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Federal Member for Wills

Moreland Community Legal Centre
AGM

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- I would like to begin with a quote from the Institute for Sustainable Futures on the value of community legal centres:

“It is important to emphasise that the value of the preventative work provided by Community Legal Centres is far greater than the reactive costs that would be incurred in the absence of such services. The fence at the top of the cliff not only saves lives, but it is also much cheaper than the ambulance at the bottom.”

- Community Legal Centres particularly assist clients before problems escalate.
- Community Legal Centres provide early assistance and respond to developing crises, along with increasing the awareness of people about their legal rights and where they can access information. This empowers individuals and contributes significantly to social inclusion.
- Community Legal Centres are a vital component in the provision of legal services in Australia.
- As Liz Curran has noted in her article on *Community Legal Centres* there are 207 community legal centres in Australia which provide legal services to approximately 350,000 clients per year. Because they provide legal services for free, Community Legal Centres see a broad cross-section of the Australian community. They see working families; they see people in difficulty with credit providers, energy services and experiencing family law breakdown.
- Community Legal Centres provide a range of assistance on legal and related matters to people on low incomes and those with special needs.
- Community Legal Centres are also at the coalface in playing a role in effective law reform.
- By working closely with disadvantaged people you are placed in a unique position to undertake law reform projects that are related to client need. You highlight problems for clients and you bring inequities in systems to the attention of governments.
- Community Legal Centres have often been the sole agency identifying and advocating about a specific problem encountered by clients over many years.
- Community Legal Centres suggested reforms are frequently adopted at a later stage.

- For example, Community Legal Centres have had their recommendations heeded in parliamentary, statutory and other inquiries at federal and state level and by industry bodies.
- Community Legal Centres work on law reform creates a more streamlined and improved legal system, responsive to individuals in society and enhancing community legal education which facilitates preventative measures that can help avoid an escalation of people's legal problems.
- They provide an alternative voice and their work in law reform is invaluable in a democratic civil society.
- Community Legal Centres can be a first point of contact for people seeking assistance, or they can be a last resort when all other attempts to obtain legal assistance have failed.
- From time to time I refer people to this Community Legal Centre myself for two reasons. I have confidence in the quality of its work, and secondly many of the people who come to my office simply cannot afford the cost of private legal advice and services.
- Community Legal Centres have the ability to harness voluntary efforts of the community, as well as the pro bono resources of the legal profession, thereby effecting cost savings.
- According to the National Association of Community Legal Centres "Community Legal Centres are leveraging more than \$23 million worth of free legal assistance each year".
- It is further noted that more than 2200 private solicitors provide significant voluntary legal services to Community Legal Centres, along with 1600 professionals, students and others.
- In 2006 this was measured at "300,000 hours, including over 68,000 hours by lawyers and over 229,000 by non lawyer volunteers".
- The cost-effectiveness of this contribution by volunteers has been demonstrated in places like the Redfern Legal Centre where volunteers were calculated to have provided more than \$1.7 million for legal services to clients for 2008.
- The Victorian Homeless Persons Legal Service negotiates \$3.5 million of pro bono legal services through private law firms each year.
- Community Legal Centres provide a flexible approach to conflict resolution, endeavouring to resolve legal problems through avenues other than litigation, which can be extremely costly.
- Community Legal Centres have a multi-dimensional approach to dealing with clients' problems, reflecting that their clients often have complex needs and multiple disadvantages.
- Community Legal Centres are set up to be flexible in their service delivery, for example, providing after hours advice clinics, often where vulnerable members of the community get together, such as community centres.
- Community Legal Centres offer legal services to people who are least able to pay for those services and who would otherwise be unable to access legal services.

