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Coast's community lawyers hopeful about \$39m decision



Nicky Moffat | 24th Apr 2017 10:20 AM



Suncoast Community Legal Service says reduced funding will mean the Coast's most disadvantaged - like domestic violence victims and parents seeking custody of their grandkids from drug-addicted children - miss out. Principal Julian Porter has welcomed the Federal Government's decision to reinstate \$39 million in funding to community legal services.

Contributed

COMMUNITY lawyers at Suncoast Community Legal Service are hopeful the Federal Government backflip on its decision to slash funds to not-for-profit legal services will mean its advocacy for the Coast's domestic violence victims can continue.

The service announced earlier this month that an expected funding cut of about one third would likely mean its lawyers would be confined to answering phones rather than taking on cases through the courts.

But Federal Attorney-General George Brandis says a \$55.7 million federal contribution to the community legal sector would be restored in the May 9 budget, with \$39 million to go to community legal centres.

Suncoast Community Legal Service principal Julian Porter said the funding announcement looked promising, and he would wait to hear whether the devastating cuts to his not-for-profit organisation would be reversed.

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A recent explosion of extreme domestic violence on the Sunshine Coast, [reported by the Daily over Easter](#), confirms the importance of continued legal advocacy for victims, Mr Porter said.

Mr O'Brien said he made representations to both Mr Brandis and the state Attorney-General Yvette D'Ath on the issue last year, requesting that a one-off stream of funding for Suncoast Community Legal Service be renewed, and that these funds prioritise domestic violence victim support.

"From my point of view for the Sunshine Coast, now the Federal Government has stepped up to the plate and confirmed further funding will be provided and it will support addressing domestic violence, we will need to keep the pressure on the State Government to ensure the Suncoast Community Legal Service will get its share," he said.

"I think our local Suncoast Community Legal Service is a high performer in this regard.

"It's important for the state attorney-general, who will allocate the money, to reward high performance. We need to be incentivising community legal services to be high-performing organisations as opposed to providing funding purely on the basis of who is calling for money."

Mr Porter said his organisation was efficient, with more than 85% of funding going directly to staff costs.

An active network of 100 volunteer lawyers and a partnership with the University of the Sunshine Coast were among strategies for keeping the organisation lean, he said.

Queensland Law Society president Christine Smyth has welcomed the news that the Federal Government will abandon planned funding cuts to community legal centres, noting that the decision means that society's most vulnerable people will continue to be able to access justice.

"Community legal centres in Queensland are already forced to turn away 160,000 people a year - that's more than the MCG crowd at the Boxing Day test," she said.

"Had these funding cuts been maintained, tens of thousands of people would have been effectively unable to access their basic legal rights."

Ms Smyth said the Queensland Law Society had been relentless in its lobbying for a reversal of the cuts, and she was glad that the government was listening.

"The fact that the government took on board the society's submissions and changed its mind is pleasing, although it is regrettable that the cuts were proposed in the first place.

"We are all aware that current economic conditions require some austerity measures, but you can't tighten your belt if you don't have one; a country like Australia should always be able to protect its most vulnerable people."

