



## **MEDIA RELEASE**

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### **Budget cuts place free legal help further out of reach for South Australians**

People in South Australia are less likely to get the legal help they need, as the Federal Government continues to cut funds to community legal centres.

In addition to \$19.6 million cuts to community legal centres nationally, announced last December, there was an additional \$6 million cut in the recent Federal Budget.

“The Federal Government says ‘frontline legal services will not be affected’ but these funds currently support significant frontline services,” said Carolyn Bond AO, national spokesperson for Community Law Australia, today.

“South Australian community legal centres will either need to reduce the number of lawyers available to help people, turn away more people seeking help, limit the range of problems they can address, or restrict the regional areas they can cover,” Ms Bond said.

The kinds of impacts these cuts could have include:

- Thousands of women experiencing family violence denied free legal help;
- People who want to challenge a decision that affects their income may not be able to get free legal help, particularly those in some regional areas;
- People who can’t afford a private lawyer for family law, tenancy or debt issues may be turned away by free services, or may need to travel hundreds of kilometres to find help.

Zita Ngor from the Women’s Legal Service SA said the service gave legal help and advice to thousands of women each year.

“We fear we could lose up to half of our funding, which would not only impact on women experiencing family violence who would be turned away, but on their families, on the courts, and on community and health services,” she said.

Mark Leahy from the Welfare Rights Centre SA, which helps people with Centrelink problems, said that for many of their clients, being able to deal with a dispute with Centrelink can significantly impact on a family’s financial security.

“With the funding cuts proposed, we may have no option than to reduce our work in areas such as Cardinia and Port Augusta, where there is high demand and nowhere else for people to turn,” he said.

“Even before these damaging cuts, community legal centres were already grossly underfunded and struggled to meet increasing demand for help with serious legal problems from people unable to afford a private lawyer. These cuts will only make that situation worse,” Ms Bond said.

“We know that community legal centres are already very efficient in the help they provide, and that nationally at least 500,000 Australians miss out on legal help every year. The answer is funding community legal centres properly to meet increasing need, not cutting their funding,” she said.

Alan Merritt from the South Australian Council of Community Legal Services said the State Government provided some funds to community legal centres, and state funding for a new Consumer Credit Legal Service was good news for South Australia. However, with the level of demand for help, a greater commitment was needed from Federal and State governments – not a reduction in Federal funding.

Community legal centres give free legal help to disadvantaged Australians experiencing relationship breakdown, workplace mistreatment, family violence, debt, eviction, homelessness and other legal problems that severely impact their lives. They address the growing gap between people who qualify for legal aid, and those who can afford a private lawyer.

As well as these cuts, the Government has stopped centres doing any policy or law reform work with their funding.

“While it’s a small part of their overall work, community legal centres are in a position to identify repeat problems based on the experiences of their clients to bring about changes that prevent problems in the first place,” Ms Bond concluded.

#### **Further information**

[Federal budget cuts to community legal centres in the news](#)

[Economic benefit of community legal centres strong, says cost benefit analysis](#)

[Community legal centres accuse Federal Government of gagging](#)

[Last chance for law services to be heard, fighting to protect the most vulnerable](#)

[Brandis restrictions starting tomorrow seek to silence community legal centres speaking out on unfair laws, policies and practices](#)

[Advocacy and frontline services vital to achieve access to justice](#)

#### **To arrange an interview**

Darren Lewin-Hill on 0488 773 535