

# Media Release



## **Community lawyers challenge Federal Government's commitment to ending family violence as Budget fears mount**

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Community lawyers are challenging the Federal Government's commitment to ending family violence as fears mount that the 2016 Budget will fail to reverse cuts to community legal centres that form the backbone of its proposed national intervention order scheme.

The national scheme being developed through COAG will mean that women obtaining an intervention order in one State or Territory will be protected by that order anywhere in Australia.

'We need to be clear that we are not talking about legal aid here, which primarily helps respondents (perpetrators); we are talking about community legal centres helping women and children seriously at risk of abuse, injury and death,' said Dr Chris Atmore, senior policy adviser with the Federation of Community Legal Centres, today.

'The Federal Government's rhetoric on family violence is contradicted by the reality that it continues to lock in a 30 per cent national cut to community legal centres for whom a major and growing focus is helping women secure intervention orders through the courts. The Federal Government cut risks seriously undermining an otherwise sensible commitment to a national scheme.'

Dr Atmore said the recent report of Victoria's Royal Commission into Family Violence gave further impetus and direction for an effective national family violence response, and had clear implications for Federal funding of community legal centres in the May Budget.

In July 2017, national community legal centre funding will drop from \$42.1m to just \$30.1m, far less than the 2014-15 increase in Federal Government spending on its own lawyers, which climbed by \$39.53m to \$728m on the Federal Government's own figures.

The Federal Government has still not responded to a September 2014 Productivity Commission report which recommended boosting funding for combined legal assistance services by \$200 million a year. That recommendation is publicly supported by all State and Territory Attorneys General, who wrote to the Federal Attorney-General twice last year about the crisis in legal assistance funding.

'On the one hand, by not increasing our funding, and instead drastically reducing it, the Federal Government is sending Australians the message that it's not "living within our means" to properly fund free legal help, despite clear evidence of need identified by the Productivity Commission. On the other hand, it's acceptable to spend more than \$700m a year on lawyers to protect its own legal interests.

'Community legal centres are at the core of an effective family violence response, and they are often the victim's first contact with the system. Community legal centres must be properly funded for this vital work.

'We say to the Prime Minister, the Treasurer and the Attorney-General that their priorities will see women and children suffering severe harm and death.

'Frontline workers fighting to end family violence – including the community lawyers who help women get intervention orders – and indeed all of us in the community concerned about family violence, are entitled to fully expect the Prime Minister's "fiscal envelope" to include funding for the protection of women and children,' Dr Atmore said.

She said last September's funding through the Prime Minister's Women's Safety Package would be dwarfed by the 2017 cuts.

'If the Federal Government denies women free help from a community lawyer, it is likely that many victims will not get the tailored, enforceable intervention order that they need to protect themselves and their children.

'Through these cuts, the Federal Government is letting family violence perpetrators off the hook. Victims will be less likely to access lawyers to help them deal with all of the fallout from the violence in order to move on with the rest of their lives,' Dr Atmore said.

She said the Federal Budget needed to reverse the 2017 cuts, boost community legal centre funding in line with the Productivity Commission's recommendations, and set a clear future path towards funding legal help to keep pace with legal need.

'The Federal Government knows what is required. The National Association of Community Legal Centres has made that very clear in a Federal Budget submission supported by all State and Territory community legal peaks, including the Federation.

'We also need the Federal Opposition, the Australian Greens and indeed all parties and independents to clearly state where they stand on what we know is needed to better protect women and children across Australia,' Dr Atmore concluded.

**For media interview and information**

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