

## Introduction

The Central Australian Aboriginal Legal Service Youth Justice Advocacy Project (YJAP) commenced in August 2008. The primary focus of YJAP was to pick up on previous core functions of YJAP which was funded by the NT Law Society and auspice by ASYASS this funding ceased in February 2008. The YJAP is the only project of this kind currently funded in the NT. The need for Youth Advocacy Project/Legal service was highlighted in the 'Seen and Heard: priority for children in the legal process' report of the Australia Law Reform Commission and the Human Rights and Equal Opportunities Commission in 1997. Indigenous young people continue to be grossly over-represented in the criminal justice system.

A major focus of the project is the involvement of immediate and extended families to reinforce and support young people in the criminal justice system in order address the cycle that leads to incarceration and recidivism. YJAP continues to be guided by the Central Australian Youth Justice Committee (CAYJ) and is operationally responsible to the board of management of CAALAS. There have been some change made in relation to how young people are processed in criminal justice system since 2007 in Central Australia, however, the committee of CAYJ and YJAP continue to advocate for best practice in regards to youth justice issues.

One of the key priorities of YJAP is to maintain strong links with Legal Aid providers and Aboriginal Legal Services, which are the primary providers of court-based litigation services, particularly criminal defence work. Having worked in the youth sector for ten years I have been able to draw on my extensive networks in Alice Springs to work with all key stakeholders to develop a shared view and strategies on how best to improve the youth justice system in Alice Springs.

In January 2009 I was nominated as chair of the NT Government Youth Justice Advisory Committee (YJAC) as per section 13 of the Youth Justice Act. One of the key functions of YJAC is to advise Minister Vaskalis on issues relevant to the administration of youth justice, including the planning, development, integration implementation of government policies and programs concerning youth. YJAP feeds into the following committees.

- Central Australian Youth Justice Committee (CAYJ)
- Youth Justice Advisory Committee (YJAC)
- Law Society of Northern Territory Criminal Justice Committee

*Note the above committees are comprised of representatives from government and non government agencies*

The project is based in Alice Springs but the nature of the client group means that young people from bush communities and outstations throughout central Australia benefit from this service.

As many young people's issues will be more complex e.g. drug and alcohol abuse, family issue, young people in the care of the minister with criminal justice matters. Overall the YJAP role acts as an independent advocate for young people in the criminal justice system. A major focus of the project is the involvement of immediate and extended families to reinforce and support young people in the criminal justice system to break the cycle that

leads to incarceration and recidivism, thus having a positive influence on the over-representation of young people in courts.

As per the previous project duties YJAP will also provide individual court support (both at the pre court and hearing point) to young people and/or their family when a young person is before the court. YJAP continues to initiate and participate in community partnerships, networks and forums to promote and advocate for the rights of young people to access and equity in the legal system on a Regional and National Crime Prevention level.

The YJAP project enables CAALAS to provide a quality holistic service to young people in Central Australia, including court support, advocacy, legal rights information and training and referrals to appropriate support services. It provides young people and families with a greater understanding of the implications of involvement in the criminal justice system, whilst also working in collaboration with other key youth agencies to provide ongoing case management to develop skills that are aimed at breaking the cycle of offending behaviour.

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