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Residents lose support

Funding cuts mean legal limbo

Sherelle Moody
ARM Newdesk

CUTS to funding mean hundreds of Toowoomba 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.



FAIR GO: The Advocacy and Support Centre chief executive officer Philippa Whitman. PHOTO: CONTRIBUTED



BY THE NUMBERS

The Advocacy and Support Centre last financial year:

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

Source: The Advocacy and Support Centre

TASC helped more than 789 Toowoomba, Warwick and Ipswich 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 Toowoomba 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.

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.

"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 received 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 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.

Drugs, explosives, weapons case back in court

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CHARGES against a Helidon man who police claim had drugs, explosives and weapons on his property which was subject of police search, have again been adjourned in the Toowoomba Magistrates Court.

John Barker, 35, has been held in custody since his arrest in December and was not in Toowoomba Magistrates Court yesterday for the brief mention of his matters.

The 35 charges he is facing arise from a police search of his Helidon Dip Rd property in December where police claim they found a hydroponic marijuana drug lab as well as booby traps and security cameras.

Three motorbikes believed stolen were also found and the Bomb Squad from Brisbane detonated several alleged home made explosive devices on scene.

Barker has not as yet been required to enter any pleas to the 35 charges against him which include producing and possessing dangerous drugs, possessing explosives and possessing drug related material.

Defence solicitor Nathan Bouchier, acting for Barker's legal representatives from the Brisbane-based Mulcahy Ryan Lawyers, told the court his principals had received the police brief of evidence pertaining to the case but were still awaiting analysis certificates on the alleged substances seized.

The case would eventually have to go up to the higher court, he said.

Magistrate Bruce Schemioneck therefore remanded Barker in custody and adjourned the case for committal mention on July 5.

Cash will not fix community centre cuts

Sherelle Moody
ARM Newdesk

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

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

— Daniel Stubbs from the National Association of Community Legal Centres

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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