

Federal budget 2017: George Brandis to reverse community legal centre cuts

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The Turnbull government has abandoned plans to slash millions of dollars in funding from community legal centres after coming under intense pressure from lawyers, Labor and the states.

The 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 new funding arrangements due to start on July 1.

Legal centres warned the 30 per cent shortfall would have plunged them into crisis, forcing them to sack staff and turn away thousands more desperate people who could not afford their own legal advice.

But Attorney-General George Brandis is now promising \$55.7 million in extra funding to be confirmed in the May 9 budget, which will prioritise victims of domestic violence and Indigenous people.

The new money will chiefly go to frontline services, with \$39 million to go to community legal centres and the remaining \$16.7 million earmarked for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Legal Services.

The government says the boost brings the Commonwealth's commitment to legal assistance services to a record \$1.73 billion.

"The government has always recognised the essential role of the legal assistance sector in providing access to justice for the most vulnerable Australians," Senator Brandis said in a joint statement with fellow ministers Michaelia Cash and Nigel Scullion.

"This record funding commitment acknowledges this and has been achieved despite budgetary pressures. And unlike the Labor Party, the available funds are being prioritised and committed to provide frontline services to those who need them most."

The funding plan will be finalised with the states and territories under what is known as a national partnership agreement.

The backflip ends a long battle with lawyers, advocates and the federal opposition over the cuts. State governments were also angry, with the NSW government this month stepping in to announce \$6 million in stopgap funding.

Shadow attorney-general Mark Dreyfus has been urging the government to reverse course for years and Labor pledged ahead of the last election to restore the funding. But the government has long blamed Labor for leaving it with a funding shortfall, which it calls the "Dreyfus funding cliff".

Earlier legal centre cuts were the catalyst for Senator Dreyfus' three-year freedom of information battle to access Senator Brandis' diary.

The minister finally released the diary last month but there was no record of any consultations with the sector ahead of the funding decision.

The government made the cuts despite a Productivity Commission report that found the sector needed an extra \$200 million.

The Senate last month passed a motion – supported by Labor, the Greens, Jacqui Lambie, Derryn Hinch and the Nick Xenophon Team – condemning the cuts and calling on the government to reconsider.

Community legal centres offer free legal advice to people on issues as diverse as family violence, welfare, employment and tenancy. They already turn thousands of people away each year due to resource constraints.