ABORIGINAL PEOPLE FACE BARRIERS IN OBTAINING AND HOLDING A DRIVER’S LICENCE

The Aboriginal Legal Service (NSW/ACT), the NSW Council of Social Services (NCOSS) and the Law Society of NSW have joined forces in calling on the State Government to recognise and address the multiple barriers Aboriginal people face in obtaining and retaining a drivers licence.

They say statistics highlight the need for “end to end” support for Aboriginal people trying to obtain a licence:

- One in 20 Aboriginal people in jail is serving a sentence for unlicensed driving and other “driver licence” offences;
- Less than half of eligible Aboriginal people hold a driver licence compared to 70 per cent of the non-Aboriginal population;
- Only 51% of Aboriginal families have access to a motor vehicle compared to over 85% of non-Aboriginal families;
- 57% of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people pass the Driver Knowledge test (DKT) compared to 74% for other groups in the community;
- 38% of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people with a licence have had it disqualified, suspended or cancelled;
- 12% of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander found guilty of driving offences were jailed, compared to 5% for the general population.

The ALS, NCOSS and the Law Society of NSW have all provided Submissions to the Staysafe Inquiry into Driver Education, Training and Road Safety and will give evidence to its hearings today (22 May, 2017) and say there must be properly-resourced programs that are accessible to Indigenous people, including those in rural and remote areas.

ALS Acting CEO Lesley Turner:

“It’s clear that significant barriers in accessing proper driver education and training are negatively affecting Aboriginal people, particularly those living in regional and remote communities.

“Limited financial capacity, poorer literacy and numeracy skills and the current requirement of 120 logbook hours of supervised driving, is resulting in an under-representation of Aboriginal people holding licences.

“Unfortunately, this inequitable access to driver education and training only increases their chance of coming into contact with the criminal justice system and NOT receiving appropriate justice.

“It’s unacceptable that at a time of alarming incarceration rates, 1 in 20 Aboriginal people are in prison for some type of driving offences. We need to act.”

NCOSS CEO Tracy Howe:

“We are deeply concerned about the impact unlicensed driving has on Aboriginal people and their communities.
“At a time when governments around Australia are trying to close the gap between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people, unlicensed driving is a problem that can be fixed by a solution that already exists.

“Driving Change, a program developed by the George Institute for Global Health, has been very effective in helping Aboriginal drive safely and legally. It is run by community-based Aboriginal organisations in various parts of the state.

“The program provides participants with information and advice on how to navigate the licensing system, assistance with completing forms and obtaining essential documentation (e.g. birth certificate) and help with supervised driving.

“Since 2012, when the program started, it has helped some 400 people obtain their licence and it hasn’t cost the government a lot of money at all.

“What we’re worried about is the government not funding Driving Change for the long term and in locations where it’s needed.

“It makes perfect sense to fund it sustainably because every dollar invested means a lot less being spent keeping these people in prison.

“This is what we’ll be recommending when we give evidence today at the Staysafe Inquiry.”

**NSW Law Society President Pauline Wright:**

“The licensing system in NSW effectively excludes marginalised and disadvantaged people including Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, particularly those living in regional and remote areas.

“Poor literacy skills, lack of money and difficulties in obtaining a birth certificate make it difficult for many Indigenous Australians to complete driving tests. This results in a disproportionate number of Indigenous Australians facing incarceration, penalties and fines for driving offences.

“Having a driver license can affect the quality of life for people in regional and remote areas where there may be little or no access to public transport. License sanctions for unauthorised driving and disqualification periods can have a significant impact that is disproportionate to the offence.

“A continuation and expansion of programs including the Driving Change Program, run in partnership with Indigenous community organisations, and the NSW Government’s Driver Licensing Access Program could reduce help to reduce the barriers that prevent Indigenous people from obtaining licenses. There are also opportunities to partner with programs including Literacy for Life to support learning. Such programs can lead to greater employment, education and social inclusion.”

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