

Media Release



Shine a light on ‘patchwork’ family violence legal system, community legal peak tells royal commission

Tuesday 4 August 2015 – embargoed until 12.00am Wednesday 5 August 2015

Victoria’s family violence legal system offers a ‘patchwork response’ that is sometimes dangerously threadbare through poorly funded legal help, inconsistent specialisation and insufficient risk management, the Royal Commission into Family Violence will hear this Wednesday (5 August) in evidence to be presented by the Federation of Community Legal Centres.

‘On the whole, the current family violence legal response is a patchwork quilt across the state that is severely threadbare in many places,’ said Dr Chris Atmore, Senior Policy Adviser with the Federation.

‘Depending on where and who they are, victims of family violence may not get free legal help from a community legal centre, they may not have the benefit of a specialist family violence magistrate and court staff, and there may be dangerous gaps in ensuring victims’ safety, including a failure to hold perpetrators to account in any ongoing, meaningful way.’

Dr Atmore said that it was up to all workers at court to work together more effectively to ‘shine a light’ on what is working well and where the system can do better.

‘We’ve got some great pockets of best practice but we also need to admit to where we are letting victims down and, with leadership support, collaborate to do better and expand those pockets,’ she said.

Community legal centres currently offer 19 family violence duty lawyer assistance programs at 29 Magistrates’ Courts, but centres are struggling to meet demand in the face of an 85 per cent increase in the family violence cases they have opened between 2008–9 and 2013–14.

‘Centres just aren’t funded to help early enough, to cover every court, or to provide continuity of free legal help both through the court process leading to the granting of intervention orders, and with broader legal problems related to family violence,’ Dr Atmore said.

She said recent cuts under the Federal Budget had exacerbated the problem, and were contrary to recommendations of a recent Productivity Commission report that recommended a significant funding boost for legal assistance services nationally.

‘In many cases, women need free legal help to navigate the system, and it’s important that help is independent, community-based and understands the needs of victims. Community legal centres are often the preferred choice, but at current levels of demand, we’re just not funded to help every woman,’ Dr Atmore said.

In her statement to the commission, Dr Atmore will argue that funding of at least an additional \$1.8 million is needed to fill gaps in family violence duty lawyer services at court, with more than \$5 million needed to meet associated legal need in areas such as family law, child protection and tenancy.

As well as presenting at Wednesday’s public hearing, Dr Atmore is the author of a Federation submission that has made [63 recommendations](#) to the royal commission.

Dr Chris Atmore will present at the Royal Commission into Family Violence on Wednesday 5 August, at Level 11, 222 Exhibition Street, Melbourne. Further details are available at the royal commission [website](#).

[Download the Federation's submission to the royal commission](#) (PDF).

Media contacts

Dr Chris Atmore
Senior Policy Adviser
Federation of Community Legal Centres
0425 796 434

Darren Lewin-Hill
Communications Manager
Federation of Community Legal Centres
0488 773 535