

Community legal body hopes for no further cuts

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WITH federal government funding cuts to community legal centres due to take effect next year, Suncoast Community Legal Service is worried it is about to fall "off a funding cliff".

The federal government handed responsibility for distributing funding to community legal centres to the states in July last year and centre managers are submitting tenders and hoping their funding will stay in place for next year.

With 30% of funds cut across the country in the 2014 federal budget, there will have to be losers in this model, SCLS principal solicitor Julian Porter said.

"We don't know who's going to get the chop. There is uncertainty within the sector as to how this funding will be distributed," he said.

"We need some clarity if we're still going to be able to offer our services into the future.

"It's absolutely essential that we move away from the current model of funding."

Labor senator for Queensland Chris Ketter was in Maroochy last week to hear from solicitors and volunteers.

"These funding cuts will

leave real uncertainty in the sector, people need to be able to access practical legal advice," Senator Ketter said.

"This is a service we cannot afford to lose."

Federal Member for Fairfax Ted O'Brien said the Suncoast legal service played "an important role in providing access to justice".

"I support ongoing government funding for their operations," he said.

"I would happily support efforts by the Suncoast Community Legal Service to advocate to the State Government to carve out sufficient funds for them to continue their operations."

He said he "could only assume" the five-year National Partnership

Agreement on Legal Assistance Services that governed the current funding decision-making framework had been made voluntarily by both state and federal signatories.

"I'm more than happy to be briefed by the local community service and legal sector on their needs on the matter and if there's a need to speak directly with the Attorney-General," he said.

"However, my understanding is it's already been agreed upon by the Attorney-General and the

State Government, so to go back now and try to undo a five-year agreement is unlikely."

Mr Porter said the service would submit a tender to the state Department of Justice, and hoped decision makers would recognise the work SCLS did for the Coast community by retaining its funding.

"The truth of the matter is we may be about to fall off a funding cliff," he said.



WORRIED: Principal solicitor with Suncoast Community Legal Service Julian Porter.