



Queensland Association of Independent Legal Services Inc

12 August 2014

Select Committee into the Abbott Government's Budget Cuts
PO Box 6100
Parliament House
Canberra ACT 2600

Dear Committee members,

Cuts to community legal services

On the night that the Federal Budget was delivered, 11 of Queensland's community legal centres were advised of funding cuts to their services. This is despite independent analysis cited by the Federal Attorney-General which shows that for every \$1 invested in community legal centres, there is an \$18 benefit to the community.

The Queensland Association of Independent Legal Services (**QAILS**) is disappointed with these cuts, but our members – Queensland's community legal centres – will continue working to ensure people with legal problems can get access to proper legal assistance in a timely and appropriate way. Inability to access legal help when it is needed can exacerbate people's problems, and they become more costly to resolve. Even fewer people will have access to our services following this funding decision.

Community legal centres are independently operating not-for-profit, community-based organisations that provide free legal services to the public, focusing on the vulnerable and/or disadvantaged and people with special needs.

When these funding reductions were originally announced in December's Mid-Year Economic and Fiscal Outlook, the Commonwealth noted that 'the provision of frontline legal services will not be affected', as these funding reductions were focussed on policy reform and advocacy activities.

However, this decision **will** significantly affect front line services. These funds currently support significant frontline services, including:

- consumer law services in Cairns, helping people that have been the subject of predatory and unlawful business practices;
- specialist legal services for tenants who are facing eviction across Queensland;
- a specialist family law outreach service in Coomera;
- helping the Inala community access general legal help, from an organisation that recently had to relocate after its premises were condemned;
- family law services on the Sunshine Coast and in Townsville, helping people when their relationships end;
- state-wide advice and casework support for people who have disputes with Centrelink; and
- duty lawyer and outreach services at the Southport Magistrates' Court when it hears family violence applications.

While community legal centres are unsure which/how much of their services will have to cease, the cuts can only be to frontline services: that is what the monies are used for. There will be consequences for other community service providers as people continue to try and find help, as well as having an impact on the courts, government agencies, and electorate offices.

Six of the affected organisations are in regional Queensland, three in outer suburbs of Brisbane, and two are state-wide specialist legal services. Clearly, it is regional Queenslanders who will be most affected by these cuts, which will commence in July 2015. For completeness, we note that four of our members received additional one-off funding from the Government in June 2014, but this will not address the impacts of the broader cuts in the long term.

We write to ask you to note the importance of our work and the impact of these funding decisions, and we encourage the Government keeps its MYEFO commitment to ensure there is no negative impact on frontline services.

Yours sincerely,

James Farrell
QAILS Director