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Barwon Community Legal Service faces funding crisis, urgently appeals to government for support

Barwon Community Legal Service, which helps vulnerable people like family violence victims, says it may be forced to slash staff and offerings.

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Barwon Community Legal Services CEO Bryanna Connell at their offices in Belmont. Picture: Brad Fleet

A local legal service helping victims of family violence could have to cut back staff and services if it does not receive additional funding.

The [Barwon Community Legal Service \(BCLS\)](#) has sent letters to federal MPs requesting “urgent” funding.

The local campaign follows a national push by Community Legal Centres (CLCs) to address an issue of indexation not keeping pace with real wage growth.

According to BCLS, CLCs have only had their federal government funding increase by 1.5 per cent year-on-year, but wages have increased by up to 5.75 per cent each year, creating a significant, cumulative shortfall.

BCLS chief executive Bryanna Connell said it had diversified the way it could fund certain programs, however, this money would not last forever.

“Whilst wage growth is essential for our staff who work incredibly hard in very challenging roles, it is paramount to acknowledge that the continuation of some of our services is now at risk due to this funding shortfall,” Ms Connell said

“If we don’t get extra funding, then we’re turning people away.



19-03-2024 Barwon Community Legal Services CEO Bryanna Connell at their offices in Belmont. Picture: Brad Fleet

“The government has a duty to enable vulnerable people in society to have access to legal representation, but we won’t be able to deliver our current level of help without fair funding.

“We’ve got lawyers who really want to do this work, but they’re not able to help the people who need it most.”

Ms Connell also said a number of frontline staff were experiencing vicarious trauma and burnout.

“People are stressed,” she said.

“We have a family law team who act purely for clients who have experienced family violence and (those cases) can go on for a long time and can be difficult.”

A letter from BCLS to local federal MPs Libby Coker and Richard Marles asks them to write to the attorney-general, treasurer and finance minister to receive an urgent injection of at least \$50m funding for CLCs.

They are also seeking an additional injection of at least \$75m to enable CLCs to start to address high increasing levels of unmet legal need and a clear commitment to ongoing National Legal Assistance Partnership (NLAP) funding for all legal assistance providers beyond June 2025.



Barwon Community Legal Services CEO Bryanna Connell at their offices in Belmont. Picture: Brad Fleet

Federal MP for Corangamite Libby Coker said she would continue to advocate for BCLS.

“They offer much-needed support for individuals and families navigating often complex legal matters and ensure equal access to justice, particularly for our most vulnerable community members,” Ms Coker said.

A spokesperson for the Deputy Prime Minister and Corio MP Richard Marles said community legal centres provide legal assistance to some of the most vulnerable people in the community.

“These services impact people’s lives and the government will continue to work with the Community Legal Centres to ensure the continuation of assistance to the community,” the spokesperson said.

There are almost 200 CLCs operating across Australia.

The Commonwealth Government provides funding for community legal centres through the NLAP with the states and territories.

The current NLAP expires on June 30, 2025.

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