

Federal funding for community legal centres welcomed

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Fears increasing numbers of desperate Queenslanders would be turned away from community legal centres amid funding cuts have been quashed after a last-minute reprieve.

The federal government was due to effectively take \$35 million from the sector, which gives free legal help to disadvantaged and vulnerable people in 190 centres across Australia, under funding arrangements due to start on July 1.

However, on Monday, federal Attorney-General George Brandis pledged \$55.7 million in extra funding over the next three years, to be confirmed in the May budget.

The 11th-hour win comes after months of campaigning from lawyers, Labor and state governments.

The funding includes \$39 million for community legal centres – prioritising family law and domestic violence services – and \$16.7 million for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Legal Services.

The federal government is describing it as the "largest ever Commonwealth investment in legal assistance services", totalling \$1.73 billion.

The funding allocation will be finalised with states and territories under the National Partnership Agreement.

Community Legal Centres Queensland director James Farrell said the announcement meant access to justice would be available to everyone, no matter the "size of their bank account".

"Community legal centres will be able to continue providing legal help to women leaving violent relationships, parents struggling to care for their children, workers who aren't paid or are unfairly sacked, tenants threatened with illegal evictions and older people whose financial assets are taken by their carers," Mr Farrell said.

But Mr Farrell said ongoing uncertainty about the "funding cliff" meant some services had already been significantly reduced.

"Queensland's community legal centres were forced to turn away half of the people who reached out for help last year, so the last thing that Queenslanders needed was a reduction in the services available to help them solve their legal problems," he said.

Queensland Attorney-General Yvette D'Ath welcomed the funding but questioned why it took so long to be announced.

"I am relieved that George Brandis has listened to reason, but the uncertainty has been deeply troubling for centres who have had to turn vulnerable people away," Ms D'Ath said.

Earlier this month, the Palaszczuk government announced \$51.3 million in combined state and federal government funding for 36 Queensland community legal centres over the next three financial years.

That included funding the volunteer-run LGBTI Legal Service for the first time.

Women's Legal Service Queensland chief executive Angela Lynch said services were in a desperate situation across the country and were grateful that cuts were being reversed.

"Already 50 per cent of calls to our helpline go unanswered," she said.

"At current capacity and demand levels we are predicting 9000 missed calls in 2017.

"Not just maintaining, but increasing funding to services like ours is so critical – it really can be the difference between life and death for many women and children."

In March, the WLSQ received the largest number of calls to its domestic violence helpline since it opened – with more than 1500 incoming calls for help.

Queensland Council for Civil Liberties president Michael Cope said the federal government should go further and find long-term sources of funding.

Mr Cope suggested possible sources of funding, such as a special industry levy on alcohol and gambling, a speeding fine levy or a high income corporation levy.

This story was found at: <http://www.brisbanetimes.com.au/queensland/federal-funding-for-community-legal-centres-welcomed-20170424-gvr6vt.html>