aligned is a prerequisite for the success of the Mabels partnership and implementation, rather than an optional addition or area of negotiation.

Mabels is described by stakeholders as being grounded in values including relational practice; respect and collaboration; accessibility; safety, confidentiality and discretion; respect for local context; and meaningful Aboriginal engagement.

> *"[Mabels is] reliant really very much on ... the culture and values of the lead partner agencies involved." – Mabels senior/executive leadership*

> *"The foundation is the shared values and vision. And I think until that's established or transmitted or checked out, it's not helpful to try and build anything until that foundation is really strong." – Mabels senior/executive leadership*

Partnership is embodied as a value, as well as a governance structure. Mabels partners invest deliberately and intentionally in partnership maintenance.

This resourcing means that partnership work is not incidental but a sustained, ongoing activity, which maintains positive relationships and culture, keeps stakeholders engaged and invested, and preserves collective ownership.

> *"We philosophically put resources into the partnership role that supports [Mabels] in practice. Our staff do a lot of work in that management and partnership development space all the time with [the partners]."*
> *– Mabels senior/executive leadership*

Careful, strategic growth with an eye to integrity

The Review found that Mabels has maintained a careful strategy of expansion, through values-based partnerships, local adaptation, and inclusive decision-making, while protecting the integrity of the model. Stakeholders discussed the importance of ensuring that prospective partners hold values consistent with the Mabels approach when considering expansion.

> *"Who we partner with or where the rollouts may start would also depend on what the original kind of culture and value base already is." – Mabels senior/executive leadership*

b. Leadership, trust, and culture.

Leadership championing and modelling

The Review found that Mabels benefits from senior leadership who role model partnership values and advocate internally and across organisations. This leadership is practical and enabling rather than political or bureaucratic and holds the values of Mabels at its core – in particular, safety, confidentiality and discretion.

Effective leadership in the context of Mabels provides the program's authorising environment, maintaining trusted relationships and supporting decision-making at the right organisational levels.

Leadership operates across strategic and operational levels, and leaders at all levels are essential to maintaining alignment and supporting decision-making.

> *"[In the establishment period] something that we realised was that, you know, getting buy-in from … the top echelons of whatever organisation or … department you're a part of, is an extremely important part of doing the work … for role modelling … for championing and advocacy internally and across partnership work." – Mabels senior/executive leadership*

Trusting rather than contractual relationships

The Review found that the relational culture of the Mabels partnership is central, where effectiveness depends not simply on the services provided but also on the quality of relationships between professionals, and between partner organisations.

This relational culture is characterised by mutual respect, trust, collaboration, shared responsibility and responsiveness. In this context, formal structures such as contracts or MOUs are not necessarily enabling; instead partner organisations are working together in the context of shared values, purpose and practice.

> *"It's like a relationship, it's trust, it's shared commitment, like all those values, I guess you could communicate in an MOU, but it seems to be quite successful to just build it through ongoing trust and commitment and meeting each other's expectations." – Mabels senior/executive leadership*

This relational practice also involves recognising distinct forms of expertise and allowing each professional to contribute to a shared understanding of a client's circumstances.

> *"There's this kind of inherent collegiality across [Mabels]. There's no kind of hierarchy … everybody kind of working together and there's this confidence of each other knowing what they do. And that speaks to the trust and the relationship building and why it does work so well." – MCH service manager/coordinator*

Meaningful Aboriginal partnership from the outset

Aboriginal leadership is essential to Mabels. From its inception, Aboriginal organisations have been recognised as key leaders and partners in the design governance and delivery of the Mabels model.

The Review heard from Aboriginal partners that the genuinely collaborative governance structures of Mabels enables rather than over-burdens them. By recognising that ACCOs tend to operate with limited resources and seeking to establish sustainable and meaningful engagement rather than imposing unrealistic expectations, Mabels has avoided 'tokenistic' engagement of Aboriginal partners that creates more work than value.

This is reflected in the stability and longevity of the Mabels partnership in the East, where Boorndawan Willam has been a partner since the outset.

> *"It doesn't feel like a tick the box thing. 'Oh, we've, you know, we've added on the blak side of this thing' – it doesn't feel like that....It feels like it's a meaningful partnership for [Mabels], which, you know, is just not something that is very common for us" – Aboriginal organisation partner*

> *"It's 10 years this year of the [Boorndawan Willam] partnership [with Mabels]. We've been a partner since the very outset ..., we've been there the whole time. It's pretty rock solid." – Aboriginal organisation partner*

c. Right people

Careful recruitment of practitioners with unique skills and knowledge

Mabels requires professionals who are well suited to its distinctive, collaborative and relationship-based way of working. This applies equally to legal practitioners, Family Violence Advocates, and MCH nurses.

Over time, recruitment to Mabels roles has become more deliberate, with ECLC refining how it describes program roles, investigating candidates' suitability through scenarios and being clearer that the work is different to 'typical' lawyering or family violence support. Retention has improved when recruitment has intentionally sought people who understand and value this type of work.

> *"We've been very strategic, I think, and lucky, but strategic with our recruitment. We've realised and honed-in on how niche [Mabels] is ... we're getting better at articulating what we're needing, and better in the interview process to put forward some of the scenarios and then follow up with conversations to go, are you sure this is for you sort of thing." – Mabels senior/executive leadership*

d. Technology and digital infrastructure

Pragmatic use of technology to enable safe engagement

Mabels is pragmatic regarding use of technology in order to ensure access while maintaining the human connection essential for building trust and engaging in trauma-informed practice. This includes tele-practice or hybrid appointments, where legal practitioners join appointments by phone while Family Violence Advocates remain physically present with clients, to maintain the benefits of face-to-face support while addressing workforce limitations[28].

e. Funding

Resourcing for the entire Mabels model

The Review found that Mabels could not be replicated simply by funding a legal practitioner to attend MCH settings: its multidisciplinary practice and partnership structure needs to be adequately resourced, including resourcing for Family Violence Advocates, meaningful partnerships with Aboriginal organisations, and other associated governance and partnership costs.

That is, Mabels crosses typical funding portfolio silos. Funding may (in theory) be sourced via family violence, justice and legal services, MCH, and Aboriginal initiatives – although, in practice, program funding has largely come via family violence and justice and legal funding pathways, alongside philanthropic funding. What is critical, however, is that wherever funding is sourced from, it recognises that the model is integrated and that its effectiveness comes from the whole rather than the individual parts.

No cost for clients

Being a free service is central to the accessibility of Mabels. Many women face financial barriers to seeking legal help, particularly when they are financially dependent on the person using violence or are postpartum and not working.

Financial abuse can also prevent women from accessing their own money safely. Access to a free service is particularly important for the 'missing majority' – that is, women who do not qualify for legal aid but cannot afford a private lawyer.

No cost for local government

Noting that local governments contribute 'in kind' support via office and appointment space at MCH locations, as well as the time of their staff to participate in training and governance, involvement in Mabels is cost neutral for local government.

This is important as funding for MCH itself is limited. The cost-neutrality of Mabels for local governments also supports the program's low profile described in 3.2.2 as, by keeping Mabels 'off the books', councils are more easily able to maintain the discretion required to keep the program safe.

3.3.2. Initiative design

a. Purposive design

Focus on the specific needs of women following the birth of a child

The VLF describes purposive design as problem-solving agendas which seek to create justice initiatives that address the specific needs of particular communities or groups, and to address aspects of the legal system that create barriers to people experiencing legal problems or seeking justice.[29]

From its inception Mabels has held a clear focus on its target cohort – women at a key transition point of their lives, following the birth of a child, when they may face increased risk of family violence and/or may first identify or disclose family violence.

Mabels has then been purposively designed around how best to reach and support that specific cohort. This translates into specific design features or core components of Mabels, discussed through sections 3.2.2 and 3.2.3, including the following:

- Prioritising accessibility by identifying and referring women through a trusted, universal service, and safety by maintaining low profile.
- Leveraging established trust and confidence in MCH services to increase likelihood that women will 'accept' the service.
- Using a flexible and client-centred approach that provides timely assistance when women are ready, and when it is useful to them.
- Providing multidisciplinary integrated practice which enables a holistic, trauma informed response grounded in risk and safety considerations.
- The inclusion of Aboriginal controlled organisations as partners, and of an Aboriginal Engagement and Liaison Worker to enhance the cultural safety of Mabels.
- Ensuring that the safety and support needs of children are visible, considered and proactively responded to.
- Use of confidentiality and protection of legal professional privilege through integrated practice delivered by a CLC, enabling trusted conversations or disclosures.

Rather than providing a 'generic' family violence or legal assistance response, Mabels could be described as a family violence response that goes to victim-survivors, rather than putting the onus on victim-survivors to 'find' the service.

Focus on outcomes for infants and children

In addition to holding a clear focus on women at a key transition point of their lives, Mabels holds central infants and children as victim-survivors in their own right. This is demonstrated by:

- Providing mothers with psychoeducational support to understand the impacts of family violence and separation on infants and children, and to strengthen mothers' capacity to support safe attachment with their children.

- Supporting mothers to consider and make decisions regarding their children's individual rights in relation to safety and support needs.
- Supporting mothers to provide clear, child-friendly information and explanations to their children, including about changes in parenting and living arrangements, legal and court processes, so that children and young people have an understanding of what is happening in their lives and the decisions and actions impacting them.
- Providing information, resources and reading materials to equip mothers with the knowledge and practical tools to support their children's wellbeing and development.
- Providing child-appropriate community referrals, including to child and family services, counselling services, health services and education support.

b. Collaboration and coordination

Genuine collaboration with Maternal and Child Health services which provides real benefit and fills a gap

Mabels doesn't simply tap into MCH as a referral pathway, but fills a real gap for MCH, supporting them to fulfil their MARAM requirements.

> *"The feedback that we get and specifically from the nurses is that they feel like this is a partnership where they really do feel respected." – MCH service manager/coordinator*

Without Mabels, MCH nurses are largely reliant on crisis-oriented pathways which may not address women's needs or be accessible to them because they do not meet the 'crisis' threshold – for example, referral to The Orange Door or to Child Protection. In particular, women who are still at a pre-contemplative stage of seeking support in relation to their experiences of family violence, or whose family violence risk is relatively low and would benefit from an early intervention, may not have their needs met by a crisis-oriented pathway.

Without Mabels, this lack of appropriate support pathways can leave MCH nurses holding complex family violence risk alone.

> *"The risk [MCH nurses] carry is much less [now]. The real service impact is so strong, I think they'd be highly reluctant to give that up." – Mabels senior/executive leadership*

Mabels, therefore, provides a "middle ground" referral pathway which can respond to family violence risk when and where it is identified, irrespective of the safety needs and goals of victim-survivors, such as whether they are ready to leave the situation of harm. It means that MCH nurses have somewhere safe and reliable to send clients for early independent legal advice and wrap-around support.

> *"it's that level of confidence that [Mabels] gives [MCH nurses] that they are actually able to help in these situations and provide a referral that is going to be helpful or not get lost in a waiting list." – Local government partner*

Importantly, MCH nurses have visibility of what happens after a referral. If the client consents, Mabels can advise the MCH nurse of the general outcome of the client's engagement with Mabels. This reduces gaps in ongoing support but also gives MCH nurses more confidence in the Mabels response. These feedback loops, and the fostering of collaborative, trusted relationships between MCH nurses and Mabels practitioners, are further enabled and supported through co-location, where this is a feature of the model.

Significant evidence indicates better outcomes for victim-survivors where organisations collaborate to deliver holistic support.[30] In this context, physical co-location facilitates collaboration, trust and communication among service providers and practitioners.

Having Mabels practitioners physically located at MCH services enables a safe, low profile and accessible entry point, described below, while also fostering the development of relationships and trust between MCH nurses and Mabels practitioners.

"it's a really timely, safe, relationship-based, accessible process that I don't think is available in other locations in the same way." – Local government partner

In the Mallee – where co-location isn't feasible due to the large distances and high number of locations covered – outreach is a similar enabler of relationship building, communication and trust between Mabels practitioners and MCH services.

