

# STRATEGIC PLAN 2011-2013



National Legal Aid

30 March 2011

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## **ABOUT NATIONAL LEGAL AID (NLA)**

There are eight independent Legal Aid Commissions in Australia, one in each of the States and Territories. The Directors/Chief Executive Officers of the Commissions combine at a national level to form National Legal Aid (NLA), and one of their number is on a rotation basis elected as Chair.

There is a strong alliance between NLA and the Legal Services Agency of New Zealand. This alliance reflects the similarities between Australia and New Zealand, and facilitates the sharing of information, the showcasing of initiatives, and contributes to the development of best practice. The Director/Manager of the Legal Services Agency attends NLA meetings.

NLA, through the Australian Legal Assistance Forum (ALAF), works closely with the National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Legal Services Forum (NATSILF), National Association of Community Legal Centres (NACLC), and the Law Council of Australia (LCA), to pursue our shared vision for access to justice.

## **NLA WORKING GROUPS AND NETWORKS**

NLA is supported by Working Groups and Networks, each of which comprises a representative from each of the Legal Aid Commissions, an NLA Director with the Working Group/Network, and the NLA Executive Officer. Working Groups exist in areas of legal aid practice such as family law, dispute resolution, civil law, community legal education, and criminal law. Working Groups and Networks are also established in legal aid business areas such as grants, statistics, finance, and information technology.

## **SECRETARIAT OF NLA**

Louise Smith, Executive Officer  
GPO Box 1422 Hobart TAS 7001  
Phone: 03 6236 3813  
Fax: 03 6236 3811  
Mobile: 0419 350 065  
[louise.smith@legalaid.tas.gov.au](mailto:louise.smith@legalaid.tas.gov.au)

# THIS PLAN

This plan was developed by NLA through workshops involving Directors, the Manager of the Legal Services Agency New Zealand, representatives of the Commonwealth Attorney-General's Department, the NLA Executive Officer, and with input from staff of the Legal Aid Commissions.

## VISION

A socially inclusive, just society in which people have equitable access to services that meet their legal needs.

## MISSION

To promote leadership and management of a national system of legal aid through sharing resources, knowledge and systems that enhance best practice and value for money in the delivery of legal aid.

## AIMS OF NLA

To achieve our vision, we aim to:

1. **Anticipate and respond to changing legal needs**
2. **Facilitate the provision of services to those most in need and least able to advocate for themselves**
3. **Promote the development of innovative and effective legal aid services**
4. **Support a national legal aid partnership between the Commonwealth, States and Territories**
5. **Collaborate with representatives of other legal assistance service providers to:**
  - ✦ **pursue the development of an integrated system of legal assistance services**
  - ✦ **address access to justice issues as efficiently and effectively as possible**
6. **Work with representatives of non-legal service providers to:**
  - ✦ **facilitate a more holistic response to client issues**
  - ✦ **promote social inclusion.**

# ACTION PLAN

## 1. Anticipate and respond to changing legal needs

The Law and Justice Foundation of NSW has been commissioned by NLA to undertake a national survey of legal needs. The results of this survey are expected in late 2011. This will shape the future work of NLA on unmet legal needs.

### Actions

- i) NLA to promote the results of the legal needs survey when published, and to work with governments to identify responses to areas of unmet need identified through the survey.
- ii) Each Working Group to monitor research and/or proposed legislative reforms in their respective areas of practice/business, and to brief NLA Directors' meetings, and make recommendations as appropriate.
- iii) The Grants and National Statistics Working Group (GNSWG) to develop the National Legal Aid Statistics for reporting on the NLA website.
- iv) NLA to collaborate with researchers on areas of shared interest.

## 2. Facilitate the provision of services to those most in need and least able to advocate for themselves

NLA has identified three key priority groups for the period 2011 to 2013: Children, people with mental health issues, and low-income consumers.

### Children

Legal Aid Commissions are the leading providers of independent legal representation of children in Australia. Legal Aid Commissions provide legal aid services to children in the areas of child protection and welfare, family law and criminal law.

### Mental health

A significant number of people experience mental illness. This can affect the type of legal problem/s they experience, and their ability to seek assistance and to advocate for themselves. Some Commissions provide specialist services to people in the statutory mental health system in addition to the range of legal aid services.

### Low income consumers

Legal Aid Commissions provide legal advice and minor assistance services in consumer law matters, particularly in relation to credit and debt issues. Some Commissions also provide representation in some consumer law matters.

