

7 October 2020

Federal Budget fails to respond to call for urgent funding for specialist women's legal services

Women's Legal Services have been left struggling to help Australian women escape abusive partners, after the Federal Budget failed to deliver an emergency injection of \$25 million needed to meet the overwhelming demand for family violence legal aid and support.

Women's Legal Services Australia (WLSA) wrote to Attorney-General Christian Porter with costings by Jim Stanford of the Centre for Future Work estimating an extra \$25 million is needed to ensure the current volume of requests received by its members can be addressed.

Joanna Fletcher, CEO of Women's Legal Service Victoria, said this emergency intervention missing from yesterday's budget will cost thousands of Australian women their health and safety, and increase financial pressure on other sectors including police, courts and social services.

"We are in an intolerable situation where we are forced to deny help to women, including many in high-risk situations, because we don't have the staff to help them," said Ms Fletcher.

"The women who come to us for help are often experiencing financial abuse and coercive control as well as physical violence. We know from decades of experience that without intervention, these controlling behaviours can escalate into deadly violence against women and children.

"This Budget was an opportunity for the Morrison Government to address decades of chronic underspending on life-saving legal services. Now, women have been ignored yet again."

The Federal Budget injected \$10.2 million to the Family and Federal Circuit Courts to manage the strain of increasing case volumes and COVID-19, but no new funding was allocated to legal services representing and supporting people in need.

"Politicians are happy to voice concern that one woman a week dies at the hands of a violent partner or ex-partner in Australia, but evidently there is still no political will to remedy the situation and provide the lifeline these women need to escape their abusers," says Ms Fletcher.

"Meanwhile, a disproportionate amount of Federal community legal funding still makes its way to organisations that represent respondents in family violence cases, helping perpetrators drag women and children through the court system and retain access to their victims.

"The need is dire. Specialist women's legal services are one solution that actually works. We provide not just legal representation, but financial counselling, emotional support and access to social services; all the supports women need to safely extricate themselves and their children from dangerous situations.

"This situation cannot go on. We will continue to engage with the Government and demand our leaders step up and invest in solutions to address family violence. The queues of women in need will only grow, and so will the scourge of violence against women and children that remains our national shame."

WLSA will continue to campaign for this vital increase in funding during the evaluation of the Fourth Action Plan of the National Plan to Reduce Violence against Women and their Children, and throughout the development of the next National Plan due to commence in 2021.

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