

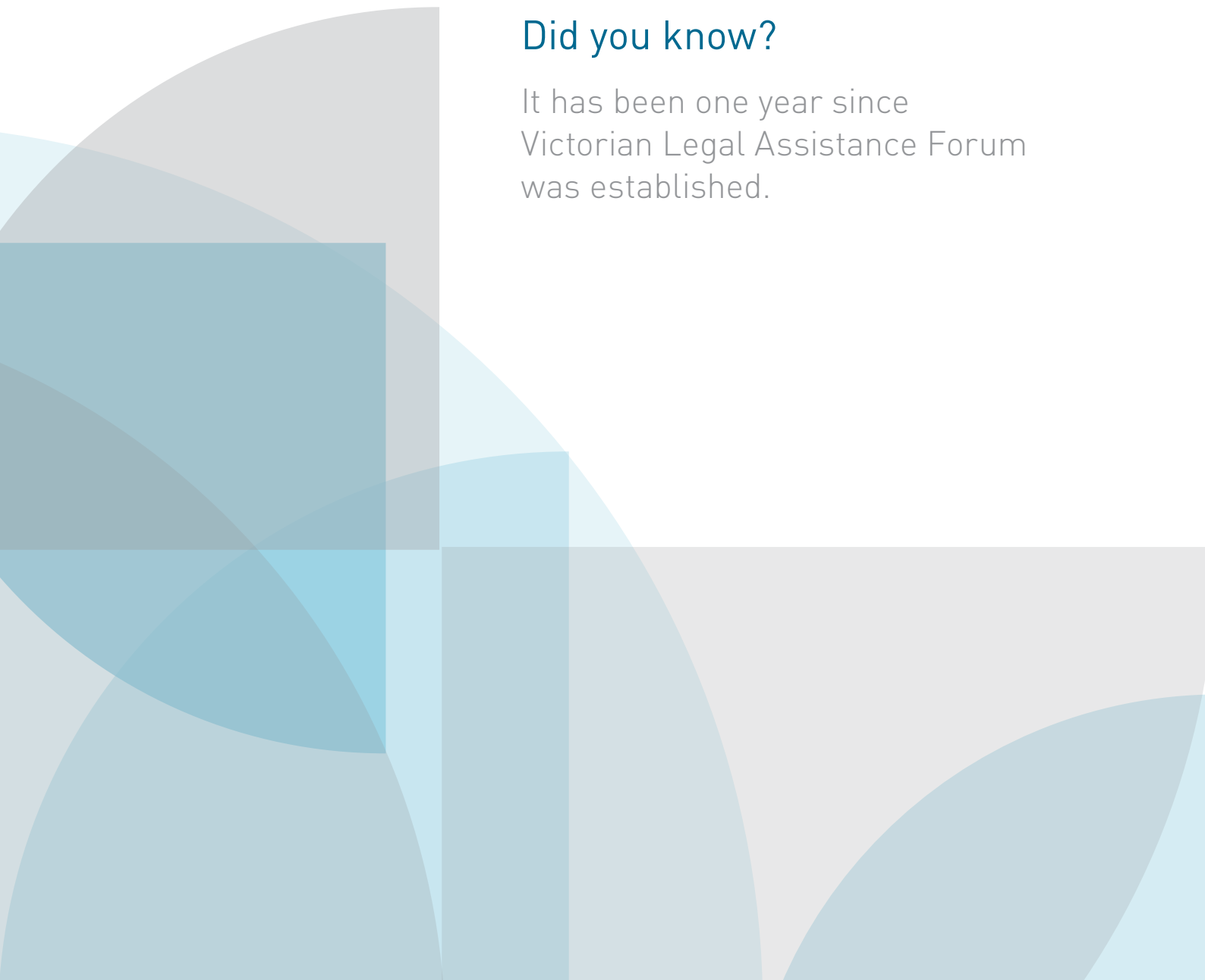


Victorian Legal Assistance Forum

2009 the year gone by

Did you know?

It has been one year since
Victorian Legal Assistance Forum
was established.





The Victorian Legal Assistance Forum promotes collaboration and co-ordination in the delivery of legal services for socially and economically disadvantaged people in Victoria.

