

Backdown as legal service keeps funds

BRIANNA PARKINS

STAFF and clients of Illawarra Legal Centre have breathed a sigh of relief after the Abbott government reversed its decision to cut community legal services.

Described as another budget backdown, Attorney-General George Brandis made the announcement restoring \$25.5 million over two years to community, Indigenous and domestic violence services on Thursday.

Illawarra Legal Centre principal solicitor Phillip Dicalfas said the announcement meant staff at the not-for-profit legal service could continue assisting clients in need.

"It's a relief, it's been on our minds ... now we're able to focus back on our work."

The centre primarily represents people from low socio-economic backgrounds with civil law problems such as rental, Centrelink and debt matters.

"It's about keeping people out of court," co-ordinator Truda Gray said.

"We support complex problems that come in clusters; they're the ones Legal Aid can't handle."

More than 7000 use the service every year, usually with a variety of interlinked issues.

In one case, "Debbie", who suffered from mental illness, had been contacted by a debt collection agency that said she owed \$3000. The centre's financial counsellor investigated her legal options. She was able to finalise the debt, saving \$2000.

The centre helps mediate custody and child support, preventing families from having to seek expensive and stressful solutions through courts.

NSW Attorney-General Brad Hazzard said: "A big thank you to George Brandis and the federal government on behalf of all vulnerable communities across NSW - indeed, across Australia."

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