

Law Council welcomes legal assistance sector funding

The Law Council of Australia welcomes the announcement by the Attorney-General the Hon. Nicola Roxon MP, to boost funding for legal assistance services nationwide.

Law Council of Australia President, Ms Catherine Gale, said the allocation of \$1.6 million in one-off funding for community legal centres and legal aid commissions is a small, but much needed injection of funds for legal assistance providers.

“Due to nearly 15 years of underfunding, Community Legal Centre’s (CLCs) and Legal Aid Commissions (LAC) have struggled to maintain basic services,” Ms Gale said.

Funding shortfalls have forced legal aid commissions in some jurisdictions to tighten eligibility for legal aid to such an extent, that many people who are living below the Henderson poverty line are unable to receive legal aid assistance.

“This lack of funding does not just affect disadvantaged Australians charged with criminal offences - those most significantly affected are hard working people who have fallen on difficult times, or low income earners who require legal help that most Australians simply cannot afford,” Ms Gale said.

A recent report released by the National Association of Community Legal Centres (NACLC) noted there are substantial downstream savings in the delivery of justice of up to \$18 for every dollar invested in the legal assistance sector.

This report reflects findings from PriceWaterhouseCoopers which estimated that, for every dollar invested in the legal assistance sector, there is a saving of \$1.60 to \$2.25 in the delivery of justice.

“The legal assistance sector undoubtedly provides one of the best returns on investment from any Australian Government funded program,” Ms Gale said.

Since 1997 the Australian Government’s contribution to Legal Aid Commission funding, compared to the states and territories, has fallen from 55 per cent to the present level of 35 per cent.

The Law Council has been calling on the Australian Government to restore funding to 50:50 with the States and Territories by 2015.

Actuarial advice obtained by the Law Council indicates that to return Commonwealth per capita funding levels to 50 per cent, an additional \$72.94 million increase is required in the 2012-13 financial year, with further substantial increases in subsequent years.

“The Attorney-General’s funding announcement is a positive step forward for the legal assistance sector.

“The Law Council will continue to work with its Constituent Bodies to ensure this issue remains a priority for the Australian Government so that all Australians have access to legal advice and services, regardless of their means,” Ms Gale concluded.

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