



Eminent panel considers continuing Federal Government challenges to ‘last resort’ legal help

Thursday 29 October 2015 – for immediate release

An eminent panel including Leader of the Australian Greens, Senator Richard Di Natale, Federal Labor MP Tim Watts, Magistrate Anne Goldsbrough and leading community lawyers will today (1.30pm) consider the value of ‘last resort’ free legal help by community legal centres, and key challenges that Victorian centres continue to face as they work daily to deliver justice for disadvantaged Victorians.

‘For the many people who do not qualify for legal aid but can’t afford a private lawyer, community legal centres are often the last resort for free legal help with many common but serious legal problems arising from homelessness, debt, employment, relationship breakdown and family violence. Last year, a massive 40 per cent of new cases opened by Victorian centres were family violence cases. Yet challenges under former prime minister Tony Abbott continue and prevent people getting the legal help they desperately need,’ said Liana Buchanan, Executive Officer of the Federation of Community Legal Centres, today.

Doing justice on the front line: community legal centres in the age of ‘lawfare’ will highlight the role of community legal centres, and consider how their work is challenged and compromised by the Federal Government’s rejection of strategic litigation as ‘lawfare’, the silencing of community legal centres through restrictions on speaking out about law reform and the issues affecting their clients, the narrowing of eligibility for legal help, and deep Federal funding cuts that contradict the recommendations of the Productivity Commission.

‘Lawfare has been a recent focal point, particularly around community legal help with the Federal legal challenge of the Adani coal mine, but the challenges faced by community legal centres and the communities they serve pose a broader question. Does the Federal Government consider any action that points to flaws in its policies, problems with the law, or the impact of funding cuts illegitimate?’

‘If so, government risks undermining public interest work not only on environmental issues, but on a wide range of issues that go to the heart of ordinary Australians, and the quality, safety and fairness of their lives.’

‘Community legal centres work every day on the front line, providing advice and representing people in courts across the state. They provide a vital safety net for some of the most vulnerable people in our community. But they also need to work to change unfair laws and policies, to effect improvements that can benefit thousands of people and prevent the need to seek legal help in the first place. They need to be able to speak out, for their help to be open to everyone who needs it, and they need to be properly funded to do that work,’ Buchanan concluded.

Panel

- Anne Goldsbrough, Magistrate
- Belinda Lo, Principal Lawyer, Eastern Community Legal Centre
- Brendan Sydes, CEO/Lawyer, Environmental Justice Australia
- Tim Watts, Federal Labor Member for Gellibrand
- Senator Richard Di Natale, Leader of the Australian Greens

The panel will commence promptly at 1.30pm at Level 2, Library at the Dock, 107 Victoria Harbour Promenade, Docklands.

Media are invited, but strongly encouraged to RSVP to Darren Lewin-Hill, Communications Manager, on 0488 773 535.

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