

Media Release



Budget fails on urgently needed funding for free legal help for vulnerable people

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Tonight's Federal Budget has seen no new investment in community legal centres, leaving in place a national 30 per cent cut set to commence in July 2017. In failing on free legal help for people who can't afford a lawyer or get legal aid, the Federal Government has ignored 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.

'This Budget will leave more women and children at risk of family violence, more people exposed to eviction, homelessness, crippling debt, unfair fines and workplace mistreatment,' said Katie Fraser, acting executive officer of the Federation of Community Legal Centres, today.

Each year, community legal centres nationally are forced to turn away nearly 160,000 people, with lack of resources – particularly chronic underfunding at Federal level – a key factor.

'The Federal Government's deliberate priorities in this Budget will see this situation grow much worse, when quite a modest investment relative to the scale of the Budget would have made a big difference,' Ms Fraser said.

Community legal centres were asking for the reversal of the 30 per cent national 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 have seen national funding for community legal centres at \$61.6 million a year, pending a further assessment of full legal need.

With no new investment in the Federal Budget, centres nationally will now drop 30 per cent from 2016–17 to just \$30.1m in July next year – less than half of what is needed.

Modest legal assistance funding of \$15 million over three years announced in last September's Women's Safety Package will fail by a big margin to offset cuts that will be sustained through to 2019–20.

'The funding of free legal assistance is a barometer for the fairness this Budget, which should have been the aim for all parties and candidates. On that measure it has clearly failed,' Ms Fraser said.

'The Turnbull Government remains 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 these orders in court,' Ms Fraser said.

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

In contrast to the cuts now facing centres, the Federal Government's spending on its own legal advice and representation topped \$728 million in 2014–15 alone.

'We will now be seeking to press the parties and candidates in the Federal election to adopt policies and funding based on the evidence of legal need. That evidence is definitive, and there is a substantial opportunity to demonstrate fairness by the parties and candidates who are prepared to heed it,' Ms Fraser concluded.

For media interview and information

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

**Productivity Commission Report on Access to Justice Arrangements*