

Battlers could miss out on legal support if funds are cut



Luke Mortimer | 7th Mar 2017 2:02 PM



Mackay Regional Community Legal Centre solicitor Nikki Hancock is concerned the Federal Government is going to cut funds to the service in coming months. It would have a dire impact on legal services the centre can offer disadvantaged members of the community.

Luke Mortimer

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 \$42.2million in funding from the National Partnership Agreement on Legal Assistance by July 1.

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

The Mackay 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 Ms Hancock said it was likely an administration staff member would be out of a job and a solicitor would have their hours cut.

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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.



Principal solicitor Jessica Brake from Mackay Regional Community Legal Centre is concerned funding cuts will badly impact legal services offered.

Tony Martin

"The most distressing part is that our centre often 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, including stress and health problems for the person and significant costs to the broader community."

Ms Hancock said she's personally

baffled why cuts are proposed to vital legal services, critical for 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, of course. 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. The Productivity Commission recommended last year more money should go into community legal centres. Instead, it's been cut.

"There's a lot of people across the region who have various issues and sometimes if we can't help them for however many weeks, things may be worsened by that waiting period. We have to come up with ways to deal with this when it happens."

Ms Hancock said the Commonwealth funding for legal centres was being administered by the State "and we have to tender for what we already have, plus extra that we need".

"We won't get any extra and we will lose what we've already got," she said, extending an invitation to regional 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 funding cuts, Ms Hancock said.

Daily Mercury