



Victorian Aboriginal Legal Service Co-operative Newsletter March 2004

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Staffing Updates

VALS would like to welcome our new Criminal Law Solicitors Jill Prior and John Sutton. Jill will be servicing clients in the Mildura and Robinvale region. Jill completed a Diploma of Practical Training at the Leo Cussen Institute in 2003. As part of her diploma she undertook a placement at VALS for a period of three weeks. John's involvement with VALS commenced as a volunteer. John will be servicing clients in the Western district.

Tender for Aboriginal Legal Aid Services

ATSIS has released an Exposure Draft of the proposed Request for Tender. AT-SIS plan to tender out legal services for Indigenous Australians and enter into a Legal Services Contract 2005-2007 with the successful tenderer(s). VALS staff attended an ATSIS Exposure Draft Information Session on 16 March 2004. ATSIS have called for comments on the Exposure Draft to be lodged by 16 April 2004 and VALS is in the process of preparing a submission. ATSIS plan to release the Final Request for Tender in late May 2004.

VALS has many concerns with the content of the Exposure Draft. The ATSIS policy of tendering out legal services can be criticized as 'white washing legal services'. The proposed ATSIS policy is culturally insensitive and will disadvantage Aboriginal people. The effect of such policy will be to narrow core services of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Legal Services (ATSILS). For instance, the level of assistance in criminal law matters will be restricted. The proposed ATSIS policy may have a detrimental impact on ATSILS. The Exposure Draft creates the possibility of control over legal services being transferred from indigenous organizations to mainstream legal aid or private law firms. Further information on tendering out legal services will be available on the website shortly: www.vals.org.au.

The Exposure Draft can be accessed from the ATSIS website: www.atsis.gov.au. Enquiries can be sent to the following email address (legaltender@atsis.gov.au), or call the Tender Enquiry Line (1800 23 22 10).

Implementation Review of Recommendations – Royal Commission into Aboriginal Deaths in Custody (1991)

The Victorian Government is conducting an Implementation Review of the recommendations of the Royal Commission into Aboriginal Deaths in Custody (RCIADIC 1991). A Discussion Paper was released in March 2004 which provides background to the RCIADIC and its recommendations, and highlights the critical issues.

VALS will draft a submission in response to the Discussion Paper. An Implementation Review Team will undertake consultations with the Indigenous community across Victoria and with Government departments until April 2004. VALS staff will meet with the Implementation Review Team on 22 April 2004.

Indigenous Women's Justice Newsletter.

VALS has launched an Indigenous Women's Justice Newsletter. The newsletter will be released twice a year. The newsletter aims to inform members of the Indigenous Women's Justice Forum, and members of the wider community, about justice issues Indigenous women face. The newsletter can be accessed from the VALS website: www.vals.org.au.

New ABS Data

The Australian Bureau of Statistics has just released a report entitled *Population Characteristics of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Australians 2001*. The report is based on the 2001 census data. The report highlights a number of key characteristics of the Indigenous population at both a national and state level. In Victoria 39% of the population is under the age of 15 compared with 15% of the non-Indigenous community. Indigenous people (51%) continue to live in regional Victoria in greater numbers than non-Indigenous people (26%). To find out more log on to the ABS website: www.abs.gov.au.

A Hand Up Not A Hand Out Poverty Report

The Senate Community Affairs References Committee's report, entitled *A Hand Up Not A Hand Out Poverty Report*, was released on 11 March 2004. Poverty is a major factor impeding the access of Indigenous students to education. The report highlights the massive 8.14% decline in the overall number of Indigenous students and a 15.2% decline in the number of commencing Indigenous students coinciding with the year 2000 cuts to ABSTUDY.

The National Indigenous Postgraduate Association Aboriginal Corporation (NIPAAC) considers the report and proposed Senate Inquiry into Student Income Support a small breakthrough for Indigenous Australians. NIPAAC President, Vicki-Ann Speechley-Golden, stated "[t]he poverty report does not go far enough in its recommendations but is welcomed for its frank exposé of poverty in Australia and, in particular, its focus on the 'most disadvantaged and marginalised group in Australia'". For more information send enquiries to the following email address: indigoz@indigoz.com.au.