

Victims battling legal funding cut

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THE Gold Coast's deplorable boom in domestic violence has led the city's leading community law group to appoint a specialist lawyer, but a looming funding cut could leave victims in the wilderness.

The Gold Coast Community Legal Centre has appointed a solicitor specialising in family, child protection and family law. Funding for the position was applied for after the centre discovered that one in four people who were accessing its services were self-identifying as suffering from domestic violence.

In the first two months of this year, the centre has opened 79 domestic violence cases and given another 152 clients advice on the subject.

This compares with 18 cases and advice for 118 people during the same period last year.

However, while centre head Victoria Sheil said it had obtained funding for the lawyer through to June next year, the position's future was in doubt after that.

A federal government deal to which community legal centres across Australia signed up will see the Gold Coast cen-

tre suffer a 30 per cent drop in funding after June 30, 2017.

Adding to the dilemma, the explosion in domestic violence cases in recent times has sucked oxygen from other services the centre offers.

"We have opened up a lot more of our appointments for domestic violence and domestic law," Ms Sheil said.

"People seeking help with other areas don't have the same access to solicitors.

"There are a lot of resources being cut, but that's why we applied for funding for another solicitor."

She said initiatives such as the city's recently opened domestic violence court were helping reduce the stigma of domestic violence and encouraging more people to seek help.

"The DV court has two magistrates who sit every day. Now they have started sitting some afternoons to cover for people who have come in for emergency hearings," Ms Sheil said.

"When people didn't feel there was anyone they could approach, they wouldn't come forward.

"It's a frightening thing to put yourself out there and ask for help."