



## MEDIA RELEASE – Tuesday 24 October 2023

### Community legal centres commit to supporting ongoing First Nations-led protest movements for justice and safety

#### Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community legal centre workers speak out on Australian racism in the wake of Voice referendum

The Australian community legal sector has [reaffirmed its commitment](#) to supporting First Nations justice movements, including work towards Treaty and Truth, as Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community legal sector workers speak out on Australian racism in the wake of the referendum.

In an [open letter](#) penned in the days following the referendum, Bobbi Murray, First Nations Justice Advisor to Community Legal Centres Australia, spoke of the racism stoked in the community in the months leading up to the referendum, and expressed disappointment in the results as disrespectful to past generations of First Nations peoples, and unjust for her children's generation.

*"[T]his has been so disrespectful to all the tireless efforts of our old people who gave up so much for us to have the little say in our lives we have today. The countless lives lost, blood spilt and tears that could form an ocean. All that we have fought for, in Australia's short history, is equity, and the right to have access to the same education, health, housing... and to be treated the same under the law.*

*"Now I see that my children will need to join a very long line in Australia's history. One of fighting for what they need to be equal in this country and for what is right and just for our people."*

Many Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community legal centre workers publicly supported the Yes23 campaign. Bobbi was among those who felt forced to keep a low profile in recent months due to the risk of racist targeting of her family. Community legal sector organisations have hosted safe space discussions for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander workers before and since the referendum. Central to discussions were safety anxieties, with some workers reporting needing to bring extra family members with them to the polls for physical protection from racism. Bobbi said:

*"The severe racism and targeting of violence towards people and families for campaigning for rights for our people has hurt. During the campaign, I wanted to make my position heard. I wanted to talk openly and proudly but I was never going to put my family at risk. I commend the absolute bravery of those who did."*

Bobbi and other First Nations community legal centre workers are speaking out publicly now, with the full support of the community legal sector.

Tim Leach, CEO of Community Legal Centres Australia, says:

*"The first community legal centres were established more than half a century ago by grassroots activists and advocates frustrated by the injustices faced by their communities. They were responding to the unfairnesses of a legal system that punished poverty and difference – unfairnesses that pervade our legal system to this day, particularly when it comes to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples.*

*"The No vote was not a national endorsement to stop work on First Nations justice – the Voice would only have been one part of a much broader tapestry.*

*"The community legal centres movement was born out of protest and community action, and our sector is prepared to stand in solidarity with First Nations struggles going forward: ending Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander deaths in custody, ending the disproportionate removal of First Nations children from their families, moving towards truth-telling and treaties, and beyond."*

## Here is what some more First Nations community legal centre staff have to say:

*"I along with so many incredible Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people have put everything they had into achieving a successful referendum. And doing that work has been a heavy emotional and cultural burden. To carry such hope for our future and then get last week's result was heartbreaking.*

*"And now, again, we're in the same place that we've always been – needing to be the ones who are strong in the face of another disappointment, strong in the face of a deep-seated racism that has been given another platform, and to continue to be strong in our fight for justice."*

**Kate Sinclair**

Solicitor, Strategic Litigation, Public Interest Advocacy Centre

*"Myself and my family are feeling overwhelming loss, but I do know this: we aren't divided. If anything, this has brought us all closer together, despite the No campaign's lies that this would divide us. Personally, I have had the privilege to join mob and listen to different community members across Australia as well as our many allies.*

*"We will grow stronger together. I am so proud of the many allies we have formed, both young and old, from different cultures. I believe we can move forward in a positive light, knowing that we are surrounded by amazing people – people that will walk beside us."*

**Jacqui Watkins**

First Nations Engagement Lead, Consumer Action Law Centre

*"I am still trying to piece together my thoughts about the referendum outcome. The result is heartbreaking, disappointing, and shameful. The level of racism and lies levelled at our people and the Yes23 campaign, and the attempt to divide us was disgraceful.*

*"Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples are strong and enduring. We are not defeated but determined. We will continue to fight for what is just, fair, and for the human rights of our mob. Closing the Gap will continue to be a priority.*

*"I am proud to have stood beside some deadly mob and allies to fight for the Yes23 campaign. I am proud to work in a sector that publicly supported this campaign. A sector that is committed to advocating for the rights of our Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples."*

**Candice Hughes**

Kamilaroi

Principal Solicitor, YFS Legal

*"As a power-serving attitude, racism empowers The Powerful by dividing The People for the purpose of hiding lawful and unlawful economic, military and ecological corruption in plain sight. Divisive messaging from those in power, pushed by sections of the media, facilitates the transfer of wealth and power upwards, from The People to The Powerful. For this business-as-usual to continue, The People must be divided.*

*"The Voice was never divisive; the process was. The outcomes include many First Nations people have again been harmed; The People are even more divided, and; again The Powerful are the beneficiaries. First Nations people have again been thrown under the bus so that business-as-usual can go on hidden in plain sight."*

**Zachary Mukgrngal Armytage**

Aboriginal Legal Access Program Coordinator, Community Legal Centres NSW

*"I am deeply and profoundly disappointed that the Voice to Parliament was not something that most Australians supported. Australia is a progressive country where we vote Yes for Marriage Equality and other basic human rights. There was nothing deceiving about the Yes23 campaign, and I'm not sure how people did not have enough information to make an informed decision.*

*"To me, it was excuses to not progress and support First Nations people, let us have a voice at the political table.*

*"To quote the words of a legendary Aboriginal Leader and Activist, Rob Riley (1954 – 1996), 'you can't be wrong if you're right and you don't stop fighting for justice because those around you don't like it'. And that's exactly what we will do, keep fighting!"*

**Natasha Moore**

Senior Social Worker

Western Australian Family Violence Prevention Legal Service Aboriginal Corporation