VLAF's Main Forum executive is made up of representatives from each member organisation:

- Joh Kirby, Victoria Law Foundation
- Hugh de Kretser, Federation of Community Legal Centres
- Frank Guiverra, Victorian Aboriginal Legal Service
- Antoinette Braybrook, Aboriginal Family Violence Prevention Legal Service
- David Neal, The Victorian Bar
- Brendan Sydes, Federation of Community Legal Centres
- Fiona McLeay, Public Interest Law Clearing House
- Bevan Warner, Victoria Legal Aid
- Mark Woods, Law Institute of Victoria
- Rachna Muddagouni, Victoria Legal Aid (project manager).

Main Forum representatives meet quarterly to discuss issues of relevance to the legal assistance sector.

Last year the main forum members met four times and provided strategic direction and leadership for the establishment and development of VLAF.

The minutes of the meeting are published on our website: www.vlaf.org.au

Legal Assistance Forums

As part of our ongoing commitment to consultation, collaboration and partnership development, VLAF developed an extensive community engagement strategy. We continue to engage with disadvantaged communities, community organisations, legal assistance providers, government departments and other external stakeholders on a regular basis.

Legal Access for CALD Communities

The first Legal Assistance Dialogue (LAD) was held on 5 June 2009 at Lionel Murphy Centre 360 Queen St, Melbourne. We had 70 participants who attended the event, including representatives from the community legal sector, Victoria Legal Aid, community legal centres (CLCS), Law Institute of Victoria, Department of Justice, health sector, housing sector and women's domestic violence workers.

The keynote speakers were George Lekakis (Commissioner, Victorian Multicultural Commission), Carmel Guerra (Director, Centre for Multicultural Youth Issues), Ross Barnett (Executive Officer, Ethnic Community Council of Victoria) and Commander Ashley Dickinson (Multicultural Advisory Unit, Victoria Police).

The three main issues, which the forum considered VLAF should take forward, are:

- Access to interpreters and translating services (increase resources, training and ensure that VLAF advocates the use of interpreter services for legal service delivery provision)
- Access to migration law services (mainly by CLCs and Legal Aid). Discussion on why Department of Immigration & Citizenship does not include the cost of legal information provision for newly arrived communities and the possibility of VLAF's advocacy role on this issue.
- Scoping exercise on looking at the services that currently exists for CALD communities and identifying the gaps (a larger project for VLAF to work on)



Legal Assistance Dialogue: Prison Forum

The Victorian Legal Assistance Prison Forum was held on the 28 July at the Lionel Murphy Centre, 360 Queen St, Melbourne. There were 76 participants who attended the event, including representatives from the community legal sector, VLA, LIV, PILCH, health and housing sectors, Department of Justice and Corrections Victoria.

The keynote speakers and topics were:

- Lived experience of Imprisonment: Vickie Roach
- Systemic Issues in Imprisonment/ Decarceration (non-legal perspective): Amanda George
- Overview of Prisoners Legal Services in Victoria: Phoebe Barton, Jim Nicolaides and Sam Sowerwine
- VLA Service Provision and Gaps in Services to Imprisoned People: Domenico Calabro

The speakers provided a broad overview of the experiences and issues for prisoners, the systemic issues related to lack of housing, employment and mental health issues that are some of the factors that lead to imprisonment, and some frameworks to improve service delivery models.

The forum identified lack of housing, employment, education, support, mental health services and drug and alcohol program as the keys factors why people are at the risk of being imprisoned or why people reoffend when they come out of prisons.

Community and Financial Hardship Forum

The Victorian Legal Assistance Forum heard about and discussed the harsh reality of financial hardship on Wednesday 19 August, at a roundtable dialogue at the Lionel Murphy Centre attended by 60 people.

The overarching theme was the impact of the global financial crisis on the most vulnerable and marginalised members of society.

In his opening address, Bevan Warner said, 'VLA doesn't profess to have all the answers, however I am able to affirm that VLA alongside National Legal Aid and partner agencies working with VLAF – is committed to doing its part.'

Carolyn Atkins, of the Victorian Council of Social Services, described how some families hit by unemployment then have to face family breakdown and family violence.

Mark O'Brien of the Tenants Union of Victoria spoke of the constant lack of public housing, saying the housing crisis won't be solved while housing is seen as way of making profits rather than as providing a public resource.

The second half of the dialogue included representatives of the Consumer Action Law Centre (CALC), the Financial Ombudsman Services and the Civil Law Division of VLA discussing the strain on their various services, with CALC pointing out there are now more middle-class people seeking assistance.

Focus groups then discussed current initiatives, referral systems and further lobbying.

Out of Africa and into courts: the legal problems of African Communities

A new report by the Footscray-based African Legal Service was launched on 2 September 2009 at the Lionel Murphy Centre.

