

## MEDIA RELEASE

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### TARGET SIGNATORIES REPORT RECORD NUMBER OF PRO BONO HOURS AND EXCEED TARGET

Despite unprecedented challenges in the last financial year the Australian legal profession has demonstrated a growing dedication to pro bono legal work, according to the 13<sup>th</sup> Annual Performance Report on the National Pro Bono Target (**Target**). Australian lawyers have reported a record number of 551,427.5 pro bono hours in the 2020 financial year (**FY2020**), a 16.5% rise in pro bono hours compared to the year before.

Target signatories reported undertaking an average of 36.4 hours of pro bono legal services per lawyer in FY2020, exceeding the Target of 35 hours. This is the highest average number of pro bono hours per lawyer reported since 2011 and is higher than the 35.8 hour average reported in FY2019. In particular, the average hours per lawyer of small law firms (with fewer than 50 lawyers) increased significantly to 35.7 hours in FY2020, up from 32.9 hours in FY2019. Thirty-two small law firms met or exceeded the Target, up from 26 small law firms in FY2019.

Foundation Target signatories – those signatories who committed to the Target before its launch on 26 April 2007 – reported on average 48.6 pro bono hours per lawyer, significantly higher than the overall average of 36.4. Mature signatories – those signatories who committed to the Target before 1 July 2014 – reported 38.2 pro bono hours per lawyer, which is also higher than the overall average.

A record 15,779 full-time equivalent (FTE) lawyers are now covered by the Target. This is a significant increase from the last financial year, when 14,057 FTE lawyers were covered. As at 30 June 2020 there were 187 Target signatories compared to 161 signatories as at 30 June 2019. The 2020 Target results indicate that pro bono conditions in Commonwealth and State government tender arrangements are continuing to have an important influence on the number of firms signing up to the Target and the amount of pro bono work undertaken.

“We should all applaud the Australian pro bono community for its increasing commitment to support and empower the most disadvantaged members of our community this year. Despite significant operational challenges, many Target signatories have continued to prioritise pro bono work as a crucial pillar of access to justice, and an integral part of the professional life of Australian lawyers,” said Gabriela Christian-Hare, CEO of the Australian Pro Bono Centre.

“Overall, the Target community has proven it is responsive, adaptable, and dedicated. Throughout the COVID-19 pandemic many signatories have continued to offer pro bono support despite remote-working challenges and reduced staffing. Many Target signatories have been part of a coordinated, collaborative response across the legal assistance sector to aid our society’s most vulnerable individuals and to support numerous charities, not-for-profits and other community organisations during this extraordinarily challenging year involving bushfires and a global pandemic,” Gabriela commented.

Gabriela acknowledges that despite this year’s strong results, there was a disparity of effort among Target signatories. “Only 44.3% of Target signatories met or exceeded the Target in FY2020 – down by 1.2% since 2019,” she noted.

Phillip Cornwell, the Centre's Chair, said: "Overall these are beautiful, inspiring numbers. I see it as the profession responding magnificently to the tragedy of our Black Summer Bushfires, and to the challenges of COVID-19. Law firms have been doing good since long before the development of notions of corporate social responsibility; they have never been subject to Milton Friedman's strictures of profit at all costs. Further, pro bono work is flourishing not only because it benefits society, it also helps lawyers build skills, resilience and a broader and more nuanced view of the world. In addition there are recruitment and retention benefits for firms.

"Unfortunately not all firms are capturing these benefits, as there are still some signatories with very low average hours per lawyer. For example there are six large firms with average per lawyer hours in single figures. It is understandable that new signatories will take time to build up their pro bono practices - the Centre has instituted a mentor system to help them do just that – but some of these firms are not new to the Target. With the Centre's encouragement many governments and corporates now require firms to sign up for the Target as a condition of getting on to their legal panels. We would like to see governments and corporates take the next step by pressing the chronic under-achievers to show how they will redress this imbalance."

The 13<sup>th</sup> Annual Target Performance Report can be downloaded [here](#).

### **Background to the Target**

The National Pro Bono Target is a voluntary target that law firms, incorporated legal practices, solicitors and barristers can adopt by signing a [Statement of Principles](#).

Signatories to the Target agree to use their best efforts to provide at least 35 hours of "pro bono legal services" per lawyer per year. Signatories report annually to the Centre on their performance against the Target.

The Target was opened to in-house legal team signatories from 1 July 2020, who will report to the Centre for the first time at the end of FY2021. In-house signatories are encouraged to meet or exceed a benchmark of 20 hours of pro bono work per lawyer per year.

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