

Tuesday 13 February 2024

The Hon Natalie Suleyman MP  
Member for St Albans  
Shop M004A, Keilor Shopping Centre  
80 Taylors Road  
Keilor Downs VIC 3021  
By email: [natalie.suleyman@parliament.vic.gov.au](mailto:natalie.suleyman@parliament.vic.gov.au)

Dear the Hon Natalie Suleyman MP,

Thank you for your correspondence of 31 January 2024, acknowledging our submission for the 2024/25 Victorian State Budget and the significant work performed by the Partners in Wellbeing Small Business Financial Counselling program. As you noted in your letter, financial counsellors across the state are supporting many small businesses in financial distress, and continuation of this service is critical to ensuring that the state economy continues to prosper.

As Minister for Small Business, you will be aware of the individual and economic benefits of supporting small businesses to maintain profit-yielding operations. The impact is not only for these individuals and their households, but also for their employees and their communities.

What has also become evident through the Partners in Wellbeing program, is that in addition to the crucial specialist financial counselling support required by small businesses, the establishment of a Small Business Community Legal Centre (CLC) is vital to provide essential legal aid to small business owners navigating financial and legal difficulties.

By way of example, we have received increased reports from our financial counsellor members of an ATO 'scam' targeting small business owners. In this scam, third parties are scamming small business owners with lower levels of financial literacy by assisting them to file inaccurate Business Activity Statements to receive funds from the ATO. The third party then claims a portion of the funds as their fee, and the client is left with significant ATO debts due to the inaccurately filed documents.

In this context, this week's announcement by the ATO that they will be recommencing use of an external debt collection agency is particularly worrying. We have significant concerns about how vulnerable small business owners in this situation will be supported to exercise their legal rights.

There are currently 47 community legal centres across Victoria, yet none are accessible to small business owners, whose legal needs come to the fore when they are least likely to be able to afford access to legal assistance. Financial counsellors currently have nowhere to refer small business owners with legal issues requiring assistance.

With our partners the Federation of Community Legal Centres and Consumer Action Law Centre, we have developed a proposal for a Specialist Small Business CLC for Victoria, which I include as an attachment to this letter. We believe that establishing a specialist Small Business CLC would leverage the proven infrastructure, governance and funding model of CLCs to deliver essential services for small businesses across the state, integrating closely with the small business wellbeing program.

**Minister, I seek a meeting with you to discuss this proposal further.** Along with our project partners, I believe that the establishment of a Small Business CLC will not only respond appropriately to the 'long tail' of the economic and social impacts from the disasters of recent years, but also ensure that small businesses will continue to be supported in the years to come.

I note that I have sent a similar invitation to meet, along with our proposal, to Attorney-General Jaclyn Symes given that the proposal relates to community legal centres.

Finally Minister, we would like to invite you to attend our 2024 Summit, The Changing Face of Hardship on March 20 at the Timber Yard in Port Melbourne. We understand that this is during a Parliamentary sitting week, however given that the first session on the day is focused on the current cost of living crisis including its impacts on small businesses, we believe there is clear correlation to your portfolio. You are very welcome to send an advisor on your behalf.

Minister, to RSVP to this important solutions-focused sector event and to arrange a meeting to further discuss the establishment of a Specialist Small Business CLC and continuation of financial counselling services as detailed in this letter and the attached proposal, please contact me directly on [zylhw@fcvic.org.au](mailto:zylhw@fcvic.org.au).

Yours sincerely,



Zyl Hovenga-Wauchope  
Executive Officer  
Financial Counselling Victoria