

Fraser Coast community legal centre fears for its future



Eliza Wheeler | 5th Mar 2017 5:00 AM



The Taylor Street Legal Centre fears their funding may be cut by the Federal Government.

Valerie Horton

A FRASER Coast-based community legal service has voiced fears of funding cuts, as the Federal Government is set to scale back the services' funding by \$12.1 million across Australia, but the region's federal members say funding is increasing for the Fraser Coast centre.

The Palaszczuk Government has announced that under the National Partnership Agreement on Legal Assistance, national funding for Community Legal Centres will drop from \$42.2 million in 2016-17 to \$30.1 million in 2017-18.

Queensland's share will be cut by \$2 million - from \$8.9 million in 2015-16 to \$6.9 million in 2017-18, which Attorney-General and Minister for Justice Yvette D'Ath said would stop some Fraser Coast residents being able to access free legal help through the Taylor Street Community Legal Service.

The Taylor Street CLS supports people struggling with debt, family violence, relationship breakdowns, tenancy and employment issues.

Taylor Street CLS Principal Solicitor Melissa Seymour Dearness said their waiting lists were already up to three weeks and this would increase if the Federal Government slashed funding.

"If the Federal Government proceeds with the funding cuts, our centre will have to reduce staffing levels and services which will likely result in closure of some of our outreach venues," Ms Seymour Dearness said.

"We would have to end the free legal advice we provide to about 1,500 people per year and those needing urgent legal advice will be heavily impacted."

In light of the fears of funding cuts, Federal Member for Hinkler Keith Pitt and Federal Member for Wide Bay Llew O'Brien said the Commonwealth funding for the Taylor Street Centre had increased by 150% since 2010; from \$115,484 in 2010-11 to \$292,640 in 2016-17.

"In addition to the funding increase, the Coalition Government is delivering \$45 million in targeted frontline legal assistance services as part of our \$200 million investment to provide services and reduce family violence. \$16.5 million of this is going directly to community legal centres," Mr O'Brien said.

"With increased Federal Government funding, it's hard to see how the service can justify the claim advanced in the question that it needs to cut staff, close offices and cut services."

Although the Palaszczuk Government has announced it is calling on the Turnbull Government to reverse the cuts, Mr O'Brien said he was "disappointed" the organisation did not directly approach him to convey their concerns about funding.

Mr Pitt said the LNP supported the important work of the legal assistance sector and was providing "substantial funding to front-line services who help those who need it most".

The Hinkler MP said when Labor was in Government, the former Attorney-General Mark Dreyfus set aside funding, but decided it would "expire on June 30 2017".

"This is the 'Dreyfus funding cliff'," Mr Pitt said.

"A direct result of decisions the former Attorney-General made but now, with trademark hypocrisy, criticises."



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