

MEDIA RELEASE

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FEDERATION FAILURE – THE NATIONAL PARTNERSHIP AGREEMENT ON LEGAL ASSISTANCE SERVICES

Community lawyers from across Australia today wrote an open letter to the Council of Australian Governments ahead of the 1 April 2016 meeting. The group, representing almost 200 community legal centres across Australia that provide legal help to over 216,000 people a year, is calling for a collective government response to ensure disadvantaged Australians have equal access to legal assistance services no matter where they live.

The National Partnership Agreement on Legal Assistance (NPA) will cut funding to Community Legal Centres by 30% from 1 July 2017 (\$34.83 million over 3 years). “Unlike other Commonwealth and State partnerships, this NPA is silent about State and Territory contributions. Not only does the NPA compound the inequity in the access to justice for ordinary Australians between jurisdictions, it fails to provide a mechanism to agree appropriate arrangements for current and future government investment in essential community legal services” said Rosslyn Munro, Chair of the National Association of Community Legal Centres (NACLC).

“At this time of heightened awareness about the limitations of Commonwealth/State relations, COAG needs to show positive leadership. We can’t afford for discussions about big, long term policy solutions to deflect from the immediate crisis in the funding of front-line services. Community legal centres already turn away over 160,000 people a year due to inadequate resourcing,” said Ms Munro.

NACLC welcomes the recommendation of the Victorian Royal Commission into Family Violence released yesterday that sets a 12 month plan for COAG’s Law, Crime and Community Safety Council to identify appropriate funding so that legal services can continue vital domestic and family violence work.

“COAG’s stated prioritisation of domestic and family violence is undermined by the Commonwealth Government’s scheduled cuts in the NPA. We call on the Attorney-General Senator Brandis to reverse the cuts so front-line services can survive while the governments work together on a long-term funding solution,” added Ms Munro.

In the open letter to COAG, NACLC calls 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, to 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)
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.

Open the link to view a PDF of the: [Open Letter to COAG 31 March 2016](#)

To arrange an interview contact Rosslyn Munro, NACLC Chairperson, 0407 633 084