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Community Law Australia



MEDIA RELEASE

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Defunding of Aboriginal legal services peak a dangerous “economy”

National access to justice campaign Community Law Australia has called for the immediate reversal of today’s defunding by the Coalition Government of Aboriginal legal services peak body, National Aboriginal & Torres Strait Islander Legal Services (NATSILS).

“The announcement that this vital peak body will be defunded, together with policy officers in State and Territory affiliates is a dangerous economy given the stark over-representation of Indigenous people in the prison system, their significant and disproportionate disadvantage compared to the broader population across a range of areas, and the systemic discrimination they face,” said Carolyn Bond AO, Community Law Australia’s national spokesperson, today.

“These cuts will result in a very small saving, but will have a massively disproportionate impact. They will create downstream human and economic costs that will dwarf the minor short-term budget savings. Saving \$9 million over three years, when Indigenous incarceration rates are spiralling and states are spending billions on prisons makes no sense at all,” Ms Bond said.

As well as resulting in more Indigenous people going to prison, the cuts would also undermine early intervention and prevention work in family and civil law matters, she said.

“It is vital that the valuable experience of NATSILS can be shared with policy-makers, so that laws and policies are effective – this work includes things such as engaging with the productivity commission inquiry into access to justice, submissions about family violence laws, sharing the experience of Indigenous people in the family law system, responses to the incarceration of young people, and the framing of principles for placing aboriginal children in care – and the list goes on.

“We support the NATSILS position that the cuts will seriously undermine an informed, evidence-based approach to Indigenous legal services in Australia. It is fundamentally important that these services be informed by the full engagement of Indigenous people themselves. The cuts threaten the capacity of Indigenous people to participate in creating the solutions to the issues affecting them. They contradict an aim we should all share, the empowerment of Indigenous people,” Ms Bond said.

In September, the Coalition was heavily criticised for slated \$42 million cuts to Indigenous legal services. Whether today’s cuts are part of the earlier proposed cuts, will replace them, or are additional, remains unclear.

“When additional investment is so badly needed, any cuts to Indigenous legal services are a dangerous economy,” Ms Bond concluded.

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