Multidisciplinary, integrated practice

The Review found that multidisciplinary, integrated practice is a primary feature of the Mabels approach.

Mabels undertakes integrated practice by bringing different professionals together around the client, rather than having each service work separately. This includes through integrated appointments involving both legal practitioners and Family Violence Advocates; joint conferences and case management where legal practitioners and Family Violence Advocates work together to understand the client's circumstances and coordinate support; shared identification and assessment of risk; consistent psychoeducational messaging; and provision of information and support that combines legal assistance and interconnected family violence support.

Within Mabels, integrated practice enables a holistic, trauma-informed and coordinated response grounded in risk and safety considerations, and in which professionals contribute distinct expertise while jointly responding to the client's legal, safety and support needs.

Practically, this approach means that clients don't have to shuttle between separate services, improving accessibility and engagement, including where safety considerations might impact on capacity to access services.

"It was a great combination [having the legal practitioner and Family Violence Advocate], because it really did sort of cover all of those things that you need, particularly in those early days. It's a very stressful time. I think that the combination worked really, really well." – Mabels client

Clients described integrated practice as providing a more coordinated and human response during a highly stressful period. The combined involvement of the Family Violence Advocate and legal practitioner helped clients feel understood, supported and more confident to make decisions.

"Speaking to [the Family Violence Advocate] for a little bit before speaking to a lawyer [helped] me explain myself and then also be there to help me understand what the lawyer was trying to advise me [of]. [The Advocate was] that piece of the puzzle to help with the missing spots between me and the lawyer … helping both of us understand. It was really good … It makes it more of a human interaction … it made things feel very at ease." – Mabels client

The combination of care, information and practical action helped clients to feel less overwhelmed and more confident in advocating for themselves.

"You know when you talk to friends, and they're just giving you advice, and it's literally just advice. But it's different when it comes from [someone like the Family Violence Advocate] knowing the kind of things that you need, and having someone practical [like the lawyer] alongside her tell you 'actually these are the pathways in order to have these'. It's kind of genius actually. Having both of them there, I guess it's two sides of the mind. One is giving you an action plan. One is saying this is what you need, and the other one is putting it into action." – Mabels client

There is also critical value in bringing different disciplines together to address a woman's legal and safety needs *at the same time*. While the advice from both disciplines may neatly align, at times there will be an inconsistency in the legal advice and the safety advice provided, given the expertise and focus of each professional discipline. For example, from a legal perspective, a woman may be advised not to leave the state while, from a safety perspective, this may be an appropriate course of action. The integrated nature of the Mabels model means a woman can be supported in that moment by both practitioners to understand conflicting advice, weigh up her options, and, ultimately, make an informed decision that considers both legal and safety risks.

Having the legal practitioner and Family Violence Advocate both employed by a CLC also supports Mabels to manage client confidentiality and legal professional privilege, including when responding to interconnected support needs. The lack of clarity in relation to the operation of legal privilege in integrated practice settings raises some concerns that integrated practice could compromise a client's ability to retain legal privilege. Risks raised include that an opposing party in a legal matter could argue that the presence or involvement of a social service professional has waived legal privilege; that the communication was not for the 'dominant purpose' of legal advice or litigation (the basis upon which legal privilege can be asserted);[31] or that privilege has been waived due to the social service professional having to act on their professional obligations.[32]

In having a CLC employ both the legal practitioner and Family Violence Advocate these risks can be mitigated, with both professionals supported to maintain commitment to the integrity of the Mabels program as a legal program within a legal framework. This in turn safeguards confidentiality and legal professional privilege in the following ways.[33]

- The CLCs delivering Mabels are able to formulate internal guidelines, policies and ways of working to manage the risks involved in integrated practice and ensure that practitioners are working in accordance with shared policies whilst complying with their own professional obligations. Conflicting or unclear obligations can also be surfaced and managed collaboratively.
- The CLCs can maintain role clarity – particularly for the Family Violence Advocate as a social service professional working within a legal framework and setting.[34] By confining the role of Family Violence Advocates to the provision of support that is interconnected to legal needs, CLCs can more readily ensure that engagement with the Family Violence Advocate comes under the protection of privilege.

Additionally, the CLCs delivering Mabels can implement clear and consistent processes for information documentation, storing and sharing, ensuring that confidential information is not communicated beyond the practitioners with whom the client is working.[35]

Multidisciplinary, integrated practice leadership

Additionally, multidisciplinary practice extends into Mabels leadership. Leaders work as an integrated leadership team, with legal practice and family violence team leaders communicating regularly to stay aligned, share decision-making and ensure a consistent approach to risk management, particularly when addressing complex or ethically challenging cases.

While leadership is integrated, clear reporting lines and responsibilities are maintained recognising that these structures can still necessarily create some separation between disciplines.

> *"That integrated approach is really modelled for staff who are doing that work on the ground as well, and also through the consultation processes we might have about particularly complex or ethically challenging cases as well. It's always an integrated approach to decision making and sharing of risk." – Mabels senior/executive leadership*

c. Accessible and timely pathways

Safe, low profile, accessible entry point through a universal service

The Review found that the most unique aspect of Mabels is its safe, low profile and accessible entry point through a universal service for women at any point in their experiences of violence and at a time when their children are very young.

Because MCH services are familiar, widely used and associated with routine care for mothers and children, attending an appointment does not signal that a woman is seeking legal or family violence assistance. Support can be provided in 'benign' community locations, with online or telephone consultations where safe and appropriate.

This low profile 'invisible' service needs to be managed carefully, in the way that Mabels is communicated publicly, including with and by elected councillors and MPs. Mabels is therefore intentionally not heavily public facing but instead is described discreetly to minimise risk of people using violence becoming aware of the program.

> *"It's the first rule of Mabels – protect the program and protect the participants. It's not something that you promote across your website." – Local government partner*

Timely and swift intake and engagement

Mabels has prioritised swift response to referrals, with an aim for women to be contacted and intake/to occur within three days of a referral being received from MCH.

This timeliness of engagement flows onto the initial appointment, which, occurs on average within two weeks of a referral being received.

> *"So generally, there can be contact within seven days, but we're hearing that Mabels are starting to work with clients in [our region] within one to three [days], which is also a lot quicker than if they were to reach out to Orange Door." – Local government partner*

> *"We do try to do it within three business days ... And then we book an appointment with the lawyer and the advocate or the lawyer only, and generally that's about a couple of days waiting to get an appointment with someone in our team." – Mabels Intake and Assessment*

d. Embedding capability

Supporting new ways of undertaking roles and capability uplift

Even the most capable legal practitioners cannot simply be placed into Mabels without support. They need to understand that Mabels involves a different approach and need to be supported to "sit in the grey" and not rely on narrow, options-only legal practice.

Equally, Family Violence Advocates have to adjust and hold risk without using some of the tools and levers they may be used to in other contexts.

> *"I used to work in crisis, so at the very intense end. So, in the Mabels program, I found it quite an adjustment to ... super early [intervention] and some of the clients that I've been seeing." – Mabels Family Violence Advocate*

> *"I know that family violence advocates might occasionally feel, especially when they first come into the role, that their wings are being clipped a bit and that the skills and the expertise and the experience they bring, they have to kind of transform that into something else." – Mabels senior/executive leadership*

For MCH services, the focus is on embedding knowledge in their skilled workforce through professional development, induction, regular team updates and practical referral processes, particularly for new staff.

Mutual learning between disciplines

Mabels also provides opportunity for legal practitioners, Family Violence Advocates, MCH nurses and Aboriginal services to learn from each other. This informal, mutual learning and knowledge transfer complements formal induction, practice management, and professional development.

Working alongside Family Violence Advocates supports legal practitioners to develop their family violence risk- and trauma-informed practice; and Family Violence Advocates learn to work within a legal framework and to adjust their practice.

Meanwhile, MCH nurses build capacity and confidence in understanding family violence risk and response.

> *"I've certainly had practitioners say that working with advocates has helped support their practice and approach to working with clients experiencing family violence and take a more holistic and considered approach and coming to the realisation that sometimes for the client at the end of the day, a particular legal outcome or what might be considered a successful legal outcome isn't necessarily the client's priority. It might be other things that are more important to the client at the end of the day ... So, that can be a bit of a learning process for lawyers too." – Mabels senior/executive leadership*

"[Mabels MCH nurses] are having their skill level increased to feel confident to be asking the questions, to do the identifying and to know what to do with that information and a secure place to send it." – Local government partner

e. Learning and adapting

Continuous learning and reflection

One of the objectives of Mabels, stated in the Mabels guidelines, is to identify key lessons and insights in the design and delivery of early intervention for women and children experiencing family violence.

To that end, Mabels has undergone extensive and iterative reflection, review and evaluation across its development, with a view to refining the model and understanding its impacts.

This includes through two independent evaluations, engagement of a consultant to document the adaption of the model to the Mallee context, as well as through the commissioning of this Review.

At the practice-level, Mabels team members (including legal practitioners, family violence advocates and intake staff and paralegals) attend reflective practice sessions to further support and enhance practice, and to provide the opportunity for individual practitioners to gain further insight into how they work through integrated practice.[36] In addition, broader learning and reflection occurs through the partnership integration and governance meetings.

3.3.3. Tailored responses

a. Responsive, person-led support

Flexibility to respond to a broad range of needs

Mabels provides individualised, trauma-informed and person-led support to women, including those with potentially high-risk, complex or previously unmet needs. Practitioners are empowered to respond to each woman's circumstances, priorities, level of readiness and safety concerns rather than applying a standard or crisis-oriented approach.

Accordingly, support available through Mabels is highly individualised, and may include legal advice, safety planning, psychoeducation, emotional and cultural support and assistance with Child Protection, police, courts and other systems as well as referrals to specialist services and for housing and financial assistance.

This level of individualisation meant that women interviewed as part of this Review reported feeling listened to, understood and genuinely cared for by their Mabels practitioners, in contrast to experiences with services they perceived as routine, impersonal or focused on "ticking a box".

Ability to work at the pace of the client

Mabels practitioners adapt their approach with women they support over time, providing information and validation when women are not ready to act, and more practical assistance when they are ready to pursue options such as FVIOs, separation or parenting arrangements.

This person-led and readiness-informed approach also helps women understand that their experiences constitute family violence and build confidence to make informed decisions and advocate for themselves.

A focus of Mabels is supporting women to make informed choices about if, when and how they respond to family violence. Women can receive information about their legal rights, entitlements, risks and available pathways without being pressured to take immediate action.

This is particularly important for women who are still deciding what steps to take, whether that be leaving a relationship, applying for an FVIO, engaging with legal proceedings or even disclosing the nature or extent of their experiences of family violence any further.

By providing clear information alongside safety planning, Mabels enables women to choose pathways that are appropriate and safe for them.

b. Provision of choice

Variety of formats and locations of appointments

Women in this cohort need engagement tailored to their individual needs. This can include a variety of formats and locations of appointments, such as phone, video, or in-person at MCH sites or CLC offices. Women also need the flexibility to engage and re-engage with Mabels as their circumstances and needs shift across their journey.

Choice of 'integrated' or 'lawyer only' appointment

Women receiving support through the Mabels program are also offered the choice of an 'integrated' or 'lawyer only' appointment in accordance with their personal circumstances and how to best meet their needs. This includes consideration of the potential risks involved in integrated practice, including the risk that information shared in the context of an integrated appointment might not be protected by legal professional privilege due to the presence of the Family Violence Advocate.

Mabels practitioners support clients to make an informed choice about the type of appointment that best suits them and that will best ensure that their safety and wellbeing, and that of their children, is maintained, whilst ensuring information they share is protected and maintains legal privilege.

Noting this flexibility, program data from the Mabels in the East shows that the majority of appointments are integrated, rather than lawyer only (Figure 8).

