
SOUTH-EAST MONASH LEGAL SERVICE
UNIVERSITY OF MELBOURNE
OUR JOURNEY
EXPERIENCES OF INTEGRATED SERVICES AT SOUTH-EAST MONASH LEGAL SERVICE

This Photobook presents research findings on clients' experiences of integrated services at South-East Monash Legal Service (SMLS).

Researchers from the University of Melbourne took a creative approach to research and evaluation, using the power of images to explore client outcomes.

This book brings together clients' stories and photos to understand their lives before and after working with SMLS; to explore what effective legal and social assistance looks like; and to examine how we can better support people experiencing disadvantage.

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

We would like to acknowledge the previous clients of SMLS who participated in this research project.

We are deeply grateful to you for sharing your experiences and your reflections. You spoke about difficult and deeply personal periods in your lives. Sharing one's story is a significant act of generosity.

Your voices remind us of what is possible when people have access to services that see the whole person, respond to the complexity of their circumstances, and provide support with compassion and respect.

We hope that this Photobook honours your stories, and that this research project will contribute to a deeper understanding of how integrated services can make a meaningful difference in people's lives.



SMLS and the University of Melbourne acknowledge the Bunurong and Wurundjeri Peoples as Traditional Custodians of the lands on which we work, learn, and live. This land has never been ceded. Always was, always will be Aboriginal land.

FUNDERS AND PARTNERS

SMLS would like to acknowledge our funders and partners.

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We also extend our sincere appreciation to our university partners for their ongoing collaboration and commitment to student learning and community impact: University of Melbourne, Monash University, Victoria University, Federation University. Through student placement programs, these partnerships strengthen SCIP's capacity to deliver meaningful outcomes for communities while supporting the development of the next generation of practitioners.

We particularly acknowledge the University of Melbourne for its ongoing support of the SCIP evaluation and its valuable contribution to building the evidence base for this work.

Finally, we thank the many partner organisations, practitioners, students, schools, and community members whose participation, expertise, and commitment continue to make this work possible.

FOREWORD

Every person featured in this Photobook has a story that extends far beyond a legal problem.

SMLS often meet people at a difficult moment in their lives. While they may come seeking help with a legal issue, their experiences are rarely defined by that issue alone. Financial hardship, family violence, homelessness, social isolation, and other challenges are often deeply intertwined with the legal problems they face.

This Photobook offers a different way of understanding the impact of SMLS services. While traditional evaluation methods can tell us how many people accessed help and the outcomes achieved, that data alone does not always give us the full picture. By inviting participants to share their stories through photographs, we sought to better understand how people experienced SMLS integrated services, what mattered most to them, and the difference that support made in their lives.

Through the voices of those who shared their stories, we heard what integrated practice meant to the people who experienced it. Their stories described journeys from isolation to connection, from uncertainty to confidence, and from feeling overwhelmed by complex systems to feeling supported, heard, and empowered.

These stories remind us that people are experts in their own lives. Effective support means taking the time to understand the whole person and the circumstances shaping their experiences. It means walking alongside people, helping them navigate complex systems, building connections, and supporting them to access their strengths and create the future they want for themselves.

These stories also challenge us to look beyond individual circumstances and acknowledge the broader systems in which people live. Participants described barriers created by fragmented services, a lack of information, social isolation, and complex legal and social systems. Their experiences reinforce the importance of integrated approaches that recognise the interconnected nature of people's needs and work to improve access to justice.

As you turn these pages, we invite you to reflect on the courage, resilience, and hope contained within these stories, and on what becomes possible when support is designed for people, not problems.



South-East Monash Legal Service
Department of Social Work, University of Melbourne

SMLS PROVIDES INTEGRATED LEGAL, SOCIAL, AND COMMUNITY SUPPORT

In integrated services, social workers and lawyers collaborate, overcoming the silos of 'legal' and 'social' assistance to respond to clients' complex and diverse needs.

The **Support, Connect, Integrated Program (SCIP)** at SMLS brings together legal and social work expertise to support vulnerable people from diverse backgrounds in south-east Melbourne. People who see a lawyer at SMLS may choose to access additional social work support. Social work students, under the supervision of qualified social workers, work alongside people to build on their strengths and pursue the goals they identify. Depending on their goals and preferences, people may access case management, referrals, advocacy, assistance navigating the legal system, psychoeducation, and emotional support.

