

Melbourne Activist Legal Support Inc.

Annual Report

2024-25

Acknowledgment of Country

MALS acknowledges and pays respect to Country and Elders of First Peoples wherever we work across the lands now known as Victoria. We acknowledge that the police and legal system in this country remains a core component of colonisation which continues to disproportionately target and impact First Peoples. All activists in Australia today owe a huge debt to Aboriginal activists throughout our history who fought for basic human rights, social, legal and political change.

Why We Exist

MALS exists because stronger activist legal support builds stronger and more resilient social movements.

Stronger social movements mean a more robust and sustainable democracy, a more accountable and representative political system, and a more equitable and just society for everyone.



Our Objectives

The objectives of MALS are to:

- support activists in defending their own civil and political rights
- help maintain an open political space for protest in Victoria
- train and field Legal Observer Teams
- monitor and report on public order policing
- provide training and advice on legal rights, police powers, and activist legal support structures
- develop and distribute legal resources for protest movements
- maintain collaborative links with community legal centres, law firms and local, national and international human rights agencies.



Our Impact

The political context in which MALS operates today has changed markedly from when we formed fourteen years ago.

Notable over the past two years has been the global decline in fundamental respect for human rights, and deference to the norms, obligations and protections of international law. Although this continues a trend over decades of nation-states flouting and undermining United Nations mechanisms and ignoring important human rights architecture, nowhere has this been more starkly illustrated than in the utter failure of the global community, including Australia, to prevent or even mitigate the ongoing genocide of an entire population in Gaza. Like so many times in human history, hope has only come in the form of a massive, global, grassroots, popular resistance movement to these atrocities.

The pro-Palestinian movement here in Australia has deployed an impressively unique and diverse array of protest tactics, sustained for over 24 months, in efforts to enforce Australia's legal and moral obligations under international law to prevent genocide and to not be complicit in it. The large Sunday marches in Melbourne's central business district organised over 100 consecutive weeks have international and historic significance. This massive grassroots organising effort should idealy be championed and widely celebrated by all.

Instead, these past two years have seen the growth of the most vitriolic, and intense anti-protest sentiment MALS has observed in the past 14 years. Every large scale progressive protest movement is demonised by its political opponents and authorities. But the scale and ferocity of the rhetoric, community anger and institutional attacks against the Palestinian movement in Victoria and New South Wales have been frightening to all of us who recognise the intrinsic role of protest and the importance of our collective civil and political rights.

This anti-protest furore has taken the form of a moral panic, fueled by racism, business interests, strategic media attacks, and the sad propensity of conservative political forces in Victoria to jump to authoritarian, anti-democratic and oppressive responses to social conflict.

Although the current Victorian Government has so far resisted some of these, such as the ludicrous ‘protest permit’ regime and the restoration of the Coalitions’ dangerous move-on powers, the government has continued to back Victoria Police’s dangerous public order tactics with impunity, and has promised disturbing legislative changes that may threaten fundamental democratic rights, including anti-mask laws which threaten the right or all Victorians to participate in protest in a way that protects their health, privacy and safety.

Our on-the ground presence

In this current context, the visible presence of pink vests at rallies, direct actions, and pickets, and the subsequent reporting and advocacy, remains as important as ever to protect our vital political space. For another year, MALS has consistently fielded Legal Observer Teams multiple times a week while continuing to deliver high-quality reporting and analysis, community legal education, and activist legal support.

MALS has always worked across movements, and we place ourselves at protests wherever there is a possibility of police action impacting upon rights.

We fielded Legal Observer Teams at Extinction Rebellion climate protests, union pickets, refugee rights rallies, protests against police violence and police killings of Aboriginal and black men, and at large nationwide rallies against violence against women. We have continued monitoring of the policing of the annual 420 protest for the decriminalisation of cannabis and the annual Invasion Day march.

In the context of the rise of far-right, transphobic, nationalist, anti-immigration, and other organised hate groups in Victoria, we have continued the careful monitoring of how Victoria Police respond to the numerous protests countering hate-motivated mobilisations, as well as how police respond to the growing number of neo-Nazi actions appearing across Victoria.



