



MEDIA RELEASE

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Federal Budget exposes more funding cuts as A-G Brandis stops community legal centres speaking out on unfair laws and practices

The Federal Budget has exposed a further \$6 million in cuts from community legal centres in 2017/18 beyond the deep \$43.1m cuts to legal assistance services announced last December. The government is also set to stop community legal centres engaging in valuable law reform and systemic advocacy using Commonwealth funds.

"These cuts fly in the face of overwhelming demand. Community legal centres already report having to turn away one in five people needing their help. These cuts will see even more people turned away - people who cannot afford a private lawyer and have nowhere else to go for legal help with serious problems such as family violence, workplace mistreatment, homelessness, eviction, relationship breakdown and debt," said Community Law Australia Chair, Liana Buchanan, today.

"Contrary to statements from the Federal Government, these cuts are directed at frontline services. Having to close outreach offices and stop providing family violence support lawyers at court are just some of the actions centres will have to take because of these cuts.

"As well as biting deeply into frontline services to address serious legal problems, these cuts wind back some welcome expansions into areas where free legal help has been unavailable. They will worsen the postcode injustice that has too long affected people in regional Australia.

"When conservative estimates tell us half a million Australians miss out on the legal help they need each year, cutting community legal assistance is a callous and false economy. The economic cost benefit analysis of community legal centres shows for every dollar spent by government, centres return an economic benefit of \$18 (see below for link).

"These cuts have nothing to do with efficiency and everything to do with saving quick money at the expense of an unacceptable legal risk to the disadvantaged.

"As well as cutting frontline services, the government also plans to amend service agreements to stop community legal centres from working to change unfair laws, policies and practices that impact their clients.

"Through the thousands of people they see each year, community legal centres are uniquely placed to see how laws and the legal system impact the community. Working to address broader barriers to justice through advice and submissions to government, education campaigns, test cases and public advocacy is a critical part of community legal centres' work.

In many instances, law reform and systemic advocacy is quite simply the most efficient and effective way a community legal centre can stop legal problems in the future and help more than just their individual clients.

The restrictions on community legal centres come as the recent Productivity Commission draft report on access to justice 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 need fair and workable laws, and fair access to legal help regardless of whether you can afford to pay a private lawyer. The funding cuts and effective gagging of community legal centres completely undermine that goal, and they worsen the access to justice crisis already faced by many Australians," Ms Buchanan concluded.

Background information

Draft Productivity Commission Report on Access to Justice Arrangements

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

MYEFO cuts to legal assistance services

<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/>

Economic cost-benefit analysis of community legal centres

<http://www.communitylawaustralia.org.au/economic-benefit-clcs/>

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