



## **Legal assistance review is the opportunity to deliver access to justice as demand grows during tough times**

**20 June 2023**

***Broadcast-ready radio grabs available below***

Australia's leading legal assistance and peak professional representative bodies are calling on the Commonwealth Government to keep justice within reach of our most disadvantaged, ahead of its mid-cycle review of funding for legal assistance services.

The Law Council of Australia, Australian Pro Bono Centre and National Legal Aid, are urging the Australian government to deliver significant investment in the National Legal Assistance Partnership 2020-25 (NLAP), alongside corresponding State and Territory increases, when the review is undertaken in the second half of 2023.

The call to action comes as the sector unites for the National Access to Justice and Pro Bono Conference, being held in Brisbane on June 22-23 – the first since the pandemic.

Law Council President Luke Murphy said the NLAP review presented the Australian Government with the opportunity to address its failure to back the sector in the latest Federal Budget.

“It is timely to consider the vital role that legal assistance services play in ensuring a just society in Australia”, Mr Murphy said. “For instance, Victoria Legal Aid played an integral role in bringing test cases to challenge the lawfulness of the Centrelink’s ‘Robodebt’ online compliance system in the Federal Court. This led to the former Australian Government conceding that key elements of the Robodebt process raised in Victoria Legal Aid’s case on behalf of its client, Ms Deanna Amato, were unlawful.”

“Despite the clear economic and social benefits of investment in the legal assistance sector, Legal Aid Commissions, Community Legal Centres, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Legal Services and Family Violence Prevention and Legal Services remain critically underfunded,” Mr Murphy said.

“We understand that there are significant economic challenges ahead for the Australian Government, however it’s during these difficult times that demand for legal assistance grows. The consequences of being unable to access legal help can be profound, with implications for the financial security, health, housing and safety of our most vulnerable communities.”

“Undervalued and underfunded civil and family law services desperately need investment to help ensure all people have the access to justice they deserve, and this review of the NLAP is an opportunity to shine a spotlight on this need.”

The *Benefits of Access to Justice* report commissioned by National Legal Aid (NLA) earlier this year showed that for every \$1 invested in family and civil law legal aid services by the Australian Government, a benefit of \$2.25 is delivered.

Acting NLA Chair John Boersig said that equates to economic benefits for the community of \$600 million each year, at a time when every dollar counts.

“With many Australians struggling to make ends meet, it’s devastating that services are being forced to turn people away, when they should be filling the gaps in service delivery,” Mr Boersig said.

“Legal assistance can support so many people in the community on a broad range of issues including keeping victim-survivors of domestic and family violence safe, supporting children through the family law process, ensuring that people affected by natural disasters can access help, and that those living with disability can count on long-term support, rather than short-term programs.”

Australian Pro Bono Centre CEO Gabriela Christian-Hare said signatories to the National Pro Bono Target reported undertaking over 645,000 hours of pro bono legal services during the 2022 financial year – the equivalent of 359 lawyers working full-time for one year.

“Pro bono lawyers have continued to support a wide range of individual and community organisation clients but have dedicated additional time and resources in recent years to assist those affected by the pandemic and a range of natural disasters across the country,” Ms Christian-Hare said.

“We need greater funding for the legal assistance sector, both to help legal assistance organisations leverage pro bono support for the benefit of the community, and to allow the Centre to do more to foster and facilitate that support.”

The National Access to Justice and Pro Bono Conference brings together legal professionals, judges, government law officers, academics and students from across the nation, exploring the challenges and opportunities for the sector, through a series of panel discussions and plenary sessions.

The Honourable Chief Justice of the High Court of Australia, Susan Kiefel AC will deliver the opening address, with The Honourable Mark Dreyfus KC MP, Commonwealth Attorney-General giving the keynote speech on day two. Award-winning correspondent and Macquarie University Professor Peter Greste will also address the conference dinner.

Media wishing to attend the morning session on 22 June from 8.30am to 10:30am, including Chief Justice Kiefel’s address and Plenary Session One, will need to register by 3pm on 21 June.

Broadcast-ready audio grabs from Acting NLA Chair John Boersig and Australian Pro Bono Centre CEO Gabriela Christian-Hare are available for [download here](#).

**Media contact: Melissa Seiler, Senior Media Advisor – 0424 184 846**