

Media Release



Law Council
OF AUSTRALIA

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Australia's legal assistance sector facing Federal Budget disaster, and pro bono cannot plug the gap

The average Australian lawyer is contributing a full week of work every year for free, but even this is insufficient to fix Australia's legal assistance funding crisis, which is set to dramatically deepen after the upcoming Federal Budget.

Law Council of Australia President, Fiona McLeod SC, [has told](#) the sixth National [Access to Justice and Pro Bono Conference](#) in Adelaide today that although the crisis in legal assistance funding had been getting steadily worse over two decades, drastic cuts to take effect from 1 July this year will be particularly disastrous.

"Scheduled funding cuts to Community Legal Centres (CLCs) will amount to a loss of \$35 million between 2017 and 2020 – that's a 30 per cent cut to Commonwealth funding for services that are already chronically under-resourced," she said.

"Last year CLCs were forced to turn away 160,000 people seeking legal assistance. These cuts will lead to 36,000 fewer clients assisted, and 46,000 fewer advices provided.

"We are talking here about real people, with real problems. People who thought their situation was serious enough to seek legal assistance. People who would not have had other viable options for legal advice.

"How many of those turned away now have exacerbated problems? How have those problems spread within their families, their social networks, their communities?"

"The Productivity Commission has called for an extra \$200 million for legal assistance, because research shows these problems cost the economy long-term. Legal problems are a lot like medical problems – without prompt attention they tend to get much worse.

"The Government needs to listen to the experts and reverse these catastrophic cuts."

Ms McLeod noted that pro bono cannot ever be a substitute for properly funded legal aid services, remarkable though this contribution of Australian lawyers is.

"The pro bono work undertaken by Australian lawyers should be a matter of enormous pride for the profession," Ms McLeod said.

"Australian lawyers give away literally hundreds of thousands of pro bono work hours every year to those who have no one else to turn to. 35 hours of pro bono legal services, per lawyer, per year.

"But if pro bono is to be truly effective it needs a strong legal assistance sector. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Legal Services and CLCs assess cases and refer work to appropriate pro bono lawyers. Without proper funding this link is broken and many more people fall through the cracks."

You can access the Law Council President, Fiona McLeod's speech [here](#).
To learn more about the legal aid crisis visit: www.legalaidmatters.org.au.

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