

Senate Legal and Constitutional References Committee
Parliament House
Canberra 2600
ACT

Friday, 19 September 2003

Dear Sir or Madam:

Re: Inquiry into Legal Aid and Access to Justice

Thank-you for the opportunity to make a submission to the Inquiry.

The Foundation is an independent, public benefit organisation with a statutory charter. Governed by the *Victoria Law Foundation Act 1978* (Vic) and funded through the Public Purpose Fund, the broad objects of the Foundation include:

- Developing community legal education and training;
- Publishing and communicating legal information and ideas in plain language;
- Conducting professional legal education, training and development;
- Establishing and maintaining law libraries; and,
- Conducting research to advance the law, the legal system and the administration of justice.

The Foundation produces high-quality plain-language legal information, administers a grants program and undertakes projects which encourage community engagement with the law. Through its Pro bono Policy Secretariat, the Foundation supports the development of best practice in the delivery of pro bono legal services. The Foundation also works with Community Legal Centres to help them better meet the needs of their target constituencies.

Current Foundation projects relevant to the Inquiry's terms of reference include, 'Rural Law Online', 'Law @ your library' and the 'Justice Museum'. These projects, designed to improve access to justice for rural and regional Victorians, are detailed in the submission.

Please don't hesitate to contact me should you require any further information about the matters raised in this submission. You are welcome to contact me by phone on (03) 9602 2877 or via email at klaster@victorialaw.org.au.

Yours sincerely,



Professor Kathy Laster
Executive Director



1. Introduction

The Victoria Law Foundation supports the equitable delivery of legal assistance to all Australians wherever they reside. It views the provision of legal services to rural and regional areas as critical to the operation of an equitable legal system.

This submission focuses on the ways in which better provision of information can enhance people's understanding of, and access to, law and legal services. The Foundation's experience is that such information also promotes more efficient use of scarce legal resources. There is also benefit in improving the capacity of existing services to meet the needs of their constituencies. A number of Foundation projects designed to achieve these objectives are detailed below.

2. Supporting rural and regional areas

2.1 Rural Law Online

Following the success of the *Rural Law Handbook* (2002), the Foundation has been funded to develop **Rural Law Online**, an interactive website designed to provide access to free, user-friendly, plain-language information about law for primary producers and their families.¹

Rural Law Online will:

- Bring together information from a variety of media on relevant areas of the law.
- Provide links to legal referral services and resources, including private practitioners, pro bono assistance schemes and community support agencies.
- Feature discussion forums on 'hot topics' of immediate relevance to rural and regional residents. The hot topics might be associated with regional television and radio programming. It will build communities so that residents in rural and regional areas can share their experience, knowledge and expertise with each other.

2.2 Law @ your library

Following the recommendation of the Victorian Parliamentary Law Reform Committee *Review of Legal Services in Rural and Regional Victoria* (2001), the Foundation is exploring State and national opportunities for a library legal information service modelled on NSW's Legal Information Access Centre (LIAC).³ The LIAC model is a proven, cost-effective and equitable scheme that has been operating successfully for over 13 years in that State. The Foundation is seeking to establish the **Law @ your library** service in public libraries throughout Victoria.

¹ A higher proportion of rural homes have access to the Internet relative to those in metropolitan areas *Who's online and what are they doing there? Australians on the Internet* (1999) Environmetrics URL: <http://www.environmetrics.com.au/aust-internet.pdf>, accessed 5 September 2003

³ *Review of Legal Services in Rural and Regional Victoria* (2001) Parliament of Victoria, Law Reform Committee, Melbourne, p. 52.

Victoria's public library network operates throughout the state through branch and mobile libraries. It is a truly universal service, since over 56% of Victorians are registered members of a public library.⁴ The experience of LIAC in NSW is that increasing consumer knowledge about law promotes informed, confident consumer engagement with lawyers and the legal system leading to higher levels of consumer satisfaction with justice. **Law @ your library** represents an innovative approach to communicating legal information to the rural and regional communities in order to encourage such a growth in confidence.

2.3 Justice Museum

The Foundation is working with the National Trust of Australia to establish a Justice Museum in Melbourne. This museum will increase public engagement with the Law. The Foundation plans to tour a number of Justice Museum exhibits through rural and regional areas.

2.4 Law Week

In conjunction with the Law Institute of Victoria, the Foundation organizes Law Week annually. Law Week showcases the law and legal institutions and allows community members to engage with justice on their own terms. Law Week will be extended to rural and regional areas. In 2004, for instance, the Foundation will offer small grants to regional Community Legal Centres to conduct legal education activities during Law Week.

3. Meeting diverse information needs

Availability of legal information can go some way to mitigating the vulnerability of members of the community without equitable access to legal assistance. High-quality plain-language information can provide a better understanding of the legal and procedural context of particular legal problems.

The Foundation produces free, at cost or heavily subsidized publications to improve understanding of specific legal issues. An outline of the Foundation's publications is attached and is also available on the website.

Issues affecting a diverse range of people have been addressed in Foundation publications, including the *Rural Law Handbook* (2002) for primary producers and rural and regional residents; *Teachers, Students and the Law* (2002); *Applying for and Responding to Intervention Orders* (2001) and *The Coroner's Process: information for family and friends* (2000) for families; and *Future Seekers – Refugees and the Law in Australia* (2002) for refugees. Addressing the needs of the community for useful information provides an important source of legal assistance. Moreover, provision of information allows users of the justice system to make more appropriate, informed and efficient use of scarce legal resources.

⁴ Council of Australian State Libraries (2002) Submission to Senate Environment, Communications, Information Technology and the Arts Reference Committee, Inquiry into the role of libraries in the online environment, p 2.

4. Supporting community and pro bono legal services

Promoting the development of a pro bono ethos among Law students and early in a legal practitioner's career is an essential part of encouraging a life-time commitment to public benefit work. The Foundation has, for example, established the "Chief Justice's Medal for Excellence and Community Service", to be awarded to the law student with a demonstrated commitment to pro bono values. Distinguished Pro Bono Certificates are also presented by the Foundation to practitioners for long standing commitment to community service. Both these initiatives are aimed at acknowledging and thereby fostering a pro bono ethos among the legal profession. Rural and regional practitioners do valuable work for their communities and their commitment should be recognized and honoured.

5. Support for best practice

Much can be done to improve the capacity of already existing services so that they can become more efficient. The Foundation's "Capacity Building" program support Community Legal Centres and non-profit organisations improve their services through workshops and training as well as assistance with improving their management and administrative infrastructure. For instance, the Foundation provides checklists and fact sheets on various topics as well as consultancy services.

Best practice support increases the capacity of current agencies to deliver high quality legal services to meet community needs for legal assistance.

6. Conclusion

There is an urgent need to improve legal assistance and access to justice. Developing, assisting and improving services for rural and regional Australia should be a key part of this strategy.

Innovative ways of improving the provision of legal information, as well as support and assistance to service providers can enhance equitable access to justice.

High-quality plain-language legal information should target areas of need, such as rural, regional and remote communities. Effective legal information supports self-help and eases the burden on legal services. Activities and projects that engage the public with law and the legal system are also important parts of a strategy to improve the quality and access to legal services for all Australians.

7. Attachments

List of Contents for the Rural Law Handbook
List of Victoria Law Foundation publications

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