

Media Release



Federation of
Community Legal Centres
VICTORIA

Diary ruling a step towards greater scrutiny of damaging legal help cuts, community lawyers say

Tuesday 6 September 2016 – for immediate release

Today's Federal Court ruling requiring the reconsideration of a refusal to release the work diary of Attorney-General George Brandis under freedom of information laws has been welcomed by the Federation of Community Legal Centres.

'This ruling is a step towards greater scrutiny of damaging Federal Government cuts to free community legal help for vulnerable people – cuts which cannot be justified and directly contradict the recommendation of the Productivity Commission for a significant boost to free legal assistance services,' said Serina McDuff, executive officer of the Federation, today.

Release of the diaries was sought by Shadow Attorney-General Mark Dreyfus to determine the extent of the Attorney-General's consultations with stakeholders before announcing the cuts, which will reduce community legal centre funding nationally by 30 per cent in July 2017.

'We expect greater transparency regarding the decision will support the fact there is no legitimate basis for the cuts in the face of spiralling legal need,' McDuff said.

Already badly underfunded, community legal centres nationally help more than 216,000 people a year but are forced to turn away around 160,000 people who cannot afford a private lawyer or access legal aid.

'Free legal help from a community legal centre can be the difference between getting a family violence intervention order or not, between keeping a roof over your head or being evicted into homelessness, between getting help for a financial scam or being left to suffer the consequences,' McDuff said.

She said modest Federal funding announcements for family violence legal help through the Women's Safety Package and following May's Federal Budget would be dwarfed by the 2017 cuts, and failed to consider the need for broader free legal help beyond family violence.

'The Federal Government has chosen to make savings that are small in budget terms, but represent massive cuts to poorly funded community legal services that will have a very significant impact on vulnerable people,' McDuff concluded.

Legal proceedings to prevent the release of the diaries are publicly funded. The Federal Government spends more than \$700 million annually on its own legal advice and representation (AGD figures) – more than twice its expenditure on frontline legal services through community legal centres, legal aid and Aboriginal legal services.

For media interview and information

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