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MEDIA RELEASE

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Coalition's proposed cuts to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Legal Services represent a big step backwards for access to justice.

The National Association of Community Legal Centres Inc (NACLC) is deeply concerned by the \$42 million funding cuts which would be made to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander legal services under the Coalition's costings released yesterday.

Representing almost a 20% drop in funding, the cuts would have a significant impact on the operation and effectiveness of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander legal assistance services.

"The advice, information and complex support provided by the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Legal Services play a critical role in combating the overrepresentation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander men, women and young people in the criminal justice system," said Michael Smith, National Convenor of the National Association of Community Legal Centres.

"The Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Legal Services assist people to understand the legal system and support them through the intimidating process of going to court. The service helps the Courts to make fairer decisions by presenting clear, well-articulated cases on their clients' behalf," said Mr Smith.

The cuts to legal assistance funding are likely to lead to increased costs in other areas of the justice system, like imprisonment. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander prisoners comprise just over a quarter of the total prisoner population in Australia.¹ The average cost per prisoner in Australia is approximately \$315 per day or \$114,832 a year.²

The removal of parents and siblings from their homes due to imprisonment has a significant effect on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities because it continues the separation and dislocation experienced by members of the Stolen Generation and their families.

As well as criminal cases, the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Legal Services also play a vital role in family violence and civil matters.

"The social costs of these funding cuts would be far-reaching and would not be limited to the people who need to access Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander legal services, but also to their families and communities." concluded Mr Smith.

Ends

For further information or to arrange an interview contact National Convenor Michael Smith
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¹ Australian Bureau of Statistics, *4517.0 - Prisoners in Australia* (2012). At <http://www.abs.gov.au/ausstats/abs@.nsf/Products/76EB9AA0D2742379CA257ACB00130EC5?opendocument>.

² Australian National Council on Drugs, *An economic analysis for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander offenders: prison vs residential treatment* (2012) 46.