



## MEDIA RELEASE

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### Funding Certainty for Community Legal Sector Welcome First Step

The National Association of Community Legal Centres (NACLC), the peak body for community legal centres across Australia, has welcomed the funding certainty provided in the 2019-2020 Federal Budget announced last night but has warned certainty is only the first step to ensuring that people across Australia can access essential legal help.

Core Commonwealth funding for community legal centres was due to finish on 30 June next year, to coincide with the expiration of the *National Partnership Agreement on Legal Assistance Services 2015-2020*, and there had been no provision for Commonwealth funding after that date.

“In a welcome move, this Federal Budget includes funding for community legal centres, Legal Aid Commissions and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Legal Services until 30 June 2022” said Nassim Arrage, CEO of NACLC.

“Funding certainty means that the people and communities we help across Australia know we will be there to help them when they need it most and centres can now plan ahead and make decisions about service delivery, staffing and organisational sustainability”.

“This is an important first step. We now need Government to have a serious look at the level of funding. There have been a number of successive reports over many highlighting rising demand for services and the need for additional funding; it is another missed opportunity to not provide more significant funding increases in line with recommendations made by the Productivity Commission and others”.

“Importantly, funding for the sector is a joint responsibility of the Commonwealth as well as State and Territory Governments, so it is now time State and Territory Governments commit to contributing their share of funding moving forward”.

“We are concerned about the decision for the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Legal Services (ATSILS) funding to be subsumed by a single mechanism. This runs counter to the recent review of ATSILS released by the Attorney-General only last week and it potentially the independence, self-determination and community control of ATSILS. This decision must be reversed”.

“We are also disappointed that there was no additional funding for NACLC or peak community legal sector bodies which play a vital role in supporting the sector, sharing information and engaging with government to ensure delivery of quality services”.

We join ACOSS and other community organisations in expressing concern about a number of Budget decisions, including:

- Income tax cuts which benefit people on high incomes and provide people on the lowest incomes with nothing
- No commitment to increasing Newstart, for the 25<sup>th</sup> consecutive Budget, which means people will be forced to continue to live below the poverty line

- No additional funding for financial counsellors or financial services lawyers in community legal centres in light of clear findings arising from the Banking Royal Commission, despite welcome increases to funding for financial regulators
- No new funding for housing or homelessness services
- The expansion of the discriminatory Cashless Debit Card

However, there were some welcome measures in the Budget, including:

- Small funding increases for the community legal centres of \$7.25 million over 3 years
- Reversal of funding cuts scheduled to hit Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Legal Services (ATSILS)
- An additional \$30.5 million for legal assistance services broadly over 3 years, which is yet to be allocated
- \$528 million to establish a Royal Commission into Violence, Abuse, Neglect and Exploitation of People with Disability, including some additional funding for the provision of legal advice services by community legal services
- Ongoing funding for knowmore, a project of NACLCL, to assist people engaging with the National Redress Scheme arising from the Royal Commission into Institutional Child Sexual Abuse
- Additional funding for family violence under the Fourth Action Plan under the National Plan to Reduce Violence against Women and their Children, social cohesion and mental health services.

## Background

Community legal centres are independent, non-profit, community-based organisations that provide free and accessible legal and related services to everyday people, including people experiencing discrimination and disadvantage. Centres help over 200,000 people every year but are forced to turn away over 170,000 people each year.

Community legal centres provide services across a range of areas of law, primarily civil and family law. The top four areas of law in which centres provided services in 2017-2018 were:

1. Family law (in particular, parenting arrangements)
2. Credit and debt
3. Housing
4. Family violence protection orders

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 which expires on 30 June 2020.

## Key Contacts

For more information or to arrange an interview, please contact:

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