RURAL CLIENT SERVICES STRATEGY
INTRODUCTION

Equitable access to justice requires that all members of the community wherever they live are able to exercise their legal rights without being disadvantaged by cultural, linguistic or geographic barriers. Geographic isolation remains a real obstacle to accessing services, particularly legal services, for people living in regional and rural areas of the State.

The Legal Aid Commission of NSW operates a network of 21 legal aid offices throughout the State located in city and major rural centres. The Commission works closely with private practitioners to provide legal services in rural and regional areas of the State not serviced by our established offices.

This Rural Services Client Strategy reflects the Commission’s commitment to providing better access to legal services for regional and rural communities and sets out the key priorities the Commission will pursue to continue to improve access to its services for rural clients.
Key Area 1

MAKING SERVICES MORE ACCESSIBLE

The Commission endeavours to provide realistic access to its services to clients whether they live in a regional centre or small country town. The Commission's client service delivery strategies combine a focus on personal service with an appropriate use of technology to achieve the greatest level of access to its services.

Regional Solicitor Program
The number of legal practitioners located in rural areas of NSW available and willing to undertake legal aid work is declining. As a consequence the Commission is facing increasing difficulty in providing services to both the remoter areas of the State where populations and services are declining and those coastal areas experiencing population growth, particularly the North and Far North Coasts.

The Commission has developed the Regional Solicitor Program as a way of ensuring that there are sufficient legal practitioners in rural areas available and willing to undertake legal aid work.

The Program will provide salary subsidies and other incentives to private law firms in identified regional and rural areas of the State to employ an additional lawyer in return for the lawyer undertaking an agreed amount of legal aid work. The Program provides for employment of an additional private practitioner in 10 of the following identified country locations for a two year period commencing in early 2007.

Outreach Services
Each year the Commission visits a number of centres around NSW to bring legal aid services to remote communities. Outreach services are tailored to the needs of the community and cover a range of legal areas including family law services, child support and veteran’s affairs.

The Commission will continue to expand both the number of locations visited and the areas of law covered in our outreach services.

Community Legal Education
Our community education program is aimed at increasing community awareness of individual legal rights and responsibilities and includes the publication of brochures and facts sheets on a variety of legal issues available mainly in hard copy and electronic formats and conducting information and legal education sessions for community groups, schools and interested individuals.

The Commission is reviewing the program to ensure that it meets to current and future needs of clients and addresses emerging legal issues.

The Commission is expanding the number of access points for hard copy publications and is working to place a range of is publications at Centrelink offices and Local Court registries.
The Commission will focus on producing a range of self help kits for clients who are ineligible for legal aid.

The Commission recognises the importance of the internet as a tool for clients living in remote areas to access information. In recognition of this, the Commission will be expanding the information available on its website to assist clients unable to attend one of our offices.

**Telephone Services**

Telephone advice can provide clients with instant information and is particularly valuable to clients who require urgent advice, who live in remote locations or for whom attending an office creates a physical or social difficulty.

**LawAccess NSW**

The Legal Aid Commission provides funding to LawAccess NSW to provide our clients with immediate legal information, advice and referral services though its telephone help-line (incorporating TTY and translating services) talks and on-line fact sheets for the majority of legal problems. LawAccess NSW also acts as a referral pathway to other government and non-government service providers.

The Commission will develop a referral protocol between the Commission and LawAccess NSW to ensure that the two organisations work in a co-ordinated manner to address the needs of rural clients.

**Under 18s Hotline**

The Commission provides a toll free telephone service for children and young people called the Legal Aid HotLine for Under 18s. Experienced criminal lawyers with expertise in juvenile justice, provide legal advice to young people who have committed or are suspected of committing an offence. The service operates from Monday–Friday: 9 am–midnight, Weekends and public holidays 24 hours service (9am Friday to midnight Sunday night) and can be accessed without cost by clients across the State.

**Duty Solicitor Program**

The Duty Solicitor Program provides for a legal practitioner to be available for sitting of the Local Court and Children’s court to assist people appearing before the court for the first time. The Local Court and Children’s Court both sit in a large number of country towns and this program allows for people appearing without legal representation to access some assistance in dealing with the court system. Duty solicitors are provided by Legal Aid offices in locations nearby to the office and by private practitioners paid by legal aid in locations not covered by our offices.

