



Cutting funding for community legal services a travesty of justice



JAMES FARRELL

LAST year, Australia's community legal centres provided help to almost 220,000 people.

Fewer and fewer people are able to afford a lawyer to assist them with legal problems, so more people rely on government-funded services when they're facing a crisis.

People like Kate, a 40-something single mother of two. Her former partner is continuing to abuse her and she's frightened for her safety, and the safety of her two sons. While she's trying to formalise the divorce, she's

also been forced to seek a domestic violence order from the courts.

Without a community lawyer standing up for her in court, these problems would have multiplied and the impacts on Kate and her

family would have resulted in serious health and social consequences.

Or Dave, who started a traineeship after he left school. His boss refused to pay him for the overtime he worked and when Dave complained he was sacked, just a few months before his traineeship was supposed to end. A community lawyer helped Dave negotiate the complex legal system to recover his unpaid wages. It meant he was

able to make his rent payment, ensuring that he wasn't evicted into homelessness.

Or Arlia, who needed a

community lawyer's help to escape her violent husband, who'd brought her to Australia on a spousal visa. While he physically assaulted Arlia, he'd remind her that she'd be sent back to the Middle East if she left him. Community lawyers helped Arlia escape the violence and apply to stay in Australia. Arlia is now able to work, and contributes to a number of community organisations.

Community lawyers encounter people with these types of problems every day, and many more, but they just can't meet the demand for their services.

Community legal centres are independent, community-run organisations that provide legal help to people living in poverty. There are more than 30 of these organisations across Queensland, providing legal advice and information,

ongoing representation and support. In addition to these services, community legal centres work to prevent legal problems before they occur, by educating people about their legal rights and responsibilities, and suggesting ways to improve laws and practices, based on our experience working with individual clients.

In Queensland, community legal centres helped almost 50,000 people last year, but another 80,000 were turned away – there people were unable to speak to a lawyer on the phone to

get advice about their rights as a renter, or see a lawyer to get advice about their dispute with a bank, or to get someone to represent them in a divorce proceeding.

Community legal centres are forced to turn away three of every five people who ask

for their help in Queensland.

Rather than increasing the services available to people with legal problems, the federal government has flagged that it will reduce funding for legal assistance services by 30 per cent.

New federal Minister for Women, Michaelia Cash, has acknowledged the cuts to community legal centre funding and said maintaining new funding would be looked at as part of the Government's budget processes.

The acknowledgment of the cuts is welcome, but the real test is whether the Federal Government will commit to concrete actions that will ensure people get access to the legal help they need.

Last year, the Federal Government spent \$728 million on its own lawyers, but it says it can't find

the \$12 million it needs to maintain community legal services across Australia, or even the \$1.8 million to maintain services in Queensland. The money is there, and the Government should prioritise providing help to vulnerable people facing legal crises.

This week, community lawyers visited Canberra to encourage our elected leaders to ensure that these

press clip



Courier Mail Friday 18/03/2016

Page: 36
Section: General News
Region: Brisbane, AU
Circulation: 155282
Type: Capital City Daily
Size: 301.00 sq.cms.



slice
CUT STRAIGHT TO YOUR NEWS

organisations will continue to offer their critical services to people like Kate, Dave and Arlia. If it proceeds with these cuts, the Federal Government is effectively turning disadvantaged Australians away from legal help. We deserve better.

James Farrell is the director of QAILS, the peak organisation for Queensland's community legal centres. www.qails.org.au