Media Release

Law Council
OF AUSTRALIA

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Access to justice for all

Australia's legal profession has today published an open letter to key Commonwealth state and territory ministers, aimed at ensuring every member of our community can access legal support in times of need.

"Our profession is calling on all governments to significantly increase their support for Australia's legal assistance sector," Law Council of Australia President, Mr Greg McIntyre SC said.

"Australia's legal assistance services—Legal Aid Commissions, Community Legal Centres, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Legal Services and Family Violence Prevention Legal Services—are designed to be there for members of our community during times of life when they experience significant vulnerability, need, hardship and stress.

"These services provide assistance in so many ways, including providing advice, support and representation to women fleeing harm; those facing discrimination in the workplace; people experiencing elder abuse; and those at risk of homelessness.

"However, our legal assistance sector has suffered greatly under decades of funding neglect and cannot keep up with demand for services. For example, women's legal services in this country have reported they are having to turn away more than 50,000 women a year.

"The Law Council, on behalf of the profession, has today sent a letter to the Treasurer, Finance Minister and all Attorneys-General expressing our dismay this situation has been allowed to arise and calling on them to address the shortcomings without delay.

"Through our profession-wide networks, social media, and meetings with local and federal parliamentarians, we will continue to forcefully advocate for governments to adequately resource the legal assistance sector without delay.

"Our urgency is driven by the fact that the majority of current committed funding to our legal assistance sector runs out in less than 12 months.

"The recent Independent Review of the National Legal Assistance Partnership (NLAP) suggests that the level of underfunding for publicly funded legal services is significant. We need to ensure that the next partnership agreement represents a far greater investment and commitment to legal assistance, in line with the recommendation of the NLAP review.

"The NLAP review report identifies key areas for reform that will result in real and lasting change to our legal assistance sector. This reform is vital for the good of all Australians, and we cannot see any grounds on which the necessity and benefits can be denied.

"We believe priorities include improving funding levels to legal assistance services; improving the working conditions for those undertaking this valuable work; properly valuing the work of private practitioners undertaking legal aid matters; and additional incentives to attract and retain legal practitioners in rural, regional and remote Australia.

"Transformational change is required—and required now—to give these vital services the stability and certainty they need and deserve, and to ensure that access to justice is facilitated for all."

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The Law Council of Australia is the national voice of the legal profession, promoting justice and the rule of law.