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Community Law Australia



MEDIA RELEASE

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Broad cuts to legal assistance services will fuel access to justice crisis

Broad cuts to legal assistance services announced by the Coalition Government as part of its MYEFO statement today will fuel the national access to justice crisis, according to Community Law Australia.

“We know from multiple reports and studies on unmet legal need in Australia that the access to justice crisis is growing significantly. To respond to this crisis not with badly needed additional funding but with broad-ranging cuts totalling more than \$42 million will further jeopardise the most vulnerable in our community,” said Carolyn Bond AO, national spokesperson for Community Law Australia, today.

Including cuts to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Legal Services (ATSILS), the Coalition has announced that a total more than \$42 million in cuts will now also be spread over a further three legal assistance services including community legal centres (CLCs), Legal Aid Commissions, and Family Violence Prevention Legal Services.

Community legal centres – including nine Environment Defenders Offices, the Public Interest Advocacy Centre, and other CLCs for which details are yet to be announced – face cuts of \$19.61 million over four years.

“As well as the environmental and public interest advocacy CLC cuts known so far, cuts to CLCs more broadly will impact the help vulnerable people get on a range of other issues, including credit and debt, employment, family violence and family law,” Ms Bond said.

ATSILS will be cut by \$13.41 million over four years, and the balance of the more than \$42 million cuts will fall on Legal Aid Commissions and Family Violence Prevention Legal Services, with details of specific cuts to those two services yet to be announced.

“The Government has claimed that frontline services will not be affected, but this is inevitable given the legal assistance services it is targeting. We also know from economic analysis that every dollar invested in community legal centres has a return of \$18 in benefits, so the impact of these cuts will in fact be multiplied beyond the figures announced by the Coalition Government today. This is a tragedy for access to justice in Australia,” Ms Bond said.

She said that the services to be cut not only provided frontline legal help, but also drew on casework to inform and advocate for policy and legal changes that help many thousands of people.

“Cutting these services places the effectiveness of frontline legal assistance at significant risk, undermines the evidence-base of law reform, and places vital services at the mercy of short-term budgetary considerations that are blind to long-term human and economic costs,” Ms Bond concluded.

For interview: Carolyn Bond 0412 032 987

For media information: Darren Lewin-Hill 0488 773 535