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Budget 2017-18 recognises the need to restore funding to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Legal Services, but there is still a long way to go

The 2017-18 Federal Budget has acknowledged the need to reverse funding cuts that were set to impact upon Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Legal Services (ATSILS) on 1 July 2017.

The National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Legal Service (NATSILS) welcomes the Federal Government's decision to overturn \$16.7 million in cuts over the forward estimates to ATSILS; however, warns against Government action stopping there.

"The Government's decision to reverse funding cuts to ATSILS is one step toward ensuring our communities have access to justice and diversionary services. However, commitments to justice should not stop there. The Government must take further action aimed directly toward ensuring incarceration rates for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people do not continue to soar as they have done over the past years" said Co-Chair of NATSILS Ms Cheryl Axleby.

NATSILS strongly encourages Government to place continual emphasis on the importance of partnership with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities and the eight ATSILS in identifying justice solutions.

"Our ATSILS are in a position where they hold the skills, knowledge and expertise to deliver the most culturally supportive and competent legal services to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people across the country. Government should sustainably invest in our ATSILS if there is to be a real and consistent commitment to address the longstanding over-representation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people in the criminal justice system," said Ms Axleby.

Findings of the Productivity Commission have recognised the vast unmet legal need of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. The Productivity Commission has highlighted that a lack of adequate funding for civil and family law services exists as a major catalyst for involvement with child protection systems and experiences of violence that result in increased contact with the criminal justice system.

NATSILS warns against inconsistency in federal funding and hopes that funds allocated under ILAP will continue to be provided consistently in the coming years to ensure the ongoing delivery of essential front line services.

"Our ATSILS should not now, or in the coming years, be placed in a position where they are forced to turn away vulnerable clients, cut staff or withdraw from servicing remote and urban courts with no other legal assistance services available, as a consequence of insufficient and inconsistent funding" concluded Ms Axleby.

NATSILS also raise concern in relation to the strain punitive welfare measures will place upon vulnerable ATSILS clients and ATSILS' capacity to provide legal assistance and support.

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NATSILS will be part of joint post-budget press-conference with the National Congress of Australia's First Peoples in the Senate Courtyard, Parliament House at 9.00am.