SCIP also operates alongside three specialist programs: **Safe Landing**, a collaboration between SMLS and Northern Community Legal Centre; **Justice Q**; and **Victims Legal Service South East**. **Safe Landing** provides specialist support to victim-survivors of family violence who are temporary visa holders. **Justice Q** provides a service for the LGBTQIA+ community and is delivered by staff with lived experience. **Victims Legal Service South East** provides holistic support to victims and secondary victims of violent crimes, including support to apply for and access the Financial Assistance Scheme.

DRIVING DURING RAIN*

This image captures the heavy, overwhelming anxiety a married woman carries when every raindrop feels like another life challenge trying to slow her down. Even when the world moves at 100, her internal stress forces her to pace at 80 just to keep from crashing. It beautifully represents her mindset right before getting legal help, a time when she was just trying to survive the storm, stay steady, and find her way to a safer destination.



Source: Pexels.com, edited in Gemini

**Photo, name, and caption provided by a research participant*

THIS PROJECT EXPLORED OUTCOMES THROUGH CLIENT VOICES

While integrated services are growing in Australia, it remains unclear how socio-legal collaborations impact client outcomes. We need further insight into what works and what needs to be improved when providing integrated services at SMLS and beyond.

This research aimed to understand client outcomes and experiences in SMLS integrated services programs, with a focus on the client's perspectives and lived experience.

WE HEARD CLIENT VOICES THROUGH THE POWER OF IMAGES

Photovoice is a creative research method whereby community members use photographs to represent and share their experiences and perspectives. This method enabled us to capture and elevate client voices in a creative, accessible way.

We spoke to eight previous clients of SMLS integrated services programs. **We asked these participants for photos that captured life before and after working with SMLS.** Participants took their own photos, found free photos online, or used Artificial Intelligence (AI) to generate images which reflected their feelings and experiences. They also named and wrote a short caption for each photo. Subsequently, participants discussed their photos either in an interview or focus group *(further details on pages 45-48)*.

PHOTO 1

I was in a tunnel and I couldn't get out.... You have no idea how frightened I felt.



Source: Taken by participant

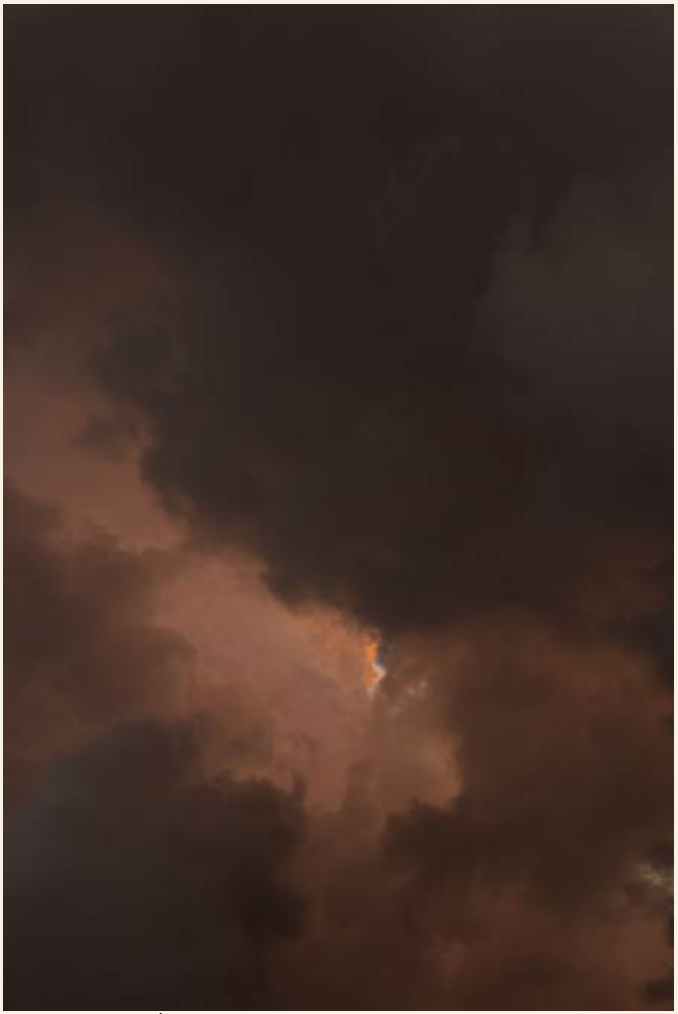
THIS PHOTOBOOK BRINGS TOGETHER CLIENT STORIES AND PHOTOS TO UNDERSTAND THE IMPACT OF INTEGRATED SERVICES

We analysed participants' photos alongside the stories they shared in interviews and focus groups, exploring shared patterns of meaning and experiences. Photos helped us understand what life looked like before and after working with SMLS; interviews and focus groups helped us understand how SMLS supported the participant on their journey from 'before' to 'after'.

