

Media Release



Community legal centres meet over VLA defunding of vital mental health legal service

Wednesday 13 February 2013 – for immediate release

The Federation of Community Legal Centres will today meet with the state's community legal centres to urgently consider a response to Victoria Legal Aid's (VLA) defunding of the Mental Health Legal Centre (MHLC).

The VLA decision was announced last Thursday, and in a letter to the Federation last night, VLA indicated it will not reconsider the decision, on which the Federation has called for an immediate reversal.

VLA will instead redirect the MHLC funding to its own mental health and disability advocacy program.

"The Federation holds serious doubts VLA can deliver services of the same quality, with the same degree of consumer focus and community trust as the MHLC, an independent community legal centre providing representation, advice and advocacy for people living with a mental illness in Victoria," said Federation Acting Executive Officer, Claudia Fatone, today.

In defending its decision, VLA cited "governance, administrative and financial problems that MHLC has experienced in recent years", but has not notified MHLC of any breach of its current funding agreement, or any concerns with its current governance arrangements.

"The VLA decision followed the first meeting of the MHLC's new Board (December 2012), in the appointment of which VLA itself played a significant role. Yet, in its own December Board meeting held just days later, VLA defunded the service.

"We have serious concerns about the objectivity of VLA's decision given that it is the funder, it has reconsidered the funding, and has now redirected the funding to itself," Ms Fatone said.

"The MHLC has a proven track record of building a strong volunteer contribution and a substantial network of pro bono lawyers, who are trained by the MHLC in the particular skills needed to successfully represent people living with a mental illness. The defunding of the MHLC also places at risk the capacity of people to choose who represents them, and would severely limit choice for people seeking mental health legal services.

"The decision makes little sense given the growing need for advice and representation that will flow from the State Government's mental health reform agenda," Ms Fatone said.

"We are further concerned VLA may encounter conflicts that prevent it representing people on mental health matters where they also represent related parties on matters such as family law and child protection – a matter left unaddressed in their response," Ms Fatone said.

"More broadly, this decision undermines community legal centres, when national research commissioned last year shows that community legal centres offer a return of \$18 for every dollar invested in the quality, free legal help they provide.

“People living with mental illness will be worse off for this decision if it is not reversed as a matter of urgency,” she said.

Available for interview from 1.30pm

Claudia Fatone, Acting Executive Officer, Federation of Community Legal Centres
Nick Hudson, Chair, Federation of Community Legal Centres

From 2.15pm (visuals only)

Members meeting of the Federation of Community Legal Centres
Kulin Room, Level 10, 225 Bourke Street, Melbourne

Media are encouraged to notify their attendance to Darren Lewin-Hill, Communications Manager, on 0488 773 535.

Media contacts

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Further background

http://www.fclc.org.au/cb_pages/news/victoria-legal-aid-cuts-vital-mental-health-legal-service.php