

OPEN LETTER: Cuts to legal services will have disastrous impact on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities

25 March 2015

The Hon. Tony Abbott MP
Prime Minister
Parliament House
Canberra ACT 2600

Cc: The Hon. Joe Hockey MP, Treasurer
Senator the Hon. George Brandis QC, Attorney-General
Senator the Hon. Nigel Scullion MP, Minister for Indigenous Affairs

Dear Prime Minister,

The undersigned organisations are writing to request that you urgently reverse the proposed funding cuts to legal assistance services under the Attorney General's portfolio, including Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Legal Services (ATSILS), its peak body National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Legal Services (NATSILS), Community Legal Centres (CLCs) and the Legal Aid Commissions (LAC).

This letter has arisen from our deeply held shared concern about the effects that these funding cuts will have on the delivery of frontline legal services to society's most vulnerable members, particularly Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, women and children. We note that these organisations have already made difficult decisions to withdraw, or reduce, key services due to the proposed funding cuts and accompanying uncertainty. This has created an extremely difficult situation for these services, their staff and most importantly, for the clients and communities they represent.

We are further concerned that these cuts come at a time when there are crisis levels of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples' imprisonment, high rates of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children in the child protection system and growing rates of family violence. These cuts will make a bad situation worse as more Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people will be unrepresented in courts and unable to access legal assistance, including family and civil law services. This will lead to increased costs to all governments as unrepresented litigants will block the courts and create inefficiencies in the system.

We ask that this matter be given urgent attention as the current uncertainty is hampering the ability of these organisations to deliver the expert frontline legal services that our communities so desperately need.

We also call upon the Government to take heed of the Productivity Commission's *Access to Justice Arrangements* report which called for a further \$200m investment into the legal assistance sector, including the Family Violence Prevention Legal Services. We believe that additional funding is needed to address skyrocketing levels of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander imprisonment and family violence.

We urge you to take critical leadership on this issue.

Yours Sincerely,

1. Amnesty International Australia
2. Anglican Board of Mission
3. ANTaR
4. Australian Bar Association
5. Australian Council of Social Service
6. Australian Lawyers for Human Rights
7. Commissioner for Aboriginal Children and Young People (Vic), Andrew Jackomos
8. Commissioner for Children and Young People (Vic), Bernie Geary
9. Congress of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Nurses and Midwives
10. Federation of Community Legal Centres (Vic) Inc.
11. First Peoples Disability Network (Australia)
12. Human Rights Law Centre
13. Indigenous Allied Health Australia
14. Law Council of Australia
15. National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Legal Services
16. National Association for Community Legal Centres
17. National Congress of Australia's First Peoples
18. National Family Violence Legal and Prevention Services Forum
19. Muru Marri, School of Public Health and Community Medicine, UNSW Australia
20. Oxfam Australia
21. The Australian College of Midwives
22. The Fred Hollows Foundation
23. The Public Health Association of Australia
24. Reconciliation Australia
25. Secretariat for National Aboriginal and Islander Child Care
26. The Lowitja Institute