



MEDIA RELEASE

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Commonwealth cuts funding for legal assistance for the most vulnerable and disadvantaged, while imprisonment rate of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people soars

The National Association of Community Legal Centres (NACLC) has expressed great concern about the continued and increasing numbers of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people being imprisoned, highlighted in the Productivity Commission *Overcoming Indigenous Disadvantage* report released last week.

“The report shows an increase in the adult imprisonment rate for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people of 57.4% between 2000–2013, while juvenile detention rates have fluctuated at around 24 times the rate for non-Indigenous young people since 2007–2008,” said NACLC National Convenor, Michael Smith. “Meanwhile the Australian Government has already announced funding cuts to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Legal Services (ATSILS) of \$3 million every year from 1 July 2015 onwards, and defunded the ATSILS’ national peak body.”

“With these incarceration rates, the ATSILS could not have kept up with the need for their specialist legal services, even if their funding had been maintained. The cuts exacerbate the crisis. Making matters worse, other legal assistance services are also being cut,” Mr Smith continued.

“The future of the only other legal assistance service dedicated specifically to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, the Family Violence Prevention Legal Services (FVPLS), that provides legal assistance to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander victims of family violence — primarily women and children — remains uncertain after direct funding from the Commonwealth ceased and the services were required to tender for funding under the Indigenous Advancement Strategy”, said Mr Smith. “Those services will not know until March whether they have funding for the 2014–15 year, let alone beyond.”

“Meanwhile, the total funding for community legal centres (CLCs) was cut by the Government by \$19.6 million over 4 years, with about \$4 million of those cuts implemented already and the remaining \$15.6 million to be spread over two years commencing on 1 July 2015.

“Further, there is no suggestion of any additional Commonwealth funding for Legal Aid Commissions. This means that across all four legal assistance providers for disadvantaged people, there is no capacity to meet this increasing demand, particularly for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people needing legal representation in criminal matters, and vulnerable women and children experiencing or at risk of family violence.”

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.

“Governments are not addressing the factors that are leading to this unacceptable level of incarceration for Australia’s First Peoples, and some governments’ policies such as mandatory sentencing are contributing to it.”

“Large funding cuts and uncertainty for legal assistance providers across Australia will have a terrible impact on vulnerable and disadvantaged members of the community, particularly the most disadvantaged, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples,” said Mr Smith.

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For further information or to arrange an interview contact National Convenor Michael Smith on 0421 437 883.