

# Media Release



## **Federal Government flags Budget failure on vital funding boost needed for free legal help**

**Monday 2 May 2016 – for immediate release**

The Federal Government has flagged its failure on community legal centre funding in tomorrow's Federal Budget by ignoring a central recommendation of the Productivity Commission for an urgent annual boost to national funding for combined free legal assistance services of \$200 million a year.

Recommendation 21.4\* recommending the boost was omitted in a response on Friday afternoon, in which the Federal Government made no new funding commitments, and merely restated existing five-year funding. That funding locks in a 30 per cent national cut to community legal centres beginning in July next year.

'The Federal Government has neglected to say that their restatement of existing funding includes a devastating national cut, and they've been silent about essentially ignoring a central recommendation of the Productivity Commission,' said Katie Fraser, acting executive officer of the Federation of Community Legal Centres, today.

'Free legal help for people who have no recourse to a private lawyer or legal aid will be directly hit by a massive decline in funding unless there is new investment in tomorrow's Budget,' she said.

Community legal centres are asking for the reversal of the cuts, \$14.4 million a year as a share of the boost recommended by the Productivity Commission, and the continuation of Women's Safety Package funding of \$5 million a year. These measures would see a national Federal funding level for community legal centres of \$61.6 million a year pending a further assessment of full legal need.

Without new investment in the Federal Budget, centres nationally will drop from 2016-17 funding of \$42.2m under the National Partnership Agreement on Legal Assistance Services to just \$30.1m from July next year.

Modest legal assistance funding of \$15 million over three years announced in last September's Women's Safety Package was also mentioned in the Productivity Commission response, but fails to offset cuts that will be sustained through to 2019-20.

Community legal centres are the mainstay of free legal help for women seeking family violence intervention orders through the courts. They also help women resolve the many other legal issues resulting from family violence, including family law and debt arising through violent relationships.

'The Turnbull Government is currently in the untenable position of proposing a national intervention order scheme at the same time that it deeply cuts the community legal centre lawyers who help women get the orders in court,' Ms Fraser said.

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

In contrast to the cuts facing centres, the Federal Government's spending on its own legal advice and representation topped \$728 million in 2014-15 alone – growing by nearly \$40 million in a single year, with that increase alone exceeding national community legal centre funding should the cuts proceed.

*\*Productivity Commission Report on Access to Justice Arrangements*

**For media interview and information**

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Community legal centres affected by Federal Government cuts are also available for comment.