

Media Release



Legal services agreement signed amid serious ongoing concerns for community legal clients

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A new National Partnership Agreement on Legal Assistance Services between state, territory and federal governments has been signed amid serious ongoing concerns over a failure to fully fund the justice gap, the impact of a significant national funding cut in 2017–18, and restrictions on advocacy campaigns by community legal centres on policy and law reform issues.

‘States and Territories have had little choice in signing this agreement, because it affected services delivered from 1 July. Despite its unfair conditions, not signing would have immediately affected thousands of vulnerable people,’ said Liana Buchanan, executive officer of the Federation of Community Legal Centres, today.

‘The fact is, however, that this agreement is a betrayal of disadvantaged people, including women facing family violence, and it is clear from our discussions and correspondence with the Victorian Government that they share our concerns – concerns about a crisis in legal assistance that has been the subject of two joint letters from State and Territory Attorneys-General to Federal Attorney-General George Brandis in March and again in May this year,’ Ms Buchanan said.

Announcing the new agreement, a media release from the Federal Attorney-General fails to acknowledge the funding shortfall, the significant national cuts, and the impact on people who will be harmed rather than helped by its terms.

‘When the Federal Government says legal assistance services will get \$1.3 billion over five years, it is talking about the total funding of different services that meet distinct needs. Community legal centres get just a fraction of that. In 2017–18, centres nationally will receive just \$30.1 million (down 30% from \$42.2m) – in a year when the Federal Government will spend around \$700 million on lawyers for itself,’ Ms Buchanan said.

‘A fairer agreement would acknowledge the extent of unmet legal need, would listen to the Productivity Commission on the need for a \$200 million legal assistance funding boost, and would not seek to silence community legal centres speaking in public about problems in the system that governments need to hear.

‘Instead of supporting legal assistance services to help vulnerable people, including women and children escaping family violence and people at risk of homelessness, debt, workplace mistreatment and discrimination, this agreement enacts a triple-threat of cuts, restrictions on who legal centres may assist, and silencing of community legal centres,’ Ms Buchanan concluded.

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