

Media Release



Federation of
Community Legal Centres
VICTORIA

Criticism of legal action by community legal centres is misguided and undermines access to justice

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Recent reports and editorials in the *Herald Sun* voicing strong criticism of legal action taken by community legal centres are misguided and undermine access to justice, according to State community legal peak, the Federation of Community Legal Centres.

“Community legal centres have a vital role to play ensuring legal help and access to justice for people who cannot afford private lawyers and would otherwise have no legal redress for the often serious issues impacting them. Community legal centres help hundreds of people daily with legal problems to do with housing, family violence, employment and family law. Sometimes people need legal help to protect their rights against particular action by government and public authorities,” said Federation Executive Officer, Liana Buchanan, today.

“Unless we are saying that governments and public authorities never impact people’s rights and lives, there is a legitimate role for community legal centres to ensure those rights are protected, including where that involves efficient use of public funding supported by the valued contributions of volunteers and pro bono legal counsel.”

The *Herald Sun* has been highly critical of legal action by Fitzroy Legal Service to facilitate access to pro bono lawyers for local residents impacted by the East West Link project. The legal service has also been criticised – together with the Human Rights Law Centre – for their role in co-ordinating legal support for a constitutional case in relation to local laws used against Occupy Melbourne.

“There are legitimate questions to be answered in both those cases, and it is appropriate for Fitzroy Legal Service and the Human Rights Law Centre to facilitate access to legal support to their clients to enable these matters to be resolved in the courts,” Ms Buchanan said.

She said that all community legal centres were intent on the efficient use of resources to help as many people as possible, and to make sure resources were targeted to assist those most in need. Community legal centres also connected community members with private firms and barristers prepared to resource public interest litigation, as has happened in both these cases.

“There are many examples we can think of where government funding is appropriately used to hold government and public authorities to account, including the Victorian Ombudsman and the Independent Broad-based Anti-Corruption Commission (IBAC),” Ms Buchanan concluded.

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