

MEDIA RELEASE

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Women's Legal welcomes extension of family reunification time-limits during COVID-19 but calls for permanent reform

Women's Legal Service Victoria welcomes the passing of a Victorian Government bill that gives vulnerable women whose children have been removed by child protection extra time during COVID-19 to address concerns so they can be reunited with their children.

The Omnibus (Emergency Measures) Bill, which recently passed the Victorian Upper House, allows the Court to extend the existing two-year time-limit on reunification of children and parents by up to six months where progress towards reunification has been impeded by the pandemic.

But the specialist family violence legal service said more permanent reform should be considered.

Henrietta Barclay, Director of Legal and Policy at Women's Legal Service Victoria, said the changes would give vulnerable mothers more time to access the supports they need to get back on their feet.

"Many of our clients have struggled to access services during COVID-19 including mental health services, drug and alcohol counselling and housing support, making it difficult for them to recover from family violence and resume care of their children within existing timeframes.

"Accessing services is challenging in normal times but during the pandemic it has been even harder because of service closures, long waiting lists and limited face-to-face support.

"The changes give vulnerable mothers more time to access the help they need to ensure their children can be safely returned to their care."

But Ms Barclay said more permanent reforms were needed to meet the complex needs of child protection clients and ensure mothers and children are kept safe and together.

"COVID-19 has highlighted the problem with rigid timeframes for achieving stable homes for children where parents are unable to access support services in a timely manner.



“The existing provisions mean vulnerable women are permanently separated from their children if they can’t get the support they need to have their children returned to their care within two years.”

“While it’s great that the government has recognised the challenges caused by COVID-19, further reforms are needed to allow the Court to extend reunification timelines in appropriate cases beyond the pandemic.”

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