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**Community Law Australia**



## **MEDIA RELEASE**

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### **Community legal centres among services facing greatest demand challenge, according to ACOSS survey**

Australia's 200 community legal centres, which give free legal help to low-income people, are among the community services facing the biggest demand challenges according to an ACOSS survey released today.

A large majority of community legal centres are unable to assist all those who seek their help according to the ACOSS findings, which reveal that 72 per cent of centres report they cannot meet demand.

'The findings offer strong support for a significant increase in legal assistance funding, instead of the deep cuts that were inflicted on the community legal sector in the last Federal Budget,' said Community Law Australia national spokesperson, Carolyn Bond AO, today.

'The Federal Budget cuts and further cuts in prospect for the sector will see demand challenges worsen, not improve from what is already a crisis level of unmet legal need,' Ms Bond said.

The ACOSS data underline last week's Productivity Commission finding that the legal assistance sector – including community legal centres, Aboriginal legal services and legal aid – is underfunded by at least \$200 million.

'The reality is that funding is not being increased, it is not being maintained – it is being significantly cut, at the same time that new Federal Government restrictions on advocacy make it difficult for individual community legal centres to speak out,' Ms Bond said.

The ACOSS survey found that services prioritising people on low incomes or with specific needs are least able to meet demand, a finding supported by community legal centre data. In Victoria, for example, 82 per cent of the more than 60,000 people a year who receive free legal help earn less than \$26,000 per year, and are unable either to access legal aid or afford a private lawyer.

'Governments of all levels need to increase funding to community legal centres, or more and more people who can't afford a lawyer will miss out on access to free legal help,' Ms Bond said.

‘The Australia Institute conservatively estimates that half a million Australians miss out on legal help each year. However, with 72 per cent of legal services recording unmet demand, our concern is that this figure is in actual fact much higher,’ Ms Bond said.

Community legal centres help people with legal problems arising through family violence, employment, housing, and credit and debt – problems that can have a significant impact on people’s lives.

‘These problems affect everyone, but it is the disadvantaged members of our society who are least able to access help,’ Ms Bond concluded.

**To arrange an interview, please contact Darren Lewin-Hill on 0488 773 535.**