



3 June 2020

Committee Secretary
Department of the Senate
PO Box 6100
Parliament House
Canberra ACT 2600

Dear Committee Secretary

RE: Senate Select's Committee on COVID-19 and the Australian Government's response to the pandemic

The St Vincent de Paul Society (the Society) welcomes the opportunity to provide a submission to the Senate Select's Committee on COVID-19 and the Australian Government's response to the pandemic.

The Society is a lay Catholic charitable organisation that comprises over 60,000 volunteers and members and over 3,000 employees and has an extensive history providing on-the-ground assistance in the form of emergency relief, supported accommodation, community housing and other support services across Australia. The Society has consulted with its state and territory entities in preparing this submission.

The impact of the pandemic on service demand

The Society appreciates the additional Australian Government Emergency Relief (ER) funding received around March 2020 to meet the anticipated increase in demand for emergency relief services. States and territories reported sharp increases in demand for assistance at the outset of the pandemic, prior to JobKeeper, JobSeeker and additional one off Government payments being implemented. This aligns with internet search data which found that during March-April, searches for help and emergency relief spiked, to around 450,000.ⁱ

Currently, demand from those we regularly assist has varied significantly by location, with some areas experiencing a significant drop (20-50%), while in other areas, demand has levelled off. Reasons for this variation may include receipt of increased government assistance, closed access points (through Vinnies shops centres), fear of venturing out and changes to our service model which have required companions (clients) to engage by phone or online, rather than face to face.

The Society has found that the profile of clients has changed, with most being new and not seeking charitable assistance before. These clients have limited means of support and do not qualify for the recent government assistance. Many are either casual workers who have lost their jobs, are on temporary visas or both.

Demand for assistance from young people and vulnerable families has also increased during the pandemic, especially for those families where children have been at home for extended periods, or where adult children have returned to the family home. Increased requests for assistance have also been received from people living with disability. For example, Victoria received a significant number of new callers who identified as being on disability support pension, JobSeeker, or with no income.

How has the Society responded?

Social isolation has had a significant impact on how we have assisted those in need and on our capacity to generate income during the pandemic. We have responded to the challenging operational environment by changing our service model, even though available resources were significantly reduced due to decreases in donations and income normally generated through the Vinnies shops.

The Society's visitation model and assistance provided through Vinnies' Centres rely heavily on face to face contact provided by volunteers and members who generally fall into high risk groups. To minimise risk to our members and volunteers, we have retrained staff to do volunteer work, reduced staff hours, increased the number of younger volunteers and made use of the JobKeeper scheme.

The Society calls on all governments to maintain the JobKeeper scheme and adopt a flexible approach to the delivery of contract outcomes, in recognition of the fact that the operational environment has been far from business as usual.

Serving those in need of emergency relief

The Society's revised service delivery model relies on the use of centralised phone lines and virtual volunteers. Younger volunteers assist by providing contactless delivery and drop-offs of essential items and medications to people in their homes.

Social distancing has also changed the way we prepare, serve and deliver food through mobile vans, drops-offs at homes and other venues and at various accommodation sites. Processes for cleaning, laundering and showering at our facilities have all been reviewed. During the peak of the pandemic, we also experienced difficulties with obtaining fresh food and cleaning products.

Where possible, assistance has been provided electronically, through e-vouchers and electronic payment of bills. Referral partnerships have been established with agencies that people are in contact with, to identify and assist those in need. Examples include engaging with schools to support high risk children, partnering with metropolitan local government areas to meet requests for assistance received through their information lines (in WA) and working with the NSW Department of Communities and Justice by providing pop-up support for those being temporarily housed in hotels.

The Society is also acutely aware that access to most types of assistance presupposed that everybody has, and is able to use, information and communications technology even though public access points, such as libraries, are no longer available. Consequently, the allocation of both the Society's and the Commonwealth's emergency relief assistance often included providing mobile phones, phone credits and internet access. Many people also have rent and utility bills in arrears and we have been advised that utility retailers have a large number of disconnections on their books from September onwards, when the moratorium ends. Further, these bills are likely to be very high due to people being in lockdown during the winter period.

Serving people with disability

In NSW, changes to the way disability services were provided included simplifying day programs to reduce contact between clients and staff, conducting therapy sessions by tele link and providing additional safety and well-being support over the phone to ensure clients could access essential services such as medication and food. This last element was critical for clients who live alone.

