



Speech by

Hon. R. WELFORD

MEMBER FOR EVERTON

Hansard 27 November 2001

MINISTERIAL STATEMENT

Legal Aid Queensland

Hon. R. J. WELFORD (Everton—ALP) (Attorney-General and Minister for Justice) (9.58 a.m.), by leave: I am pleased to inform the House of practical action being taken by Legal Aid Queensland to improve access to justice for remote communities in Cape York and the gulf. Our government believes it is essential that people living in these communities have access to the type of Legal Aid services available in other parts of Queensland. An extensive survey by Legal Aid detailed in its recently released *Northern outreach* report, which I launched last week, has shown that many people in these communities currently have nowhere to go to discuss their legal problems.

Access to legal services is limited and many issues not only go unresolved but often escalate into more serious matters. To respond to this need, Legal Aid lawyers will be visiting remote Cape York and gulf indigenous communities three or four times a year. This is part of an overall strategy that has already seen the establishment of an indigenous legal telephone hotline providing legal information, advice and referral services; the employment of indigenous community liaison officers in Cairns, Townsville and Rockhampton to work with councils and community organisations; and the employment of two additional criminal compensation lawyers in Cairns and Townsville.

Legal Aid's *Northern outreach* report details the findings of a comprehensive legal needs survey of remote indigenous communities in Cape York and the gulf. At least 18 indigenous communities were surveyed, mostly in remote regions where the wet season cuts road access for about five months of the year. The survey found that people living in these communities, particularly women, who are often the victims of violent crime, would gain enormous benefit from better access to legal advice. There were many examples of exploitation—that is, cars, boats and goods such as vacuum cleaners being sold at exorbitant prices or without contract conditions being explained. For example, many women in Kowanyama reported being ripped off by a travelling vacuum cleaner salesman who sold the cleaners on hire purchase for \$3,000 each.

By providing community legal education and increasing awareness of people's legal rights, we can stop this happening. Regular visits by Legal Aid lawyers will not only provide practical assistance but will also break down barriers and make mainstream justice less intimidating for these indigenous communities. With tribal councils and elders involved in the process, we expect it will have a very positive impact on communities and reduce many violations of people's rights.