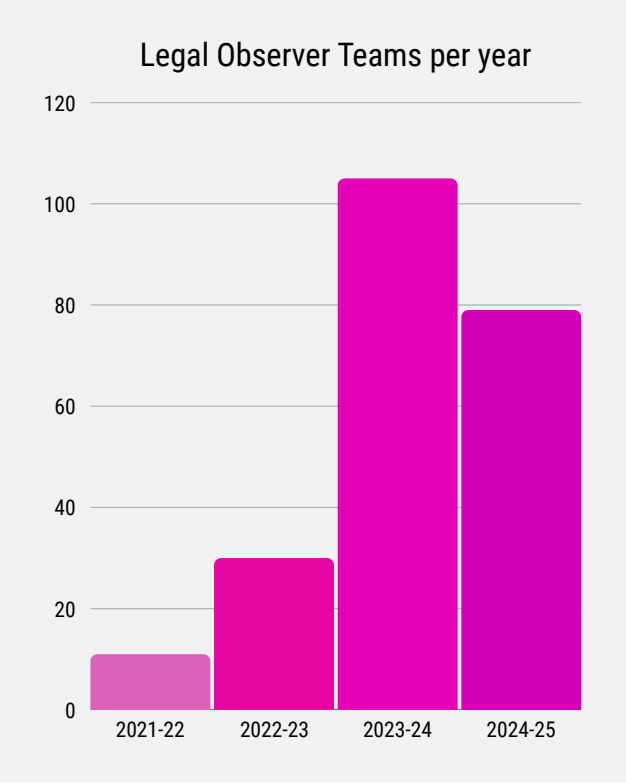
We choose to field teams where and when we think they will be most needed, and when activist groups have requested our presence. At so many critical protests, where activists have faced very real risks of police violence, abuse or discriminatory police conduct we have had legal observers present, providing legal information, monitoring, and gathering evidence.

Between July 2024 and June 2025, MALS fielded 79 Legal Observer Teams involving 363 individual legal observer shifts.

We acknowledge the amazing effort of each and every one of our volunteer legal observers.

Between July 2024 and June 2025, there were at least 42 requests for Legal Observer Teams that we could not field either due to capacity or timing.

Behind the scenes of our on-the ground presence is a huge range of organising, researching, briefing, risk assessment, preparation and training.



After each team there is an enormous amount of evidence gathering and logging, documenting and sometimes producing and distributing detailed reports or Statements of Concern.

After protests where we observe serious police misconduct, we can spend many weeks and sometimes months of referrals, reporting and advocacy.

In July 2024, the United Nations Human Rights Council called upon all States 'to pay particular attention to the safety and protection of those observing, monitoring and recording protests, including human rights defenders, lawyers, journalists and other media workers, taking into account their specific role, exposure and vulnerability.' Victoria Police, as the coercive arm of the Victorian government, has failed to respect the role, independence and safety of legal observers multiple times over the past 12 months.

The independent monitoring of police is a critical element of human rights protection. Throughout the year, we have taken every opportunity to assert the rights of journalists, human rights defenders and independent observers to access protest spaces without being hindered or obstructed, or limited in exercising their functions.

We thank the growing number of organisations, agencies, churches and unions throughout Australia who recognise and help assert our rights to safely and effectively monitor police at protest events.



Ongoing advocacy

Our capacity to gather evidence, feed into police accountability processes and to strengthen human rights advocacy continues to grow. MALS has been able to draw together statistics, evidence and extensive testimony from a wide range of protest participants, frontline legal support organisations, and combine this data with our own eye-witness evidence from legal observers. Our ongoing monitoring allows us to identify patterns of behaviour, changes in police approaches over time, and where failures to meet human rights standards are systemic.

Our contribution to a collective advocacy efforts by a wide range of trade union, religious, legal and civil society over these past 12 months, against the proposed raft of Victorian anti-protest laws has been valuable. We have appreciated the efforts of the Victorian Trades Hall Council and the Australian Democracy Network in facilitating this advocacy.

MALS provided detailed feedback this year into the development of human rights compliant monitoring standards to assist the Australian National Preventive Mechanism (NPM) in its future detention monitoring work under the UN Optional Protocol to the Convention against Torture (OPCAT). This advice included MALS's expertise regarding police stops and searches (general and within designated areas), arrests, and and detention in relation to the policing of public assemblies.

This year MALS has released two detailed Statements of Concern (SoCs), as well as two shorter 'Points of Concern' highlighting serious incidents of police misconduct or failure to uphold human rights.

Following the Disrupt Land Forces protests in September 2024, MALS produced an 87-page report documenting our significant concerns regarding police use of force and weaponry, the use of special powers including anti-terrorism laws against protests, severe mistreatment of legal observers, and disinformation and misinformation in the media. The report contains 11 recommendations.

