

MEDIA RELEASE

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FREE LEGAL HELP FOR CHILDREN, ABORIGINAL AND TORRES STRAIT ISLANDER ARTISTS AND CONSUMERS UNDER THREAT

The National Association of Community Legal Centres (NACLC) today called on the Commonwealth Government to continue and increase funding for national community legal centres.

There are almost 200 community legal centres across Australia, including a small number of national community legal centres such as the National Children's and Youth Law Centre, Arts Law and the Insurance Law Service at Financial Rights Legal Centre. The national centres receive funding directly from the Commonwealth Government rather than through the National Partnership Agreement for Legal Assistance (NPA).

'We are extremely concerned about the future of CLCs across Australia, including our national CLCs. CLCs funded under the NPA are facing a 30% cut nationally. In addition, many centres are underfunded and there is no guarantee of any funding for two of the national centres past 1 July next year' said Dan Stubbs, NACLC National Spokesperson.

'Under the NPA Commonwealth funding is provided to the States and Territories to allocate. That system doesn't work for national centres so they are still directly funded by the Commonwealth Government. However, there doesn't appear to be a plan or a commitment for these national centres' he added.

'The services that these national centres provide are a crucial part of the work CLCs do across Australia. They help children and young people, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, and people who have a problem with their insurance company' said Mr Stubbs.

Children and Young People

The award-winning National Children's and Youth Law Centre provides free online legal assistance to children, young people and their parents across Australia, directly helping 2,300 people in 2015 and providing online information to 1 million visitors.

'We help children and young people solve their legal problems such as family and domestic violence and homelessness. Because our innovative, online model really works there is an ever-increasing demand for our help, but we are now being forced to turn away one in every three young people that contact us' said Matthew Keeley, Director of the National Children's and Youth Law Centre.

'Up to 1,000 young people will miss out from 1 July because our Commonwealth grant allows us to support only one and a half staff. You would think that ours is exactly the type of service that the Commonwealth Government should be supporting more fully – innovative, online and effective' he said.

'By helping kids solve their legal problems, we improve their overall wellbeing and ensure they can get on with their lives. Without an increase in funding, there will be a real impact on children, young people and their parents across Australia' he added.

Consumers in Financial Stress

The Financial Rights Legal Centre provides free legal assistance to consumers in financial stress across consumer credit, banking, debt recovery and insurance.

'We helped over 26,500 people with free legal assistance or financial counselling last year. One of our key services is the Insurance Law Service, a national specialist consumer insurance advice service, which took roughly one third of those calls (8,500). For people facing the double whammy of being seriously ill and then being refused an income protection claim, or having their house burned down only to find they are the subject of suspicion by their insurer, we are the only free, specialist service available in the country. Unfortunately, the future of the ILS remains in question even as demand for the service continues to grow' said Karen Cox, Coordinator of the Financial Rights Legal Centre.

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Artists and Arts Organisations

Robyn Ayres, CEO of the Arts Law Centre, is concerned about the future of the Artists in the Black program: 'Our Artists in the Black program provides crucial legal help to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander artists and arts organisations nationally. We help to prevent exploitation, ensuring artists are fairly rewarded for their work and that Indigenous Cultural and Intellectual Property is respected and protected' Ms Ayres said.

'We are extremely concerned that the Artists in the Black program is threatened due to a lack of Commonwealth funding' she added.

As a result, NACLC calls on the Commonwealth Government to:

1. Reverse 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. Provide guaranteed and sustainable funding to national CLCs funded outside the NPA from 1 July 2017 onwards
3. Immediately inject \$120 million per year into the broader legal assistance system, including at least an additional \$14.4 million per year allocated to CLCs (both NPA and non-NPA funded)
4. Commit to implementing an appropriate process for determining adequate and sustainable longer-term funding contributions for legal assistance in consultation with the sector.

Event alert:

The national centres are involved in and are available to comment on a number of events this week, including:

- **Wednesday 8 June 2016:** National Arts Election Debate
- **Friday 10 June 2016:** National Child Rights Taskforce (co-convened by the National Children's and Youth Law Centre and UNICEF) launch of the Australian Child Rights Progress Report at the Australian Human Rights Commission, including a chapter on access to justice.

To arrange an interview or for more information please contact:

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