



## FEDERAL CIRCUIT AND FAMILY COURT OF AUSTRALIA

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9 February 2026

### Senate Estimates: Opening Statement

***Federal Circuit and Family Court of Australia (Division 1); and***

***Federal Circuit and Family Court of Australia (Division 2)***

My opening statement today is intended to provide the Committee with a concise update on the Courts' progress in enhancing safety and accessibility for parties in regional and rural locations, and initiatives aimed at improving outcomes for First Nations' families.

However, before I outline those matters, I take this opportunity, on behalf of the Courts, to express our sympathies for and condolences to the victims and their families of the attack which occurred in Bondi on 14 December. A number of the Courts' Judges and staff were directly affected by what occurred as local residents and given their Jewish faith. All of us in the Courts are deeply saddened by this hateful attack and our hearts go out to all of the victims and their families. To ensure that we are properly informed about the challenges posed by antisemitism, the Chief Justice has acted quickly to set up a working group, which I will be a part of, to ensure that he is properly advised on how to keep our Judges, Registrars, staff and all court users safe.

I now turn to the core theme of today's opening statement.

#### Key challenges impacting regional and rural communities

While family and domestic violence is unacceptably high in all parts of the country, in regional and rural Australia it is experienced at a disproportionately higher rate than in major cities. Women living in regional and rural Australia face a **higher lifetime** prevalence of intimate partner violence than women in major cities, with approximately **1 in 4** women in regional Australia reporting a history of violent partner relationships, compared with 1 in 5 in metropolitan areas.<sup>1</sup> Moreover, First Nations Peoples continue to be over-represented amongst those affected by family violence, with **67%** of First Nations Peoples who experienced physical harm identifying an intimate partner or family member as the perpetrator, and **72%** of assault-related hospitalisations involving family violence.<sup>2</sup>

This increased prevalence of family and domestic violence in regional and rural Australia is of particular concern when set against the overall risk data of the Courts, which shows that **61%** of Lighthouse matters screen as high risk, and **86%** of parenting cases involve allegations of family violence.

<sup>1</sup> Gina Dillon, 'Country Women are more likely to experience intimate partner violence,' *The Conversation* (3 November 2015) <[Country women are more likely to experience intimate partner violence](#)>.

<sup>2</sup> Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, 'Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people', (30 July 2025) <[Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people - Australian Institute of Health and Welfare](#)>.

The challenges for Australians living in regional and rural locations extend beyond family and domestic violence, with higher mental health-related hospitalisations and other health-related risks, and lower availability of community-based mental health and psychosocial supports.<sup>3</sup> These increased risk factors are compounded by geographic isolation, diminished employment opportunities, the “digital divide” (including limited access to digital devices and reliable internet) and reduced access to health, counselling and a range of specialist services.

### **The Courts - enhancing access to justice**

With approximately **1 in 5** of the Courts’ family law applications being filed in regional or rural locations, and approximately **1 in every 15** final order filings involving an Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander party, the Courts are acutely aware of the significant challenges faced by litigants and their legal representatives based in regional and rural communities. With these challenges in mind, the Courts have, within their available facilities and resourcing, sought to tackle these challenges through various initiatives, including the following:

- Operating in **16 major registries** and **28 regional or rural circuit locations**, allowing judicial officers to deliver services in a number of locations outside major cities. In the last financial year, Judges undertook around **120 circuits**, including in the additional locations of Foster, Gosford, Gunnedah, Sale and Narrabri.
- The appointment of **Registrars to regional registries** to ensure a physical presence of judicial officers outside large city locations. Registrars are appointed to be based in and support regional registries in Albury, Cairns, Darwin, Dubbo, Lismore, Newcastle, Rockhampton, Townsville and Wollongong. They also support a number of circuit locations, including Senior Judicial Registrars conducting Specialist Indigenous Lists in Port Macquarie and Coffs Harbour.
- The use of **Panel Family Consultants** to supplement the work of the Court Children’s Service by delivering high-quality Child Impact Reports and extending the Courts’ reach across regional areas beyond what Court Child Experts (**CCEs**) alone could provide. The Courts have recently commenced a pilot program which involves selected CCEs travelling to Mildura, Tamworth and Port Macquarie to prepare these expert reports locally.
- The Courts’ **Indigenous Family Liaison Officer (IFLO) program** seeks to address the additional barriers faced by First Nations families when engaging with the Courts, including fostering a greater understanding of court processes through culturally appropriate communication. The Courts’ **Specialist Indigenous Lists** also provide a more flexible and responsive case management approach that respects culture, community and connection to Country.
- In family law financial disputes, there is often a dispute over a lower pool of assets that can be quickly dissipated through legal fees if proceedings become protracted. The Registrar-led **PPP Cases** pathway helps to finalise such disputes inexpensively and in less than 6 months through highly efficient case management and mediation.

