

## COVID-19 and Conference Activities in Australia

As the St Vincent de Paul Society in Australia responds to the COVID-19 virus, National Council prefaces this advice by highlighting the unique role our members will play in tending to the needs of those in our communities who will be deeply challenged by responses designed to restrict this pandemic.

*“We all know that social isolation is one of the most common concerns that Conference Members respond to in communities throughout Australia. At a time of enforced self-isolation as required by the COVID-19, the Society is especially skilled through its members and model of visitation to meet the need. We need to be smart about how we do this so that both the community and our members are safe. We also know that there will be more pressures on households with the very significant impacts of the pandemic on the economy.*

*The Australian community will need the Society. Our response will be faithful to our Mission and agile to the conditions we all face”.*

The purpose of this statement is to provide instruction to conferences in all States and Territories on how the Society in Australia will respond to the spreading of the COVID-19 pandemic.

### BACKGROUND

The method of operation of St Vincent de Paul Society conferences throughout Australia is by visitation. This usually either involves 2 conference members visiting the home of a companion or the companion visiting a Society premises which is often co-located with a ‘Vinnies’ shop or other facility.

With the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, these activities become inherently more risky due to a number of factors relating to our conference members. These factors can include some or all of the following:

- Most conference members are in the 60+ age group and are hence in the ‘at risk’ category for more serious consequences if they are infected
- Conference members visit multiple companions with face-to-face contact. Contact is typically 15-30 minutes. There is the potential for our members to be spreaders of COVID-19
- Many of our companions are suffering health issues; consequently they are more at risk of serious consequences if they are infected
- The home visitation environment is not under the control of the Society with respect to hygiene arrangements
- Conference members tend to be very dedicated and sometimes dismiss risks to their own personal health and safety in their dedication to supporting our companions. This increases the potential risk they place themselves and the community at large in contracting COVID-19.

The consequences of continuing visitation beyond an advisable point will most likely include:

- Negative impact on the health and possibly even death of some members

- Negative impact on the health and possibly even death of some companions
- Negative impact on Society's reputation if a member of the Society is perceived to be a spreader of COVID-19 by not following government or health authority directives.

Councils need to weigh these highly likely potential risks against prematurely terminating visitation which may have a detrimental impact on our companions and on the Society's reputation.

### **Measures taken so far**

On 11 March the World Health Organisation described the COVID 19 virus as a pandemic. This means the deadly virus is spreading outside containment measures in multiple countries around the world.

On 13 March 2020, the Council General International issued a statement with regard to COVID-19. <https://www.ssvpglobal.org/en/actualite/council-general-internationals-statement-with-regard-to-coronavirus/>

While modelling is still in its early days, some estimates put the likely infection rate at 25-70% of the Australian population. Widespread infection has already happened in countries such as China, Korea, Iran and Italy. These countries and a growing number of European countries have already introduced or are introducing more drastic steps to try to contain the spread of the virus.

The latest response from Australian governments includes 14 day self-isolation for all international arrivals coming to Australia; penalties for those who ignore self-isolation; 30 day ban on the docking of cruise ships from foreign ports, no gatherings of more than 500 people; restrictions around aged-care facilities; and a recommendation for the population to adopt no physical contact between people and a 1.5 metre spacing between people (16 March 2020).

It is certain that Australian governments will announce further isolation initiatives as the virus spreads within Australia.

Our CEOs have informed National Council that communications about how the Society is responding to COVID-19 have been communicated to conferences and to our workforces. Communications have advised members to ensure appropriate hygiene procedures are in place as recommended by the health authorities.

There has also been some advice around screening of companions for visitation to try and ensure members are not exposed, and looking at alternative models such as telephone interviews and delivery of assistance without face-to-face contact.

### **National Council Consideration of COVID-19**

In light of the unfolding government responses in Australia and overseas to contain COVID-19, National Council has considered the cessation of home visitation, cessation of all visitation and, cessation of face-to-face conference meetings.

National Council has sought advice from Catholic Health Australia. In short, that advice is to take an aggressive proactive approach immediately and to adopt 'social distancing' strategies.

Social distancing means people staying away from other people in order to avoid catching or spreading a virus. This strategy is particularly relevant for those people in high risk cohorts and those who mix with other people in social events or through regular contact regimes like our members visiting companions.

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## National Council Directions to Respond to the Spread of COVID-19

The National Council has agreed it has a role to provide clear directions about how the Society will respond to the COVID-19 pandemic to members through their State and Territory Councils.

The National Council has decided the following:

### 1. Visitation:

- A. "Home based" visitation will cease until further notice from the National Council.
- B. Visitation will now occur at the discretion of the Conference presidents and must take place by:
  - i. telephone or web-based based care and support,  
or
  - ii. either at a St Vincent de Paul Society Centre "i.e. co-located with a Vinnies shop" or another Special Work of the Society where:
    - a) the rooms have sanitisers and appropriate personal protective equipment (referred to as 'PPEs' these items are used or worn to minimise risk to a person's health and safety and may include, but not be limited to, face masks, safety glasses, gowns or enclosed clothing, boots, etc...)
    - and
    - b) the rooms can be disinfected prior and after use.
- C. Visitation through hospitals and aged care facilities can only occur if the operator of the facility approves of ongoing visits at this time and provides both sanitisers and appropriate PPE (the same rationale applies to visitation to other facilities such as prisons)
- D. Visitation or volunteering on Vans will continue until a time where the relevant state or local government authority suspends such activity due to the pandemic. Each State and Territory Council must provide both sanitisers and appropriate PPEs and follow the advice of both their public health authorities.

**If at any time the Federal, State or Local Government Authority excludes the Society from providing visitation through attendance at a Centre or Vans or at another facility, we are still able to provide some assistance through telephone and web-based assessments.**

### 2. Conference Meetings

Conference meetings will now occur at the discretion of the Conference presidents and must take place by:

- A. telephone or web-based based care and support,  
or
- B. either at a St Vincent de Paul Society Centre "i.e. co-located with a Vinnies shop" or another Special Work of the Society where:

a) the rooms have sanitisers and appropriate personal protective equipment (PPEs)

and

b) the rooms can be disinfected prior and after use.

**If at any time the Federal, State or Local Government Authority directs closure of schools, puts quarantine zones in place with travel restrictions then Conference and all Council meetings will be conducted by telephone or other use of technology.**

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