



Battlers could lose legal help

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SOLICITORS at a legal service helping battlers in Mackay and further afield are concerned funding is going to be slashed, badly affecting an already stretched organisation.

Mackay Regional Community Legal Centre helps dozens of disadvantaged Mackay, Whitsunday and Isaac residents each week, delivering outreach programs, and providing legal assistance from its Victoria Street office.

There's a four-week waiting list at the centre, which has been as lengthy as six weeks in recent times, for free help relating to family violence, relationship breakdowns and family law, debt and consumer problem, tenancy disputes and employment issues.

Queensland Attorney-General and Minister for Justice Yvette D'Ath has told the Mackay centre the Federal Government will cut \$42.2 million in funding from the National Partnership Agreement on Legal

Most needy will be hit by funding cuts

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Assistance by July 1.

Queensland community legal centres would lose \$2 million – from \$8.9 million in funding in 2015-16 to \$6.9 million in 2017-18, Mrs D'Ath said.

The legal centre needed more funding, certainly not less, principal solicitor Jessica Brake and solicitor Nikki Hancock said.

They're still trying to find out exactly how much their centre would lose, but outreach services would be cut, waiting lists would blow out and fewer appointments would help fewer clients, Miss Brake said.

Each day, she sees clients drowning in debt, suffering family violence or struggling with work-related problems.

“The most distressing part is that our centre often



Principal solicitor Jessica Brake. PHOTO: TONY MARTIN

prevents people's legal problems from escalating,” she said.

“The Federal Government will save money, but if my clients don't resolve their legal problems there will be flow-on effects ...”

Ms Hancock's baffled why cuts are proposed to services critical to people who can't afford a lawyer or

aren't eligible for government legal aid.

“We currently have two part-time admin staff and two full-time solicitors. So, potentially we'd lose one of our admin staff and reduce the hours of one of our full-time solicitors,” she said. “That waiting period would increase ... It has been longer than four weeks, it was six weeks at the end of last year. It could increase to that or even longer.”

She extended an invitation to politicians to “come down and see what we do, see the impact we do have on people who really need free legal assistance”.

“Particularly in this area where there has been that (economic) downturn, we've seen a lot of people with bankruptcy and debt issues who need urgent assistance. We can't always provide that to everyone who needs it right now.”

Community Legal Centres Queensland has been fighting to stop any cuts, Ms Hancock said.