



St Vincent de Paul Society
CANBERRA/GOULBURN
good works



2020 ACT ELECTION STATEMENT

St Vincent de Paul Society
Canberra/Goulburn

PRESIDENT'S MESSAGE

A Canberra for all of us

We, at the St Vincent de Paul Society, work towards a future in which every person can live a full and meaningful life. The ACT should be a place in which everyone can actively and easily participate in all aspects of our community and share in our prosperity.

Vinnies is gravely concerned that while many areas of our community have significant wealth, the ACT is also home to many who we see being left further and further behind. Too many of the families and individuals we support struggle to cover the cost of their most basic needs, like food or rent, leaving little room to think beyond the next meal or bill.

Housing First is an imperative. Without a secure and affordable home, allowing safety and stability, the journey of rebuilding one's life, relationships and reimagining one's futures is even harder. We strongly believe in a Housing First approach. Our community cannot address these serious issues if we do not first address the housing crisis.

We call on all parties to this election to commit to the principle of **housing as a human right** and to agree that it is the Government's role to ensure that all individuals and families, children and adults, in the ACT have access to safe, secure, habitable and affordable housing.

Compounded disadvantage should not exist in our wealthy society. It is vital that those who are impacted by compounded disadvantage be supported by our Government. The incoming Government must place focus and importance on addressing issues of justice for our Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and to continue and expand critical supports for refugees and asylum seekers here in the ACT.

Addressing issues of equity, housing and compounded disadvantage is achievable. However, it needs political will, collaboration and the ability to imagine a better future. In our election statement we outline key steps that the ACT Government can take to remove the barriers of disadvantage and allow everyone in our community to participate freely and fully.

We hope that the incoming Government acknowledges these issues and will work with us and the broader community in order to continue supporting those in need.



John Feint
President, St Vincent de Paul Society Canberra/Goulburn
September 2020

1. EVERYONE DESERVES A PLACE TO CALL HOME

Everybody has the right to a home. A home is not just a roof over one's head. It provides security, a place in which you belong, a place from which you can build a future.

Vinnies supports a Housing First approach. A safe and secure home has never been more important than during this pandemic.

For too many people, a safe and secure home is simply out of reach. With few, if any, affordable rental options, many low-income households are now living in housing of last resort. This may be poor quality, insecure or inadequate for a family's needs.

It may involve extended periods of 'couch surfing' or living in overcrowded conditions with friends or other family members. Seventy percent of all low-income households renting in the private market now live in housing stress, where housing costs take up too great a portion of household income. The people in these households experience pressure that can affect their physical and mental health, their employment prospects, their children's educations, and their relationships with family, friends and the broader community.

Vinnies believes that it is well within an incoming ACT Government's power to turn the housing crisis in the ACT around by adopting the following key reforms:

1A. Social and community housing

A caring society is one that ensures that each and every individual or family is adequately housed. However, in the ACT many people have no choice but to wait up to 3 and a half years for public housing. Too many people spend years living in poor quality, insecure or unhealthy conditions before finally receiving the assistance they require.

Building more social housing dwellings would enable more people to receive the right support when they need it, giving them a foundation to rebuild their lives. The ACT has one of the lowest expenditures on social housing nationally, according to Report on Government Services (ROGS) 2020 the ACT's expenditure was \$139m with the next lowest being Tasmania with \$202m. There has been a net decline in families housed in ACT Public Housing in the last 10 years and there has been a decline in social housing numbers since 2010. ROGS 2020 reports how that in June 2019 there were 10,529 households in social housing in comparison to 2010's 10,737.

[Research by Australian Housing and Urban Research Institute in 2018](#) shows that the ACT has a current shortfall in public and social housing of 3000 homes. The ACT is presented with an opportunity at the moment; interest rates are currently at a record low and expenditure on social and community housing will provide a boost to the economy as we emerge from COVID-19.

Vinnies calls on all parties in this election to commit to meeting this shortfall by building an additional 3000 social housing properties over the next five years. Our housing company, Amelie Housing, which has an impressive property development record is eager to engage with the building and management of affordable and social housing accommodation in the ACT.

