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PRO BONO ON THE RISE AMID FEARS OF LEGAL FUNDING CUTS

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A NEW survey has revealed that the average Australian lawyer committed almost a full working week to pro bono tasks in 2016, up a further 9.7 per cent from 2014.

The Report on the Fifth National Law Firm Pro Bono Survey revealed that firms which employ between 201 and 449 full-time equivalent (FTE) lawyers led the way regarding percentage of pro bono work done by individuals.

Lawyers in these firms spent almost 36 hours on pro bono work in 2016, while lawyers at smaller firms between 50-200 FTE staff spent around 22 hours on pro bono projects.

The survey also identified key sectors where the largest amount of charitable action took place.

One of the biggest growth areas in 2016 was immigration, which largely included servicing the legal needs of asylum seekers.

Around 40 per cent of firms in the survey listed immigration in their top five areas of pro bono practice for 2016, up a sharp 15 per cent from 2014.

On the flipside, family law and criminal law were the areas where requests for pro bono assistance were most often rejected by large firms.

While the survey confirms that lawyer charity is on the rise, some groups are concerned that it's not enough to fix Australia's struggling public legal assistance sector.

The government is scheduled to retract further funds from community legal centres in the upcoming federal budget, an action which the Law Council of Australia says will have severe consequences on the system.

"Scheduled funding cuts to Community Legal Centres (CLCs) will amount to a loss of \$35 million between 2017 and 2020 that's a 30 per cent cut to Commonwealth funding for services that are already chronically under-resourced," says Law Council of Australia President Fiona McLeod.

"Last year CLCs were forced to turn away 160,000 people seeking legal assistance. These cuts will lead to 36,000 fewer clients assisted, and 46,000 fewer advices provided."

McLeod says the productivity commission has called for a \$200 million lifeline to offset the effects of any proposed funding cuts in the long term.

She congratulated the efforts of lawyers who engage in pro bono work, but emphasises the importance of a strong legal assistance sector for support.

"The pro bono work undertaken by Australian lawyers should be a matter of enormous pride for the profession," says McLeod.

"But if pro bono is to be truly effective it needs a strong legal assistance sector."



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