In general, attendance at our centres increased for some clients as other disability providers had suspended services. Additional care was needed to support the changes in routine, as well as provide information and education on social distancing. Due to the nature of many disabilities, and the safety that comes from following rigid routines, there were increased levels of anxiety and depression displayed by many clients we assisted. We observed that some clients took steps backward in their recovery journeys and experienced a range of symptoms of mental illness not experienced for years.

For the NDIS Local Area Coordination Program in NSW, face-to-face participant work and group-based community engagement activities were moved to online delivery. Connections with local organisations were maintained by weekly telephone meetings. This meant that community members could schedule time to have their NDIS questions answered and staff were able to support them through this. There was an increased need for information sessions from clients trying to keep up with the changes to the NDIS as a result of COVID-19. Challenges included the need for additional promotion of online community engagement activities and access to equipment, technology and internet connectivity for both staff and community members.

Additional preparation time was also required when using interpreters. However, there has been value in the online delivery of services and it is likely that some elements of online support and community engagement activities will continue beyond COVID-19.

While the Society has made every endeavour to continue its operations, it has not always been possible to maintain pre-COVID service levels across the country. Some types of assistance could not be provided at all such as through group sessions and individual face to face sessions or providing transport or outreach support services.

Even as social isolation restrictions are lifted, many of the Society's members and volunteers remain at high risk. This will continue to affect our capacity to deliver the full suite of services in the usual way and if demand increases sharply, significant costs will be borne by the Society, particularly if paid staff numbers must be increased at a time when revenue has decreased.

Serving those in need of a hand up

The pandemic has presented significant challenges to the Society's capacity to give people "a hand up" by encouraging them to take control of their own destiny. Even before the pandemic, ACOSS' survey of community services found that unmet demand for community services was significant and one-third of organisations had stopped delivering one of their services in the last year due to financial constraints. Four in five staff reported that complexity of need and levels of poverty among the people they work with had increased in the last year. ⁱⁱ

As noted recently by the National COVID-19 Coordination Commission's philanthropy advisory group, charities will find recovery harder and may require extra support. ⁱⁱⁱ Any additional government support to maintain the Society's capacity to deliver services is vital. We are planning for a significant increase in demand if a 'snapback' approach is implemented by Government in an attempt to reduce the economic fallout from the pandemic.

The five areas which the Society is particularly concerned about are

- (i) income support (through JobKeeper and JobSeeker)
- (ii) housing and homelessness and energy efficiency for low income households
- (iii) asylum seekers, refugees and temporary visa holders
- (iv) charities being exempt from the \$50 million turnover limit for the application of the code of conduct for small and medium enterprises commercial leasing principles.

(i) Income Support (through JobKeeper and JobSeeker)

The Society supports calls to the Australian Government to either continue the new JobSeeker additional payment of \$560 per fortnight or match it to other pension payments through an additional \$370 per fortnight, at least until it can be assured that the social security system will keep people out of poverty.

'Snapping back' those on JobSeeker to the old Newstart payment will have dire community consequences and make it impossible for those on income support to break the poverty cycle, particularly if a significant economic downturn occurs concurrently.

The Committee is referred to the 27 recommendations contained in the Community Affairs References Committee's report on its *Inquiry into the Adequacy of Newstart and Other Related Payments*. These recommendations align with many of the issues contained in the Society's submission (No.119) and, if implemented, would make a significant difference to the lives of many people living below the poverty line. The Society also supports the establishment of an expert group to review the social security system and provide advice to Parliament on how to achieve better outcomes, increase economic participation, index payment rates and provide support and measures to address long-term disadvantage and the long-term unemployed.

Rather than forcing people into poverty by returning to Newstart rates, the Australian Government has many other options available to it to address the economic impact of the pandemic. It is estimated that around 1.7 million will be receiving JobSeeker payments by September and it is likely that some of the 3.5 million currently on JobKeeper will need to claim JobSeeker as the former is phased out. Professor Peter Whiteford has identified anomalies and design issues with the current approach ^{iv} and recommends that, until such time as the expert group is established, the base rate should be increased by \$370 per fortnight. This would bring the payment in line with the single rate of \$944.30 per fortnight for those on the aged, disability and carer pensions.

