

Law Council opens legal year announcing 2016 legal aid campaign

The Australian legal profession has marked the Opening of the Legal Year by announcing a 2016 national campaign to draw attention to the crisis in legal aid.

Religious services and civil ceremonies held across the country marked the traditional opening of the legal year.

The Law Council said today that the current crisis is a direct consequence of funding neglect and indiscriminate cuts by the Federal Government, over many years, which has impacted severely on many Australians, including working families and those who have fallen on hard times.

“If you imagine 11,000 Victorians outside religious observances and civil ceremonies in Melbourne today, that would represent the number of people denied legal aid by cutbacks over the past five years, in just one state, Victoria,” Law Council President, Stuart Clark AM, said.

“The picture is the very similar across the country.

“The plight of those people denied legal aid is a direct result of hundreds of millions of dollars in cuts by successive federal governments.

“Over the last 20 years, successive federal governments have cut the Commonwealth’s share of legal aid from 50 per cent to just 35 per cent forcing increasing numbers of people to defend themselves in Court against well-armed prosecution teams. Meanwhile, individuals must battle well-resourced corporate opponents, abusive former partners and government agencies without any legal assistance or representation, at all.

“The consequence of federal government neglect is often catastrophic for the lives and livelihoods of those individuals and their families.

“This is despite successive government and publicly funded inquiries recommending substantial increases in federal government funding, including by the government’s chief economic policy advisory bodies. These calls have gone unanswered and the consequences for all Australians are manifold.

“The Law Council has called on all Federal Parliamentarians to demand an end to the Commonwealth’s funding neglect in 2016.

“It is time to take a stand. The Federal Government must restore its funding to 50 per cent of total funding to legal aid and substantially increase funding to all legal assistance bodies.

“In 2016, the legal profession is united in calling for immediate Commonwealth funding priority for legal assistance services.”

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