

Law Reform Committee, Parliament of Victoria

Tabled in the Legislative Assembly, Parliament of Victoria

31 May 2001

REVIEW OF LEGAL SERVICES IN RURAL AND REGIONAL VICTORIA

In its review of legal services and court services in rural and regional Victoria, the Law Reform Committee found that there was scope for innovation and improvement. While acknowledging the many excellent efforts of existing services, it is clear that many people in regional and rural Victoria do not have the same level of access to legal services as their metropolitan counterparts.

This is particularly so for Aboriginal Victorians, fifty per cent of whom live in rural and regional areas. The Committee endorses the policy strategies contained in the Victorian Aboriginal Justice Agreement, and has added its voice to the demand for service delivery that takes into account the specific demographics of Aboriginal communities in Victoria. The Committee urges innovation in the courts in response to the over-representation of Aboriginal people in the criminal justice system, and proposes measures that should assist, including the establishment of an Aboriginal court.

The Committee also found that people with a disability, and those with a mental illness, often face great difficulties in accessing legal information and legal services. Again the Committee urges innovative responses in these areas, responses that take into account both systemic problems and those that occur at the level of the individual. Many agencies in the disability and mental illness sector are seriously under-resourced, and this often makes delivery of their services to rural and regional clients impossible. The Committee urges the government to rectify the situation. This will require increasing funding to specialist services and advocacy groups, but also improving funding to those services that are the backbone of legal aid delivery, namely Victoria Legal Aid and community legal centres.

In the course of its inquiry, the Committee heard of the great potential of new technologies to overcome difficulties in legal service delivery and of the enthusiasm of many people for the implementation of such innovations. While insisting on the need for a multilevel approach, with technology as one aspect, the Committee believes that the new application of new technologies can ameliorate the effects of distance in many instances.

The Committee's investigations were timely, as it was clear that there was a growing need to establish new priorities for legal service delivery to areas outside Melbourne. The Committee has made recommendations based on closing the gap between country Victorians and their metropolitan counterparts, and delivering a first-rate justice system to rural and regional Victorians.