We saw significant commonalities in participants' stories. This Photobook presents a collective account of their experiences and the role of SMLS in supporting them.

Our analysis identified key themes relating to *Before*, *Working with SMLS Integrated Services*, and *After*. These themes are introduced in the following pages. A poem written by one of the researchers summarises the themes' central ideas.

Subsequently, we explore each theme in detail. For *Before* and *After* themes, we include participants' photos to illustrate the themes. Each photo is accompanied by a name and caption, prepared by the participants themselves. For *Working with SMLS Integrated Services* themes, we include quotes from interviews and focus groups, highlighting participants' perpsectives of SMLS integrated work.



Source: Pexels.com

DARKNESS

It is darkness. I am scared, there is a fear in there.
I am tortured and trapped.
I don't know which way to go.

BEFORE

Trapped in the Dark
Isolated,
but Seeking Change



WORKING WITH SMLS INTEGRATED SERVICES

Charted My Terrain
Rallied Supporters
Built Strength



AFTER

Illuminated Paths
Confidence in Myself and
My Team
Moving Steadily, Together

Trapped
In the dark
Alone
With the shadows of my thoughts,
Of the past, present and future
Would this be the end of me?
Is there another world out there
Kinder, brighter, full of possibilities?

And then I came here,
Together, charting the terrains of my reality
Tell my story//and be heard
Recognised in my humanity
Finding support
In people, services
And within myself

And over time,
I saw the multitude of paths
The spectrum of possibilities
Knowing that I will be supported
That I could rely on others
To move forward, steadily
One step at a time
Together,
Into the light.

-Estha Gondowijoyo, researcher

BEFORE

Trapped in the Dark

Isolated

but Seeking Change

TRAPPED IN THE DARK

Life before working with SMLS often felt like being **trapped**, like **living in the dark**. There seemed to be no way of escaping and no certainty about the future. Experiences of **fear**, **hopelessness,** intense psychological **pain** were common.

DARK NIGHT
I feel very lonely in the dark, not know to where to go... no where to go... I couldn't plan a place to go.



Source: Pexels.com

ISOLATED

It was lonely in the dark. The feeling of being **isolated**, of being **detached from community** and surroundings, was overwhelming.

For some, being trapped and isolated was literal, based on experiences of domestic and family violence. For others, this was more figurative, capturing how life felt at that time.

Source: Pexels.com, edited in Gemini



ALONE AND IN TROUBLE
Trouble looming and being alone.

BUT SEEKING CHANGE

Questions were building about what to do next and how to escape. However, legal solutions or other supports were **not clear or visible.**

It felt like being caught in a system that didn't see and didn't care.

Source: Pexels.com



TANGLED BRANCHES

There were challenges and uncertainties and it was difficult to find a clear path forward.

WORKING WITH SMLS INTEGRATED SERVICES

Charted My Terrain

Rallied Supporters

Built Strength

CHARTED MY TERRAIN

Charting the services and systems that could provide support to the unique individual was an essential part of integrated services. SMLS took the time to **understand each person's unique situation**, recognising multiple and intersecting challenges, so that people could feel seen, heard, and understood.

Knowing the whole person, not just their issues, also meant **solutions could be tailored.** Together with the person, SMLS mapped and communicated the pathways available and possible for their specific circumstances.

> *"The people, the caseworker and the solicitor I worked with at SMLS, they were more compassionate and more understanding, and they understand what was happening in my relationship."*

> "*The first one … it's [SMLS] talking to me. Then it's [asking] me about how you pay my bills with the government … because my money is not enough to me … you have a lawyer help … but it's not helping me with [keeping me] alive.*"

RALLIED SUPPORTERS

With the knowledge of what was available and possible, SMLS worked with individuals to build **tailored support networks** (consisting of SMLS staff, other services, and community) that provided the **time, consistency, and relationship** each person needed.

