

MEDIA RELEASE

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BUDGET CUTS TO LEGAL ASSISTANCE SERVICES HIT VULNERABLE HARDEST

Australia's most vulnerable people who require vital access to legal assistance services have once again been let down by the Federal Government in this year's Budget, says the National Association of Community Legal Centres (NACLC).

The 2016-17 Federal Budget does not reverse the looming funding cuts or include any additional investment in legal assistance service, including Community Legal Centres, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Legal Services, Family Violence Prevention Legal Services or Legal Aid Commissions.

"This year's Budget is a missed opportunity to stop the funding cuts and ensure the most disadvantaged and vulnerable people across Australia have access to legal assistance," NACLC Chairperson Rosslyn Monro said.

"The Government has failed our most vulnerable by not prioritising access to legal help for hundreds of thousands of people across Australia".

"Community Legal Centres helped over 215,000 people with free legal advice last year and had to turn away over 160,000 largely due to lack of funding. These are the people that will suffer as a result of this Budget".

"The unchanged funding in the Budget means the funding cliff for Community Legal Centres under the National Partnership Agreement for Legal Assistance is still a reality, amounting to \$34.83 million cut between 1 July 2017 and 30 June 2020".

"We are also extremely concerned that funding cuts to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Legal Services amounting to over \$6 million between 2014-2015 and 2017-2018 will continue, as will the underfunding of Family Violence Prevention and Legal Services and Legal Aid Commissions".

"We welcome the additional funding for family violence, but it is disappointing that funding does not include funding for legal assistance services".

"Facing a deficit of \$37.1 billion in this Budget we understand the Government needs to make difficult decisions. However, it has ignored the expert recommendations made by bodies such as the Productivity Commission in forming this Budget, in particular the clear view that investing in legal assistance services makes economic sense, and that there is an urgent need for additional funding".

"Time is running out. Community Legal Centres are facing a 30% cut to funding nationally from 1 July next year and hard decisions are already being made about cuts to services and staff."

"The bottom line is that these cuts will have a significant impact on the ability of people across Australia to access the legal help they need. They deserve better. The message in the Budget was that the Government doesn't think this is a priority," Ms Monro concluded.

For further information or to arrange an interview contact: Rosslyn Monro, Chairperson, 0407 633 084; Amanda Alford, Director Policy and Advocacy, 0421 028 645; Jackie Hanafie, Media Adviser, 0412 652 439.

NACLC and CLA acknowledge 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.