

LEGAL AID MATTERS

Monday, 16 May 2016

45,000 people faced courts alone due to legal aid crisis

National campaign launched at start of Law Week

At least 45,000 Australians have been forced to represent themselves in court, often up against powerful and well-funded legal teams, due to the crisis in legal aid that has seen hundreds of millions of dollars ripped from these vital services.

The new analysis, by the Law Council of Australia, comes as an unprecedented national [‘Legal Aid Matters’](#) campaign is launched – aimed at ensuring the next Federal Government responds decisively to the funding crisis.

The campaign, launched today on the first day of National Law Week, will see lawyers and concerned organisations [rally and attend events](#) in major cities around Australia.

According to the analysis, over a five year period (2009/10–13/14) at least 45,000 Australians faced the courts nationally without legal aid as a direct result of a lack of funding.

Legal Aid Matters campaign spokesman, Law Council of Australia President, Stuart Clark AM, said it equates to almost 10,000 people per year being denied representation.

“Deep cuts by successive federal governments now means that thousands of ordinary Australians are being denied justice,” Mr Clark said.

“Lives are being ruined because people who encounter legal problems cannot afford a lawyer to present their case effectively. Legal aid funding is now so scarce that even many Australians living below the poverty line aren’t eligible.

“It isn’t just Australia’s most disadvantaged missing out. Many middle-class Australians can’t afford to pay for legal representation and are forced to front the court alone.

“They are women trying to escape domestic violence, average workers who unfairly lose their job or young men and women who are facing the prospect of prison.

“The figures we are referring to only relate to court representation, which is nowhere near the complete picture. In fact, figures released this year by Community Legal Centres show that they are turning away more than 160,000 people each year.

“Every year one in four Australians have a problem serious enough to require a lawyer and the unfortunate fact is that not all of those will be able to afford one,” Mr Clark said.

Mr Clark said the *Legal Aid Matters* campaign is urging all major parties to end the crisis by properly funding legal aid. The campaign is calling for \$350 million. [The key asks](#) include acting on the [Productivity Commission’s recommendation](#) to immediately inject \$200 million into legal aid, which the Commission found will save the taxpayer money over the long term.

“Australia now spends half of what the UK does per capita on legal aid,” Mr Clark said.

“Decades of cuts mean whoever wins the election in July will inherit a system on the brink of complete failure. Reversing the cuts and ending this injustice must be priority for all parties.”

Mr Clark acknowledged the Government commitment to allocate \$30 million to support legal assistance services as part of its family violence package; and the Opposition’s promise to increase funding to Community Legal Centres. But said much more is needed.

Australians can get involved in the campaign by visiting [legalaidmatters.org.au](#) – where they learn more about the crisis, sign a petition, and even directly contact their local MP.

A list of this week’s *Legal Aid Matters* rallies and events is attached. You can also [click here](#).

Patrick Pantano: Public Affairs

P. 02 6246 3715

E. Patrick.Pantano@lawcouncil.asn.au

Anil Lambert: Media

P. 0416 426 722

E. anil@hortonadvisory.com.au