The Society agrees this approach would simplify the system, provide a consistent treatment to all adults and reduce incentives for people to seek to qualify for higher payments. ^v

Other matters that should be reviewed include not proceeding with next tranche (stage 3) of income tax cuts and reviewing the application and rate of the Goods and Services Tax and superannuation laws. With Treasury estimates of stage 3 tax cuts being around \$95 billion, their affordability is questionable. Further, social commentators are of the view that these tax cuts will result in the least progressive income tax system since the 1950s. ^{vi}

The Reserve Bank governor has also warned that "a 'premature' withdrawal of fiscal stimulus (in the form of expanded JobSeeker, JobKeeper and bank repayment deferrals) could damage the recovery.. the world is very uncertain and it is too early to say what the economy will be like in four months' time. Transitioning and tapering should be debated." ^{vii}

(ii) Housing and Homelessness and energy efficiency for low income households

Even prior to COVID-19, ACOSS' Community Services Survey found that the most common issues affecting people accessing services were housing pressures and homelessness (observed by 74% of staff) and inadequate rates of income support (69%). Staff involved in housing and homelessness were amongst those most likely to report demand pressures. Levels of unmet need were high particularly in regional and rural areas, where people also grappled with energy costs.^{viii}

The reality is that demand for housing, even prior to the pandemic, was not being met. At least 115,000 people were homeless on any given night and this has increased 13.7% in five years.^{ix} There is a national shortage of just over 400,000 homes that are affordable for people who are homeless or living on the lowest incomes.^x 190,000 households are already on waiting lists for social housing.^{xi} There are more than one million low-income households (2.65 million people) renting in the private market and this figure has more than doubled over the past two decades.

Two-thirds of vulnerable private renters are currently in rental stress, and 170,000 households have less than \$250 each week after paying rent. The specialist homelessness service system is turning away 254 people each day.^{xii} Most concerning, half of households experiencing rental stress are still experiencing rental stress four years later.^{xiii} Now is the time to act. With a predicted economic recession and rapid increase in unemployment, the numbers of those who are homeless, or at risk of being homeless, will only increase.

The Society commends the agreement of Australian governments to a moratorium on evictions over the next six months for residential tenants in financial distress who are unable to meet their commitments. We also commend additional state and territory funding in the form of rental grants and private rental assistance/subsidies, as well as increased temporary accommodation options for the homeless.

The Society's attention is focussed on the longer-term welfare of those who have been temporarily housed but may find themselves back on the streets, sleeping rough, as the pandemic wanes. Exit strategies must be developed now so that people can be transitioned to appropriate and long-term accommodation, with case-managed support. This support is important as it helps people to manage the transition effectively and, ultimately, move on with their lives. A 'housing first' but not 'housing only' solution is required.

This approach aligns with the Centre for Social Impact's *State of Homelessness in Australia's Cities – a health and social cost too high*,^{xiv} which examines the links between health and homelessness and, in particular, the risk of suicide for young people. The Centre's policy approach to homelessness, *Prevent, House and Support*, is also outlined in its factsheets on [homelessness in the context of COVID-19](#). The relationship between homelessness and youth suicide is especially important and must be addressed given that suicide rates are predicted to increase by 50 percent due to the economic and social impacts of the virus.^{xv}

A significant investment in the building of new social housing would not only provide secure housing for the homeless and those at risk of homelessness. It would create a significant number jobs, help kick-start the economy and provide long-term benefits to the community as a whole. Every dollar invested boosts the GDP by \$1:30. Access to housing is recognised as a vital determinant of wellbeing that is associated with better outcomes in health, education and employment, as well as economic and social participation.^{xvi}

The Society notes the current housing response by state and territory governments is variable across the country.

For example, the NSW Government has just fast-tracked the delivery of 700 new social housing homes. However, Vinnies NSW has asked the NSW Government to fund the construction of 5,000 additional social housing properties every year for a period of 10 years. This is because modelling indicates there to be an increase in the 37,000 people who are currently homeless across NSW; and the 51,000 applicants (or more than 100,000 people) on waiting lists for social housing.

The Victorian Government has committed funds to establishing an additional 168 new units and undertaking repairs and regular maintenance on 23,000 older, public housing units. This is a very welcome injection into the building economy, while contributing towards meeting a dire social need. However, the pandemic has magnified the critical necessity for secure and adequate housing and in order to meet population growth and demand from groups who rely on affordable housing, Victoria requires an additional 1600 social housing units per year, over two decades.

The ACT Government has provided support services and public housing for those on temporary visas and substantial support to the community sector to help it meet this need. However, transitional accommodation remains limited.

The Society recommends the Australian governments develop a long-term strategy to deliver social housing and that such a plan span over 30 years laying out a blueprint for government, business, private investors, community housing organisations and charitable/philanthropic institutions can follow.

