Cultural diversity action plan
2011-2012
1. About Victoria Legal Aid

Victoria Legal Aid is a leading and responsible force for community access to the legal system and for social justice.

Victoria Legal Aid (VLA) is committed to:
• serving our clients and community professionally and ethically
• acting with integrity, fairness and transparency at all times
• respecting and valuing diversity
• pursuing continuous improvement across the organisation.

Victoria Legal Aid’s Strategic Plan 2011–14 outlines these priority themes which guide our work:
• Access and inclusion
  To deliver timely and respectful access to the justice system; to help people resolve legal problems and protect rights
• Relationships and collaboration
  To build strong, effective relationships with other organisations for the benefit of our clients
• Organisational responsiveness
  To enhance organisational capability to respond to a changing environment.

2. Policy context

Victoria Legal Aid recognises its special responsibility in working with groups that may have particular challenges in getting affordable legal assistance and understanding their legal options, and identifies people from culturally and linguistically diverse (CALD) backgrounds as a priority client group.

This Cultural Diversity Action Plan outlines actions through which Victoria Legal Aid commits to continue to improve its services for Victoria’s CALD community. Its development has been informed by equal opportunity and anti-discrimination principles, State and Commonwealth policy and VLA objectives. In particular this plan will help to support these social policy objectives:
• The Commonwealth Government policy paper, A Strategic Framework for Access to Justice in the Federal Civil Justice System (2009), identifies barriers to accessing legal services for CALD members of the community.

This plan will also assist us to report, in line with Victorian government reporting requirements, on progress and actions to:
• incorporate culturally-appropriate training for staff
• ensure that information on services is readily available to CALD communities
• evaluate the effectiveness of service delivery to CALD communities as an integral part of program evaluation.

Victoria Legal Aid endorses, and will seek to fully implement, the principles outlined in the Department of Justice’s diversity statement.

We recognise that differences – whether in gender, age, race, ethnicity, culture, disability, sexual orientation, education, experience, skills or beliefs – add value to, and strengthen, our community.

We respect the rights, dignity, worth and property of all people.

We engage in recruitment and staffing practices that reflect the diverse nature of our organisation and the community.

We foster a culture that honours each individual’s unique ideas, experiences and skills.

We create an inclusive work environment that values diversity.
3. Cultural diversity challenges: access to the justice system

People from culturally and linguistically diverse (CALD) backgrounds face many barriers in getting help with their legal problems. These include:

- language and literacy issues
- confusion about where to go to get help
- lack of understanding about the legal system
- different cultural expectations, experiences and beliefs about family and marriage, the role of the courts and police, and the justice system in general.

A Strategic Framework for Access to Justice acknowledges that:

‘People from CALD backgrounds and their communities, in particular those who recently arrived in Australia or have difficulty with English, may have a low awareness of available legal services or little or no understanding of Australian law. They may also have previously lived in countries with a repressive government, unresponsive justice system or a compromised rule of law.

People need information about the law to see the options that are available to them, whether it be making the informed choice to do nothing, or seeking assistance so that the problem does not escalate or trigger broader legal issues.

Access to quality legal assistance and information can help people from CALD backgrounds and their communities by removing misconceptions, reducing fear of victimisation, promoting belonging and building trust in government and the justice system.’

These findings were reinforced by a comprehensive Access and Equity Audit (2006) in which Victoria Legal Aid explored potential barriers to its services for four key priority client groups facing disadvantage: people with a disability; women; those from a CALD background; and young people.

Specific to the CALD community the Audit identified:

- lack of awareness of Victoria Legal Aid and very limited understanding of legal services as a concept
- language barriers accompanied by literacy issues, particularly for new and emerging communities
- lack of trust in legal services
- inaccurate assumptions about the range of services offered by Victoria Legal Aid (beliefs that our focus is only on criminal law and immigration)
- underestimation of the help Victoria Legal Aid can provide in issues regarded as key legal issues for CALD clients (consumer problems, road traffic offences, family law matters).

