

Fund Equal Justice Community Legal Centres Campaign Information for Members and Senators

Summary

- Community legal centres (CLCs) are not-for-profit community-based legal services that provide free and accessible legal and related services. Almost 200 CLCs across Australia help hundreds of thousands of people each year, but are also forced to turn away hundreds of thousands of people.
- CLCs are facing a funding cliff, with a 30% reduction in Commonwealth funding nationally from 1 July 2017 and limited state and territory funding in many jurisdictions.
- The direct effect of these funding cuts and ongoing under-resourcing of CLCs will mean people across Australia will miss out on the legal help they need, and will be felt by other services and systems including other legal assistance providers, courts and the justice system.
- Vulnerable and disadvantaged people and the CLCs that assist them, including in your electorate, urgently need your assistance.

There is a crisis in legal assistance

- There is significant and rising demand for legal assistance in Australia.
- People are missing out on the legal help they need. For example, community legal centres turn away over 160,000 people every year, largely due to a lack of resources.
- Unresolved legal problems generate a range of flow-on effects, including significant costs to the government and broader community.

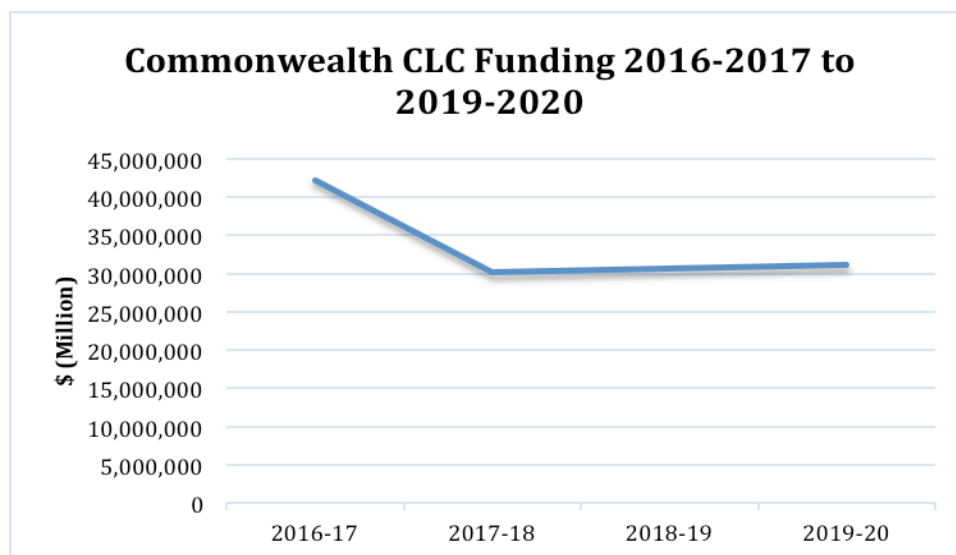
What are community legal centres and how do they help?

- **CLCs help our most vulnerable people:** CLCs help people who can't afford a lawyer, including some of the most vulnerable and disadvantaged members of the community. For example, almost 50% of CLC clients are in receipt of a Government benefit, 26.6% identify as having a disability, and 15.3% are Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander people.
- **CLCs specialise in everyday legal problems:** CLCs help people with a wide range of legal problems, including family violence, relationship breakdowns and family law, debt, consumer problems, problems with Centrelink, tenancy disputes, and employment issues.
- **CLCs are effective:** In 2014-2015 CLCs across Australia assisted over 216,000 clients with advice/casework services; provided over 250,000 referrals; and responded to around 190,000 requests for legal information from the public.
- **CLCs have a preventative focus:** As well as helping individuals with legal problems, CLCs work to prevent problems arising, through legal education to client groups, government and community sector agencies, as well as by advocating for fairer laws and policies.
- **CLCs are efficient:** CLCs work in partnerships with other organisations, and are skilled in attracting volunteer and pro bono support. For example, in 2015-2015, over 7,100 volunteers contributed over 575,000 hours (representing a total return on investment of \$5.59 million) and CLCs received over 51,800 hours of pro bono support from private law firms and other companies.

