

Ruddock tours the Territory to announce ATSILS tenders

The Northern Australian Aboriginal Justice Agency (NAAJA) commences serving the Aboriginal people of the Top End on Wednesday 1 February 2006.

NAAJA is a blending of the current three Aboriginal Legal Services operating in the Top End, NAALAS (Darwin-based), KRALAS (Katherine-based) and Miwatj (Nhulunbuy-based).

The imperative for the formation of NAAJA came from the Federal Government which decided some time ago to put the work performed by the Aboriginal Legal Services throughout Australia up for public tender. Initially the Government's approach was that there would be a single service provider per State or Territory jurisdiction. Thus it seemed that all four NT Aboriginal Legal Services (including the Alice Spring's based CAALAS) would have to merge to make a single bid for the work. Eventually the position was clarified, in the NT there would be two service providers - one in the desert and one in the Top End.

So it was that in 2004 NAALAS, KRALAS and Miwatj commenced making plans to merge and then joust for the prize. In a relatively short period, and without any serious disharmony, a merger was achieved under the NAAJA banner and the tender lodged earlier this year. In mid-November the three services were advised that the NAAJA tender was preferred.

In the desert, CAALAS remains the service provider. Very unfortunately for its clients and the quality of justice in that region, its funding is significantly reduced. This reduction in funding must be reversed. CAALAS has a proud history and has many extremely serious cases on its books. Any reduction in its funding is most regrettable and unconscionable.

In fact, the provision of legal services to Aboriginal people in the Top End has gone the full circle. It was in the 70s that NAALAS first emerged and had as its workground all of the Top End. KRALAS was formed in the mid-80s to improve services to that region. In the mid- late 90s Miwatj was launched as a response to the fact that NAALAS' level of funding meant that it had little permanent presence in the



Attorney General Phillip Ruddock announces the tender in Darwin.

East Arnhem / Groote Eylandt regions.

NAALAS, KRALAS and Miwatj have noted with thanks the support that the NT Legal Aid Commission, the NT Government and various other entities and individuals has given them on the road to forming NAAJA and securing the tender.

Today, all three services are functioning successfully. Clearly the shared aim of providing the best possible legal services to the Aboriginal people has meant that the three services have joined forces with a view to making NAAJA even greater than the sum of its parts. Lawyers will remain based in Katherine and Nhulunbuy. NAAJA will be governed by a Board that brings together the collective wisdom of 12 prominent Top End Aboriginal people. Continued efforts will be made to secure the legal talents of the best available lawyers from the NT and interstate. Recently, the NT Aboriginal Legal Services have been particularly fortunate to secure the services of several very talented young lawyers and this good fortune is set to continue. Morale is high as the challenge of launching NAAJA nears.

Glen Dooley
Principal Legal Officer, NAALAS



Senator Nigel Scullion, David Tollner MLA, Attorney-General the Hon Phillip Ruddock and Sharon Payne from NAAJA.