

NATIONAL FAMILY VIOLENCE PREVENTION LEGAL SERVICES

WORKING TO ACHIEVE IMPROVED JUSTICE OUTCOMES FOR ABORIGINAL AND TORRES STRAIT ISLANDER
VICTIMS/SURVIVORS OF FAMILY VIOLENCE AND SEXUAL ASSAULT

Media Release

2 July 2015 – FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

Reduced commitment to legal services is not good news

A new five year national partnership agreement on legal assistance was announced yesterday, ending long-term uncertainty for some services. However, this news is a double-edged sword for victims/survivors of family violence, with Commonwealth funding decreasing significantly over the coming years despite growing demand for legal services. Family Violence Prevention Legal Services (FVPLSs) remain unrecognised as a national program and face an effective cut to front-line services through a refusal to pay CPI increases under the Indigenous Advancement Strategy.

‘We remain extremely concerned about the Government’s long-term commitment to FVPLSs and legal assistance services across the board. Family violence is at epidemic proportions in our communities and there is no quick or easy fix,’ said Antoinette Braybrook, National Convenor of the National Family Violence Prevention Legal Services (NFVPLS). ‘Our women and children are still being murdered. FVPLSs support Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women to seek safety through our holistic legal services and need adequate resourcing to assist as many of our women and children as possible’.

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women are 34 times more likely to be hospitalised as a result of family violence, 10 times more likely to die from violent assault and are the most legally disadvantaged group in Australia. Despite this, and evidence of the unmet legal need in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities, FVPLSs were forced to competitively tender for their services under the Indigenous Advancement Strategy. No longer recognised as a national program, FVPLS has no secure or transparent commitment for Commonwealth funding under the IAS and, without CPI increases, the declining funds available will mean losses to frontline staff.

‘The Government says there is ongoing commitment to access to justice and responding to family violence in Aboriginal communities. But they all know our services need better resourcing. This need doesn’t dry up once the public spotlight moves on from family violence’, said Ms Braybrook. ‘The Government needs to be held accountable for its decision making in this space.’

The new arrangements for Community Legal Centres include a 30 per cent cut nationally from 2017-18, which will have a devastating impact on all victims/survivors of family violence. Similarly, the uncertainty and expected cuts to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Legal Services (ATSILS) have been distressing and damaging for communities since announcements made in December 2013. While ATSILS funding cuts were recently reversed, funding for FVPLSs and ATSILS had already declined by 20 per cent over 10 years to June 2011.

NFVPLS is calling on the Government to reinstate the National FVPLS Program with a direct allocation and long term commitment of funding. NFVPLS also calls for implementation of recommendations by the Productivity Commission and the Interim Report from the Senate Inquiry into Domestic Violence in Australia for an immediate funding boost of \$200 million into legal assistance services.

FVPLSs provide critical frontline legal and non-legal support to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander victims/survivors of family violence and undertake culturally safe early intervention prevention and community legal education to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities around Australia.

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