

## THE AUSTRALIAN

### The big winners are indigenous services and support for victims of domestic violence



Federal Attorney-General George Brandis.

GEORGE BRANDIS THE AUSTRALIAN 12:00AM April 28, 2017

Last Monday, Minister for Women Michaelia Cash, Minister for indigenous Affairs Nigel Scullion and I announced the investment of an additional \$55.7 million of federal grants to the legal assistance sector.

All of this is new money, bringing the federal government's support for the sector over the five-year period to 2020 to a record \$1.73 billion.

With the additional funding announced this week, the commonwealth's contribution to access to justice over the next three years will be the highest amount any federal government, Liberal or Labor, has ever contributed to the sector: some \$350m a year.

Of the additional \$55.7m, \$39m will be paid to community legal centres (CLCs), to be used specifically for their domestic and family violence programs. The remaining \$16.7m will be paid to provide further federal government support for indigenous legal assistance.

Monday's announcement is important for three reasons. First, of course, there are the additional resources made available to the sector where, as I have often said, the demand for services almost always outstrips availability.

Yet it is vital, in a just and civilised society, that we find the money to help those who need it most, and direct it to the most vulnerable.

While this is a responsibility that the commonwealth shares with the states and territories, I am delighted that two state governments — the Liberal governments of NSW and Tasmania — have also announced an increase in their contributions to CLCs.

With the exception of the government of Western Australia, none of the Labor state and territory governments, who always talk a big game when it comes to social justice, has put dollars where their words are.

Second, the announcement gives certainty to a sector that has suffered from ad hoc policy for years. Most of the \$39m for CLCs has been paid to remove the "Dreyfus funding cliff", which the sector faced on June 30.

Its origin lay in the shortsighted decision of the former attorney-general, in the last Labor budget in 2013, to provide a one-off ad hoc payment, outside core funding, which would expire after four years.

Although welcome at the time, the extra funding was engineered to end in 2017.

Not only has the Turnbull government reversed that decision; importantly we have built the ongoing payments into core federal legal aid funding, delivered through the national partnership agreement.

When that agreement is renegotiated ahead of its expiry in 2020, the additional funding will form part of the baseline for future agreements.

Third, we have made clear where our priorities lie: with the most vulnerable. All of the new money will go to frontline responders to domestic and family violence, and indigenous legal services.

It was for that reason that we chose the Women's Legal Service at Annerley in Brisbane as the venue for the announcement. To appreciate the magnitude of the task, appreciate that last year WLS helped more than 11,000

women and 17,000 children.

In recent years, public awareness and understanding of family violence has grown strongly.

This is an important development in addressing the scourge and protecting those affected.

It has helped to remove stigma and other barriers that have, traditionally, deterred people from seeking help. It has also better equipped us as a society to give practical, effective support.

Yet, as the national conversation continues to gain momentum, demand for legal services helping family violence victims has increased.

Consequently, the legal profession and the legal sector, along with many of my parliamentary colleagues, have made constructive representations to the federal government about the extra pressure being placed on service providers. The government has listened and acted.

Monday's funding announcement comes on top of the \$15m investment in frontline legal services announced in September, 2015, as part of the women's safety package, \$30m in family violence prevention services announced in the third action plan on the prevention of violence against women and their children, and other earlier funding announcements.

All told, with Monday's announcement, the federal government has over the past two years injected an extra \$126m into the legal assistance sector.

At a time when the budget remains under pressure, it is important that governments nevertheless recognise need where it arises and provide the resources to address it.

It is also important that those who cater to that need be given the certainty of long-term funding.

As a longstanding friend and supporter of community legal centres, particularly in my home city of Brisbane, I am very proud to be part of a government which has done both.

*George Brandis is the federal Attorney-General*

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