

Media Release



Budget sees modest but welcome investment in free legal help for disadvantaged Victorians

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The Victorian State Budget includes modest but welcome investment in free legal help for disadvantaged Victorians, according to State community legal peak, the Federation of Community Legal Centres.

'We're pleased to see \$2m over two years to support the vital services provided by community legal centres through a CLC Assistance Fund, as well as further investment to meet some of the urgent demand pressures faced by family violence duty lawyers in Magistrates' Courts and provide other family violence legal help,' Ms Buchanan said.

She acknowledged funding to tackle family violence through an \$81.3m package to support the royal commission and help women and children at risk of family violence pending its outcomes. The expansion of Family Violence Court Divisions, re-establishment of the Family Violence Death Review in the Coroner's Court and the safety audit of Magistrates' Courts are all important steps towards improving justice responses to violence.

'Taken together, investment in access to justice and family violence support services will go some way to making Victorian women safer as we seek lasting solutions and identify further necessary investment through the royal commission,' Ms Buchanan said.

Funding to save JobWatch (\$371,000) – a specialist community legal centre providing free legal advice on employment law – was also welcome and would allow the centre to continue work that was due to cease following the expiration of funding, she said. Research conducted by the Federation last year confirmed there is a significant gap between the number of vulnerable Victorians who need help with employment law issues and the level of assistance available.

Funding for Fitzroy Legal Service to continue free provision of the *Law Handbook Online* (\$200,000) would make a strong contribution to the continuing availability of free and authoritative legal information for Victorians.

'The Productivity Commission has confirmed there is a significant need for additional legal assistance funding at both State and Federal level, and in December last year recommended that governments invest an additional \$200 million into legal assistance nationally. It is reassuring to see an acknowledgment in this budget that additional investment is needed, not cuts and austerity that undermine free legal help for disadvantaged Victorians. We look forward to further investment following the Government's planned access to justice review,' Ms Buchanan said.

In Victoria, 82 per cent of clients seen by community legal centres earn less than \$26,000, with centres helping more than 100,000 people every year. One in three new cases opened by Victorian community legal centres is a family violence case.

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