

MEDIA RELEASE

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FREE LEGAL SERVICES FOR YOUNG PEOPLE UNDER THREAT

Young people across Australia should be celebrating the opportunity to 'Be The Future' this National Youth Week says the National Association of Community Legal Centres (NACLC), not worrying about their legal problems or the ability to pay bills for a legal issue that won't go away.

Community Legal Centres (CLCs) provide free legal help to children and young people across Australia. In 2015, CLCs assisted over 74,000 young people between 18-34 years and over 3,500 young people under 18 years. CLCs also provide free legal help to parents and others on issues affecting children, including over 3,300 advices on child protection issues and over 4,000 advices on child support last year" said Rosslyn Monro, NACLC Chairperson.

The Youth Advocacy Centre is a specialist CLC based in Brisbane. "We provide a range of services including legal advice and referrals to young people in the youth justice and child protection systems, and information and support to young people appearing in courts and tribunals, including a duty lawyer service at the Brisbane Children's Court" said Janet Wight, Director, Youth Advocacy Centre.

"As well as providing court/casework to young people, we also run community legal education in schools and in the community which is crucial in letting young people know what their legal rights are, and what to do if they have a legal problem."

The young people we help are extremely vulnerable. For example, last year 44% of our legal services clients were not living at home; 50% of our legal, youth support and family support clients had a past or current substance use problem; 45% of family support clients had a past or current mental health problem; and 77% of our bail support clients were known to Child Safety Services. Our service is crucial in ensuring that these young people get the advice and support they need," Ms Wight said.

"At Youthlaw we are co-located with other youth services. We assist vulnerable young people who would otherwise not seek out legal help by themselves. They come from backgrounds of family breakdown, family violence, neglect and disadvantage. Most have been in families that have had no intervention from child protection system and are largely invisible to the community. We assist with their fines, debts, mistreatment and interactions with authorities. They are so thankful for our help. For once they feel the support and protection of the law instead of fearing its use against them. Legal help along with other services makes a big difference and allows them to get on with their lives," said Ariel Couchman, Director of Youthlaw, based in Melbourne.

CLCs use a range of innovative tools to engage with children and young people. For example, the *2014 National Census of Community Legal Centres* indicated that almost 20 percent of CLCs that responded use skype to provide legal advice and over 16 percent use Youtube to provide community legal education.

Youthlaw in Melbourne is an example of one of those CLCs that uses skype to reach out to its clients. Ms Couchman said "our skype legal service throughout regional Victoria reaches out to vulnerable young people where there is high disadvantage and few services and supports. This service is simple & cost effective and works with those most in need yet we struggle every year to get funding to keep it going."

“However, CLCs across Australia face a 30% funding cut to Federal funding from 1 July next year. That sort of cut will have a significant impact on the ability of CLCs to help children and young people who need our help” added Rosslyn Monro, NACLC Chairperson.

As a result, this National Youth Week, NACLC reiterates its call for:

1. Reversal of the Commonwealth funding cuts to CLCs under the National Partnership Agreement on Legal Assistance amounting to \$34.83 million from 1 July 2017 to 30 June 2020
2. An immediate injection of \$200 million per year into the broader legal assistance service system, as recommended by the Productivity Commission, which should be shared between the Commonwealth (60%) and the States and Territories (40%). This should equate to at least an additional \$24 million per year allocated to CLCs (\$14.4 million p.a. Commonwealth and \$9.6 million p.a. from States and Territories); and
3. A commitment by all levels of Government to implementing an appropriate process for determining adequate and sustainable longer-term funding contributions for legal assistance in consultation with the sector.

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