

## Law school deans link arms in fight to preserve aid funding

Katie Walsh

Deans of law schools across the nation have combined to lobby the federal government to stop cutting funds to legal assistance, which they say will deny access to thousands of people and pressure the private sector to plug the gap.

Pressure is building on Attorney-General George Brandis from across the legal profession, after corporate law firms warned they could not fill the void and the Australian Bar Association launched a campaign to promote access to justice through proper funding.

"Reduced funding will mean diminished service capacity, which will have flow-on effects throughout the sector

and ultimately on the effective and efficient administration of the justice system as a whole," warn 33 law school deans from across the nation in an open letter to the federal government.

Federal funding to community legal centres is due to fall by 30 per cent from July 1, in a funding cliff the Coalition blames on the former Labor government's failure to provide for funding beyond four years. Labor argues the funding program was consistent with common four-year cycle budgeting practice and is pressing the government to extend it.

The debate over blame is of little consequence for the sector, which now faces very real cuts threatening the

existence of some and the ability of others to help those in need.

The law school deans warn the cuts will undermine their "ability to educate the next generation of lawyers about the importance of access to justice in Australia", by threatening strategic relationships with community legal centres to offer clinical programs in which students can cut their teeth.

"We call on the Australian government to reverse the cuts and invest in the legal assistance sector to promote access to justice for people across Australia," the deans write.

Among the 33 signatories are Western Sydney University's Professor Michael Adams, University of Western

Australia's Associate Professor Natalie Skead, UNSW's Professor George Williams, Adelaide's Professor Melissa de Zwart, and University of Canberra's Associate Professor Lorana Bartels.

"Law schools are part of the wider legal community which understands how important it is to support access to justice," Melbourne Law School dean and signatory Carolyn Evans said.

Clinical experience provided "invalu-

able support to vulnerable people who might otherwise be denied legal support", she added.

Community Legal Centres Queensland director James Farrell said clinical legal education was important for building a lawyer's "empathy and practice skills" in addition to the critical support it provided.

"We know that thousands more people will miss out on legal help with these federal funding cuts," he said.

"The impact of these funding cuts have been recognised by lawyers, community organisations, domestic violence services, churches, and now the deans of Australia's law schools."

On Friday night, Senator Brandis succumbed under threat of a contempt of court order to a freedom of information request from shadow attorney-general Mark Dreyfus, releasing his diaries, which revealed he had not engaged in extensive consultation with the legal assistance sector about cuts.