

NLAF Prisoners Forum

Report to NLAF - March 2014

The NLAF Prisoners Forum met on 13 February 2014. At that meeting, items on the agenda included:

- **Aboriginal Women Leaving Custody Project**

This project is being funded by Housing NSW until 30 June 2014. The project provides advice and casework services to Aboriginal women leaving Silverwater Women's Correctional Centre. To date, the project has 30 clients, held 55 advice sessions, and provided 200 instances of Minor Casework Assistance (MCA) in 90 different matter types. The most common matter types are fines, social security debts, consumer lending and housing applications. The project team notes that most clients are homeless and have mental health issues before entering gaol.

A challenge for the project is to coordinate services with the various agencies to ensure sustainable outcomes for clients. So far the project team has developed a close working relationship with ALS' care and protection program.

A document was distributed via email containing a directory of prison outreach workers and the services offered in each prison.

Forum members are keen to assist this project and have requested guidance from the project team how best it can continue to support the project. Monique Hitter and Ruby Steel to attend the Forum meeting on 14 August.

- **Community Engagement Team – Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse**

The Community Engagement team attended Prisoners Forum meeting. In attendance were Pia van de Zandt, Jonathen Rose and Sian Hutchinson.

They spoke about the current high demand for one-on-one private sessions with Commissioners. To date they have conducted 1000 private sessions, with 950 people on the waiting list, and 6 people per day requesting a private session.

An engagement strategy has been developed to engage and facilitate sessions in prison. Corrective Services have been enormously helpful and a pilot program will be rolled out in Lithgow Correctional Centre and Dillwynia Women's Correctional Centre. A staff information program was held at Lithgow gaol and a pilot program will be rolled out at Alexander Maconochie Centre.

Private sessions for inmates commence in April 2014, Commissioners are aiming to see 5 people per day. Demand is expected to be high, with the Commission encouraging short term inmates to contact them after their release. An 'information pack' has been developed so prisoners can send and receive information to the Commission in confidence. Pre-paid envelopes addressed to the Commission will not be checked by prison officials and 4 unmonitored phone lines will be installed in Lithgow gaol, with calls limited to 10 minutes.

ALS expressed an interest in receiving the Commission's information packs to distribute to its lawyers and an invitation by the CLC Prisoner's Working Group was extended to the Engagement team to present at their next meeting.

Pia reminded Forum members that the Royal Commission's focus is on 'institutional child abuse' and not abuse suffered at the hands of family, friends or individuals.

- **Lawyer /Client Communication**

 - ***Biometric system***

Members have previously expressed concern over the safety of the biometric scanning process. The Law Society of NSW wrote to Corrective Services outlining practitioner's health concerns. Corrective Services have advised that a risk assessment conducted by the Justice Health and

Forensic Mental Health Network showed that the iris scanners are “*safe and non-invasive and there is no health risks to any individual from the appropriate use of the scanners.*”

Some practitioners requested that biometric data be retained beyond the 6 month non-use period. This issue is still under consideration.

Lockdown notifications

CSNSW are working on a lockdown notification system. However, it was noted that lockdown notifications cannot occur until 12pm.

Phase 1 of scheduling via telephone will be complete by June 2014. Smartphones and mobile devices will be able to be used for video conferencing once the rollout of the new network is complete. This will be piloted with identified users.

- **Reports on work of other groups addressing prisoners**

The Forum received reports from the Fines and Traffic Law Working Group, the Women's Advisory Council and CSNSW Legal Practitioners Group. Highlights from these groups include:

- An issue was raised regarding young women in juvenile detention a centre electing to enter the adult system in order to keep their babies is not working;
- The rollout of inmate access to ‘green’ computers for legal briefs is being expanded;
- Secure booths for legal practitioner visits are being designed in conjunction with the Law Society, NSW Bar Association, and Legal Aid; and
- Restitution orders are now added to the debt recovery services of State Debt and cannot be the subject of a WDO. This means driver licenses may be cancelled or suspended if the debt is not paid. The WDO steering committee have added this to their agenda.

- **Report of Prisoners Legal Information Team**

The Legal Literacy project conducted a successful first trial at Silverwater Women’s CC. Delivery of a 10 week course commenced at 3 centres in the Windsor cluster, with the Long Bay cluster to follow. Specific modules in the course are decided according to participant interest. Assessment tasks are mapped to competencies to units in Access to Employment Education and Training certificates.

- **Other issues**

Other issues discussed included:

- the Forum was advised that a new recruit will be starting in the position of ‘telephone assessments of prisoners for drug and alcohol rehabilitation programs’;
- prison lockdowns are resulting in inmates not seeing experts at appointed times;
- Law Access continues to experience high levels of calls from prisoners and the issue of transferring phone calls from Law Access/Legal Aid to private legal practitioners remains problematic given the prison population is at an all-time high of 10,500;
- Table of ‘Prisons and Legal Outreach Services to Prisoners’ is a useful and valuable tool;
- Draft policy on ‘Provision of Banking Services’ is being developed by Finance CSNSW in consultation with the Cultural and Linguistic Diversity unit, CSNSW.

- **2014 Planning**

A planning session to set objectives for 2014 will be held at the next meeting, 8 May 2014. Potential issues include:

- Delays in medical treatment
- Lack of contact between children and mothers in custody is causing distress to mothers. Foster parents are not complying with contact orders

- Lack of access to psychologists for women.
- Piloting video conferencing facilities for various services.
- Programs for female sex offenders
- Problems with AVL at MRRC, Dawn de Loas

The next meeting of the Prisoners Forum is scheduled for 8 May 2014.

Richard Funston

Chair NLAFF Prisoners Forum

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