

Door slams shut for Cairns residents seeking legal help

Recently published results from the National Association of Community Legal Centres census showed that each day seven Cairns residents are reaching out for free legal help, but only four receive the help they need. The other four were often returning to violent homes, facing possible homelessness or family law issues.

Giselle Negri, Director, Cairns Community Legal Centre commented, 'Insufficient funding means that we have to limit the number of consultations that we can provide, and we are forced to refer people away. Sometimes we can't get people in for an appointment for 3 weeks, and people just aren't able to wait that long when they have pressing legal problems. They give up hope. Our ability to assist those in crisis and needing urgent assistance is also impacted.'

James Farrell, Director of Community Legal Centres commented, 'Our census showed that the situation will get worse as our centres are facing funding cuts over the next twelve months which will see a further reduction in services and outreach, closure of branch offices and telephone advice lines, and loss of staff.'

'Our census results showed us that each year Queensland's community legal centres turn away over 58,000 people and the top three reasons people access a community legal centre is for domestic/family violence, homelessness and family law issues. Over 15% of people coming to a centre was Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander and more than a quarter tell us they have a disability. It's these vulnerable Cairns residents that are missing out on the legal help they needed,' said Mr Farrell.

"Our census showed that community legal centres are also being forced to spend more and more time on searching for funding to maintain crucial services. 28 community legal centres report spending 247 hours per week in 2014/15 financial year on funding-related activities. This means less time is available to provide legal assistance to clients" concluded Mr Farrell.

The national survey looked at the work undertaken by community legal centres over a twelve month period. In summary, the Census revealed that in 2014-15:

- The top 3 specialist areas or client groups for Queensland's community legal centres were domestic/family violence (46.0%), homelessness (41.1%) and family law (40.3%)
- The average proportion of Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander clients was 15.3% and of clients with disability was 26.6%.
- 28 community legal centres in Queensland turned away 58,000 people over a twelve month period
- 1,750 volunteers contributed 96,000 hours to 28 community legal centres across Queensland
- 48% of Qld community legal centres have a formal arrangement with a university to offer clinical legal education to students

Ends

NOTES:

Community Legal Centres Queensland Inc (formerly QAILS) is the state-wide peak body representing community legal centres in Queensland. Queensland community legal centres have 40 years of service delivery experience providing free information, advice and referral, casework and representation to the community. www.communitylegalqld.org.au

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