

**SUBMISSION TO LISMORE CITY COUNCIL'S  
DRAFT SOCIAL AND COMMUNITY PLAN 2004**

*From*

***Coalition of Activist Lesbians Australia -  
Northern NSW Branch of Based in Lismore***

Thank you for accepting this submission. Lismore City Council is to be congratulated on its commitment to the community as exemplified through its Social and Community Plans. Even in the short time since the last LCC Social Plan, the fact that we live in an area of great social diversity is becoming more widely recognised and positively appreciated.

**1. Introduction**

The Coalition of Activist Lesbians Australia (COAL) is a national organisation which has local groups in various regions, states and territories across Australia. COAL is an accredited human rights non-government organisation in consultative status with the Economic and Social Committee of the United Nations. COAL works with other Australian lesbian, women's and gay/lesbian organisations to further the equality rights of lesbian women. This means that while we are not a service organisation, we do monitor services' policy and delivery, and we are committed to advocating for, and supporting lesbians (groups and individuals) in their quest for fair and equitable treatment. We have been involved in federal, state and local government activities as well as with the community and private sectors. Because we are a women's organisation as well as a lesbian organisation we focus our activities both within women's interests and lesbian/ gay/ bisexual/ transgender/ intersex (LGBTI) interests. For the purposes of this submission and as consistent with the COAL mission, we will address issues relevant to the needs and views of lesbian women.

It should always be clear that the diversity of lesbian women is considerable and that stereotypes are often misleading and unreliable. It is also important to be aware that even in research and surveys it is nigh impossible to have a "representative sample" of the lesbian population. This is because many lesbians are invisible and may not wish to be so identified. Therefore any group identified as lesbian will not include those invisible lesbians. It is impossible to be representative of a largely hidden population. Most surveys and research reports really refer to those lesbians who have self-identified and offered to participate.

In and around Lismore COAL has been actively engaged with members of lesbian communities and group activities, as well as with women's and LGBTI activities. There have been seminars, presentations at conferences and events, surveys and qualitative research and representation on various committees and advisory bodies. We have addressed a range of issues including health, violence, domestic violence, police servicing, discrimination, education, youth services, housing, ageing and legal rights.

## **2. Lesbians and Services (government and community)**

In provision of human services it is important that lesbian women are recognised as having many needs similar to other women and yet also having some differences. This also pertains to commonalities and differences between gay man and lesbian women, only here there are more differences than commonalities. The fact of heterosexual bias has been identified for many years and reported in literature. Locally research into lesbian health, conducted as part of an Australia-wide survey, identified that lesbians were often discriminated against or ignored in both medical and “alternative” health care environments (Lavender & Myers: 1997).

Service providers should take the trouble to inform themselves about lesbian needs, both through reference to reliable literature (preferably Australian) and by consulting lesbian groups. Unfortunately often this has not happened locally and information from LGBTI services is taken to be reliably applicable to lesbians when in fact it is not lesbian specific, and/or has been informed by a limited number and range of lesbians. Locally the AIDS Council of NSW (ACON) has been imputed to be the main source of information and community activity for LGBTI persons, which means that lesbians have been “rolled” into this conglomerate personage. Whilst it is acknowledged that ACON has a specific lesbian project with its own particular parameters, this does not mean that that organisation – or any other *one* – is the one-stop shop for all things lesbian. Although community groups are often constrained through limited finances and the absence of funding grants, they are not constrained as are funded non-government services, as to the applicability and range of issues that they can address.

It is suggested that Lismore City Council and other institutions recognise that autonomous lesbian organisations offer particularly valuable and unique information. There is a strong need for local community, women’s and services generally to be both better informed and to work with COAL concerning lesbians as a client group and as community participants. Often it is presumed that because there is a visible lesbian on the staff or management of a service that lesbian needs and interests have been recognised and addressed. Such an expectation should not exist – it is the duty of the organisation as a whole to have policies and strategies addressing the full range of client needs. It is not the responsibility of individual lesbians to ensure appropriate, fair and equitable provision for lesbian women. If in doubt an autonomous lesbian group, such as COAL, should be called on to assist and work in partnership. The example of consultation with and involvement of Indigenous people in services is noted. Social justice principles demand that marginalised people be recognised as client groups, that they are consulted and that responsibility for policy and practices lies with the provider.

## **3. Raising Positive Awareness about Equitable Provision for and Participation of Lesbians**

COAL has a three part training resource designed to improve the quality of life and health of NSW lesbians. It was funded by the NSW Dept for Women with an update funded by AIDS Council of NSW (ACON). It is user friendly and includes fact sheets and activity guides and is applicable to almost any service or organisation (not just health and welfare ones).

- Part 1: Out For Our Lives - For empowering young and newly emerging Lesbians about their "coming out", legal rights, identity, culture and community.
- Part 2: Out For Justice - Targets mainstream service providers and organisations to assist inclusion of Lesbians in their programs and policies in a sensitive and effective manner.

- Part 3: Out For Our Sisters – Designed to resource lesbians wanting to become more involved in positive community development initiatives.

It is suggested that the local COAL representative be contacted to organise training sessions conducted by especially trained facilitators at a cost to be negotiated according to size and type of organisation.

#### **4. Lismore City Council and Lesbians**

It is suggested that COAL be listed in both this Social and Community Plan and the Community Directory as a local lesbian community organisation. In fact COAL has been active in Lismore since 1995 and is the only lesbian specific organisation in the locality. COAL is engaged in local activities as mentioned above and although it may well be that we are overshadowed by more strident or higher profile organisations, none the less inclusion is required. It would be counterproductive for both the Council and the community for a lesbian group which is proudly and publicly lesbian-identified to be made invisible. COAL should be included in both women's and LGBTI lists for Council – and indeed other – purposes.

Finally it was rather a surprise to learn that COAL had not been listed as being part of the previous LCC Gay/Lesbian consultation nor as having made a submission to the last Plan. We were represented there. This year, unfortunately, we were not able to send a member to the LGBTI consultation, but did send apologies – perhaps this should be recorded too. Please contact us for particulars for those listings.

#### ***Coalition of Activist Lesbians Australia***

*North NSW Representative*

Lavender

PO Box 7361 Lismore Heights 2480

Phone - 02 6625 1348 (9am-9pm)

*National Office*

PO Box 424 Thirroul NSW 2515

[jackd@womenshealthcentre.com.au](mailto:jackd@womenshealthcentre.com.au)

[www.coal.org.au](http://www.coal.org.au)

#### **Reference:**

Lavender & Helen Myers, *An Overview of Lesbians and Health Issues*, Paper for Coalition of Activist Lesbians Australia, Launched by the Hon. Dr. Carmen Lawrence MP, at 5th Women and Labour Conference, Geelong, December 1997.