



# Residents could miss out on a legal fair go

Funding slash hits Mackay community legal centre

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ARM Newsdesk

CUTS to funding mean hundreds of Mackay region residents will be in legal limbo from July 1 next year.

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.

Residents who do not qualify for legal aid and who do not have enough cash to hire private solicitors will often turn to the Mackay Regional Community Legal Centre.

The Mackay CLC is the only legal centre between Rockhampton and Townsville and it helped more than 600 people last financial year.

While it's still unclear how much the Mackay 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.

Mackay CLC manager Jessica Brake said she was



**FUNDING FEARS:** Jessica Brake fears the region's only community legal service will not be able to provide vital family court support for residents if mooted Federal Government funding cuts go ahead.

PHOTO: TONY MARTIN

preparing for the funding cut to increase the centre's five-week waiting list significantly as the organisation reduced its three full-time lawyers to two full-time and one part-time.

She said the cuts could affect hundreds of residents.

"It's probably going to mean we will not be able to do five family law matters and eight general advice appointments each week," Ms Brake said.

She urged Prime Minister Malcolm Turnbull, whose government announced the cuts, and Opposition Leader

## AT A GLANCE

- The Mackay Regional Community Legal Centre helped more than 600 people last financial year.
- It is the only free legal centre between Rockhampton and Townsville.

Source: Community Legal Centres Queensland

Bill Shorten to make sure our region gets a fair go.

"We want the next government to ensure that regional community legal centres receive the funding that we currently receive but we'd love that funding to be increased," she said.

There are 198 community legal centres across all of

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 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.

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## DV services cash will not fix 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 \$34.83m cut in funding.

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

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

Attorney-General George Brandis and Minister for Women Michaelia Cash said a portion of the \$30m would go to CLC domestic violence services. "The \$30m funding is part of the \$100m 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 in a media release.

However, Daniel Stubbs, of 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 \$10m 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."

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