

# Media Release



## **Deferred Budget cuts offer only short term relief for Victorians in need of free legal help**

**Tuesday 12 May 2015 – for immediate release**

Despite the reversal of community legal centre cuts planned for Victoria in the next two years, the 2015 Federal Budget has failed to ensure that funding for legal assistance keeps pace with the growing need for free legal help among disadvantaged Victorians, according to State community legal peak, the Federation of Community Legal Centres.

‘The Government’s decision not to proceed with Victorian cuts from 1 July 2015 is welcome but offers limited relief to a sector struggling to meet demand,’ said Federation executive officer, Liana Buchanan, today.

‘Funding under this Budget will still leave many vulnerable people unable to get free legal assistance from community legal centres. That means women and children missing out on protection from family violence, disadvantaged people going unassisted with family law, homelessness and tenancy problems, credit and debt issues, fines, and workplace mistreatment.’

Nationally, figures in the Portfolio Budget Statement for the Federal Attorney-General’s Department make a direct comparison of national community legal centre funding with last year’s Budget impossible.

‘The figures contained in the Portfolio Budget Statement are a further step in reducing the transparency of national community legal centre funding. However, it is clear that total legal assistance funding declines in 2017–18,’ Buchanan said.

State-level information provided to the Federation independently of the Budget shows that Victorian community legal centre funding will be maintained for the next two years but is set to receive significant Federal cuts in 2017–18. Between 2016–17 and 2017–18 this is expected to result in a cut of 26 per cent (\$10.52m to \$7.79m).

‘This Budget shows that legal assistance funding remains in the crisis flagged to Attorney-General George Brandis by State and Territory Attorneys-General back in March and highlighted by the Productivity Commission in December,’ Buchanan said.

‘Simply deferring cuts to community legal centres that are already chronically underfunded is not the solution to growing unmet legal need, and it flies in the face of the Productivity Commission’s 2014 recommendation to boost funding for free legal assistance by \$200 million a year.

‘The Federal Government has appealed to findings of the Productivity Commission to justify some of its Budget measures, but has listened selectively, accepting some evidence but rejecting evidence in areas it has chosen not to fund.

‘We agree with the Productivity Commission that not funding free legal assistance is a false economy that risks shifting costs to health care, housing, child protection and other community services,’ Buchanan said.

'The bottom line is that any cuts will have a devastating impact on frontline legal services vital to the well-being of disadvantaged Victorians,' Buchanan concluded.

**For media interview and inquiries**

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