This year our reports have been picked up and used by Members of Parliament, the Human Rights Law Centre, Liberty Victoria, The Guardian Australia, Sydney Criminal Lawyers, Overland, Deepcut News, as well as the global civil society alliance, CIVICUS.



Our reports remain the most reliable, detailed, accurate, objective and comprehensive analysis of protest policing currently available in Victoria.

Linking activists with legal support

Legal observers form an important link between social movement groups and Victoria's legal and human rights community. A great deal of our work is gathering evidence, testimony and providing supported referrals to law firms. Our referral work has increased substantially over recent years. Between July 2024 and June 2025 MALS received 27 requests for footage of arrests, assaults, injuries and police harassment from both activists and lawyers.

This represents a 170% increase on the 10 requests received the previous year. Footage has already been provided in response to eight of these requests, and four legal referrals have been made to expert legal support. One activist who was referred to legal support has made a complaint to the Independent Broad-based Anti-corruption Commission (IBAC) about being injured by a police rubber bullet at the Disrupt Land Forces protests.

In addition to our referral work, MALS has continued to link activists on the ground with on-call lawyers during protest actions. In March 2025, MALS launched a dedicated on-call lawyer phone number to streamline this support. Between July 2024 and June 2025, MALS had an on-call lawyer available for 13 actions and a total of 29 hours, with 23 of these hours making use of the dedicated on-call lawyer phone number. MALS is continuing to reach out to barristers to expand its pool of on-call lawyers.

Our strong relationship with many expert police accountability solicitors and barristers and critical evidence gathering creates a landscape for many other systemic accountability cases in Victoria.

Training and upskilling legal observers

MALS continues to grow our capacity to train and upskill legal observers and provide community-based Know Your Rights workshops. In 2024-25, we have run three sold-out public legal observer trainings, upskilled our members through internal Train the Trainer and Team Coordinator sessions, and delivered a number of workshops to community groups.

The expansion of our training working group through a Train the Trainer model has enabled us to deliver more legal observer trainings in diverse communities and respond to requests from collectives for tailored workshops. We have facilitated training for the University of Melbourne Student Union, community public housing pickets, Anak Bangsa Merdeka, healthcare workers, and law students. We have experimented with new formats including online refresher training to support our legal observers in engaging in assertive rights-based police interactions.

Our 2024-25 training program has been a resounding success and MALS remains commited to accessible, engaging training that meets the needs of our members and broader community.



United Nations submissions

Following its submission to the United Nations Special Rapporteur on the freedom of peaceful assembly and of association in July 2024, MALS provided a detailed submission to the United Nations Human Rights Council's (UNHCR) fourth Universal Periodic Review (UPR) into Australia's human rights record in June 2025.

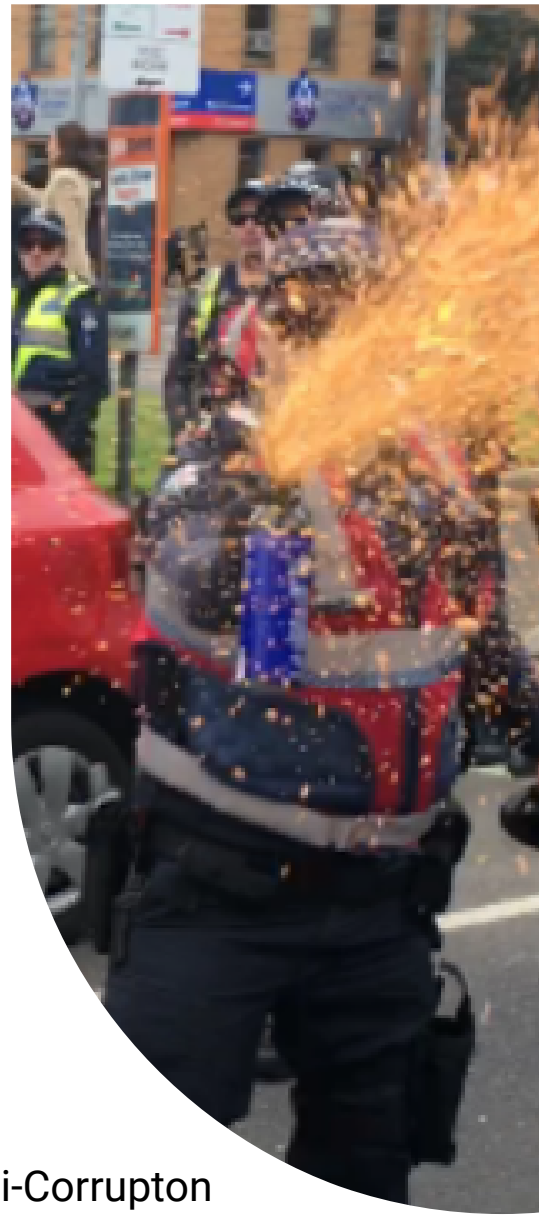


The UPR is a comprehensive peer review of UN member states' human rights performance which occurs every 4 ½ years. MALS' submission assesses the Australian Government's performance regarding its responsibility to uphold and protect our civil and political rights and the right to protest.

