Wallumatta Legal: **A new low-fee model for the missing middle**

By Vivian Galanis
and Kisanne Dulin

About Wallumatta Legal

Established in 2021 through a partnership between DLA Piper and Macquarie University, Wallumatta Legal is a new model low-bono family law firm, providing services on a 'low fee, fixed fee' basis to the 'missing middle' – that is, people who do not qualify for government funded services and cannot afford private lawyer representation.

Wallumatta Legal's mission is to increase equity in accessing family law services in Australia, with the wider objective of demonstrating that low-fee law firm models can be both financially self-sustaining and scalable. By leading the charge in this space, it is hoped that other firms will be encouraged to develop similar models – creating a new sector in the legal ecosystem and narrowing the 'missing middle'.

Wallumatta Legal is now also a registered charity with Public Benevolent Institution (PBI) status with the Australian Charities and Not-For-Profit Commission.

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How we fill the gaps

Wallumatta Legal is a full-service firm – providing advice and representation in all aspects of family law, including parenting, property, divorce, child support and spousal maintenance from the outset of a matter and through the entire litigation process – making us unique in the context of not-for-profit firms. Whilst most clients facing disadvantage may be able to access some legal advice or assistance as to parenting issues, the critical gap we fill is in relation to other areas of family law, particularly in property disputes in which Legal Aid and the CLC sector generally do not assist.

By providing the full spectrum of family law services, our firm challenges the prevailing traditional law firm model by providing the same high standard of service and continuity that clients can expect from private law firms.

While we consider income and factors of disadvantage during our intake process, we are careful to not apply strict eligibility criteria, acknowledging that rigidity can have the effect of creating additional barriers to people seeking legal assistance.

The impact of more people receiving family law advice and representation is not only significant for the individual clients but also positively impacts society at large – with the socio-economic implications for people (including children) following relationship breakdown being far reaching as they relate to safety, wellbeing, financial security and family connection.

Our fixed fee model involves a staged approach, with defined scopes of work for periods of 4 to 8 weeks at a time. It is important to note that while the fees charged are low relative to those charged by private firms, Wallumatta Legal does not provide pro bono services and clients require fee paying capacity.

The firm has also adopted the use of client facing technology in a strategic and meaningful way, with the ultimate consideration being improving client access to our firm. To that end our focus is on utilising technology to drive internal efficiencies and processes to enable us to assist more clients.

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Progress against our objectives

1. Increase equity in access to justice: To date we have provided assistance on more than 400 family law matters – both through representation in court (33%) and providing out of court assistance. We have also held more than 500 introductory (free) calls – with weekly enquiry levels currently tracking above 20 each week across NSW and Victoria.

   Some high level statistics on our clients:

   - 79% are women.
   - 69% of all matters involve parenting issues.
   - 70% earn under the average wage.
   - 55% of matters include aspects of domestic violence.
   - 33% report the presence of mental health issues.
   - 25% were located in regional or rural areas.

2. Prove that the model can be replicated across geographies (and eventually, areas of law): With the opening of operations in Victoria in February 2024 we are well on our way to proving the replication of the model. Further expansion is planned for FY25.

3. Prove the financial sustainability of the model by becoming self-sufficient: While full financial self-sufficiency is a longer-term goal, we are making steady progress and anticipate covering approximately 60% of our costs through fee income this financial year.

Who is involved

Originally founded in New South Wales, Wallumatta Legal started life on campus at Macquarie University with two lawyers and a seconded CEO.

"The Wallumatta Legal team is augmented each semester by student intern placements as well as students undertaking Practical Legal Training through our partnerships with Macquarie University and University of Melbourne Law Schools."

Three years later, while we are still on campus at Macquarie University – we also now have a presence in Victoria, based at Melbourne Law School, and have grown to a staff of 10 – including seven lawyers.

Structurally the firm is co-managed by the Managing Principal Solicitor and General Manager nationally, with four additional lawyers in NSW and two in Victoria. Support for the team is provided across both locations by a Legal Support Coordinator and Legal Assistant.

The Wallumatta Legal team is augmented each semester by student intern placements as well as students undertaking Practical Legal Training through our partnerships with Macquarie University and University of Melbourne Law Schools.

In addition to our partnerships with these two universities we have also received generous support from the pro bono sector through both financial support and secondments, and our expansion into Victoria was made possible by a grant from the Victorian Legal Services Board as part of its increasing access to justice remit.

Another significant factor in what we have achieved so far are the relationships we have formed, and are continuing to develop, within the family law community with the last three years seeing us build a strong network of referrers and becoming recognised by the courts and other agencies for the role we play in the sector. Outside of the legal sector our relationships with community organisations continue to be a focus in the evolution of our firm.

It is an exciting time for Wallumatta Legal and we look forward to sharing updates on our progress with the pro bono community and exploring further opportunities to collaborate. ■

Kisanne Dulin has spent the majority of her working life in not-for-profit and professional services environments (predominately in legal services and engineering consulting). Having started in marketing and business development, the last decade has seen her shift her focus to broader commercial operations and general management roles – serving as COO of an industry association prior to joining Wallumatta Legal where she manages the 'non-legal' aspects of the firm.

Working closely with the Managing Principal Solicitor, legal team, Board, and other stakeholders, Kisanne is focused on ensuring that as many clients as possible are able to access high quality and affordable family law services.

She is incredibly proud of what the firm has achieved to date, excited about what is still to come and embraces the challenges and opportunities presented by being part of an organisation that is actively making a difference by doing things a bit differently.

Vivian Galanis is the Managing Principal Solicitor at Wallumatta Legal, bringing over a decade of experience in family law across the private, CLC, and not-for-profit sectors. Her diverse background provides her with a deep, nuanced understanding of the Australian family law system and the varied needs of the people it serves.

Driven by a commitment to social justice and a passion for innovation, Vivian joined Wallumatta Legal at its inception in 2021. She spearheaded the firm's unique low-fee, fixed-fee model, designed to make high-quality legal services more accessible to everyday Australians while fostering long-term financial stability and growth for the firm.

As the head of a national legal team spanning offices in Sydney and Melbourne, Vivian leads with empathy, legal excellence, and a client-centred approach. She is dedicated to fostering the next generation of legal professionals, mentoring law graduates and interns, and delivering legal education workshops to CLC lawyers and community organisations.

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