



14 December 2023

Dear COVID-19 Inquiry team,

RE: AUSTRALIAN GOVERNMENT COVID-19 RESPONSE INQUIRY

The St Vincent de Paul Society National Council of Australia (the Society) welcomes the opportunity to provide this submission to help improve Australia's preparedness for future pandemics.

This submission addresses the following areas pertinent to the Society's operations and those we assist, namely

- health response measures
- broader health supports
- financial support for individuals
- support for industry and business, and
- community supports.

In summary, the Society recommends

- funding of community-based psychosocial services
- funding of community-based social services to modify service models and establish processes to improve coordination of assistance at the local, community level
- funding and resources to support establishment of local partnerships and practices between the health sector and community based social services
- lifting people out of poverty permanently through increases to working age payments and Commonwealth Rent Assistance, to reduce risk to individuals and the community
- specific funding to support vulnerable cohorts including people living with disability, people who are homeless, lone households, culturally and linguistically diverse groups, and people on temporary visas
- funding to increase housing options and the delivery of wrap around support (to help people transition successfully along the 'housing pathway')
- funding and processes to support improved early coordination between the Australian Government and other service sectors (such as the National Coordination Mechanism and the National Coordination Group)
- 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, and
- processes to support early implementation of moratoriums on evictions and disconnections during the crisis period (including through the national rental standards), along with implementation of rental and utility relief programs to coincide with the lifting of moratoriums.

Background

The Society's assistance mainly takes the form of emergency relief and accommodation. Emergency relief includes help with food, clothes, transport, health, education and utility costs. Most of this assistance is provided by our members and volunteers and ordinarily through our face-to-face visitation programs or at our centres. Accommodation assistance ranges from helping with rent through to providing emergency, transitional and permanent affordable housing.

The Society prepared a submission to the Parliamentary Inquiry into COVID-19 (Sub. No. 258) and refers the Department to its recommendations.

Health Response Measures and Broader Health Supports

The Society previously expressed concern about the narrow approach taken to mental health policy and funding. There was, and continues to be, a strong reliance on the Primary Health Network, with information on service provision difficult to access. There is also no funding of community-based psychosocial services, or recognition of how these services could partner with clinical care to support community development and resilience activities. Nor are any funds made available to provide a holistic, client-centred and coordinated approach to service delivery. The Department is referred to the Society's submission ([Sub. No. 1216](#)) to the Productivity Commission on its mental health review.

Financial Support for Individuals

As a significant provider of Commonwealth Emergency Relief (ER), the Society appreciated the additional funding made available around March 2020 to help meet increased demand. This enabled us to respond to a sharp increase in demand for ER at the outset of the pandemic, prior to JobKeeper, JobSeeker and additional one-off Government payments being implemented. The Pandemic Leave Disaster Payment also helped keep our operations afloat.

Research at the time showed that the Coronavirus supplement was used judiciously by recipients to cover every-day expenses, with additional payments quickly washing through local economies and benefitting local businesses and communities.

Filling the Gap – the relationship between the rate of unemployment benefits and charity assistance for JobSeekers'

In NSW, the Society comprises approximately 4,000 member volunteers who provide food, groceries, clothing, household items, financial support and friendship to over 400 communities. People receiving unemployment benefits have been consistently and significantly over-represented because they have no other way of making ends meet.

In March 2021, the NSW Society assessed the impact of doubling the rate of income support payments during the pandemic and the number of people seeking charitable assistance.

The doubling of the base rate of income support payments during the pandemic meant that many people traditionally assisted by the Society were able to cover their basic living costs without regularly seeking help. During this period, across Australia the Society experienced a significant and sustained reduction in requests for help. For example, in NSW in the last quarter of 2019-20, the number of people on the JobSeeker Payment requiring assistance fell by 75 per cent compared to the same quarter in 2018-19. In September 2020, the Coronavirus supplement was cut by \$300/fortnight, reducing it to \$250/fortnight. This was accompanied by a steady increase in the number of people seeking assistance, even though the total number of people receiving JobSeeker in NSW had begun to decline.

