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# Cuts to community legal aid service hurting those in need



**Sherelle Moody**  
ARM Newsdesk

CUTS to funding mean hundreds of Ipswich 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 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 Advocacy and Support Centre.

TASC helped more than 789 Ipswich, Toowoomba and Warwick residents last

financial year.

The centre opened 485 cases, provided 967 referrals and gave 1856 pieces of advice.

While it's still unclear how much the Ipswich office 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.

**“The right of all people for equal access to justice is compromised**

— Philippa Whitman

TASC chief executive officer Philippa Whitman said she was preparing for the funding cut to hurt programs such as the Regional Women's Outreach Legal Service and the Disability Law Project.

## BY THE NUMBERS

The Advocacy and Support Centre last financial year:

- Provided legal support for 789 Warwick, Toowoomba and Ipswich residents.
- Worked on 485 on-going cases.
- Offered 967 referrals.
- Provided 1856 pieces of advice.

Source: The Advocacy and Support Centre

"Opportunities to expand our services into new areas where we have identified a need are severely limited - for example employment issues, criminal law issues, representation of clients in court who will otherwise be unrepresented," Ms Whitman said.

"The right of all people for equal access to justice is compromised."

Ms Whitman urged

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

"We represent the most vulnerable and marginalised members of our communities," Ms Whitman said.

"How we treat and care for these people is a reflection on us all."

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 residents, so it was vital the



TASC chief executive officer Philippa Whitman PHOTO: FILE

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.

## Demand for help is at an high, yet funds dry up

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 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 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 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," he 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 in the face of rising demand."



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