



Jesuit Social Services is a social change organisation. We work with the most disadvantaged members of the community, providing services and advocacy in the areas of justice and crime prevention; mental health and well-being; settlement and community building; education, training and employment; gender and ecological justice.

Senator Katy Gallagher, Chair
Select Committee on COVID-19
Department of the Senate
covid.sen@aph.gov.au

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Dear Senator Gallagher

Jesuit Social Services welcomes the opportunity to contribute to the Select Committee's *Inquiry into the Australian Government's response to the COVID-19 pandemic*.

With government decisions and policy development necessarily occurring rapidly at this time, ongoing robust scrutiny is vital to ensure government accountability and to help guide the best possible responses in future.

INTRODUCTION

Life before the COVID-19 pandemic was already tough for many people on the margins. As an organisation working with some of the most disadvantaged members of the community, we saw and continue to see this first hand. While we are all affected in some way, the burdens of crises such as these are not borne equally, but impact most severely on already marginalised individuals and communities. This is evident at present in the heightened health risk from COVID-19 faced by people in prison and immigration detention, people without safe and secure housing, people with chronic medical conditions, and those unemployed or in insecure employment.

This crisis also underlines pre-existing inequalities in society. As we look to recover, we should not simply aim to return to 'business as usual,' where people are punished for not having work, where profit outweighs environmental concerns, and where the needs of disadvantaged people are overlooked. We should aim for a fairer, more inclusive and compassionate society.

The barriers people face to social and economic inclusion are complex, multiple and overlapping, but they are not beyond resolution. Indeed, recent policy responses by Australian governments, informed by the evidence and responsive to community need, demonstrate quite the opposite. Measures to raise the level of income support, scrap unreasonable mutual obligation requirements, boost funding for legal assistance services, and provide housing for vulnerable people are a few examples. But these positive steps must not be wound down or reversed post-crisis.

Our response to the damaging health and economic impact of COVID-19 should be grounded in principles of justice and equity. We need a *just recovery* that addresses structural inequalities; supports localised social and economic responses; builds community resilience; and fosters collaboration across sectors and communities to ensure we transition to an ecologically sustainable, zero greenhouse gas emissions society in a way that protects people's rights and livelihoods.¹

¹ Recognising that environmental challenges pose particular risks to the communities with whom we work, since 2012, Jesuit Social Services has sought to bring an ecological perspective to all our operations. Our 2017 paper, [Ecological Justice – Expanding the Conversation](#), outlines this journey and our commitment to building a just society inclusive of both social and environmental justice.

THE GOVERNMENT'S RESPONSE SO FAR

We are encouraged that the Federal Government's response to the COVID-19 pandemic thus far has been guided by expert medical advice and focused on safeguarding the health and well-being of all Australians. Appropriately funding health services, including mental health and family violence services, and ensuring equitable access for all, should continue to be a priority.

The cooperation between Australian governments through the national cabinet and the scale of the economic response have also given us cause for optimism. In particular, the Federal Government's JobKeeper package, and the increase to the JobSeeker payment, are vital support measures. With the economic downturn as a result of the pandemic expected to be protracted, the Government must continue to support those people most in need.

People without access to support

Jesuit Social Services is concerned about the significant cohort of people (estimated at more than one million²) who are excluded from the Government's economic support measures. This includes:

- people on temporary visas, including refugees and temporary migrant workers, who do not have access to the JobKeeper payment, and
- people seeking asylum on bridging visas, who are not eligible for either JobSeeker, JobKeeper or other income support.

No one should face obstacles to medical treatment or be forced into destitution because of the type of visa they hold. Alongside more than 180 community organisations, Jesuit Social Services is calling on the government to ensure *all* people in Australia, including people seeking asylum, refugees and other vulnerable groups, are supported during this crisis.³ This should extend to access to Medicare for all people, regardless of their visa status.

Immigration detention

We also hold concerns for the 1,373 people⁴ currently held in immigration detention facilities across Australia, including refugees and asylum seekers detained in hotels. As the Government's health advice recognises,⁵ people in detention are at heightened risk during the COVID-19 crisis. Medical experts have warned of outbreaks in detention facilities, where practicing physical distancing is not possible, risking not only the health of people detained but also staff and the broader community.⁶ We note the significant number of groups and individuals that have called on the Government to release people into the community where it is safe to do so. This includes the Australian Human Rights

² Australian Council of Social Service (ACOSS) (21 April 2020). *Who misses out on access to Australia's safety net under Covid19*, <https://www.acoss.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2020/04/Who-misses-out-Briefing-ACCESSIBLE-FINAL.pdf>.