At this time, the Society's capacity to respond to demand has also been reduced due to social isolation requirements and fewer resources. For example, the Men's Centre's (SA) capacity to accommodate people has decreased because double rooms have been converted to singles. In Western Australia, social distancing and reduced staffing hours mean that some services (such as youth engagement hubs) have reduced their opening hours and no additional funding has been made available to increase hours. However, some additional short term funding (4 months) has been provided by the Mental Health Commission to bring staff hours up to usual levels for some residential services.

As a community housing provider, the St Vincent de Paul Society holds a variable accommodation profile across Australia. It has established Amelie Housing Ltd, a national initiative that offers social and affordable housing to those in need, with up to 1200 dwellings in New South Wales, the ACT and South Australia. Other accommodation options are available in the states and territories, ranging from short-term crisis arrangements, through to long-term permanent residencies.

The Society's housing company, Amélie Housing, is currently undertaking preparatory work so that it is ready to deliver additional social housing should Government funding be made available. The Society currently holds land in NSW (Sydney, Newcastle and Wollongong) and SA but requires funding to progress the development of new dwellings. Proceeds from the sale of an aged care facility in Tasmania and funds held in Vinnies Housing in Queensland have resulted in several million being set aside to support housing activities.

The Society understands that many other community housing providers are similarly preparing to build new homes, and generate jobs and growth, if supported to do so. However, none of us, be it the Commonwealth or state governments, the private sector, or charities, can do it alone. The Master Builders Association has urged governments and the private sector to partner to fill the gap as market demand softens, saying the way out of COVID-19 could be accelerated by investment into affordable supply, while boosting vital trade and valuable flow-on market activity. Affordable and social housing by definition needs a level of government support to be viable, as the burden cannot be borne by the private sector (or any one sector) alone.^{xvii}

The Society supports the recent call made by national housing and homelessness leaders for an immediate employment-boosting investment to expand Australia's social housing by 30,000 homes. This four-staged process, over three years, called the [Social Housing Acceleration and Renovation Program \(SHARP\)](#) requires \$7.7 billion of government investment for:

- wave 1 – social housing maintenance and upgrading
- wave 2 – acquisition of sites and properties requiring renovation / completion which are suitable for social housing
- wave 3 – shovel ready development projects
- wave 4 – longer term new development projects

Commonwealth Government funding could be met by in-kind contributions, such as land, from state and local governments. The Society believes that there is a lot of good will between various sectors and levels of government and that now is the time to act, particularly as interest rates are at record lows.

In the Society's 2016 [Ache for Home report](#), it was recommended that \$10 billion of Commonwealth funds be allocated across states and territories on the basis of need and the cost of new housing in each location. The development of a national housing affordability and homelessness strategy that complements state and territory plans was also seen as essential to bringing key stakeholders to the table to tackle what is a complex and financially challenging issue.

The Society supports the national community coalition of organisations who work with renters and calls for national minimum standards that

- stop evictions for rental arrears or evictions where the tenant is not at fault, covering all tenants including occupants

- support renters to terminate a rental contract that is no longer viable and is causing hardship, without being burdened with unfair debts or penalties
- implement binding arbitration where tenants and landlords cannot reach agreement on a rent reduction (with the arbitration taking into account the financial position of both tenants and lessors)
- implement a temporary freeze on any rent increases
- direct financial support for tenants who, after genuine rent reductions have been applied, would struggle to afford their rent
- require banks and insurers to offer genuine relief to landlords who have reduced rent.

Low income energy productivity program

The Society supports the *Healthy & Affordable Homes: National low-income energy productivity program*. This economic stimulus proposal supports jobs growth, focusses on people most at risk, is collaborative in its approach, improves the liveability of homes and reduces carbon emissions. The program has four components and calls for:

- Federal, state and territory government matched funding in the investment of energy efficiency upgrades and solar PV installations for social housing dwellings
- Federal Government partnering with local councils and community organisations to provide energy efficiency audits, upgrades and solar PV installations for low-income owner occupiers
- Federal Government funding grants to landlords to support the upgrade of poor performing rental properties while COAG develops a proposal to implement mandatory energy efficiency standards for rental properties
- all governments providing subsidies for low-income households to replace inefficient appliances or purchase more energy efficient appliances.

The Society also supports investment in better energy efficiency and energy management. Useful upgrades could be made across Australia's private and public housing, commercial, community and government buildings and industrial facilities. We have partnered with a range of organisations such as the Australian Energy Council, the Carbon Market Institute and the Business Council of Australia and support the integration of government recovery plans with:

- respective clean technology roadmaps and long term emissions strategies
- grid modernisation planning
- carbon farming development
- bushfire recovery to build greater resilience and reduce climate risk.

