



Community legal centres gather for national conference as new figures reveal severe impact of Federal Government cuts in Victoria

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As community legal centres from around Australia converge on Melbourne for their national conference this week, the full impact of Federal Government cuts has been revealed by new figures showing the projected funding for Victorian centres through to 2019–20.

Faced with a statewide cut of nearly 30 per cent in 2017–18, the figures show individual Victorian centres face cuts of as much 70 per cent, with eight centres facing cuts of more than 50 per cent.

‘Offering free legal help to women facing family violence is a core part of the work for many of the ten centres facing the deepest cuts,’ said Liana Buchanan, executive officer of the Federation of Community Legal Centres, today.

‘The Federal Government should be opening more doors to community legal help, but through its funding cuts it is closing them, creating dangerous barriers for women seeking intervention orders, and denying them the legal help they urgently need to stay safe,’ Buchanan said.

The Wyndham branch of Western Community Legal Centre is facing a cut of more than 56 per cent, and is threatened with the loss of two lawyers in an area where the population is booming and family violence is a key issue for its vulnerable clients.

‘The population growth in this area has been recognised by plans to create a new justice precinct within the next five years so people can access courts locally, but when related services such as community legal help should be doubling or even trebling, these cuts will deal them a devastating blow. The Federal Government is cutting people off from the legal help they need, including women facing family violence, new arrivals to Australia, and young people,’ said Denis Nelthorpe, chief executive officer of Western Community Legal Centre, today.

In a catchment covering 100,000 square kilometres, 10 local government areas, and with sparse legal services to address a high incidence of family violence, Murray Mallee Community Legal Service is facing a cut of more than 30 per cent.

‘These cuts will mean we won’t be able to help women in family violence courts in Mildura, Swan Hill, Kerang and Robinvale, or provide outreach services to remote areas. The Federal Government is leaving the victims of family violence isolated and without help. We are appalled at the future picture for family violence victims in the Murray Mallee,’ said Lisa-Maree Stevens, Director of Community Services with Mallee Family Care, today.

Liana Buchanan said that the cuts to community legal centres contradicted the evidence of the Productivity Commission, which had recommended a \$200 million annual boost to free legal assistance services.

'While legal assistance overall remains chronically underfunded around Australia, community legal help receives only a fraction this inadequate amount, despite its distinct and vital role in helping disadvantaged Australians.

'In 2017–18, community legal centres nationally will receive just \$30.1 million. In 2014–15 Federal MPs spent \$32 million on electoral office refurbishments, and in a typical year the Federal Government spends nearly \$700 million on lawyers for its own purposes.

'Where are the Federal Government's priorities when so many women are dying, and so many are at risk of preventable injury and death?' Buchanan concluded.

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