

Coalition to spend \$56m on legal help



CHRIS MERRITT
LEGAL AFFAIRS EDITOR

The federal government has reversed proposed cuts to community legal centres and is pouring in an extra \$55.7 million as part of a plan to spend record levels of public money on legal assistance.

This is intended to help victims of domestic violence, improve legal services for indigenous people and ease a funding crisis that threatened to leave many abused women without access to legal advice.

The extra funding will lift the government's commitment to legal assistance to a record \$1.7 billion over the five years to 2020, an increase of \$125m on the previous five years. The new spending will focus on areas of greatest need, which could leave other legal centres in difficulty.

The move, to be unveiled today by Attorney-General George Brandis and Employment Minister Michaelia Cash, is aimed at wiping out a financial shortfall that has been described

by Senator Brandis as "the Dreyfus cliff".

Just before Labor lost office at the 2013 federal election, then attorney-general Mark Dreyfus put in place extra funding for community legal centres that expires on June 30. The additional \$55.7m will be provided over three years and is aimed at preventing what legal centres say would have been a 30 per cent collapse in their federal funding.

The government will extend the program put in place by Labor and wipe out earlier cuts by the Coalition. It will not be offset by reductions to other programs administered by the Attorney-General's Department.

The extra spending will be part of next month's federal budget but is being unveiled today in a move that could prevent job loss-

es as legal centres prepare their own budgets.

"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.

"This record funding commitment acknowledges this, and has been achieved despite strong 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," he said.

Most of the extra money is intended to step up the government's attack on domestic violence by earmarking \$39m for frontline family law and family violence services. There will be no easing of the ban that prevents legal centres spending public funding on political advocacy instead of providing legal services.

The rest of today's package — \$16.7m — will go to legal services for Aborigines and Torres Strait Islanders, which means legal centres that fall outside the priority areas could face difficulties.

This includes centres that focus on refugees, migration and human rights. However the governments of Tasmania and NSW have unveiled their own initiatives to ease the funding shortfall.

The extra \$55.7m for legal centres and Aboriginal legal services is almost \$3m greater than the estimated shortfall provided to the government by the National Association of Community Legal Centres.

The government is already committed to spending \$100m over three years on its third action plan to curb violence against women and children.

A separate women's safety package, worth another \$100m, is

paying for the development of specialist domestic violence units at selected legal centres. More spending under this program is expected in next month's budget.

Moves to improve indigenous legal services follow a warning from the Law Council that incarceration rates among Aborigines and Torres Strait Islanders grew by 88 per cent in 10 years.