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Opening of the Legal Year 2016

Northern Territory joins call for Legal Assistance Funding

It is traditional for legal communities around the world to mark the Opening of the Legal Year (OLY) with celebrations of collegiality and the administration of justice. In the Northern Territory, Law Society Northern Territory (Society) marks the opening of the legal year with events for members and guests where the Chief Justice of the Supreme Court reflects on the work of the courts and the challenges on the horizon. This year, the Society also joins other Australian law societies by marking the commencement of a national campaign for restoration of legal assistance funding.

Most courts no-longer take an extended Christmas break, but as far away as Tasmania and the United Kingdom they still have a parade of judges and barristers in wigs and gowns, followed by a church service as part of these celebrations. "We do things a little differently here. I wouldn't be the first to say that horse hair and woollen robes aren't that comfortable under the Centralian sun and certainly not in the tropical north" said Society president Mr Tass Liveris.

There is a lot more to the opening of the legal year celebrations. "Being part of a profession means you adhere to codes of conduct and you have an obligation to uphold the rule of law and support the work of the courts. In 2015, the Chief Justice raised the alarm about the cost of unrepresented people before the courts, hearings taking longer and the need for adequate levels of legal assistance funding" Mr Liveris said.

Over the last 20 years, federal governments have reduced the funding for legal aid, meaning the reduction in the availability of legal services to the community from legal aid agencies. "The gap is widening between those that will be eligible for legal aid and those that can afford legal services. We are talking of some of the most disadvantaged and vulnerable members of our community who are in need of legal assistance, including parents and children of families undergoing divorce; we cannot leave these people to face court on their own, or face being questioned by a former partner in court where there are allegations of domestic violence." Mr Liveris said. Many national and international reports highlight that every dollar spent on legal assistance brings up to two dollars of value to the community. NT Legal Aid received a one off \$1 million golden ticket last year from the Northern Territory government; what we now need is ongoing commitment from the federal government. "Remember that a \$1 million investment will see a \$2 million benefit to the community and this makes good economic sense."

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