

MEDIA RELEASE

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Critical Yarra Ranges and Eastern legal services under threat as Budget confirms funding cuts.

Vulnerable communities in the Yarra Ranges and across Melbourne's east may lose access to critical legal services from July 2017, according to the Federal Government's budget announcements on Tuesday.

The figures confirmed that a 30 per cent cut in federal funding of community legal services would take place in July 2017 as the sector faces a national funding cliff.

Eastern Community Legal Centre's Yarra Ranges office, which caters to 140,000 people living across the municipality, may be forced to close when the centre cops an expected \$240,000 cut in funding next year. The Centre appeared set to close its Yarra Ranges office during a funding crisis in 2014-15, before the cuts were reversed and stabilised the sector for two years.

"The funding cut to free legal help is still a year away, but we know so well the impact and pressure that funding uncertainty has on our communities." said ECLC CEO Michael Smith.

"Our Centre is already facing huge demand for family violence and other legal help but the Centre will now have to expend energy to advocate to retain services, rather than expanding services to meet community needs."

Recently Ringwood Magistrates' Court added an extra day to family violence matters as the court's lists are exhausted by increased demand. Last year Victoria Police released figures that showed the number of applications for an intervention order in the Yarra Ranges region has increased by 228.69% over the past five years. These figures reflect a general increase across the region.

"The Productivity Commission has called for significant funding expansion to legal assistance and the Victorian government has recognised demand in some recent family violence funding increases.

"Regrettably, rather than expanding legal help, this Federal Budget leaves our Centre and many others in another year of 'funding limbo' with the stress of major cuts again hanging over these crucial services." Mr. Smith concluded.

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Interviews with ECLC CEO Michael Smith are available. For further media information and interviews, please contact: Michael Smith on 0421 437 883 or michaels@eclc.org.au