



NATSILS

National Aboriginal and
Torres Strait Islander Legal Services

TRUE JUSTICE FOR OUR PEOPLE

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Emergency funding needed to prevent imminent service freezes: Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Legal Services

Issued in partnership with National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Legal Services, Aboriginal Legal Rights Movement South Australia, Aboriginal Legal Service of Western Australia, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Legal Service (QLD) Ltd, North Australian Aboriginal Justice Agency, Tasmanian Aboriginal Legal Service, Victorian Aboriginal Legal Service

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Legal Services (ATSILS) around Australia are calling on the federal government to deliver a \$250 million emergency support package to prevent imminent service freezes and unjust incarceration of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people.

At the frontline, certain service locations in regional Australia face freezes within four weeks. A dramatic increase in service freezes can only be prevented or reversed with additional core funding from the Commonwealth.

Demand for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Legal Services (ATSILS) has increased by up to 100% since 2018 but core funding from the Commonwealth has declined in real terms.

Service freezes will have dire consequences for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Australians who need our services to have any chance of equal access to justice. Service freezes risk disastrous outcomes including increased family violence and child removal, unjust incarceration and deaths in custody.

The current workload crisis facing our frontline services risks the physical and mental health of our staff and therefore our clients. The difficult decision to freeze services will be devastating for our organisations because it means real people who deserve culturally appropriate legal representation are turned away and suffer unnecessarily through the justice system.

“Our staff are at the brink of collapse. Double the services and less funding: that’s the latest driver of Australia’s national justice system emergency for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people,” said Karly Warner, Chair of NATSILS, the national peak body for the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Legal Services around the country, and CEO of the Aboriginal Legal Service in NSW/ACT.

“The federal government has known about our slide into crisis for some time. They appear to be willing to let our services either collapse or turn people away.

“We are giving advance warning to our communities that without immediate intervention from the federal government we will need to reduce services within the next four weeks. We are currently drawing up plans to reduce workload of burnt out staff whilst having the minimum impact on service delivery possible.

“We are committed to doing everything we can to support our communities but there’s no point in sugar-coating it - this is an extremely dire situation. This crisis can only be averted with immediate emergency funding, complemented with a sector strengthening plan for ensuring ongoing service sustainability for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people.

“Every Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander person who wants to use a culturally safe legal service deserves to be able to access those services. Communities are crying out for greater access to

ATSILS. The federal government is committed to listening to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander voices and we need them to listen right now,” Ms Warner said.

This funding crisis has been building for some time because successive parliaments have not prioritised culturally safe services for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. The federal government was elected promising to address Aboriginal justice and we know that all Australians want to see investment in services that work.

ENDS

Media contact: Jane Garcia (Essential) 0455 111 593

Emergency funding package to maintain current services:

\$54 million ‘ATSILS Workforce Continuity Fund’ to be delivered over the next six months to immediately fund additional external support where ALS lawyers are unable to reach clients and to start recruitment for new permanent staff.

Additional \$196 million is necessary over FY2023-24 & FY24-25 simply to maintain current levels of service and prevent freezes in certain locations.