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(for immediate release)**

**Sector leaders unite to call on Government to reinstate access to justice for asylum seekers**

To mark the 12-month anniversary of drastic Government cuts to free legal services for asylum seekers, leading refugee organisations across Australia have called on the Federal Government to ensure access to justice and reinstate free legal representation.

One year ago today - on 31 March 2014 - the Abbott government made deep cuts to a long-standing and successful scheme that provided funding for legal assistance to asylum seekers in Australia. These cuts have resulted in a sharp reduction in legal services to asylum seekers and have increased pressure on organisations providing pro bono legal help.

Tanya Jackson-Vaughan, executive director at the Refugee Advice & Casework Service in Sydney said that the cuts were forcing people from different cultural and linguistic backgrounds to go through complex legal processes unrepresented.

"Lawyers provide expert support through an ever-changing landscape. For asylum seekers these cuts mean decisions may be made about their claims without their full story being told," said Jackson-Vaughan.

Kon Karapanagiotidis, CEO of the Melbourne-based Asylum Seeker Resource Centre, said the funding cuts had created almost insurmountable barriers to justice.

"Assessing refugee claims can quite literally be the difference between life and death. Vulnerable people going through this process without lawyers compromises the integrity of the system and leads to poorer decision-making. It inevitably leads to people who are refugees not being recognised as such and being wrongfully returned to harm," said Karapanagiotidis.

David Manne, executive director of the Refugee & Immigration Legal Centre in Melbourne, said that "legal assistance is vital in ensuring that deeply vulnerable people facing real, life threatening persecution are able to effectively present their case for protection. Loss of legal assistance when people are already desperate risks adding to the tragedy of their lives."

Dana Affleck and Kate Fitzgerald from Young Liberty for Law Reform, a program of Liberty Victoria which has prepared a video [[libertyvictoria.org/fairgo4refugees](http://libertyvictoria.org/fairgo4refugees)] calling on members of the public to show their support for organisations providing pro bono help to asylum seekers, said it was clear immediate action had to be taken.

"In addition to cutting access to lawyers, the Government has also introduced 'fast-track' refugee processing and made all sorts of other legal changes stacking the system against people seeking protection. Vulnerable people are having to navigate an increasingly unfair and ever-changing process alone," said Affleck.

"The stakes simply could not be higher. We're really calling on the Government and members of the community to step up to the plate and ensure access to justice for some of the world's most vulnerable people," said Fitzgerald.

*From our experience of the impact of this policy, we, the undersigned, say that this policy undermines the integrity of our legal system. It makes a fair process unattainable for people seeking our nation's protection. On this anniversary, we call on the government to reinstate funding for legal assistance for asylum seekers and encourage the Australian public to support organisations who are giving asylum seekers a fair go until the government reinstates its support for the rule of law in this way.*

**Signed By:**

**Liberty Victoria  
Young Liberty for Law Reform  
Refugee & Immigration Legal Centre  
CASE for Refugees  
Refugee Advice & Casework Service  
Asylum Seeker Resource Centre  
Brigidene Asylum Seeker Project  
Road to Refuge  
Welcome to Australia**

**For comment please contact** Liberty Victoria Senior Vice President, Jessie Taylor on (03) 9670 6422

