

# LEGAL AID MATTERS

BE AFRAID WITHOUT LEGAL AID

## WHY SHOULD I CARE ABOUT LEGAL AID?

### THE NUMBERS

Around half of all Australians (8.5 million people) experience a legal problem every year. (LAW Survey, 2012)

25% of the population experience a legal problem each year which is substantial enough to require a lawyer. (LAW Survey, 2012).

In 2014, 2.5 million Australians were living below the poverty line. At current funding levels, however, many people living below the poverty line cannot access legal aid (PricewaterhouseCooper, 2009). Fewer than 74,000 legal aid grants were offered in 2014 (ACOSS, 2014; NLA Website).

### THE PROBLEMS

Serious legal problems are concentrated among economically and socially disadvantaged people. Limited access to legal aid, however, means that many legal problems are left unresolved. Over time these can escalate into more complex matters, clogging up the courts and raising serious social and economic consequences

The Productivity Commission has found that many relatively affluent Australians could not afford a lawyer if they had a serious legal issue (PC Report, p639). There is a massive 'justice gap' between publicly-funded legal aid and the capacity of people to pay for legal representation.

### THE CONSEQUENCES

Unresolved legal problems have major social and economic consequences. The 2012 LAW Survey found that:

- financial strain was associated with 29% of problems;
- stress-related illness was associated with 21% of problems;
- physical ill health was associated with 20% of problems;
- relationship breakdown was associated with 10% of problems;
- having to move home was associated with 6% of problems; and
- legal problems related to family issues had the most adverse consequences.

The Commonwealth Government has crippled legal aid with massive cuts. This means:

- more unresolved legal problems;
- more expensive court and trial proceedings;
- more financial strain and health problems in the community;
- more family violence, relationship breakdown, substance and alcohol abuse and crime;
- more imprisonment, lives and livelihoods destroyed; and
- more homelessness and unemployment.

All of these consequences have flow-on costs to tax-payers, productivity and social well-being.

**The Federal Government's neglect of legal aid is more costly than anyone realises.**

