



ACT Government

Improving Access to the Justice System in the ACT

Embargoed until 1 May 2001

Canberrans will notice improvements accessing the justice system in the ACT following announcements today in the 2001-02 ACT Budget.

A number of initiatives announced today will improve access to legislation, speed up processes within the courts and offer support through information technology.

One of the key themes of this year's budget – innovation – has an important role to play in the justice system.

As part of the 2001-02 budget \$245,000 has been allocated to improve the way the ACT Law Courts conduct business through an *IT Court Support* initiative.

The initiative is designed to allow for a refocus on information systems and technology within the ACT Law Courts and move towards a more modern and efficient operating environment.

It is also a strategy that embraces the opportunities provided by new technologies to streamline the administration of justice and increase access to justice by the Courts.

These initiatives build on a commitment by the ACT Government to enhance Canberra's reputation as a clever, caring capital, and reflects the governments priority of building a community with a focus on information technology.

Some of the planned initiatives include:

- developing courtroom technology with both audio and video systems in the courtroom;
- electronic presentation of evidence;
- electronic management of case information for exhibits and remote witness recording;
- case management and court management systems that will reduce waiting times and clear backlogs of cases by the court;
- improvement in public access to the law by the enhancement and upgrading of the Court websites, making them more informative, dynamic and user friendly;
- the development of statistical information to meet the demand for more redefined and enhanced statistical data, and
- pilot study of electronic filing of documents and transactions.

Attorney General Bill Stefaniak said that the range of initiatives would result in improved and faster client service and support to the Judiciary, Tribunal members, the legal profession and the ACT Community.

ACT Budget 2001-02

The ***Public Access to Legislation*** project will put the ACT at the forefront of legislative access provision in Australia.

The *Legislation Act 2001*, notified on 5 April 2001, sets up the legislative framework for the Public Access to Legislation project.

The Government has allocated \$319,000 to establish an authorised, electronic statute book, which will be known as the 'ACT legislation register'.

The register will be published on the Internet to provide free public access to authorised versions of ACT legislation and other legislative material. The Act also provides for notification of ACT legislation on the register instead of notification in the Gazette.

Mr Stefaniak said that the project was an important part of the Government's innovation framework.

"No other Australian jurisdiction to date has authorised its legislation in electronic form. This pioneering step will promote the ACT's reputation for technology-based innovation.

"It will also ensure a level of legislative access that is not only free, convenient and comprehensive, but also backed by statutory presumptions to support its authoritative status," he said.

The project is being developed in consultation with the Human Rights Office and will offer people with disabilities a significantly improved level of access to ACT laws.

The emphasis in publishing legislation will change from printed to electronic form. However, legislation will continue to be made available in printed form. On-line access to the register will also be provided in convenient places, for example, the ACT Shopfront and ACT public libraries.

The Government is also committed to improving court services in the ACT. As part of this commitment \$163,000 has been allocated in the budget for the establishment of an ***Appeal Court*** in the Territory.

The Attorney General said that this was an important funding allocation and an appeal court was a necessity in the ACT.

"The ACT is the only jurisdiction in Australia not to control the process of appeals from its Supreme Court. Appeals have been heard in the Federal court since 1992.

"Following extensive consultation with members of the judiciary and other stakeholders, the ACT Government will shortly introduce legislation to establish its own Court of Appeal to hear all appeals from the ACT Supreme Court.

"The bulk of the work of the Federal Court involves taxation, bankruptcy and trade practice matters, whereas the bulk of appeals involve criminal matters and common law personal injury claims.

"The Federal Court hears approximately 40 appeals from the ACT Supreme Court each year and there is a need to ensure that litigants don't experience excessive cost and delay that could lead to injustice," Mr Stefaniak said.

Funding has also been set aside in the budget to further assist the ***ACT Law Reform Commission***.

The Government has allocated \$50,000 to ensure that members of the Commission receive improved financial recognition compensating them for work entailed in research and preparation of reports.

Mr Stefaniak said that these initiatives, when looked at holistically, show an integrated and coordinated approach to modernising the ACT's criminal justice and crime fighting capabilities.

"Upgrading of information technology support and public access to statutes through the internet together with additional resourcing of the Law Reform Commission and the establishment for the first time of an Appeals Court will substantially improve access to the law in the ACT," he said.

Statement ends

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