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Funding boost welcome for legal services supporting women and those experiencing mental health issues

The Law Council of Australia is pleased that the Australian Government has announced additional funding for Australia's legal assistance sector, with a focus on improving access to justice for women and those experiencing mental health issues.

Key funding measures in the 2021-22 Budget will provide a range of further legal assistance resourcing under the National Legal Assistance Partnership, including:

- \$129 million over four years for women's legal services to increase their capacity to women, including those experiencing, or at risk of, family violence;
- \$17.1 million over four years to Domestic Violence Units and Health Justice Partnerships, to deliver additional mental health specific services for women who have experienced family and domestic violence; and
- \$60 million over four years for the legal assistance sector to provide support to people experiencing mental health conditions.

"The legal assistance sector has been chronically underfunded over many years, and this Budget is a step in the right direction towards a greater recognition of the critical role these services play in providing access to justice for some of our most vulnerable communities," said President of the Law Council, Dr Jacoba Brasch QC.

"Women's legal services in particular have faced a significant increase in demand over the last 12 months, with the COVID-19 pandemic pushing these already resource-poor centres to breaking point."

Frontline legal services within the legal assistance sector – Legal Aid Commissions, Community Legal Centres, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Legal Services, and Family Violence Prevention and Legal Services – are fundamentally important to improving the lives of marginalised and vulnerable communities.

"The downstream savings created by proper investment in the legal sector are clear. It's time government recognizes that a failure to adequately invest in these services has broader implications to health, housing, social services and welfare, child protection, families, corrections, policing and justice portfolios," said Dr Brasch QC.

"While we want to see significant increases in funding across all parts of the legal assistance sector, particularly for specialised and culturally appropriate legal services for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, we are hopeful that this Budget indicates a recognition by government that resourcing this sector is a fundamental component to responding to challenging social and economic problems."

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