

Date: 11 December 2012

MEDIA RELEASE

VLA cuts will lead to more vulnerable women being unrepresented in family law disputes

Victoria Legal Aid (VLA) today released information on changes to its eligibility guidelines to come into effect from 7 January 2013.

In the area of family law, the greatest impact will be felt by parents who are unrepresented at court and in dispute regarding their children.

According to VLA's information "funding of parents in family law matters...will be limited to trial preparation."

"We appreciate that VLA has had to make some tough decisions in order to address its funding crisis" said Joanna Fletcher, CEO of Women's Legal Service Victoria.

"However in the area of family law, we have real fears that the changes to family law guidelines will lead to a significant increase in the number of vulnerable women who are unrepresented in family law disputes."

"For women who have experienced family violence, having to negotiate and come face to face with an abusive ex-partner in court is a frightening experience. Unfortunately, for the growing number of women who will not be able to access legal aid because of the cuts, this will be their reality".

VLA receives funding from both Federal and State Governments.

Real funding of legal aid commissions by the Federal Government fell from 49% in 1997 to 32% of total funding in 2010.

VLA has also attributed the increased demand to Victorian Government initiatives to improve community safety, responses to family violence and child protection.

"Rather than blame shifting, it is essential that both the Federal and Victorian Governments step up and commit to increasing funding to VLA" said Ms Fletcher.

"It's time for governments to start investing again in a cornerstone of our legal system. Without legal aid the most vulnerable in our community are denied access to justice."

Media contacts: Joanna Fletcher or Pasanna Mutha, (03) 9642 0877