It collates evidence of the Australian Government's progress towards recommendations from its last UPR which occurred in 2021, and makes new recommendations to improve Australia's civil and political rights performance focusing on three key issues that impact the right to protest: anti-protest laws and police powers, dangerous police weapons, and legal observer rights and protections.

According to the Federal Attorney General's department, Australia's appearance before the UNHCR in Geneva for its UPR is tentatively scheduled for 26 January 2026.

Police weaponry



In March 2024 we repeated our call for the Victorian Government to ban explosive crowd control devices, such as ‘flashbangs’ and ‘stinger grenades’, and legislate to properly regulate the use of dangerous Kinetic Impact Projectile (KIP) weapons, with appropriate accountability and limits on their use.

That call was backed up in May 2024 by 28 Australian civil society groups who signed a joint letter calling upon the Victorian Premier to “legislate to strictly prohibit the use of all types of explosive devices, such as stinger grenades and flash-bangs, by Victoria Police due to their documented ability to cause severe injuries.”

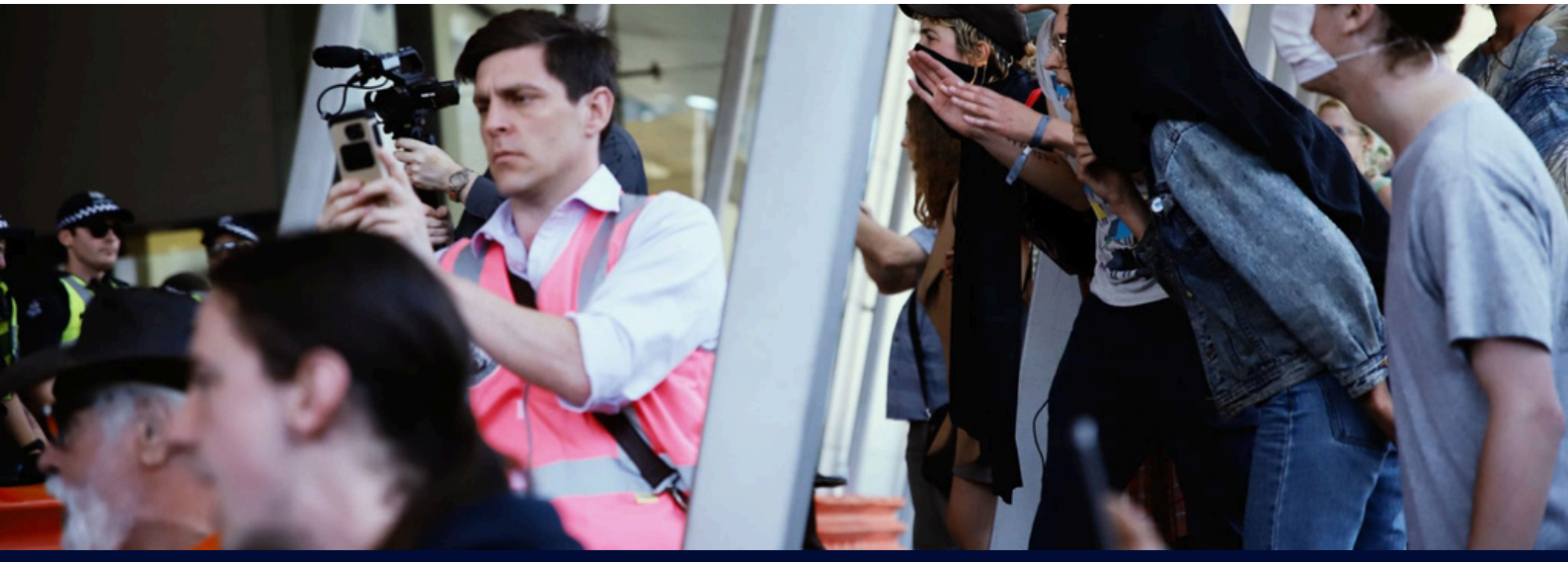
In April 2024, the Independent Broad-based Anti-Corrupton Commission (IBAC) released a summary of its thematic review into Victoria Police’s investigations of complaints about its use of OC spray. The thematic review was an oversight review of already completed internal police investigations that only examined 15 cases. But it was the closest we have come to an official examination of the ways in which police use OC spray.

