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## Community legal centres targeted in Coalition cuts

Community legal centres have become the latest victims of budget cutbacks by the Coalition Government, in a move seen by some as an attempt to silence advocacy.

A total of \$43.1 million will be cut from “legal policy reform and advocacy funding” over four years. The announcement was part of the Federal Government’s mid-year budget update, released this week, which forecast a \$47 billion budget deficit.

Environmental legal centres are among those to have their funding cut. The government has cut about \$10 million over four years pledged to the Environmental Defenders Offices (EDOs) by the former Labor government.

It will also end an annual payment, meaning the legal centres will not receive any federal funding after July 1 next year.

The move could see the closure of some of the nine environmental legal centre offices around the country. EDOs provide representation to community groups fighting major developments or planning decisions and also advise on conservation issues and advocate law reform.

While some branches are also funded by private donations and state governments, EDO Victoria chief executive Brendan Sydes said the cuts would reduce his organisation’s funding by up to half. The NSW office will lose 20-30% of its funding.

“This decision by the Federal Government demonstrates the hostility that this government has for the many Australian communities using the law to stand up for the places they love,” Mr Sydes said. “It is outrageous that the Federal Government seeks to silence the voice of communities.”

Online donations site GiveNow.com.au (a Funding Centre sister site) has listed appeals on behalf of many state EDOs who are seeking funding in light of the decision.

Indigenous legal services will also be hit hard. About \$13.4 million will be cut from the National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Island Legal Services (NATSILS), while Family Violence Prevention Legal Services – a legal service for Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander victims of family violence – will lose \$3.66 million.

NATSILS chairperson Shane Duffy said the decision to defund the organisation was short sighted and would only save \$9 million over three years.

“Cutting funding at the policy level in order to save money is simply a false economy,” Mr Duffy said. “More people are going to end up in prison, it’s as simple as that.”

Human Rights Law Centre executive director Hugh de Kretser said the cuts went against the recommendations of repeated parliamentary inquiries that highlighted the chronic underfunding of Aboriginal legal services.

“These are significant cuts to already overstretched services,” Mr de Kretser said. “Community legal services,



Indigenous legal services and legal aid commissions perform preventative, cost-saving legal work that governments should be encouraging, not cutting.”

The Australian Council of Social Service urged the Federal Government to take a cool approach and avoid trying to restore the budget in one hit. It said the cuts would have “little impact on the budget bottom line, but a devastating impact on those who need access to legal assistance”.

The Federal Government says the cuts will only apply to policy reform and legal advocacy and will not affect frontline services.

The balance of the \$43.1 million includes \$19.6 million cut from the Community Legal Service program – which funded the Environmental Defenders Offices and the Public Interest Advocacy Centre – and \$6.5 million cut from Legal Aid Commissions.

