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Slashed funding means locals will lose legal support

■ Sherelle Moody

CUTS to funding mean hundreds of Fraser Coast region residents will be in legal limbo from July 1, 2017.

This is because the current Federal Government cut community legal centre funding by 30% in the 2014 budget.

Unlike in the nation's capital cities, there is just one free legal service for our residents to turn to when they are facing problems relating to domestic violence, divorce and separation, child protection, employment, credit, debt and consumer contract issues, disability discrimination, tenancy and neighbourhood disputes and even minor legal issues including driving offences.

Locals who do not qualify for legal aid and who do not have enough cash to hire private solicitors will often seek help at the Taylor Street Community Legal Service.

The service helped more than 900 Fraser Coast residents last financial year.

While it's still unclear how much the service will lose, it was announced in the 2014 Federal Budget that \$12.1 million would be cut nationwide in 2017-18, \$11.6 million would go in 2018-19 and a further \$11.1 million would be cut in 2019-20.

Community Legal Centres Queensland director James Farrell said he expected the funding cut to wipe out some of the centre's outreach services and reduce its team of three solicitors.

"The allocation of funds, including the cuts, will be decided by the government later this year," Mr Farrell said.

"Until then our communities don't have any



CUTS WILL CREATE CRISIS: Community Legal Centres are often the only source of legal support for regional and rural residents to go for advice. PHOTO: THINKSTOCK

“The pending 30% funding cut for community legal centres has not been reversed, which means more and more people will be turned away when they're facing a crisis.”

— Community Legal Centres Queensland director James Farrell

certainly about their legal help.”

Mr Farrell urged Prime Minister Malcolm Turnbull, whose government announced the cuts, and Opposition Leader Bill Shorten to make sure our region got a fair go.

“The pending 30% funding cut for community legal centres has not been reversed, which means more and more people will be turned away when they're facing a crisis,” he said.

“We need to make sure people can access legal services when they're in

crisis.”

There are 198 community legal centres across Australia.

About 77% of Queensland's community legal centre services were provided to regional, rural and remote areas of the state in 2015.

Their support included 100,000 pieces of legal advice to more than 50,000 clients.

Amanda Alford from the National Association of Community Legal Centres said CLCs were often the only source of legal support for regional and rural

BY THE NUMBERS

The Taylor Street Community Legal Service last financial year helped:

- 908 Fraser Coast residents.
 - 470 Bundaberg residents.
 - 368 Gympie residents.
- It provides outreach services to 14 Wide Bay region locations.
Source: Community Legal Centres Queensland

residents, so it was vital the funding cuts were reversed.

“The impact of the cuts on centres in regional areas is likely to be greater because often there's no alternative - there is nowhere else for people to go,” Ms Alford said.

— ARM Newsdesk



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Community Legal Centres Queensland director James Farrell. PHOTO: CONTRIBUTED

Domestic violence cash will not fix community centre funding cuts

WHILE the Federal Coalition has pledged \$30 million over three years for family violence law services, both the Opposition and lawyers say community legal centres are still out in the cold as they try to work out how to absorb a \$34.83 million cut in funding.

Shadow attorney-general Mark Dreyfus said if Labor won the July 2 election, regional CLCs would be in line for a \$43 million boost.

“Community legal centres will fall off a cliff unless the government reverses its earlier cuts in full,” Mr Dreyfus said.

“Many CLCs are struggling to keep their doors open.”

In a media release, Attorney-General George Brandis and Minister for Women Michaelia Cash said a portion of the \$30 million would go to CLC domestic violence services.

“The \$30 million funding is

part of the \$100 million in new funding over three years announced in the 2016 budget to implement the Third Action Plan under the National Plan to Reduce Violence Against Women and Their Children,” they said.

However, Daniel Stubbs from the National Association of Community Legal Centres said this did not cancel out the CLC funding cuts.

“It is difficult to understand why the government would provide CLCs with some share of \$10 million per year as part of this funding, but during the same period cut CLCs by 30% nationally,” Mr Stubbs said.

“It is tantamount to paying for a new roof on a house but removing the foundations at the same time.”

“It's totally inadequate amount for legal assistance services in the face of rising demand and funding cuts.”

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