

Wednesday, 1 July 2020

Funding certainty for legal assistance services from today

The announcement that the National Legal Assistance Partnership (NLAP) – a five-year funding agreement for the legal assistance sector – will commence today is welcomed by the Law Council of Australia.

Law Council President, Pauline Wright, said that the agreement provides much-needed financial certainty for legal assistance services and will allow the sector to focus on the delivery of quality legal help to vulnerable communities.

“Recent crises including the COVID-19 pandemic and the past summer’s bushfires has again shone a spotlight on the immense value of frontline legal service providers, and the vital role they play in our society,” Ms Wright said.

“These services deserve the funding certainty that the NLAP brings, and the Law Council hopes that it will provide some comfort to those that are responsible for delivering critical legal support to some of our most disadvantaged community members.”

“The Law Council’s 2018 Justice Project Final Report confirmed how critically important it is that we prioritise financial support for accessible legal assistance.”

“Regrettably, that report also highlighted the chronic underfunding of our legal assistance services and confirmed that without a significant funding injection into the sector, legal assistance will remain out of reach for many who may need it most,” Ms Wright said.

These funding shortfalls were a key focus of the Justice Project, which noted that due to the shortage of funds, although 14 per cent of Australians fell below the poverty line, only 8 per cent qualified for legal aid.

“These are difficult economic times, with tough decisions to be made on how public funds are to be allocated,” Ms Wright said.

While pleased that consultations and negotiations with the legal assistance sector, and the states and territories has meant that a final agreement has been reached, there still exist concerns over the decision to roll the standalone funding stream for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Legal Services into a single funding mechanism, according to Ms Wright.

“The Law Council is adamant that legal assistance must remain a top priority, and the Law Council will continue to advocate for additional support that will lead to a properly funded legal assistance sector,” Ms Wright said.

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