



# Victorian Aboriginal Legal Service Incorporated Newsletter August 2003

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## VALS welcomes new staff

*Loretta O'Neill*, who is replacing Jan Muir as the Community Legal Education Officer. Loretta is of Yorta Yorta descent from Shepparton, and has spent much of her life in Melbourne. She was employed at VALS as a Client Service Officer until early 2002, and is now back at VALS as the Community Legal Education Officer. Loretta says that she is looking forward to getting out into the community, and tackling issues at the grassroots level.



*Burnetta Corbett*, the new Legal Word Processor for the Criminal Law section. Burnetta is a Nyoogar from the southwest of Western Australia. She has only been in Melbourne for 7 months, and she says she loves it. In WA, Burnetta worked as a Customer Service Officer for the WA police, and as an administrator at Curtin



University.

*Francis Hill*, the new lawyer for Bairnsdale. Francis is originally from central country Victoria, and has most recently been working in Echuca in a private general practice. Francis will be working from the Melbourne office for the next month and then he will be based in Bairnsdale.



## VALS on-line

VALS is now on the web. To find out more about our services, such as how we can help you, who we are, legal issues affecting Kooris, and much more, visit [www.vals.org.au](http://www.vals.org.au). The website will be undergoing some changes over the next couple of weeks, so watch for new info on the site. To offer feedback or any comments, email us at [vals@vals.org.au](mailto:vals@vals.org.au) or contact Kate on 9419 3888.

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## VALS Client Service Officer elected to new Indigenous youth council

Congratulations to VALS Client Service Officer John Bell, who was elected last month as the Metropolitan representative for the Victorian Aboriginal Youth Advisory Council. A male and female representative from each ATSIC region sit on the Council, which will examine, and advise ATSIC on youth issues throughout Victoria. This is the first year that the council will operate.



## VALS statistics

VALS opened a total of 6112 cases from July 2002 to June 2003. This is an increase of 16% for the last financial year, and an 18% increase over the last five years. With the employment of two new family lawyers in the second half of last year, the number of Family Law cases opened increased by a staggering 216% in the last year

Period	Civil	Criminal	Family	Total
July 98-June 99	97	4896	189	<b>5182</b>
July 99-June 00	107	5172	198	<b>5477</b>
July 00-June 01	92	5159	168	<b>5419</b>
July 01-July 02	84	5117	90	<b>5291</b>
July 02-June 03	66	5762	284	<b>6112</b>

## VALS meets with new Aboriginal Family Violence Prevention and Legal Service

Community Legal Education staff at VALS met with representatives from the Aboriginal Family Violence Prevention and Legal Service (AFVPLS). Both organisations agreed that given their common aims of preventing family violence, their relationship should be further developed. Once AFVPLS employs a lawyer, VALS and AFVPLS will meet again to discuss referrals and other ways they can work together.

Victorian Aboriginal Legal Service

### **Aboriginal Legal Services receive only six months funding**

Last month, Aboriginal Legal Services were informed that they would only receive funding until 31 December. ATSSIS is currently re-examining its funding allocation method, which will determine the funding received by VALS for the 6 months from 1 January to 30 June.

Most ALS's are community-controlled organisations with an Indigenous board. A recent evaluation by the Office of Evaluation and Audit (ATSIC) found that it would cost the public purse \$25 million more if Legal Aid Commissions were to pay private solicitors to do the work. The report concluded that tendering was not likely to improve service delivery, a fact that seems to have been completely ignored by the Commonwealth Government.

ALS's already have problems with service delivery because of low levels of funding compared to other types of legal services. Receiving only six month funding makes it even more difficult to function effectively. It means that it is difficult to employ new staff, and encourages existing staff to leave. It also means that services are unlikely to spend money on infrastructure, such as updating computer systems, or buying new office equipment.

### **NAILSS loses funding**

Last month, the National Aboriginal and Islander Legal Service Secretariat (NAILSS) had its application for funding denied. Phillip Ruddock, the Minister for Immigration and Multicultural and Indigenous Affairs, said this decision was a result of NAILSS re-electing Ray Robinson to its Board, despite the minister's Conflict of Interest Directions that states no full-time ATSSIS elected official could sit on the Board of an Indigenous organisation receiving ATSSIS funds. Although Robinson stood down from the Board on 18 June, NAILSS, which is the peak coordinating body for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander legal services across Australia, will not receive funding.

### **Indigenous people still grossly over-represented in prisons**

Indigenous prisoners made up 20% of the Australian prison population at the end of last financial year, up from 14% a decade

ago. This meant that Indigenous adults were 15 times more likely than non-Indigenous persons to be in prison. The highest Indigenous imprisonment rate was in Western Australia, followed by NSW, and Queensland.

Indigenous young people are even worse off than Indigenous adult offenders. Even though the numbers of juveniles being locked up have dropped quite considerably, Indigenous young people are 17 times more likely to be in prison than non-Indigenous. Western Australia is again the State that imprisons more Indigenous young people than any other state, followed by South Australia and the ACT. Victoria has the lowest rate of imprisonment of Indigenous juveniles.

### **Koori Court to open in Warrnambool**

Last month the State Attorney-General Rob Hulls announced that a Koori Court would open in Warrnambool by November. This will add to the Koori Courts at Shepparton and Broadmeadows that are already operating under the two-year pilot project.

The Koori Court is a day set aside in the Magistrates' Court to sentence adult Aboriginal offenders who plead guilty. The court hears all offences that are usually held in the Magistrates' Court, with the exception of family violence and sexual offences.

The Koori Court is different from a normal court in that it is less formal. The judge sits at a table with everyone else, rather than at the bench. An Elder from the community advises the Magistrate issues that may affect the sentence.

### **VAHS celebrates its 30th**

The Victorian Aboriginal Health Service will celebrate its 30th year of operation by opening the Edna Rose Brown Garden of Remembrance at the Nicholson St office on Monday 18th August. Everyone welcome.