- Community Legal Centres clients often fall outside of the guidelines for legal aid assistance, for example, by not meeting the relevant merit or assets tests.
- Consequently, Community Legal Centres are instrumental in contributing towards equitable access to legal services.
- The close connection of Community Legal Centres to local communities enables them to respond directly and effectively to community needs, and to assist in community law areas such as family law, credit law and consumer protection.
- They have an acute understanding on how the law and the legal system impact on specific communities, and also on the wider society.
- This close connection to local communities enables Community Legal Centres to provide services that can focus upon and be tailored to the needs of individuals and communities.
- This is particularly the case in Indigenous communities, where many Community Legal Centres have engineered specific programs within a cooperative and consultative framework that is suited to these communities.
- Community law matters represent most people's experience of the law and account for many people's dealings with government. Community Legal Centres play a significant mediating role in the relationship the community has with government.
- Given all this it is crucial they are adequately funded and resourced.
- The Labor Government recognises this and that is why \$10 million of one-off funding was injected into Community Legal Centres.
- This included an additional \$67,656 of one-off funding for the Moreland Community Legal Centre Inc., an organisation that makes an enormous contribution to our local community, particularly in the areas of family law and homelessness.
- The Labor Government is committed to assisting vulnerable people to access much needed legal assistance services, a key component to achieving social inclusion.
- This is in sharp contrast to the former government whose former Federal Attorney-General Ruddock complained Community Legal Centres had "the audacity to allocate resources to partisan political campaigns while complaining they are in need of more Commonwealth funding". This was out of touch and mean spirited.
- Previous Attorney-Generals were about seeking out and denigrating what they imagined were secret agendas, as opposed to the reality of organisations like Community Legal Centres which go into to bat for the disadvantaged and marginalised.
- I understand that the Community Legal Services Program plays a key role in assisting members of the community with legal and related problems, having the expertise, and adopting an innovative approach to providing this assistance.
- Community Legal Centres grew out of voluntary efforts of community members committed to addressing the legal needs of those who are vulnerable in society.

- I commend you for your work in developing policies and programs that deliver fairness in access to justice.
- I will conclude by telling you a little about the most recent task I have been given in Canberra.
- I Chair the Joint Standing Committee on Treaties. We are presently conducting an inquiry into the Kyoto Protocol on Climate Change, which contains plenty of demands and challenges.
- But the Prime Minister Kevin Rudd has recently asked me and my Committee to undertake an inquiry into Australia's involvement in nuclear non-proliferation and disarmament treaties.
- Nuclear non-proliferation and disarmament is one of the major challenges facing the international community. Australia has signalled the importance that it places upon this issue through the recent establishment with Japan of an International Commission on Nuclear Non-Proliferation and Disarmament. This Commission has a mandate to reinvigorate the global debate on the need to prevent the further spread of nuclear weapons, advance nuclear disarmament and strengthen the Nuclear Non-proliferation treaty (NPT). The 2010 NPT Review Conference is a particularly important milestone in this process.
- The Prime Minister has asked the Treaties Committee to contribute to Australia's non-proliferation and disarmament objectives by examining:
 - how the international treaties on nuclear non-proliferation and disarmament that involve Australia advance our objectives in these areas;
 - how treaties might be made more comprehensive or effective; and
 - how the Committee and the Parliament can contribute to the work of the International Commission.
- I believe the Federal Parliament's Treaties Committee can contribute to the work of the International Commission and the development of consensus on the way forward for the 2010 NPT Review Conference.
- I am honoured that the Prime Minister has asked my Committee to investigate important issues concerning nuclear non-proliferation and disarmament. I believe the Treaties Committee can play an important role in engaging the Australian community and other Parliaments in the debate leading up to the 2010 Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty Review Conference.
- The Treaties Committee has already demonstrated the importance that it attaches to the disarmament and non-proliferation regime established by the NPT in an earlier inquiry this year. I look forward to this opportunity for the Committee to be at the forefront of contemporary public debate about an issue of global significance.
- The Committee is calling for submissions from the public and interested organisations to be received by Friday, 30 January 2009, and is due to report its findings by 30 June 2009.

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