This Audit also found that most advocates and representatives of community organisations consulted, including those assisting people from a CALD background, were either completely unaware of the existence of VLA, or where they did know about the organisation, they believed that VLA only provided grants of legal assistance.
4. Where are we at?

Many of the recommendations stemming from this Audit have been taken up, most notably:
• the development of an interpreters’ policy to bring about consistent and effective practice across VLA services
• multilingual pamphlets promoting VLA services
• cultural awareness training.

Other important recent initiatives have been the 2010 community legal education sessions focusing on newly arrived communities such as the Sudanese, Congolese, Afghans and Iraqis in the Shepparton area.

A working group of VLA staff with a keen interest in issues relating to CALD communities has been set up and meets regularly to share knowledge and identify ways to improve our services.

We are also active participants in the Victoria Legal Assistance Forum working group on CALD issues, which has led to projects such as the development of a checklist for lawyers to use when working with interpreters, and a project to assist young unaccompanied humanitarian minor refugees.

Victoria Legal Aid has also been working with National Legal Aid, creating an education package to be delivered to new arrivals through the Adult Migrant Education Program across Australia.

We have developed new, innovative ‘helpcards’ to promote our services, specifically targeted at ‘hard-to-reach’ communities, which will be translated into more than 25 languages.

This Cultural Diversity Action Plan consolidates some of the work in this area and identifies new priority areas for the next two years, focusing on two goals – accessibility and cultural competency.

5. Strengthening VLA’s capacity as a culturally competent organisation

A survey of 20,000 public sector employees found that 9.4 percent of employees were from cultures where English is not the first language – half the Victorian workforce average.

Language diversity among Victorian public servants is generally two-thirds less diverse than in the wider Victorian population.

Languages that are clearly under-represented in the public sector workforce include Greek, Italian, Vietnamese, Cantonese, Arabic, Turkish, Macedonian, Sinhalese and Maltese.

Organisational and staff practices are an important component of strengthening our capacity to respond to the challenges of effective service delivery.

Victoria Legal Aid recognises that our capacity to be responsive to culturally diverse communities will be enriched and strengthened by recruiting and supporting staff from diverse cultural backgrounds.

For our services to successfully integrate cultural diversity policies and strategies, our staffing should reflect the cultural diversity of the community.

Working to strengthen the presence of staff from culturally diverse backgrounds within the organisation will have the following benefits:
• CALD members of the community may be more comfortable accessing Victoria Legal Aid if they can see their ethnicity reflected by our staff
• Increased knowledge of specific cultures will improve our capacity to make connections with those communities
• Greater resource base in terms of language abilities
• Greater cultural sensitivity in service provision
• Introduction of new perspectives and life experiences
• Building mutual respect, understanding and tolerance.

A further focus of Victoria Legal Aid’s progress towards cultural competence will be ensuring that our staff are confident and well-equipped with the knowledge and skills to meet the needs of the communities with which they work. Training staff to be sensitive to, and aware of, the different cultural backgrounds of people approaching our services for help is another step in increasing people’s readiness to access services.

Victoria Legal Aid is also committed to evaluating and improving its organisational practices, strategic planning, and leadership to ensure that consideration of CALD issues is integral to our organisational systems and processes.
6. Goals and actions 2011–12

Victoria Legal Aid will adopt these goals and strategies in order to continue to improve its services in relation to the culturally and linguistically diverse community.

**Goal one**
Improved accessibility and responsiveness to the CALD community

**Priority areas**

**Communication:** VLA will work to make our services more widely known to the CALD community

**Engagement:** VLA will work to develop positive and productive relationships with CALD communities

**Service delivery:** VLA will ensure that services are accessible and responsive to CALD clients’ needs

**Goal two**
Building a culturally competent organisation

**Priority areas:**

**An inclusive workplace and culture:** VLA will work to develop its staff’s capacity to effectively address the needs of CALD clients and communities and to promote opportunities for employment to CALD people.

