



**impact
report**
2019



about us

We exist to help build a gender equitable country

Our unique contribution to this vision is to work alongside women to promote their rights to live free from violence and make informed choices about their relationships.

We do this by:

- + Providing legal advice and representation to women experiencing disadvantage.
- + Advocating for law and policy that respects and promotes the rights of women.
- + Building the capacity of other professionals and the community to identify and respond appropriately to legal need.
- + Leading change in the legal and justice sector to prevent violence against women.



Around
3000
women a year benefit
from our free legal help

“

Your kind advice and emotional support meant a lot. Your phone calls always reminded me that I am not alone. You always checked on me even when I [didn't] feel like responding due to the hardships I was facing.”

Women's Legal Client

“

“Women's Legal... spoke for me when I couldn't find my own voice, they knew exactly what needed to be done when I was feeling lost, and they didn't back down because they knew what was right. If it wasn't for them, I honestly do not know where I would be today. Thank you.”

Women's Legal Client



We represented around
450 women
with complex family
violence, family law and
child protection cases

Chair & Chief Executive Officer's report

Women's Legal has been working alongside disadvantaged women to address their legal needs and to advocate for equality and non-violence for almost 40 years.

Highlights of 2018/2019 included:

- + The Federal Government committing \$10 million to implement three reforms proposed in our *Small Claims, Large Battles* report (see p5).
- + The expansion of our award-winning Critical Legal Issues Map to include information on migration, employment and criminal law (see p6) and
- + Holding a forum of 70 legal and justice leaders to respond to the issues raised in our new *Starts With Us* report (see p8), and commit to action to eradicate sexism and gender inequality in the sector.

URGENT INVESTMENT NEEDED IN FAMILY VIOLENCE LEGAL ASSISTANCE

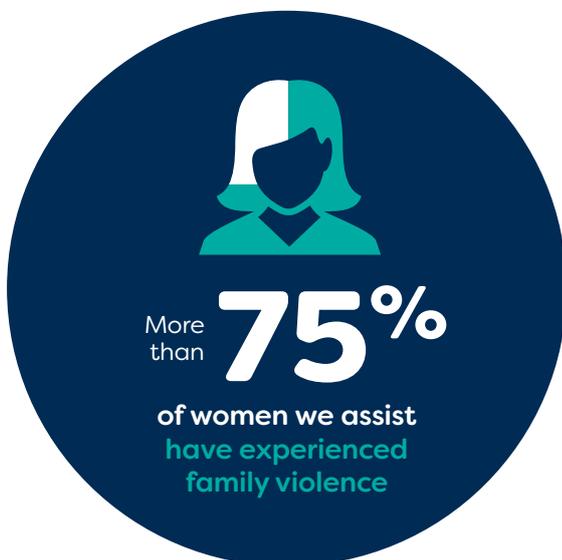
We call on the Victorian Government to urgently invest in legal assistance and in improving pathways into legal assistance for women experiencing family violence.

Since 2016, a massive \$2.7 billion has been invested in addressing family violence in Victoria. Less than 1% of that has been allocated to family violence legal assistance services. This is despite exponential growth in demand for legal help, driven by the appointment of nearly 2700 more police, 450 more child protection workers and 18 new magistrates, amongst other things.

Why legal services are so important for family violence victims

For women experiencing family violence, access to legal services is a critical aspect of their survival and recovery. Family violence victims are 10 times more likely than others to have legal problems and a massive 16 times more likely than others to have family law problems.

When legal problems are not addressed they can leave victims of violence at immediate risk of injury or death. Over the longer term, unaddressed legal problems can lead to stress-related illness, physical ill health, relationship breakdown, loss of income or financial strain, and housing insecurity. This leads to significant downstream costs to other publicly funded services such as health, housing and financial support.



The current system is broken

Currently, accessing essential legal help for victims of violence is a matter of luck. This is because:

- + Most people do not know that they have a legal problem so they reach out to non-legal workers - like community support workers and others - for help.
- + Most community support workers are not trained and supported to identify legal need and refer appropriately, so this does not occur systematically. This includes workers in The Orange Door and the broader family violence system.
- + Even if a connection is made to potential legal help, access to free legal assistance is so constrained that many women will not get the help they need. This includes women facing additional disadvantage such as disability, homelessness and limited English.