³ Refugee Council of Australia (2020). *Open letter to Prime Minister Scott Morrison – Nobody Left Behind*, <https://www.refugeecouncil.org.au/open-letter-covid/>.

⁴ Department of Home Affairs (31 March 2020). *Immigration Detention and Community Statistics Summary*, <https://www.homeaffairs.gov.au/research-and-stats/files/immigration-detention-statistics-31-march-2020.pdf>.

⁵ Department of Health (2020). *What you need to know about coronavirus (COVID-19)*, <https://www.health.gov.au/news/health-alerts/novel-coronavirus-2019-ncov-health-alert/what-you-need-to-know-about-coronavirus-covid-19#who-is-most-at-risk>.

⁶ Australasian Society for Infectious Diseases and Australasian College for Infection Prevention and Control (19 March 2020). <https://www.asid.net.au/documents/item/1868>.

Commissioner,⁷ the Australasian College for Infection Prevention and Control,⁸ the Australasian Society for Infectious Diseases,⁹ the Royal Australian & New Zealand College of Psychiatrists,¹⁰ and over 1,000 academics and health professionals.¹¹ Jesuit Social Services echoes these calls.

Immigration detention is supposed to be administrative, not punitive. Despite this, the average length of time people have been held in detention is currently 545 days.¹² This is unacceptable. Immigration detention should only ever be a measure of last resort, with legislated timeframes to guard against cases of prolonged and indefinite detention. Recent reports that a person detained in Melbourne's Mantra Hotel self-harmed are yet another awful illustration of the serious mental distress caused by indefinite detention.¹³

Oversight of places of detention

While restrictions begin to relax in the community, the ongoing risk of COVID-19 for people in detention remains acute and must not be ignored. Prison populations in Australia are at record levels,¹⁴ and the physical and mental health of people in prison, who usually come from disadvantaged backgrounds, is well below the general population.¹⁵ Jesuit Social Services supports the joint submission of an alliance of civil society organisations and individuals calling on governments to take immediate steps to reduce the number of people in detention, including the responsible release of those at higher risk of significant harm due to COVID-19.¹⁶ We also reiterate the alliance's call for greater oversight of detention, and the need for governments to urgently designate and/or establish National Preventive Mechanisms, in response to the COVID-19 pandemic, to oversee conditions of detention and the treatment of people in detention.

Transparency and accountability

The importance of public trust, civic engagement and transparency are key elements of an effective government response to the pandemic cited by researchers from the Group of Eight universities in

⁷ SBS (13 April 2020). Human Rights Commissioner calls for immigration detainees' release over coronavirus infection fears, <https://www.sbs.com.au/news/human-rights-commissioner-calls-for-immigration-detainees-release-over-coronavirus-infection-fears>.

⁸ Australasian Society for Infectious Diseases and Australasian College for Infection Prevention and Control (19 March 2020). *Op. cit.*

⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁰ Royal Australian and New Zealand College of Psychiatrists (17 April 2020). *Immigration detention centres a significant COVID-19 risk*, <https://www.ranzcp.org/news-policy/news/immigration-detention-centres-a-significant-covid>.

¹¹ See <https://docs.google.com/document/d/16M02AA9KvM1G45JM3iip4xpP9JuAOzIEac8mneL03ms/edit>.

¹² Department of Home Affairs (31 March 2020). *Op. cit.*

¹³ Asylum Seeker Resource Centre (2020). *Long term medical neglect compounded with COVID19 causing rapidly deteriorating mental health in immigration detention*, <https://www.asrc.org.au/2020/05/13/long-term-medical-neglect-compounded-with-covid19-causing-rapidly-deteriorating-mental-health-in-immigration-detention/>.

¹⁴ Russell, S. & Baldry, R. (14 June 2017). *Three charts on: Australia's booming prison population*, *The Conversation*, <https://theconversation.com/three-charts-on-australias-booming-prison-population-76940>.

¹⁵ Australian Institute of Health and Welfare 2019, *The health of Australia's prisoners 2018*, <https://www.aihw.gov.au/getmedia/2e92f007-453d-48a1-9c6b-4c9531cf0371/aihw-phe-246.pdf.aspx?inline=true>.

