



MEDIA RELEASE

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Community lawyers disappointed with Government response to Productivity Commission Report

The National Association of Community Legal Centres (NACLC) has expressed disappointment at the Federal Government's response to the Productivity Commission's 2014 Access to Justice Arrangements Inquiry Report, released late on Friday.

The Productivity Commission's two-volume report made over 80 recommendations for reform. The Report recognised the important role of and work done by legal assistance providers in Australia, including Community Legal Centres (CLCs), the major level of unmet legal need, and that there is a need for more resources to meet the legal needs of disadvantaged and vulnerable people in Australia.

"We have been waiting since 2014 for a formal Government response to the Report, however what was finally released on Friday was limited and does not address many of the key recommendations, including in relation to funding for CLCs" said Rosslyn Monro, NACLC Chairperson.

"For example, the Commission identified and quantified the level of funding required, recommending an immediate injection of \$200 million per year into legal assistance services from Commonwealth, state and territory governments to adequately meet legal need of disadvantaged and vulnerable people in Australia. There is no reference to that recommendation in the Government's response" she said.

The Government's response states that 'over the next five years, the Australian Government will provide \$1.6 billion for Legal Aid Commissions and Community Legal Centres through the National Partnership Agreement'. "What the response does not acknowledge however, is that CLCs only get 12% of that funding and are facing a 30 per cent cut to funding next year, and similar cuts over the following two years, under the National Partnership Agreement" said Ms Monro.

"The Commission also recommended that Commonwealth funding for legal assistance services should be allocated in a way that encourages 'funding participation by State and Territory Governments'. However, this NPA is silent about State and Territory contributions, which leaves CLCs facing a Commonwealth funding cliff and limited State or Territory funding in most jurisdictions" she added.

The Productivity Commission also made a range of other important recommendations not addressed in the response. For example, the Commission clearly recognised that law reform and advocacy is an important part of what CLCs do, that such work is an efficient way to use limited taxpayer dollars, and that the Government should support it being undertaken. In light of this, the Government's restriction under the NPA on CLCs undertaking this work with Commonwealth funding doesn't make sense, and there was no reference to this issue in the response either" continued Ms Monro.

NACLC acknowledges the traditional owners of the lands across Australia and particularly the Gadigal people of the Eora Nation, traditional owners of the land on which the NACLC office is situated. We pay deep respect to Elders past and present.

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“We are hopeful that the Government will consider the recommendations made by the Productivity Commission in more detail, and use it to inform policy moving forward. We welcome the opportunity to work with the Government on this” added Ms Monroe.

“In the meantime however, our immediate challenge is the funding cliff facing CLCs. We welcome the statement in the response that says the ‘Government is committed to doing what it can to increase funding levels for legal assistance in a tight fiscal environment’. In a tight fiscal environment it makes sense to invest in CLCs, because as the Productivity Commission recognised, investment in legal assistance services, including CLCs, reduces costs to Government as well as community and other systems and services” said Ms Monroe.

“Tomorrow’s Federal Budget presents an important opportunity for the Government to put that commitment into action and reverse these potentially devastating cuts. We urge the Government to recognise the importance of CLCs in our communities and make funding for these vital services a priority,” concluded Ms Monroe.

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