

Victorian Aboriginal Legal Service Co-operative Ltd

Newsletter April 2006



24 Hour Legal Service
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Staff Update

VALS welcomes Joel Orenstein to the position of Solicitor. After an initial period in the Fitzroy office, undergoing induction, etc. Joel will take up the position of Solicitor at the Bairnsdale Office.

Tender Update

New South Wales has recently gone through the Commonwealth Attorney-General's tender process of legal services for Indigenous Australians. The successful tenderer is a newly formed Aboriginal Legal Service, which merges the six existing Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Legal Services in New South Wales, and which will commence operations on 1 July 2006.

The Police Cautioning and Youth Diversion Pilot Project - Update

The implementation of the Police Cautioning and Youth Diversion Pilot Project is well underway in the Mildura and Latrobe Regions. Over recent months, VALS has been liaising with community members and local police with the purpose of developing area-specific protocols to facilitate the establishment of this Pilot, which aims to limit Koorie Youth contact with the criminal justice system. From these consultations, a number of key initiatives have been designed including the development of new referral services, a community based "Follow-up" Program, co-ordination of key diversion services and the promotion of a Community Legal Education campaign aimed specifically at youth and parents.

Integral to the success of this Pilot is the establishment of new local Police protocols. To this end, members of Victoria Police at both pilot sites have provided VALS and the community with an opportunity to negotiate an appropriate process through which youth are afforded the best chance at avoiding the criminal justice system in the future. Key components of this process include the presence of a community member at the time a caution is given, informal talks concerning factors that contributed to the offence, participation in a Follow-up program and referral to any appropriate services. This process is a joint venture between local police and the community and reflects a mutual vested interest in the future of Koorie youth.

Methylated Spirits Abuse – Chronic Health Danger

VALS is aware of a concerning practice within the Indigenous Australian community that

can have fatal consequences. In 2005, an Indigenous Australian died as a result of drinking four bottles of methylated spirits and three casks of moselle wine with drinking companions. It appears the reason for drinking methylated spirits was that it was cheaper by the litre. The Coroner's Report comments that there is a significant level of abuse of mentholated spirits. Also, self regulation by retailers selling methylated spirits is found wanting. The Coroner recommended, amongst other things:

- That retailers be encouraged to monitor sales of methylated spirits and question those whom they suspect of being users, particularly those who are intoxicated at the time of intended purchase and with commonsense refuse to offer to sell the product to persons they have reasonable cause to suspect are abusers.
- The local Aboriginal Corporation (or other suitable body) be encouraged to monitor as best it can the extent of methylated spirits abuse and develop a preventative strategy.

A meeting is scheduled to take place in Swan Hill on 5th June 2006 to discuss the Coroners Report and will involve a number of agencies, including VALS, Victoria Police, Victorian Aboriginal Community Controlled Health Organisation, the Indigenous Issues Unit of Department of Justice and the Drug Policy Unit of the Department of Human Services. It is hoped that the Aboriginal Community Liaison Officer from the Oxley Area Command (Tamworth, NSW) will also attend the meeting.

Opening of Gippsland Koori Court

Attorney-General Rob Hulls launched Victoria's sixth Koori Court in Moe on 28 April 2006.

COMMUNITY NOTICES

Waiver of Fees for Fines (31 May 2006 deadline so ACT NOW)

The State Government is waving some fees on some outstanding fines. Most State Government fines are covered by the amnesty, but most Local Government fines are not. When a person fails to pay a fine on time they have to pay fees on top of their fine for being late with payments. To find out if you are eligible to have your fees waived call 9200 8222 or go to www.fines.vic.gov.au.

If you have an existing payment plan and you continue to make your regular payment the fees will be automatically deducted. If you do not have an existing payment plan then you need to Act before 31 May 2006. The waiver offer ends on 31 May 2006 so ACT NOW. To take up this offer you need to pay your fine by doing one of the following things:

- pay the reduced amount in full;
- arrange an installment payment plan;
- arrange for an extension of time to pay.

If you do not do one of these things before 31 May 2005 then your fees will not be waived and you will have to pay them in full. Act NOW!!!