> "*I wonder whether I'm bothering [the social work student] every time calling ... I was crying, and I was, thinking about future and what will happen, and I'm undergoing a lot of difficulties and problems and questions ... [the social work student] was with me for a long time, and I talked to [the social work student] and I tell everything to [the social work student], and [the social work student] also many times called me. How I'm, you know, moving forward with things. I updated them, and it was like family. Actually, this became the family for me.*"

> *"They, give me … links for the meetup groups, because I was feeling very alone. And… so much they can do, you know, it's not, so, but they were … able to give me some ideas how to… how I can build new friendship, and … find fellow single mums."*

BUILT STRENGTH

SMLS supported people to build their sense of **strength, hope, and resilience** for what was ahead. For some this meant providing reassurance when they felt uncertain about the paths ahead. For others it were specific interventions and counselling to enable individuals to gain control of and rewrite their narrative.

> *"Sometimes I was a bit unsure. Then, you know, I'd have moments where I was really nervous and unsure, and other moments where I felt all right. And then I just returned thinking to you know what [the lawyer and social worker] might have said to me … that while the outcome is not guaranteed, usually, you know, usually we get the outcome. Usually we get the outcome that we're pursuing."*

> *"They were supportive, it boosted my confidence and I was quite hopeful. That's how I resolved to manage my difficulty … Somehow, we resolved it together."*

AFTER

Illuminated Paths

Confidence in Myself and My Team

Moving Steadily, Together

ILLUMINATED PATHS

From being in darkness, working with SMLS was like turning on the light. Pathways toward change and support seemed **illuminated and possible.** The burdens that had been so heavy and carried for so long seemed **lighter**. Working with SMLS was an opportunity for **learning and growing**, knowing now how and where they could seek help in the future.

Source: Taken by participant



NOT SINKING YET

It still feels like I'm carrying all these mountains on me. However, I'm not sinking yet. Not yet.

CONFIDENCE IN MYSELF AND MY TEAM

Having a **strong support network** with SMLS and other services provided **confidence** and a feeling that they were not alone. There was a resolve, that while the journey ahead may continue to contain challenges, they had the **capacity to handle whatever lies ahead.**

Source: Pexels.com, edited in Gemini



WIPER CLEARING RAIN

This image captures the powerful turning point after receiving legal help, where her view through the storm finally begins to clear. While the rain and challenges are still present, she is no longer paralysed by anxiety or forced to drive at a cautious 80 just to survive. Gaining momentum, she is now navigating confidently at 92, and while it's not 100 speed or her final destination, she is finally moving forward with a clarity and strength she didn't have before. (The best part, this time there is no wedding ring.)

MOVING STEADILY, TOGETHER

There was a strong insistence on **raising awareness** in the community about the supports and resources available. Some also saw themselves having a role in this as **promoters or ambassadors** for the SMLS way of working.

Source: ChatGPT



THE VELOCITY OF DAWN

This photograph portrays motivation, focus and determination, surrounded by goal planners with ambition, teamwork, strategic planning for personal growth. Overall, the image represents the belief that dedication, perseverance and purposeful actions can transform dreams into meaningful achievements.

SMLS Integrated Work is

Individual

Relational

Structural

Participants' descriptions of SMLS integrated work could be clearly themed into three interconnected approaches: SMLS delivered supports at the **individual**, **relational**, and **structural** levels. Participants viewed supports at all three levels as essential to successful experiences and outcomes.



