

Media Release



Community lawyers urge caution over claims of new legal assistance funding not detailed in Budget

Thursday 5 May 2016 – for immediate release

Community lawyers have urged caution and called for full funding of all family violence services following claims by Senator Michaelia Cash on ABC radio (from 6.44) that community legal centres can expect a share of broader family violence funding* from the Federal Budget that was not allocated to legal assistance services.

'This Budget has left in place community legal centre cuts of more than \$34 million and a broader shortfall of \$100 million over the next four years. The Federal Government has had two clear opportunities to rectify this – in the Budget and in last Friday's response to the Productivity Commission – and it has failed twice,' said Dr Chris Atmore, senior policy adviser with the Federation of Community Legal Centres, today.

'To make up the national shortfall, we would need all the family violence money to which Senator Cash is referring, but the last thing we want is to have our funding needs set against those of broader family violence services when they too have fared very poorly in the Budget – all parts of the family violence system need to be fully funded, not set against each other,' Dr Atmore said.

Community legal centres had called for the Budget to reverse the 30 per cent national cuts they face from July 2017, continue Women's Safety Package funding of \$5 million a year, and provide an additional boost of \$14.4 million a year as a share of the \$200 million increase for broader legal assistance services recommended by the Productivity Commission (rec 21.4).

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.

'Over the next four years, we fall short of that by at least \$100 million,' Dr Atmore said.

She said it was also critical to recognise that the Federal Government's cuts and chronic underfunding of community legal centres have a broader impact beyond family violence.

'Community legal centres are at the heart of the legal response to violence against women, but as it stands this Budget will have severe impacts for the broader free legal help community legal centres provide. That includes help with family law, workplace disputes, credit and debt, consumer issues, infringements, tenancy, homelessness, and discrimination.

'We help people who can't afford a lawyer and can't get help from legal aid. Without fully funded community legal centres, thousands of vulnerable people have nowhere else to go.

'In 2014–15 alone, community legal centres nationally were forced to turn away nearly 160,000 people, largely due to a lack of resources. The chronic underfunding and cuts left in place by this Budget will only make that worse,' Dr Atmore concluded.

*\$100 million over three years, \$33 million in 2016–17

For media interview and information

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