



Victorian Aboriginal Legal Service Incorporated Newsletter October 2003

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Staffing Updates

VALS would like to welcome Wayne Walsh to the organisation. Wayne is the new Client Service Officer at Swan Hill. A Wamba Wamba man, Wayne has just completed a degree in criminology from Melbourne University, and has previously worked at the Swan Hill co-operative.

After three and a half years, Catie Pitman, the Community Education Officer at VALS has moved on. VALS would like to thank Catie for her commitment and enthusiasm, and wishes her all the best in her new position at VACCHO.

Be Strong. Use Your Rights Workshops

Loretta O'Neill and Catie Pitman from the Community Legal Education section have been busy in the last two months running workshops based on the *Be Strong. Use Your Rights* kit which was developed by VALS. The kit guides you through what to do if you experience an injustice such as problems with the police, a consumer issue or an act of racial discrimination. This might be the real estate agent not renting you a house, the store detective following you every time you go to the store, or a pub not letting you in just because you are Koori. Loretta and Catie talked to a range of community groups and organisations in Bairnsdale, Swan Hill, Shepparton, Wodonga, Morwell, Mildura, Warrnambool and the metropolitan area. For more information about the workshops and the kit, contact Loretta O'Neill on 9419 3888 or loneill@vals.org.au

Indigenous Women's Justice Forum

The third Indigenous Women's Justice Forum for the year was held on 19th September at the Victorian Aboriginal Health Service. It was attended by representatives from Northern CASA, the Northern Family Violence Prevention Unit, Wanjana Lidj in Morwell, and Home and Community Care workers from VAHS.

Jen Anderson from Job Watch, a community legal centre specialising in employment and training law, gave a presentation about the organisation and its services. Jen is available to provide information and training in the workplace tailored to meet the needs of Koori people. For more details, contact Jen on 03-9662 1933 or 1800 331 617.

For more information about the Indigenous Women's Justice Forums, please contact the co-ordinator Melissa Morgan on 9419 3888 or on mmorgan@vals.org.au

National Network of Indigenous Women's Legal Services

Melissa Morgan, the Indigenous Women's Justice Forum coordinator recently attended Annual General Meeting of the National Network of Indigenous Women's Legal Services in Hobart. Melissa found the meeting a great opportunity to meet with other Indigenous women around Australia and to find out about the different programs run by the network. Their website is <http://www.nwjc.org.au/awlsn/>

VALS website

Don't forget the VALS website on www.vals.org.au

Koorie Access to Justice

In June 2003, the Senate launched an Inquiry into Legal Aid and Access to Justice. VALS believes that low funding levels are the most important factor affecting Indigenous people in Victoria's lack of access to justice.

- In the last five years, 90% of Indigenous people in Victoria chose VALS as their legal service provider.
- In the five years between 1996 and 2001, the Indigenous population of Victoria increased by 17%, compared to a 6% increase in the general population. 39% of the Indigenous population is under 15 compared to 20% of the general population. The client base for VALS' service has therefore already increased, and is expected to increase exponentially in the near future.
- In the last five years, VALS' case load has increased 18%.
- In the last five years, VALS funding has fallen 7% in real terms.
- In the last two years, the chances of an Indigenous person being imprisoned in Victoria has increased 8%.
- Indigenous people in Victoria are 13 times more likely to be imprisoned than the non-Indigenous population. This rate has increased over the last decade. Indigenous young people in Victoria are 16 times more likely to be involved in the juvenile justice system than non-Indigenous young people.

Given the numerous studies and research that undeniably demonstrate the abysmal levels of disadvantage suffered by Indigenous people in Australia, it is incredible that an Indigenous organisation continue to be funded well below the levels of mainstream services. The Senate is expected to report on the hearing in March 2004. For the full submission, see www.vals.org.au

Deaths in Custody Rate Falls

In 2002 there were 69 deaths in custody, 14 of which were Indigenous. Of these, eight occurred in prison, and six in police custody. No Indigenous person died of

hanging in 2002, which down from eight hangings in 2001. The National Deaths in Custody Research and Monitoring Program was implemented in 1992 as a result of the Royal Commission into Aboriginal Deaths in Custody.

Children First

Supported by Elizabeth Hoffman House, VACSAL and the Aboriginal Family Violence Protection and Legal Service, VALS put in a submission to the Parliamentary Inquiry on the Joint Residency Bill. If passed, the bill will mean when parents separate, the child will automatically have joint residency, unless there is reason to rebut (or dismiss) the joint residency.

Under the current Family Law Act, the judge can order joint residency when it is appropriate. The reasons it chooses not to do so is because joint residency requires particular circumstances in order to be successful. For example, both parents need to be suitable carers, parents need to have enough money to maintain two households, parents need to have flexible work arrangements so that they can be a appropriate carer, and both parents need to reside in near each other so that children can have continuity in friendships, and school. The full submission can be read on the VALS website at www.vals.org.au

New Indigenous Corrections Officers

Corrections Victoria has created six new Indigenous Community Corrections Officer (ICCO) positions, which were created out of the Victorian Aboriginal Justice Agreement. A key focus involves developing stronger links with Indigenous community agencies within the area with the aim of better supporting Koori offenders in successfully completing court orders and at reducing their risk of re-offending. The ICCOs are based at: Mildura, Bendigo, Shepparton, Geelong, Broadmeadows and Bairnsdale.