We believe that this work can be progressed through discussion with regulators, business and the community and that equity and accessibility are essential to ensure that the most vulnerable benefit fully.

Low take up rates for state energy concessions

The take up rate by those who are eligible to receive state energy concessions for gas, water, electricity and council rates is only about 50 percent. We believe this is due to a lack of knowledge on what is available and how to access it. One way to increase the take up rate would be to automate the process so that when a person is assessed as eligible for statutory income payment, their consent is obtained to provide this information to state and local governments so that they are then aware that this person is eligible and agrees to receiving concessions and other supports they are entitled to.

(iii) Asylum Seekers, Refugees and Temporary Visa Holders (including visitor visas, working holiday visas, studying and training visas, family and partner visas, working and skilled visas, refugee and temporary protection visas and Safe Haven Enterprise visas)

The Society acknowledges and appreciates the additional ER funding of \$100 million to existing grant holders to meet additional demand for emergency relief assistance created by the pandemic. While \$7 million has been made available to the Red Cross specifically for those on temporary visas, it is insufficient to meet demand.

There are 2.17 million people currently on temporary visa holders. Many are casual employees who have lost work, are still expected to pay rent and bills, are unable to meet JobSeeker or JobKeeper requirements, have little savings, may not qualify for Medicare and, for a range of reasons, are unable to return home. For example, many of the 565,000 international students are casually employed, have lost work and cannot rely on their family for support as they too are in lockdown in their own countries. While universities have generally done a good job at referring people or providing hardship assistance, limited options are available to those studying in private institutions.

State and territory governments in Victoria, Tasmania, Northern Territory and the Australian Capital Territory have released COVID relief packages targeting temporary visa holders in recognition of the fact that many charities are experiencing increased demand from these cohorts. International education is the country's third largest export, with international students injecting \$32 billion into the economy.^{xviii} Benefits to Australia through this include generating jobs, supporting wages and lifting living standards.

However, the response to international students on temporary visas has been too little, too late, with policy advice limited to go home...look to your families for support.. or access superannuation.

The Society largely uses its own resources to provide support to asylum seekers and refugees. The extent to which this is done varies by states and territories. A description of these activities, including the profile of clients and issues is contained at **Attachment A**. In general, the Vinnies Asylum Seeker Program (VASA) continues to provide support to 30 asylum seekers. The Migrant and Resource Centre (M&RC) has been in contact with 113 visa holders (050). Very few are in receipt of government assistance (around 15%), while a significant proportion require assistance (around 65%) and very few are currently in jobs (around 20%). Due to limited resources, staff numbers have been reduced even though demand has increased, particularly from new clients who have not previously sought assistance before.

We support the Refugee Council of Australia's call to the Prime Minister to fill the gaps in the Government's COVID-19 support package, which currently leaves over a million people on temporary and bridging visas without access to financial, legal or medical support. Those particularly affected are people seeking asylum on bridging visas and temporary visa holders including refugees, temporary migrant workers and international students.

This should be done by ensuring that all people have access to medical treatment and a financial safety net so that they are not forced into destitution. The Government should:

- extend JobSeeker to people on bridging visas currently ineligible for income support
- extend JobKeeper to temporary visa holders so that businesses employing them can continue to operate
- remove penalties for Safe Haven Enterprise Visa (SHEV) holders accessing Special Benefit in light of the pandemic and remove restrictions on accessing Special Benefit for Temporary Protection Visa (TPV) or SHEV holders who are studying, and
- take action in a way that prevents people losing legal status and access to support

We are concerned by reports received by the Race Discrimination Commissioner on persistent incidents of racist abuse and discrimination since the beginning of the COVID-19 outbreak. We support the Commissioner's position that these incidents harm our collective wellbeing at a time when we need to be working together. We also support the Federation of Ethnic Communities' Council of Australia's (FECCA) request for bipartisan to develop a national anti-racism strategy. This will be particularly important as restrictions are relaxed and people struggle to regain employment and re-open businesses.

