



Media Release

5 March 2015

PM should reverse looming Budget cuts to Indigenous Legal Services

The President of the Australian Bar Association Fiona McLeod SC has called on the Prime Minister to intervene to prevent funding cuts to Indigenous Legal Services due to take effect from the 1st of July 2015.

The cuts to Indigenous Legal Services, worth \$13 Million, are part of the Government's first budget. They have been widely criticised by the legal profession, Legal Aid Service leaders, the Productivity Commission and, most recently, the Northern Territory's Chief Justice Trevor Riley. The proposed cuts will result in a significant reduction of legal service staff and a profound impact upon the ability of legal services to assist the most vulnerable members of our community.

Ms McLeod SC urged 'The Prime Minister should heed the advice of the Productivity Commission and Chief Justice Riley and reverse this decision now. The likely consequences of these cuts will be chaos in the Courts and an increase in indigenous imprisonment, already at unprecedented levels. Family violence prevention programs are amongst those facing the axe.'

The Productivity Commission in December last year said that the proposed \$13.3 million cuts to Indigenous Legal Services would not save money in the long run. Ms McLeod SC said 'cutting services to Aboriginal Legal Aid may make improve the budget bottom line marginally for a year but the increased costs elsewhere in the justice system, due to the lack of services to vulnerable people and the enormous social impact of these cuts will far outweigh any short term savings.'

'The statistics as regards indigenous imprisonment in Australia are damning and constitute a national crisis. Aboriginal people constitute 2.3% of our population, but tragically 27.4% of our jail population. Indigenous people are 18 times more likely to be imprisoned than non-indigenous people. That figure is double what it was when we had the Royal Commission into Deaths in Custody. The figures for juveniles are worse. Young Aboriginal people are locked up at 24 times the rate of non-indigenous juveniles. Incarceration rates for women have increased by over 70% since 2000,' said Ms McLeod.

At the Opening of the Northern Territory Legal year in Darwin earlier this year, Chief Justice Riley said the cuts will 'strike a blow to the heart of the justice system.' He further stated that it was 'obvious that such cuts would not save money in the long run.' Ms McLeod said that 'such a warning from the Chief Justice should not be ignored.' The consequence of underfunding these programs will include an increase in unrepresented litigants, significant delays in concluding cases and additional costs for Courts, prosecution and prison services.

Contact: Philip Selth, ph: (02) 9232 4055