The IBAC findings vindicated what we and many other accountability groups, human rights advocates, law firms and victims of police violence had been saying about the unlawful use of OC spray for some years.

The important OC Spray Class Action progressed to trial this year with hearing dates in February, March and June 2025 before Her Honour Justice Claire Harris. We thank the legal team and the many activists involved for their persistence. Launched in September 2021 by Phi Finney McDonald and Inner Melbourne Community Legal, this case alleges, as MALS has publicly stated, that Victoria Police's use of capsicum spray against protesters at the 2019 International Mining and Resources Conference (IMARC) was unlawful, and argues the use of OC foam breaches the law when used as a coercive tool.

A MALS legal observer provided strong eye-witness evidence during the trial. High-ranking Victoria Police officers, including tactical commanders from the Public Order Response Team, also took the stand during the trial. A decision has not yet been handed down, but the case has attracted significant media attention.

The wanton, widespread and arguably unlawful use of police weaponry outside the Land Forces weapons convention on 11 September 2024, and the extent of serious injuries suffered by activists, legal observers, medics and journalists alike, demonstrated very plainly why our continued advocacy against these weapons is so important.

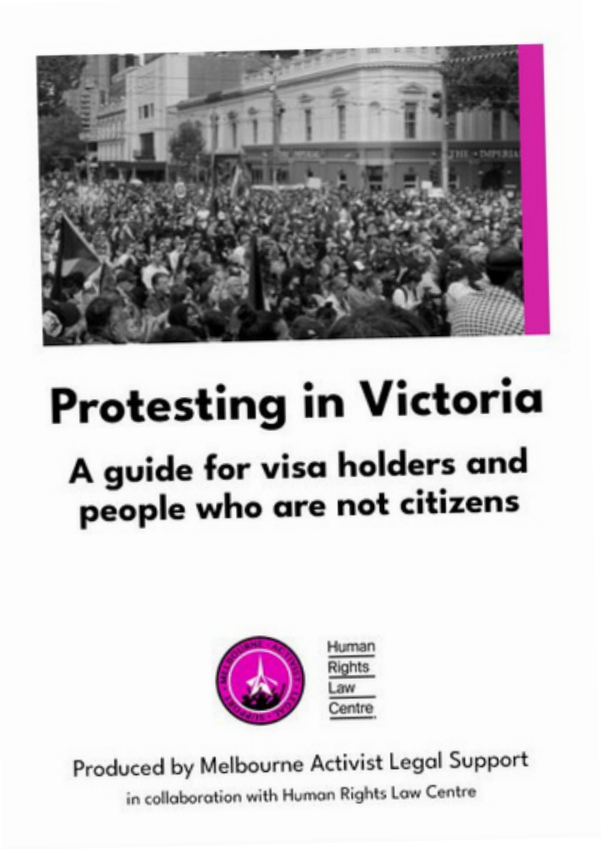


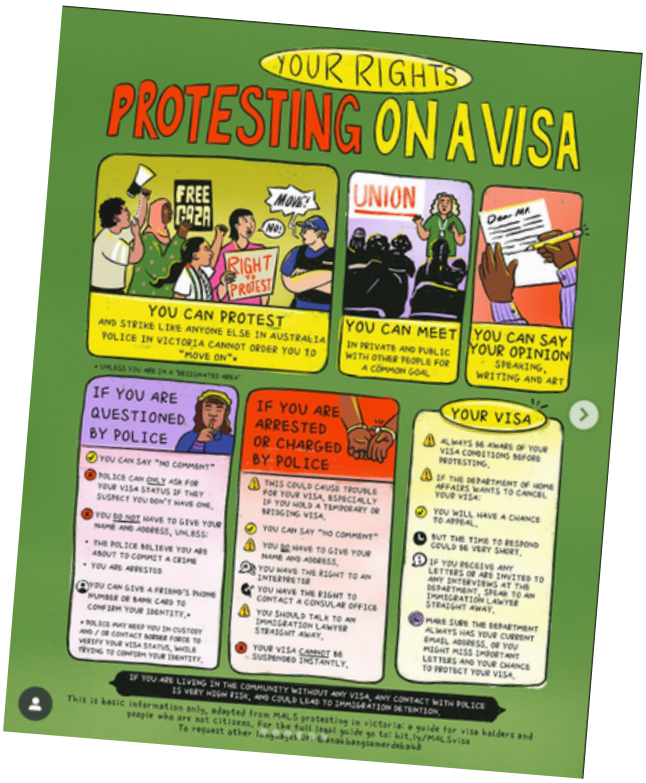
Protesting on a visa guide

In March 2025, MALS launched *Protesting in Victoria: A guide for visa holders and people who are not citizens*, a new legal information resource produced in collaboration with Human Rights Law Centre.