Out of Africa and into Court highlights the difficulties facing newly arrived migrants in moving from war-torn countries to a Western society such as Melbourne.

Written by Katie Fraser, of the Footscray Community Legal Centre, the report calls for increased funding from State and Federal Governments so that settlement agencies can provide face-to-face information to migrants before and after their arrival in Australia, particularly about driving and insurance and how to use utilities. It also calls for more innovative and holistic approaches to helping refugees, including reviews of the infringement system and of VicRoads licence suspension system.

'Resettlement is not a straightforward process', said guest speaker Dr Melika Yassin Sheikh-Eldin, manager, Settlement Partnership, AMES and chairperson, Horn of Africa Community Network (HACN).



'New arrivals face many confusing and competing demands on arrival and their immediate focus will not always be on legal issues. They have other basic and important needs,' she told the audience of nearly 100 people.

'The legal system is very complicated and many refugees might have never lived in a country where law and order is the norm. In those countries, human suffering, violence, oppression, autocracy, intolerance and violation of human rights are part of daily life. It may also mean refugees having to adjust their initial knowledge and expectations of the law.

'The barriers are huge and designing ways for a smooth transition has to be the ultimate goal of everyone, whether it be the government, the recipient, or service providers.'

VLA managing director Bevan Warner said, 'This report well demonstrates that our work in educating the community about the law is never done and early intervention and preventative approaches, like those identified in the report, are sorely needed.

'On behalf of the Victorian Legal Assistance Forum and VLA, I congratulate Katie Fraser and the Footscray Community Legal Centre for undertaking such important research and for challenging us all with their seemingly simple, but sometimes difficult to implement recommendations for improvement.

'This is a fine example of work occurring in partnership and the law operating within a community development framework.'



Access to Justice Challenges of developing a holistic legal service for people with a disability - VLAFF

On 9 December 2009 more than 70 people attended a very successful forum which explored some of the legal problems experienced by people with a disability, and began working on possible solutions.

In the battle for human rights, achieving true equality for people with a disability has sometimes been described as the 'last frontier'. Because disability is so often associated with other forms of inequity such as poverty, housing and social isolation, people with a disability are among the most marginalised and socially disadvantaged in the community. As one speaker put it, 'If we get things right for people with a disability, we'll get it right for everybody.'

The event was the latest initiative of the Victorian Legal Assistance Forum, formed last year to build collaborative relationships between providers of legal assistance services.

It attracted the attention of Bill Shorten, Parliamentary Secretary for Disabilities, who sent a message of support and expressed keen interest in hearing about problems and road-blocks identified by the forum, as well as suggestions on how systemic issues could be tackled.



The event attracted a broad audience, including representatives from disability advocacy organisations, the Departments of Human Services and Justice, and the Commonwealth Attorney-General's department. The emphasis on the day was on problem-solving and looking at co-operative ways forward, with each organisation present also having the opportunity to reflect on how they could change their own practices to make a difference.

Some of the issues that were identified as priorities for future work included: the needs of people with mental health needs or intellectual disabilities in prisons, who often 'fall through the cracks'; how the justice system deals with so-called 'nuisance offenders' who get repeatedly fined and criminalised for their behaviours; and the need for better training for people working in the justice system in understanding and responding to the needs of people with a disability. The findings of the forum are currently being collated and will be distributed further in early 2010.



Regional Legal Assistance Forum

Successful establishment of Bendigo Legal Assistance Forum

Aim

The Forum's role:

- to act as a contact point for legal services assisting disadvantaged and vulnerable individuals in the region
- to provide a forum to enable legal services and communities of interest to exchange information and identify local issues requiring support or response
- to build the capacity of legal services across the region
- to coordinate the promotion of legal services and the delivery of community legal education across the region.



Agencies Participating

1. Advocacy & Rights Centre (incorporating the Social Housing Advocacy & Support Program [SHASP])
2. Loddon Campaspe Community Legal Centre, and Seniors Rights Victoria)
3. Victoria Legal Aid (Bendigo)
4. Consumer Affairs Victoria (Bendigo)
5. Bendigo Courts
6. Department of Human Services (Bendigo: Placement & Family Services)
7. Community Care Partnerships
8. Meetings
9. The forum will meet regularly (initially monthly) and will be convened by the Loddon Campaspe Community Legal Centre.

For further information about
Victorian Legal Assistance Forum
please contact

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