



 Lindsay Nicholson (outreach lawyer) at South West Brisbane Community Legal Centre, Inala. Picture: Patria Jannides

Local

Community legal centre funding cuts hurt vulnerable

Emma Schafer, David Alexander, Quest Newspapers

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A LOOMING funding cut to community legal centres could leave vulnerable families out in the cold.

Community legal centres, including the South West Brisbane Community Legal Centre at Inala and the Pine Rivers Community Legal Centre, are facing a 30 per cent cut to Federal Government funding from July this year.

Under the National Partnership Agreement on Legal Assistance, Queensland's funding will be cut by \$2 million – from \$8.9 million in 2015-16 to \$6.9 million in 2017-18

The centres provide free legal advice and information to disadvantaged community members who cannot afford a lawyer and are not eligible for government legal aid.

Acting South West Community Legal Centre director Jonathan Ward said there was high demand for the service, with an average 35 appointments booked weekly to provide advice about family law, domestic violence and child protection issues.

There was a five week waiting list for assistance.

The Pine Rivers centre assisted more than 5000 people in 2016 with legal advice and information.

Bray Park principal solicitor Louise Skidmore said people struggling with family separation, children's matters, debt and family violence came into the centre on a daily basis.

"The situation is untenable because it means 'early' access to legal advice and information for those who cannot afford a solicitor will be almost impossible," she said.

The National Association of Community Legal Centres hopes to convince the Federal Government to wind back the planned cuts.

Attorney-General and Minister for Justice Yvette D'Ath urged the Federal Government to reverse the funding cuts.

"These people are among the most disadvantaged in our communities and we need to support them as much as possible and think about how much we can help them," she said.

However, Member for Dickson Peter Dutton, whose electorate covers the Pine Rivers Community Legal Centre, said funding for the centre had actually increased by 75 per cent under the Coalition and quadrupled since 2010.

"Total Commonwealth funding to Queensland Community Legal Centres has also increased by 40 per cent under the Coalition Government," he said.

ATTORNEY-GENERAL TIGHT-LIPPED

A spokesman for the Office of the Attorney-General won't confirm if funding cuts to community legal centres would be wound back before July this year.

"The government supports the important work of the legal assistance sector and is providing substantial funding to frontline services to help those who need it most," she said.

“Even in a resource constrained environment, the government is providing over \$1.6 billion for legal aid, community legal centres and indigenous legal assistance between 2015 and 2020.”

Meanwhile, in a Queensland first, domestic violence victims attending Logan Hospital will be able to [access legal help there as well as medical care](#).

A specialist domestic violence lawyer is now embedded at the hospital to provide discreet and free legal help to women at risk.