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MEDIA RELEASE

NATSILS backs Law Council's call for urgent injection of funding into legal services

The National peak body for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Legal Services (NATSILS) is throwing support behind the latest finding from the Law Council's Justice Project for an urgent injection of at least \$390 million per annum of funds into legal services.

The Justice Project report has emphasised the extremely high levels of unmet legal need for criminal, family and civil law services for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Legal Services and Family Violence Prevention Legal Services. The Report also found that Aboriginal community-controlled legal assistance services are the preferred service provider for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people.

"Our ATSILS providers hold the skills, knowledge and expertise to deliver culturally safe legal assistance services to our communities across Australia, yet we are woefully under-funded," said Cheryl Axleby, co-Chair of NATSILS.

ATSILS will face approximately \$5m in funding cuts in 2020-2021 according to this year's Budget Papers. There is currently a review underway of the Indigenous Legal Assistance Program, the main source of funding for ATSILS and NATSILS across Australia, which will be used to determine administration of future funding.

"The Law Council have rightly raised the importance of Commonwealth, State and Territory governments providing adequate, predictable, sustainable and long-term funding," said Cheryl. "All governments must adequately invest in our ATSILS if there is to be a real and consistent commitment to address the longstanding over-representation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people in the justice system."

The Law Council is calling for funding to be based on evidence regarding legal need, through periodic survey and commissioned work.

"Too many Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people do not have access to justice nor culturally safe legal assistance services. NATSILS joins with the Law Council's recommendation for the Government to do this important work of mapping unmet legal need," said Cheryl.

NATSILS also supports other recommendations of the Justice Project aimed at ending the over-representation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people in the justice system.

“The time has come for the Commonwealth, State and Territory governments to show true leadership on justice issues. This includes adopting national justice targets in the Closing the Gap framework and raising the age of criminal responsibility to at least 14 years of age.”

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