



Strategic Plan

2017-2020

On the frontline of Legal Services to the Community.

Legal Aid Commission ACT

The Commission is an independent statutory authority established under the *Legal Aid Act 1977* charged with providing legal assistance in the Australian Capital Territory in accordance with the Act. While the Commission is accountable to the Commonwealth Government, and specifically to the ACT Attorney-General for the exercise of its statutory functions, it operates a legal practice with a high degree of autonomy. This is necessary because of the Commission's duty to protect the legal rights and interests of individuals many of whom are parties to actions by, or against, the executive branch of government. While the work of the Commission must be undertaken in the broad context of government justice policy, as set out in the Act and in the National Partnership Agreement for legal assistance, the Commission's lawyers are required to observe the same rules and standards of professional conduct as private lawyers, and are subject to the same professional duties. This means that their professional duties are owed to the law, the court and clients, rather than to executive government.

INTRODUCTION

A strategic plan has little utility unless it is a living document. It is meant to be relevant to each person who either comes to the Commission for assistance or who is a staff member. The Commission's Strategic Plan is intended to be an inclusive document, organically located within the operations of this organisation, and written in a way that is practically meaningful. It needs buy-in from staff and to be transparent to our clients.

The Strategic Plan is linked to the daily activity of the organisation, and, through section business plans, is instrumental in what we do and why we are doing it. The Plan underlines the importance of 'front-line' service delivery and confirms that a well-run organisation is fundamental to delivering high quality professional legal aid services.

The Plan is the culmination of a lengthy, comprehensive business planning process led by the senior executive team. All staff at the Commission have had an opportunity to consider and contribute to this process, and the Board of Commissioners have also provided important input.

While it is important that the Commission visibly document what we are seeking to achieve, a strategic plan must also be flexible, non-monolithic, and capable of adaptation. It is a tool, or guide, to how we seek to deliver services in accord with the purpose, values and vision of the Commission. We must not consider the document by any means static, or incapable of adaptation, to ensure we provide the best possible service to the most vulnerable and disadvantaged people in the ACT.

Challenges and Risks

The Commission faces a range of challenges in ensuring the delivery of legal services to the most vulnerable and disadvantaged members of our community. The overall cost of providing services continues to increase while the demand for services grows. The Commission also faces having to meet emerging needs in the civil law area, including in family and domestic violence and in issues connected to elder abuse, and in extending services to people in Culturally and Linguistically Diverse Communities. In this context the Commission intends to reallocate its resources to new priority client groups.

The two main drivers of the Commission's litigation work are child welfare in family law disputes and people at risk of incarceration in the criminal courts. In this context, the Commission's capacity to respond is limited by needing to meet the cost of litigation, and is compounded by further reductions in Commission revenue from the Statutory Interest Account managed by the ACT Law Society. Consequently, the Commission's primary challenge is meeting the emerging needs in the civil law area without reducing services in the core family and criminal areas.

The Commission must also ensure it manages funding prudently, and continues to make savings in administrative overheads and in the cost of legally assisted cases. These measures off-set the high cost of criminal cases, and the increases in family law case costs (particularly for Independent Children's matters). The additional costs associated with the Eastman Board of inquiry will also need to be managed in consultation with the Territory Government.

PART 1 IDENTITY STATEMENT

PURPOSE

The purpose of Legal Aid ACT is to promote a just society in the Australian Capital Territory by:

- ensuring that vulnerable and disadvantaged people receive the legal services they need to protect their rights and interests;
- developing an improved community understanding of the law; and
- seeking reform of laws that adversely affect those we assist.

We achieve this purpose by delivering a range of high quality legal services through our staff and professional partners in a caring manner that respects diversity and promotes confidence in the legal system.

VALUES

Legal Aid ACT espouses the following values in its relationships, service delivery, business processes and decision making.

- We are committed to helping disadvantaged people achieve justice.
- We respect people and their diversity.
- We value integrity and ethical conduct.
- We are accountable and committed to using learning and innovation to improve the quality of our services and the efficient use of resources.
- We work collaboratively with others to meet people's needs.
- We value and protect our statutory independence.

VISION

Our vision is to be a leader in the delivery of legal services that are recognised for their excellence and for the caring, responsive and professional manner in which they are provided.