Lifting people out of poverty benefits all of us – A Fairer Tax and Welfare System

It is difficult to implement national coordinated responses to any type of crisis if there are large cohorts of people who are significantly disadvantaged prior to a new emerging emergency period. In general, these vulnerable cohorts are difficult to reach and have fewer resources (financially and socially) to call upon. Subsequently, they are often 'over-looked' by systems. Specific, direct policies and funding are required to ensure they are engaged and receive the assistance they need. Significant inroads could be made to reducing the number of people living in poverty and/or financial stress by reviewing Australia's tax and welfare system.

In 2022 and 2023 the Society commissioned the ANU to model three options to reduce the poverty gap by increasing working age payments and Commonwealth Rent Assistance. The ANU paper and first facts are accessible on [our website](#).

In summary, the options are underpinned by dropping the stage 3 tax cuts, lowering the tax threshold for capital gains from 50 per cent to 37.5 per cent, restructuring the superannuation tax system, and making moderate changes to personal income taxation thresholds.

The model:

- increases the tax-free threshold from \$18,200 to \$24,000 for modest and high options
- lifts between 193,000 and 834,000 people out of poverty
- reduces the after-housing poverty gap by between 5.1 per cent and 18.6 per cent
- reduces households in poverty from 11.7 per cent to 8.6 per cent
- benefits people with incomes in the bottom two quintiles (40 per cent) namely low-income and low wealth households, single parents, lone persons, renters and those relying on working age welfare payments
- increases the superannuation balances for people of lower and middle income and wealth, including those expected to be on the age pension in retirement, and
- has the greatest impact on areas with high poverty and financial stress rates, including outer Western Sydney, suburban Greater Brisbane, and regional Australia, including Daly-Tiwi-West Arnhem, Katherine, Arnhem NT and Far North Queensland.

The options increase

- JobSeeker by \$176 per fortnight (pf), \$249 pf or \$338 pf
- Parenting Payment by \$167 pf, \$238 pf, or \$351 pf
- Disability Support Pension and Carer Payments by \$69 pf or \$249 pf
- Family Tax Benefit A by 20 per cent, and
- Commonwealth Rent Assistance by 25 per cent (in addition to the 15 per cent increase in the 2023 Budget).

Locations of high poverty and financial stress rates are also more likely to be adversely impacted by pandemics, as witnessed in Australia during COVID-19. This is also supported by the evidence base on the social determinants of health.

Assisting those falling through the cracks

People seeking asylum and those on temporary visas

During the pandemic, the Society was particularly concerned about people seeking asylum and those on temporary visas. For those with work rights, many were engaged in casual work. Research found that casual workers lost employment eight times faster than those in permanent jobs. Many were unable to meet JobSeeker or JobKeeper requirements, had little savings, did not qualify for Medicare and, for a range of reasons, were unable to return home. While \$7.0 million was made available to The Red Cross specifically to assist this cohort in Australia, it was insufficient to meet demand. Funding the one provider also limited the service footprint.

In response to future pandemics, the Australian Government should ensure that all people have access to medical treatment and Medicare, an adequate safety net and suitable accommodation.

People living with disability, living alone or with mental health issues

During the pandemic, the Society conducted therapy sessions and well-being checks to people living with disability or in lone households (by tele-link or phone) to ensure they had access to essential services, including food and medicine.

In general, attendance at our centres by people living with disability increased during the pandemic as other disability providers suspended their services. Additional care was required as people navigated changes to their routine and information was shared on the different operational environments due to social distancing. The nature of many disabilities means that set routines provide safety and reassurance. Disruption often results in increased levels of anxiety and depression, as displayed by many of those we assisted. Consequently, some people went backwards in their recovery journeys and experienced a range of symptoms of mental illness not experienced for years.

