

## CENTRAL AUSTRALIAN WOMEN'S LEGAL SERVICE | MEDIA RELEASE

### CAWLS' Criminal Practice: One Year of Transforming Justice for Central Australian Women

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE | Tuesday 6 May 2025

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The Central Australian Women's Legal Service (CAWLS) is proud to mark one year since the launch of its Criminal Practice — a groundbreaking expansion that is already changing the legal landscape for women across Central Australia.

Although CAWLS has delivered vital legal support for almost 25 years, the opening of its specialist Criminal Practice in 2024 has allowed the service to offer dedicated criminal defence to women for the first time.

With a team of three highly skilled full-time criminal lawyers, supported by the training and rotation of our civil law team, CAWLS is working at the frontline to support women who are often among the most vulnerable and disadvantaged in our region.

In just 12 months, the Criminal Practice team has delivered:

- **385 instances of legal advice**, helping women better understand their rights and legal options,
- **374 duty lawyer services** at court appearances, ensuring vital representation when it matters most,
- **160 instances of ongoing legal support**, advocating for women through complex and high-stakes matters.

Our specialist team regularly provides outreach services at the Alice Springs Correctional Centre, and represents women facing charges in the Local and Supreme Courts. Many of our clients are survivors of domestic, family, or sexual violence — facing criminalisation often as a direct result of the abuse they have experienced.

*"Our Criminal Practice is about more than legal representation – it's about standing beside women in some of the hardest moments of their lives,"* said Anna Ryan, CEO of CAWLS. *"The majority of women we assist have been impacted by violence and disadvantage. Having specialist, trauma-informed legal defence can be the difference between justice and injustice."*

The life-changing impact of CAWLS' work is best captured by the voices of the women themselves. One client recently shared:

*"I never thought I'd come across a lawyer so great at her job. I'm so amazed on both my cases. We need more of you to support clients like me that are in need of help."*

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#### Real Impact: Changing Lives

- In one matter, CAWLS secured a **suspended sentence** for an Aboriginal woman with disability who had experienced severe domestic violence, helping her avoid further incarceration and connecting her with NDIS supports and housing.
- In another case, CAWLS successfully defended a **young Warlpiri woman** wrongly charged with breaching bail, avoiding a criminal record that could have impacted her entire future. With CAWLS' support, she was diverted into a rehabilitation program — setting her on a positive life path.
- CAWLS is also leading the way in addressing **misidentification of women** in the criminal justice system, supporting clients like TA — a young mother misidentified as a perpetrator of violence when she was in fact defending herself and her baby from an abusive partner. With CAWLS' integrated civil and criminal legal support, TA now has safe accommodation, support services, and a clear path forward.

*"Every case we take on is about justice, dignity, and creating safer futures for women," said Ms Ryan. "We are proud of what we have achieved, but we know there is still much more to do."*

#### Working Together to Deliver Justice

Over the past year, CAWLS has continued to build strong collaborations with the Judiciary, Police Prosecution, the DPP, NAAJA, NTLAC, Aboriginal community-controlled organisations, and other government and non-government services. Our criminal practice is now a recognised part of the legal landscape in Alice Springs, filling critical gaps for women when other services are conflicted.

CAWLS' Criminal Practice is a model for how specialist, gender-informed services can deliver real, tangible outcomes — ensuring that no woman is left to face the justice system alone.

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