**Strategic planning and leadership:** VLA will work to build the organisation’s capacity and responsiveness in engaging with CALD communities.
### Goal 1:
**Improving VLA’s accessibility and responsiveness to the CALD community**

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<tr>
<th>COMMUNICATION</th>
<th>ENGAGEMENT</th>
<th>SERVICE DELIVERY</th>
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<tr>
<td><strong>To make our services more widely known to CALD communities, VLA will:</strong></td>
<td><strong>To develop positive and productive relationships with CALD communities, VLA will:</strong></td>
<td><strong>To ensure that services are accessible and responsive to client’s needs, VLA will:</strong></td>
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<td>Develop opportunities, such as focus groups, to include the viewpoint of CALD communities, in developing and evaluating community legal education strategies</td>
<td>Participate in Cultural Diversity Week and Refugee Week</td>
<td>Outline specific protocols to assist people with language barriers in the development of a proposed new client access model and referrals policies</td>
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<td>Prioritise the need for greater awareness and understanding of VLA services among the CALD community, with communication targeted to these communities</td>
<td>Hold an ‘expo’ to promote VLA services to the CALD community</td>
<td>Establish ways to track staff awareness and understanding of current interpreter policy, and gain feedback on whether the policy requires updating and adjustment</td>
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<td>Work with local government services and community workers to build capacity to present, distribute and promote resources targeted to CALD communities including older members of these communities</td>
<td>Continue and broaden our participation in key multicultural networks and committees, and develop mechanisms to ensure information gained this way is usefully shared and disseminated within the organisation</td>
<td>Improve data collection in both quantitative and qualitative areas to analyse interpreter usage</td>
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<td>Continue to develop innovative approaches to community legal education for CALD communities.</td>
<td>Hold a regular roundtable consultation with multicultural stakeholders to seek feedback (by establishing a multicultural reference group)</td>
<td>Identify potential issues in accessing interpreters among private legal practitioners, who may be assisting clients with language barriers to apply for legal aid, and explore solutions</td>
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<td>Include images of CALD community members in VLA publications</td>
<td>Include multicultural events and activities in a diversity calendar to increase VLA’s visible presence in the community</td>
<td>Review approach to provision of information on legal aid eligibility, and resources explaining the grants system, to people from CALD background</td>
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<td>Develop and maintain a database of CALD media and peak organisations</td>
<td>Collaborate with key partners such as the Department of Justice Access for Refugees bilingual workers program to deliver community legal education initiatives</td>
<td>Display interpreter symbol in publicly accessed areas and consider other ways to make offices welcoming to CALD clients</td>
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Goal 2: Improving VLA’s cultural competence

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<th>STRATEGIC PLANNING AND LEADERSHIP</th>
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<td>To build the organisation’s capacity and responsiveness in engaging with CALD communities, VLA will:</td>
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<td>Develop and implement targeted diversity training for in-house legal practitioners and staff in frontline roles</td>
<td>Explore ways of embedding diversity competence goals into business planning and strategic frameworks</td>
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<td>Review training to include diversity and inclusive practices into VLA Essentials program</td>
<td>Identify ways in which VLA can more effectively collect data on the cultural diversity of its client group</td>
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<td>Consolidate data on how many staff are from CALD background, and develop and implement strategies to attract CALD lawyers and trainees</td>
<td>Use data to enable critical analysis in any areas of under-representation in service use for particular communities and identify possible causes</td>
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<td>Develop a project to consider ways in which the skills, networks and knowledge of bilingual workers can be effectively utilised by the organisation</td>
<td>Develop quality tools and measures to assess effectiveness of interpreter usage within the organisation and mechanisms to monitor the performance of interpreting agencies</td>
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<td>Develop resources on the intranet that provide information on working effectively with CALD communities and individuals</td>
<td>Review complaints policies, information and processes to ensure their relevance and accessibility for CALD clients</td>
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<td>Celebrate staff diversity through ‘Harmony Day’</td>
<td>Monitor the implementation of this Cultural Diversity Action Plan through quarterly reporting to the Senior Executive Team</td>
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