

Queensland refugee legal advice service under threat

Queensland refugees won't be able to access free legal services if planned funding cuts go ahead, a service provider has warned.

Community Legal Centres across the country are facing a 30 per cent drop in funding as of July this year.

The Refugee and Immigration Legal Service (RAILS) is already struggling to cope with an alarming number of calls from refugees looking for legal assistance without further funding cuts.

RAILS Director Greg Mackay said everyone in our community deserved a fair decision making process about their legal rights, particularly when their freedom and safety were at risk.

"Without access to justice for persons seeking protection in Australia individuals become disheartened and desperate and we see people's mental health deteriorate," said Mr Mackay.

"Loss of funding will mean loss of legal assistance for women suffering from family violence seeking to separate from their Australian sponsor, permanent residents and citizens seeking to reunite with families overseas, prisoners seeking advice on visa cancellations and those seeking protection from persecution, torture and other inhumane and degrading punishment.

"We are seeing more and more people caught up in what seems like an endless cycle of disadvantage: they experience a set-back, whether personal or financial or losing a job, are not able to deal well with the situation and end up needing what is often fairly straight-forward legal advice or assistance."

Sue Hutchinson, Co-convenor of the Brisbane Refugee and Asylum Seekers Support Network (BRASS) confirmed this view, "BRASS members know that these people who have sought safety in Australia are already very vulnerable. They need access to highly specialised legal services which understand their particular needs as refugees.

"The proposed cuts to Community Legal Centres' funding will reduce RAILS' capacity to provide proper assistance and advice to these people who have already experienced significant trauma, war and other difficulties in their lives. To add to that disadvantage by cutting funding to RAILS is simply unacceptable," Ms Hutchinson went on to say.

The National Association of Community Legal Centres is still hoping to convince the Federal Government to wind back the planned funding cuts.

According to Community Legal Centres Queensland Director James Farrell only half the people who contact a community legal centre will have access to the help they need.

"The remaining 50 per cent are turned away because we just don't have the resources we need to provide help for everyone who qualifies," he said.

'In July this year the Commonwealth Government will cut almost 30 per cent of funding to community legal centres across Australia.

"Community Legal Centres Queensland and BRASS are calling on Malcolm Turnbull and George Brandis to reverse this decision to ensure refugees get the legal help they need and the justice they deserve."

-Ends-

NOTES:

1. Community Legal Centres Queensland Inc (formerly QAILS) is the state-wide peak body representing community legal centres in Queensland. Queensland community legal centres have 40 years of service delivery experience providing free information, advice and referral, casework and representation to the community. www.communitylegalqld.org.au
2. The Brisbane Refugee and Asylum Seeker Support Network (BRASS) brings together over 900 organisations, community groups, churches and individuals who work together to ensure refugees and people seeking asylum receive the support they need in our communities.

MEDIA CONTACT:

Catherine Baker, Communications Manager, Community Legal Centres Queensland

Email: Communications@communitylegalqld.org.au / Phone: (07) 3392 0092 / 0432 105 415

Merrett Pye, Director, Altitude Public Relations

Email: merrett@altitudepr.com.au / Phone: 0422 096 049

Caroline Thurlow, Director, Altitude Public Relations

Email: caroline@altitudepr.com.au / Phone: 0414 565 575