The legal assistance model we need now

Wherever a victim of violence connects with the community service sector, workers should be equipped to identify legal need and refer appropriately.

This is why Women's Legal has developed a tool and training program to assist non-lawyers to identify legal need (the Critical Legal Issues Map). With current resources we are able to support 16 family violence agencies with this tool and training. A comprehensive statewide approach is needed to ensure women with significant legal needs are connected with legal assistance.

Free legal help must be more widely available and targeted to the needs of victims of family violence. Women facing additional disadvantage should be able to access legal help that is integrated with social work and financial counselling support so their broader welfare and financial issues can also be addressed.



Tina Lavranos
Chair



Joanna Fletcher
Chief Executive Officer

our impact change

Boosting women's safety in family law proceedings

Women's Legal had a great win this year, when our advocacy led to laws being changed to ensure a woman cannot be interrogated by her abuser in court. The passing of amendments to the *Family Law Act* in March 2019 acknowledged the trauma and fear many women felt when their abusive ex-partner directly questioned them in court. The change should reduce the risk of women withdrawing from court proceedings or accepting unsafe arrangements for herself and her children to avoid that trauma.

We were disappointed that the Australian Law Reform Commission's recent family law review missed the opportunity to reassess the system with family violence in mind. We will continue to advocate for more appropriate responses to family violence. This includes courts making decisions on family violence early in family law proceedings, and stopping abusers using the system to continue to inflict harm on women. We will be keeping a close eye on the parliamentary inquiry into family law that was announced by the Federal Government just as we were going to print.

Helping women recover financially after separation

Vulnerable women who have separated from their partner will benefit from changes announced this year that stem from our advocacy and policy work around economic wellbeing. In November 2018, the Federal

WHAT SUCCESS LOOKS LIKE TO US:

Decision makers changing laws and policies to promote women's rights

Government committed \$10 million to implement three reforms proposed in our *Small Claims, Large Battles* report, which highlighted the difficulties poorer women face when trying to access a fair property settlement in the family court.

The reforms mean women will now be able to easily access their former partner's superannuation information via the Australian Taxation Office (ATO) and the courts. Four pilot locations across Australia will trial a simplified and streamlined family law property process for small claims. Women will also be able to access legally assisted family dispute resolution to resolve their small property disputes.

Looking ahead, we have developed key partnerships within the superannuation industry to achieve further reforms, including a plan to simplify the process for splitting superannuation after couples separate.

Improving outcomes for victims of crime

We were pleased to see several of our recommendations included in the final report of the Victorian Law Reform Commission's (VLRC) review into the Victims of Crime compensation system. The report, which was tabled in Parliament in September 2018, picked up on our main recommendations, which aim to improve access to financial and therapeutic case management support and entitlements for family violence victim survivors. The Victorian Government has given its in-principle support for the report's recommendations and we look forward to hearing when reforms will be implemented.

93%

of child protection
clients were suffering
financial hardship



Almost

70%

of our clients
had no or low
income



our impact

women's rights

Keeping police accountable when responding to family violence

When police attend a family violence incident and wrongly name a woman as the aggressor, it can have devastating consequences for her. She could face criminal charges, lose care of her children and find herself homeless – and still be at risk of family violence.

This year, Women's Legal has continued to advocate for changes that would mean police are better supported to identify who is most at risk in a family violence incident. While police say the problem is being addressed through training, our duty lawyers still regularly work with women who find themselves at court defending Intervention Order applications based on false claims made by their violent partner.

To keep this issue on the agenda, we have met with government Ministers and MPs, senior police – including Family Violence Command – and the family violence sector. We have also helped other community sector lawyers build their awareness and advocacy skills so they can address this issue at court.

Educating the sector to help women experiencing violence

Safer Families, our professional development program for community lawyers, delivers best-practice legal education to the sector so it can better assist victims of family violence. This year, we launched new child protection training that helps lawyers understand the complexity of this area of law and how it intersects with family violence. We have had fantastic feedback from participants, who report that their practice has been transformed.

