

FOR QUALITY LEGAL HELP IN YOUR COMMUNITY

Community Law Australia



Premier Campbell Newman
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30 July 2012

Dear Premier,

Reverse TAAS funding cuts and commit to essential funding in the public interest

Community Law Australia, a national coalition of more than 200 organisations campaigning for access to justice, writes this open letter to voice our opposition to your recent decision to withdraw funding from Tenancy Advice and Advocacy Services (TAAS), and to call for its immediate reversal.

TAAS funding each year helps more than 100,000 disadvantaged and ordinary Queenslanders to avoid a host of serious tenancy problems including eviction, and, in many cases, homelessness.

The already modest funding for the program – derived from only ten per cent of the interest from Queensland rental bonds – does not come from public taxes. Nor is the claimed saving sufficient to make any significant contribution to the critical scarcity of public and social housing in Queensland, which itself demands additional core government investment.

Savings must not be made from funding and organisations already working hard with scant resources to solve tenancy and housing problems. To do so is equivalent to sacking doctors and nurses on the pretext of funding the construction of new hospitals. It is a false economy.

Among the 23 TAAS-funded organisations, the Tenants Union of Queensland (TUQ) alone provided help for 7500 Queenslanders last year.

At present, the TUQ derives 60 per cent of its funding from TAAS. Significantly, it is the only one of 32 community legal centres in Queensland funded for this work. Yet these centres – themselves under-resourced and facing heavy demand pressures – will bear the direct impact of people seeking help for serious tenancy issues who have nowhere else to go.

The Residential Tenancies Authority (RTA), a source of information, not advocacy or advice, is no substitute for the strong independent voice of advice, support and advocacy enabled by TAAS.

The increased pressure on community legal centres resulting from your decision will diminish the ability of disadvantaged and ordinary Queenslanders to achieve housing justice. It will also undermine their access to justice across a range of everyday legal problems for which they do not qualify for government assistance, and for which they cannot afford to pay for private legal help.

As well as diminishing the capacity of community legal centres through increased demand and greater pressure on scarce resources, the de-funding of TAAS will see flow-on cost increases to cases brought before the Queensland Civil and Administrative Tribunal (QCAT).

Early assistance that helps people to resolve their legal issues, and which helps them to participate on an informed basis where court and tribunal proceedings are necessary, generates significant cost savings. These savings will be negated by the decision of your government to de-fund TAAS.

We also note that this latest decision continues an alarming trend of de-funding organisations providing free help across a range of public interest areas – from the Queensland Working Women’s Service to Sisters Inside, the Environment Defenders Office and the Environment Defenders Office North Queensland.

As a national campaign we share the aims of programs helping people whose claimed equal rights are not a reality in practice. Community legal centres provide access to justice for those who do not qualify for government-funded legal help and for whom private legal help is out of reach.

In Queensland and elsewhere, cuts to services such as TAAS, to community legal centres, and to other essential programs providing free assistance to disadvantaged and ordinary people cannot be justified on the basis of the same economic “necessities” that worsen the problems these vital programs struggle to address.

We urge you to reconsider your decision to de-fund TAAS, and to commit to providing essential funding for other vital public interest programs and organisations.

Yours faithfully,



Michael Smith
Chair
Community Law Australia

cc The Hon Nicola Roxon MP
 Attorney-General
 Minister for Emergency Management
 Parliament House
 Canberra ACT 2600

cc Senator the Hon George Brandis SC
 Shadow Attorney-General
 Parliament House
 Canberra ACT 2600