

**DR MIKE FREELANDER
FEDERAL MEMBER FOR MACARTHUR**

**DR MIKE FREELANDER MP PRAISES THE WORK OF THE
MACARTHUR LEGAL CENTRE AND CALLS ON THE PRIME MINISTER
TO REVERSE ALL CUTS TO LEGAL AID AND COMMUNITY LEGAL
CENTRES**

“I come here today to speak about the Macarthur Legal Centre. Nationally, and not for the first time, a coalition government is placing legal aid services across the country at risk. There are about 200 not-for-profit community legal centres across Australia. The one I know best is in Campbelltown, and that is the Macarthur Legal Centre. It is staffed with passionate and selfless workers dedicated to helping those that are most vulnerable and most disadvantaged in our society, including people suffering from the effects of domestic violence, those with tenancy difficulties in a time of housing stress and those living in poverty. I have the highest regard for their professionalism, and I continue to refer people to them, both in my role as a parliamentarian and in my role as a paediatrician.

Every year community legal centres deal with well over 200,000 requests for legal advice but, sadly, have to turn away many thousands due to lack of funding. Community legal centres are a lifeline for those who cannot afford to access qualified legal help when they need it most—often in an emergency or after a family crisis or tragedy. They provide hope and certainty where otherwise there would be none.

Today I call on the government to fully reverse the cuts foreshadowed to all community legal aid centres. Those cuts are mean and miserable and will make little if any tangible difference to the government's overall budget position. In a Commonwealth budget of over \$400 billion, the cuts are a drop in the ocean. To the people affected and their communities, they are of

incalculable value. As the Law Council has noted, cuts to legal aid services are a false economy. The Productivity Commission agrees. In 2014, the commission concluded that civil legal services were already underfunded to the tune of \$200 million and that 'money invested in legal aid would yield substantial economic savings'.

The Macarthur Legal Centre has operated for 29 years, providing free legal advice, referrals and assistance for people of the Macarthur electorate and also those outside the electorate. It is used by over 4,000 people every year and offers family law, care and protection law, civil law, elder law and employment law, as well as other support services. It encompasses a tenancy advocacy service and is of enormous value to the families that I see in difficulty. It also encompasses a women's domestic violence court advocacy service—a vital need in our society. It is one of many that have been told their federal funding is to be cut by 25 percent from the middle of 2017. That is the equivalent of 1½ solicitors, and many more people in desperate need will be turned away.

My plea to the Prime Minister is to show his better self, heed the expert advice and permanently reverse all the cuts and false economies first proposed by his predecessor. We have a responsibility, as members of parliament and as human beings, to ensure that all Australians have fair access to the law.”

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