¹⁶ Human Rights Law Centre, *Greater oversight needed in places of detention: Senate COVID-19 Committee told*, <https://www.hrlc.org.au/news/2020/5/27/greater-oversight-needed-in-places-of-detention-senate-covid-19-committee-told>.

their *Roadmap to Recovery* report.¹⁷ The Government's health response to date appears to place value on these principles. So too should its economic response.

The National COVID-19 Coordination Commission (NCCC) has been tasked with the broad remit to advise the Prime Minister on "all non-health aspects of the pandemic response". This is a significant and important task and we urge the Government to ensure the NCCC operates with transparency and accountability to help ensure public confidence in its advice to Government. This includes clear channels for public input, timely public reporting of its work and ensuring full cooperation with oversight bodies, including the Senate Select Committee on COVID-19. The effective management of conflicts of interest will also be crucial for the NCCC, given the interests commission members have in particular industries, including the oil and gas sectors.

We call for economic programs to prioritise the most disadvantaged members of society, who will have borne the brunt of this crisis, as part of a national project to reduce inequality and transition to a zero greenhouse gas emissions future.

LEADING A JUST RECOVERY

While it should not have taken a global health crisis to take steps to house the homeless or a fair social safety net for people out of work, support for those most in need must now continue and be strengthened. Even before the pandemic, one in eight Australian adults were living in poverty.¹⁸ The life expectancy of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people was several years lower than that of non-Indigenous people.¹⁹ The youth unemployment rate was more than double the overall unemployment rate.²⁰ We need to meaningfully address these inequalities on the path to recovery, not settle for the pre-crisis status quo.

We believe that, broadly, economic recovery measures should prioritise support for people most at risk, reduce inequality, build community resilience, advance ecological justice and support community-led responses. Given the ongoing threat of climate change, including more frequent and severe weather events such as the devastating bushfires over the 2019-20 summer, a just transition to a zero greenhouse gas emissions society is inseparable from any sustainable economic recovery. All these overlapping objectives are features of what has been termed a *just recovery*, a concept increasingly used to describe localised post-disaster organising efforts.²¹ For our communities and environments to rebuild and thrive, and to avoid or mitigate future disaster risks, we need a just recovery.

No one has all the answers and some of the long-lasting impacts of this crisis are yet to fully emerge. While there is a long list of social, economic and environmental measures we would wish to see for a

¹⁷ Group of Eight Australia (2020). *COVID-19 Roadmap to Recovery: A Report for the Nation*, <https://go8.edu.au/wp-content/uploads/2020/05/Go8-Road-to-Recovery.pdf>.

¹⁸ Davidson, P., Saunders, P., Bradbury, B. and Wong, M. (2020). *Poverty in Australia 2020: Part 1, Overview*, ACOSS/UNSW Sydney, <http://povertyandinequality.acoss.org.au/poverty/>.

¹⁹ Australian Institute of Health and Welfare (AIHW) (17 July 2019). *Deaths in Australia*, <https://www.aihw.gov.au/reports/life-expectancy-death/deaths/contents/life-expectancy>.

²⁰ Dimov, S., King, T., Shields, M., Kavanagh, A., University of Melbourne, *The young Australians hit hard during Covid-19*, <https://pursuit.unimelb.edu.au/articles/the-young-australians-hit-hard-during-covid-19>.

²¹ Movement Generation (accessed 27 May 2020). *A Critical Framework for Just Recovery*, The Commons social change library, <https://commonslibrary.org/a-critical-framework-for-just-recovery/>.

more equitable future, below are three key measures we strongly recommend that the Government act on.

1. Permanently increase the JobSeeker payment

We cannot revert to the pre-crisis level of Newstart (now JobSeeker), that was so low it was widely seen as a barrier to employment.²² To do so would be to relegate tens of thousands of people to living below the poverty line.

As levels of unemployment and underemployment look set to continue to rise, the importance of a fair social safety net is only magnified. JobSeeker and related payments must be permanently increased.

Now is also an opportunity to move away from the inflexible and arbitrary mutual obligation requirements, including unreasonable job search activity, that simply punished people for not being in work.

