

MEDIA RELEASE

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STATE BUDGET STILL SHORT ON LEGAL AID

Victoria's peak legal bodies today welcomed the Victorian Government's pledge to continue to provide an additional \$26 million to Legal Aid each year for the next four years.

At the same time, they expressed disappointment that the additional funding for legal aid for the next year is only \$1 million in circumstances where demand is expected to rise significantly (and wages pressures will also affect delivery of services).

The Law Institute of Victoria (LIV) and the Victorian Bar had urged the Attorney-General Robert Clark to increase legal aid funding in a bid to avoid a crisis in legal aid, particularly as implementation of law and order policies take effect.

In a submission to the Attorney-General late last year, the LIV and the Bar outlined the dire situation and its consequences. The peak legal bodies called for \$35 million of additional funding, \$25 million of which would be required to maintain current legal aid services without the additional burden on the system created by the reforms introduced by the Baillieu government's election commitments.

"We are pleased that the Government has committed to the recurrent funding but fear that the system will still be well short, given the additional demand for services. said LIV President Michael Holcroft. "The Government's own law and order reforms such as statutory minimum sentences and additional police mean the demand for legal aid services will be stretched further than ever before."

Legal aid enables legal advice and representation to be provided to some of Victoria's most vulnerable low income citizens who invariably cannot afford a lawyer. "If these citizens cannot access legal aid, have no representation in court and do not know their rights, then that makes the job of the courts considerably more difficult in terms of achieving just outcomes" said Victorian Bar Chairman Melanie Sloss SC.

Both leaders acknowledge that in the current economic climate the Government faced challenges with this year's budget and expressed relief that at least the current level of funding was maintained which should make it possible to maintain current services. However, they warn that if the legal aid service is not properly resourced, the cost to the community at the end of the day will be far greater.

"We appreciate that the Attorney-General has always maintained that legal aid funding is a priority. However the administration of justice in Victoria depends on proper funding of legal aid – it is the only effective means of promoting access to justice for disadvantaged Victorians," said Ms Sloss.