We also expanded our award-winning Critical Legal Issues Map, which provides community support workers with a step-by-step guide to help them identify when their clients might have a legal problem. New information on migration, employment and criminal law was added to the Map, giving workers a framework for discussing these issues with women escaping violent

WHAT SUCCESS LOOKS LIKE TO US:

Institutions, service providers and the courts responding appropriately to women experiencing violence and respecting their rights

relationships. The Map training provided to our Link Community family violence partners around Victoria ensures women are referred for legal advice early, before an issue escalates to a crisis.

We continue to seek funding to expand the scope and reach of all our **training programs**, so that more sector professionals around Victoria can benefit.

Working with women in the child protection system

The demand for our child protection legal services has grown considerably over the past two years. Our lawyers work with each woman throughout her court case to support her to make informed decisions and, where appropriate, to work towards reunification with her child.

This year we were excited to connect with GMAR (Grandmothers Against Removals), a group of Aboriginal grandmothers and aunties from across Victoria who are supporting and advocating on behalf of Aboriginal families in the child protection system. We now offer a free phone advice service to GMAR members who wish to speak to a lawyer.

We continue to push for reform in the child protection system. This includes using our casework and advocacy to stop children who have been in out-of-home care for two years being permanently removed from their parents.





Meera's story

A woman left homeless by her former partner wins funds to help her move on.

ISSUES

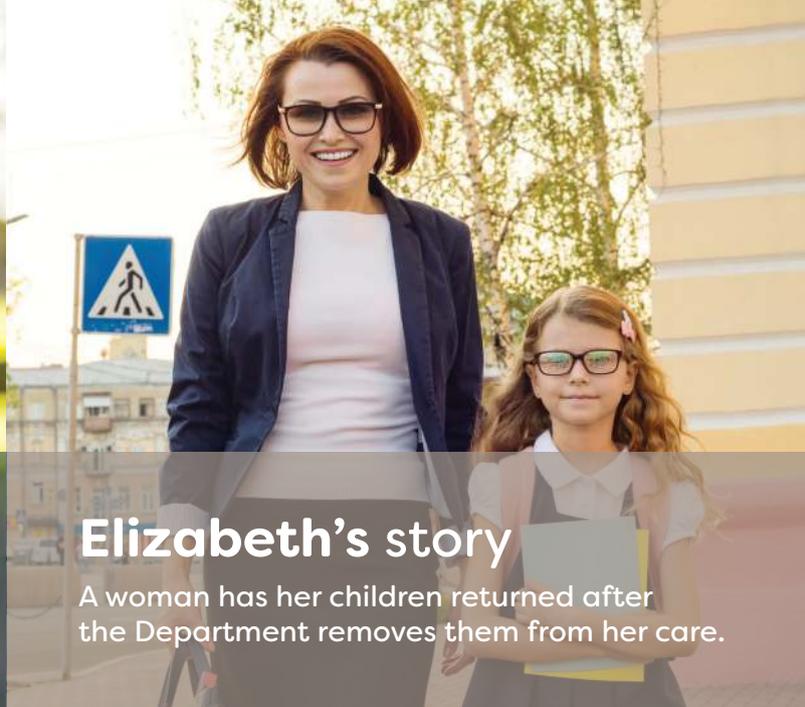
Meera came to Australia on a student visa and met Arjun. Despite his controlling and sometimes abusive behaviour, Meera gave up her studies and moved in with him. Over a number of years, she contributed her own funds to their joint living expenses and also gave Arjun a sum of money to process her partner visa application. When Arjun returned from an overseas holiday married to someone else, Meera found herself homeless and without any means of support. Arjun had not made the partner visa application and her money was gone. Meera was unable to work in Australia or access Centrelink benefits.

RESOLUTION

Meera's problems required a team response. Our social worker helped Meera access a family violence support package, which gave her short-term financial assistance. Arjun would not discuss spousal maintenance or property settlement. He denied any relationship with Meera.

