



MEDIA RELEASE

Monday 19 May 2014 – for immediate release

Attorney-General wrong in media statement on cuts to community legal centres, says national access to justice campaign

A media statement issued last Saturday (17/5) by Federal Attorney-General George Brandis on Federal Budget cuts to community legal centres is wrong and miscasts the extent of the cuts, according to national access to justice campaign, Community Law Australia.

In a statement issued to the ABC's *AM* program and broadcast last Saturday, the Attorney-General stated that funding withdrawn from community legal centres was "supplementary only", and "would have expired at the end of the financial year in any event".

In fact, 57 community legal centres were advised last week that the last two years of signed four-year agreements will no longer be funded. These funds were not "expiring" and centres have frontline staffing and services operating in expectation of the fulfilment of those agreements.

"The additional \$6 million cut announced in the Federal Budget follows the \$43.1 million cuts to legal assistance services announced last December. The additional centres to be hit by last Tuesday's cut are yet to be identified," said Community Law Australia Chair, Liana Buchanan, today.

"We're talking about free legal help for disadvantaged Australians experiencing relationship breakdown, workplace mistreatment, family violence, debt, eviction, homelessness and other legal problems that severely impact their lives.

"There is strong evidence that community legal centres are grossly underfunded and already struggle to meet increasing demand for help with serious legal problems from people who cannot afford a private lawyer. Conservative estimates tell us half a million Australians miss out on the legal help they need each year.

"To inflict further deep cuts against a base of clearly inadequate funding and increasing demand will only worsen the access to justice crisis in Australia," Ms Buchanan said.

The cuts have come with proposed new restrictions effective from 1 July 2014 precluding the use of Commonwealth funding for law reform and policy advocacy by community legal centres.

The new funding conditions are at odds with a draft Productivity Commission report released in April on access to justice arrangements. The report places advocacy at the core of what community legal centres should do, explicitly recognising the efficiency and community benefit of law reform and systemic work. (see pp.624–5).

"We note the Attorney-General's statement that the findings of the Productivity Commission review will 'inform future decisions concerning legal aid services' but query why the Government is acting

contrary to the Commission’s clear advice by acting to limit law reform and policy work,” Ms Buchanan said.

“If, in the words of the Attorney-General, we’re talking about protecting ‘the most vulnerable Australians’, then the Federal Government should support the vital role of community legal centres in fixing bad laws and practices, and in providing free legal help in thousands of individual cases each year – cases that provide unique insights into legal problems and how they can be addressed.

“These are essential aspects of access to justice that the Budget cuts and restrictions on law reform and policy advocacy directly undermine,” Ms Buchanan concluded.

Background information

Community legal centres condemn budget cuts, ABC AM, 17 May 2014

<http://www.abc.net.au/am/content/2014/s4006544.htm>

(The Attorney-General’s full written statement is available.)

Draft Productivity Commission Report on Access to Justice Arrangements

<http://www.pc.gov.au/projects/inquiry/access-justice>

Related media releases

<http://www.communitylawaustralia.org.au/federal-budget-exposes-more-funding-cuts-as-a-g-brandis-stops-community-legal-centres-speaking-out-on-unfair-laws-and-practices/>

<http://www.communitylawaustralia.org.au/broad-cuts-to-legal-assistance-services-will-fuel-access-to-justice-crisis/>

<http://www.communitylawaustralia.org.au/defunding-of-aboriginal-legal-services-peak-a-dangerous-economy/>

To arrange a media interview or for further information, please contact Darren Lewin-Hill on 0488 773 535. www.communitylawaustralia.org.au

This media release was amended on Tuesday 20 May 2014 to correct minor details regarding reference to the ABC, and the timing of A-G Brandis’ statement (Saturday, not Friday).