

MEDIA RELEASE

CLCA (WA) is calling on all major parties for the 2017 State Election to commit to a \$1.2 million increase per annum for WA Community Legal Centres (WA's share of the \$200m for CLCs).

When a legal crisis hits, vulnerable and low-income West Australians increasingly have nowhere to turn. With funding for community legal services in decline, paying up to \$340 per hour for private legal help is simply out of the question.

Legal problems such as family separation, unfair dismissal or tenancy issues, by their nature, often occur at a time of financial or emotional crisis. Faced with prohibitive costs for legal assistance often means the difference between accessing justice, or letting the problems escalate further.

Helen Creed, Executive Director of the peak body for community legal centres said today: "It has been two years since the Productivity Commission released the report 'Access to Justice Arrangements, in which it stated:

"...not providing legal assistance in these instances can be a false economy as the costs of unresolved problems are often shifted to other areas of government spending such as health care, housing and child protection."

The Productivity Commission further recommended an immediate injection of \$200 million per year was required for the legal assistance service system. Both the Commonwealth Government and WA State Government have instead decreased funding to Community Legal Centres during the last two years.

"We are calling on all major parties for the 2017 State Election to commitment to a \$1.2 million increase per annum for WA Community Legal Centres. This represents WA's share in meeting the Productivity Commission call for an injection of funds." said Helen Creed.

Louise Giolitto, CEO of WACOSS, also said: "increased funding for front line services, such as community legal centres is one of the key asks of the community sector's *What if it was me?* campaign."

The Northern Suburbs Community Legal Centre (NSCLC) is one of 28 centres in WA providing assistance to the 240,000 West Australians living below the poverty line. Their help means the difference between accessing justice - and letting the problems escalate further.

NSCLC's intervened last year to assist a vulnerable father facing the prospect of being legally separated from his two children.

Following a separation from the children's mother, the client had concerns about his children's safety in her care. Unable to afford private legal fees a CLC was his only option for assistance, as Legal Aid were unable to assist as they were representing his ex-partner.

Faced with allegations from his ex-partner that he was the unfit parent he could have been banned from contact with his children. Despite gathering evidence to dispute the allegations against him, he did not have the capacity to present this complex case to the court without legal assistance.

NSCLC took on his case and fought on his behalf. Using the evidence he had collected, they were able to present a legal case demonstrating the inconsistencies in the allegations against him and the risks the mother posed to the children, and as a result orders were made for the children to live with him.

Whilst this was a great result for the client, NSCLC ability to provide this support to future clients is being restricted. Community Legal Centres (CLCs) in WA face a funding reduction of by 32.2%, from July this year. This goes against the advice of the Productivity Commission's report '*Access to Justice Arrangements*' recommendation to inject \$200 million per year into the legal assistance service system.

That is why the Community Legal Centres Association (WA) is asking West Australians to consider 'What if it was me?'

"If you were suddenly facing a custody dispute would you be able to find \$340 per hour to pay a solicitor at this time of emotional and financial crisis?" asked Helen Creed.

For further comment and other case studies of legal assistance provided please contact:
Helen Creed, Executive Director, Community Legal Centres Association (WA). Mobile: 0400 175 874. Email: executivedirector@communitylaw.net

The Community Legal Centres Association (WA) Inc is the peak body for community legal centres. Located throughout the state, community legal centres are independent, non-profit organizations who provide legal services to disadvantaged and vulnerable people or those on low incomes who are ineligible for legal aid.