

People Are Missing Out On The Legal Help They Need

Community Legal Centres Briefing

November 2015



What are community legal centres?

- Community legal centres (CLCs) are non-profit community-based legal services that provide free and accessible legal help and related services.
- **CLCs help our most vulnerable people:** CLCs help people who can't afford a lawyer, including some of our most vulnerable and disadvantaged members of the community. For example, almost 50% of our clients are in receipt of a Government benefit, 25.4% identify as having a disability, and 13.3% are Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander people.
- **CLCs specialise in everyday legal problems:** CLCs help people with a wide range of legal problems, including family violence, relationship breakdowns and family law, debt, consumer problems, tenancy disputes, and employment issues.
- **CLCs are effective:** in 2013-2014 CLCs across Australia assisted over 208,000 clients with advice/casework services; provided over 4,000 education sessions; and responded to around 190,000 requests for information from the public.
- **CLCs have a preventative focus:** As well as helping individuals with legal problems, CLCs work to prevent problems arising, through legal education to client groups, government and community sector agencies, as well as through advocating for fairer laws and policies.
- **CLCs are efficient:** CLCs work in partnerships with other organisations, and are skilled in attracting volunteer and pro bono support. For example, in 2013-2014, over 6,500 volunteers contributed over 776,000 hours and CLCs received over 72,000 hours of pro bono support from private law firms and other companies.

Funding crisis – risk to frontline legal services

- CLCs across Australia are facing a funding crisis.
- Under the new National Partnership Agreement for Legal Assistance 2015-2020 (NPA), CLCs in South Australia, Western Australia, Tasmania and the Northern Territory experienced funding cuts this financial year as the result of a new Commonwealth funding model.
- CLCs nationally are facing a 'funding cliff' from 1 July 2017, when Commonwealth funding will be cut by 30%. CLCs will receive \$40 million in 2015-2016, \$42.2 million in 2016-2017, dropping to \$30.1 million in 2017-2018.
- The direct effect of these funding cuts and ongoing under-resourcing of CLCs will be felt by individuals across Australia, but also more broadly across Australia's legal, and other, service systems.
- The Productivity Commission recommended an immediate injection of \$200 million per year to legal assistance services to meet existing unmet legal need, suggesting 60% of that increase should come from the Commonwealth Government and 40% from State and Territory Governments.

- NACLC calls for a stop to the planned cuts to CLCs from 2017-2018 and a long-term commitment to increasing funding for CLCs to ensure they can provide legal help to the people who most need it in our communities.

CLCs already turn hundreds of thousands of people away

- CLCs are often the last port of call for people who can't afford a lawyer. However, the NACLC Census shows that over 150,000 of Australia's most disadvantaged and vulnerable people had to be turned away by CLCs in 2013-2014.
- Hundreds of thousands of people are missing out on the legal help they need. Hundreds of thousands more will miss out unless the funding crisis is averted.

Family violence

- CLCs provide significant legal and non-legal assistance to people experiencing family violence.
- Rosie Batty, Australian of the Year 2015, has said: "[CLCs] are experts at working with survivors like me to achieve genuine justice for women and children affected by family violence and they need to be properly funded to do this work".
- NACLC welcomed the \$15 million funding for legal assistance under the Women's Safety Package to pilot 12 new specialist domestic violence units and five health justice partnerships over a 3-year period.
- However, additional, ongoing funding to all CLCs will assist much greater numbers of that people experiencing family violence to access timely, specialised legal advice and support.

Other legal assistance providers are also in crisis

The four publicly-funded legal assistance sectors in Australia are CLCs, Legal Aid Commissions, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Legal Services and Family Violence Prevention Legal Services.

We work together to ensure people are able to access the legal help they need. However, all four sectors are experiencing funding crises. NACLC in particular supports long-term funding for the Aboriginal Family Violence Prevention Legal Services, and the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Legal Services.

More information

For more information, please contact NACLC. We can also put you in contact with your local community legal centre:

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