- **CLCs save downstream costs:** The Productivity Commission says assistance from CLCs can “prevent or reduce the escalation of legal problems, which in turn can mean reduced costs to the justice system and lower costs to other taxpayer funded services (in areas such as health, housing and social security payments)”.

Funding crisis – risk to frontline legal services

- CLCs are not funded enough to meet existing let alone the increasing demand for services; yet they are facing funding cuts. Nationally, CLCs only receive approximately 12% of funding provided to the legal assistance sector.
- Under the National Partnership Agreement on Legal Assistance 2015-2020 (NPA), nationally CLCs will receive \$142.9 million over five years, which equates to \$40 million in 2015-2016, \$42.2 million in 2016-2017, dropping to \$30.1 million in 2017-2018, then \$30.6 million in 2018-2019 and \$31 million in 2019-2020.



What is needed?

1. Reversal of funding cuts

- Reversal of the Commonwealth funding cuts to CLCs of approximately 30%, or \$34.83 million, nationally between 2017-2018 and 2019-2020.
- Specifically, CLCs are facing funding cuts nationally of \$12.1 million in 2017-2018 (29%), \$11.6 million (27%) in 2018-2019 and \$11.13 million in 2019-2020 (26%).

2. Immediate injection of additional funding

- Immediate injection of \$200 million per year into the legal assistance sector, implementing the Productivity Commission’s recommendations, including 60% (\$120 million) from the Commonwealth Government, which should include, at a minimum, \$14.4 million per year to CLCs.

3. Long-term investment

- A commitment by Commonwealth and State and Territory Governments to develop a process for determining adequate and sustainable longer-term funding contributions to the legal assistance sector, in consultation with the sector and informed by robust data and evidence.

Family violence

- CLCs provide significant legal and other assistance to people experiencing family violence.
- The additional family violence-related funding for CLCs announced since 2015 (\$20 million) is welcome but has been limited to a small number of centres.
- This funding is insufficient to address family violence more broadly, and insufficient for legal assistance services given the broader funding cuts. The broader cuts to occur during these 3-year funding periods will undermine the ability of the specific CLCs that received funding to undertake family violence-related work and will limit the ability of other CLCs providing legal help to people experiencing family violence to provide such help.
- Additional ongoing funding to all CLCs will assist much greater numbers of people experiencing family violence to access timely, specialised legal advice and support.

Other legal assistance providers are also in crisis

- The four publicly funded legal assistance sectors in Australia are CLCs, Legal Aid Commissions, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Legal Services (ATSILS) and Family Violence Prevention Legal Services (FVPLS). We work together to ensure that together we reach as many disadvantaged and vulnerable people as we can, so that as many people as possible receive the legal help they need.
- However, all four services are experiencing funding crises. NALC supports increased funding to better address legal need across the legal assistance sector, including the reversal of funding cuts and long-term funding for the FVPLS and the ATSILS, and increased funding to all legal assistance services including LACs.
- The Law Council of Australia has launched a *Legal Aid Matters* campaign, which is calling for an increase in Commonwealth Government funding to LACs, bringing the Commonwealth's share to 50% well as the reversal of funding cuts and additional investment in all legal assistance services in line with the Productivity Commission's recommendations.

What can you as a Member/Senator do to help?

- Contact your local CLC and arrange a meeting, or attend an event. Find out about the work they do in your community, what the impact of funding cuts will be on the people in your community, and how you can support their work.
- Speak with your colleagues in Parliament about the work that CLCs do and how it assists vulnerable community members, such as people experiencing family violence.
- Publicly pledge your support for CLCs (and other legal assistance services) and voice concern about the upcoming funding cuts and the impact they will have on free legal help for people across Australia and in your community.
- Talk to or write to the Prime Minister, Attorney-General and other Members/Senators voicing your support for the reversal of the funding cuts, an immediate injection of funding into the legal assistance sector, and consideration of longer-term investment in CLCs.
- Support the Fund Equal Justice campaign in the media and on social media using #fundequaljustice.

More information

www.communitylawaustralia.org.au

www.naclc.org.au

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