

No definitive answer over legal aid cuts

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CENTRAL Queensland's frontline legal service could face crippling cuts as the future of federal legal aid funding remains uncertain.

Labor Senator for Queensland Chris Ketter visited Rockhampton last Thursday to hear from the Central Queensland Community Legal Centre (CQCLC) staff how proposed federal funding arrangements would limit their services.

The CQCLC is the only service of its kind in Central Queensland and provides free legal advice – particularly on family, employment and criminal law – for those who cannot afford it or don't qualify for legal aid.

In April this year, Attorney General George Brandis delivered his long-awaited response to the Productivity Commission's 2014 report on legal aid, in which he made no new funding commitments and argued the Federal Government was constrained by the financial climate.

The Commission found the Federal and State governments needed to inject an extra \$200 million into the sector every year to help it meet growing demand for services.

During his visit, Sen Ketter claimed the CQCLC could see an estimated 30



UNCERTAINTY: CQLS solicitor Flora Wellington, Labor Senator for Queensland Chris Ketter, CQUniversity student Justin French and CQLS vice-president Wayne Jones met in Rockhampton to discuss proposed funding cuts to the centre.

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per cent of its allocated federal resources axed come July 2017.

"These funding cuts will leave real uncertainty in the sector, people need to be able to access practical legal advice," Sen Ketter said.

"Under the current funding arrangements, the community legal centre has already had to turn around more than 480 cases because they simply can't cope with the workload.

"If there are further cuts it will have a detrimental impact on the ground."

Sen Ketter said solicitors he had spoken to feared the cuts would result in more people "being on the street".

"I call on Michelle Landry to raise this issue with the

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Attorney General to provide some clarity around the future funding of the Central Queensland Community Legal Centre," Sen Ketter said.

When contacted for comment, Michelle Landry's office referred The Morning Bulletin on to the Attorney General Senator George Brandis' office, which

suggested Senator Ketter raise the issue with former Labor Attorney General Mark Dreyfus.

"The Coalition Government struck a landmark five-year National Partnership Agreement last year delivering over \$1.3 billion in Commonwealth funding to legal aid commissions and community legal centres, which increases funding over the life of the agreement," an Office of the Attorney General spokesperson said.

"The government is also providing \$350 million for indigenous legal assistance services.

"In addition, it has provided \$45 million for frontline legal assistance services for victims of family violence and restored a further \$25.5 million in funding to the legal assistance sector.

"In government the Labor Party, through Mark Dreyfus, allocated an amount of funding to expire under terms he set, on June 30, 2017. Mr Dreyfus owns that funding drop and if Senator Ketter is serious with his concerns over funding he should be raising them with Mr Dreyfus."

CQCLC vice-president Wayne Jones said "we need to move away from the current model of funding" and to a structure that guaranteed at least five years' worth of funding.