



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.

Ms Lizzie Blandthorn, Chair
Public Accounts and Estimates Committee
Parliament House, Spring Street
East Melbourne, VIC 3002
E: covid.committee@parliament.vic.gov.au

13 August 2020

Dear Ms Blandthorn,

Jesuit Social Services welcomes the opportunity to contribute to the committee's *Inquiry into the Victorian Government's response to the COVID-19 pandemic*. Robust scrutiny of government actions, particularly in the rapidly changing environment of an ongoing crisis, is crucial to ensuring accountability and informing the best possible responses.

Introduction

At the time of writing, Victoria is grappling with a surge in COVID-19 cases and a second large-scale lockdown. Much remains uncertain. We do not know how long this pandemic will last, the total number of deaths, or the full physical, mental, social and economic toll.

We do know, however, that certain groups and individuals have been at heightened risk during this crisis. This includes people without safe and secure housing, people in prison or immigration detention, people in aged care, people with chronic ill-health, and those who are unemployed or in insecure work. We recognise, too, the many Victorians working in essential services who continue to provide the crucial healthcare, social support, food, transport and other services that people rely on, in circumstances that often expose them to greater health risks.

Before this crisis struck, life 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. Before the pandemic, 13.2 per cent of Victorians lived in poverty; an estimated 650,000 adults were at the lowest levels of literacy; and the youth unemployment rate was more than double the overall rate.¹ Issues such as high rates of casual and insecure work, expanding prison populations and inadequate housing, among others – have now been brought into stark relief. The lessons need to be learned.

Managing the health and economic response to a once in a century crisis is no easy task. We welcome the important initiatives the Victorian Government has undertaken to date, including providing emergency accommodation for people experiencing homelessness; additional funding for community legal services; emergency relief packages for people in need; and the Working for Victoria initiative to connect people with job opportunities and training. These measures have been a lifeline for many and demonstrate the importance of timely, flexible policy responses, informed by the evidence and

¹ Skills for Victoria's Growing Economy Issues Paper, 2020, https://s3.ap-southeast-2.amazonaws.com/hdp.au.prod.app.vic-engage.files/2215/8621/6823/Issues_Paper_Skills_for_Victorias_Growing_Economy_accessible.pdf.

responsive to community need. With the economic downturn resulting from this crisis expected to be acute, this kind of support will need to continue and be expanded.

In the following sections, we set out key steps we believe the Victorian Government should take – both in the immediate term and as we chart our recovery – to help ensure the health and well-being of all Victorians and build a more equitable future.

Address COVID-19 risk in Victorian prisons

The Australian Government’s health advice recognises that people in detention are among those most at risk of contracting this virus.² Prison populations in Victoria are at record levels,³ and the physical and mental health of people in prison, who usually come from disadvantaged backgrounds, is well below the general population.⁴ The recent news that six Victorian prisons went into lockdown, after a staff member tested positive to COVID-19, awakened all our worst fears. At the time of writing, several cases have also been linked to staff at Malmsbury Youth Justice Centre,⁵ young people at Parkville youth detention facility, and people at the Metropolitan Remand Centre.

A proactive response is needed – we cannot sit back and wait for a large-scale outbreak to unfold. Already, we have seen the consequences of this overseas. In the United States, as of 28 July, more than 78,000 cases of COVID-19 had been recorded among prisoners and at least 766 deaths.⁶

We continue to call on the Victorian Government to release low-risk offenders, people on remand, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, and people with chronic health conditions. In relation to Victoria’s youth justice system, where a worrying increase in cases has been reported at the Parkville facility, we are calling on the Government to explore the immediate exit of a number of young people from detention into safe and supported alternatives in the community. Children aged under 14, young people with chronic health problems, young people on remand and young people involved in the residential care system are among the groups that should be considered for immediate release. The health and safety of all young people in detention must be the priority. Acting swiftly to release vulnerable groups will protect the health and well-being of all people connected with the justice system, as well as the broader community.

The use of isolation and lockdowns as a way of ‘managing’ the health risks of COVID-19 in prisons is also very troubling. We have previously detailed the physical and mental impact of isolation in prison settings, and our program participants have spoken to us about the toll isolation has had on them.⁷

² <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>.

³ <https://www.sentencingcouncil.vic.gov.au/statistics/sentencing-trends/victoria-prison-population>.

⁴ 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>.

⁵ Bendigo Advertiser (30 July 2020) *Eight coronavirus cases linked to Malmsbury Youth Justice Centre after Department of Education staff member tests positive*, <https://www.bendigoadvertiser.com.au/story/6857746/another-covid-19-case-connected-to-malmsbury-youth-justice-centre/>.

⁶ The Marshall Project, *A State-by-State Look at Coronavirus in Prisons*, <https://www.themarshallproject.org/2020/05/01/a-state-by-state-look-at-coronavirus-in-prisons>.

⁷ Jesuit Social Services (September 2018) *All alone: Young adults in the Victorian justice system*, <https://jss.org.au/all-alone-young-adults-in-the-victorian-justice-system/>.