(iv) Mental Health

While the Society is planning for an expected increase in demand for assistance towards the second half of this year, we are concerned by the recent estimates issued by the Sydney's Brain and Mind Centre that suicide rates could rise by up to 50 per cent in the wake of the prolonged economic impacts of COVID-19. A 'best case scenario' is still very troubling, with a 25 per cent increase in suicides predicted, of which around 40 per cent will be among young people. Rural and regional areas are likely to be hardest hit, with this 'persisting for up to five years if the economic downturn lasts more than 12 months'.^{xix}

The Society prepared a submission in response to the Productivity Commission's draft report into mental health (Submission no. 1216) and recommended that the report should:

- outline a national vision for mental health services
- clearly articulate the role of community-based psychosocial services, their benefits from a social determinants of health perspective, and how these services could partner with clinical care to provide an holistic, client-centred and coordinated approach to service delivery
- outline the importance and benefits of the health sector working collaboratively with non-health sectors to reduce the hospital/bed/crisis-response cycle
- note that current funding models encourage dependency, in that the more dependent an individual, the more funding is received. There is limited incentive to implement a recovery philosophy
- propose a way forward for the 'missing middle'

We outlined similar issues in our submission to the current parliamentary inquiry into *Lessons to be learned in relation to the Australian bushfire season 2019-20* (Submission no. 47). Society members and volunteers have found that the mental health of those in bushfire areas has been compounded by COVID-19. Overall, mental health responses, through the public health network, were too slow and information difficult to access, especially when it was needed most (in the immediate aftermath of the fires).

Further, the majority of funds have been directed to health services, ignoring the value of community-based psychosocial services and with limited funding made available to support community development and resilience activities. We hope that a similar approach will not be taken again with respect to the mental health response to COVID-19.

Some shops have experienced an increase in anti-social and abusive behaviour by customers whom they have known and assisted in the past. There is concern about what will happen when income support supplements end and recipients who have now experienced a greater capacity to manage their living costs and a less stressful existence are forced back into poverty. The Society is bracing for what is expected to be an escalation of demand for all types of assistance after September.

(v) Request that charities be exempt from the \$50 million turnover limit for the application of the code of conduct for small and medium enterprises commercial leasing principles.

The Mandatory Code of Conduct for Small and Medium Enterprises Commercial Leasing Principles (the Code) is an important initiative to support these enterprises affected by COVID-19 to continue to provide invaluable services to local communities. The Code will assist enterprises to remain solvent in the coming months ahead. However, the \$50 million annual turnover threshold means that organisations such as Vinnies NSW is experiencing challenges negotiating rent reductions for its shops.

We request that charities be exempt from this limit as revenue is raised solely for the purpose of advancing social and public welfare. Further, shops account for only a part of Vinnies NSW's sources of income, which include government contracts, regular giving, fundraising events, bequests, and container deposit recycling. It is also likely that the volunteer workforce, who is vulnerable to the impacts of COVID-19, will need to be replaced by paid staff when shops re-open. This will add to overhead costs and reduce income that would otherwise be used to provide services and support to people in need.

Other matters

In times of crisis, agility is essential. Too often, government departments and agencies are hamstrung by red tape and while it is essential that checks and balances are in place, it seems that the current balance is hindering rather than helping responsiveness. In our recent submissions to various parliamentary inquiries and to the Royal Commission into National Natural Disaster Arrangements, the Society has recommended, amongst other things, that:

- emergency provisions/exemptions be included in the Commonwealth Grant Rules and Guidelines and the Commonwealth Procurement Rules
- fundraising laws be reviewed by the Australian Law Reform Commission as they are no longer fit for purpose, are complex and do not support national online fundraising activities.

We commend the establishment of mechanisms such as the new National Coordination Group to advise the Government on how the response to emergency relief can assist individuals in need during the coronavirus pandemic. Members include representatives from the emergency relief, food relief and

financial counselling sectors, as well as officers from the Department of Social Services. We believe that forums such as these are an effective means of working collaboratively across service sectors and with Government in times of crisis.

To conclude

In conclusion, the Society highlights the following matters:

