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MEDIA RELEASE

NATSILS welcome the Government's decision to overturn planned cuts to the ATSILS

NATSILS congratulate the Government on their decision to overturn \$16.7 million in cuts over the forward estimates to the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Legal Services (ATSILS) and \$39 million in cuts to Community Legal Centres. The announcement was made by the Attorney-General Senator the Hon George Brandis QC and Senator Michaelia Cash earlier today.

"We thank the Government for acknowledging the critical role ATSILS play within their communities and within the Legal Assistance Sector. The decision to not tie these resources to the provision of certain service areas allows the ATSILS flexibility and independence to determine where these resources are most needed in their communities", said Mr Wayne Muir, Co-Chair of NATSILS.

The Government has emphasised the importance of identifying local solutions by working with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples to ensure development and ownership of community led approaches and we strongly encourage this partnership approach with ATSILS.

"The decision to reverse the planned cuts to ATSILS up until 2019-20 allows us to continue working in partnership with Government to develop a funding model that addresses the vast unmet legal need of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children, women and men around the country particularly in the face of devastating family violence rates, increasing child protection removals and sky rocketing rates of incarceration" said Mr Muir.

The Productivity Commission has recognised that our people face vast unmet need. They have highlighted what we have known for a long time: that a lack of adequate funding for civil and family law services is a major issue that leads to involvement with child protection systems and experiences of violence. The Productivity Commission also found that the "inevitable consequence of these unmet legal needs is a further cementing of the longstanding over-representation of Indigenous Australians in the criminal justice system".¹

At present the national incarceration rate of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander adults is 15 times higher than that for non-Indigenous adults.² Whilst Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people make up only 2% of the national population, we account for 27% of the national prison population.³

"Our legal services require funding stability and consistency. For too long now we have spent time and energy advocating for our services to be funded appropriately. It is time for us to divert that energy away from fear of losing funding toward ensuring our clients have access to the most culturally supportive and competent legal services that we know we can deliver", concluded Mr Muir.

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¹ Productivity Commission, Access to Justice Arrangements, Inquiry report, Volume 2, p 784

² Australian Bureau of Statistics, 4512.0-Corrective Services, Australia, December quarter 2016

³ Australian Bureau of Statistics, 4512.0-Corrective Services, Australia, December quarter 2016

<http://www.abs.gov.au/ausstats/abs@.nsf/Lookup/by%20Subject/4517.0~2016~Main%20Features~Aboriginal%20and%20Torres%20Strait%20Islander%20prisoner%20characteristics~5>