

MEDIA RELEASE

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Greater investment in communities is needed, post-Budget

The National Justice Coalition today expressed concern that the Budget failed to include the targeted investment needed to change the record on the crisis levels of imprisonment and violence currently being experienced by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people.

Coalition Co-Chair Kirstie Parker said “The evidence clearly demonstrates that strong, healthy communities are the most effective way to prevent crime and make communities safe. Every dollar spent on prisons is one less dollar available to invest in reducing social and economic disadvantage through education, health, disability, housing, employment and other programs. Government funding must be reinvested into initiatives that address the underlying causes of crime”.

“If we are serious about changing the record of violence and imprisonment rates for our people, it is vitally important that the Government commits to long-term investment in Aboriginal community controlled services and organizations, including law reform and advocacy peaks, to support the development of holistic solutions” said MS Parker, who is also Co-Chair of the National Congress of Australia’s First Peoples.

“We are deeply concerned by the potential flow-on impact that a number of budget announcements are likely to have on imprisonment and violence rates, such as the defunding of 300 Aboriginal early years services, including Aboriginal Children and Family Centers, which provide vital support services in communities. A number of other Budget measures are likely to have a disproportionate impact on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities, and we continue to be concerned by the potential closure of WA remote communities due to a dispute between the federal and state governments over responsibility for funding of adequate services” said MS Parker.

The group welcomed the restoration of funding to Family Violence Prevention Legal Services (FVPLS) and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Legal Services (ATSILS) in the Federal Budget, but argued that the Government needs to recognize that the levels of funding currently being provided are not enough to meet the legal and socio-legal needs of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities.

Co-Chair Shane Duffy said, “The restoration of funding gives due recognition to the importance of providing our people with access to culturally safe legal assistance services, whilst also putting to end months of unnecessary anxiety and uncertainty for organizations, staff and the communities they serve”.

“Despite this, legal assistance services across the board remain significantly under-resourced and there remains a high level of unmet legal need, particularly within Aboriginal and Torres Strait

Islander communities. The Productivity Commission recently recommended an additional \$200 million investment into the legal assistance sector is needed. We are disappointed that the Government has not taken heed of the Productivity Commission's advice, and that the Budget contains no increases in funding for legal assistance services, despite high levels of demand" said Mr. Duffy, who is also Chair of the National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Legal Services (NATSILS).

"In recent years real funding for the FVPLS and ATSILS has declined by 20 per cent, and we are further concerned that the Budget forward estimates indicate a gradual reduction of funding to the Indigenous Legal Assistance Programmed from mid-2017 onwards. Without additional investment into the sector we will eventually be forced to turn away vulnerable people from our services," said Mr. Duffy.

"More effective and targeted investment into Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities and community controlled services is crucial, and this will require coordinated action across all levels of government. We continue to call for the urgent development of justice targets as part of Closing the Gap Strategy to bring a much needed policy focus to this issue" Ms Parker said.

The National Justice Coalition is a group of leading Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander, human rights and community organisations. Together, they run the Change the Record campaign, a national movement aimed at ending the over-representation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people in the justice system.

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