2. Invest in social, affordable and energy efficient housing

Rough sleepers across the country have been housed in hotels and other accommodation during the COVID-19 pandemic. When this crisis recedes, they need a safe, secure and long-term place to go. The severe shortage in public housing is well-established – more than 140,000 Australians were on a wait list for public housing as of June 2018.²³

Significant investment by all Australian governments, including at the federal level, in social (public and community) and affordable housing is vital. This is imperative from a public health perspective – as this pandemic has shown – and also makes economic sense. The Australian Housing and Urban Research Institute (AHURI) has made a compelling business case for social housing to be considered as public infrastructure.²⁴ Infrastructure Australia concurs that social housing is “an important piece of social infrastructure in Australia that serves both a social and economic purpose and contributes to the effective functioning of society”.²⁵ To reduce homelessness and generate jobs, we support ACOSS’ call for public investment to build 30,000 social housing dwellings.²⁶

Jesuit Social Services also supports the joint proposal developed by the Healthy and Affordable Homes Coalition for a national low-income energy productivity program that would improve the energy

²² Pro Bono News (19 November 2019). *A sad and sorry history of Newstart*, <https://probonoaustralia.com.au/news/2019/11/a-sad-and-sorry-history-of-newstart/>.

²³ Australian Institute of Health and Welfare (AIHW) (18 July 2019). *Housing assistance in Australia 2019*, <https://www.aihw.gov.au/reports/housing-assistance/housing-assistance-in-australia-2019/contents/priority-groups-and-wait-lists#pg4>.

²⁴ Denham, T., Dodson, J., & Lawson, J. (2019). *The business case for social housing as infrastructure*, Australian Housing & Urban Research Institute, <https://www.ahuri.edu.au/research/final-reports/312>

²⁵ Infrastructure Australia (2019). *An Assessment of Australia’s Future Infrastructure Needs: The Australian Infrastructure Audit 2019*, Infrastructure Australia, Australian Government, <https://www.infrastructureaustralia.gov.au/sites/default/files/2019-08/Australian%20Infrastructure%20Audit%202019.pdf>

²⁶ Australian Council of Social Services (ACOSS) (April 2020). *POST COVID 19 Economic Recovery: Briefing*, <https://www.acoss.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2020/04/200429-Economic-Recovery-Briefing-PDF-1.pdf>.

efficiency of low-income homes.²⁷ The initiative aims to create jobs in areas of the program such as auditing, installation and manufacturing, and relieve financial pressure and improve the health and well-being of people on low incomes, including those in social housing. The proposal meets multiple important objectives including reduced energy bills, cuts in carbon emissions and reduced pressure on the electricity grid.

3. Build community resilience

Increasingly, frequent disasters and emergencies in Australia will continue to disproportionately affect people who are already vulnerable due to poverty, housing insecurity, disability and other factors. As was seen during the Black Summer bushfires and now during the COVID-19 pandemic, they will also throw many more Australians into positions of vulnerability, precarity and poverty. To meet these inevitable challenges, proactively building the capacity of communities to withstand shocks and to learn, adapt and equitably recover will be essential. We note the recent establishment of Resilience NSW and call on the Federal Government to consider creating a similar national body to support communities across the country to prevent, prepare for and respond to crises.

The community resilience approach is well-established and embedded in many local councils, and community, aid and infrastructure entities. Community resilience refers to the ability of communities to create, over the long-term, the enabling conditions for collaborative and equitable adaptation and recovery from emergency events. Resilient communities are those that build social cohesion; ecological resilience; localised social and economic initiatives; strong collaboration and engagement within and between communities and sectors; and prioritise principles of equity and social justice in preparedness and responses, ensuring the needs of the most vulnerable are at the forefront of relief efforts.

Establishing a Community Resilience Fund

Jesuit Social Services is calling on the Federal Government to establish a \$1 billion community resilience fund to support local communities to build resilience over the long-term, enabling them to withstand and recover from disasters and emergencies when they do occur, and to thrive in the interim. These projects would vary greatly, according to community need, but may include initiatives that build food, energy or housing security, generate sustainable and meaningful employment, and safeguard the environment.

We recommend prioritising projects that:

- Positively impact the most disadvantaged communities.
- Build social cohesion, generate sustainable local employment, and promote a healthy environment.
- Are community-led and demonstrably address community need.
- Address root drivers of vulnerability and inequality.
- Foster partnerships within and between communities and across sectors.

²⁷ <https://www.acoss.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2020/04/200429-Economic-Recovery-Briefing-PDF-1.pdf>.



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Thank you for taking our views into consideration.

Yours sincerely

A handwritten signature in grey ink that reads 'Sally Parnell'. The signature is written in a cursive style.

Sally Parnell
Acting CEO, Jesuit Social Services