

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

27 March 2015 – FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

Devastating legal assistance funding cuts reversed

The National Family Violence Prevention Legal Services (NFVPLS) welcome yesterday's announcement that major cuts to legal assistance services under the Commonwealth Attorney-General's portfolio will not go ahead. This follows on the heels of confirmation of funding for FVPLSs under the Commonwealth Government's *Indigenous Advancement Strategy*.

"The Government has listened to the legal sector, the wider community and the increasing momentum around addressing family violence and made the brave decision to reverse many of these cuts. If this had gone ahead, the cuts would have been catastrophic for the most vulnerable in our community," said Antoinette Braybrook, National Convenor of the NFVPLS. "With family violence hospitalisation and reporting rates for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women escalating, our services are more important than ever. FVPLSs are the only Aboriginal legal service providers exclusively dedicated to assisting victims/survivors of family violence" continued Ms Braybrook.

Legal assistance services have been subject to upheaval and uncertainty for many months. The cuts under the Attorney-General's portfolio were set to come into effect in July 2015 and would have forced reduction and closure of many Community Legal Centres (CLCs) and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Legal Services (ATSILS). FVPLSs were also worried for their own survival as the only legal assistance service provider administered by the Department of Prime Minister and Cabinet under the *Indigenous Advancement Strategy*. Funding for 2015-16 was only confirmed earlier this month.

"Although this is a step in the right direction, legal assistance services are still woefully under resourced," said Ms Braybrook. "For Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, ATSILS and FVPLSs are essential in supporting our access to justice in a culturally safe, community controlled service setting. Given alarming and increasing rates of imprisonment and family violence, it is essential that these services are fully resourced by the Government."

The NFVPLS also calls on the Government to implement the Productivity Commission's recommendations, which called for an immediate \$200 million funding boost to all four legal assistance services. Under the *Indigenous Advancement Strategy*, FVPLSs will receive no increase in funding and many are only guaranteed one additional year. Real funding per person for ATSILS and FVPLSs has declined by approximately 20 per cent in recent years – this is despite skyrocketing family violence and imprisonment rates.

FVPLSs provide 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. In comparison with other Australian women, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women are 34 times more likely to be hospitalised and 10 times more likely to die as a result of violent assault.

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