

Media Release



Federation of
Community Legal Centres
VICTORIA

Cuts reversal welcome relief, but future funding boost to legal services needed to fully protect the vulnerable

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The reversal of deep cuts to legal assistance services announced today by Federal Attorney-General George Brandis has been welcomed by the Federation of Community Legal Centres, but the Victorian community legal peak has warned that a future funding boost is required to fully protect the most vulnerable.

'We welcome the reversal of cuts that were already impacting 13 community legal centres in Victoria and 60 nationally, and the recognition from Government that centres play a vital role. There remains that the Productivity Commission has recommended a funding boost of \$200 million to legal assistance services that were already chronically underfunded before these cuts,' said Liana Buchanan, Executive Officer of the Federation, today.

'The cuts had meant that many community legal centres were already losing lawyers and winding back services, including for women facing family violence in regional areas. Today's announcement will halt that damage, but we need to ensure not just that we prevent further damage to a system in crisis, but that the system is properly funded to ensure that vulnerable people are not turned away from free legal help.

'The \$200 million funding boost recommended by the Productivity Commission and supported by the interim recommendations of the Senate inquiry into domestic violence in Australia is less than one third of the \$688 million the Federal Government spent on legal assistance for itself in 2013-14 alone,' Ms Buchanan said.

The announcement follows widespread concern that Federal Government cuts directly impacted frontline services, despite repeated claims by the Government that frontline services would not be affected.

'We know every centre that was hit by the cuts and there isn't one where frontline services and vulnerable people were not directly impacted. We are glad the Government has now recognised this through today's announcement. What we need now is an evidence-based approach that matches funding for legal assistance with legal need,' Ms Buchanan said.

She said she was disappointed that the announcement reaffirmed advocacy restrictions on community legal centres introduced by the Attorney-General in July last year.

'The Attorney-General claims that his priority is "cases over causes", but we know that advocacy is a vital task for community legal centres in preventing legal problems that would otherwise increase the number of cases that walk into our centres every day, and this has been clearly acknowledged by the Productivity Commission,' Ms Buchanan concluded.

The Federation supported calls by the National Association of Community Legal Centres for a more realistic timeframe to consult with the community legal sector on broader reforms to legal assistance services and the allocation of funding.

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