

Media Release



Federation of
Community Legal Centres
VICTORIA

Community lawyers head to Canberra seeking urgent action on legal assistance crisis

Tuesday 15 March 2016 – for immediate release

The Victorian Federation of Community Legal Centres is joining other community legal peaks today (Tuesday 15/3) to brief Federal MPs and call on the Federal Government to take urgent action in the Budget to reverse deep cuts and boost funding for free legal help.

The call comes as thousands of people who cannot afford a private lawyer are denied free help for common but serious legal problems.

'Anyone can suffer legal problems - as we are seeing with thousands of women seeking protection from family violence through the courts - but, through cuts and underfunding, the Federal Government is leaving many at risk because they can't afford a lawyer, do not qualify for legal aid, or legal aid does not cover their legal problem. If a community legal centre can't help, they have nowhere else to go,' said Katie Fraser, manager of sector strategy for the Federation of Community Legal Centres, today.

Already chronically underfunded, centres face a 30 per cent national cut of \$12 million in 2017 (down to \$30.1m), with funding cut to similar levels for the life of a national agreement extending until 2019-20. In Victoria, this means some centres will face a federal funding cut of up to 70 per cent.

'Today we are talking to MPs about the devastating impact this will have on people in their electorates. Instead of fair funding to meet clear and growing legal need, the Federal Government is cutting community legal centres when they are already forced to turn away more than 150,000 people a year,' Fraser said.

The underfunding has been acknowledged by the Productivity Commission in a September 2014 report recommending an urgent \$200 million yearly boost across combined legal assistance services, including a \$120 million contribution from the Federal Government.

The government is yet to respond to the report, but in February Attorney-General George Brandis told the Senate there would be a response in this term of government.

'With an early election looming, time is running out. The Budget needs to reflect a significant increase for free legal assistance.

'There is money available if the Federal Government chooses to prioritise people in need, with ACOSS already presenting a range of savings measures.

'A further step open to the Federal Government is to look closely at its own spending on legal advice and representation, which is currently more than double its combined spending across all free legal assistance services for vulnerable people,' Fraser said.

In 2014-15, the government spent around \$728 million on its own lawyers – an increase of \$39.53 million on the previous year, and close to a year's national funding for all community legal centres in Australia. Savings made in the government's own legal spending could make a very significant contribution to boosting those frontline services.

'We need to know where the government stands. We need to be clear on these vital issues in the Budget and before the Federal election. Is the Federal Government committed to funding equal justice or not?' Fraser concluded.

Tuesday's briefing is part of the national Community Law Australia campaign by the National Association of Community Legal Centres, supported by state and territory community legal peaks.

The Federation supports national recommendations for community legal centre funding set out in a Federal Budget submission by the National Association of Community Legal Centres.

For media interview and information

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