Victim Support Agency Information Sessions

In 2005 the Victim Support Agency (VSA) became aware that there is need for information

sessions within the Indigenous Australian community about victim's rights. Many Indigenous Australians are victims of crimes but do not know about or feel confident enough to use the assistance available to them, or think of themselves as a victim with entitlements. VALS encourages members of the Indigenous Australian community to attend the sessions to find out about assistance available to victims and get the help they deserve. A stigma is attached to Indigenous Australians as being perpetrators of crime but Indigenous Australians are victims of crime too, not just non Indigenous Australians.

The Regional Aboriginal Justice Advisory Committees throughout the State have assisted the VSA in facilitating information sessions. VALS intends to attend as many of the information sessions as possible to provide information about the service it provides to victims. For instance, a VALS solicitor can help victims with applications to the Victim of Crime Assistance Tribunal (ie: filling in forms, organising and collecting necessary paper work like doctors reports, organising for a solicitor to go represent you at the Victim of Crime Assistance Tribunal).

Information about the following information is also available at the sessions:

- VSA Victims of Crime Helpline (1800 819 817, open 8.30am-5.00pm weekdays).
- Victim Assistance and Counselling Program, which can provide some free counselling sessions and practical assistance to people who have been a victim of a crime in Victoria in the last twelve months.
- The VOCAT which provides assistance to people who have been a victim of a crime in Victoria in the last two years. An outcome of a VOCAT application may be that a victim receives free counselling or compensation.

The following information sessions will take place in May and RSVP to Mervyn Atkinson (Grampians Regional Aboriginal Justice Advisory Committee) on 0408 574 679 or merv.atkinson@justice.vi

- **Ballarat:** 17 May 2006 from 10.00am – 12.00pm at Ballarat and District Aboriginal Cooperative (5 Market Street, Ballarat Vic). RSVP by 16 April.
- **Horsham:** 18 May 2006 from 10.00am – 12.00pm at Goolum Goolum (143-145 Bailie St Horsham). RSVP by 15 May 2006.
- **Halls Gap: 18 May 2006 from 2.00pm-4.00pm at** Budja Budja Aboriginal Cooperative (Grampians Road Halls Gap). RSVP by 15 May 2006.

The following information sessions will take place in May and RSVP to Raylene Fennell (Loddon Mallee Regional Aboriginal Justice Advisory Committee) on 0408 578 036 or Raylene.Fennell@justice.vic.gov.au:

- **Mildura:** 23 May 2006 from 9.30am-12.00pm at Mildura Aboriginal Corporation (120 Madden Avenue). RSVP by 22 May 2006.
- **Robinvale:** 23 May from 2.00pm-4.00pm at Murray Valley Aboriginal Cooperative (87 Latje Rd Robinvale). RSVP by 22 May 2006.
- **Swan Hill:** 24 May 2006 from 10.00am-12.00pm at Swan Hill Aboriginal Health Service (70 Nyah Rd Swan Hill). RSVP by 23 May 2006.
- **Echuca:** 25 May 2006 from 10.00am-12.00pm at Njernda Medical Centre (84 Hare St Echuca). RSVP by 24 May 2006.
- **Bendigo:** 25 May 2005 from 2.00pm-4.00pm at Bendigo Aboriginal Cooperative (13-15 Forest St Bendigo). RSVP by 24 May 2006.

The following information sessions will take place in May and RSVP to Joanne Atkinson (Hume Regional Aboriginal Justice Advisory Committee) on 0408 579 392

- **Wodonga:** 29 May 2006 from 2.00pm-4.00pm at Mungabareena Aboriginal Corporation (21 Hovell St Wodonga). RSVP by 26 May 2006.
- **Shepparton:** 30 May 2006 from 10.00am-12.00pm at Rumbalara Football and Netball Club (Mercury Drive, Shepparton). RSVP by 29 May 2006.
- **Seymour:** 30 May 2005 from 2.00pm-4.00pm at Berry Street (52 Station St Seymour). RSVP by 29 May 2006.

Have your say about Discrimination in the Western Suburbs

The Western Suburbs Legal Service (WSLS) is doing a project to find out about Racial and Religious Discrimination in the western suburbs. The WSLS is requesting that people tell them about experiences of discrimination. To find out how to tell your story contact Bec at the WSLS on 9391 2244 or Karen Jackson (Karen.Jackson@vu.edu.au) on 9919 2836.

Contact Details

If you require information about the contents of this newsletter or wish to subscribe to the mailing list, please contact VALS. Previous newsletters are available on the VALS website.