We started family law property proceedings and lodged a caveat on the property held in Arjun's name. We soon established that the only significant asset of the relationship was Arjun's superannuation. Splitting superannuation is a complex process.

Meera was facing a deadline for leaving Australia, so we finalised the court proceedings. She received superannuation of \$25,000 from Arjun. Our financial counsellor has now been working with Meera to have this superannuation released early so she can get herself back on her feet.



Elizabeth's story

A woman has her children returned after the Department removes them from her care.

ISSUES

In 2016, Elizabeth reported finding child pornography on her partner's phone. The Department of Health and Human Services (DHHS) responded by removing Elizabeth's two children, James and Katie, from her care, citing concerns about her mental health. DHHS also claimed that she had an intellectual disability and this was adversely impacting her ability to parent. Over the next two years, James and Katie were placed with a number of different relatives as we fought to have them returned.

RESOLUTION

We established through a clinician's report that Elizabeth did not have an intellectual disability. The clinician recommended the immediate return of James and Katie to Elizabeth's care as long as DHHS put supports in place to assist her. Instead, when Elizabeth expressed some anxiety about the imminent return of her children, DHHS sought to place them permanently out of her care. On the third day of a contested hearing, the Magistrate ordered that the children remain in Elizabeth's care and ordered DHHS to place a "scaffold of support" around her. The children have remained in Elizabeth's care ever since.

**Names and images changed to protect our clients' identities.*

our impact free from violence

Leading change in the legal and justice sector

Starts With Us, our innovative, collaborative program to target the drivers of violence against women in the legal and justice sector, achieved important milestones in 2019.

Informed by sector-wide research we produced the *Starts With Us* discussion paper, which reported on the experiences of almost 300 professionals.

In April, we hosted a forum of 70 sector leaders to examine the research findings and discuss how we can reduce sexist and discriminatory behaviours and re-shape the systems that reinforce them. Speakers included Legal Services Commissioner Fiona McLeay, Justice Maxwell, President of the Court of Appeal, and Tracey Gaudry, CEO of Respect Victoria.

The next stage of the project is collaborative development of an action plan to eradicate sexism and gender inequality in the legal and justice sector.

Starts With Us is supported by the Victorian Government, and is a partnership with Victorian Women Lawyers, the Federation of Community Legal Centres, and Women's Health In The North.

“

Thank you for all your help, I couldn't have done it without your help. All those years I felt like I was at a bottom of a barrel but now I can't wait for the next day. Thank you.”

Women's Legal Client

WHAT SUCCESS LOOKS LIKE TO US:

Disadvantaged women exercising their rights to live free from violence and make informed choices about their relationships

Empowering communities to act on family violence

Over the past year, Women's Legal established key community partnerships to develop a program that will improve the legal knowledge of disadvantaged women experiencing family violence.

The program, known as Empowering Communities through Peers, will educate women community leaders on the laws around family violence. The women can then share their knowledge with disadvantaged women in their community, so they can better navigate the legal system.

Research has found many people consult their peers for advice and support for legal problems. That is why we chose to use an early intervention, peer education model for this program. We believe better legal and safety outcomes can be achieved when women are empowered to identify legal issues early and get help before matters escalate.

We are continuing our efforts to secure funding for a pilot of this innovative program with our partners Olympic Adult Education (OAE) and West Heidelberg Community Legal Service.



83%

of community lawyers found our child protection training improved their knowledge and skills

Linking vulnerable women with legal help and support

Navigating the legal system in the aftermath of family violence can be a confusing, exhausting and complicated process. Women are often required to attend multiple hearings at several courts, including magistrates' courts, family courts and sometimes the children's court and the Victims of Crime Assistance Tribunal.

This can be a daunting prospect for any woman, but for women who face additional barriers such as financial disadvantage, geographic isolation and lack of English the system can be impenetrable.

To combat this, our Link Community program uses video technology to link our lawyers and financial counsellors with women and their family violence workers, providing women with multi-disciplinary support throughout their legal case. Our social workers also provide emotional and practical support when women attend court with our lawyers.



Arti's story

With our help in the family courts, a woman has her child returned from her abusive ex-husband.