- Demand for emergency relief assistance has varied by location. Clients seen during the pandemic are new and have not accessed charitable assistance before.
- Vulnerable families, young people, those living with disability, those on temporary visas and those who were in casual employment are the main client types presenting for assistance during this period.
- Service models have changed significantly with an increased online presence and virtual/contactless support being provided. The provision of food, accommodation services and types of emergency relief have all changed during the pandemic.
- Fewer volunteers and members mean that operational overheads have increased. Staff have been retained through retraining, reduced hours and access to JobKeeper. This has occurred at a time when income generation through donations and shops is significantly reduced.
- A flexible approach to contract administration would help the Society to continue to operate (for example, extending contract end dates for Emergency Relief and Drought Community Support Initiative funding).
- The Society is concerned about the long term health and wellbeing of those on income support (JobKeeper and JobSeeker), those at risk of homelessness, those on temporary visas and those living with mental health issues. A significant portion of the Australian community will be worse off if they are forced back into poverty and homelessness, particularly at a time when an economic downturn is anticipated.
- JobSeeker and JobKeeper should be retained until an expert group is established to advise the Australian Government on payment rates that keep people out of poverty. Either the current JobSeeker rate should be retained (an additional \$560 per fortnight) or the payment should match existing aged and disability pensions (an additional \$370 per fortnight)
- The Society recommends that the next tranche (stage 3) of the tax cuts should not be progressed in the current environment and that other options such as reviewing the Goods and Services tax and superannuation laws should be explored.
- The Society supports the [Social Housing Acceleration and Renovation Program \(SHARP\)](#) and calls on government to invest at least \$7.7 billion into social housing. The Society's Ache for Home Report (2016) called for \$10 billion of funds to be allocated across states and territories on the basis of need and the cost of new housing in each location. A national housing affordability and homelessness strategy must also be developed that complements state and territory plans.
- The Society supports investment in better energy efficiency and energy management and the *Healthy & Affordable Homes: National low-income energy productivity program*.
- The Society recommends that processes be put in place (between Commonwealth and state and territory governments) to increase the uptake of state energy concessions for gas, water, electricity and council rates.
- The Society requests that charities be exempt from the \$50 million turnover limit for the application of the code of conduct for small and medium enterprises commercial leasing principles.
- The Society supports the national community coalition of organisations calls to establish national minimum standards for renters and landlords for managing tenancy issues.
- The Society supports the Refugee Council of Australia's call to the Prime Minister to fill the gaps in the Government's COVID-19 support package. This means
 - ensuring all people have access to medical treatment and Medicare for people seeking asylum
 - ensuring all people have a financial safety net so they are not forced into destitution, and

- preventing people from losing legal status and access to support.
- The Society supports FECCA's call for bipartisan support to develop a national anti-racism strategy
- The Society is concerned about the narrow approach taken to mental health policy and funding and calls for:
 - a national vision for mental health services
 - clearer articulation of the role of community-based psychosocial services, their benefits from a social determinants of health perspective, and how these services could partner with clinical care to provide an holistic, client-centred and coordinated approach to service delivery
 - a better understanding of the importance and benefits of the health sector working collaboratively with non-health sectors to reduce the hospital/bed/crisis-response cycle
 - funding for community-based psychosocial services and community resilience projects
- The Society calls for emergency exemptions and provisions to be included in the Commonwealth Grant Rules and Guidelines and the Commonwealth Procurement Rules
- The Society calls for a review of the fundraising laws by the Australian Law Reform Commission as they are no longer fit for purpose, are complex and do not support national online fundraising activities

We thank you for the time you have given our submission. If you require any further information, please do not hesitate to contact me

Yours sincerely



Toby oConnor
Chief Executive Officer

Attachment A

Vinnies Asylum Seeker Program (VASA) and Migrant and Resource Centre (M&RC), South Australia