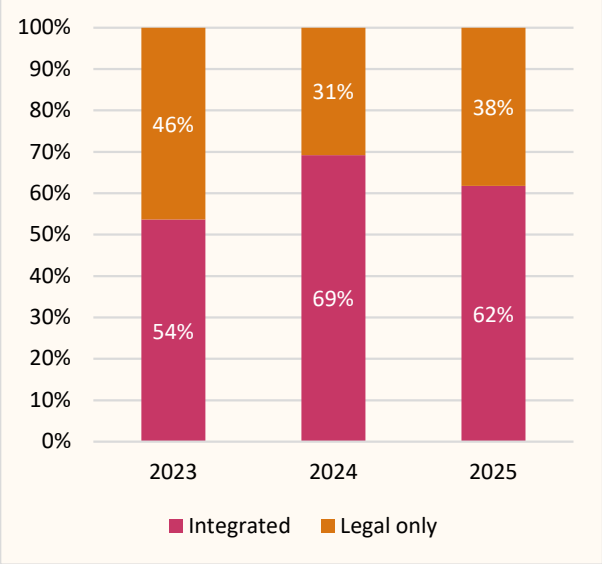

Figure 8: Proportion of Mabels appointments that are integrated (East only, 2023 – 2025)

Aboriginal self determination

Aboriginal women referred to Mabels in the East can access an Aboriginal Engagement and Liaison Worker from Boorndawan Willam, who enhances cultural safety and connects families with other ACCOs and other culturally appropriate services.

Across both Mabels sites, staff adapt support to each woman's needs and preferences, including allowing a trusted support worker to be present throughout appointments when this helps the client feel safe. Clients can also choose how and when they engage, with services tailored to their individual circumstances.

c. Continuity and supported transitions

Leveraging trust in Maternal and Child Health services

MCH services reach almost all women after a birth and are widely respected and familiar to families. In the context of Mabels, the MCH nurse acts as a trusted bridge between the woman and an unfamiliar legal and family violence service.

Women may not initially know what Mabels is, but the nurse's recommendation and associated transfer of trust reassure them that the service is safe, confidential and appropriate. A referral from the nurse therefore carries more credibility than approaching an unknown service independently.

"The trust of an MCH nurse kind of gets transferred to the client support. So, you know, huge trust they have in their nurse when things are really early and then they say, 'well, you know, you can trust these (Mabels) people that are coming into the centre next week'" – Mabels senior executive/leadership

"Yeah, my Maternal and Child Health Nurse [referred me]. So, it was amazing because I had no idea of its existence at all. So, no, she was fantastic for referring me through, and it just was such an easy process … she [was] sort of right on it." – Mabels client

MCH nurses can also confidently explain what will happen once a referral is made because Mabels provides prompt acknowledgement of referrals, and loop back after consultations. When the service operates as described, the nurse's credibility is reinforced. Conversely, referrals to other services may not be assessed in a timely way, accepted, or may not result in meaningful support.

This approach benefits both women and MCH nurses: women feel supported and empowered, while MCH nurses develop greater confidence and capability in responding to family violence. Thus, Mabels extends the protective role of MCH services without undermining their existing relationships with families.

"I think that people trust their nurses to be able to, you know, give them the information about their circumstances. And their nurses trust us. So, I feel like that trust is very transparent … [W]hen we eventually get to speak to the person, they already know a bit about Mabels and are willing to share their information with us so that we can then book an appointment." – Mabels Intake and Assessment

Enabling women to re-engage if their circumstances or safety needs change

Although Mabels generally provides short-term assistance rather than ongoing legal representation, women can re-engage when their circumstances or safety needs change. This creates a sense of ongoing support and provides a trusted touchpoint throughout different stages of their journey, including before separation, during crisis, through court or FVIO proceedings, and after the relationship has ended.

Women interviewed through this Review valued being able to contact Mabels again and, where possible, continuing to work with familiar practitioners who remembered their circumstances.

4. What does Mabels achieve?

This section outlines the impacts that Mabels has on women who have engaged with it, drawing primarily from interviews and case file review.

4.1. Provision of safe, accessible, timely and tailored support

Mabels provides support to a cohort which evidence indicates can be at heightened risk of family violence, including risk of lethality, at a time in their lives when wider supports may be inaccessible or ill-suited to meet their needs. It does this at a time when their youngest child is very young (from birth to 6 years old), intervening as early as possible to reduce the likelihood that young children will remain at risk and to reduce (or prevent) experiences of family violence among infants and other children. The Review found that by tailoring responses to the readiness of a client, Mabels equips women with information and options so that they can make informed choices, plan and take action when they are ready.

4.1.1. Enabling access to support for an isolated and hard-to-reach cohort

Women who participated in interviews described feeling extremely isolated at the point at which they first engaged with Mabels. This was particularly the case where women were at home full time caring for a newborn.

> *"It was my first child. It's all brand new in terms of parenting ... particularly in those early stages, she was barely six months old, still [I was having] all the hormone stuff, you're sleep deprived, all of that, with everything going on ... It's a really difficult time." – Mabels client*

Engaging with Mabels at this point in time can also ensure that further harm to the young child is prevented and that the young child's overall exposure to family violence risk is reduced.

Women interviewed through this Review described having limited or no service supports prior to their engagement with Mabels. Similarly, women described having minimal knowledge of their rights and entitlements, and what options were available to them in response to the violence that they were experiencing. In some cases, women did not have the language to describe their experience as family violence or hadn't fully understood that what they were experiencing was family violence – meaning that they were highly unlikely to help-seek proactively without the intervention of Mabels.

In five of the 12 case files reviewed, clients had not disclosed their experience of family violence prior to engaging with Mabels, and only four were engaged with specialist family violence services at the time of their referral. Some described trepidation to discuss the family violence that they were experiencing until their MCH nurse raised the topic directly.

> *"[My MCH nurse] talked a lot ... she had a lot of knowledge to give ... I didn't know that they had these things available, and had she not been rambling on about some things, I never would have known. [It] must have been another day to her, [but] that meant everything. And also having someone just kind of like know that you need something without you having to say it. That kind of took that pressure off me. And just anticipating that need and then just meeting it. Yeah, I think that's very vital too." – Mabels client*

Women described being unsure of how to get help before their initial engagement with Mabels. For most of the women interviewed, their attempts to seek help from other services before being engaged with Mabels did not address their breadth of needs, and in some cases were ineffective. Language and cultural barriers were noted to act as a further barrier for some clients' ability to express their experiences and access support.

"Around [that] time I did have a [family violence crisis service] involved, but I didn't find them particularly helpful … [The worker] didn't actually inform me with all the things I could apply for, for example, the Escaping Violence Payment …. She told me very, very basic stuff. She didn't really try to help me as much as she can … She could have let me know more to navigate the system. She only gave me the bare minimum. I had to figure out myself what other help I can get." – Mabels client

The support offered to the above woman through the family violence crisis service only lasted a couple of months, and her case was closed quite quickly due to the short-term offering available. By contrast, this woman described the support from Mabels as a "huge relief", particularly due to the legal information and advice offered, noting that Mabels helped her in a "big way".

The ease of the referral and intake process also made seeking help through Mabels streamlined for women who were already feeling extremely fatigued and overwhelmed.

"The Orange Door just sent me over to [Mabels]. So, then I actually made the phone call myself … I spoke to the reception, and I just told them what I was seeking and within a couple of days, I was able to have a support worker from the legal team call me … And it was such an easy process, a lot easier than what I expected when needing … legal support … You'd expect it to be a longer system, especially when you're going in for like a free service … I expected it to be a bigger job." – Mabels client

4.1.2. Enabling safe access to support

Critical to the model, having appointments within the MCH setting, rather than attending a legal service site, means that women are able to avoid visibility of their seeking legal and family violence assistance from the person using violence, including in cases where surveillance or service gate-keeping is occurring. Here, both stakeholders and women interviewed spoke of the surveillance that women experiencing family violence can be subjected to by the person using violence, reducing their capacity to seek help and stay engaged with services.

In this context, the MCH setting offers a simple explanation for why women are attending an appointment.

"Because of the way they were – being down at the [MCH] Centre, that made things hella easier. Because I was still getting questions around that time [from my partner] like, 'what are you doing, where are you going?' 'I'm just going for the baby's appointment!' So that made things way easier, than being on the phone. I can talk on the phone but it's different in person. For sure [it gave me a sense of safety]." – Mabels client

By contrast, women seeking support from legal services may be seen by the person using violence (or other people known to them) entering buildings clearly marked as legal offices, or might otherwise be tracked by the person using violence to these locations.

4.1.3. Addressing financial barriers to accessing support

Women interviewed described financial barriers to help-seeking, with a lack of awareness about free or low-cost service options preventing them from seeking support, including legal information and advice.

"[I]magine if I had to go out on my own to get advice from a private lawyer, or Legal Aid [which] is really difficult to get a hold of. Mabels was a huge help." – Mabels client

Mabels offers support to women who cannot afford a private legal practitioner, including women who are unable to access their finances (either at all, or without the person using violence being made aware of it). The impacts of giving birth and early parenthood on women's capacity to earn independent income, as well as recent separation from a primary earner, further compounded these challenges and the need for free assistance. Equally, financial abuse was a factor, with seven of the 12 case files involving disclosure of financial abuse.

"At that point I was 100 per cent dependent on him financially as well, so I didn't really have many other options." – Mabels client

In 2019-2020, the proportion of Australian households that satisfied income and asset tests for grants of legal aid was 8 per cent. This leaves a significant gap in legal assistance, given that 13 per cent of Australians were living below the poverty line in 2020.[37] Studies have indicated that the Australian population may also have limited awareness of legal assistance services available at little or no cost; one of many reasons why many eligible people aren't accessing such services.[38]

While CLCs generally do not have income and asset tests, for many people seeking legal assistance, their awareness of CLCs may be limited or non-existent, and they may only seek support from legal aid services, that do have strict eligibility criteria. Mabels, therefore, fills a key service gap for women with limited funds who may not otherwise be aware of their capacity to access free legal support without undergoing an income and assets test.

"I guess it would be the same for many people when they are postpartum. You're not working. And some people aren't fortunate enough to have assistance from Centrelink or family around or all that. Depending on the circumstances, whether they've extended out to reach out to friends and people who've known in their circumstances. Yeah, to have that access is such a vulnerable time, for sure. I think you already feel like you've got the world on your shoulders when you have to keep a human alive. And then try and keep you alive too." – Mabels client

"It is that kind of middle group [women who wouldn't be eligible for legal aid but can't afford their own private lawyer]. So often we'll receive referrals, women with less finances will probably enter the crisis system in a different way, where Mabels has really had the opportunity to provide early intervention to women who probably aren't as aware of what the service system kind of looks like … We provide obviously referrals to private legal practitioners in the region and most of our clients wouldn't be eligible for a legal aid grant." – Mabels senior/executive leadership

In this way, Mabels responds to the so-called 'missing majority': those that are unable to access legal aid yet simultaneously unable to afford a private lawyer.[39]

"We all know that the legal aid resourcing for individuals has been, you know, getting tighter and tighter. So … even clients that we would say, from the CLC point of view, should be eligible for legal assistance … sometimes can't make it as well. And so I would say … definitely over 50 per cent of Mabels clients would fit within … you know, the 'missing middle' that everybody talks about and that we know about with all the research related to legal need …" – Mabels senior/executive leadership

"[If I hadn't have been connected in with Mabels] I anticipate what would have happened is I would have … spoken with my parents and they would have probably given me a hefty loan to engage a family lawyer and sort of go down that path … So [it's made] a massive, massive difference. I'm a single parent not expecting to be. Paying the mortgage, the financial stress at that point. You're thinking, oh my god …" – Mabels client

4.1.4. Tailoring service to client's journey and readiness

Women engaging with Mabels have varying levels of readiness to take action in response to the family violence that they are experiencing. The support provided through Mabels is responsive to this level of readiness, with a focus on equipping women with information and advice so that they can make informed decisions and act when ready.

