



NATSILS

**NATIONAL ABORIGINAL & TORRES
STRAIT ISLANDER LEGAL SERVICES**

MEDIA RELEASE

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Government to defund Aboriginal Legal Services Peak Body and all Law Reform and Policy Positions

Federal Government cuts to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Legal Services will mean that even more Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples will not be able to access essential legal services and will further entrench Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples as second class citizens in their own country, says the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Legal Services peak body.

The Abbott Government is set to announce the defunding of the National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Legal Services (NATSILS), the national peak body for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Legal Services (ATSILS), and of all Law Reform and Policy Officer positions within each State and Territory based ATSILS, in order to make an annual saving of \$3m from the 2014-2015 financial year onwards.

NATSILS Chairperson, Shane Duffy, said that at a time when Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander incarceration rates are at an alarming high, and only continue to rise, defunding services such as ATSILS and its national peak body is short sighted.

“Without a national peak body and state based law reform and policy officers, governments around Australia will have no access to informed, evidenced based frontline advice in regards to the effectiveness of the justice system,” Mr Duffy said.

“Justice related costs are spiralling out of control around Australia, and removing the ability of frontline services to provide government agencies with accurate policy advice will only serve to make our system more ineffective, inefficient and increasingly costly. Cutting funding at the policy level in order to save money is simply a false economy.”

Mr Duffy said that the small saving of \$3m per year is nothing compared to the impact that such cuts are going to have on the ground.

“Without the advocacy work of a national peak body and State and Territory based Law Reform and Policy Officers, more people are going to end up in prison. It’s as simple as that,” Mr Duffy said.

“The funding cuts directly target our ability work with Governments to address the underlying causes of why Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples are so disproportionately represented in our justice system. There is no one else to fulfil this role if we are prohibited from doing so”.

Mr Duffy said that the funding cuts will also affect the level of prevention and early intervention services provided to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples.

“Our Law Reform and Policy Officers undertake a significant amount of community legal education to help Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples better understand the justice system, how to prevent contact with the justice system and

how to resolve their disputes earlier before they escalate into more serious matters,” Mr Duffy said.

“Rather than funding cuts, we need more investment in prevention and early intervention services to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, especially in regards to civil and family law. Cutting funding to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Legal Services goes against all the evidence of what is needed to close the gap in access to justice for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples.”

Mr Duffy said that it is unclear where the sudden impetus for the cuts has come from.

“The Prime Minister’s Indigenous Advisory Council has been tasked with the review of all Government expenditure on Indigenous Programs yet it is unclear as to why the funding of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Legal Services has been excluded from this review and the cuts have already been decided upon,” Mr Duffy said.

“The fact that the Government has pre-empted this review calls into question the commitment Tony Abbott has for the Council that he has specifically created to advise him on such issues. This isn’t what you would expect from a Prime Minister who has positioned himself as the Prime Minister for Indigenous Affairs”.

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