



NATSILS

**NATIONAL ABORIGINAL & TORRES
STRAIT ISLANDER LEGAL SERVICES**

MEDIA RELEASE

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Frontline legal service delivery cuts planned as funding cuts loom

Today, the peak body for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Legal Services NATSILS, called upon the federal government to reverse their decision of funding cuts to member organisations across the country.

In 2013, the Federal Attorney-General's Department announced a cut of \$13.34 million to the ATSILS. The Attorney-General George Brandis stated that the funding cuts were targeted at defunding law reform and advocacy work and not frontline service delivery. However, over time it has become quite clear that cuts are already impacting upon front line service delivery.

NATSILS Deputy Chairperson, Priscilla Collins, said, "These funding cuts are already having a major impact on the ATSILS. Quality staff have left because of the lack of employment security, positions are not being backfilled and some ATSILS are already planning to reduce their front line criminal, civil and family law services from April."

"This situation is highly regrettable, but the ATSILS can't be taking on family, civil and criminal matters and then six weeks before the end of the financial year saying to clients that we can't continue with their matters" Ms Collins said.

"We find it completely unacceptable that our services won't find out exactly what the funding cuts will be, and to what area of law or community, until the budget is delivered in mid-May. Risk management and risk mitigation planning, a common framework for good governance and organisational management, remains difficult because of the May budget announcement and funding agreement expiry in June."

Ms Collins said, "This will mean that we have to refer these people to Community Legal Centres and Legal Aid Commissions, but these services do not cater to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples in the way ATSILS do, and in some places they do not provide services at all. Additionally, if the proposed funding cuts go ahead, NATSILS as the peak body for ATSILS will not be in existence come the end of June."

"The result will be more Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people being unrepresented in courts and unable to access legal services. There will be unintended costs associated to the courts because of unrepresented litigants blocking the courts up. In turn this will increase costs to government."

"Basically these cuts will deny many Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people the access to justice that all Australian citizens deserve" Ms Collins said.

"These cuts will also directly lead to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people losing their jobs as approximately 40% of ATSILS staff are Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people."

Ms Collins said, “Abbott’s government has stated that employment is a key focus for the Indigenous Advancement Strategy. However, these funding cuts will mean many Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people at the ATSILS and NATSILS will lose their jobs.”

“If employment of Aboriginal people is the key focus of the Federal government then these cuts just don’t make sense.”

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