## Actions

- i) The GNSWG to agree a national approach to key funding priorities to ensure consistency in the approach to both Commonwealth and State matters across Commissions.
- ii) The GNSWG to continually review and develop the Guidelines for Grants in Commonwealth Matters.
- iii) The GNSWG to provide a brief to NLA meetings in relation to proposed changes to key priorities and the Guidelines for Grants in Commonwealth Matters, as appropriate from time to time.
- iv) The Family Law Working Group (FLWG) and GNSWG to undertake a review of Independent Children's Lawyers practices and processes and to brief NLA and make recommendations as appropriate.
- v) The FLWG and Criminal Law Working Group (CLWG) to monitor international, national, and state and territory child protection and juvenile justice models in relation to responding to the legal needs of children, and to brief NLA in relation to developments and make recommendations as appropriate.
- vi) NLA to seek to increase and improve engagement with the Department of Families, Housing, Community Services and Indigenous Affairs and the Child Support Agency in relation to family law needs.
- vi) NLA to work with other organisations to develop a better understanding of the legal needs of people experiencing mental illness and identify appropriate service responses.
- vii) The Civil Law Working Group (CivLWG) to identify best practice models of providing legal assistance services to low income consumers, and to brief NLA and make recommendations as appropriate.

### **3. Promote the development of innovative and effective legal aid services**

NLA is ideally placed to facilitate communication and collaboration about good practice in the delivery of legal aid services.

## Actions

- i) Plan and hold a Legal Aid Best Practice Conference for legal assistance service providers in 2011 and 2013.
- ii) Each Working Group to identify and promote best practice in the provision of preventative and early intervention services.
- iii) Each Working Group to identify and develop one new initiative relevant to their area of operation.

- iv) Working Groups to set benchmarks, and to develop Key Performance Indicators (KPIs) with a view to identifying best practice, and to brief NLA and make recommendations as appropriate.
- v) Each Working Group/Network to monitor inter/national trends in relation to their respective business, and to keep NLA briefed and make recommendations accordingly.
- vi) NLA to make submissions to funders to support nationally coordinated approaches to the development and implementation of best practice as appropriate.
- vii) NLA website to be developed and to be a main point of reference for NLA Directors, Working Groups and Networks.

#### **4. Support a National Legal Aid partnership between the Commonwealth, States and Territories**

The new National Partnership Agreement for Legal Assistance Services has been signed by the Commonwealth and by each State and Territory and will be a significant influence on legal assistance service delivery through the life of this plan.

##### **Actions**

- i) NLA representatives on the National Legal Assistance Advisory Body (NLAAB) to work closely with NLA and with other organisations represented on the Body.
- ii) NLA to invite representatives of the Commonwealth to attend each NLA general meeting.
- iii) NLA to contribute to the work of National Justice Chief Executive Officers (NJCEOs) and the Standing Committee of Attorneys-General as appropriate.
- iv) NLA to maintain a close working relationship with the Attorney-General's office, and to seek to work with Ministers with portfolio responsibilities that affect legal aid as appropriate.

#### **5. Collaborate with representatives of other legal assistance service providers to:**

- ✦ **pursue the development of an integrated system of legal assistance services, and**
- ✦ **address access to justice issues as efficiently and effectively as possible**

NLA is a member of the Australian Legal Assistance Forum (ALAF) and is a signatory to the ALAF Statement of Co-operation.

#### Actions

- i) Chair of NLA and one other NLA representative to participate in all ALAF meetings.
- ii) NLA to work closely with NATSILF, NACLC, and the LCA on issues of shared interest.
- iii) NLA to provide Secretariat support to meetings of ALAF.
- iv) At State and Territory level each Legal Aid Commission to support and participate in the local Legal Assistance Forum (LAF), and respective Jurisdictional Forums, pursuant to the National Partnership Agreement.

**6. Work with representatives of non-legal service providers to:**  
✦ **facilitate a more holistic response to client issues, and**  
✦ **promote social inclusion**

NLA recognises that the legal needs of disadvantaged people are frequently associated with a range of non-legal needs. Legal assistance is best provided in a way that recognises the complex needs of clients and helps them to find the most appropriate assistance, through integrated models of service delivery and effective working relationships with non-legal service providers.

#### Actions

- i) Promote an understanding of the role of legal assistance in social inclusion, to Ministers and government agencies with responsibility for social inclusion and relevant peak bodies.
- ii) NLA to seek the involvement of peak community services bodies at the Best Practice Conferences.
- iii) NLA to send representatives to major conferences held by relevant sectors.
- iv) NLA Working Groups to engage with peak bodies in relevant sectors, to identify opportunities for joint policy work and the development of integrated service delivery models.
- v) NLA Working Groups to meet in regional/rural/remote legal aid offices from time to time and to seek to engage with local researchers/service providers in the area.

End.