

Victorian Aboriginal Legal Service Co-operative Ltd

Newsletter March-April 2007



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Staff

VALS welcomes Carly Marcs to the position of locum criminal solicitor. VALS farewells David Atkinson from the position of Client Service Officer in the Shepparton region. David will be missed at VALS as he was employed for seven years. His commitment to serving his local community is respected by all staff.

Civil Law

Indigenous Australians who are victims of a crime can seek assistance at VALS. VALS is fortunate to secure the services of a Barrister who will meet clients at VALS, together with VALS' civil lawyer, to provide a personal face to face service in appropriate cases.

VALS is acting for a man who is suing several members of the Victoria Police who used excessive force during his arrest. Witnesses say that the police repeatedly beat our client, dragged him through a broken car window and smashed his head on the car. The police also used capsicum spray to such an extent that our client required hospitalisation.

Family Law

VALS acted for the father of a child who was taken to live in Ireland with his mother. VALS attended Court to issue Hague proceedings, but the response of the Irish authorities was unsatisfactory as it took two and a half years to issue proceedings. The case did not go in favour of our client, the father.

National Communication and Resource Sharing Project

Research Officers, Policy Officers and some Chief Executive Officers of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Legal Services from throughout Australia met in Adelaide on 16th and 17th April 2007 to discuss matters relating to research and policy formulation. An agenda item was the Royal Commission into Aboriginal Deaths in Custody (RCIADIC). Mr. Elliott Johnston, QC, who was the Commissioner of the RCIADIC in 1991, attended and provided useful insights into



Frank Guivarra, CEO of VALS, Mr Elliott Johnston, QC and Shane Duffy, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders Corporation for Legal Services in South East Queensland

the post-RCIADIC era.

Community Legal Education

On 18 April 2007 VALS' Community Legal Education Officer, Loretta O'Neill, attended Bendigo and Swan Hill to provide information sessions to the Indigenous Australian community. Loretta's travel companions were from: Indigenous Consumer's Unit- Consumer Affairs Victoria, Ombudsman's Office, Energy and Water Ombudsman, Dispute Settlement Centre, Working with Children Check Unit - Department of Justice, Essential Services Commission, Office of the Health Services Commissioner, Office of the Public Advocate, Office of the Victorian Privacy Commissioner, Sheriff's Office, Mental Health Legal Centre, Victims Support Agency and Victorian Electoral Commission. These organisations and VALS are working in partnership to provide information sessions throughout the State.



On 19 April 2007 VALS held a forum titled 'Organisational Strategies for Indigenous Australians. What works? What doesn't?' The forum was organised by Fiona Roberts, Project Officer (Legal Access).

Access to Justice

Approximately 60 people employed in various Government and non-Government, Indigenous specific and mainstream organisations, from both metropolitan and rural areas of Victoria, participated.



Open Space discussion group including Frank Guivarra and Robin Inglis, from Victorian Aboriginal Legal Service Co-operative Limited

The forum began with a traditional welcome by Aboriginal Elder and Chairperson, Phil Cooper, CEO of the Aborigines Advancement League. The forum was roughly divided into four sessions. Sessions one and two opened with a number of distinguished panelists. Firstly, Alf Bamblett, the CEO of the Victorian Aboriginal Community Services Association Limited, placed the lives of Victorian Indigenous Australians into an historical context that reflected the need by Indigenous Australians to adopt a dual identity. Secondly, three CEOs from Indigenous Australian specific organisations in the areas of Law (Frank Guivarra, Victorian Aboriginal Legal Service Co-operative Limited) Children (Muriel Bamblett, Victorian Aboriginal Child Care Agency) and Health (Jill Gallagher, Victorian Aboriginal Community Controlled Health Organisation) laid out present and past organisational strategies and policy directions that affect the work done in their organisations.



Jill Gallagher, CEO of Victorian Aboriginal Community Controlled Health Organisation

Next, the audience heard from various people working in mainstream organisations, such as Drug and Alcohol services (Youth Substance Abuse Service), and Local Government (City of Latrobe and City of Mornington). The speakers from these mainstream organisations included Kylie Quirk, Joanne Brunt, Glenys Watts and Beryl Wilson. Also, Terrie Stewart, Aunty Joan Vickery (AO) and Annette Vickery presented on the Koori Court in Broadmeadows.

The forum reconvened in the afternoon for a research presentation on systemic discrimination as it relates to Indigenous Australian's use of services and organisational structures. In the final session, the participants broke into small Open Space Discussion Group, where those attending identified issues and opportunities that arise when working with Indigenous Australians.



Michaela Bangard, talking about responding to systemic discrimination

The identified issues and opportunities included building successful and sustainable partnerships between Indigenous Australian organisations and mainstream organisations, cultural awareness training and working with Koorie kids in custody. The contributions from participants helped to identify specific mechanisms and challenges in engaging Indigenous Australian peoples. The participants also identified the important principles that can help guide appropriate and effective engagement with Indigenous Australian clients.

The diversity and expertise of the speakers allowed for rich and valuable discussions throughout the day, especially during the Open Space discussion session. It is hoped that these discussions will continue as people who attended on the day take the ideas and information back to their workplaces to help inform their practice of working with Indigenous Australians.



Open Space discussion group including Mary Papadopoulos, Banyule City Council and Phil Cooper, the Aborigines Advancement League.

Overall, people's responses showed that they had gained a great deal through attending as they listened, shared and reflected about what their plan would be for the future in their own workplaces (i.e. where to from here?) Some people felt that it had been great to see what was happening in this area within other organisations, it had been valuable to network with other people and walk away with a clearer vision of what might be possible.



Open Space discussion group including Helen Archibald, Parkville JJ Centre and Terrie Stewart, Broadmeadows Koori Court.

Others spoke of coming away from the day with a greater clarity of the relationship between policy (past and present) and the 'on the ground' application of this policy in the daily practice of both mainstream and Indigenous Australian specific organisations.

VALS wishes to thank all of the invited speakers who contributed on the day and shared their invaluable insights into the topic. Also, VALS wishes to thank and congratulate all the forum participants from Melbourne and other parts of Victoria, who contributed to the forum discussion and shared their experiences and views.

Death in Custody

The Queensland police officer charged over a death in custody in Palm Island will stand trial for manslaughter in June 2007. Mulrunji suffered fatal injuries in 2004 whilst in police custody.

Indigenous Community Justice Awards 2007

Consider nominating a worthy person to be acknowledged at the 2007 Indigenous Community Justice Awards. The closing date is 25 May 2007 and for further information please contact Mrs. Sue Haseloff, Project Officer- Indigenous Issues Unit Department of Justice on 8684 1733.

Contact Details

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