

FOR QUALITY LEGAL HELP IN YOUR COMMUNITY

Community Law Australia



MEDIA RELEASE

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Tough Budget must not target people unable to afford legal help

With Treasurer Joe Hockey warning of a ‘tough’ Federal Budget, national access to justice campaign Community Law Australia has highlighted the risk of further cuts to free legal assistance, when growing unmet legal need instead demands a doubling of current funding to community legal centres.

“We hear the Federal Government’s view that everyone needs to share the burden of a ‘tough’ Budget, but we say that people who can’t afford legal help for common and often serious legal problems should not be called on to bear it,” said Carolyn Bond AO, national spokesperson for Community Law Australia, today.

Ms Bond said that free legal assistance services, including frontline services targeting family violence, were already reeling from significant cuts following the Mid-Year Economic and Financial Outlook (MYEFO) last December.

“MYEFO saw announced cuts of more than \$43 million to Aboriginal, family violence, environmental and broader legal assistance services. The Government claims these were primarily directed at policy and law reform, but the reality is that frontline services for Australians in need will be affected.

“These cuts need to be reversed, and free legal assistance needs to be funded across the board on a sustainable basis or we’ll risk an even worse access to justice crisis in Australia,” Ms Bond said.

Research by the Australia Institute found that half-a-million people miss out on legal help each year, while 63 per cent of centres responding to a 2012–13 ACOSS survey said they were unable to meet demand. Of the people community legal centres are able to help, 80 per cent earn less than \$26,000 per year.

“We’re talking about issues like family violence, housing problems, employment and credit and debt issues. An elderly person with a dispute about faulty roofing on her home, the family of a man with a terminal illness facing loss of their home, a woman seeking support to leave a violent partner – these are the sorts of problems that will increasingly go unaddressed unless there’s more funding in the system,” Ms Bond said.

She said the problems encountered by community legal centres as individual cases could sometimes be better addressed at a systemic level to change policies and laws for the benefit of thousands of people, so continued funding for policy and law reform work was also vital.

“Community legal centres see thousands of people and gain unique insights into legal problems that would otherwise be unavailable to government. To deny the value of this work for policy and law reform simply because it may question government policy is counter-productive. Effectively, it’s asking an efficient community legal sector not to be smart in the way it works. It’s asking us to be inefficient,” Ms Bond said.

She said the lead-up to the Federal Budget would see the consideration of a recently completed national review of legal assistance services commissioned by the former Government, and also the release of a Productivity Commission report on legal assistance services.

“Ultimately, budgets are a matter of priorities. Agencies like ACOSS have already suggested where alternative cuts could be made if a ‘tough’ Budget is necessary. We note, for example, that the Federal Government spent \$714 million on its own legal services in 2012–13 compared with \$32 million for community legal centres over the same period.

“The Government can choose how the burden of a ‘tough’ Budget is shared. It shouldn’t choose to cut services that prevent legal problems that will otherwise escalate to impact disadvantaged individuals and the community, causing further human costs and expense to government,” Ms Bond concluded.

Today, Community Law Australia is holding a social media Day of Action with community legal centres around Australia telling their stories on Facebook, and using the #unlockthelaw hashtag on Twitter.

For more information or to arrange an interview, please contact Carolyn Bond on 0412 032 987 or Darren Lewin-Hill on 0488 773 535. www.communitylawaustralia.org.au