"I just remember walking away [from the appointments], like I had answers. And I made plans. So, there was so much more. And that's kind of the thing that I struggled with throughout those periods of time [before getting help] – I knew what I wanted to do, whether I could do them or not – and then having those answers there [from Mabels] and kind of getting halfway forward." – Mabels client

The women who were interviewed first engaged with Mabels at various points in their journeys, including the following:

- Well before wanting to take any action, with advice sought about possible options and how to protect herself and her child.

- When the woman was still unsure if applying for an FVIO was the right thing for her, with advice given on the FVIO process and family law proceedings.
- When violence had escalated to high levels and the woman had been thinking of leaving the person using violence for some time.
- Many years after the relationship of violence had ended, with the woman seeking advice on applying for passports for her children.

With the support of other community service professionals, legal practitioners adapt their support to the reality of a client's circumstances, capacity and readiness, rather than approaching the situation with a primarily legal lens. In this way, they can support the client to achieve her individual goals, rather than imposing legal options and pathways to safety. This includes considering the safety and support needs of children, providing appropriate referrals, or linking the client back in with the MCH service for additional support.

> *"[F]or a lot of the psychosocial barriers and issues that they're facing, there are legal solutions, but jumping to those legal solutions may not be the most appropriate thing for that client or, you know, the best first step for them … [H]aving that [Family Violence Advocate] in the appointment to sort of give them that information and that encouragement and sort of confidence to maybe look at issues in a different way that's not strictly like, 'here's a legal solution, go and, you know, file this paperwork and do all this.'" – Mabels legal practitioner*

Victim-survivors reflected that this tailored approach and recognition of the reality of the lived experience of victim-survivors, and the complexity of relationship breakdowns occurring in the context of family violence, helped them to feel heard and in control. This acknowledgement appeared to increase wellbeing for women in their help-seeking journeys.

> *"I very much just felt genuinely cared for … [With other legal practitioners] I think this is what I struggled most with – the absolute lack of consideration around the emotional component … [From other legal practitioners] there was no patience, I guess, in the understanding that whilst it won't factor into outcomes, [emotions are] a huge part of the process. I think that's definitely the difference I've noticed … With Mabels there was never any of that. It was very much coming from a [place of] caring about you and feeling like they did genuinely care about you … It was really clear." – Mabels client*

4.1.5. Providing the right support at the right time

The Review found that for some women, receiving support through Mabels helped them to feel secure in subsequent actions they might take in response to the family violence that they are experiencing, whether or not they were ready to take such action at the time of their initial engagement with Mabels.

> *"I think I was wanting more to know my position as pertaining to [my baby] and what my legal recourse was before being able to action anything. I didn't want to be in a position where I started making demands that I legally can't make … Just seeking more options and what that looked like" – Mabels client*

The woman quoted above had experienced significant, high-risk physical violence from her partner before being referred to Mabels, and the support that she received equipped her to know her rights and legal entitlements before taking action. She described her engagement with Mabels as being more productive than past attempts at help-seeking, precisely because it aligned with a point in time when she was ready to take action and supported her to do so at her own pace, including once she felt adequately informed about her options.

Consistent with the example above, the support offered through the Mabels program extended beyond what might be considered early intervention, offering assistance even when family violence and risk had escalated and reached crisis point.

"Yes, we do see a lot of early intervention matters, but we also see a lot of mothers who are not early intervention … referrals that we receive from the nurses may not necessarily be early intervention … they'll make a referral to us regardless [of whether] it's early intervention or not. So, the person could have already been separated from the other person, or they might be going through court, they might have an intervention order proceeding on foot … [W]e definitely do see a large number of people who aren't [early intervention] … [W]e may be the first legal service that they've spoken to, or … we might be the 3rd or the 4th." – Mabels Intake and Assessment

While Mabels is technically offered as a short-term response, the fact that clients know they can re-engage whenever they need to, at various points in their journey, appears to increase the impact of the program for clients and the sense of consistent, trusted, wrap-around support offered.

"To this day, if something escalates and things get messy, they would still be my first place to contact … It's just been amazing … I thought it would just be that immediate, you know, safety support, but the ongoing [support] has been phenomenal." – Mabels client

Within the case file review, most women (10 of 12) had four or more appointments with Mabels practitioners, while four women had eight or more appointments in total. For many of these women, they re-engaged with Mabels over a number of years and in some cases they re-engaged after multiple years had passed.

"[E]very minute I'm thinking … oh my God, they should be able to charge so much money. So, I just feel so lucky every time I'm able to … have some of their time and that's why I'm sort of shocked" – Mabels client

Despite this 'short-term' assistance, interview participants felt that their full range of needs were able to be met at the time or times they engaged with Mabels.

"They were really helpful, and they gave me all the information I wanted … They gave me all the services I wanted at the time … I [didn't] know what to do, in those kinds of situations, so it's so good to have them. I know there is someone who can help." – Mabels client

Two women interviewed specifically noted the value of having the same practitioners providing support throughout their engagement with Mabels, with participants emphasising the relational nature of the support provided, helping them to feel genuinely seen and supported.

"I'm just so blown away that this is over an extended period of time [12 months] that I've had that contact with them and the continuity of the people, but also kind of feel like it was as if they remembered me from then." – Mabels client

4.2. Education and validation regarding family violence and help-seeking

The Review found that given many Mabels clients may have had limited service engagement or may not recognise what they are experiencing as family violence, the program provides important psychoeducation and validation of women's experiences. At the same time, the program increases clients' knowledge about their legal rights and options and gently challenges shame around help-seeking.

4.2.1. Developing understanding of family violence

Psychoeducational support offered by Mabels practitioners educates women about family violence, coercive control, impacts on children, and what to look out for regarding risk escalation.

Mabels offers consistent messaging from multiple practitioners (the MCH nurse, Aboriginal Engagement and Liaison Worker, legal practitioner and Family Violence Advocate) that what a woman is experiencing constitutes family violence, and that she and her children deserve safety. This messaging and psychoeducation can in turn improve safety and prevent further harm to women and their children by enabling families who may not have had any prior interactions with services to understand their experiences as family violence, and to begin to consider what steps they need to take for themselves and their children. As one woman interviewed noted:

> *"I didn't know my rights, and I'm not confident – like, I [had] doubts that it was wrong, but I just [didn't] have the confidence, you know, like this is not the way it is supposed to be. Because I'd been living like that for so many years, it becomes normal to me. So when I went [to Mabels], I learned that it's not right, and I can separate without having any guilt." – Mabels client*

The woman quoted above highlighted the value in learning from the Mabels practitioner that, not only was she experiencing family violence and that the violence was not morally acceptable, but that it also met thresholds for legal intervention.

Psychoeducational support is provided consistently across the Mabels program. Eleven of the 12 case files reviewed explicitly described Family Violence Advocate's providing psychoeducational support, including to women at the 'pre-awareness stage'. This was particularly relevant where the family violence experienced took the form of non-physical violence, which victim-survivors may have a harder time recognising and naming as violence.

> *"A lot of it is really validation, psychoeducation around forms of family violence, helping them to understand that, you know, what they're experiencing is classed as [family violence]. Using a lot of the Power and Control Wheel to help them to understand that and the cycle and patterns of coercive control, because, yeah, they're experiencing these patterns and they talk about patterns, but using different language, obviously, that they understand ..." – Mabels Family Violence Advocate*

> *"A lot of the time we receive a referral from a nurse where there hasn't really been a disclosure, but the nurse has just felt like they could maybe benefit from a conversation. And it's during the conversation with us that things come out and that we can actually identify for the client for the first time that they are experiencing family violence. And because they didn't know that, they wouldn't have reached out to a family violence service or engaged legal help at that point, if it weren't for just us having those conversations with them." – Mabels legal practitioner*

> *"I think you'd have clients coming that don't actually know what, because not all family violence is physical, and maybe they might come not realizing the red flags and the controlling coercive behaviour that's there that can escalate." – Mabels legal practitioner*

Mabels practitioners' messaging can also challenge narratives of the person using violence that are rooted in coercive control, at a time when women may have few other people in their lives to do so. One woman interviewed noted that the guidance helped her to sift through fact and manipulation by the person using violence in terms of what he was entitled to ask of her.

"[I]t's just making sure women have the information about the processes in order to know what they can do and what they rightfully can do in terms of setting boundaries around, say, parenting arrangements. So yeah, you have seen the increase of safety." – Mabels Family Violence Advocate

Practitioners also noted the value of psychoeducation in equipping women with an understanding of their circumstances and experiences, regardless of whether they are ready to utilise legal avenues at that point of engagement.

4.2.2. Increasing knowledge on legal rights and options

The Review found that Mabels improves safety by informing women about their legal rights and options, as well as offering access to legal and other mechanisms to keep them and their children safe should they be ready to access these. This in turn enables women to engage in short and longer-term safety planning, including planning for major transition or risk points, such as separation, and, in particular, to support the safety of their children.

"[They advised me on] separation and they gave me some ... early advice about keeping records ... I did find the earlier advice I got for family law was quite helpful because I was really lost about what to do, and they were really good guiders." – Mabels client

"I imagine some of it is also what if, in terms of safety, if Child Protection becomes involved, what are my rights? Or if he threatens that I'm not a good mother because of mental health or because I'm the one who's yelling ... in terms of gaslighting or coercive control and things like that. Having a bit more of an understanding of her rights around children and where they might reside, or, you know, that he can't just spirit them off to the country they came from. Any of those sorts of things, I think at a very early stage, I imagine, allows them to get their ducks in a row, so to speak, and make more empowered, informed decisions with better outcomes as they go." – Mabels senior/executive leadership

One woman described Mabels as helping to reduce the stress of experiencing family violence and providing space for action by helping her to understand and reflect on what she needed and what was possible.

"You really don't know what you need as well at the time, because when you are in that situation, like everything is all like very cloudy and you are under a lot of stress ... And when you don't know your rights, like you're just stuck there ... you know, it's just like there's a blank wall and you don't know where to go. So, if they can guide [with] 'you might need this', 'we have all this support', ... 'do you want to [do this]?'" – Mabels client

Another woman reflected that being informed about her rights empowered her to identify the narratives of the person using violence that were rooted in manipulation and control. This helped her to feel confident naming her experiences and taking steps to protect the safety of herself and her child.

"[I wanted to know] what I would have to do for [my baby], and what he could ask. It was more of a relationship where he would try to tell me what to do, because that's what he wanted to do. But I wanted to know what I had to do, rather than what I felt obligated to do. So as long as I had that knowledge in my back pocket I knew that I didn't have to be forced to do something that I didn't want to do, to appease someone ..." – Mabels client

4.2.3. Gently challenging shame around help-seeking

Mabels was also seen to help women begin to challenge the shame around help-seeking and their right to access support. One woman interviewed described this shame as follows:

"To be honest ... there is a lot of shame around being in the situation that I was in. Realistically, I've imposed it on myself, but also in accessing a service like that, effectively a not-for-profit, and you know, a lot of stuff to work through there. That was all me." – Mabels client

For women experiencing shame or other barriers to help-seeking, engagement with Mabels provided an opportunity for positive service system interaction, building their confidence and trust in wider services.

"How amazing they were, I had absolutely no need to have any of those sort of concerns or feelings, because they were just so good at making you feel comfortable and supported." – Mabels client

For some women, this window came at a critical juncture, either because risk was escalating or the need to act protectively for their child meant that they were more ready to take action.

"Before having the responsibility of having a child I would've never asked for help. The only reason is because it's not about me anymore ... Being in that situation and to have actually done that for the first time in my life, and it being such a great experience, I'm incredibly grateful for." – Mabels client

Additionally, Mabels practitioners are able to challenge the assumptions that women might make about themselves and reframe what their experience of family violence means 'about' them.