PART 2 COMMISSION PRIORITIES 2017-2020

STRATEGIC OBJECTIVES

The Commission has committed to three strategic objectives for the duration of the Strategic Plan (2017-2020). These objectives will underpin our identity as an independent organisation, and will guide our services:

Strategic Objective 1

[Provide services to promote the earlier resolution of legal problems](#)

The Commission provides a range of legal services that promote the identification and early resolution of legal problems. Evidence shows that the most vulnerable and disadvantaged in our community, such as victims of family violence, children, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, and members of culturally and linguistically diverse communities would particularly benefit from early intervention services.

Investing in the provision of these types of services so that more people have an opportunity to receive assistance before litigation is commenced is a key indicator of improvement in access to justice for those persons most at disadvantage in the community.

Strategic Objective 2

[Provide legal information and referral services](#)

The Commission seeks to ensure that people are not prevented, by disadvantage, from obtaining the legal services they need to protect their rights and interests. Enhancing the capacity of people to assist themselves when faced with legal problems, improves the chances of resolution and appropriate referral to social support services.

Growth in the number of people receiving information and advice, and where appropriate referral for preventative and early intervention services, is a strong indicator that targeting this type of assistance is meeting the needs of the most disadvantaged members of the community.

Strategic Objective 3

[Provide efficient and cost-effective legal aid services](#)

The Commission has well developed systems to determine applications for grants of legal assistance and to reduce the administrative costs of providing legal assistance.

Increasing the number of people assisted by improving the efficiency and timeliness of service provision is an indicator that services are reaching those people most in need of legal aid services and that community understanding of the law and the legal system operating in the Territory is improving.

STRATEGIC PRIORITIES

The creation of a business plan for each section of the Commission has enabled us to both distil core activities and identify new ways of providing services. While the list of priorities naturally reflects innovation, we need to maintain our commitment to the delivery of **core** services. This approach reflects the essential needs of our clients, the fundamental nature of what constitutes the provision of legal aid services, and the expectations of our key stakeholders.

The Commission's priorities for the next three years are to:

- Support victims of family and domestic violence through an increase in the provision of legal assistance services.
- Improve the provision of legal assistance services to the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities and other culturally and linguistically diverse communities.
- Develop and implement legal education programs tailored to the needs of people experiencing a high incidence of adverse legal events, and those working in community organisations that assist them.
- Promote the prevention of legal problems by providing timely information about the law and legal processes and referring people to other legal or non-legal services where necessary to meet their needs.
- Promote the early resolution of legal problems by providing legal advice, advocacy, minor legal assistance and dispute resolution services.
- Advise and assist people appearing unrepresented before courts and tribunals, particularly those persons experiencing family violence.
- Provide legal representation to people in need to enable them to assert or defend their legal rights.

STRATEGIC ACTIONS

What the Commission will do

The Commission will focus resources on a range of activities to deliver on these priorities. We will utilise our core service functions as the primary way in which we will achieve our goals. In this context we will embark on or consolidate **front line services** by:

- **Creating** a 'store-front' service to enhance public access to advice and legal task assistance and also as an opportunity for 'warm' referrals to non-legal support services, by re-locating part of the General Practice (as well as the Youth Law Centre) to the Commission's ground floor office.
- **Optimising** the number of people for whom we can provide representation in courts and tribunals utilising in-house lawyers and targeted referral of matters to the private profession
- **Improving** outreach services, particularly to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders and culturally and linguistically diverse communities, using a client-centred approach and by working in collaboration with social and health services

- **Generating** an active social media presence through tools such as Facebook, Twitter, blogging and on-line chat activities to engage priority clients
- **Developing** more service opportunities by collaborating with community legal centres (CLCs), the private legal profession, universities and non-legal organisations
- **Providing** better services in family violence, migrants/refugees and in elder abuse, through improved legal assistance and community legal education
- **Improving** ICT support by developing the functionality of intake forms, reporting in accordance with the NPA data manual, and using a new grants management system
- **Improving** the efficiency of work practices through comprehensive skills training program.

PART 3 STRATEGIC PLAN

The Strategic Plan set out below links our daily governance and service activities to the results we are trying to obtain, which in turn should put us in a position to meet the strategic objectives to which we have committed. The Plan identifies the essential processes we need to have in place to deliver the results we have committed to obtaining; and we need to ensure that we are able to measure our work, both quantitatively through outputs but also qualitatively. In this Plan we outline the priority areas with the key performance indicators (measurements) that the Commission might undertake as the method or means to deliver the outcomes.

