

**Monday 23<sup>rd</sup> March 2015**

## **It's time to reverse decision to defund Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Legal Services**

National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander rights advocacy organisation ANTaR today welcomed the referral of the Indigenous Advancement Strategy (IAS) process to a Senate Committee and called for decisions to cut funding to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Legal Services to be reversed as a matter of urgency.

National Director Andrew Meehan said that the opaque and unclear IAS tendering process has caused great anxiety and confusion for many services and is continuing to do so.

Mr Meehan said "ANTaR welcomes the referral of the IAS to the Senate Committee as we need to shine a light on what the process has been and what impact it has already had, and is continuing to have, on services for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people."

"Among the worst outcome so far has been the decision to strip \$13.4 million out of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander legal services at a time when there are crisis levels of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people being imprisoned," Mr Meehan said.

"Government needs to consider the impact of the cuts as a matter of urgency as these organisations are already being forced to make decisions to withdraw and reduce services," he said.

He said that Government should make no mistake that along with the impact on the services, their staff, clients, and communities, these cuts will cost the Government money in the not too distant future.

"The cuts will see more Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people unrepresented in courts and unable to access legal assistance, including family and civil law services. This will mean unrepresented litigants will be overwhelming the system," Mr Meehan said.

Mr Meehan also said that whilst the decision to reverse funding cuts to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Legal Services and their peak body the National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Legal Services (NATSILS) should be made immediately, there was a broader need to understand the impact of the IAS on the provision of services to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people across the board, as it was at this stage unknown.

There were more than 2,400 applications put in for around 5,000 projects worth \$14billion in the IAS. The total funding allocated to 2018 was \$2.3billion, with \$860million approved as part of this round. Nearly half of the applications were deemed 'non-compliant' and reports are emerging that many of those that haven't been funded or received only one year of funding were smaller Aboriginal organisations.

"The Senate Inquiry will be critical to getting to the bottom of this process" Mr Meehan said.

*ANTaR is the only non-Indigenous organisation dedicated solely to supporting the aspirations of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples and working to educate the wider community, shape public opinion, and speak up for justice, rights and respect for Australia's First Peoples.*