

8 March 2016

Mr Donald Speagle  
Deputy Secretary, Civil Justice  
Department of Justice and Regulation  
Level 24, 121 Exhibition Street  
Melbourne VIC 3000

Dear Mr Speagle

On behalf of the Victorian Legal Assistance Forum (**VLA**F) I am writing to you in response to the State Government's Access to Justice Review (**Review**). VLA F welcomes the Review and considers that it offers an excellent opportunity to reflect on the state of access to justice in Victoria.

VLA F would welcome the opportunity to meet with the Department of Justice and Regulation's Access to Justice Review team to discuss how it can assist the Department in its task.

### **Additional funding**

While VLA F considers that there are opportunities to strengthen and better respond to legal need within the existing framework, we are strongly of the view that additional investment of resources is urgently required to enable the sector to meet the legal needs of Victorians, particularly those experiencing disadvantage.

### **Limited duplication**

VLA F is of the view that there is limited duplication within the legal assistance sector in Victoria. While some services or legal information may appear to be similar, they often address the needs of different groups. Tailoring services of this type is a cost effective way to avoid gaps, minimise duplication and target specific legal needs.

The duplication that does exist is best dealt with by better coordination. We believe that VLA F has shown its strength in this area through the development of working groups and Regional Legal Assistance Forums which are discussed below. These forums provide an opportunity for the discussion and sharing of ideas across the sector. At our recent meeting we agreed to scope the establishment of a new working group to examine legal information in Victoria. The establishment of this working group has direct relevance to terms one and seven of the Review's terms of reference.



### **Mixed model**

VLAF supports a mixed model of legal assistance in Victoria, including a range of services such as private practitioners, Victoria Legal Aid, community legal centres and culturally appropriate services such as the Victorian Aboriginal Legal Service, and Aboriginal Family Violence Prevention and Legal Service Victoria. Each provider plays a unique and complementary role in the delivery of legal assistance to the community. Better servicing the needs of all Victorians.

### **About VLAF**

VLAF is a network of Victorian legal assistance agencies which aims to:

- advocate for increased access to legal services for socially and economically disadvantaged people, and
- continuously improve service delivery models used by providers of legal assistance services to try to ensure they are as responsive as possible to unmet legal assistance needs.

The members of VLAF Main Forum are:

- Aboriginal Family Violence Prevention and Legal Service Victoria
- Federation of Community Legal Centres (Victoria)
- Law Institute of Victoria
- Justice Connect
- Victorian Bar
- Victoria Law Foundation
- Victoria Legal Aid
- Victorian Aboriginal Legal Service

The members of VLAF Main Forum meet quarterly to discuss key issues taking place in the sector and to share ideas. Recent topics have included: National Partnership Agreement on Legal Assistance Services; Productivity Commissions Report on Access to Justice; and this Review.

Representatives of the Victorian Department of Justice and Regulation attend the meetings, and the Commonwealth Attorney-General's Department regularly attend every second meeting.

The administration of VLAF is undertaken by a Project Officer who assists with secretariat and coordination functions. This position is supported by Victoria Legal Aid, although acts independently on behalf of VLAF.

### **Disaster Legal Help Victoria**

Disaster Legal Help Victoria is a collaborative project of VLAF to provide legal assistance to Victorians affected by disasters. It was established following the 2009 Black Saturday fires.



Disaster Legal Help Victoria provides free legal advice, information, assistance and referrals. Disaster Legal Help Victoria has a website<sup>1</sup> with regularly updated factsheets<sup>2</sup> about common legal issues arising out of disasters, and a phone line that is open during business hours throughout the year.

Disaster Legal Help Victoria has assisted in a number of disasters since its inception in 2009. This has included matters arising out of floods, hailstorms and, more recently, a response to the apartment block fire in Melbourne's Docklands. In its response to the Docklands fire, Disaster Legal Help Victoria provided legal assistance and advice to 65 people over two days at the relief centre, and assisted 43 people via the Disaster Legal Help Victoria phone line. Disaster Legal Help Victoria lawyers also negotiated directly with property managers to secure positive outcomes for tenants across a large number of other apartments (**Attachment A**).

More information can be found on the Disaster Legal Help Victoria website: [www.disasterlegalhelp.org.au](http://www.disasterlegalhelp.org.au).

### **Working groups**

VLAF oversees the establishment of working groups and Regional Legal Assistance Forums (**LAF**). Working groups are generally established to examine and make recommendations on a key issue or focus area. LAFs focus on fostering coordination and collaboration for specific legal issues or geographic regions. Current working groups include Western LAF, an Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander working group and a Prisoners working group. Past working groups include the Online Legal Information working group and the Culturally and Linguistically Diverse working group.

More information on the working groups and LAFs can be found on our website: [www.VLAF.org.au](http://www.VLAF.org.au).

### **Conclusion**

As mentioned above we would welcome the opportunity discuss how we can assist the Department in the Review. For more information please contact Samantha Watson, VLAF Project Officer, on (03) 9269 0125 or [samantha.watson@vla.vic.gov.au](mailto:samantha.watson@vla.vic.gov.au).

Yours faithfully

### **Romesh Kumar**

Chairperson

Victorian Legal Assistance Forum

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<sup>1</sup> See <http://disasterlegalhelp.org.au/>

<sup>2</sup> See [http://www.disasterlegalhelp.org.au/legal\\_factsheets.php](http://www.disasterlegalhelp.org.au/legal_factsheets.php)