The Australian Government should ensure that organisations assisting the community are resourced to help those living with disability. The support provided by the Society was covered by its own resources.

People who are homeless, sleeping rough or at risk of homelessness

Blueprint model of care to support vaccine hubs for people experiencing homelessness

In NSW, the Society worked in partnership with the NSW Government, City of Sydney, St Vincent's Hospital, QUT, KRC Health and Neami National to develop a blueprint model of care to support vaccine hubs for people experiencing homelessness. The purpose was to provide guidance to agencies on vaccination efforts targeting hard to reach or marginalised people and communities. The process was initiated by a range of stakeholders who shared resources, such as Accredited Nurse Immunisers, consent forms and a common approach to messaging.

The Society's Ozanam Learning Centre — a community centre located next to the Matthew Talbot Hostel Woolloomooloo, which ordinarily provides opportunities for people in the target client group to connect, learn, participate in activities, and access support — was identified as a suitable location for the hub. As at mid-Sept 2021, 5,000 hard to reach people had been vaccinated. The Blueprint is at **Attachment 1**.

All levels of governments need to understand that the formal health network alone is not the only way to engage people, particularly those who are hard to reach. Effective outcomes can be achieved when the health network partners with a range of locally based community-service providers. Further, health and community-based service sectors need to be resourced to develop partnerships and implement local solutions, rather than simply being expected to absorb these costs, particularly during a crisis.

Lifting the moratorium on evictions and utility disconnections

During the pandemic various state and territory governments put in place moratoriums on evictions. However, the time taken to implement these policies, the duration for which they were in place and the provision of follow up support varied considerably across the country.

In Western Australia, a Housing Emergency Response Group was established (April 2021) to initiate and drive immediate solutions to the rental crisis, particularly as a result of lifting of rental moratorium. They identified the devastating impact of the social affordable housing shortage on many families, with increases in rent and evictions, family and domestic violence referrals and requests for housing, support and emergency relief services.ⁱⁱ

Moratoriums on evictions and provision of rental relief in the form of grants, no interest loans etc are essential and must be established early. National rental standards are currently being developed and should include provisions for moratoriums to be implemented during times of crisis (natural disasters, emergencies, pandemics etc).

The Society was also aware that many people had utility bills in arrears and were advised that utility retailers had a large number of disconnections on their books from when the moratorium ended. These bills were also likely to be very high due to people being in lockdown during the winter period. Again, moratoriums on disconnections are essential and must be established early. Utility bill relief after the moratorium has been lifted is also vital to ensuring the wellbeing of households and individuals.

Lived experiences of community services users and the workers who supported them during the COVID-19 pandemic in NSW, Australiaⁱⁱⁱ

A research partnership between Australian Catholic University, Jesuit Refugee Service Australia, and the St Vincent de Paul Society NSW sought to better understand the experience of people who sought emergency financial assistance from community service organisations during the pandemic, as well as the experiences of the frontline workers who supported them.

In summary, the research found that governments must take more action to reduce underlying vulnerability in the community including reducing the number of people without access to adequate income and/or meaningful employment. People from marginalised backgrounds should also be provided with adequate opportunities to develop social networks and build social capital. The stigma associated with accessing services, including income support, must also be addressed.

Co-ordinated provision of services and emergency relief must be improved. Greater investment in the promotion of services and supports, including in languages other than English, through a wide variety of

channels must be made. This includes resourcing community organisations to promote services such as emergency financial relief.

The vital role community organisations play in responding to needs during crises must be recognised and they should be resourced accordingly. More resources are also needed to better support frontline workers and volunteers delivering services to vulnerable people.

Support for Industry and Business

The Society provides the following information on the impact of not-for-profit organisations.