CLIENTS SUGGESTED AREAS FOR IMPROVEMENT

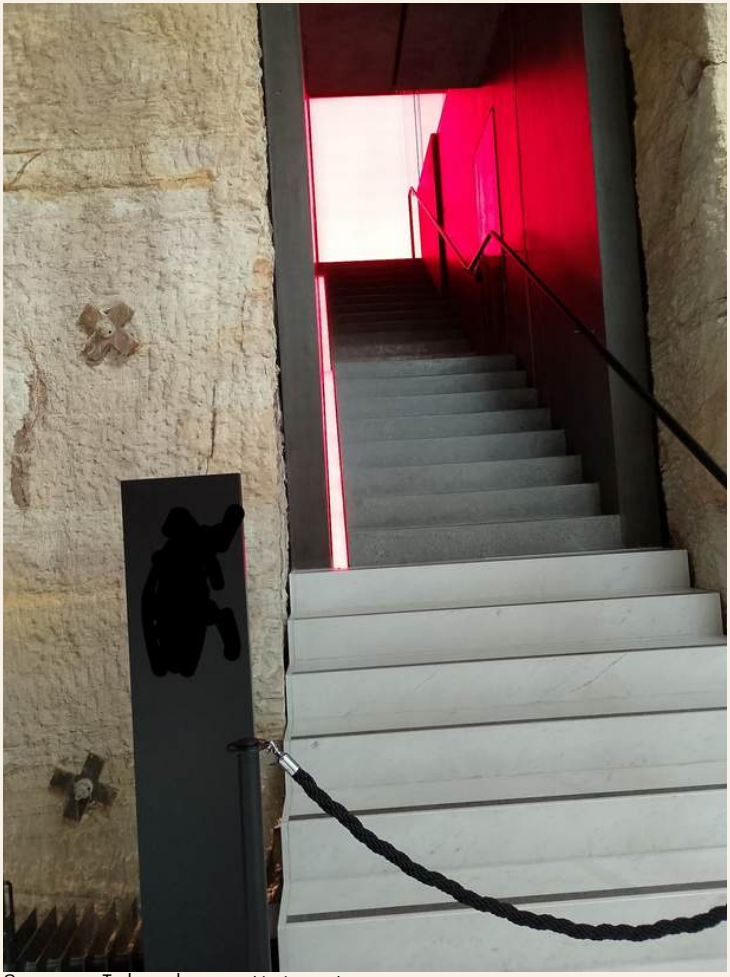
Participants made recommendations on having **More** of, and greater **Visibility** for the valuable services SMLS offers.

More
Recommendations related to an expanded scope of service, more appointments, and improved service facilities.

An expanded scope of service includes: legal assistance for financial and criminal matters; financial support; and social network support (i.e., enhancing formal and informal connections). Existing income eligibility criteria at SMLS can limit people's ability to access the legal assistance they need at the quality that SMLS delivers. Furthermore, SMLS can play a greater role in government advocacy, elevating understandings of lived experiences.

To enhance service access, it was suggested that SMLS offers more appointments to reduce wait time; online booking options; and clearer phone lines.

Visibility
There is an opportunity to raise greater awareness of SMLS services. It is crucial that there are early referral pathways to SMLS, and that many people in the community understand what SMLS does and can do.



Source: Taken by participant

PHOTO 2

I'm feeling free...
I see one door open, now
I'm going out of this
door, and I feel free...
The world is open.
I escape of this prison.

TO CONCLUDE

The stories shared here illustrate the importance of SMLS integrated services. When people face multiple, complex, and interconnected challenges, it is not enough to address a legal issue in isolation. Effective support sees the whole person and builds their strengths, rallies their supporters and enhances relationships, and helps the person navigate and leverage structures across complex social and legal systems.

These stories also show what is possible when legal and social services come together. They point to further opportunities to strengthen practice, enhance collaboration, and build community.

This research highlights the value of creative research methods. Photovoice enables participants to communicate complex emotions and experiences that are difficult to convey through words alone. Multiple modes of expression support participation among partcipants for whom English is not a first language. Emotionally powerful images enable practitioners, policymakers, and community members to deeply connect with lived experience, bringing greater nuance to their understanding.

Meaningful change requires a shared commitment to overcoming ‘legal’ and ‘social’ silos, to seeing people in the context of their whole lives, and to walking alongside them. This is what SMLS integrated services can do.



Source: Pexels.com

PEACE

I find my peace and freedom now.
It is bright.
It reminds me of my home, where I am happy with my son.

SUPPLEMENTARY MATERIALS

The following pages include:

- Participants' photos, photo names, and captions, representing life before and after working with SMLS
- A description of the research sample's demographic characteristics
- A description of the methods used in this research project.

Before

BE QUIET

Stuck in a mental health ward, learning how to be normal again. Even though everyone knows that my pain, my grief, my anger and my desperation are normal.



Source: Taken by participant

NOT SINKING YET

It still feels like I'm carrying all these mountains on me. However, I'm not sinking yet. Not yet.



Source: Taken by participant

Before

THE SILENT BATTLE WITHIN

This photograph portrays the emotional struggle with deep inner pain, anxiety, fear, and isolation. Sitting alone in a dark and stormy environment, the figure represents feelings of hopelessness, self-doubt, rejection and the weight of negative thoughts. This symbolises uncertainty about the future, the sense of damaged sense of self, while the stormy surrounding represents emotional turmoil and the struggle to find hope and healing.



