

Media Release



New restrictions on who can be helped will worsen the impact of deep cuts to community legal centres

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The impact of deep Federal Budget cuts to free legal assistance will be increased by proposed new restrictions on who community legal centres can help under a new funding agreement, according to the Federation of Community Legal Centres, the State peak for 50 community legal centres in Victoria.

Under the proposed changes being fast-tracked by the Federal Government, it is no longer sufficient to be financially disadvantaged or to fall within a priority group to obtain free legal help; those who receive free legal help from community legal centres must be experiencing financial disadvantage *and* fall within a named priority group.

'In Victoria this year, 39 per cent of new cases opened by community legal centres relate to family violence. Yet women seeking help with family violence – whether they need an intervention order, want to stop financial control by a perpetrator or pursue victims of crime compensation – will be among those excluded from help by these new restrictions,' said Liana Buchanan, executive officer of the Federation, today.

'The new arrangements would also exclude people living in poverty who are, for example, facing credit and debt problems but who do not fit within another category of 'priority client'.

'These are just a few examples of the impacts that will emerge from this attempt by the Federal Government to restrict and narrow what counts as legal need,' Buchanan said.

'Community legal centres already target their services at the disadvantaged, with 82 per cent of the more than 100,000 people helped in Victoria every year earning less than \$26,000. The Federal Government cannot rationalise deep cuts to legal help through a wilful blindness to legal need,' Buchanan said.

Despite a Productivity Commission recommendation to boost free legal assistance funding by \$200 million a year, the Federal Budget exposed plans to cut national community legal centre funding to just \$30.1 million in 2017–18 – a cut of 28.7 per cent in a single year.

'In a single year, the Federal Government spends around \$700 million on legal assistance for itself – around 23 times the amount it plans to spend in 2017–18 on free legal help for vulnerable people through community legal centres.

'Budget analysis from ACOSS and NATSEM is providing compelling evidence that this Budget is unfair – particularly for disadvantaged and vulnerable people. Funding cuts for free legal help are saying to people who cannot afford a private lawyer for a serious legal problem that they're on their own,' Buchanan concluded.

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