Pre-COVID service levels could not be maintained

The Society was particularly affected by the fact that as many of our members and volunteers are older, they fell into the high-risk category which meant they were unable to maintain community contact. While the Society attempted to continue its operations, it was not possible to maintain pre-COVID service levels across the country. Some types of assistance could not be provided at all, such as group sessions and individual face to face sessions or providing transport or outreach support services.

Changes to service models

The nature of the pandemic necessitated change to our service model, the costs of which were covered by the Society. This occurred at a time when available resources were significantly reduced due to decreases in donations and income normally generated through our Shop Network.

Significant changes included use of centralised phone lines, virtual volunteers and contactless deliveries. Where possible, assistance was provided electronically, through e-vouchers and electronic payment of bills.

Social distancing also changed the way we prepared, served and delivered 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 were all reviewed. During the peak of the pandemic, we also experienced difficulties with obtaining fresh food and cleaning products.

The Society helped operate vaccination hubs or worked alongside mobile vaccination clinics. In some state based residential services such as homelessness, disabilities, crisis accommodation and refuges, vaccination of eligible groups (staff and residents) was encouraged, with operations conducted in accordance with COVID-19 safe plans as per State Government directives.

While JobKeeper helped with changes to our staffing and volunteer profiles, costs associated with changes to service models were borne by the Society. For some matters, such as limited access to fresh food and cleaning products, the issue was a lack of supply.

Mandatory Code of Conduct for Small and Medium Enterprises Commercial Leasing Principles

During the pandemic, the Society called for charities to 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) was an important initiative to support enterprises affected by COVID-19 to continue to provide invaluable services to local communities. The aim of the Code was to assist enterprises to remain solvent. However, the \$50 million annual turnover threshold meant that organisations such as the Society in NSW experienced challenges negotiating rent reductions for its (largely non-functioning) shops.

Community Supports

Improved access to telecommunications

The Society was acutely aware that access to most types of assistance presupposed that everybody had, and was able to use, information and communications technology even though public access points, such as libraries, were no longer available. Consequently, the allocation of both the Society's and the Commonwealth's ER assistance often included providing mobile phones, phone credits and internet access.

Improved coordination between Government and non-government agencies

Referral partnerships were established with agencies that people were in contact with, to identify and assist those in need. Examples included 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 government departments (such as the NSW Department of Communities and Justice) to provide pop-up support for those being temporarily housed in hotels.

National Coordination Mechanism

The Department of Home Affairs established a National Coordination Mechanism. This included various Government agencies (such as Emergency Management Australia, Department of Health, Department of Climate Change, Energy and Environment) and industry representatives from Retail, Groceries and Consumers, Transport, Energy, Banking and Finance, Telecommunication, Trades and Construction, Agriculture and the Not-for-Profit Sector. We were not aware of the Mechanism until relatively late in the pandemic and due to the size of the group, found the process unwieldy. Improved coordination was needed but better mechanisms must be identified and established early in a pandemic.

National Coordination Group (NCG)

The Society's National Council was a member of the NCG established by former Minister Ruston in April 2020 at the start of the pandemic to provide advice on the implementation of Emergency Relief, Food Relief and Financial Counselling. This ministerial advisory committee now reports to the Minister for Social Services, the Hon Amanda Rishworth MP. NCG provided, and continues to provide, on the ground advice directly to the Minister on emerging areas of need and demand. It has been a highly and cost-effective means of providing key service providers with a platform to share their expertise and intelligence directly with Government on a monthly basis. NCG met more frequently during the pandemic.

Housing and Homelessness

At the outset of the pandemic, it was apparent that shelter-based homeless accommodation was inadequate to enable people to socially distance and practice the hygiene and self-care required to maintain positive health and prevent the spread of communicable diseases.

It is also important to note that simply providing accommodation, without wrap around support, is likely to fail, particularly for those who have been homeless long term. Resources to provide additional social support services and help people transition to new and different environments are essential.

