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## Adequate legal aid will protect needy

THE Federal Government's ideas on how to crack down on domestic violence (*The Age*, 24/7) leave out the main point. Legal aid has been slashed, so people from violent families are often not able to be properly represented in court.

The most difficult cases can involve decades of family violence or mental illness or a combination of the two. These are the families who must be helped by lawyers paid through legal aid.

Legal aid provides some funding to Independent Children's Lawyers to represent the child. They investigate how a child is performing at school, what injuries are recorded at the doctor, what the childcare centre says about the child and so on. But ICL does not get enough money to do its job properly.

The Government has spent hundreds of millions of dollars setting up Family Relationship Centres for compulsory mediation before family law matters go to court. These centres are a good thing but they do not resolve the problems in the most difficult cases. Not uncommonly, abused women give in because they don't have the resources to advocate for themselves through the legal system.

The Government needs to add tens of millions of dollars to legal aid funding so that children and women are protected.

In some cases, women with mental illness make ill-founded allegations against men who lose contact with their children. The men give up on the legal process because they have difficulty getting funding and yet they are good dads. Proper legal aid funding for those men and ICLs in their cases is also vital.

**Stephen Winspear, chairman, family law section, Law Institute of Victoria**