Source: Generated by participant using ChatGPT

After

THE VELOCITY OF DAWN

This photograph portrays motivation, focus and determination, surrounded by goal planners with ambition, teamwork, strategic planning for personal growth. Overall, the image represents the belief that dedication, perseverance and purposeful actions can transform dreams into meaningful achievements.



Source: Generated by participant using ChatGPT

Before

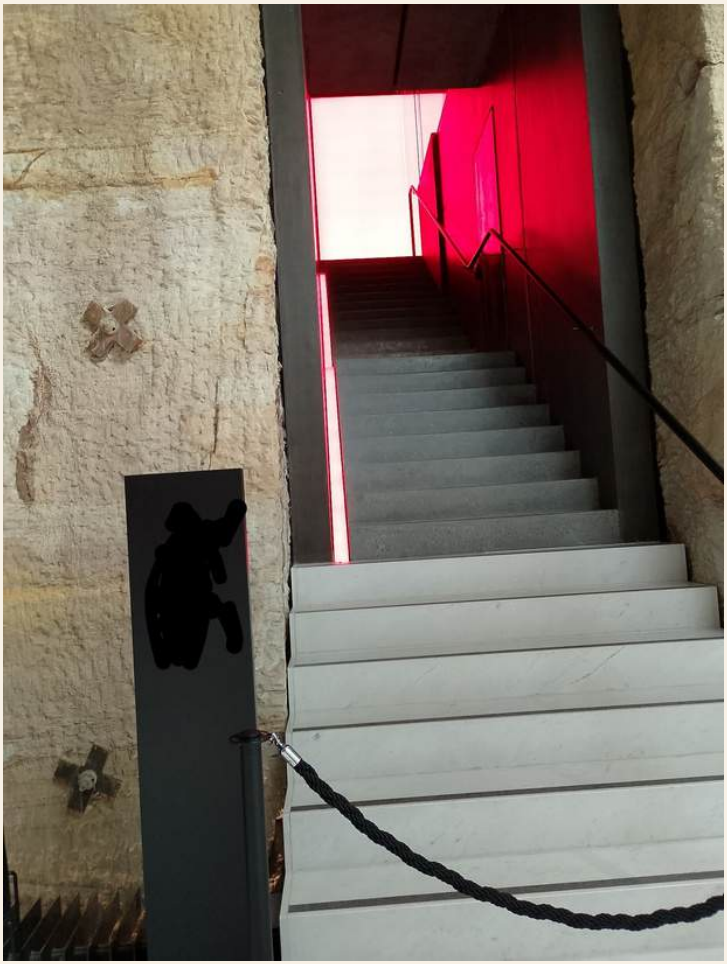
PHOTO 1

I was in a tunnel and I couldn't get out.... You have no idea how frightened I felt.



Source: Taken by participant

After



Source: Taken by participant

PHOTO 2

I'm feeling free...
I see one door
open, now I'm going
out of this door,
and I feel free...
The world is open.
I escape of this
prison.

Before

ALONE AND IN TROUBLE

Trouble looming and being alone.



Source: Pexels.com, edited in Gemini

After



Source: Taken by researcher

ON THE SUMMIT

When you prevail against trouble and danger.

Before

TANGLED BRANCHES

There were challenges and uncertainties and it was difficult to find a clear path forward.



Source: Pexels.com

After



Source: Pexels.com

THE FLOWER IN SUNLIGHT

The flower in sunlight represents the positive changes that came after, I found the solution I needed to my problems and being able to move forward with confidence.

DRIVING DURING RAIN

This image captures the heavy, overwhelming anxiety a married woman carries when every raindrop feels like another life challenge trying to slow her down. Even when the world moves at 100, her internal stress forces her to pace at 80 just to keep from crashing. It beautifully represents her mindset right before getting legal help, a time when she was just trying to survive the storm, stay steady, and find her way to a safer destination.



Source: Pexels.com, edited in Gemini

After

WIPER CLEARING RAIN

This image captures the powerful turning point after receiving legal help, where her view through the storm finally begins to clear. While the rain and challenges are still present, she is no longer paralysed by anxiety or forced to drive at a cautious 80 just to survive. Gaining momentum, she is now navigating confidently at 92, and while it's not 100 speed or her final destination, she is finally moving forward with a clarity and strength she didn't have before.

(The best part, this time there is no wedding ring.)



