



Victorian Aboriginal Legal Service Co-operative Ltd.

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Media Release:
“Mr Howard listen to us, work with us”
27 June 2007

The Victorian Aboriginal Legal Service Co-operative Limited (VALS) has a simple message for Mr Howard in relation to his emergency response to child abuse in the Indigenous Australian community: “listen to us, work with us”.

VALS is welcoming of the Government’s commitment to do something about abuse because this means that Indigenous Australian’s message that something more needs to be done about abuse has finally been heard. However, at the same time VALS is concerned that the Government’s proposal to attempt to address the issue ignores the Indigenous Australian voice. The Government did not consult Indigenous Australians about the proposal and there appears to be no role for local people to have a say about what measures are adopted.

VALS repeats its simple message to the Government “listen to us, work with us” in order to prevent a repeat of mistakes of the past. The past failure of the Government to listen to Indigenous Australians about abuse is an important reason why we find ourselves with a national emergency today.

VALS is not calling for a talk-fest. Suggestions by the Government that consultation, discussion and co-operation are negative, or backward looking, fly in the face of common sense. In a crisis you want all hands on deck. The Commonwealth Government, by telling Indigenous Australians, State Governments and non-Government organisations they are irrelevant, is suggesting that it can fix the problem in isolation.

In calling for the Government to listen to and work with Indigenous Australians, VALS is asking the Government to recognise that Indigenous Australians are experts on how to deal with issues that affect them. Consequentially, measures that involve the Indigenous Australian community are more likely to succeed than those that do not.

The prevalence of the following messages should be seen as an opportunity to get the balance of measures right:

- Indigenous Australians should be involved in measures to deal with abuse.
- More should be done in terms of stabilizing change and preventing future problems (eg: providing support services, health and housing etc).

The value of a balance of measures was recognised in the Royal Commission into Aboriginal Deaths in Custody Report (RCIADIC). The RCIADIC not only made recommendations about the criminal justice system, but underlying issues such as health, housing and employment etc. The Government has ignored many of the 339 RCIADIC recommendations and VALS calls on all Governments to revisit and implement the recommendations of the RCIADIC in totality.

Governments listening to and working with Indigenous Australians is essential to getting safer and happier communities.

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