

MEDIA RELEASE



11 October 2012
For immediate release

Landmark Australian research uncovers hidden epidemic of legal problems

A landmark report has revealed that legal problems are a hidden epidemic, affecting around 8.5 million Australians each year - almost half the national population over 15 years of age.

Commissioned by the eight State and Territory legal aid commissions, the *Legal Australia-Wide Survey* is the largest of its kind ever conducted in the world.

National Legal Aid Chair, Mr Bevan Warner said the survey found that each year about a quarter of Australians over 15 years old will have a legal problem that has a moderate or severe impact on their everyday life.

"Legal aid commissions are the largest providers of legal help in Australia so we knew that many people face legal problems and that they can have a significant impact, but the survey findings were still startling," said Mr Warner.

"People with legal problems get sick, have relationship breakdowns or lose their home. This is not only a severe impact on individuals but an additional burden on the health system, family counselling services, government and community services and charities."

Mr Warner said that the survey showed too many people were missing out on valuable professional legal help that could resolve their problems because they didn't know what to do, found it too stressful or couldn't afford it.

"People with a disability, single parents, unemployed people and Indigenous people were more likely to have legal problems, so we particularly need investment in more intensive services to help these groups before their problems snowball in complexity and cost," said Mr Warner.

"The Commonwealth's funding share in legal aid has dropped from half of overall funding in 1997 to only a third this year.

"While legal aid commissions are committed to continuously reviewing and improving our legal services and we will use the survey findings to help us in this task, we simply can't meet the need for legal help without additional investment."

National Legal Aid represents the directors of the eight State and Territory legal aid commissions in Australia, independent statutory bodies established to provide access to legal services to the community, and in particular to disadvantaged people. The commissions sponsored the Law and Justice Foundation of NSW to conduct the *Legal Australia-Wide Survey*.

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