The Commission has committed itself to providing a duty solicitor to every Local Court sitting on it “list day”. The Commission will work to maintain this level of service and will focus on providing training and guidance to private practitioners providing duty solicitor service on behalf of the Commission to ensure a high level of service is available.
Practitioner Panels
The Commission works in partnership with private practitioners to provide legal representation to legally assisted clients.

Practitioner panels are being progressively implemented across a number of practice areas. On appointment to a panel, practitioners sign a service agreement and agree to practice standards and audit arrangements. Legal aid work will then be assigned to practitioners appointed to a Panel.

The Commission acknowledges the special circumstances of country and regional firms. Special arrangements are being made to accommodate private practitioners in regional New South Wales to ensure that disadvantaged clients, wherever they live, have access to legal aid services through private practitioners.

KEY PRIORITIES
• Provide employment for an additional lawyer in 10 country locations under the Regional Solicitor Program by 30 June 2007
• Expand outreach services to an additional 5 locations by 30 December 2007
• Increase legal aid telephone calls handled by LawAccess NSW by 5% by 30 June 2008
• Increase Community Legal Education activity by 10% by 30 June 2007
Key Area 2

PLANNING AND CO-ORDINATING RURAL SERVICES

The Commission works with its justice partners and government and non-government agencies across rural areas, to ensure that government services are delivered in a co-ordinated manner, and that client needs are integral to service planning.

Co-operative Legal Service Delivery Model

The Commission firmly believes that the best possible outcomes for rural clients can be achieved only where service providers work together in a co-operative way.

In 2002, the Commission took a major step towards achieving better service delivery for rural communities by establishing the Co-operative Legal Services Delivery Model – a program aimed at improving co-operation between key legal service providers to increase the range of and access to legal services delivered to rural areas in New South Wales, particularly for socially and economically disadvantaged people.

After a successful pilot in the Central western and Northern Rivers areas, the model has been expanded to the Hunter and Albury/Wagga Wagga regions and will continue to progressively rolled out to 2 new country regions in future years.

New South Wales Legal Assistance Forum

In June 2005 a state body, the New South Wales Legal Assistance Forum (NLAF) was established to improve co-ordination and provide a more strategic approach to the design, planning, delivery and evaluation by legal assistance service providers in NSW. The Commission was instrumental in establishing the forum and is a founding member.

The goal of the NLAF is to continuously improve service delivery to socially and economically disadvantaged people through better alignment of planning, program design and service delivery by providers of legal assistance services.

The forum promotes dialogue and debate on service issues and consultation, collaboration and networking between service providers at a strategic level. The Forum identifies and sponsors the best available research and service delivery initiatives for the benefit of communities.

Services to Aboriginal People

Aboriginal people living in rural and remote areas of New South Wales suffer significant disadvantage in accessing legal services. The Commission has made improving services for Aboriginal people a priority in its 2005-2007 Corporate Plan and is addressing this issue in a number of ways.
Director, Aboriginal Services

The Commission has created the position of Director, Aboriginal Services, to help improve and expand the delivery of Commission services to Aboriginal people. The Director will be responsible for:

- Developing and maintaining effective communication between the Commission and Aboriginal communities across New South Wales while building trust and confidence among Aboriginal clients in the Commission and the services its delivers
- Providing strategic advice to the Commission on current and future Aboriginal client service needs and law reform proposals
- Working across all areas of the Commission to drive the delivery of responsive and innovative client service initiatives across the range of legal aid services
- Bringing together legal and quasi-legal service agencies and other key stakeholders to work collaboratively on identifying and addressing Aboriginal client and legal service delivery issues

Aboriginal Legal Service

The Commission is developing a Statement of Co-operation with the Aboriginal Legal Service NSW/ACT Ltd (ALS) to allow the two agencies to work together to meet the legal service needs of Aboriginal people. The Commission has agreed to fund three legal officer positions with the ALS in country areas of the State to provide legal representation to Aboriginal people and children involved in children’s care and protection court proceedings.

The Commission and the ALS are working together to persuade the District Court of NSW to establish a Diversion and Rehabilitation Program for Aboriginal offenders appearing before the Court as one way to address the high and disproportionate level of incarceration of Aboriginal people.

