

## Meeting of **Indigenous Women's Justice Forum**

Friday, September 16, 2003

At: Victorian Aboriginal Health Service, Fitzroy.

**Present:** Selena White (VAHS Health Worker), Thelma Williams (VAHS, HACC program), Jan Chessells, Loretta O'Neill (VALS), Danielle McLeod (Northern CASA), Melek Bagdas (Northern CASA), Darren Malone (Wanjana Lidj, Morwell), Vicki Heal (Northern Family Violence Prevention), Jen Anderson (JobWatch), Kate Hairsine (VALS), Catie Pitman (VALS).

### **Discussions:**

#### **Victorian Aboriginal Health Service:**

The women from VAHS said that Indigenous women are reluctant to report family violence, and that it is a difficult process encouraging them to speak up, and to seek help. They said women are reluctant to go to the Legal Service or to the police for help. There are complex issues with family and substance abuse which are part of the family violence problem.

HACC (Home and Community Care) is a home help program including assisting with police, lawyers, financially counseling, as well as help with day to day existence such as shopping, conversation and support.

The HACC program consists of two home help workers, four allied health outreach workers and two financial and community (housing, Centrelink, welfare) counselor/workers. HACC workers also spend time with parkies in Collingwood, taking them food and clothing with help from the Smith Family.

Centrelink and Department of Housing visit VAHS regularly to make community aware of their services, and the help they can provide.

VAHS also has Koori aged-care packages which includes 15 family carers who assist Elders with home help. Another program is the Making a Difference Program which assists community members with disabilities.

#### **Northern Family Violence Prevention Network:**

Vicki explained that the Northern FV Prevention network, based in Heidelberg, Berry Street, is concerned to make their services more accessible to the Koorie community. A working group has been set up to make this happen. The **Regional Reference Group** is keen to have an Indigenous representative so that there is more ready contact with the Koorie community. They want to develop their space in Berry Street so that it is more welcoming to Koories, improve the cultural relevance of their services, and get advice about how to consult effectively with the Koorie community.

The Northern FV prevention network would also like to know how they could access Koorie trainers of their mainstream staff, so that they have more awareness of Koorie culture and community needs.

Vicki also said the “Week without Violence” will be held in October. It is an opportunity to be heard more regularly about women’s issues about FV.

**Northern CASA:**

The two women from Northern CASA said they had made progress towards increasing access for Indigenous women to their CASA services. They met with Elizabeth Hoffman House and have decided to meet regularly as a joint women’s group, looking for ways to support EHH workers.

At CASA there are also men workers who have made contact with the Indigenous Men’s Group from VACSAL, co-ordinated by Phil Cooper.

They have received funding to produce a film interviewing sexual assault workers to focus on the needs of young Indigenous women. Funding was received from a young woman.

CASA aims to be involved with key agencies within the Koorie community to work out ways to improve access for Indigenous people. Finding ways to identify what is sexual assault in a specific community, through community consultation, will assist with this process. The law is harsher on other crimes such as theft than it is on rape, trauma, sexual assault and family violence. It is often hard to get people to talk about sexual assault especially in this context.

CASA is launching sexual harassment at work post cards, targeting women from two language groups (Vietnamese and Chinese). These will be launched at North Yarra Community Health Centre (Hoddle Street) as part of an awareness raising project.

The discussion raised the issue that often Koorie Workers do not know how to respond to patients who say they have been victims of sexual assault. How can CASA help Koorie workers with this.

CASA offers training for workers who work with survivors of sexual assault. They have counseling and advocacy available from 12.30pm to 5pm on a hotline, and can work with workers to assist.

**Wanjana Lidj:**

Darren is one of two case workers from Wanjana Lidj in Morwell which is a Family Preservation program. The workers work with families suffering from family violence, sexual abuse and substance abuse.

Wanjana Lidj means “to hold the children”. The program receives referrals from DHS. They run anger management, counseling, and a parenting program each week for parents and extended family members.

Another program in Morwell is Quantum which provides support services for families and has a special program for victims of family violence called “The Women’s Place”.

**JobWatch:**

Jen Anderson was invited to speak to the women at this Forum. She explained that there were 18 laws affecting employment and workplaces.

JobWatch has four functions:

- Telephone advice service, providing direction, advice and referral.
- Providing legal advice and representation for disadvantaged workers regarding work claims such as discrimination, bullying and unfair dismissal etc.
- Law reform.
- Education and publications to provide guidance and advice and to assist people with their rights concerning employment conditions and conflicts. (Note their publication: “People and Work”.)

JobWatch work claim process:

- Detailed documentation of verbal and psychological abuse in the workplace.
- Referral to appropriate organization. (Long list of referrals.) - JobWatch refers people to CASA in relation to issues of workplace violence and to the Equal Opportunity Commission regarding discrimination complaints. JobWatch will assist complainant with letter and form writing, and putting claim together. Often people present with a number of overlapping problems such as a combination of discrimination, wages issues and bullying.
- Information is sent out to person who has phoned, about their rights and options.
- JobWatch provides back up for people who they have assisted. They will follow up issues concerned with that person’s complaint.

Jen said that JobWatch try to emphasise to people that if they do nothing about a problem they are having in the workplace, then nothing will change. Their aim is therefore to empower people to stand up for their rights.

A major concern for JobWatch and for people trying to access them by phone is the long wait at the end of the phone. Jen explained that there are not enough answering lines to cater for the huge demand on them and that they are trying all the time to address this inadequacy by pursuing relentlessly increased funding. (She also explained that people ringing from outside the metro region get priority on their 1800 number, which creates disadvantage for people in the city).

Jen explained that for those who can wait and do get through to JobWatch, the service is excellent. There is evidence to back up the success they have had assisting clients.

The discussion led to the need for a central “rights information” place, so that people could access information about different rights issues such as employment, discrimination, housing etc.

The discussion also went on to say that there is a great need for Koorie advocates who can assist people making complaints, at all stages of their complaint making – from information, confidence, lodging complaints forms etc, to confronting agencies and people who have offended them or abused their rights etc.

Jen said she would arrange for JobWatch to provide training for Indigenous workers who could become advocates and supports. She said she would get back to the IWJF about this.

**VALS:**

The VALS Community Legal Education and Research workers briefed the meeting on their work in the community workshopping the options available for Koories wishing to do something about injustices such as discrimination, and about making complaints. They brought copies of the “Be Strong Use Your Rights” complaints kit, developed at VALS. The issue of available Koorie advocates for those making complaints was further discussed.