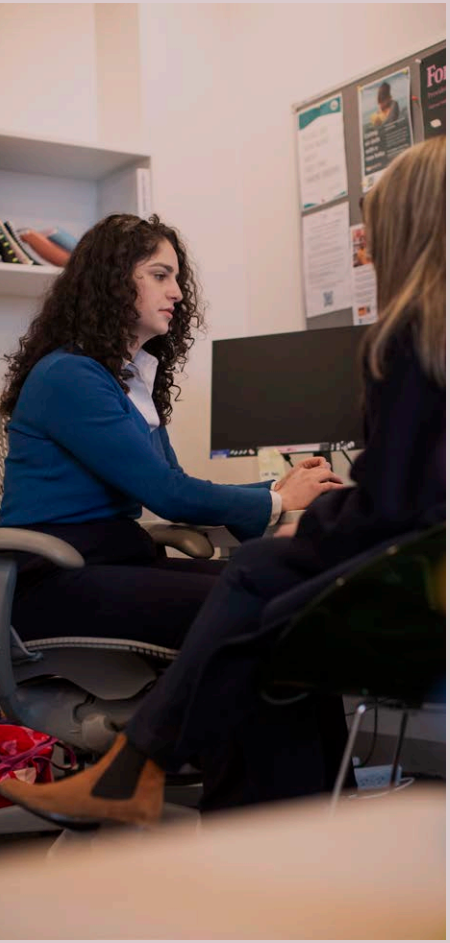
Social Justice for Women:
Barry Nilsson and Southside Justice's Impactful Pro Bono Partnership

By Katie Swain and Cameron Lavery

In 2024, Barry Nilsson's Katie Swain, Will Stidston, Leeah Caverzan and Stephen Somerville joined Mel Dye and Maie Gibney from Southside Justice at their office to acknowledge the social impact of our pro bono partnership.

Since becoming a National Pro Bono Target signatory in 2020, Barry Nilsson has continued to strategically strengthen its social justice commitment through a national Pro Bono and Responsible Business practice. This includes Impact Project, an initiative which encourages and facilitates a firm-wide culture of making a positive difference across pro bono, community, reconciliation and the environment.

Our firm's pro bono work has been enhanced through an innovative partnership with the Community Legal Centre Southside Justice **(Southside)** in Victoria. In the face of rising need, the firm's collaboratively designed pro bono program has directly supported women to know and act on their family law rights, improved women's safety through frontline family violence legal supports, and sustainably built community legal capacity.



Leeah Caverzan at the Maternal Child Health service, which is one of Southside Justice's community-based partnership sites that increases women's access to free legal support.

Strategically designed, women-centred pro bono program delivers specialist family law assistance and improves frontline capabilities

Southside provides community legal services to low-income individuals, with a commitment to access to justice, fairness and social advocacy. Our embedded partnership with Southside focusses on the critical legal needs in family law and family violence by offering tailored, multi-channel legal supports for women.

"The support from Barry Nilsson has significantly strengthened our capacity to respond to the high levels of unmet legal need in our community. Among the people we support, 82% are women and 80% are experiencing or at risk of family violence."
– Mel Dye, Southside Justice CEO

In developing this program with Southside, we have focussed on:

- Dedicated, client-facing secondments: Leeah Caverzan works full-time at Southside, with another lawyer, Stephanie Nolan, also joining full-time from June 2025. We further support Southside through a part-time Graduate Pro Bono Placement Program, with these secondments enabling women to access free legal support.
- On-call advice: Our accredited specialist family law team provides on-call advice to Southside lawyers, allowing them to regularly consult with experienced lawyers.
- Capability building: The family law team, led by Principal Will Stidston, provides continuous mentoring to Southside, building capabilities so they can support clients with complex legal needs. This is complemented by access to the firm's customised legal education and resources.

Impactfully prioritising the safety and family law rights of women in our community

Since commencing in 2023, this wraparound pro bono program has achieved social impact through:

- Bridging the family law justice gap: Community legal centres, including Southside, regularly face resourcing constraints. The Impact Program helps bridge this justice gap by providing essential legal support that would otherwise be unavailable to women, while also supporting sustainability by providing an evidence-base for direct funding opportunities.
- Deepening frontline client support: By providing access to the firm's family law expertise, we have supported the delivery of high-quality legal assistance to Southside's clients, addressing their presenting and longer-term legal needs.
- Building social advocacy culture and transferrable skills for new lawyers: There are limited opportunities for new lawyers to gain hands-on community legal experience. In addition to involving the firm's expert family law team, the program provides new lawyers an opportunity to work directly with Southside clients, developing transferrable skills and their social advocacy passion.

"I wanted to take a moment to express my heartfelt gratitude for your invaluable assistance in preparing for my mediation. Your guidance and support have been instrumental, and I truly appreciate all the effort you put in to help me through this challenging time. Thank you so much for everything." – Client feedback

In FY2024-25 to date, the firm's Southside secondments have contributed over 1,650 hours in free legal support, equating to an in-kind pro bono contribution of more than $450,000. We currently estimate that the firm will again surpass the National Pro Bono Target for FY2024-25, with lawyers averaging over 35 pro bono hours each.

Barry Nilsson lawyer, Leeah Caverzan, at Southside Justice, where she is seconded full-time.

We are particularly proud to have facilitated positive change in the lives of women through this program with Southside, which is highlighted by Alice's* story.

Without the firm's pro bono support, Southside would have had to turn away vulnerable women seeking vital family law and family violence legal support. This integrated partnership, which has now expanded Southside's family law practice from one lawyer to three, has enabled at risk women to receive impactful legal assistance. The firm is committed to maintaining and enhancing its pro bono program with Southside, recognising the prevalence of family law and family violence legal needs for women in our community. ■

Pro bono collaboratively ensures young mother's safety and empowers future stability

Alice* is a young mother who was referred to the program by the family violence team at an embedded community partner organisation. Alice had separated from her child's father, Min*, a few months earlier due to physical violence that left her in significant fear. During their time together, Min struggled with untreated mental health issues.

Despite her traumatic experience, Alice was determined to maintain a connection between her child and his father, provided it was safe for them. Alice and her case manager, worked together with our lawyer to create a safe parenting plan. This plan included measures to ensure Min received appropriate mental health and parenting supports. Our lawyer represented Alice through family dispute resolution, ultimately finalising the plan by consent with Min.

Through our community-based partnerships, we collaboratively provided timely and effective legal assistance to Alice, ensuring her safety and empowering her to focus on her goals for herself and her child's future.

*Names have been changed

Katie Swain is Principal & Head of Pro Bono & Responsible Business at Barry Nilsson. Katie was named Pro Bono Partner of the Year at the 2024 Lawyers Weekly Awards. She leads the firm's Impact Project, which is focussed on providing free legal services to vulnerable and disadvantaged people, supporting charitable and community causes, advancing equality for First Nations peoples, and driving sustainability and Environmental Social Governance initiatives across Bary Nilsson.

Cameron Lavery is Special Counsel & National Pro Bono Manager at Barry Nilsson. Cameron has had specialist involvement in the pro bono and legal assistance sectors across two decades, and also works within frontline community legal centres as part of his current role.

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