



MEDIA RELEASE

5 June 2020

Tragic Death in Custody

The St Vincent de Paul Society National Council strongly supports the recent recommendations of the NSW Deputy State Coroner, following an inquest into the death in custody of an ACT Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander resident who was incarcerated in a NSW prison.

National President Claire Victory said this is a tragic case which could have been avoided if the recommendations of the 2017 ALRC Report had been implemented.

The Deputy Coroner found

- the state failed to provide the prisoner with adequate care at a time of great need and that the prisoner was left “flying under the radar”
- input and involvement from an Aboriginal Mental Health Worker could have been an important component of improved care which could also have impacted on the prisoner’s mental state and that the provision of culturally appropriate treatment and cell placement must be pursued.

It was recommended in Deputy State Coroner’s report (6 May 2020) that:

- the relevant prison review the practice and procedures at the intake stage to ensure that inmates with known diagnoses for serious mental illnesses are reviewed by a suitably qualified mental health clinician in a timely manner; and
- the prison considers creating Aboriginal Health Worker positions, at least one of whom has responsibility for the provision of mental health care and treatment to Aboriginal inmates.

‘The St Vincent de Paul Society notes with dismay that the Report was delivered to the Federal Government in December 2017 and that the Government has failed to respond,’ Ms Victory said.

‘The St Vincent de Paul Society strongly agrees with the view of the Deputy Coroner that the tragedy of Aboriginal deaths in custody must be addressed in the context of the over representation of Aboriginal people in the criminal justice system’ Ms Victory said.

According to the Australian Law Reform Commission (ALRC), Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander adults make up around 2% of the national population, however they constitute around 27% of the national prison population. In 2016, around 20 in every 1000 Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people were incarcerated. Tragically, over-representation appears to have grown, not decreased. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander incarceration rates increased 41% between 2006 and 2016 and the gap between Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander and non-indigenous rates widened over the decade.

Deputy Coroner

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Specifically, in NSW, the Bureau of Crimes Statistics and Research (“BOSCAR”) have reported that as at March 2019, 25% of the prison population across the state were identified as indigenous. During the inquest, the relevant Correctional Centre also confirmed that its indigenous population sat at around 30% of its total inmate population.

Deputy Coroner

It is clear that if we are to reduce the number of Aboriginal deaths in custody we need to grapple with the underlying causes of over-representation. The ALRC report properly supports initiatives such as justice re-investment as one crucial strategy..... it is necessary to state clearly the nature of this ongoing problem. Quite simply, more young Aboriginal citizens must be diverted away from the criminal justice system if we are to reduce the number of Aboriginal deaths in custody nationally.

Inquest Report

ALRC Report 133 (December 2017): [Pathways to Justice – An Inquiry into the Incarceration Rate of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples](#)

[Coroner’s Report](#)

The St Vincent de Paul Society in Australia consists of 60,000 members and volunteers who operate on the ground through over 1,000 conferences located in individual parishes across the country.

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