Program Reviews

The Commission has committed to progressively reviewing its service programs to ensure that our services continue to meet the current and future needs of clients. Recent reviews of services in the areas of children’s care and protection cases, mental health services and prisoner legal services have included an examination of the needs of rural clients. Implementation teams are working over the coming months to put in place the recommendations contained in each of the reviews.

As a result of the review of Children’s Care and Protection Services the Commission has committed to employing additional legal resources in nine country locations. Following an earlier review of the Commission’s Civil law services, the Commission has also committed to employing an additional seven civil lawyers in country locations. Following a review of the Commission’s Prisoner’s Legal Service, the Commission is working to extend the service to visits prisoners in gaols in country areas not currently visited through a combination of personal visits and use of audio visual links.
New Service initiatives
As part of its planning process, the Commission will be focussing on improving its services to a number of client groups, particularly the homeless and elderly. Homelessness affects people living in both metropolitan and rural areas and the needs of elderly people can be exacerbated by rural isolation. The Commission will work closely with other service providers in improving current services and developing new initiatives for these two client groups.

Community Legal Centres
The State Government funds a network of 32 independent Community Legal Centres across the State, many in locations where the Commission does not have an office, and many specialising in particular types of legal issues. The Commission has invited the community legal centres movement to work with the Commission in the areas of legal education and service delivery. Projects being undertaken include the development of a self help kits on discrimination law and consumer credit issues.

KEY PRIORITIES

- Expand the Co-operative Legal service Delivery Model to an additional two country regions during 2007/2008
- Appoint Director, Aboriginal services by March 2007
- Appoint additional children’s care and protection lawyers in nine country locations by 30 June 2007
- Appoint additional 7 civil lawyers in country locations by 30 March 2007.
- Provide funding to the Aboriginal Legal Service for children’s care and protection lawyers in 3 country locations by 30 March 2007.
- Extend the Prisoners Legal Service to more country gaols.
**Key Area 3**

** USING TECHNOLOGY TO REACH OUR CLIENTS**

Information technology provides the opportunity to connect people in regional areas to services and information in a way that can make significant differences to economic, social and cultural wellbeing. People want fast and reliable access to information. The Commission has introduced a range of technological solutions to improve services to rural and regional clients and will continue to explore opportunities to use information technology to better serve its clients.

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**Video conferencing**

The Commission first introduced audio video conferencing facilities in 2000. Since that time, we have continued to expand both the number of offices able to use audio video conferencing and its usages. The facilities provide an important tool for clients living in country areas to gain access to legal advice not available in their local area and to conduct business with our lawyers without having to leave their local communities. During 2005/2006 we used the facilities on 3,691 occasions across all areas of law.

The Commission will continue to build its use of audio-video conferencing as a major communication tool for rural clients to talk with the Commission and its staff, and for our country staff to receive training and other important information.

**Internet**

The internet is increasingly becoming an information lifeline for people living in remote communities. The internet provides access to information almost anywhere, at any time, and provides an unparalleled opportunity for the Commission to reach many more clients than our traditional service delivery methods can achieve.

With this in mind, the Commission will improve the range of information and advice available through our website over the coming year while also increasing its user friendliness.

**Electronic document lodgement**

In 2002, the Commission piloted the electronic lodgement of legal aid applications. Since that time, the use of electronic lodgement has grown rapidly allowing the Commission to improve the time it takes to consider applications.

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**KEY PRIORITIES**

- Increase the use of video conferencing by 5% by 30 June 2008
- Provide an additional 3 information kits available from the Commission’s website by 30 December 2007.
While the Commission’s information, advice and community legal education services are free to all members of the community, legal representation is available only to those that meet the Commission’s jurisdictional, financial and merit test.

The Commission’s policies make provision for additional services to be provided to people who suffer significant disadvantage in participating in the justice system. This has generally included children and people suffering from mental illness and some form of intellectual impairment.

The Commission will review the category of special disadvantage to include people suffering from other forms of social disadvantage including geographic isolation.

The Commission will also undertake a review of the asset thresholds for financial eligibility for legal aid. As part of that review, the Commission will consider the impacts of drought and other natural disasters impacting farmers and other rural clients on an individual’s ability to afford private legal representation, and whether it is appropriate to extend financial eligibility for legal aid in these types of circumstances.

**KEY PRIORITIES**

- Review the assets component of the Commission’s financial eligibility test by 30 June 2007.