

Monday, 24 April 2017

Last-minute cancellation of legal assistance funding cuts a great victory for justice and vulnerable Australians

The Federal Government's cancellation of millions of dollars worth of cuts to legal assistance services is a huge relief with profound consequences for the justice system, and thousands of vulnerable Australians, according to the Law Council of Australia.

The Government was due to slash \$35 million from the sector in the upcoming Budget, a 30 per cent cut that would have devastated community legal centres (CLCs) and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Legal Services (ATSILS). Tens of thousands of Australians would have been cut off from legal assistance.

The Law Council, along with many in the legal assistance sector, had been advocating relentlessly for the abandonment of the cuts. Law Council President, Fiona McLeod SC, said today's decision was a massive relief.

"This is a tremendous victory for access to justice in Australia," Ms McLeod said.

"Each year, we know tens of thousands of Australians experience legal problems and cannot access help due to the inadequate funding of legal assistance. Without legal intervention, these problems often spiral out of control, creating enormous financial and social costs.

"The scheduled budget cuts would have significantly deepened the funding crisis affecting the legal assistance sector, with enormous downstream costs to taxpayers.

"Those who work in the legal assistance sector are the unsung heroes of our community, working long hours in extremely challenging conditions to achieve justice for their clients.

"This announcement will be a great relief for those dedicated lawyers and their clients. It heads off an impending disaster, as many community legal centres, particularly in regional areas, were set to close.

"CLCs are also the conduits for an enormous amount of pro bono legal work contributed by the private profession. This contribution which would have diminished if the cuts had proceeded."

Ms McLeod noted that while the cancellation of the cuts staved off the immediate 'funding cliff' crisis, it is clear that much more is needed to address the structural and systemic underfunding of legal aid including legal assistance services, which have suffered from over 20 years of funding neglect by successive Federal Governments.

"In 2014, the Productivity Commission recommended an additional \$200 million in legal assistance funding, noting the substantial savings for taxpayers by reducing costs and demand for the courts and other services," Ms McLeod said.

"Clearly there is still a broader problem here that needs to be fixed if we want an Australia in which everyone can access justice.

"On behalf of the Australian legal profession, I congratulate the Attorney-General on today's decision. I also thank the hard-working lawyers of the legal assistance sector for their tireless advocacy.

"Today marks a critically important victory, but the fight for proper legal assistance funding will continue."

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