ISSUES

Arti came to Australia with her husband in 2009. Shortly after arriving, she had a child. From early on in the marriage her husband was abusive and violent. During one violent incident, Arti was so seriously injured she needed round-the-clock hospital care for weeks. When she was released, her husband sent her back to her home country so her family could take care of her. Her child remained in Australia with him. When Arti arrived back in Australia months later, she did not want to return to her husband and was desperate to be reunited with her child.

RESOLUTION

Arti was connected through friends to one of Women's Legal's Link Community partners. An appointment was arranged with one of our Link Community lawyers. We applied to the family courts to have Arti's child returned to her care, and asked that her husband provide spousal maintenance payments and a fair share of the property. Arti's husband argued that the child should remain with him, and that he should keep most of the family property. The court made orders that the child be returned to Arti's care, and that her husband provide ongoing financial support as well as give her a fair share of the property. This has given Arti the means to establish a new and safe life for herself and her child.

**Name and image changed to protect our client's identity.*

our supporters

Women's Legal is funded by the Indigenous Justice and Legal Assistance Division, Attorney General's Department, Canberra, and Victoria Legal Aid.

We also received project funding this year from Consumer Affairs Victoria, Department of Health and Human Services, Department of Justice and Regulation, Department of Premier and Cabinet, Domestic Violence Resource Centre and the Helen Macpherson Smith Trust. The *Starts With Us* project was supported by the Victorian Government.

We rely on volunteers, pro bono lawyers, donations and in-kind support to extend and enhance our services. Thank you to the following people and organisations who have supported us and our clients this year.

Major pro bono project partners

Baker McKenzie
Colin Biggers & Paisley
Gadens
Herbert Smith Freehills
Holding Redlich
Lander & Rogers

Pro bono and reduced fee legal assistance

Andreia Monteiro
Anne-Louise Juneja
Catherine Devine
Chiara Bryan
Daniel Cole
Ian Morgan
Jack O'Conner
Kerry Paull
Lachlan Wraith
Sarah Damon
Stragen Foo

Legal Advice Line volunteers

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Lara Perrett
Laura Harding
Lissa Thomas
Loren Gulliver
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Michelle Petrovski
Miranda Brookes
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Nathalie Ng
Nico Garea
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Rommy Noeth

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Siobhan McGee
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Teresa Fae
Vanessa Shambrook
Winning Wang

Student volunteers and student placements

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Sara Ito
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Sonia Narduzzo
Tabea Hansen
Taylah Alanis

Administrative support

Special thanks to Kathy Fawcett, who has provided administrative support to Women's Legal for more than 20 years.

In-kind support and donations

Alexander Batsis
Amy Rogers,
Victorian Equal Opportunity & Human Rights Commission
Asylum Seeker Resource Centre
Autodesk Australia
Belinda Lo,
Federation of Community Legal Centres
Brendan Lacota
Cara Gleeson, *Our Watch*
Carol Quayle, *Monash Health*
Caroline Gowan
Carolyn Bond
Charlotte Fox, *Victorian Legal Services Board & Commissioner*
Connie Kellett, *Department of Justice & Community Safety*
Corinne Grant,
Office of Public Prosecutions
Council to Homeless Persons
Creative Facilitation
Dana Robson,
Banyule Community Health
Deakin University
Emma Asscher,
Office of the Public Advocate
Fiona Daly
Fiona McLeay,
Legal Services Commissioner
Gemma Hazmi,
Law Institute of Victoria
Girls Rock Melbourne
Grata Fund