Source: Pexels.com, edited in Gemini

Before

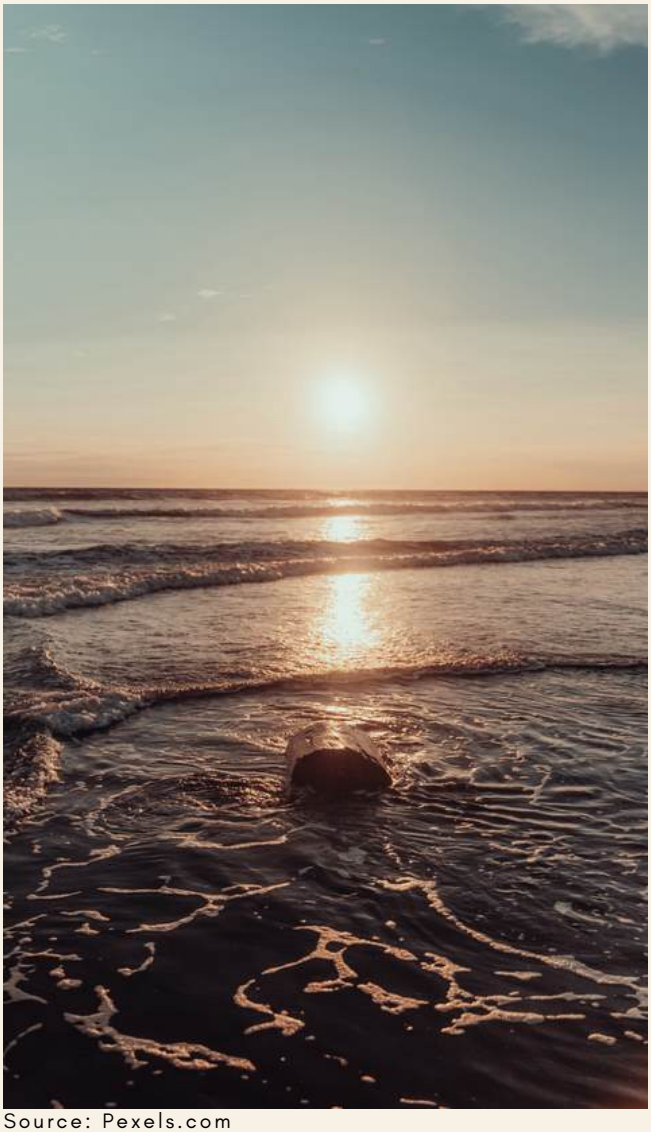
DARK NIGHT

I feel very lonely
in the dark, not
know to where to
go...
no where to go...
I couldn't plan a
place to go.