This is not a humane way to treat anybody, let alone people who are already marginalised and, in many cases, dealing with trauma or pre-existing health concerns.

As well as working to reduce the number of people in prison, greater oversight of places of detention must also be facilitated, during the COVID-19 pandemic and beyond. In line with our obligations under the Optional Protocol to the Convention against Torture (OPCAT), Jesuit Social Services reiterates the need for governments to urgently designate and/or establish National Preventive Mechanisms to oversee conditions of detention and the treatment of people in detention.⁸

Safeguard human rights and dignity as part of public health response

We recognise the difficulties and speed at which public authorities have had to make decisions during this crisis in order to protect lives. We have also been encouraged that, across the country, the response of governments thus far has been guided by the advice of health experts. Equally, there will of course be lessons to learn.

Government responses to any crisis must seek, to the fullest extent possible, to not compound existing disadvantage. We know, for example, that disadvantaged communities are disproportionately impacted by measures such as fines.⁹ The Committee's Interim Report notes that, as of 17 May, Victoria had issued the most fines of any Australian jurisdiction, and that the most disadvantaged Local Government Areas (LGAs) were receiving a proportionately higher number of fines than LGAs with the highest levels of advantage.¹⁰ There are numerous and often complex reasons why people may not comply with health orders. Some may simply be doing the wrong thing. Others may not feel safe at home. We welcome proactive measures taken by the Government to address underlying issues, such as providing worker support payments for those forced to self-isolate with no access to income.¹¹ This policy response demonstrates a flexible, evidence-based intervention that supports people in need.

Jesuit Social Services works with numerous people and families who were directly impacted by the restrictions imposed on nine public housing estates in Flemington and North Melbourne in early July. We know that some people living in the estates have experienced complex forms of disadvantage, including abuse and trauma, discrimination, mental illness and substance misuse. In all decision-making intended to keep people safe, it is imperative that the rights and dignity of each individual are held as paramount. We welcome the Victorian Ombudsman's investigation into the treatment of residents at 33 Alfred Street, North Melbourne, and broader issues of how to protect people's rights when they are detained in lockdown, including access to fresh air, exercise, medical care and medical supplies.

⁸ 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>.

⁹ Law and Justice Foundation of New South Wales (February 2018) *Fines: are disadvantaged people at a disadvantage?* [http://www.lawfoundation.net.au/ljf/site/articleIDs/D5D375991CE8E1B68525823A000641F4/\\$file/JI_27_Fines_disadvantaged_people.pdf](http://www.lawfoundation.net.au/ljf/site/articleIDs/D5D375991CE8E1B68525823A000641F4/$file/JI_27_Fines_disadvantaged_people.pdf).

¹⁰ https://www.parliament.vic.gov.au/images/stories/committees/paec/COVID-19_Inquiry/Report/PAEC_59-07_Vic_Gov_response_COVID-19_Interim_report.pdf.

¹¹ <https://www.dhhs.vic.gov.au/covid-19-worker-support-payment>.

Lead a just recovery

When the immediate health risks of this emergency recede, we need to focus on an equitable recovery that prioritises support for people most at risk, reduces inequality, builds community resilience, and advances ecological justice. 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.¹² Given the threat and impact 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. For our communities and environments to rebuild and thrive, and to avoid or mitigate future disaster risks, we need a just recovery.

While there is a long list of social, economic and environmental measures we would wish to see for a more equitable future, below are three key areas we strongly recommend the Government act on in charting a path to recovery.

1. Invest in social, affordable and energy efficient housing

The severe shortage in social housing across Australia is well-established. More than 140,000 Australians were on a wait list for public housing as of June 2018.¹³ Victoria lags even further behind, with the lowest proportion of social housing of any Australian jurisdiction.¹⁴ But there is cause for hope. The Government's commendable action in housing thousands of people experiencing homelessness at the beginning of this health crisis demonstrated what was possible. We also welcome the recent commitment to extending this emergency accommodation for some 2,000 people until April next year, and to support them into permanent, safe and supported housing options. We now need to ensure sustainable housing solutions for the future, for all those who need it.

Significant investment by all Australian governments, including at the Federal level, in social (public and community) and affordable housing is vital. Victoria should take the lead. 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.¹⁵ 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”.¹⁶

¹² 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/>.

¹³ 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>.

¹⁴ <https://chp.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2020/05/Make-Social-Housing-Work.pdf>.

¹⁵ 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>

¹⁶ 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>

It has been identified that to meet the current shortfall, Victoria would need to build 6,000 new social housing homes annually over 10 years.¹⁷ Given this scale, strong partnerships across all levels of government, the community and private sector are needed. Public support for these efforts is clear. A recent poll found 77 per cent of Victorian voters wanted the Government to build more public and community housing.¹⁸ To reduce homelessness and generate jobs, we support and reiterate the Council to Homeless Persons' call on the Victorian Government to provide significant public investment in building new social housing dwellings.¹⁹

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 efficiency of low-income homes.²⁰ 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. This proposal, which meets important objectives such as lower energy bills, cuts in carbon emissions and reduced pressure on the electricity grid, is one we believe the Victorian Government should support.

