



MEDIA RELEASE

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Government commitment to Closing the Gap questioned as funding cut to National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Legal Services

The National Association of Community Legal Centres (NACLC) is extremely disappointed with the announcement that the National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Legal Services (NATSILS) did not receive funding under the Indigenous Advancement Strategy (IAS), announced on 4 March 2015 by Minister Scullion.

NATSILS is the peak body for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Legal Services in Australia and will have to close at the end of June.

“The value of the NATSILS in providing a voice for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples in relation to the ways laws and the justice system affect them, cannot be underestimated and their closure will be a devastating blow to the whole legal assistance sector as well as to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples” said Michael Smith, NACLC Chair.

The disturbing facts on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander imprisonment speak for themselves. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander adults are 15 times more likely to be imprisoned than non-Indigenous Australians. From 2000-2013, the imprisonment rate for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander adults increased 57 per cent while the non-Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander rate remained fairly stable. The juvenile detention rate for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people is around 24 times the rate for non-Indigenous youth. (AHRC Social Justice & Native Title Report, 2014)

“In this context, the NATSILS have extraordinary expertise on the legal issues faced by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, yet their ability to speak on these issues is being silenced when it is most needed” continued Mr Smith.

“The Prime Minister declared himself the Prime Minister for Indigenous Affairs, but has withdrawn funding for NATSILS. This comes at a time where it is vital to secure long term commitment to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander services and organisations, to address the challenges highlighted in the recent Close the Gap Progress and Priorities Report” concluded Mr Smith.

NACLC renews calls on all levels of Government to commit the additional \$200 million identified in the recent Productivity Commission Report as being required to adequately fund legal assistance services in Australia, including ongoing funding to NATSILS.

For further information or to arrange an interview contact NACLC Chair Michael Smith on 0421 437 883

NACLC acknowledges the traditional owners of the lands across Australia and particularly the Gadigal people of the Eora Nation, traditional owners of the land on which the NACLC office is situated. We pay deep respect to Elders past and present.