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## **Media release**

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### **Massive funding cuts to legal services for Indigenous people show the Government's total disregard for justice.**

Proposed funding cuts to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Legal Services (ATSILS) represent a social justice and human rights failure. It will see more Indigenous Australians imprisoned and more Indigenous children removed from their parents, Australian Lawyers for Human Rights (ALHR) has warned.

The cuts announced in the 2014 federal budget equate to around \$13.4 million or around 20 per cent of national funding from critically needed Aboriginal legal services around the country.

ALHR President, Nathan Kennedy says, "The cuts do not make sense for justice, nor do they make fiscal sense.

"In NSW, for example, the ALS provides legal advice and court representation at a very low cost, and saves the government and the tax payer approximately \$652 per day each time they keep a young indigenous person from unnecessarily entering detention. They do much needed, cost-effective work for Aboriginal families in regional and remote areas where there are no other lawyers.

"The ATSILS are more than just a legal services. They helps to address Indigenous disadvantage, one of Australia's worst human rights violations. By working tirelessly to interrupt the cycle of Indigenous imprisonment and family breakdown the ATSILS help to keep families together.

"The Government has said that only the ATSILS's policy work will be affected by the cuts. However, it is very difficult to see how a 20% budget reduction will not have a dramatic and severe impact on frontline legal services for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples," said Mr Kennedy.

"For example, at risk is the Custody Notification Service run by the ALS NSW/ACT. This service is a rare example of where a recommendation of the Royal Commission into Aboriginal Deaths in Custody was implemented. It has been very successful at addressing Aboriginal deaths in custody in NSW.

"At a time when more Indigenous children are being removed from their parents than during the stolen generation, when one in four adults in adult correctional centres are Indigenous, and

Indigenous kids make up at least 52 per cent of juvenile detention centres, these cuts represent a massive blow to the ability of the ATSILS to deliver services to some of the most disadvantaged, vulnerable people in the country.”

“It is well known that people who end up in gaol have been failed by many other systems along the way. Any funding cuts to the ATSILS will directly undermine the Government’s Close the Gap campaign, especially in a time when governments seem to be engaging in law and order auctions.

“Indeed these cuts are likely to see an increase in the number of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples incarcerated at great social and significant financial cost to the country,” Mr Kennedy said.

ALHR calls on the federal government and in particular the Prime Minister, who committed to be the Prime Minister for Indigenous Australia, to reverse the funding cuts proposed in the 2014 budget and reject any further cuts to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Legal Services in the forthcoming 2015 budget.

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*ALHR was established in 1993 and is a national network of over 2600 Australian solicitors, barristers, academics, judicial officers and law students who practise and promote international human rights law in Australia. ALHR has active and engaged National, State and Territory committees and a secretariat at La Trobe University Law School in Melbourne. Through advocacy, media engagement, education, networking, research and training, ALHR promotes, practices and protects universally accepted standards of human rights throughout Australia and overseas.*

