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Media Release

FUNDING CUTS TO INDIGENOUS LEGAL SECTOR WILL BE DEVASTATING

- Government cuts \$13.41 million from Indigenous Legal Aid and Policy Reform Program.
- Cuts to take effect despite record rates of Indigenous imprisonment outlined in the Productivity Commission's [Overcoming Indigenous Disadvantage report](#).
- Concerns laid out in the latest issue of the [Indigenous Law Bulletin](#).

Federal Government funding cuts to the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander legal sector will have a potentially devastating impact on the delivery of frontline legal services to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander clients, the sector's peak body has warned.

The Executive Officer of the National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Legal Services (NATSILS) Executive Officer, Mr Eddie Cubillo, has raised concerns as to how Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Legal Services will survive such a significant funding cut.

Writing in the latest *Indigenous Law Bulletin* released today, Mr Cubillo said: "The over-representation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples in all markers of socio-economic disadvantage, and in all stages of the criminal justice system, is one of Australia's most significant issues.

"This level of disadvantage, combined with an inevitable reduction in services due to cuts to our national budget, will place critical pressures on the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Legal Services' ability to deliver services to their clients."

Mr Cubillo's concerns are reinforced by the release of alarming statistics on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander imprisonment and juvenile detention rates by the Productivity Commission. The latest *Overcoming Indigenous Disadvantage* report, released last week, showed rates of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander imprisonment have increased by 57 per cent between 2000 and 2013.

"It is scandalous that while Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples comprise less than three per cent of the Australian population, we now account for almost 30 per cent of the prison population," Mr Cubillo said.

"We can clearly see it in the statistics, but it is also seen through the tragic individual stories of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people who have suffered from being caught in the system."

“Rather than accept the simplistic claim that more Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples are in the criminal justice system because more of us commit crimes, there needs to be recognition that crime is often the consequence of past and present policies and levels of socio-economic disadvantage, and that we are not inherently more criminal.”

Mr Cubillo also said that governments do not fully appreciate the benefits of the integrated model that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Legal Services use.

“I haven’t seen any evidence that decision-makers understand the actual impact that a funding cut of this size will have to services on the ground.

“Rather than allocating full-time staff to focus solely on law reform and advocacy, these activities are undertaken within Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Legal Services by a range of staff in addition to their main roles. For this reason, implementing the announced funding cuts cannot simply be done by removing dedicated law reform and advocacy positions.”

Mr Cubillo has called on the Federal Attorney-General’s Department to provide information on how the planned funding cuts will be applied across legal services.

“Without this information we are unable to appropriately plan ahead and provide staff with direction and certainty,” he said. “Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Legal Services around the country are already losing staff as a result of the uncertainty in employment created by the announced cuts.

The peak body NATSILS, which builds on the investment in individual Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Legal Services by ensuring that services across the country are efficient, effective and coordinated, has itself been defunded by the Federal Attorney-General as part of the cuts.

“It has been over 20 years since the Royal Commission into Aboriginal Deaths in Custody, yet funding to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Legal Services—major contributors to making changes in this area—has continually been ignored,” Mr Cubillo said. “This is despite credible reports constantly pointing out that our services offer a high value-to-cost ratio that warrants further investment.

“Justice related costs are spiralling out of control around Australia, and reducing the capacity of frontline legal services will only serve to make our system more ineffective, inefficient and increasingly costly. Cutting funding in this way in order to save money is simply a false economy.”

[Read Mr Cubillo’s article in full here.](#)

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