"[A] decent amount of referrals that come through are women who have experienced, have a history of experiencing violence in relationships. So they could be on a second partner or third partner where they've been exposed to family violence and been through the court system before. [I sat in on a few appointments] in a row where they were ... having that similar moment of like, 'why do I keep doing this? ... why does this keep happening to me? Why am I choosing these people?' And that was really interesting to see the Advocates ... support the client through that and reassure them that, 'you know, it's not you, it's the perpetrators [who] will seek out [that] type of people.'" – Mabels Intake and Assessment

4.3. Addressing safety and support goals

The Mabels program improves safety and reduces risk while also protecting children. The Review found that Mabels' flexible, trauma-informed and person-centred approach responds to dynamic risk, needs and readiness, and helps clients to identify and address individual safety and support goals as well as the safety and support needs of their children. The program actively increases confidence to navigate legal and support systems, set boundaries, self-advocate and make informed decisions about longer-term safety.

4.3.1. Reducing risk and increasing safety

The most significant outcome achieved by the Mabels program is that it improves the safety of women and children experiencing family violence. In 11 out of the 12 cases reviewed as part of this Review, women were reported to have exited the Mabels program with reduced risk and increased safety. In the twelfth case, the reviewer noted that it was unclear if risk was reduced, but that it was not increased. The following outcomes relating to safety were achieved in the cases reviewed:

- FVIOs for women and children, including extensions of FVIOs already in place.
- Safe, low-cost housing secured, including safely leaving family home where person using violence resided.
- Enhanced knowledge of legal system and supports available.
- Enhanced knowledge of legal options, including FVIO process, and where to seek further help.
- Referrals made to specialist family violence services, legal services and culturally appropriate supports such as ACCOs.
- Support to enforce boundaries with the person using violence, reducing vulnerability of women to coercive control.
- Planning to support safe engagement and/or contact with the person using violence where appropriate and part of the client's goals.

- Increased awareness of risks, including technology-facilitated abuse, coercive control, and other forms of violence, which in turn enables women to engage in safety planning.
- Increased confidence in own judgement and ability to keep themselves and children safe.
- One-off financial assistance (including funding for safety measures such as locks and cameras) and increased financial independence through support to address fines, access (the former) Victims of Crime Assistance Tribunal (VOCAT) (replaced by the Financial Assistance Scheme (FAS)), and address legal barriers to employment.
- Decreased social and cultural isolation through appropriate referrals.
- Positive Child Protection outcomes, including support to address Child Protection concerns, prevention of child removal and guidance about Child Protection directions.

For multiple women whose files were reviewed, increased safety also came in part from Mabels facilitating referrals to culturally appropriate services to provide holistic support to women to manage their family violence and related system engagements going forward.

Importantly, risk and safety needs can change for women at different points in their journey and clients captured in the case file review were identified as having different safety needs at their first engagement compared to their most recent engagement. As women are free to re-engage with the program as needed, the program is able to meet safety needs as they evolve, with the response of the Mabels practitioner evolving in line with these needs.

"We get a lot of people coming back ... I just spoke to one on the phone this morning, I think she had 13 appointments or something ... and that was over the course of two years, but yeah, as different things ... happen or emerge." – *Mabels Family Violence Advocate*

Women interviewed noted that simply knowing that they could reach out to Mabels at any point provided them with a sense of safety and security. Mabels, therefore, acts as a safe touchpoint and gateway for further support that is always accessible.

"I think with how supportive they were, and how easily I was able to then have a follow-up appointment or touch base with them, I think that was almost more important than the actual support, just knowing that they were there." – *Mabels client*

"Knowing that I could contact them. I just felt so much more confident in terms of my knowledge and being able to fight for what was the right thing. It was absolutely a huge help." – *Mabels client*

Safety of children and young people

The narratives outlined in the case file review highlighted the direct family violence risks to children and young people. Equally, the case file review highlighted the wide-ranging impacts of Mabels' support upon the safety and wellbeing of children and young people. Examples of these impacts from the case file review include the following:

- Provision of safety planning, advice for FVIOs, as well as referrals for counselling, tech sweeps and housing support. Through this support, a client was granted a final FVIO for the protection of herself and her children and was supported to leave the family home and secure a private rental property.
- Provision of safety planning support and referrals to specialist migrant and refugee support groups, along with counselling and housing support. This contributed to improvements in the client's mental health and reduced social and cultural isolation, increasing her capacity to parent and support her child's safety and wellbeing.

- Provision of safety planning support and support to extend an FVIO, as well as supporting the client to re-engage with a specialist family violence service and see a financial counsellor. Mabels formed part of a network of support services to assist the client with complex legal needs, and the client and her children eventually secured private accommodation after being in family violence crisis accommodation for an extended period.
- Provision of legal advice and representation at court for an FVIO matter, as well as referrals to cultural supports, with a view to supporting the client to address Child Protection concerns and prevent child removal.

4.3.2. Wider support goals

Mabels provides individualised, person-centred and person-led support to assist women to achieve their unique goals. Individual goals met by the program or following support from Mabels, in addition to the safety needs described above, included the following):

- Resolution of fines and debts, including payment plans and waivers.
- Referrals for specialist legal advice in a range of areas of law (e.g. migration law, criminal law, family law, and social security).
- Support to engage with a range of specialist services including family violence, family services, AOD, housing, and counselling.

Mabels supports the achievement of individual goals by tailoring its responses to the specific experiences and needs of each client and is led by clients in the support offered and avenues explored. Women interviewed as part of this Review contrasted this with their attempts to seek help from other services such as The Orange Door, where they often experienced a 'one-size-fits all' response that didn't reflect or account for their needs, goals and circumstances. One woman noted that speaking with The Orange Door felt like 'going through the motions' and left her feeling more alone:

> *"It's just going through the motions, honestly. I liked that it was the same person the first time around that I was involved with them, but the second time, it was different people … Asking a lot of questions, right in the thick of everything, and it's hard to answer on the phone so it's like I'm just talking to no one. Sitting there crying to myself. It's like, I know someone's on the other side of the line but it's completely different. It made me feel even more alone. The difference [with Mabels was clear]." – Mabels client*

Such responses can also leave women feeling unheard and like the services do not actually care about their experiences. Another woman described her experience with The Orange Door as a 'tick the box' process:

> *"[The Orange Door] can be [helpful], it can be. They can be very supportive in some situations, but I think in some cases, they hear a lot of the same. So, I think unless your story is something out of the ordinary, they sort of just tick a box, if that makes sense. So, instead of having like a tailored support team, it's sort of like you're in this box and this is what we do and it's just like, 'get that over and done with and send you on your way', sort of thing …" – Mabels client*

The genuine care shown by Mabels practitioners fundamentally shaped the impact of support received, helping women to feel seen, supported and genuinely cared for.

> *"It was like I was speaking to someone who understood me. It didn't sound like they were just trying to tick a box and get it done with. They were able to listen and understand. They weren't finishing my sentences … [O]ther organisations they just try to get you to fit in this little box … but with [the Mabels Family Violence Advocates and Lawyer] it was a very human interaction. I felt heard, I felt understood. Even in difficult conversations, they were so supportive. They could read the energy and know where to lead from there. It was amazing." – Mabels client*

Similarly, another woman noted the value of the time that Mabels practitioners dedicated to her in the appointment that she had, reflecting that this, along with the undirected and organic nature of the appointment, allowed her to get what she needed from the appointment.

"I didn't know what I needed to know … I had a gist of what I wanted to ask … and the conversations that ended up happening were super helpful … Having that time and space to actually have these conversations, and whatever direction you ended up going in is the direction it went. But I never felt like there was any pressure time-wise, which is something I needed. I didn't know that I needed it, but I did need it … [T]hey had sufficient time booked out for just me, which made me feel seen, and like, you're not just another one … [H]aving that space and time to actually just do whatever, and then having those conversations, and … finding answers, validating experiences, because that stuff's pretty tough to talk about. [They gave] time and space to actually just talk and then slowly put it back together. I think, actually … they did really well with what they had, what I threw at them." – Mabels client

Clients also spoke to the value of the integrated nature of the support offered, reflecting that the legal assistance had more impact because of the additional guidance and support of the Family Violence Advocate, including to address interconnected support needs. Similarly, the Family Violence Advocate's guidance and support was translated into practical actions by the legal practitioner, who could identify tangible pathways and options through which clients could work towards their support and safety goals. All of the clients interviewed had opted for integrated service delivery either for all or at least some of their appointments.

"it's unique in that it just provides a real wraparound service to kind of meet all the needs in that one place to really maximize the experience and the information that the woman receives." – Mabels Family Violence Advocate

4.3.3. Increased confidence to respond to experiences of violence

A critical outcome identified by women interviewed and practitioners alike is increased confidence to respond to the family violence that they've experienced.

"A very common theme is that we don't go to a legal service for support or empowerment because it's not the thing you think of or not what [victim-survivors] thinking of. And it's often used against [victim-survivors] that 'I'm going to get a lawyer', or 'I'm going to take you to court'. And so, it's very empowering when they get their own legal advice. That's a common theme I've found … it's a relief." – Mabels Family Violence Advocate

The support of Mabels was said to increase women's confidence in dealing with legal systems and exercising their rights, as well as increasing their personal confidence to handle their experiences and self-advocate.

"I think [it increased my confidence to engage with legal systems]. I definitely think so. The combination of the knowledge and the way that it was imparted, and the care… [J]ust knowing that I could contact them, I just felt so much more confident in terms of my knowledge and being able to fight for what was the right thing. It was absolutely a big help." – Mabels client

A number of factors were noted to be fundamental to this increased confidence.

Confidence to engage with available supports

The Review found that Mabels practitioners provide tangible support to women, reducing isolation and creating a sense that someone is in their corner. In many cases, Mabels practitioners also link women into other supports to address their range of needs, sometimes resulting in multiple services supporting them. Services to which women were referred, included other legal assistance, mental health support, cultural support, housing assistance, supports for children including therapy, financial assistance and AOD support. This increase in supports can counter the isolation of experiencing family violence, particularly soon after the birth of a child.

Having the Family Violence Advocate in an integrated appointment streamlines the process of referral to other services, with facilitated referrals reducing the load on women and making it more likely that women will actually access those other supports.

"Having that Advocate in the appointment, they hear all the stuff that you're hearing and ... that helps them make more appropriate referrals ... [The client doesn't] have to repeat it, I guess, to then get that support ... [B]y being able to address it in the appointment, people are more likely to then follow up because it's not left to them to go and do it themselves. Someone else is assisting that process. So that means that they're more likely to actually link in with other services." – Mabels legal practitioner

Confidence to engage with other parts of the family violence system and adjacent systems

A number of women whose files were reviewed were supported by the Mabels program to engage with other parts of the family violence system and adjacent systems. This includes where women have had prior negative system engagement or are experiencing ongoing trauma in the context of family violence, which can contribute to overwhelm and reduce their capacity to navigate complex systems. For example, women were supported through Mabels to report incidents and raise issues with police, where they previously had not felt comfortable to do so.

The case file review also highlighted that Mabels practitioners supported and guided women to engage with courts, Child Protection, The Orange Door and Fines Victoria. One practitioner described actively trying to increase the confidence in the women who they support to self-advocate and engage with the various systems relevant to their circumstances.

"I'm a firm believer in trying to give people confidence to advocate for themselves and not to be scared of the justice system because it is about speaking the truth and getting up and advocating for yourself ... [O]n the grapevine I've heard some feedback where [MCH Nurses are] saying the mothers have come back a lot more confident than they [were], and that they understand the steps and the avenues that are there for them and they're more confident about it rather than being more scared about potential risks..." – Mabels legal practitioner

Here, the specialist advice and guidance offered by Mabels equips women with information about their entitlements, the process, and likely outcomes of pursuing certain actions. Receiving guidance from experts increases women's confidence that their chosen avenue(s) to deal with the family violence are valid, and confidence to navigate mechanisms carefully to achieve the desired outcomes. It can also ensure that women are aware of what information is important to share to ensure that they met the eligibility requirements of different services, particularly when communicating the level and nature of the risk being experienced by them and their children.

