

Attorney-General's Department

Item 18: Reports on Indigenous justice issues - Standing Committee of Attorneys-General

Speaking notes for Attorney-General

Note that the following speaking notes are not a transcript of the Attorney's speech.

Introduction

- The Australian Government is committed to protecting all citizens from violence and criminal behaviour and to overcoming the particular issues and disadvantage faced by Indigenous Australians.
- The Government has committed a record \$3.5 billion on Indigenous specific programs in the 2007–08 Budget. The Prime Minister has also recently announced emergency response measures as part of the Australian Government response to the report of the Northern Territory Board of Inquiry into the Protection of Aboriginal Children from Child Abuse 2007, 'Little Children Are Sacred'.
- My Department works to achieve its vision of a just and secure society within the context of the whole of government approach to Indigenous affairs. This encompasses Indigenous specific services, mainstream services and national strategies and initiatives.

Indigenous specific services and programs

- The Department continues to ensure the efficient and effective delivery of Indigenous specific legal services through the provision of family violence prevention legal services and Indigenous legal aid services.
- The Government's priorities include increasing protection for victims of violence, which has seen the expansion of the Family Violence Prevention Legal Services program in 2006–07 from 26 to 31 units in rural and remote locations across Australia.
- Additional funds have also been allocated to Indigenous legal aid services for capital and associated management costs, as well as conducting a pilot new initiative, the Expensive Indigenous Criminal Cases Fund, that assists providers of legal services to manage the impact of expensive criminal law litigation.

- The Australian Government also continues to supplement State and Territory funding of law and justice initiatives through a variety of programs such as the Prevention, Diversion, Rehabilitation and Restorative Justice Program and the Law and Justice Advocacy Program.
- The Australian Government recognises the need for adequate interpreter services and continues to fund the Northern Territory Aboriginal Interpreter Service.

Mainstream services and programs

- My Department administers a number of mainstream programs that provide a significant range of services to Indigenous Australians. I announced recently that an additional \$1 million has been provided by the Australian Government to fund the establishment of a new legal aid office in Kununurra, Western Australia, to serve the people of the East Kimberley region and increase their access to justice services.
- Many of the mainstream programs also seek to enhance their services with Indigenous specific initiatives. For example, the Community Legal Services Program funds Indigenous Women's Projects to provide legal services specific to the needs of Indigenous women. In addition, Family Relationship Centres serving communities with significant numbers of Indigenous Australians receive additional funding to provide culturally sensitive outreach services, such as in Darwin, Townsville, Lismore and Mildura.

Summit on Violence and Child Abuse in Indigenous Communities

- The Australian Government has committed \$130 million towards a package of initiatives to address the high rates of violence and abuse in Indigenous communities as a result of the COAG decisions following the Summit on Violence and Child Abuse in Indigenous Communities in June 2006. The Summit focused national attention on the appalling rates of violence and child abuse in many Indigenous communities and highlighted the need for action, including increasing support services to victims of violence such as access to safe houses and community support workers.
- The Department is currently overseeing the implementation of the law and justice components of the Summit package. For example, the community legal education initiative will be implemented through HREOC in 15 priority communities in remote and rural locations across Australia, to ensure Indigenous Australians are informed about their rights, know how to access assistance and are encouraged to report incidents of violence and abuse. In addition, the Australian Crime Commission has successfully established the National Indigenous Violence

and Child Abuse Intelligence Task Force. This intelligence and information gathering is a key component of the Australian Government's emergency response in the Northern Territory.

National Indigenous Law and Justice Strategy

- I have approved a consultative draft of the National Indigenous Law and Justice Strategy and commended it as a framework for discussion and development of a coordinated response to Indigenous justice issues across Australia. The strategy represents formative ideas on how to progress key Indigenous justice issues.
- Collaboration amongst the Australian Government, State and Territory Governments, peak professional bodies and Indigenous stakeholders is one of the visions of the strategy. My Department has distributed the consultative draft to departments and relevant stakeholders.
- The Department looks forward to receiving comments and ideas about how the strategy will intersect with strategies you may have in your jurisdictions.

National Aboriginal Justice Advisory Committee (NAJAC)

- My Department continues to support NAJAC to meet regularly. All State and Territory Justice Departments are represented, with the exception of Tasmania.
- The existence of funded and effective state Aboriginal Justice Advisory Committees in each jurisdiction, or complementary arrangements, is critical to the future effectiveness of NAJAC. I urge you to review the arrangements in place in your jurisdictions.
- I consider it important that there is a strong Indigenous input to advise SCAG on pressing issues in Indigenous justice.