Source: Pexels.com

After



Source: Pexels.com

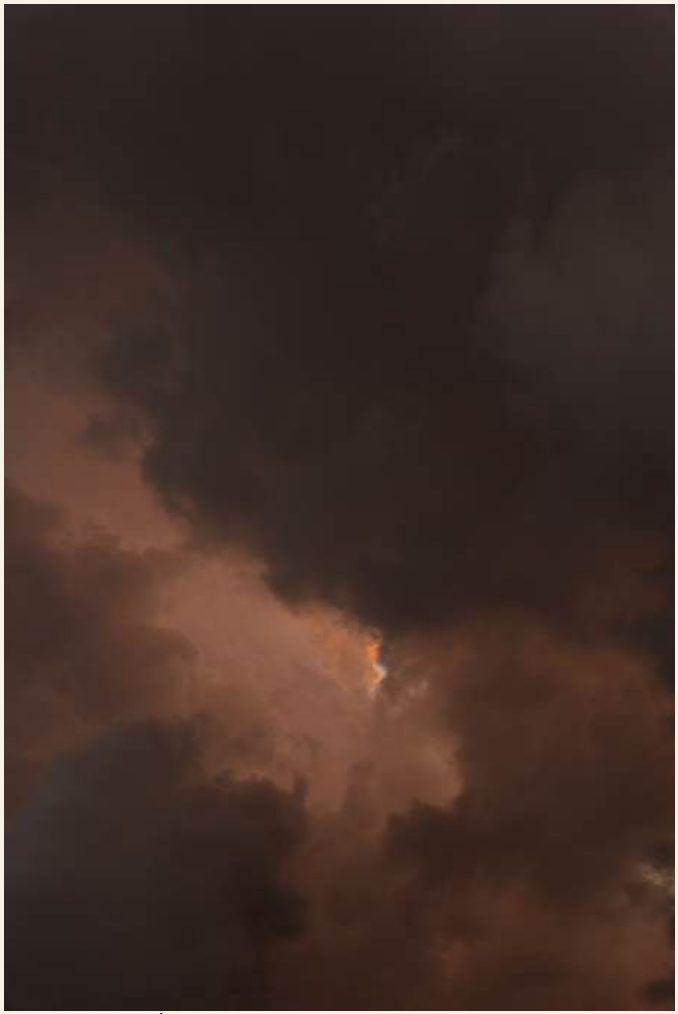
BRIGHTER DAY

After getting support from South-East Monash, my life seemed to be very bright... I feel strong even though I face a lot of obstacles... Through the service, it made me feel warm... and they help me to be confident... and not really scared of anything.

Before

DARKNESS

It is darkness. I am scared, there is a fear in there.
I am tortured and trapped.
I don't know which way to go.



Source: Pexels.com

After



Source: Pexels.com

PEACE

I find my peace and freedom now.
It is bright.
It reminds me of my home, where I am happy with my son.

SAMPLE DESCRIPTION

The sample included eight participants who were past clients of SMLS integrated services programs. Four participants were supported in SCIP, four in the Safe Landing program, and two in the Justice Q program (one participant was supported across two programs).

The average age of participants were 42.88 years (range 28-68).

Six participants identified as female; one as male; and one participant identified as trans/female.

METHODS

Photovoice

Photovoice is a creative research method whereby community members use photographs to capture and share their experiences and perspectives. Photovoice seeks to empower marginalised voices, promote critical dialogue about lived experiences, and bring community concerns to policymakers (Wang, 1999; Wang & Burris, 1997).

Recruitment methods

Participants were eligible if:

- they were 18 years and over
- they had been previously supported by SMLS integrated services programs
- they were not experiencing ongoing distress or mental health problems that may be exacerbated by participating in the research
- they were not experiencing ongoing violence and abuse that may be exacerbated by participating in the research.

Eligible participants were identified and approached by SMLS staff who had worked with them. SMLS staff briefly introduced the research, asked participants for consent to share their contact details with researchers, and discussed safety considerations for participating in research. Subsequently, researchers contacted the potential participants, explained the research, and sought informed consent.

METHODS

Data collection

Each participant attended an individual or group Photovoice training workshop. Participants were instructed on what appropriate Photovoice photos and captions look like. Participants were also instructed to not include any identifying information of persons and organisations; to not take photos of illegal activity/content; and to not take photos of people in private settings.

Subsequently, and in their own time, participants took photographs, chose royalty-free photos, or used free AI programs to generate images that captured life before and after working with SMLS. Participants also named their photos and wrote short accompanying captions. Researchers checked all photos and captions to ensure ethical guidelines were met. Where necessary, researchers helped participants write captions or choose alternative images that met ethical guidelines.

Subsequently, participants attended either a focus group or individual interview, online or in-person, according to their preference. One focus group and six individual interviews were conducted. During the focus group and interviews, participants described what each of their photos represented; discussed how working with SMLS brought them from the ‘before’ to the ‘after’ photo; and recommended areas for service improvement.

METHODS

Data collection (cont.)
Participants signed Image Release Forms for their photos and captions. Participants were given the choice to remain anonymous or have their first name published with their photos in research outputs. Participants were remunerated with two $50 gift cards for participating in the Photovoice training workshop and the focus group or interview.

Data analysis
Photos, captions, and focus group and interview transcripts underwent reflexive thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2021). Researchers collaboratively coded segments of the photos and texts, and subsequently, compiled clusters of codes to develop themes. Themes captured patterns of shared meaning and experiences across participants.

Ethics approval
Ethics approval was received from the University of Melbourne Human Research Ethics committee (ID 33222).

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Legal problems rarely occur in isolation. Housing instability, financial hardship, family and relationship difficulties, mental health, and other social circumstances can influence a person's ability to understand and address their legal issues. Integrated services overcome the silos of 'legal' and 'social' assistance to respond to these complex and diverse needs.

Since the establishment of the Support, Connect, Integrated Program in 2020, South-East Monash Legal Service (SMLS) has continued to strengthen the partnership between legal and social work practice.

This Photobook demonstrates the impact of SMLS integrated services, not through statistics alone, but through the stories and experiences of the people at its centre—
offering insights into why an integrated approach matters.

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