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MEDIA RELEASE

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Leading Human Rights Lawyers Warn of National Crisis in Access to Justice and Back Critical Legal Aid Funding Campaign

Australian Lawyers for Human Rights (ALHR) today put its support behind an unprecedented national *'Legal Aid Matters'* campaign aimed at ensuring the next Federal Government responds decisively to Australia's legal aid funding crisis.

Vice President Kerry Weste said that "with rallies and events occurring in major cities in this National Law Week, the *Legal Aid Matters* campaign will bring a sharp focus to the funding crisis that is crippling this vital justice safety net and threatening access to the right to a fair trial for all Australians."

"ALHR is deeply concerned" said Mrs Weste, "about the effects this funding crisis will have on the delivery of frontline legal services to society's most vulnerable members, particularly Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, women and children. Funding cuts have come at a time when there are crisis levels of Indigenous imprisonment, high rates of Indigenous children in the child protection system and growing rates of family violence. We note that legal aid organisations have already made difficult decisions to withdraw, or reduce, key services due to funding cuts. This has created an extremely difficult situation for the clients and communities they represent."

"A failure to address the funding crisis will make a bad situation worse as more Australians will be unrepresented in courts and unable to access legal assistance. This will lead to increased costs to all governments as unrepresented litigants will block the courts and create inefficiencies in the system."

"Successive federal governments have ripped hundreds of millions of dollars from legal aid, crippling this vital justice safety net," Mrs Weste said. "The system is now at a point where most Australians who can't afford a lawyer simply won't get one – in many cases even if they are below the poverty line."

"ALHR calls upon both major parties to take heed of the Productivity Commission's *Access to Justice Arrangements* report which called for a further \$200m investment into the legal assistance sector. All of these services play a critical role in the Australian legal system. They ensure that vulnerable people can access the legal system on an equal footing."

"Access to justice is a fundamental human right", said Mrs Weste, adding "Legal aid services are already incredibly cost-effective. They do challenging work with minimal resources, and the funding crisis undermines their ability to ensure basic rights are protected in this country."

"Whichever party wins the July election will inherit a legal aid in crisis. We must convince both sides of Parliament that legal aid funding is a critically urgent priority," Mrs Weste said.

“Legal aid goes the heart of Australia’s closely- held concept of fairness and to the heart of the question as to what kind of society we want to be. Is it a society in which everyone has access to justice – or only those who can afford a lawyer?” said Mrs Weste.

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ALHR was established in 1993 and is a national network of 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.