**Highlights of the NSW Legal Assistance Forum (NLAF)**

**September 2011**

This report summarises the activities of NLAF during the period from June to September 2011, including the outcomes of the NLAF meeting on 7 September 2011.

Further information on NLAF activities is available at [www.nlaf.org.au](http://www.nlaf.org.au)

**Working group on availability of lawyers for disadvantaged people in rural, regional and remote (RRR) NSW**

The Federal government has announced funding of $4 million over four years to enable National Broadband Network based delivery of legal services and to attract and retain professional staff in selected regional areas.

In response to the recent funding announcements, the working group has developed a funding proposal relating to use of the NBN to facilitate professional development for solicitors and increased access to legal services in remote NSW.

The working group meets quarterly in 2011, approximately, one month before NLAF meetings. The next working group meeting will take place in November 2011.

**NLAF Prisoners Forum**

The NLAF Prisoners forum met on 18 August 2011 and items on the agenda included:

* the authorisation process for legal and non-legal visitors to prisons – the process has been finalised.
* psychiatric reports of inmates – Corrective Services NSW has facilitated contact between the ALS and Justice Health NSW so that psychiatric reports or inmates can be emailed directly to Justice Health;
* pregnant women and births in custody – Corrective Services NSW reported on the processes and procedures in place to accommodate women giving birth in custody; and
* the Corrective Services NSW and Legal Aid NSW Homelessness and Tenancy CLE Project;
* support for Aboriginal prisoners;
* security scanning procedures in correctional centres; and
* programs for perpetrators of domestic violence.

**Legal Information Needs of Newly Arrived Migrants and Refugees**

The catalogue listing legal resources for newly arrived migrants and refugees and the accompanying diagram of the settlement process in Australia has been finalised and is being promoted to relevant agencies and organisations across the community and justice sector. The catalogue and flow chart can be accessed at: <http://www.nlaf.org.au/reports/new_arrivals.html>

**Domestic Violence Working Group**

The NLAF Domestic Violence Working Group met with representatives of Police on 16 June 2011 to discuss ways to work together with Police, particularly in relation to issues of training. The group is scheduled to meet again on 3 November 2011.

**Employment Law Services Working Group**

The working group met on 28 July 2011. The working group has mapped the provision of free employment law services in NSW and is producing a report that sets out the key findings of the mapping exercise.

In summary:

* The number of people seeking information, advice and assistance in employment matters is high. In addition, this does not take into account unexpressed demand for services.
* The availability of legal advice and representation in employment law is inconsistent across the state.
* The most pressing need is for legal representation up to the conciliation stage for vulnerable workers at risk of long term exclusion from the workforce.
* The sector is not currently able to meet that demand for services.

The working group is in the process of finalising a proposal to increase the capacity of the sector to provide assistance in employment law matters to certain disadvantaged groups in the community. One of the aims of the proposal is to document the impact of legal representation on settlement outcomes and identify systemic issues and the resources required to provide services to meet demand for employment law assistance in NSW.

**Learning and Development Group**

The group met on 25 August 2011. The group is considering collaborating on an induction program initiative involving site visits to key legal organisations in the sector.

**Cooperative Legal Service Delivery Program**

NLAF members discussed the issues raised in the CLSD report including:

* Domestic violence, in particular in relation to CALD women
* Victim’s compensation – impact of legislation change, costs and availability of legal services
* Debt, including utility debt
* Fines, SDRO debt in RRR areas
* Young people and cyber bullying.

**Legal Information and Referral Forum**

The LIRF meeting focused on initiatives to provide legal information to newly arrived migrants and refugees

**National Partnership Agreement on Legal Assistance Services (NPA)**

This NLAF meeting in September 2011 also served as the Jurisdictional Forum in accordance with the NPA. Representatives from the Commonwealth Attorney-General’s Department attended the meeting.

NLAF members agreed to amend the Terms of Reference to reflect the participation of the Commonwealth Attorney General’s Department in the NSW Jurisdictional Forum and NLAF.

*Access to Justice Framework*

The Commonwealth reported that elements of the framework are being progressed and implemented as the resources are made available.

*Referrals from Commonwealth service delivery agencies to legal services*

A representative from Human Services attended the meeting to discuss the issue of referrals to legal services by Commonwealth service agencies. The following strategies were discussed:

* One potential strategy for increasing referrals is to promote awareness of the legal issues facing clients with customer service providers so that they can identify that clients may have legal issues and how to refer appropriately.
* It may be beneficial to include training about legal issues in the curriculum of training that is provided to customer service officers.
* Another strategy may be to have a concerted campaign to promote relevant referral pathways to customer service staff for a specified period – for example, one month, the monthly message could be related to legal issues of clients. Other potential strategies include putting up posters in Centrelink offices to promote awareness about LawAccess, changing screensavers to include messages about LawAccess and legal issues for clients.

NLAF members agreed that representatives from the Commonwealth Human Services Department and Legal Aid would liaise to progress the suggestions outlined above.

**Review of the Delivery of Legal Assistance Services to the NSW Community**

The NSW Department of Attorney General and Justice is conducting a review of legal assistance services to the NSW community. Consultations are to take place in October 2011 and it is planned that a report will be produced early in 2012.

**New Working Groups**

NLAF members considered and endorsed the establishment of a new Traffic Law and Fines Working Group and a working group to consider the role of legal services in responding to disasters and emergencies.

**Meeting dates**

The last meeting for 2011 will take place on 7 December 2011.