2. Build community resilience

Increasingly frequent disasters and emergencies in Australia will continue to disproportionately affect people who are already marginalised due to poverty, housing insecurity, disability and other factors. As seen during this Summer's bushfires and now during the COVID-19 pandemic, they will also throw many more Australians into positions of precarity and poverty. To meet these inevitable challenges, proactively building the capacity of communities to withstand shocks and to learn, adapt and recover will be essential.

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.

¹⁷ <https://chp.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2020/05/Make-Social-Housing-Work.pdf>.

¹⁸ <https://vcoss.org.au/news/2020/08/victorians-back-social-housing/>.

¹⁹ <https://chp.org.au/victoria-needs-social-housing-to-end-homelessness-and-stimulate-the-victorian-economy/>.

²⁰ <https://www.acoss.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2020/04/200429-Economic-Recovery-Briefing-PDF-1.pdf>.

Establishing a Community Resilience Fund

Jesuit Social Services is calling on the Victorian Government to establish a 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. 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.

3. Strengthen training and employment services systems

The economic toll of COVID-19 in Victoria looks likely to be significant and prolonged. Recent estimates at the national level outlined that there was one job for every 13 people looking for work,²¹ and unemployment and underemployment are set to continue to rise. To help create jobs, tailored training pathways and secure social support, the role of the Government will be crucial. For disadvantaged jobseekers, in particular, this includes using levers such as the Social Procurement Framework to create jobs for Victorians facing significant barriers to employment through the Government's social and infrastructure expenditure. The Out for Good pilot initiative, which supports 50 young people who have had contact with the justice system into jobs in the construction industry – which Jesuit Social Services is a part of – is one such positive example.

In Victoria, shoring up existing programs that are working well will be a crucial aspect of supporting disadvantaged people through this crisis and beyond. This includes support for key foundational learning pathways, including pre-accredited training and accredited foundation skills training; the Skills First Reconnect program, an initiative assisting the engagement into training of people from disadvantaged backgrounds; and initiatives under Jobs Victoria, such as the Jobs Victoria Employment Network (JVEN). For many people facing significant barriers to social and economic inclusion, entry into foundational training that is strongly linked to the Victorian Government's employment services system is the beginning of a pathway to meaningful employment.

We outline the importance of these foundational training pathways in our recent submission²² to the *Skills for Victoria's Growing Economy* review. For disadvantaged people out of work, the effectiveness

²¹ https://www.acoss.org.au/media-releases/?media_release=1-job-for-every-13-looking-acoss-calls-on-government-to-have-peoples-backs-through-tough-times.

²² <https://jss.org.au/submission-to-the-skills-for-victorias-growing-economy-review/>

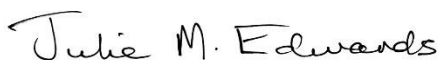
and value of the training system is only realised when it helps them get a job. For this to happen, strong links are needed with effective employment services systems. Initiatives such as the Jobs Victoria Employment Network (JVEN) have enabled providers such as Jesuit Social Services to support people who face significant barriers, including past justice involvement, mental-ill health or other complex needs, into jobs. For this cohort, the kind of tailored, flexible and long-term support able to be provided both through pre-accredited and foundation skills training, and then through their engagement in JVEN programs, has been crucial. JVEN, with its focus on supporting the most disadvantaged, stands in contrast to the compliance-focused nature of the Federal employment services system, *jobactive*. JVEN enables time and resources to be invested into developing and enhancing people's vocational skills and work readiness in order to secure a suitable position with an employer, and to maintain employment once a job is secured.

Jesuit Social Services calls on the Victorian Government to strengthen support for the following key programs that are crucial for the people we work with:

- ***Sustained funding for Jobs Victoria initiatives such as JVEN.*** We welcomed the \$8.8 million commitment in funding for Jobs Victoria in the 2019-20 Victorian Budget. We call on the Victorian Government to expand investment in these initiatives and commit to recurrent funding to support disadvantaged Victorians.
- ***Better recognise, value and resource pre-accredited training in Victoria.*** We call on the Victorian Government to increase funding for pre-accredited training programs through the Adult, Community and Further Education (ACFE) Board, to further support often highly vulnerable people to enter or re-enter education and training as a pathway to employment. Without a pre-accredited training pathway, we would not have been able to assist scores of participants to increase their skills, confidence and engagement with workplace training and, ultimately, to support their transition into work.
- ***Recommit to provide, expand on and fund over the long-term Skills First Reconnect,*** a crucial initiative to identify and support people with low levels of educational attainment into training as a first step toward meaningful employment.

Thank you for taking our views into consideration.

Yours sincerely



Julie Edwards – CEO, Jesuit Social Services