

North Australian Aboriginal Justice Agency

MEDIA RELEASE

Friday 27th March, 2009

Rudd Government called on to honour promises

The recently elected North Australian Aboriginal Justice Agency (NAAJA) Board met in Darwin today following ongoing meetings with both the Australian and Northern Territory Governments seeking adequate funding for Aboriginal Legal Aid.

"Over the past five years NAAJA's criminal matters have increased by 20% and our civil and family matters have increased by 90%," CEO Priscilla Collins said.

"Yet, in this time, our funding has not even matched inflationary increases."

In 2007/2008 NAAJA lawyers attended to 7,418 matters. This excludes the additional number of clients NAAJA sees when providing mediation, welfare rights, advocacy and community legal education. Each individual NAAJA lawyer currently attends to approximately 280 new matters a year in addition to matters that continue from previous years.

"Our Solicitors have heavy individual caseloads and high workloads in comparison to other legal aid providers and they operate in culturally challenging and complex conditions," she said.

"Solicitors report very high work loads at all of our bush courts and our staffing levels only allow solicitors one day to prepare for court. This means many clients cannot be seen beforehand.

"Adding to this load on bush courts is the 18 new police stations recently opened in remote communities, adding significantly to NAAJA's workload," Ms Collins said.

NAAJA Chairman, Norman George from Katherine, said the Board calls on the Australian Government to honour its commitments.

"We're simply asking the Rudd Government to meet it's 2007 election platform that states: *Labor acknowledges the many social and cultural dimensions of the Australian community, and the impact this has upon the understanding of and access to justice. Labor will ensure that Australians from all cultural and ethnic backgrounds are given access to information about their rights and responsibilities under the law, including court interpreter services, and the ways in which these rights and responsibilities can be fulfilled.*

"It goes on to commit to: *'strengthening funding to Aboriginal Legal Aid Agencies'*.¹

"The federal Labor Government has committed to the NT Intervention. We ask they do the same to their election promises about Aboriginal Legal Aid."

The new Board is also marking three years since NAAJA was formed from the coming together of legal services in Darwin, Katherine and Nhulunbuy.

"We've come a long way in that time," Mr George said. "We need to be able to adequately protect the legal rights of Aboriginal people of the Top End. Surely that's part and parcel of the Rudd Government committing to International Indigenous human rights."

Contact: Francine Chinn 0417 871 592 (NAAJA Communications Officer)
francine.chinn@naaja.org.au

1. see: http://www.alp.org.au/download/now/2007_national_platform.pdf page 194

Head Office: 1 Gardiner Street, DARWIN
GPO Box 1064 DARWIN NT 08012
Tel: (08) 8982 5100
Fax: (08) 8982 5199