

Media Release



Dreyfus-Brandis debate a vital chance to focus on legal help funding crisis, community lawyers say

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A [debate](#) this afternoon between Attorney-General George Brandis and Shadow Attorney-General Mark Dreyfus offers a vital chance to focus on the national crisis in community legal centre funding in the lead-up to the Federal election, according to the peak body for fifty community legal centres in Victoria.

‘In the face of a Productivity Commission report recommending a \$200 million yearly boost across free legal assistance services, the Federal Budget left in place more than \$34 million in cuts to community legal centres amid a broader shortfall of \$100 million over four years. Today’s debate can place those issues in the spotlight,’ said Serina McDuff, executive officer of the Federation of Community Legal Centres, today.

Community legal centres provide free legal help to vulnerable people who can’t afford a lawyer or get help from legal aid. In 2014–15 they were forced to turn away around 160,000 people, largely due to inadequate funding, even before a 30 per cent national cut set for July next year.

‘The Attorney-General has acknowledged the contribution of community legal centres to a fair society, and indeed to a society where women and children are protected from family violence. Unfortunately, Federal [cuts and chronic underfunding](#) are seriously undermining that contribution,’ McDuff said.

The debate follows last week’s [open letter](#) to Prime Minister Malcolm Turnbull calling on action to address the cuts. The letter was supported by 13 partner organisations, including family violence, legal and community service peaks.

In the letter, the Federation calls on the prime minister ‘to reverse cuts to community legal centres, sustain funding under the Women’s Safety Package, and boost funding to reflect the recommendation of the Productivity Commission in its report on access to justice arrangements’.

Unless funding is urgently addressed, it will become harder for women to get the legal help they need to protect themselves and their children from violence and rebuild their lives. More broadly, funding cuts will mean that help with family law problems will be further reduced, and more people will be left without help in the face of crushing debt, unfair fines, consumer scams, workplace mistreatment, discrimination, elder abuse, eviction and homelessness.

Both Labor and the Greens have announced election commitments that would reverse the Federal cuts, if not entirely meet the Federal shortfall in funding for community legal centres. The Federation estimates that community legal centres nationally require Federal funding of around \$61.6 million a year pending further assessment of legal need.

For comment or to arrange an interview

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