

Media Release



Federal cuts threaten response to family violence following royal commission, community lawyers warn

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The potential for progress on tackling family violence following tomorrow's report of the Royal Commission into Family Violence will be threatened by Federal Government cuts to services critical to the family violence response, community lawyers have warned today.

'This royal commission could mark an historic moment of change in the fight against family violence, but the Federal Government needs to redress chronic cuts and underfunding to services, including a 30 per cent national cut to free legal help through community legal centres, locked in for July 2017,' said Dr Chris Atmore, senior policy adviser with the Federation of Community Legal Centres, today.

'If the Federal Government is committed to stopping family violence – and its commitment to a national intervention order scheme suggests it is – it would not be cutting funding to community lawyers who help women secure intervention orders and negotiate the difficult legal issues surrounding family violence, such as custody of children and financial abuse.'

Dr Atmore said little had changed since State and Territory Attorneys-General had written to Federal Attorney-General George Brandis in March and May last year urging action on the legal assistance crisis, and the failure of the Federal Government to heed a 2014 Productivity Commission report finding that combined legal assistance services are underfunded by at least \$200 million a year.

'Last September we had \$100 million announced for the Women's Safety Package, but if we break that package down, we see, for example, that the \$15 million it provided for family violence legal help nationally is completely erased by much bigger cuts commencing next year,' Dr Atmore said.

'Family violence is a significant part of our caseloads – for example, in Victoria, 40 per cent of new cases. Community legal centres around the country are already being forced to turn away at least 160,000 people every year, and this will only get worse once the cuts take effect.

'The Royal Commission heard from many witnesses how important it is that women and children are provided with more of a holistic and seamless service. To provide this genuine access to justice for all family violence victims, we need Federal Government accountability on funding,' Dr Atmore said.

She said that with COAG meeting this week and the Federal Budget imminent, there was a significant opportunity for the Federal Government to do its share to help realise the full potential of Victoria's historic royal commission.

'Will the Federal Government do everything it can to help keep women and children safe from family violence, or will it leave in place the funding barriers it has placed between them and safety?' Dr Atmore concluded.

Combined legal assistance spending over a five-year period currently stands at \$1.6 billion, including community legal centres, legal aid, and Aboriginal legal services. In 2017, community legal centres

nationally will receive just \$30.1 million. In contrast, in 2014-15 (latest available figures) the Federal Government spent \$728 million on its own legal advice and representation.

For media interview and information

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