

# 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

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## New threat for Family Violence Prevention Legal Services

New Commonwealth funding guidelines for the *Indigenous Advancement Strategy*, released on 8 August 2014, could see the demise of the Family Violence Prevention Legal Services (FVPLS) program nationally unless urgent action is taken by the Prime Minister.

Under the new guidelines, FVPLS's are no longer recognised as a stand-alone program or as a core service model that provides frontline legal assistance. Instead, FVPLS's may apply for funding as one of many potential activities under a broad 'Safety and Wellbeing Programme' alongside health, welfare and other service providers. However, it is not yet clear whether legal services are even eligible to apply.

Antoinette Braybrook, Convenor of the National FVPLS Forum, says: "By abolishing our direct allocation of funding, the Abbott government is essentially defunding the FVPLS program which has been in existence for 16 years. The FVPLS program is already reeling from budget cuts and now vulnerable Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women and children are being put at greater risk."

In December 2014, the Abbott government announced a cut of \$3.6 million over three years to the national FVPLS program which costs only \$20 million per annum. This compares to the economic costs of domestic violence, estimated at \$14.4 billion per annum or 1.1% of Australia's GDP. Mary Cowley, CEO of Aboriginal Family Law Services WA, says "Cuts to services will inevitably mean fewer victims of family violence will have access to legal and support services to keep them safe."

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women are 31 times more likely to be hospitalised as a result of violence and 15 times more likely to seek support from homelessness services to escape family violence. Despite this, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander victims/survivors of family violence continue to have very limited access to legal advice and representation.

The FVPLS program provides critical frontline legal and non legal support to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander victims/survivors of family violence, in areas including intervention orders, victims of crime assistance, child protection and family law. "We were created because Aboriginal victims – mostly women – were falling through the cracks. The reasons we were established have not changed – Aboriginal women are not accessing mainstream services and continue to be conflicted out of Aboriginal Legal Services. Without this program, many women and children escaping violence will have nowhere to go," said Ms Braybrook.

The National FVPLS Forum is seeking a direct allocation of funding for current providers for the next three years, in order to protect access to justice for FVPLS clients through existing capacity and technical expertise, ongoing delivery of services and the integrity of the FVPLS service model. "If the Prime Minister is really going to be the Minister for Women *and* the Prime Minister for Indigenous Affairs he needs to make a funding commitment that reflects this," said Ms Braybrook. "Our members are calling for an immediate allocation of funding to keep the Family Violence Prevention Legal Service program alive."

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Media Release