



NATSILS

National Aboriginal and
Torres Strait Islander Legal Services

TRUE JUSTICE FOR OUR PEOPLE

MEDIA RELEASE – 15 May 2024 for immediate release

Budget treats First Nations justice as an afterthought

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Legal Services across the country will have to continue getting by on a shoestring after the Federal Budget failed to provide meaningful relief.

Together, the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Legal Services (ATSILS) in each state and territory called for a \$229 million injection in the Budget to ensure they can continue to deliver their critical services.

Far from delivering what is needed to ensure First Nations people have access to justice, the Budget allocated only around \$15 million for ATSILS.

“We are angry and distressed that our funding crisis will continue for another year,” said Nerita Waight, Deputy Chair of National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Legal Services (NATSILS), the peak body representing ATSILS, which provide essential legal and community services in criminal, family, child protection, and civil law.

“This crisis is caused by decades of underfunding by successive parliaments, coupled with skyrocketing demand for our services.

“Some ATSILS have had to reduce or freeze services already. After this disappointing Budget they are at the precipice of being forced take further action. Further service freezes would have dire consequences for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. When culturally safe, accessible legal help isn’t available, the result is more children taken from their families, more family violence, more unjust imprisonment, and the very real possibility of more deaths in custody,” Ms Waight said.

ATSILS are primarily funded under the 2020-2025 National Legal Assistance Partnership (NLAP), the same agreement that funds Legal Aid Commissions, Community Legal Centres, and Family Violence Prevention Legal Services across Australia. An independent review of the NLAP was recently completed by Dr Warren Mundy and delivered to Commonwealth and State Attorneys-General in March.

“Though ATSILS are yet to be provided with a copy of the review two months after its delivery to government, we understand that it recommends a significant increase to our baseline funding from mid-2025, when the NLAP agreement is due to be renewed,” Ms Waight said.

“We are calling on Attorney-General Dreyfus to publicly release the review in the interests of transparency.

“Without additional investment, we are going to see services reduced and cut across the legal assistance sector. We’ll see a greater number of workers leave the sector for more appropriate remuneration and recognition, and these issues will further compound the investment required to meet growing unmet legal need,” Ms Waight said.

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