Harry Prout, *Olympic Village Exodus Community*
Jacqueline Morris,
Victorian Aboriginal Legal Service
Jill Prior, *Law & Advocacy Centre for Women*
Job Watch
Justice Connect
Justitia Lawyers & Consultants
King & Wood Mallesons
Lowana Wickham
Luba Tanevski,
inTouch Multicultural Centre against Family Violence
Lynne Haultain,
Victoria Law Foundation
Maddy Ulbrich, *Monash University*
Magistrate Kate Hawkins
Magistrate Paul Glass
Magistrate Pauline Spencer
Man with a Van
Marissa Johnpillai,
West Heidelberg Community Legal Service
Mary Delahuntly, *HESTA*
Monique Hameed, *WIRE*
Monique Keel, *Our Watch*
Multicultural Centre for Women's Health
Naty Guerrero-Diaz,
Slater & Gordon
Nicole Rich, *Victoria Legal Aid*
Peta Hodgson, *Inner Melbourne Community Legal*
Philippa Campbell,
Seniors Rights Victoria
Professor Belinda Fehlberg,
Melbourne Law School
Professor Gillian Triggs
Professor Jan Tobin,
University of Melbourne
Rachel Carson, *Australian Institute of Family Studies*
Rebecca Tipper,
Women's Health in the North
Russell Kennedy Lawyers
Sandra Buckley,
Women in Super
Sandy Ross, *Financial & Consumer Rights Council*

Pro bono and volunteers' contributions to WLSV are worth more than

\$2 million



More than
3000 hours
of work was contributed by
our pro bono partners

Serena McDuff,
Federation of Community Legal Centres
Shirley Abbatoivi,
Y-M-D Years Months Days
Social Security Rights Victoria
Stephanie Price, *West Heidelberg Community Legal Service*
Suzanne Crellin,
Olympic Adult Education
Tanja Haeusler,
Financial & Consumer Rights Council
The Hon. Justice Maxwell
Tracey Gaudry, *Respect Victoria*
Vanessa Shambrook,
Victorian Women Lawyers

Public donations

We also acknowledge the generosity of the many individuals who made donations to Women's Legal last year.

our people

Board Members

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Chair (from February 2019)

Shirley Southgate
Chair (until February 2019)

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Jane Welsh
Member (from April 2019)

Leonie Mayson
Member (from April 2019)

“

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*Thank you for fighting
so hard for us... you
have done big things
to help us move
on with our lives.”*

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Women's Legal Client

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Staff

Staff listed were employed
for all or part of 2018/19.

Joanna Fletcher
Chief Executive Officer

Legal & Policy

Elisa Whittaker
Director Legal & Policy

Helen Matthews
Director Legal & Policy

Henrietta Barclay
Director Legal & Policy

Andreia Monteiro *Senior Lawyer*

Brenna Powney *Senior Lawyer*

Lara Guarino *Senior Lawyer*

Rebecca Helberg *Senior Lawyer*

Anna Farrant *Lawyer*

Beth Jones *Lawyer*

Bonnie Renou *Lawyer*

Bronwyn Lay *Lawyer*

Carol Mellords *Lawyer*

Catherine Moroney
Lawyer/Project Manager

Chelsea Trang *Lawyer*

Laura Jordan *Lawyer*

Marta Vezzosi *Lawyer*

Molly Willoughby *Lawyer*

Rebecca Ballard *Lawyer*

Sze Lim *Lawyer*

Kate Robinson *Graduate Lawyer*

Kythe Di Scala *Graduate Lawyer*

Michelle Luarte *Graduate Lawyer*

Marianne Jago
Senior Policy Adviser

Tania Clarke *Senior Policy Adviser*

Kate Munro
Integrated Programs Manager

Donna Letchford
Financial Counsellor

Koula Neophytou *Social Worker*

Julia Bennett *Support Worker*

Amanda Prince *Administrator*

Sandra O'Connor *Administrator*

Education & Engagement

Eila Pourasgheri
Director Education & Engagement

Lynda Memery *Senior Education
& Engagement Practitioner*

Ilana Faivel *Education & Engagement
Coordinator & Lawyer*

Nina Ulasowski *Education &
Engagement Coordinator & Lawyer*

Monica Campo
Education & Engagement Coordinator

Tasha Lloyd *Administrator*

Operations

Nuzhat Lotia *Director Operations*

Belinda Harrison
People & Culture Manager

Emma Miller
Communications Manager

Menaka Bandara *Finance Manager*

Abril Garcia Negron *Data Analysis
& Evaluation Coordinator*

Genie Abramoff *Finance Coordinator*

Louise Ellis *Administrator*

Sarah Thomas *Administrator*

Vicki Gazzola *Receptionist*



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