



Victorian Aboriginal Legal Service

Newsletter April 2003

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Best Wishes to Departing Staff

The Department of Human Services is fortunate to have recruited Jan Muir to co-ordinate their Indigenous Family Violence Strategy. Jan has been employed as a community legal education project worker at VALS since October 2001. Her enthusiasm, skill and experience have been a valued contribution to the section. Jan was involved in the development of the Indigenous Women's Justice Forum and has represented VALS at numerous forums and meetings. Jan will be sadly missed at VALS. We wish her all the best.

Sharon Barnes has resigned her position as the Indigenous Women's Justice Forum Co-ordinator in order to finish her law degree at Melbourne University.

VALS Annual General Meeting

The AGM will be held on April 11 at the Aborigines Advancement League, 2 Watts Street Thornbury, at 10am.

Indigenous Women's Justice Forum

The central issue identified at the Indigenous Women's Justice Forum held last month was the need to map the resources of Indigenous organisations, especially in the area of Family Violence. The Community Education section is currently looking at the best way to do this.

In order to better publicise information relevant to Victorian Indigenous women, such as conferences, workshops and grants, VALS is setting up an email discussion group called the Victorian Indigenous Women's Justice Network. To subscribe to this group, please send an email to khairsine@vals.org.au

Be Strong, Use Your Rights

The Community Education at VALS section recently held a workshop at Warrnambool around the *Be Strong, Use Your Rights* kit. A reference and support group was established for community members who want to make complaints about issues such as discrimination.

For more information about workshops contact Catie Pitman on 9419 3888.

Victorian Indigenous Family Violence Taskforce

A 3-day forum exploring Indigenous family violence took place last Month. Funded by Aboriginal Affairs Victoria, the aim of the workshop was to inform the Indigenous Family Violence Taskforce's report to the Victorian Government on the implementation of a state-wide Indigenous family violence strategy. Jan Muir and Leah Billeam from VALS, together with the Department of Justice, hosted a session on criminal justice responses to family violence.

Our Country – Pushing Back the Tide of History

Yorta Yorta claimants will speak about their experiences of their Native Title case on Wednesday 30 April, 6.30pm at Union Hall, LaTrobe University.

The Yorta Yorta claim was lodged in 1994. In 1998 the Federal Court ruled that the Yorta Yorta claim failed to prove that their traditional laws and customs had survived the impact of white settlement, and that consequently, they did not have Native Title. The ruling was upheld in the High Court in December 2002.

This is the first time claimants will speak publicly about the events.

Aboriginal Family Violence Prevention & Legal Service

A new Koori organisation which deals exclusively with issues surrounding family violence has recently been established.

The Service has a state-wide focus and is an independent Indigenous-controlled organisation funded by ATSIC. For more information contact Antoinette Braybrook on (03) 9654 3111 or email: fvpsl.victoria@bigpond.com

Broadmeadows Koori Court Opens

The first metro Koori Court officially opened last month at Broadmeadows. It will sit for the first time on 1 April 2003.

VALS congratulates Board member Terrie Stewart, who has been appointed as the Aboriginal Justice Worker attached to the Broadmeadows Koori Court.

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 on the sentence.

The most important difference is that the Koori Court gives Indigenous people the chance to have a say. Offenders can talk about their past, and why they did things, and what they can do about it. Offenders' families and community members can give their view.

Two Koori courts are currently operating in Victoria as part of a two-year pilot program - Shepparton and Broadmeadows. Until the program has been evaluated, there are no plans for an expansion of the Koori Courts.

The Koori court is based on the South Australian model of the Nunga Court, which operates in three locations in the state. Queensland also has one Aboriginal Court, the Murri Court in Brisbane.

The Koori, Nunga and Murri Court currently only deal with adult offenders. In South Australia, however, the possibility of introducing a juvenile Nunga Court is being discussed.

First Indigenous Person Elected to NSW State Parliament

Following the recent NSW state elections, Linda Burney became the first Indigenous person to be elected to NSW State Parliament. She is only the fourth Indigenous woman elected to any Australian parliament.

Linda, from the NSW town of Whitton, was previously the director-general of the NSW Department of Aboriginal Affairs.

The first Aboriginal Australian to win a seat in Parliament was Queensland Senator Neville Bonner in 1971. Since that time, there have been only 11 Indigenous MPs.

Imprisonment of Indigenous Women Risen Dramatically

According to a new report, the imprisonment of Indigenous women has increased by over 250% across Australia in the last decade. The report, published by the Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission (HREOC), reveals that Indigenous women now have the highest imprisonment rate of any group in Australia.

Indigenous women tend to serve shorter sentences compared to non-Indigenous women. Contrary to the recommendations of the Royal Commission into Aboriginal Deaths in Custody, imprisonment is still not being used as a last resort for Indigenous people.

In Victoria, 80% of women who are imprisoned are mothers, mostly with young children. As such, the imprisonment of Indigenous women not only impacts on offenders, but also their children and their communities.

The report concludes that "there is insufficient attention devoted to circumstances of Indigenous women when in custody and insufficient attention to the environmental factors which contribute to their being in custody at all. Indigenous women indeed live in 'a landscape of risk' and suffer at the crossroads of race and gender."

For more information, visit HREOC's website on www.hreoc.gov.au/social_justice/sjreport_02

State	Indigenous Women as a% of Population	Indigenous Women as a % of Prison Population
WA	3	52
NT	26	57
NSW	2	30
Qld	3	28
Vic	2	8

* Figures from HREOC Social Justice Report 2002

Book Launch

The book "Letters from Aboriginal Women of Victoria, 1867 to 1926" will be launched on Friday 11 April, 3.30pm in the Seminar Room, Centre for the Study of Health and Society, 209 Grattan St, Parkville.

Newsletter: To include any items in the VALS newsletter, please contact Kate Hairsine on 9419 3888 or khairsine@vals.org.au