Priority	Measurement
Creating accessibility to legal assistance services	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Establish a 'Store-front' service by December 2016; • Co-locate YLC, General Practice and visiting sessional clinic staff (and volunteers and students) on ground floor • Number of people assisted at the 'Store-front' • Quality assurance independently reported
Optimise representation in courts and tribunals	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Number of people assisted through duty services, FDR and by representation; • Number of referrals to other legal service providers; • Number of non-support services provided • Quality assurance independently reported
Improve Outreach services	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Number of outreach sites and people assisted (by priority group); • Number of CLE activities • Quality assurance independently reported
Generate Social Media Profile	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Establish one FTE position by December 2016 • Set benchmark for social media activity • Number of website hits • Revamped website and intranet
Develop collaborations	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Number of partnerships created or renewed by 2020;

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Number of collaborative or joint activities; • professionalism of staff affirmed in key relationships survey
Better services in family violence, migration/refugees and elder abuse	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Number of services provided in target areas annually; • Number of referrals to legal and non-legal services providers; • Number of non-legal support services; • Number of CLE activities; • Number of law reform submissions • Quality assurance independently reported
Improve ICT support	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Staff self-sufficient and utilising the full range of IT services; • Work process demonstrably streamlined; • no breakdown in IT services
Improve efficiency of work place	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Demonstrable efficiencies in grants administration, corporate services and legal practice ; • Legal services delivered in timely manner, court dates met and grants administer within agreed timelines; • Key relationship and client satisfaction with professionalism, skills and commitment of staff • Financial targets and operations conducted within budget

ACHIEVING RESULTS

Measuring our success, or otherwise, must be a key component of the Strategic Plan. Immediately, we need to show that we have reached our Strategic Objectives. On a broader basis, the measurement of outputs/outcomes must link to our reporting accountability to the Territory and Federal governments. The measurement of our priority action must be evidenced in the data reports and through client surveys. The Plan is integrally connected to the business operations for each section, and will ultimately track to each staff member's personal management and performance plan.

In this context the test of whether the Commission has *achieved results* must be independently benchmarked against clear criteria drawn from the National Partnership Agreement:

- Priority clients assisted
- High quality legal aid service provided
- Workload effectively allocated to lawyers
- Justice policy implemented in accord with NPA and Territory requirements
- Key performance indicators achieved
- Outputs measured
- Client survey conducted
- IT meets operational needs of the Commission

CONCLUSION

The major outcome of our business planning process, which forms the basis for this strategic plan, was that the Commission's operations need to more explicitly recognise the key risks to our productivity as an organisation. The notion of risk that we have employed is not narrow; rather it looks critically at all aspects of our operations to identify the specific inhibitors of a healthy legal aid service.

The Commission's risk management plan provides a starting point for identifying these concerns on an organisational level. Drawing from this document, and the business planning process, we have used four key questions as a locus for being able to measure our success in achieving strategic goals:

- How do we improve our operations?
- Will the selected innovative delivery techniques facilitate reaching our outcomes?
- Will our planning and budgetary processes be properly informed?
- Do our training plans facilitate a professional service?

Our assessment of the high-level risks and responses led to a focus on three fundamental outcomes. These outcomes have their root in the Commission's identify statement; and go to the heart of what the organisation should be trying to achieve.

Unless the Commission's operational structure and practices embrace new and innovative modes of service delivery our capacity to adequately respond to emerging client needs will be diminished. Limited public funding can have dire implications for our ability to provide access to justice for an increasingly large cohort of people unable to afford legal representation.

Utilising strategies that will allow us to 'close the justice gap' to provide support to more people who currently fall outside legal aid means would be consistent with Productivity Commission and NSW Law Foundation findings around legal need, and though problematic on a limited budget certainly a worthwhile aim for all legal aid commissions. It may be that we can best tackle legal need by better refining our priorities, for example in relation to primary victims of violence and children; making better connections between the Domestic Violence Unit in the Magistrates Court and care/protection matters in the Children's Court, and with family law proceedings in the Family Court. Meeting the needs of primary victims of family and domestic violence will continue to be a core priority for the Commission.

Financial pressures will continue to test our ability to meet the needs of the ACT community. While innovation and using 'smart' strategies to better meet demand are a necessary part of Commission business planning, in the medium to long term finding additional income streams will be necessary if services are not to be reduced. In that sense we expect to continue to develop early intervention and self-help services, and to identify more forms of 'unbundled' services that can be provided to facilitate access to justice outcomes.

Overall this Strategic plan points the way forward for our organisation as we seek to meet the needs of the most vulnerable and disadvantaged people in the ACT, but it is intended to set out realistic goals. Our aspirations must be couched in the willingness of governments to invest in legal aid, and an understanding that our capacity to assist people through innovations and new projects will be proscribed by the strength of this investment.