

Media Release



Legal Aid cuts spark serious concerns for community legal centres

Tuesday 18 December 2012 – for immediate release

A Victoria Legal Aid briefing yesterday sparked concerns that financial constraints on the State funding body are set to have serious flow-on impacts for Victoria's fifty community legal centres.

An audience of community lawyers – including some attending via video link from regional Victoria – heard that new funding principles would be broadly applied to all State community legal centres in new agreements to be negotiated following a national legal assistance review now underway.

'These proposals start from a premise that little new State funding will be injected into a strapped community legal sector already struggling to cope with demand, and set to face additional demand due to cuts within Legal Aid itself,' said Claudia Fatone, acting executive officer of the Federation of Community Legal Centres, today.

Community legal centres are currently funded by the Commonwealth and State governments, with the new principles set to apply to the State component only.

Accepting the principles as a reasonable guide for negotiating funding increases, Ms Fatone said they were not appropriate for considering reallocation of existing funding of CLCs given chronic under-resourcing and steep increases in demand for help from community legal centres – especially in the area of family violence, where services provided had increased 70 per cent over the past five years.

'Multiple studies and reports demonstrate the cost-benefit of community legal centres, the nearly half-a-million people turned away each year from legal help nationally, and the shortfall in legal assistance across a range of areas of law and in specific geographic locations.

'The solution isn't to try to wring further efficiencies from the system, but to fund it properly based on an objective assessment of legal needs,' Ms Fatone said.

The briefing also sparked concern that smaller centres across the State could face significant pressure to amalgamate for reasons other than community need.

'There are already examples of centres amalgamating successfully, but these have been led by centres themselves responding to community need. There are also highly successful examples of small centres deciding against amalgamation and continuing to offer their specialist services to the community,' Ms Fatone said.

Victoria Legal Aid acknowledged yesterday that a key driver of the changes was to save money, as well as to direct resources to areas of greatest need where intervention could have the greatest impact.

'We have no problem with directing resources in that way, but on the evidence we have, it should mean a big funding increase. Seeking to extract savings from a badly under-resourced system is

likely to frustrate that aim and seriously risk undermining access to justice for Victorians,' Ms Fatone said.

She acknowledged that the funding for community legal centres was a Commonwealth and State issue, and that the State share of funding had increased relative to the Commonwealth in recent years, but the State was driving increased demand without a proportional increase in funding for legal assistance.

'The funding imbalance doesn't change the fact that many of the factors leading to increased pressure on Victorian community legal centres – especially law-and-order measures – have been driven by the Victorian State Government,' Ms Fatone said.

Victoria Legal Aid stated at the briefing that it would be important for community legal centres to have a say in the outcome of new funding arrangements, but they were unable to present a consultation plan at the briefing on how this would be achieved.

The issues facing Victorian community legal centres are shared by centres nationally, with the Federation a key participant in the national access to justice Community Law Australia campaign.

Media contacts

Claudia Fatone
Acting Executive Officer
Federation of Community Legal Centres
0403 234 156

Michael Smith
Chair
Community Law Australia
0421 437 883

Darren Lewin-Hill
Communications Manager
Federation of Community Legal Centres
0488 773 535

Links

73 per cent of legal services unable to meet demand: system at crisis point

<http://www.communitylawaustralia.org.au/73-per-cent-of-legal-services-unable-to-meet-demand-system-at-crisis-point/>

Economic Cost Benefit Analysis of Community Legal centres

<http://www.communitylawaustralia.org.au/economic-benefit-clcs/>

Legal Australia-Wide Survey: Legal Need in Australia

<http://www.lawfoundation.net.au/ljf/app/6DDF12F188975AC9CA257A910006089D.html>

Justice for All

<https://www.tai.org.au/index.php?q=node%2F19&pubid=973&act=display>