"It was quite empowering to know that I actually had things that I could do rather than just wait for things to keep happening to me." – Mabels client

"[It] gave me the confidence [that] what I was doing was right. In the beginning everything was so messy. Mabels really gave me guidance about how to deal with my ex ... I can't thank the service enough." – Mabels client

The support of the Family Violence Advocate ensures that advice and assistance are delivered in a trauma-informed way, reducing the anxiety, stress and risk of re-traumatisation that can be associated with service and system navigation.

"[If I hadn't seen Mabels] I think my anxiety would have just made the best of me and I just would have still been sitting here stressing about what am I going to do. I am a worry wart. I get into my own head ... I probably would have just still been too scared to even know where to start." – Mabels client

Family Violence Advocates were also able to guide planning and decisions to ensure that actions are family violence risk-informed and likely to improve safety in each family's individual circumstances, rather than inadvertently escalating risk.

"Definitely [there's] empowerment for clients once they really kind of know what's happening for them. They have the sense of empowerment to kind of make informed choices after our appointments. And obviously a lot of safety planning is a big part so that they go away knowing what things to put in place. And if they do choose to leave, they can do that safely. And yeah, not in a rush and in a hurry and in a situation where it can be dangerous. Working with clients and planning that exit with safety is a big part." – Mabels Family Violence Advocate

"Definitely, definitely [confidence is increased]. But then there can be a bit of a fear, 'oh my gosh, if you're telling me that I've got the right to set boundaries, well, I've got an intervention order', you know, that fear of communicating and saying no to the perpetrator can be really scary. So, this is where the Advocate, you know, kind of steps in and really assesses, you know, how safe do you feel about communicating? If you do this, what's the safety plan? Let's kind of talk about what things you need to kind of look out for. So, that's where you see that integrated practice model work and be effective when the legal advice supports the work of the Advocate to maintain the safety of any decisions or changes being made legally." – Mabels Family Violence Advocate

Confidence to implement longer-term strategies to improve safety, including leaving relationships of violence

One woman interviewed said that engagement with Mabels helped challenge the fears that were keeping her in the relationship of violence. Support from Mabels opened up a clear pathway for her to leave the relationship and ensure safety for herself and her child.

"I knew I wanted to leave but I wasn't sure how to or what that looked like. And there were bits where I thought maybe it's just easier to stay. But knowing that there were services available to me and who I could contact from stuff that I got from the lawyer, it just made that pathway seem real, rather than 'ah yeah, there are people there who are going to help you', but 'these people can help with this, these people can help with this …" – Mabels client

Similarly, a Mabels Family Violence Advocate reflected on a client who expressed doubt that she would ever have left the relationship of violence before her child became an adult, if not for Mabels' support.

"… there was one woman when I first started, she basically said, 'oh my gosh, if it wasn't for Mabels, I would still think I had to be with my partner 'til my daughter was 18'. But she was able to safely separate and have safe parenting arrangements." – Mabels Family Violence Advocate

As described previously, the capacity to re-engage with Mabels at various points in their journey itself empowers women to engage in longer-term planning and safety strategies, as they know that this pathway to support is always available and ready when needed.

"I know there's probably a few more things that will come to me that I do need help with, but I always know that I can call [Mabels] back when I need to." – Mabels client

"It was very comprehensive … To this day, if something escalates and things get messy, they would still be my first place to contact … It's just been amazing …" – Mabels client

4.4. Critical role within the broader family violence system response

The Review found that Mabels plays a critical role in the broader family violence response by helping MCH nurses to meet their MARAM obligations and providing an early-intervention option between routine services screening and crisis support. It complements duty and private legal services by connecting legal and family violence systems, preparing both clients and practitioners for court so that clients can understand what is happening, participate meaningfully, and experience reduced stress around court events.

4.4.1. Supports Maternal and Child Health services to fulfil MARAM obligations

Mabels fills a significant gap for MCH nurses in their support of women experiencing family violence, enabling them to fulfil their MARAM requirements and offering a referral point other than the crisis options that are otherwise available to them such as The Orange Door and Child Protection.

Mabels increases the confidence of MCH nurses to identify and respond to family violence risk. Referring clients to Mabels enables MCH nurses to share the risk of supporting a victim-survivor with other expert practitioners and can address the family violence before the risk escalates.

> *"MCH has a role in identification and referral based on whatever things are being discovered or unpacked with the family, which is why [Mabels] has such a profound impact because [MCH nurses] are having their skill level increased to feel confident to be asking the questions, to do the identifying and to know what to do with that information and a secure place to send it" – Local government partner*

The Review heard that where Mabels isn't available, MCH nurses may not have that same confidence in their ability to adequately respond to a disclosure of family violence. This may lead to MCH nurses not fulfilling their obligations for screening and identification under Responsibility Two of the MARAM Framework.

> *"We know that one of the really big barriers to nurses asking the family violence questions is if they don't have somewhere that they feel confident to refer that family on, because it's like opening Pandora's box and then not being able to do something with that information. I have spoken with nurses in other locations and if they don't feel like they've got somewhere to refer, they just don't necessarily ask the questions that they should be asking." – Local government partner*

In supporting MCH nurses to undertake their MARAM obligations, Mabels also reduces workplace-related stress and anxiety for a critical frontline workforce involved in supporting mothers, children and families.

> *"[W]e can't underestimate how [having confidence in a referral pathway] reduces [MCH nurses'] anxiety as well. So, from a workforce wellbeing perspective, I think there's a massive benefit in these sorts of programs." – Local government partner*

4.4.2. Complements other legal services

The Mabels program also supports the operation, and adds to the effectiveness, of more light-touch legal services, such as those offered by family violence duty lawyers. Mabels practitioners can scaffold the support that those services provide by advising women about relevant court proceedings and their legal rights and entitlements ahead of the court event, sometimes well before such proceedings are initiated.

For example, while referral to ECLC's duty lawyer is a function of the Magistrates' Court, when Mabels practitioners become aware that a client is being supported by ECLC's duty lawyer service at court, they will, with the client's consent, prepare a detailed memo to support the client's engagement with the duty lawyer service. This can include representation received at court and reduce the need for Mabels clients to retell their story.

In the case of the Mallee, the Mabels Family Violence Advocate sometimes attends court with clients, providing practical and emotional support in the context of a proceeding. Mallee also offers duty lawyer assistance at court, along with a duty social worker, with the case file review identifying that, in at least one case, a Mabels client was supported through the duty lawyer and social worker.

Mabels was also said to bridge the service gap that exists between family violence services and legal services – sectors that were noted as typically lacking the capacity to communicate and collaborate with one another. Women are usually left to navigate this gap themselves.

> *"I'm not quite sure if there's any women or children who experience family violence who won't end up as in the legal system at some point. And yet legal assistance is seen so separate to the family violence support that we provide women. And I guess the difficulty in women trying to navigate the legal system and the family violence service system – but also how professionals working with the family violence service system don't understand the legal system and can't provide that support to women – means that it's women experiencing the gap of two service sectors that can't communicate, don't know how to work together, can't be more creative or innovative or responsive in their approaches." – Mabels senior/executive leadership*

Similarly, where referrals are made to private legal practitioners, Mabels can play a role in supporting the private legal practitioner, who may be less experienced in responding to family violence and ensuring that legal support is both trauma-informed and family violence risk-informed.

> *"So, we try and provide some sort of assistance to fill the gap between a private lawyer, who may not be so good at responding to family violence, but … where women need to access that private lawyer … for the types of work that we can't support with …" – Mabels senior/executive leadership*

It is also important to note that, while many CLCs provide legal support in relation to family violence matters, demand for these services (from both CLCs and legal aid) consistently outweighs the capacity and resourcing of these services. The Mabels program, therefore, offers legal assistance dedicated to this specific cohort of clients, ensuring that they receive a consistently resourced response irrespective of demand across the wider CLC sector.

4.4.3. Provides flexible support along early intervention, response and recovery continuum

Although initially conceptualised as an early intervention, Mabels offers women who engage with the program assistance regardless of where they are in their journey of experiencing family violence and seeking help, and is not restricted to what may be considered an 'early intervention' stage of experiencing violence. Offering early but flexible intervention support in the way that Mabels does fills a significant service gap in a system that tends to be crisis-oriented, directing intervention to those whose risk has already escalated and missing those for whom it has not.

> *"[In the Mallee, Mabels] captures what hasn't gone down that [crisis] path. Sometimes [Mallee does] get some of the [crisis work] … [But] in the Mallee, it's the early intervention … capturing a cohort that hasn't been captured before, which is good. It shows that there's still people out there that need help, that haven't accessed a specialised domestic family violence service yet, or have chosen not to on this occasion." – Mabels Family Violence Advocate*

As noted, in five of the 12 case files reviewed, clients had not disclosed their experience of family violence prior to engaging with Mabels, and only four were engaged with specialist family violence services at the time of their referral, highlighting that, for many women, Mabels is the service catching them when no one else has.

For some of the files in which Mabels was the first service where women disclosed the family violence they were experiencing, the violence had already been occurring for a year or multiple years before they engaged with the program. In this way, Mabels can perhaps best be described as providing 'earliest possible' intervention rather than 'early intervention' as it is traditionally understood, creating a window of opportunity to identify and respond to risk at a point in women's lives when they may be at greater risk while, simultaneously, facing additional barriers to support.

Equally, while other services often have confined eligibility criteria; respond only to crisis; or have time-limited service offerings, the eligibility criteria of Mabels is broad by comparison, with access not dependent on the woman being at a particular point in her journey and access not timing out after a certain number of months or appointments.

"[My engagement with Mabels was] probably over 12 to 15 months or so ... So, definitely over the extended period of time, and that's what was just so amazing because I guess what I sort of assumed once I'd had my first session ... maybe because, too, it was all [related to] the intervention orders ... But when I contacted them again, I was like, 'I don't even know if I'm entitled to contact them again, it's been months and the intervention orders are in place, so that part's done.' And it was like, just no problems ... I'd hear from the amazing lawyer that I had been dealing with. So [it's] absolutely amazingly well run." – Mabels client

5. How can the impact of Mabels be strengthened?

This section explores lessons for the current implementation of Mabels, what is required to enable the expansion of Mabels to new sites while retaining fidelity of the model; and system level reflections.

5.1. Lessons for current implementation of Mabels

5.1.1. Current model

The Strategic Review consistently heard positive feedback – from clients and stakeholders – about Mabels' current model of implementation and delivery, and the need for it to be continued.

> *"[We need] ongoing commitment to a program like this because the risk is if the program stopped, that would be really disastrous for the places where it's been operating." – Local government partner*

> *"The nurses said they love [the program] so much … They said we don't want anything to change." – MCH service manager/coordinator*

> *"There is really nothing [that could be improved upon]. I couldn't pick [anything] negative out of any of the interactions that I've had." – Mabels client*

> *"I cannot fault it … The approach, the people, honestly … I cannot fault it. Other than the utopia of them actually representing [clients]. I'm blown away with just how amazing everything was. Every person that I interacted with, the way you could book the appointments, the ease of it, the support, all of it. There's actually nothing I can fault." – Mabels client*

Stakeholders and Mabels clients alike affirmed the potential value of service offerings to add to the current model, which could further deepen impact. These included the following:

- *Financial counselling* to assist women to address the financial pressures that can intensify legal and safety difficulties. Women may be managing mortgage or housing costs, reduced income during maternity leave, childcare and parenting expenses, employment pressures, and the costs associated with separation, FVIO s and family law proceedings.

  An integrated financial counsellor could provide practical support with budgeting and managing immediate financial pressures; understanding debts, mortgages and financial options; accessing available entitlements and hardship assistance; planning for housing, childcare and parenting costs; reducing financial dependence on a person using violence; and coordinating financial planning with legal and family violence support.
- *Childcare services* for women when they attend appointments, to enable women to speak more freely to the Mabels legal practitioner and Family Violence Advocate about their circumstances without their comments (potentially of a sensitive nature or relating to trauma) being heard by their children. Previous research undertaken by the CIJ in a court context found that by providing a specialist worker to engage children onsite in play and distraction while the woman attended court or engaged with workers, women were better able to focus on their legal matter which mitigated the risks of the court process being re-traumatising for women and children.[40]
- *Expanding legal areas* in which Mabels offers advice. One example raised was advice on property settlements, with women struggling to access this advice and support elsewhere without having to pay legal fees.

