

Highlights of the NSW Legal Assistance Forum (NLAF) meeting on 25 February 2009

The work of NLAF is focused on three strategic areas: meeting community need; policy and law reform; and co-ordination and communication.

Meeting Community Need

Working Group on Availability of Lawyers for Disadvantaged People in Rural, Regional and Remote areas

NLAF decided to establish a new working group on this issue, with the following interim terms of reference:

1. Better identify/define the nature of the problem in NSW. For example, in which RRR regions of NSW are there problems in terms of gaps in lawyer availability, gaps in availability of lawyers practicing specific types of law, gaps in take-up of legal aid work, etc, and to assess these in the context of other data and regional specific circumstances.
2. Develop a proposal for further research as a project for which NLAF might seek funding from the Commonwealth Attorney-General's Department.
3. Determine how the issues should be progressed taking into account the roles that can be played by Commonwealth Attorney-General's Department, Australian Legal Assistance Forum, the Law Council of Australia and parallel submissions from other state LAFs.
4. Communicate with and monitor the other state programs, in particular the Western Australian Country Lawyers Program.
5. Liaise with the RRR Working Group of the Law Council of Australia in the development of subsequent TOR, but generally to avoid duplication of effort ensure the NLAF work complements that of the Law Council.
6. At an appropriate stage, prepare draft Terms of Reference for an NLAF RRR Working Group.

The working group will be chaired by the Law Society of NSW.



NSW LEGAL ASSISTANCE FORUM

Working Group on Access to Civil Law for Aboriginal people

The *Evaluation of the Guide to Legal Services for Aboriginal People in NSW and the ACT* has now been published and is available from the NLAFF website (www.nlaf.org.au). The Guide is being updated by the Aboriginal Legal Service.

Working Group on CALD issues

The Group is assisting Blacktown Local Court in its project to identify resources in Dinka, Arabic and Juba and to provide services to assist the Sudanese community to address legal issues. The Group is also working with the South West Sydney Legal Service, LawAccess NSW and the Liverpool Migrant Resource Centre to identify and where possible meet the needs of the Iraqi and Fijian communities in Liverpool.

Working Group on Legal Needs of Prisoners

The Working Group on the Legal Needs of Prisoners held its first meeting on 6 February 2009. Three sub-groups were formed: (i) information, education and training (ii) communication between inmates and lawyers and (iii) co-ordination and facilitation of civil and family law needs.

Court Services

The Attorney General's Department described the services provided by Local Courts as outlined in its new information sheet: "Getting Help with Legal and Court Matters".

(at http://www.nswbar.asn.au/circulars/agd_factsheet_23109.pdf). Legal Aid NSW, the Attorney General's Department and the Combined Community Legal Centre Group agreed to meet to clarify referral arrangements and services available at Local Courts.

Interpreters for CLC Clients

It was agreed that NLAFF had played a valuable role in clarifying barriers to access to interpreters for CLCs and that no further action should be taken by NLAFF.

Public Interest Careers for Law Students

NLAFF noted that three members had met to discuss this issue, and decided to consider whether there is any further role for NLAFF at the next meeting.



Policy and Law Reform

Stolen Wages

It was noted that the Department of Premier and Cabinet had written, in response to a letter from NLAFF, to advise that the deadline for registering claims under the Aboriginal Trust Fund Repayment Scheme had been extended from 31 December 2008 to 31 May 2009.

Conflict of Interest Working Group

NLAFF had submitted a submission to the Ethics Committee of the Law Society on the issue of managing conflict of interests in legal advice-only services. The Law Society has advised that the submission has not been endorsed. The President of the Law Society offered to facilitate further discussions on this issue.

Coordination and Communication

Care and Protection Working Group

The Working Group is preparing a table mapping children's care and protection services and referral guidelines for different stages of care and protection matters. At its next meeting the Forum will consider whether this Group should be wound up or whether its work should be expanded to take account of the Special Commission of Inquiry into Child Protection Services in NSW, as well as the impact of changes to Legal Aid funding guidelines in this area.

Legal Information and Referral Forum

No report was provided as there has not been a meeting since the November NLAFF meeting. The next LIRF meeting is scheduled for 25 March 2009 and will focus on domestic violence issues.

Training Reference Group

A report was tabled and the Training Calendar developed by the CCLCG was circulated.

Other Issues

Report on 2008 activities/2009 Work plan

The NLAFF report to the NSW Attorney General on its activities in 2008 was circulated for comment, along with the action plan for 2009.



Engagement with Commonwealth Government, NSW Government, and State Legal Assistance Forums

One of the activities on the 2009 action plan is to work to strengthen the links between NLAf and the NSW and Commonwealth Governments. NLAf is also looking to work more closely with the other State Legal Assistance Forums.

Representatives of VLAF, QLAF, Western Australia Legal Aid met on 18 February 2009 to discuss the mechanisms for increased co-operation between the state LAFs as well as interaction between the State LAFs and the Commonwealth and ALAF. It was agreed to meet or speak on a regular basis. It was also suggested that minutes of LAF meetings be circulated to other State LAFs, the Commonwealth and ALAF.

Review of Pro Bono in NSW

The NSW Attorney General's Department has established a Pro Bono Legal Services Committee to look at the structure of pro bono services in NSW. No meeting has been held as yet.

Website

The website has been updated and format revised. (see www.nlaf.org.au)

Chair and Deputy Chair

Alan Kirkland was elected Chair and Helen Campbell Deputy Chair for 2009. The excellent work of Geoff Mulherin in his role of Chair since November 2007 was acknowledged.

The next meeting of NLAf will be on Wednesday 27 May 2009.