



Community Law Australia—Fund Equal Justice Information for Supporters and Partner Organisations

There is a crisis in legal assistance

- Fewer and fewer people can get the legal help that they need.
- In 2014-2015, over 160,000 of Australia’s most disadvantaged and vulnerable people had to be turned away by community legal centres, largely due to a lack of resources.

What are community legal centres and how do they help?

- Community legal centres (CLCs) are not-for-profit community-based legal services that provide free and accessible legal and related services.
- **CLCs help our most vulnerable people:** CLCs help people who can’t afford a lawyer and aren’t eligible for legal aid, including some of the most vulnerable and disadvantaged members of the community. Almost 50% of CLC clients receive a Government benefit, 25.4% tell us they have a disability, and 13.3% are Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander people.
- **CLCs specialise in everyday legal problems,** including family violence, relationship breakdowns and family law, debt, problems with Centrelink, tenancy disputes, and employment issues.
- **CLCs are effective:** in 2014-2015 CLCs across Australia assisted over 216,000 clients with advice/casework services; provided over 250,000 referrals; and responded to around 190,000 requests for legal information from the public.
- **CLCs have a preventative focus:** As well as helping individuals with legal problems, CLCs prevent problems arising, through legal education to client groups, government and community sector agencies, and advocating for fairer laws and policies.
- **CLCs are efficient:** CLCs work in partnerships with other organisations. In 2013-2014, over 6,500 volunteers contributed over 776,000 hours (valued at \$8.47 million). CLCs also received over 72,000 hours of pro bono support from private law firms and other companies.
- **CLCs save downstream costs:** The Productivity Commission says CLCs can “prevent or reduce the escalation of legal problems, which in turn can mean reduced costs to the justice system and lower costs to other taxpayer funded services (in areas such as health, housing and social security payments)”.

Funding crisis – risk to frontline legal services

CLCs are not funded enough to meet existing let alone the increasing demand for services; yet they are facing funding cuts (see image).

Reverse the funding cuts: Under the National Partnership Agreement on Legal Assistance Services, CLCs nationally are facing a ‘funding cliff’. CLCs face a funding cut of almost **30%** nationally between 2017-2018 and 2019-2020. The direct effect of these funding cuts and ongoing under-resourcing of CLCs will be felt by people who need legal help across Australia, but also by other services and systems.



Immediate injection of additional funding: Even if the funding cuts were reversed, CLCs need increased funding. Governments must also implement the Productivity Commission recommendation to immediately inject \$200 million additional funding per year to legal assistance to meet existing unmet legal need. This should include, at a minimum, \$14.4 million per year to CLCs.

Long-term investment: Governments must work with services providers to research and plan to ensure adequate and sustainable long-term funding by both Federal and State/Territory Governments.

Family violence

- CLCs provide significant legal and other assistance to people experiencing family violence.
- Rosie Batty, Australian of the Year 2015, says: “[CLCs] are experts at working with survivors like me to achieve genuine justice for women and children affected by family violence and they need to be properly funded to do this work”.
- Additional family violence-related funding for legal assistance services announced in September 2015 (the Women’s Safety Package) and in May 2016 is welcome, but insufficient.
 - The Women’s Safety Package includes \$15 million of new funding for 12 services across Australia to pilot new specialist domestic violence units and health justice partnerships for 3 years.
 - The 2016-2017 Federal Budget includes an extra \$10 million per year over 3 years to be split between all four legal assistance providers, to be announced after the July Election.
- This funding is insufficient to address family violence more broadly, and insufficient for legal assistance services given the broader funding cuts. The broader cuts to occur during these 3-year funding periods will undermine the ability of the specific CLCs that received funding to undertake family violence-related work and will limit the ability of other CLCs providing legal help to people experiencing family violence to provide such help. Additional ongoing funding to all CLCs will assist more people experiencing family violence to access timely, specialised legal advice and support.

Other legal assistance providers are also in crisis

- CLCs work with Legal Aid Commissions, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Legal Services (ATSILS) and Family Violence Prevention Legal Services (FVPLS) to ensure that together we reach as many disadvantaged and vulnerable people as we can, so that as many people as possible receive the legal help they need.
- However, all these services are experiencing funding crises. Governments must increase funding to better address legal need across the legal assistance sector, including reversing funding cuts and long-term funding for the FVPLS and the ATSILS, and increased funding to all legal assistance services.
- The Law Council of Australia has launched a *Legal Aid Matters* campaign, which includes calls for increased funding to the legal assistance sector

More information

www.communitylawaustralia.org.au www.naclc.org.au

@CommunityLawAus

@NACLCComms

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Dan Stubbs
National Spokesperson
P 03 9328 1885 M: 0437 253 543
dan.stubbs@imcl.org.au

Amanda Alford
Director Policy & Advocacy, NACLCL
P: 0421 028 645
amanda_alford@clc.net.au