- *Exploring the ability for legal practitioners to provide ongoing representation*

  Stakeholders identified gaps in referral avenues for ongoing legal assistance, such as ongoing assistance in family law matters and other specialist legal areas, and services generally being at capacity and unable to provide representation due to demand outweighing supply.

  While, currently, clients of Mabels may be able to be referred to other programs for ongoing assistance if they are eligible, such as to ECLC's SAGE (Support, Advice, Guidance Empowerment) Program [41] or to the general community law program provided by both ECLC and MFCCLC; it is clear that the client cohort is under-resourced in terms of access to free legal representation in areas of law relevant to their circumstances.

  At the same time, having Mabels practitioners undertake ongoing casework as part of the Mabels program might compromise the model as it currently operates, or increase workloads such that the effectiveness of the model is reduced.

  "I think it's just like in a perfect world, which, you know, you would never [have], they could, you know ... be the one to support you through the intervention order process and potentially, you know, representing you if it does come to the court [including] the custody [proceedings]." – Mabels client

  Nonetheless, it is clear that further funding is needed, either within Mabels or the broader legal assistance sector, to ensure that critical legal needs of victim-survivors of family violence are able to be met.

5.1.2. Other early intervention contexts

While not being a focus of the Review or explored in any depth, stakeholders proactively identified that there may be other early intervention contexts in which the Mabels model could operate if core components of the model can be replicated in these settings. This included prenatal services provided during pregnancy, noting that settings in which fathers are more likely to attend would require extreme caution and care to protect the model and minimise risk posed to women seeking support.

"I've had clients that had concerns ... [while] pregnant ... And maybe if [hospital staff] had referral pathways to go, 'I'm seeing stuff here, I'm a bit concerned, I've had an opportunity to have a quiet word and then refer them on without the partner' – Mabels legal practitioner

"There's a challenge between wanting to increase visibility and increase our reach and not increase it too much that it's then it becomes too visible and sort of they lose that safety net" – Mabels legal practitioner

Since 2020, ECLC have partnered with Eastern Health and Boorndawan Willam to develop and deliver the WELS (Women Engaging and Living Safely) Program, [42] which is designed to respond to the needs of women engaged with maternity services who are experiencing or at risk of experiencing family violence. Whilst they are distinct, the WELS and Mabels programs currently work closely together, with similar principles and objectives, as well as strong cross-referral processes. The WELS program offers the kind of 'earlier intervention' raised by stakeholders and provides important learnings for expanding the Mabels program into prenatal and other settings.

5.2. Lessons for the expansion of Mabels

The most consistent suggestion for how to increase the impact of Mabels was to expand it to more sites.

"I'd love to see it everywhere." – MCH Nurse

"We have to make sure this is available to other people." – Mabels client

When considering expansion, Mabels should take a fidelity-with-adaptation approach, protecting the core components, principles and values that make Mabels effective, while adapting elements to local circumstances to increase likelihood of success in new contexts. This Review identified the following features of what should be held core, and what can be adapted, if Mabels were to be made available in new locations (detailed further in the following sections):

What to hold core

- Health-justice partnership model.
- Strong collaborative governance and partnership maintenance.
- Aboriginal inclusivity and pathways.
- Trust, relational culture, and mutual respect.
- Low profile, "invisible" access.
- Simple, swift referral and intake processes.
- Integrated, multidisciplinary practice and practice leadership.
- Robust recruitment, induction and support for specialised roles.
- CLC employer arrangements for legal practitioners and Family Violence Advocates.
- Pace and sequencing of system-level engagement.
- Strategic communications and political engagement.

What to adapt

- Co-location and outreach frequency, locations, modes.
- Use of technology and digital infrastructure.
- Degree of formalisation.

Figure 9: What to hold core and what to adapt in expansion of Mabels

5.2.1. What to hold core

Health justice partnership model

Future Mabels sites should be established as an integrated HJP, rather than simply a legal service located within an MCH setting. This distinction is important because replicating only one component (such as placing a legal practitioner in an MCH clinic) does not reproduce the model of Mabels.

> HJP integrates legal help into health and community services, recognising that those most likely to experience legal need and its impact are more likely to be in contact with [health and community services] than legal services. Through partnership, HJPs build the capability of health and legal practitioners and capacity of the services in which they work to provide an accessible, 'person centred' and holistic response to complex need.[43]

HJPs are a demonstrated model of service delivery built on the assumption that pursuing health and legal outcomes in partnership will have better results than service provision in silos.[44] Equally, people experiencing domestic and family violence are a population group at higher risk of both poor health and justice outcomes, making this cohort a particularly suitable to HJP approaches.

Strong collaborative governance and partnership maintenance

Mabels requires governance arrangements that enable collective ownership across partners. Any expansion of Mabels should begin with relationship-building, governance establishment and model development through that collaborative governance, rather than introducing a fully formed model without local consultation. Collaborative governance structures should include representatives from relevant local government / MCH, legal services, as well as Aboriginal leadership.

Partnerships also need active and continuous investment, and partnership maintenance is a substantive function of the Mabels model. Resources and time (including staff resources) must be allocated to partnership coordination, relationship development and maintenance and shared learning, not simply service delivery. In addition to regular governance and practice meetings, partnership maintenance activities may include informal communications; joint professional development; visits between partner services; periodic review of protocols and referral barriers, and early resolution of emerging tensions.

Aboriginal inclusivity and culturally safe pathways

Aboriginal leadership should be embedded in the design, governance, delivery and evaluation of any expansion of Mabels. Sites should engage local Aboriginal organisations and communities early to support Aboriginal leadership and self-determination.

Relationships with Aboriginal organisations and practitioners cannot be assumed to develop automatically. They require deliberate investment, persistence and realistic expectations about local capacity. Where a relationship is not yet functioning effectively, expansions should seek to identify and understand the barriers and establish a practical plan for inclusion.

In future expansion, culturally safe pathways should be developed by or with local Aboriginal partners; recognise the effects of colonisation, racism and institutional mistrust; provide choice about where and how support is accessed; and use culturally appropriate communication and referral practices.

Trust and relational practice

Trust is a core operating condition for Mabels. Partners need confidence that colleagues will maintain confidentiality, communicate reliably, and follow through on agreed actions.

To create a relational culture built on mutual trust, expansion sites should promote respect for different forms of expertise and professions; demonstrate transparency about organisational limitations, policies and procedures; encourage curiosity rather than professional defensiveness; and pay attention to power differences between health, legal, community and Aboriginal organisations.

Low profile, 'invisible' access

Expansion sites must maintain the low profile and accessible entry point through a universal service for women at any point in their experiences of violence. This is a key feature of the success of Mabels but, more importantly, keeps women safe.

If this low profile cannot be maintained, including due to funding contexts which increase awareness of Mabels, expansion sites should reconsider whether the Mabels model is appropriate or feasible for them to implement.

Simple, swift referral and intake processes

Referral and intake should be simple, timely and coordinated. A short referral pathway is especially important where women are experiencing multiple and/or urgent needs. Delays or repeated assessments may result in missed opportunities for intervention.

Key features of referral and intake processes for expanded Mabels sites should include a single, clear point of contact; rapid follow-up; minimal repetition of personal information; consent-based information sharing; clear arrangements for urgent safety concerns; and feedback to the referring practitioner where appropriate.

Integrated, multidisciplinary practice and practice leadership

The distinctive value of Mabels is its capacity to provide a coordinated, wraparound response that identifies and addresses a woman's wide-ranging needs. Any expansion of Mabels must, therefore, retain a genuinely multidisciplinary approach, bringing together legal practitioners and Family Violence Advocates into a single, integrated team.

The purpose is not simply to co-locate professionals, but to enable coordinated thinking and action around the whole situation affecting a woman and her children.

Integrated practice leadership is similarly key to maintaining the model's purpose;[45] supporting complex decision-making; assisting with risk escalation; and preventing the partnership from becoming just a series of referrals.

Robust recruitment, induction and support for specialised roles

Expansion sites should recruit practitioners who combine relevant technical expertise with strong relationship-building and collaboration skills. For legal and Family Violence Advocate roles, recruitment should consider capacity and willingness to work across professional boundaries; ability to undertake partnership and collaborative work; and cultural responsiveness, alongside 'standard' skills and qualifications.

Specialist practitioners cannot simply be placed into Mabels without preparation. Legal practitioners need support to work beyond narrow, options-based lawyering and to operate comfortably within an early intervention, multidisciplinary model. Family Violence Advocates may similarly need support to work within Mabels' approach to risk, safety and coordinated practice, including understanding when and where legal professional privilege applies.

Induction should cover the Mabels model; partner roles and responsibilities; information sharing and its intersections with legal professional privilege; family violence risk assessment and safety planning; and culturally safe practice. Practitioners should receive ongoing supervision, reflective practice, and professional development.

CLC employer arrangements for legal practitioners and Family Violence Advocates

The experience of Mabels' service delivery has highlighted that the model works most effectively by having the legal assistance service that delivers Mabels employ both the legal practitioner and the Family Violence Advocate. Most important, however, is ensuring that the legal practitioner and the Family Violence Advocate are both employed by a legal assistance service, even if they are employed by different legal assistance services.

This approach helps to ensure the legal service or services delivering the Mabels program maintain the program's integrity as a legal program within a legal framework, minimising risks to legal professional privilege, in the following ways:

- It enables the employer legal service or services to formulate (and monitor compliance with) internal guidelines and policies which carefully manage the risks involved in integrated practice and have both practitioners work in accordance with these same policies, while complying with their own professional obligations.
- It enables the employer legal service or services to maintain role clarity between Mabels practitioners, including clearly outlining the expectations for the Family Violence Advocate as a social service professional working within a legal framework, with an emphasis on responding to interconnected support needs that complement legal support.
- It enables the employer legal service or services to maintain clear processes for information documentation, storing and sharing, ensuring that confidential information is not communicated beyond the practitioners with whom the client is working.

Pace and sequencing of system-level engagement

Engagement with local system players such as The Orange Door, police and Child Protection should be deliberate and staged. These systems are important to client safety and referral coordination, but they may involve different mandates, thresholds, information sharing requirements, and organisational cultures and constraints.

Any expansion of Mabels, however, should avoid allowing broader service system processes to define the entire model. The strength of Mabels is its trusted, relationship-based and early intervention role. System engagement should, therefore, support that role rather than make access more bureaucratic or deter women from seeking assistance.

Communications and political strategies (while prioritising risk management).

Expansion sites should develop a communication strategy that accurately represents Mabels as an integrated partnership, rather than as a legal outreach program delivered in a health setting.

Political and public engagement should be carefully coordinated. Sites may need to communicate with funders, government departments, local councils, service networks and community leaders, but advocacy should not compromise client safety, confidentiality or partner relationships.

Communication should prioritise the safety, trust and accessibility of the service. Communication strategies and risk management should include agreed media and public-comment protocols considering risks to clients, particularly where people using violence may monitor information.

5.2.2. What to adapt to local context

Co-location and outreach frequency, locations, modes.

Co-location should be treated as a means of building accessibility, trust and relationships, rather than as a fixed requirement that must look identical at every site. In some locations, frequent co-location may be necessary to build trust and identify needs early. In others, less frequent visits supported by strong referral and communication pathways may be appropriate and more readily accommodated within available resources and physical infrastructure. An inability to accommodate co-location should not, therefore, become a barrier to delivering the model.

The Mallee experience demonstrates that the model can operate across a larger geographical area, but arrangements need to reflect regional distances and service availability. What should remain core is accessible, relationship-based contact and effective integration with MCH services rather than a prescribed number of days or a single physical location.

The appropriate arrangement will depend on local geography, transport, workforce availability, and the distribution of health and community services within the catchment.

