



Federation of
Community Legal Centres
VICTORIA

Senator the Hon. George Brandis QC
Attorney-General
PO Box 6100
Senate
Parliament House
Canberra ACT 2600

By email: senator.brandis@aph.gov.au

19 May 2014

Dear Attorney-General

Re: Funding cuts and restrictions on systemic work by community legal centres

I write on behalf of the Federation of Community Legal Centres (Vic) Inc (the Federation) following several decisions impacting community legal centres and their clients that have been communicated to us in the past week.

The Federation is the peak body for Victorian community legal centres. Victoria has a strong and effective community legal sector comprising 51 centres located across the state. Victoria's community legal centres assist over 60,000 people each year, providing around 50,000 instances of advice, a similar number of instances of legal information and taking on the cases of around 23,500 Victorians.

As you are aware, some 14 centres learned last week that they will lose two years of funding provided in 2013 to enable them to open or expand urgently needed legal services. With this funding, some centres have been able to open outreach offices or new centres to meet legal needs in areas where there was previously no access to free legal help. Others have been able to increase their services and thereby reduce the numbers of people turned away weekly, while others have been able to employ new methods of delivering services to make sure that the most vulnerable members of the community have some access to legal assistance. Removal of funding for these services from July 2015 will mean the end of these frontline services to Australians in need.

We further learned from the Budget Papers that another \$6 million in funding cuts appears planned for community legal centres in 2017/18. Given community legal centres already cannot meet demand and conservative estimates are that half a million Australians annually cannot access the legal help they need, these cuts will have a devastating effect on access to justice for disadvantaged Australians.

Finally, your Department advised us last week that amendments will be included in the Community Legal Services Program service agreement for 2014/15 to restrict community legal centres from using Commonwealth funds to conduct law reform and policy work. We are extremely disappointed by this news, as the proposed restrictions will prevent centres from engaging in work that is effective, efficient and

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of significant benefit to the community.

Through their contact with thousands of people each week, community legal centres are uniquely placed to identify policies, practices and laws that could be improved or that impact unfairly on members of the community, particularly those experiencing disadvantage. Not only is systemic work to change these laws or practices often the most efficient use of scarce resources, much of the law reform or policy work conducted by community legal centres is done at the request of government. Preventing centres from engaging in systemic work, for example to strengthen laws or address unfair practices by traders or business, will close off a valued source of advice to government, will leave many flawed practices and policies unaddressed and result in poorer public policy.

Victoria's community legal centres are deeply concerned about the impact of these various decisions on their clients and will meet to discuss the ramifications at a meeting in Melbourne on Wednesday 21 May 2014. We extend an invitation to you or your representative to attend this meeting to discuss the various planned restrictions on the work of community legal centres in the context of your stated commitment to access to justice as a basic human right. In the event you are unable to attend at this time, we would be please to arrange another meeting at your convenience.

We look forward to hearing from you.

Yours sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Nicholas A. V. Hudson". The signature is fluid and cursive, with a long horizontal stroke at the end.

Nick Hudson

Chair

Federation of Community Legal Centres (Vic) Inc