



Victorian Aboriginal Legal Service Co-operative Ltd.

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**Submission by the Victorian Aboriginal Legal Service to the
Commonwealth Department of Family and Community Services**

Comments on the Emergency Relief Program Discussion Paper

Section 1.

Is the revised program objective clear and realistic?

VALS has several concerns about the proposed change to the emergency relief program from a 'last stop' program to a "gateway" into a range of appropriate social supports."

- VALS believes that there is a real necessity for some sort of emergency relief program that functions as a 'last stop' for people in financial crisis. Although clients of the emergency relief program may be dealing with the factors that lead to their financial crisis, there is still a good chance that they will need to make occasional use of the emergency relief fund. This is because an individual client often has a number of problems which are not solvable in the short term (unemployment, substance abuse, mental illness).
- The need for emergency relief service providers to demonstrate that they are referring clients to other services will place a greater strain on providers' already limited resources.

If organisations are expected to refer clients to support agencies, then VALS recommends that up-to-date directories of appropriate agencies and services be readily available.

To what extent are you aware of and in contact with other local sources of support who can help your clients to address the underlying cause of their financial crisis?

As part of its holistic approach to criminal justice, Victorian Aboriginal Legal Service attempts to refer clients to other agencies and services. This approach is taken with all clients. Furthermore, VALS emergency relief guidelines require the organisation to network with other agencies, and refer clients for support. It must be emphasised, however, that there are limited services which deal specifically with Indigenous people and their needs. Therefore, although VALS refers clients to other services, it does not necessarily mean that client's need are being met.

How would you be able to demonstrate that your agency is translating this new program objective into practice?

Currently, there is no requirement to formally record whether a client is referred, and to where. If the requirement of the program revision was to do this, then VALS would have concerns about increasing staff work loads for little benefit to its clients.

Section 2.

Are you currently collecting information on your clients, and how are you collecting this information?

VALS provides emergency relief payments for clients and their families who have difficulty attending court. The payment is usually for public transport to get to and/or from court, although occasionally food and accommodation costs are covered for regional clients who are on bail in Melbourne. In order to receive emergency relief payments, VALS requires clients to give reason for the assistance.

VALS does not currently collect statistics on emergency relief payments. However, the information is readily available from the emergency relief files.

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VALS does not collect information on what happens to the clients after the distribution of emergency relief. VALS would like to point out that given the transient nature and high level of homelessness of many clients, it would be difficult to follow up. VALS also questions the cost-effectiveness of allocating funds to follow up clients receiving such small amounts of emergency relief.

What sort of information would you recommend be collected to inform both your agency's work and the Government's policy developments?

VALS does not recommend the collection and analysis of more information about the emergency relief program. This is due to the low level of emergency relief funding received by VALS, and the small amounts distributed in emergency relief. For example, in 2002, the Victorian Aboriginal Legal Service provided \$5818 of emergency relief to 150 individuals - an average expenditure of \$38.80 per individual.

As VALS provides emergency relief for very specific circumstances, it seems of limited value to allocate valuable resources to the analysis of data which reveals little about clients other than that they do not have bus fare.

Do you have any other comments about accountability issues or how agencies can demonstrate effectiveness?

The emergency relief program provided by VALS is effective in increasing the number of clients who turn up to court. This, in turn, reduces the number of Indigenous people who are arrested at a later date because of breaches of court orders. As such, the emergency relief program is essential to tackling some of the issues which lead to the high rate of over-representation of Indigenous people in the criminal justice system.

VALS has some concerns as to how the Department plans to measure the accountability of the emergency relief program. For example, if a client continues to access the emergency relief fund over a certain period, will this mean that the agency is deemed ineffective because they have failed to address the factors that led to the financial crisis? Clients often have numerous issues requiring dedicated long-term support before becoming financially self-sufficient. As such, a measure of the effectiveness of the emergency relief fund may be simply that clients can return home, or that they have something to eat.

Section 3.

No comment.