Expansion sites may consider use of regular co-location in MCH or other trusted health settings; outreach to multiple health, community or Aboriginal service locations; outreach linked to existing appointments or community activities; and flexible, mobile or pop-up service delivery.

Use of technology and digital infrastructure.

Technology should extend access and support collaboration, while remaining subordinate to relationship-based practice. Telepractice and hybrid appointments may be useful where distance, transport, workforce shortages or safety concerns limit face-to-face contact.

Expansion sites should establish clear protocols for privacy, legal professional privilege, consent, data security and information sharing. This is particularly important when MCH, legal, and family violence services use different systems and obligations.

Any use of technology should not become a barrier for clients with limited connectivity, digital literacy, privacy at home or concerns about monitoring by a person using violence.

Degree of formalisation

Formal agreements can provide clarity and continuity as Mabels expands. However, excessive formalisation may create bureaucracy, slow referrals and weaken the relational culture that enables the model to work.

The appropriate level of formalisation will depend on the maturity, size and complexity of the local partnership. Possible instruments may include a partnership statement of intent; a memorandum of understanding; service-level agreements; establishment of agreed referral and information-sharing agreements.

Formal documents should not attempt to prescribe every aspect of day-to-day collaboration. Relational practice still requires trust, informal communication, professional judgement and flexibility. Partners should review formal agreements periodically to ensure that they support, rather than replace, active relationship maintenance.

5.3. Broader reflections

5.3.1. The need for a consistent understanding of early intervention

While 'primary prevention', 'response' and 'recovery and healing' are generally quickly and easily understood categories, 'early intervention' is a more nebulous concept which, in different contexts, may mean different things.

The National Plan to End Violence against Women and Children 2022-2032 states that early intervention is one of the least developed areas of work and needs greater attention.[46] Safe + Equal have argued that early intervention has received less specific focus in terms of building an evidence base for what works across systems, and developing considerations for policy and practice and coordination by key stakeholders.[47]

The conceptualisation of early intervention in a trajectory potentially undervalues its importance, contributing to a lack of attention. In particular, the delineation between early intervention and response can both undermine the critical role of programs like Mabels which are effectively engaging with victim-survivors across a continuum of risk, as well as siloing system responses in ways that do not reflect how dynamic risk and trajectories of harm work in practice.

The CIJ echoes Safe + Equal who have called for greater investment in 'early intervention' that is coordinated, collaborative, and argue that there are opportunities for greater clarity within Commonwealth and state policy on how governments are explicitly investing in early intervention as a key domain in family and gender-based violence responses.[48]

It is particularly important that understandings of early intervention are not limited to simply 'early in the experience of violence.' This is also reflected in the Rapid Review into Prevention Approaches, which similarly challenged the siloed concept of prevention in theoretical frameworks which prioritise 'primary' prevention over 'secondary' and 'tertiary' prevention.[49] The Rapid Review found that all forms of prevention need to be operationalised together for an effective service response.[50]

This Review has shown how Mabels could as easily be categorised as a response and healing intervention, as it could an early intervention. That is also reflected in the definition of early intervention that ECLC has adopted in the context of Mabels:

> A specialised family violence legal response at a critical time in a woman's experience, earlier than she would otherwise access it, provided in a context where she is particularly likely to have existing or emerging family violence and legal needs and that aims to offer an intervention in the experience of the violence to limit or prevent further harm.[51]

Mabels demonstrates that 'early' interventions are responding to violence that may have been occurring for years. Mabels intervenes as early as possible without excluding people because of where they are in their journey, and in doing so is filling a gap that the specialist family violence response system is not able to fill due to both resourcing challenges and accessibility.

To enable better clarity, Figure 10 builds upon the continuum conceptualisation of responses to family violence, instead showing how early intervention is a central intersecting layer or doorway to prevention, response and recovery.

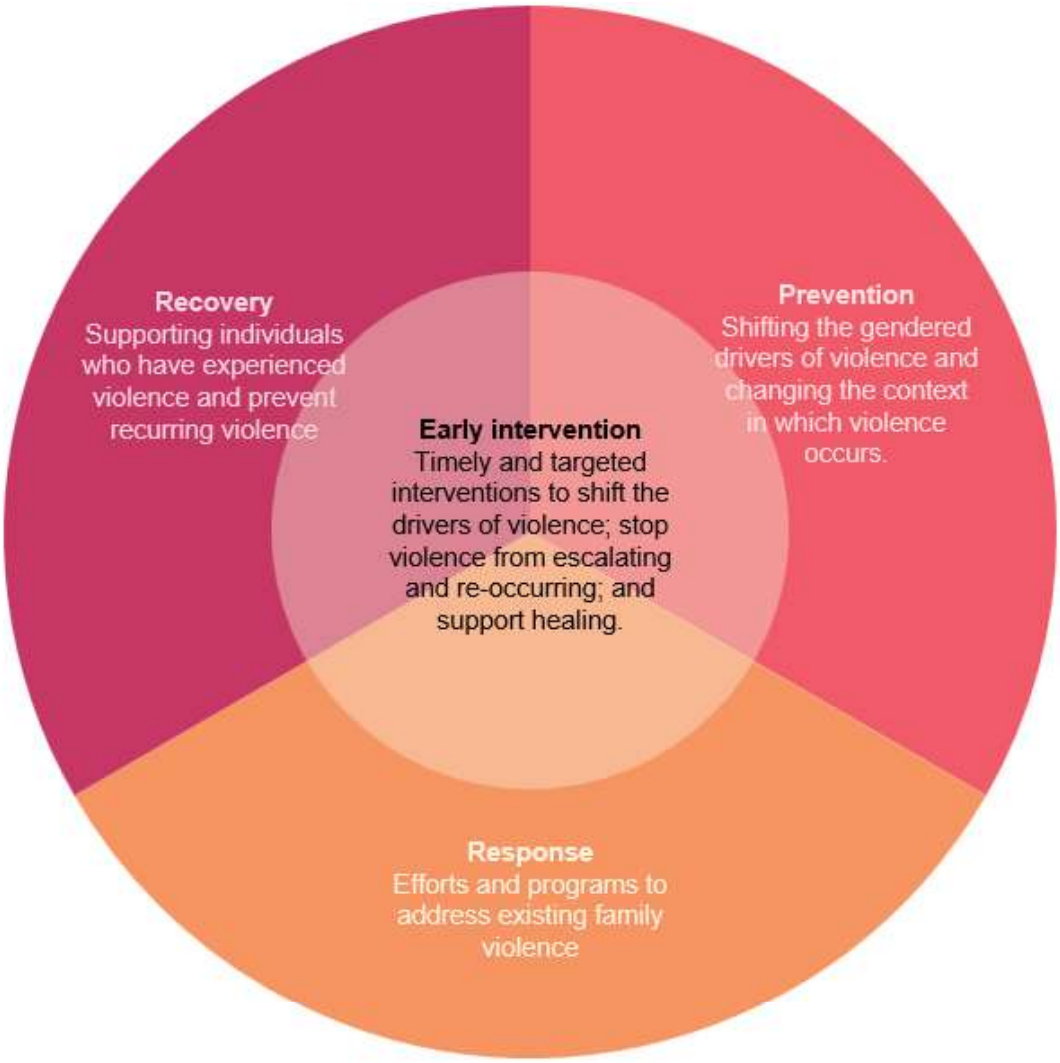

Figure 10: Overlap of Early Intervention with Prevention, Response and Recovery

6. Recommendations

This section proposes recommendations to strengthen the current implementation of Mabels, support expansion and inform broader family violence system reform.

1. Maintain existing Mabels sites with secure, sustainable funding for the whole model

Ten years of implementation and learning have demonstrated the value of Mabels, and Mabels is now an integral part of the local service system response to family violence in the East and in the Mallee. The existing Mabels sites should be maintained and securely funded on an ongoing basis, particularly considering the growing evidence that early and effective intervention can reduce risk and harm for individual families, costs associated with crisis family violence services, and pressure and demand on housing, homelessness, Child Protection, health, and justice services. Sustainable government funding should be sought across justice, family violence, local government and MCH portfolios, rather than relying solely on short-term or philanthropic funding.

2. Expand Mabels carefully and strategically

Mabels should be supported to continue expansion to additional metropolitan, regional and rural locations where the following conditions are present:

- Potential CLC, local government and Aboriginal partners with values aligned with the Mabels model and integrated ways of working.
- A CLC provider with the ability to provide legal advice in the areas of law relevant to Mabels, and with openness to develop structures and employ professionals to provide a multidisciplinary service.
- Aboriginal organisations with capacity and interest in engaging in the development and implementation of a local Mabels service which can provide culturally safe pathways to support.
- Funding available for the complete partnership and integrated model, including resources to enable the founding partnership to provide oversight and support expansions.

Expansion should proceed in stages, allowing sufficient time for relationship-building, local consultation, workforce preparation and partnership development before service delivery begins.

3. Protect the core Mabels model in any expansion

Any expansion of Mabels should be assessed against the ability of the proposed site to maintain core features, particularly the following:

- The Health Justice Partnership model.
- Local collaborative governance structures.
- Embedded Aboriginal leadership and self-determination.
- Integrated multidisciplinary practice.
- A low-profile and safe access point.

Where these features cannot be maintained, the suitability of implementing Mabels in that setting should be reconsidered.

4. Establish statewide collaborative governance to maintain quality as Mabels expands

To support expansion, a statewide steering committee or body with a statewide perspective should be established to monitor fidelity, quality assurance, consistency, and implementation of the Mabels model across new sites.

Membership should include ECLC, alongside relevant state and local government, legal and Aboriginal partners to support workforce and practice development across the Mabels network.

This may include partners such as the Municipal Association of Victoria, Health Justice Australia, Women's Legal Service Victoria, the Federation of Community Legal Centres Victoria, and Aboriginal organisations, agencies or peaks.

Inclusion of state government stakeholders from justice, health and family violence portfolios may also strengthen statewide coordination and systematic links between Mabels, the MCH service, The Orange Door, justice services and other relevant systems.

5. Implement a continuous monitoring, evaluation and learning framework

Mabels should maintain its culture of learning, reflection and evaluation. Future monitoring, including of Mabels' operation and fidelity in any future expansions, should combine quantitative and qualitative information, including the following:

- Client referral and re-engagement volumes and sources.
- Time from client referral to contact and appointment.
- Client-reported outcomes, including outcomes for children.
- Early intervention indicators, including age of children, and whether this is a client's first disclosure of family violence.
- Legal, safety and support goals achieved.
- Access and outcomes for Aboriginal women and other priority cohorts.
- Practitioner feedback, including that of partner organisations such as MCH staff and Aboriginal organisations involved in referrals to Mabels.

Data collection should be trauma-informed and designed to support learning rather than create additional burdens on staff.

6. Explore additional early intervention settings cautiously

Mabels partners should investigate whether the model could operate through other trusted universal or routine services, including antenatal and maternity settings. Any expansion beyond MCH should occur only where the setting can provide a safe and discreet access point; a trusted practitioner able to identify and refer family violence; appropriate privacy from the person using violence; and clear consent and information-sharing arrangements. Settings where the person using violence is likely to be present should be approached with particular caution.

7. Embed and resource integrated legal assistance within the broader family violence response

Mabels clearly demonstrates the benefits of integrated legal assistance for victim-survivors of family violence. Government and sector partners should further explore ways to make legal assistance more accessible within family violence services, identified as a priority in the Family Violence Reform Rolling Action Plan 2020-2023.[52] This should include the following:

- Strengthening legal referral pathways from The Orange Door and other specialist family violence services.
- Supporting legal practitioners to work alongside family violence practitioners.
- Funding legal services to enable increased capacity to respond to associated increases in referrals.

8. Promote a consistent understanding of early intervention

Government and sector partners should develop a clearer and more consistent understanding of early intervention in family violence. Policy and funding frameworks should avoid treating early intervention as relevant only to the earliest stage of violence, or as a precursor to specialist family violence service engagement.

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