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<sup>3</sup> Productivity Commission, ‘Mental Health and Suicide Prevention Agreement Review’, (Inquiry Report No. 108, 11 November 2025).

- Both Judges and Registrars also **utilise technology** (Microsoft Teams and Webex) to reach out to as many locations as possible for a variety of court events (including many procedural hearings and dispute resolution events), and to assist with certain high-risk cases. The Courts also launched '**Kids Corner**' in October 2025 as an online resource to provide age-appropriate information that helps children understand court processes in family law proceedings regardless of where they reside.

While the above initiatives, including the use of technology, can be helpful in mitigating some of the challenges faced in cases involving regional and rural parties, the reality is that many court events, particularly complex final hearings and most interviews of children by Court Child Experts, require in-person attendance. Many parties also simply do not have access to the necessary technology and devices required for digital court events. Equally, access to circuit locations for in-person hearings is wholly dependant on the Courts being able to access suitable State and Territory court facilities, which are all in high demand in relevant States and Territory locations. There are also considerable constraints upon secure spaces in these facilities to keep vulnerable parties safe.

This all means that parties in regional and rural locations not only have the significant social and other challenges noted earlier, but can struggle to attend court events, and are at risk of waiting longer for their hearings, and experiencing increased costs.

### **Ensuring safe access to justice for regional and rural parties**

The Courts welcome, and are grateful for, the Government's decision, as part of the recent MYEFO, to extend most of the funding for the Courts' Lighthouse and IFLO programs for an additional two years to 30 June 2028. This funding enables the Courts to continue delivering these important initiatives to a significant proportion of Australian families.

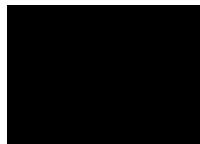
However, without additional ongoing funding for the Courts, many regional and rural Australians, including First Nations families, remain at a significant disadvantage, noting that:

- Funding for 15 IFLOs nationally presently allows only **47%** of matters involving a First Nations party to be supported by an IFLO;
- The renowned Lighthouse program **cannot cover circuit locations** and therefore much of regional and rural Australia, including locations with a high proportion of First Nations Peoples (who need greater support to ensure that they participate in the program at the same rate as other parties);
- The Courts have resources for only **relatively few permanently located regional registries**, with those locations having facilities requiring significant upgrade to ensure the same services and safety (including safe-rooms) as in corresponding city locations;
- The **ability for CCEs to assist families** that live a significant distance from major cities is presently limited, including constraints in being able to offer Child Impact Reports. While the pilot program seeks to address this in part, the long-term continuation of this program and its expansion to additional locations will require additional funding;
- **Access to State and Territory courtrooms** and circuit facilities, whilst greatly appreciated, is required to be negotiated on an annual basis and is subject to the considerable pressures and demands on those local courthouses due to State and Territory caseload.

The Lighthouse and IFLO programs are embedded within the Courts' case management pathway and play a critical role in early risk identification, the management of high-risk family violence matters, and support for First Nations families. It is essential that funding for these programs is also expanded and embedded. It is also essential that access to appropriate and safe facilities in regional locations is increased. Given the digital divide and broader disadvantages faced by regional and rural Australians, the Courts also consider it critically important that they are supported to reach out to regional and rural Australians by providing justice through **digital hubs** in regional locations, as well as **on-country hearings** to support First Nations parties.

The Courts remain committed to continuous improvement and to constructive and collaborative engagement with Government to support these objectives into the future, including exploring options for funding to ensure safe access to justice for regional and rural parties.

We appreciate the opportunity to provide this update and welcome any questions from the Committee.



**David Pringle PSM**

Chief Executive Officer & Principal Registrar

Federal Circuit and Family Court of Australia (Division 1)

Federal Circuit and Family Court of Australia (Division 2)