

Media Release



Vic Govt boosts free legal help, but should do more

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Today's State Budget has included a modest one-year boost of \$2.5 million to help community legal centres tackling family violence, and one-year \$400,000 funding for specialist community legal centre JobWatch, but more sustained investment is needed, according to the Federation of Community Legal Centres, the peak body for 50 community legal centres in Victoria.

'The Victorian Government can do more to support vulnerable people who turn to community legal centres because they can't get free legal help from legal aid and can't afford a private lawyer,' said Katie Fraser, acting executive officer of the Federation, today.

'With the State set for a surplus of \$2.9 billion in 2016-17, there's a strong case for increased and ongoing funding that is small in the context of the overall budget, but would make a big difference to vulnerable people who need free legal help.

'At least an additional \$4 million is needed for community legal centres to support the legal response to family violence alone, but Victoria also needs to contribute its fair share of a national funding shortfall identified in the Productivity Commission's 2014 report on legal assistance services. On that measure, the State Government is falling well short,' Ms Fraser said.

The Productivity Commission recommended States and Territories contribute \$80 million of a proposed national \$200 million annual boost to combined free legal assistance services, with the balance of \$120 million to be contributed by the Federal Government.

'Even that funding would need to stretch a long way to cover not just community legal centres, but Aboriginal legal services, family violence prevention and legal services, and legal aid, which are all distinct types of free legal assistance serving specific needs,' Ms Fraser said.

Ms Fraser said that while a 30 per cent Federal cut set for July next year posed the biggest threat to community legal centres, disputes over the fair division of State and Federal funding were not helping vulnerable people – particularly, women facing family violence.

'The State Government needs to recognise community legal centres are at the heart of the legal response to family violence, and to fund them consistently with the strong leadership it has shown through the Royal Commission into Family Violence and its broader family violence funding commitments,' Ms Fraser said.

Family violence legal help has seen a big increase in the work of community legal centres in Victoria, with 40 per cent of new cases each year relating to family violence and 20 community legal centres providing around 10,000 duty lawyer services across 29 Victorian courts to help women secure intervention orders.

Community legal centres also help women resolve the many other legal issues resulting from family violence, including family law and debt arising through violent relationships.

More broadly, they help vulnerable people with a diverse range of legal problems including workplace disputes, credit and debt, consumer problems, infringements, tenancy and homelessness, and discrimination.

Ms Fraser said vulnerable people could not afford to wait for the outcome of Victoria's current access to justice review, which is focusing on the provision of free legal assistance services.

'We need more than stop-gap funding that sees community legal centres struggling from year to year,' she concluded.

For media interview and information

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