The guide has been illustrated, translated into at least two languages, and referenced at a legal rights workshop hosted by Anak Bangsa Merdeka at South-East Monash Legal Service. The Instagram tile advertising the guide was viewed almost 19,000 times within ten days of being posted.

Special thanks to MALS member Sandrine Persaud for researching and writing the guide, and Josephine Langbien and Sanmati Verma from Human Rights Law Centre for reviewing it.





Membership

226 members

136 legal observers

40+ working group members

1000+ monthly email subscribers

Organisational growth

The strengthening of our governance, budgeting, planning and operational policies and practices over 2023 and 2024 seems to have really paid off. The Organising Body has continued to provide strategic direction, leadership, and has developed additional governance policies over the past year that will guide our work in the years ahead.

Establishing working groups has seen an influx of highly skilled legal researchers, trainers, writers, media and legal advocates. We currently have over 40 members active in working groups, 136 trained, active legal observers. 1040 people currently subscribe to our monthly Activist Legal News, with 155 new subscribers between July 2024 and June 2025.

Acknowledgement and Thanks

MALS would like to acknowledge all of the many volunteers who have contributed to MALS organising as well as the all those who coordinate or have taken part in Legal Observer Teams over the past 12 months.

We would also like to thank the 14 members of the Organising Body for their commitment to the strategic direction, health and impact of the organisation over the year. We would also like to thank Brenna McNeil for her central and critical role as MALS Admin Coordinator this past year.

MALS would also like to thank:

- Ali Besiroglu, Victorian Aboriginal Legal Service
- Jordan Brown for IT infrastructure support
- Adam V Chernok, Niagara Lane Chambers
- Alice Drury, Acting Legal Director, Human Rights Law Centre
- Gregor Husper, Police Accountability Project, Inner Melbourne Community Legal
- Jeremy King, Principal, Robinson Gill
- Brenna McNeil for her continued work as MALS Admin Coordinator
- David Mejia-Canales, Human Rights Law Centre
- Nadia Morales, Inner Melbourne Community Legal
- Dr Maria O'Sullivan, Monash University
- Adel Salman, President, Islamic Council of Victoria
- Louise Sampson, Office of Katherine Copsey, Greens Justice spokesperson
- Sarah Schwartz, Executive Officer, Jewish Council of Australia
- Anastasia Radievska, Protest Rights Campaigner, Australian Democracy Network
- Raagini Vijaykumar, Associate, Robinson Gill
- Philip Waters, General Manager, Deaf Victoria
- Nikita White, Amnesty International
- Erin Buckley, Moonee Valley Legal Service
- Maya George, Doogue and George
- Josephine Langbien, Human Rights Law Centre
- Sanmati Verma, Human Rights Law Centre

MALS wishes to thank the following organisations for their valuable in-kind support or direct assistance:

- Amnesty International – Victoria
- Black Spark Cultural Centre
- Catalyst Social Centre
- CIVICUS Monitor
- Commons Social Change Library
- Deaf Victoria
- Fitzroy Legal Service
- Human Rights Law Centre
- Inner Melbourne Community Legal
- Islamic Council of Victoria
- Legal Observers NSW
- Naarm Frontline Medics
- Phi Finney McDonald
- Police Accountability Project
- Serverasaurus
- South-East Monash Legal Service
- Victorian Aboriginal Legal Service
- Victorian Equal Opportunity and Human Rights Commission
- Victorian Law Foundation
- Zulip and Kandra Labs

In 2024-2025 MALS received significant funding from an anonymous community member who recognised the vital role we play in keeping acitivists safe. We would like to thank this donor for their very generous support of MALS. MALS would also like to thank Robinson Gill and Free Palestine for their contributions to our work.

Finally, MALS wishes to thank all those who have donated to our work over the past 12 months. Donations to support our work into 2026 can be made via our website or the QR code.

#FundtheFrontline

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