

MEDIA RELEASE

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Labor support for community legal centres a welcome start

Community Legal Centres NSW (CLCNSW) have welcomed today's announcement of the Australian Labor Party's commitment to campaigning against Federal funding cuts to community legal centres, due to commence on 1 July 2017.

The announcement was made at a meeting in Sydney between Shadow Attorney General Mark Dreyfus, Deputy Opposition Leader Tanya Plibersek, and representatives from CLCNSW, the National Association of Community Legal Centres (NACLC), Redfern Legal Centre, the Public Interest Advocacy Centre (PIAC), Environmental Defenders' Office NSW (EDO NSW), Northern Rivers Community Legal Centre and Western Sydney Community Legal Centre.

CLCNSW also noted that simply reversing the cuts was not sufficient to meet demand. Full details of the ALP commitment are unknown at this stage, but it does not appear that the ALP is yet committed to implementing the funding recommendations of the Productivity Commission.

Pictures available on request.

Community Legal Centres NSW Chairperson Linda Tucker said, "Both Federal and NSW Labor have now committed to reversing the Coalition government's cuts to the sector. These are welcome announcements.

"Community legal centres provide assistance to some of the most vulnerable and disadvantaged members of the community. From tenancy and debt help, to child protection and domestic violence, our early intervention work saves people from further emotional and physical harm.

"If these cuts are not reversed, services will close and people will be turned away, putting people at risk and further burdening the courts, health and justice systems.

"At the same time, whether the cuts are reversed or not, the community legal assistance sector will remain underfunded, and unable to meet existing demand.

"In 2014, a Productivity Commission report recommended an investment of \$200 million into the legal assistance sector to meet existing demand. Instead the Federal government is cutting our funding by around 30 per cent," she said.

PIAC CEO Jonathon Hunyor said: "PIAC is facing deep cuts that will have a direct and immediate impact on our front-line work. Community legal centres are renowned for making a little money go a long way, so these cuts will have a significant impact.

"Services like our Homeless Persons Legal Service are already unable to meet demand, despite homelessness increasing. These cuts mean we will have no choice but to reduce services and some of

Sydney's most vulnerable people will be unable to get help," he said.

Redfern Legal Centre Acting CEO Jacqui Swinburne said: "Redfern Legal Centre is set to lose 24 per cent of our legal service funding, a drop of well over \$100,000.

"Unless we can obtain alternative funds, we will likely only have 1-2 solicitors providing direct client services. Previous large cuts from other government funding mean we have little if any ability to reduce overheads like volunteer management, office expenses, risk management and compliance costs.

"Redfern Legal Centre experiences high demand for our services. Our local area has a high concentration of public housing, homeless people, international students, young people in overcrowded apartments, and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people - all indicators of high legal need.

Western Sydney Community Legal Centre Manager Maria Girdler said: "Western Sydney is a region with many disadvantaged communities and a growing population – demand for our services is only going to increase. Community legal centres need more funding, not less.

"We recently amalgamated three community legal centres to 'trim the fat off the bone'. There's no room left to move in this regard. Any further cuts will mean reduced services.

"While the Federal government has provided some funding to assist women and children experiencing family and domestic violence, many women experiencing DV need other legal help, for example to end their relationship, care for their children, and escape debt or unsafe housing situations," she said.

Northern Rivers Community Legal Centre Legal Service Coordinator Daniel Turner said: "Our centre is due to receive cuts of around 23 per cent, in an area with a growing population and significant pockets of disadvantage.

"These cruel cuts will force the closure of our Tweed Valley Office in Murwillumbah and substantially reduce the free legal assistance available to the residents of the Tweed valley. This is despite the clear need to support women facing domestic and family violence in our community.

"Community legal centres are at the forefront of assisting some of the most vulnerable people in NSW. Without timely legal help, people's problems can compound and cause significant and unnecessary harm," he said.

Media contacts:

Linda Tucker: Community Legal Centres NSW Chairperson – 0403 158 590

Jonathon Hunyor: Public Interest Advocacy Centre CEO – 0410 359 293

Jacqui Swinburne: Redfern Legal Centre Acting CEO – 0439 974 368

Maria Girdler: Western Sydney Community Legal Centre – 0412 359 420

Daniel Turner: Northern Rivers Community Legal Centre – 0478 089 376

More information:

Mark Riboldi, Community Legal Centres NSW – 0433 753 376