Ozanam Industries

The Society's supported employees located at multiple centres in the Sydney suburbs of Stanmore and West Ryde, as well as in Coonamble, on the central western plains, packed around 1.2 million testing kits during the pandemic. Boxes of assembled kits were despatched to NSW Health Pathology, which commissioned SVdP NSW to undertake the work. This funding arrangement supported a steady supply of testing kits to frontline staff who needed regular testing and provided an opportunity for people living with disability to make an important and meaningful contribution to the community. The Society ensured that individualised supports and roles tailored to suit a range of skills and abilities were made available.

Park Hotel Queensland

The Society, in partnership with the Queensland Government and other providers, conducted an experimental model that facilitated sustainable access to housing and improve life outcomes for people experiencing homelessness in Brisbane. The Queensland Government leased a hotel in inner city Brisbane (Park Hotel) to establish self-contained homelessness accommodation with independent amenity. This contained the spread of disease, enabled support workers to engage with residents to identify and respond to their needs and better prepare them for sustainable housing and life outcomes when they exited the Park.

Assisting people who are homeless to transition along the housing pathway requires:

- establishing trauma-informed training frameworks
- prioritising residents' dignity and autonomy

- conducting tailored intake interviews (to assess needs) and regular check-ins, and providing case management where needed
- adopting a flexible and resident-led approach, and
- embedding a reflective practice environment where practitioners can engage in thought, debate, and reflection; and where divergent views can be harnessed to inform a continuous improvement agenda.

The Department of Housing took on the head lease of the property and the Park Hotel owner remained actively involved through staffing to maintain the asset and share service delivery. The Society provided social service practitioners and coordinated other contracted support service providers.

In November 2023, the partnership between the Society and the Queensland Government is now more secure in the long-term after the Queensland Government bought the hotel to ensure it will stay as a place to provide a home to the homeless. The Society will continue to manage the property through our on-site teams who support and service residents and help them transition back into the community with longer-term accommodation.

Other recommendations include developing a national data collection to better understand people's housing journeys, including transitioning to social housing or affordable housing.

Amelie Housing

The Society in NSW commissioned UNSW to conduct a longitudinal study on the wellbeing of the Society's Amelie Housing social housing tenants.^{iv} The study found that feelings of being heard and having needs respected are strongly connected to feelings of satisfaction with support and housing, and vice versa. Some tenants were managing ongoing health issues and while their housing situation had little direct bearing on their health and wellbeing, stability of housing assisted them manage their conditions better.

All governments need to identify suitable premises that could be used to provide self-contained accommodation with individual amenities, not just during the pandemic but also in response to the current housing crisis. Funding should not be limited simply to accommodation but must include wrap around support, mechanisms for referral and case management.

Please do not hesitate to contact me if you require further information.



Mr P. Toby oConnor
Chief Executive Officer

ⁱ St Vincent de Paul Society NSW. March 2021. Filling the Gap – the relationship between the rate of unemployment benefits and charity assistance for JobSeekers. Accessed at: <https://cms.vinnies.org.au/media/0q2gsg0w/019-2021-jobseeker-report.pdf?path=0q2gsg0w%2F019-2021-jobseeker-report.pdf>

ⁱⁱ Shelter WA. 7 July 2021. The impact of rental moratorium lifting. Accessed at: <https://www.shelterwa.org.au/the-impact-of-rental-moratorium-lifting/>

ⁱⁱⁱ St Vincent de Paul Society NSW. Australian Catholic University. Jesuit Refugee Service. September 2023. Building bridges as we crossed them – A summary of the lived experiences of community service users and the workers who supported them during the COVID-19 pandemic in NSW. Accessed at: <https://cms.vinnies.org.au/media/s1hbttq1/building-bridges-brochure.pdf?path=s1hbttq1%2Fbuilding-bridges-brochure.pdf>

^{iv} Blunden, H. & valentine, k. January 2023. A longitudinal study of the wellbeing of social housing tenants of St Vincent de Paul Housing – Final Report. Social Policy Research Centre, UNSW Sydney