



MEDIA RELEASE

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Independent Review Highlights Community Legal Centre Funding Certainty Crisis

The National Association of Community Legal Centres (NACLC) today welcomed the release of the Final Report of a yearlong review of the *National Partnership Agreement on Legal Assistance Services 2015-2020* (NPA), the key agreement that provides Commonwealth funding to community legal centres.

The NPA Review, completed in late 2018 was released by Attorney-General Christian Porter today and contains 21 recommendations relating to the funding and administration of community legal centres.

“We welcome the release of the Report. Overall it highlights the vital role of community legal centres across Australia and provides an important evidence base for discussions about the funding and administration of community legal centres moving forward” said Nassim Arrage, CEO of NACLC.

“In particular, we welcome recognition in the Report of the value and effectiveness of community legal centres and the positive impact of their work on people, communities and the broader justice system. Importantly, the Report is very clear about the need for greater funding certainty for the sector”.

“However, the Report didn’t go far enough, falling short of recommending an increase in funding for the sector despite the clear need in the face of rising demand for services. We already turn away over 170,000 people every year which means everyday people and people experiencing discrimination and disadvantage are not getting the legal help they need”.

“This need was supported by strong stakeholder feedback about the funding crisis facing the sector, with the Report highlighting stakeholder concerns that “funding levels were a significant barrier to achieving the outcomes and objectives set out in the NPA”.

“This was a missed opportunity to specifically recommend increased funding, in line with numerous previous reports and reviews, including the Productivity Commission of Australia” said Mr Arrage.

“Commonwealth funding for community legal centres finishes on 30 June next year and there is no provision for funding after that date. We continue to call on the Government to make a funding allocation to the sector in the Federal Budget next week over the forward estimates. Otherwise, we face ongoing uncertainty and more importantly our clients and communities face ongoing uncertainty”.

“However, funding for the sector isn’t only the responsibility of the Commonwealth Government. We have been clear and this report is clear about the shared responsibility of Commonwealth, State and Territory Governments in funding the work of the sector as well as the particular leadership role the Commonwealth Government should play”.

There were a range of other important findings and recommendations, including:

- Recognition of the unique and innovative work of the sector
- Recognition of the early intervention and prevention work of the sector and its role in averting or reducing downstream costs which delivers significant value to the government and community, and
- A recommendation about the need to recognise increases in demand for help from community legal centres driven by changes in government policy, legislative and regulatory reform, including through a legal assistance impact test.

“This Report isn’t perfect, but it does provide a useful evidence base for ongoing discussions about ways to ensure the sector is adequately funded and supported, and we continue to provide high quality services to people and communities” added Mr Arrage.

“We look forward to working with the Government to implement the positive elements of the Review, in a way that is sector-led and makes sure we are best supported to help people and communities across Australia who need it most”.

“We also await the Federal Budget next week to see if the Government can provide centres and the people and communities we work with the certainty they so desperately need by providing funding beyond 30 June next year” Mr Arrage concluded.

Background

The *National Partnership Agreement on Legal Assistance Services 2015-2020* (NPA) is the key agreement that provides Commonwealth funding to community legal centres and Legal Aid Commissions. It was reviewed in 2018 by an independent reviewer (Urbis), coordinated by the Commonwealth Attorney-General’s Department.

The current NPA expires on 30 June 2020, with no provision for Commonwealth funding for community legal centres or Legal Aid Commissions after that date. The NPA itself is available here:

<https://www.ag.gov.au/LegalSystem/Legalaidprogrammes/Pages/National-Partnership-Agreement-on-Legal-Assistance-Services.aspx>

The Final Review Report is available here:

<https://www.ag.gov.au/LegalSystem/Legalaidprogrammes/Pages/Legal-assistance-review.aspx>

The main national submission made by NACLCL to the Review is available here:

<http://www.naclc.org.au/resources/181004%20NACLCLNPAReviewMainSubmissionFINAL.pdf>

Information and Contacts

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