



NATSILS
National Aboriginal and
Torres Strait Islander Legal Services
TRUE JUSTICE FOR OUR PEOPLE

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

6 October 2020

MEDIA RELEASE: COVID-19 recovery impossible when the 2020-21 Federal Budget further entrenches Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people into poverty and the justice system

The National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Legal Service (NATSILS) is concerned that no additional funding for legal assistance services and cuts to both JobKeeper and JobSeeker will see our people entrenched in poverty and further dragged into the criminal legal system by COVID-19 over-policing, family violence and housing issues with little support to get out.

“This Budget makes the lives of rich people easier while poor people feel the brunt of again being left behind by the Government. This Government has offered no additional money to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Legal Services, or the rest of the legal sector, despite existing enormous pressure on our services, now exacerbated by COVID-19. We are concerned about the impending COVID-19 legal impacts on our people: for over-incarceration from over-policing, for family violence, housing and child protection,” said Nerita Waight, Co-Chair of NATSILS.

This Federal Budget shows the only national dedicated program to ending the disadvantage of Indigenous people in the justice system has been abolished, replaced with the mainstream National Legal Assistance Partnership. Law Council has recommended an urgent injection of at least \$310 million a year required to address critical gaps in the system. No new legal assistance funding for bushfires has been announced.

“Our services already suffer from a demand we cannot meet due to substantial delays and understaffing as a result of restrictive budgets. While we welcome five year funding for our legal services, it’s not nearly enough. Increased funding and job-creation for NATSILS means that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people can access culturally safe legal support justice when and where they need it, which as we know supports our communities and reduces the over-incarceration of our people. The Closing the Gap Agreement said our people must not be left behind for post-pandemic recovery.”

Just like the rest of the country, the pandemic has hit our people hard financially, including unemployment and underemployment, escalating utility bills, housing and an insecure economy. NATSILS welcomed the increase in the Job Seeker (formerly Newstart Allowance), the first and highest

increase in a generation, and the establishment of the JobKeeper payment. Since then, hundreds of thousands of people lose their jobs, yet supplement payments have been drastically reduced and cashless debit card programs continue. While there is continued funding for Indigenous home ownership, the Government has failed to increase much-needed social housing investment for many of our people who are homeless or otherwise in unsuitable housing.

“Cutting social security payments, lack of social housing and culturally safe disability supports, and the disproportionate increase in COVID-19 fines will likely entrench more of our people in the justice system, when we are the most incarcerated people on earth. This is a critical time for Government to provide supports for everyone to navigate our way out of the pandemic,” said Ms Waight.

In addition to the Federal Budget cutting the financial support that has alleviated some of the fiscal pressure our people have been under, state governments have committed to spending more on police and expanding police powers. This, in addition to the lack of confirmed funding for the National Family Violence Prevention Legal Forum from December, and only \$46.5 million over four years allocated to Closing the Gap, illustrates the lack of Government commitment to Closing the Gap. There are currently negotiations to embed ambitious family violence targets into the Agreement.

“The pandemic is an unprecedented time of increased family violence, child removals and families who are struggling. What is the world we want to come out of this into? This is not the time to silence the voices of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women through their national peak body or weak family violence targets. We will get through this pandemic together if our Federal leaders do everything possible to protect everyone’s health and wellbeing, no exceptions. This means dedicating serious public money to Closing the Gap.”

NATSILS notes disappointment at being excluded from the Federal Budget Lock-Up, along with many other Aboriginal Community-Controlled Organisations and legal sector peaks, at a time of importance for our people and the nation.

END OF RELEASE

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