



NATSILS

NATIONAL ABORIGINAL & TORRES
STRAIT ISLANDER LEGAL SERVICES

MEDIA RELEASE

3 December 2014

Productivity Commission calls for \$200m funding injection for legal assistance services as cuts loom

Today the National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Legal Services (NATSILS) welcome the release of the Productivity Commission's *Access to Justice Arrangements* Report which argues against the funding cuts announced by the Commonwealth Government, which are said to be targeted at defunding law reform and advocacy activities, and calls for an annual injection of \$200m to the legal assistance sector.

NATSILS Chairperson, Shane Duffy, said that while the Commonwealth Government continues with its plans to cut over \$40m from legal assistance services including Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Legal Services (ATSILS), Family Violence Prevention Legal Services, Community Legal Centres (CLCs) and Legal Aid Commissions (LACs), today's report shows that there is little evidence to support such a move.

"Today's Productivity Commission Report confirms what we have been saying ever since the cuts were announced over a year ago, that there is a huge level of unmet demand out there and that rather than cutting funding the Government should be increasing it," Mr Duffy said.

"we have continued to argue that the immediate savings achieved by the cuts are a false economy as underfunding of legal assistance services will lead to increased costs in other areas of government spending, and perhaps now that the Productivity Commission has backed us up on this the Commonwealth Government might listen."

Mr Duffy said that he also welcomed the specific findings in regards to ASTILS and the unique role they play in the broader sector as well as the need for increased funding in order for ATSILS to be able to meet the demand amongst the community for family and other civil law matters.

"ATSILS are critical to access for justice for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples and we welcome the Productivity Commission's finding that separate culturally tailored legal services, including ATSILS, must be maintained," Mr Duffy said.

"we also support the Commission's finding that funding growth for ATSILS has not kept up with the level of demand and the cost of service delivery and that current funding arrangements provide little scope for ATSILS to be able to provide services in family and other civil law matters to extent that we'd like to in order to better meet demand".

Mr Duffy said that he also welcomed the findings in relation to the effectiveness and accuracy of the Commonwealth Government's statements that current funding cuts are aimed at defunding law reform and advocacy activities by legal assistance services.

“Today the Productivity Commission has agreed with the sector that addressing systemic issues through law reform and advocacy is an efficient use of resources and should be funded by the Government as by addressing these types of issues we actually reduce the demand for frontline services,” Mr Duffy said.

“The Commission has further backed statements repeatedly made by the sector in the wake of these cuts in finding that they are in excess of what is actually spent by the sector on law reform and advocacy and will ultimately impact on frontline services and must be reversed.”

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***A media conference will be held in Melbourne on Thursday 4 December at 10am with representatives from the Australian Legal Assistance Forum. Venue details to come.**