

Queensland Parliament Hansard Green

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SUBJECT: Community Legal Centres, Funding

MEMBER: Ms LINARD

Community Legal Centres, Funding



Ms LINARD (Nudgee—ALP) (11.57 am): Every week my office has someone walk through the door who is in desperate need of legal assistance on domestic violence, complex family or child protection and/or custody issues, debt, consumer law and employment law matters. These are members of the community who have low or no income, who may be experiencing disadvantage and vulnerability and who may be at the absolute limit of their personal reserves. They are simply not able to meet the financial cost of private legal assistance and advocacy and have nowhere else to turn. I have no doubt that members across the House similarly experience this need within their communities.

Community legal centres represent an essential free and independent legal service directed at the most disadvantaged within our communities. According to Community Legal Centres Queensland, last financial year Queensland's community legal centres helped almost 60,000 vulnerable Queenslanders and had to turn away a similar number. Their average client is female and aged 35 to 49 who receives less than \$500 per week, many with dependent children, and does not live in stable housing and one in six identify as having a disability. These people are dealing with increasingly complex legal issues due to a multitude of factors including social and financial disadvantage, cultural and ethically relevant issues, mental health issues and the increase in people coming forward regarding family and domestic violence. With regard to many of the matters community legal centres deal with, an estimated 40 per cent to 60 per cent are family law matters that fall within the Federal Court jurisdiction. With these figures in mind, it is impossible to comprehend how the Commonwealth government could cut almost 30 per cent of funding to these centres across Australia in 2017 and further entrench disadvantage in our communities.

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While the Commonwealth government spends over \$700 million on its own lawyers, it seemingly cannot find \$2 million to continue providing legal assistance for Queenslanders facing legal crisis. This funding cut is a direct attack on the most vulnerable within our communities and more of the same from this and the previous LNP federal government. A justice system that provides individuals with access to justice at the earliest opportunity promotes early resolution of legal issues and reduces the ongoing impact of such issues on those individuals, the community and, ultimately, government resources. If governments do not provide for those who are at greatest risk of entrenched disadvantage, surely we must then ask: who are they serving?

Last year alone, the Nundah Community Legal Service, which services my community, assisted 2,777 people with information and referral requests and provided legal advice and information to 760 clients. This co-located service with the Nundah Neighbourhood Centre services a large geographical region—from Brisbane CBD to Pine Rivers, extending to Shorncliffe and Sandgate. The Nundah Community Legal Service harnesses the energy and expertise of 50 volunteer solicitors and legal students—many local—who have a strong community connection. Their current service delivery model consists of appointments with a general solicitor Tuesday to Friday, 9.30 to 3 pm or a Wednesday evening walk-in service from 6.15 pm to 8.30 pm with specialist solicitors who have expertise in the areas of family law, employment, wills and estates, debt and consumer law, child protection and domestic violence. This co-located service is highly valued and trusted by the local community.

In the 2014 *Access to justice arrangements* report by the Productivity Commission, the Nundah Community Legal Service was highlighted as best practice in delivering holistic services by a co-location, allowing for seamless service delivery and providing a more client focused approach to resolving problems. The Nundah Community Legal Service is an essential part of the community legal service sector and provides services that are cost effective, accessible and community focused to the north Brisbane region—a region where the demand for services is significant and growing. A removal of the legal service, or a 30 per cent reduction in funding to community legal services across this state, will result in additional risk for individuals and families in need of such support.

Although, gratefully, the Nundah Community Legal Service services my electorate, it is not physically located within my electorate. It is located a few hundred metres from the boundary in the electorate of Clayfield. Disappointingly, I have not heard the opposition leader stand in this House and give voice to this vital service that is located in his electorate. So I will.

Attorneys-general across the country have joined together, put politics aside and signed a joint letter calling on the federal Attorney-General to stop the cuts. The heads of Australia's eight law societies have joined together and last week signed a joint letter calling on the Prime Minister and the federal Attorney-General, George Brandis, to stop the cuts. Earlier this month, the Queensland Attorney-General and member for Redcliffe called on the shadow Attorney-General and member for Mansfield, or the opposition leader, who himself lays claim to a vital community legal service at Nundah in his electorate, to put politics aside and call on the federal Attorney-General to stop the cuts.

(Time expired)