- Services are currently limited to providing support to 30 asylum seekers who are existing clients of the VASA program. VASA provides assistance to asylum seekers who have been refused access to any form of social security and have no work, or insufficient work, to make ends meet. After ongoing assessment, assistance provided includes a \$120 monthly living allowance, monthly rental payments and assistance with utility bills and food vouchers. Other forms of emergency relief are also provided including regular weekly phone calls.
- Vinnies Migrant and Refugee Service (M&RC) works with the Red Cross and other non-government organisations to meet demand, which has increased over the last few months. Volunteers have been assigned 10 asylum seekers to maintain contact with during the pandemic. M&RC provides support by inquiring on people's wellbeing, maintaining social connection and providing information on visa processes and access to income and any urgent material support. 113 visa holders (050) have recently been contacted. Very few are in receipt of government assistance (around 15%), while the majority require assistance (around 65%) and very few are working (around 20%).
- The M&RC has been operating on minimal levels since the general staff stand-down at the end of March. There is a number of asylum seekers with no access to any form of income or income support whom the service is financially supporting on a regular basis. No new referrals are being taken at this stage.
- However, demand for services has increased. Some asylum seekers who were previous clients of services but stopped requiring assistance because they managed to find employment have now returned to services for assistance due to job losses. We have also had asylum seekers who have never been to the M&RC before approaching the service for assistance.
- VASA has continued to support asylum seekers, most of whom are on bridging visas, are living without access to social security and are unable to secure employment.
 - There are currently 30 clients in this category: 5 single females, 8 females with family, 11 single males and 6 males with family
 - The assistance provided has included a monthly living allowance(\$120), monthly rent assistance, monthly food vouchers and payment of utility bills.
- All of the asylum seekers who arrived by boat prior to January 2014, have had to apply, over the last few years, for official recognition of their refugee status. If successful, they have been granted new forms of temporary protection visas, either Temporary Protection Visas (TPVs of 3 years duration) or Safe Haven Enterprise Visas (SHEVs of 5 years duration). Most of these people are then eligible for the equivalent of a Centrelink payment called the 'special benefit'.
- However, some of the people have found that this 'special benefit' has been cancelled. This has occurred in instances where they are studying English full-time, where they have been deemed 'job-ready' by the Department (despite the difficulties in finding employment), or where they have sent more than \$1000 home to relatives. In other cases, the amount of the 'special benefit' has been reduced, leaving them unable to make ends meet.
- The process instituted by the Federal Department of Home Affairs to determine refugee status has been criticised by many, including the Refugee Council of Australia, as lacking in natural justice and procedural fairness. There are a number of asylum seekers – and these are the ones that are assisted through the Vinnies M&RC VASA program – who have had their access to the SRSS program which pays them the equivalent of 89% of JobSeeker cancelled. This has occurred because:
 - they have had their applications for refugee status refused
 - they are still waiting for a decision to be made
 - they are in the process of appealing the decision to refuse refugee status, a process that can take years.
- These people have no safety net and unless they can find work, which at best is usually casual, seasonal and /or part-time, they are at risk of homelessness, are unable to access daily essentials and are likely to have mental health issues and be exploited in the workplace.

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- ⁱ InfoXchange. Technology for Social Justice. 5 May 2020. *How COVID-19 is affecting Ask Izzy usage*. Accessed at <https://www.infoexchange.org/au/news/2020/05/how-covid-19-affecting-ask-izzy-usage>
- ⁱⁱ Cortis, N. & Blaxland, M (2020): *The profile and pulse of the sector: Findings from the 2019 Australian Community Sector Survey*. Sydney: ACOSS https://www.acoss.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2020/03/2020-ACSS_final-3.pdf
- ⁱⁱⁱ Karp, P. 2 June 2020. *Charities relying on donations will need government support, Covid commission official says*. *The Guardian*. Accessed at <https://www.theguardian.com/society/2020/jun/01/charities-relying-on-donations-will-need-government-support-covid-commission-official-says>.
- ^{iv} Currently a benefit cliff exists, where a single person working 27 hours per week takes home around \$720, but a person working 28 hours takes home \$508. This is the result of the loss of the entire Coronavirus Supplement when the last dollar of JobSeeker is lost under the current income test. This also creates significant anomalies: a person working up to three hours per week would have a higher disposable income than someone working 28 to 31 hours per week. And someone working 38 hours would have a lower disposable income than someone working between 19 and 27 hours.
- ^v Whiteford, P. 21 May 2020. *When the Coronavirus Supplement stops, JobSeeker needs to increase by \$185 a week*. Article in *The Conversation*. Accessed at: <https://theconversation.com/when-the-coronavirus-supplement-stops-jobseeker-needs-to-increase-by-185-a-week-138417>
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- ^{viii} Cortis, N. & Blaxland, M (2020): *The profile and pulse of the sector: Findings from the 2019 Australian Community Sector Survey*. Sydney: ACOSS https://www.acoss.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2020/03/2020-ACSS_final-3.pdf
- ^{ix} Homelessness Australia. 2016. *Homeless statistics*. With reference to ABS' 2016 Census. Accessed at: <https://www.homelessnessaustralia.org.au/about/homelessness-statistics>.
- ^x Troy, D, Nouwelant, R., Randolph, B. 2019. *Estimating need and costs of social and affordable housing delivery*. UNSW. City Futures Research Centre.
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- ^{xiv} Flatau, P., Tyson, K., Callis, Z., Seivwright, A., Box, E., Rouhani, L., Lester, N., Firth, D, Ng, S-W. (2018), *The State of Homelessness in Australia's Cities: A Health and Social Cost Too High*, Centre for Social Impact The University of Western Australia, Perth, Western Australia. Accessed at: www.csi.edu.au/research/project/the-state-of-homelessness.
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