

MEDIA RELEASE

29 July 2022

RE: FUNDING CUTS TO BUSH COURTS

Darwin Community Legal Service ('DCLS') supports efforts by Attorney-General Paech, the North Australian Aboriginal Legal Service and NT Legal Aid to ensure legal representation is available for people facing criminal charges before bush courts.

DCLS Principal Solicitor, Judy Harrison said:

"In the NT defendants appearing unrepresented before bush courts is totally unacceptable and this must be addressed. Without detracting from this, additionally, years of research and awareness-raising has gone into why civil law legal help is also a priority. Examples include:

- safety from violence,
- the wellbeing of children and older people,
- access to income and fair treatment via the social security system,
- people's rights and wellbeing as tenants,
- help in appealing National Disability Insurance Agency decisions which refuse access or fail to provide reasonable and necessary supports,
- help to avoid scams and rip-offs,
- help to overcome unlawful discrimination, and
- help to receive compensation for wrongs and injuries.

Unmet 'civil law legal needs' in remote and very remote Aboriginal communities contribute to levels of stress and vulnerability.

People who want to see contact with the criminal justice system reduced, may not realise that access to civil law legal help can play important roles by helping people solve or reduce problems and make themselves heard to help address systemic issues.

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DCLS is a member of the National Regional, Rural, Remote and Very Remote ('4Rs') Community Legal Network is also calling for the establishment of a National 4Rs Access to Justice Plan. This reflects that a national collaborative approach is required, a major injection of federal funding, new programs and place-based planning and implementation.

As the Law Council of Australia has recently highlighted, access to justice has to be inclusive of people in remote and very remote communities.

DCLS CEO Rachael Bowker said, "DCLS strongly supports full resolution of funding to restore previous levels of access to criminal representation in NT bush courts. We also highlight that increased funding is needed for access to civil law legal help. We hope the new federal government will step up and develop a National 4Rs Access to Justice Plan, which includes substantial new funding relating to civil law legal needs in 4Rs communities in the NT."

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