1B. Affordable and accessible housing

We must also invest in affordable housing for those unable to access public or social housing, or who choose to access the private market. The high prices in the ACT private rental market results in many disadvantaged Canberrans being forced into housing stress by paying more than 30% of their income on rent.

In fact, the [2020 Anglicare Rental Affordability Snapshot](#) found that there were no affordable properties available for those on income support in the ACT and very few for those on the minimum wage.

A first step should be ensuring that a higher proportion of dwellings in all new residential developments are set aside for affordable housing. **Vinnies strongly supports the call by ACTCOSS that the ACT mandate that 15% of the Land Release Program should be set aside for the supply of public, community and affordable housing.** This would help reverse the trend by Government to try to pass that responsibility onto the rental sector, with little success.

Housing must also meet the needs of residents. The high cost of utilities is a significant driver of poverty. Vinnies supports the call to mandate minimum energy efficiency standards for all public and private rental properties.

The picture is even bleaker for people with a disability or those who are aged, where they require accessible housing. **Vinnies again strongly supports the ACTCOSS call for an incoming ACT Government to commit to all new residential properties in the ACT being built to meet Universal Design standards to make them able to be adapted and accessible to all people regardless of age, disability or other factors, and support reforms of the National Construction Code.**

Vinnies recommends a multi-sector working group to develop a housing affordability and homelessness strategy that supports a comprehensive and coordinated approach to housing affordability and homelessness prevention. This group would provide specialised policy advice to inform decision-making across all levels of Government, and to monitor, analyse and report on housing and homelessness indicators. Without a holistic suite of demand and supply-side interventions, and reforms to land development, planning and zoning to achieve minimum quotas for social housing supply, we will fail to achieve the goals set by the 2018 Housing Strategy.

1C. Housing is a Human Right

Vinnies fundamentally believes that a right to adequate housing should be a basic human right. There have been many calls for the ACT Human Rights Act 2004 (the Human Rights Act) to be amended to treat rights such as the right to adequate housing in the same way that rights to freedom of speech and assembly are treated in the Human Rights Act.

Indeed, the current ACT Government promised in 2012 that it would amend the Human Rights Act to include the Right to Housing. This promise was quietly abandoned in 2014 after the second review of the Human Rights Act, this time done entirely within Government.

Many people experiencing homelessness have limited support networks and live with multiple and complex needs. Addressing homelessness from a Housing First, human rights-based approach will also mean great social connectedness and increased wellbeing. This provides a foundation to focus other goals such as health, employment and education. Addressing these needs will result in greater savings for Government and more sustainable outcomes for individuals. For example currently the Human Rights Act highlights that education is a human right, however how is anyone meant to succeed in education without a roof over their head?

Including the right within the Human Rights Act would publicly attest to the priority that Government gives to the right to adequate housing. It would require departments to take the right into account in policy development and allow for accountability where that does not occur. It would improve the legislative, policymaking, and administrative processes. This in turn will guard against policy or program decisions that inadvertently result in reduced availability of housing for those who are vulnerable.

It would also confirm the position of the ACT as a national leader in the recognition of fundamental human rights as did the original enactment of the Human Rights Act in 2004.

Vinnies seeks an undertaking from all parties to this election to support an early amendment to the ACT Human Rights Act to add a right to adequate housing

1D. Homelessness services

COVID-19 forced Governments to make urgent provision for those without a secure home so that they could self-isolate. Virtually all those who were homeless were found at least some form of housing.

We cannot go back to the way that we were. Vinnies is at the forefront of providing services to people experiencing homelessness in the ACT with programs such as Street to Home, Night Patrol and Samaritan House. These services are often struggling to meet demand.

Vinnies has partnered with CatholicCare on the pilot of the Axial Housing Program addressing people experiencing long-term homelessness with high and complex needs which has proved very successful and has now been expanded to allow for up to 30 residents. Vinnies is also aware of the great work being done through a second a pilot project, the Winter Lodge for men at Ainslie Village and at the newly open MacKillop House for women and children, operated by CatholicCare.

Vinnies calls for all parties in this election to commit to long term and expanded funding for all homelessness support programs to ensure that no one is forced back onto the streets once the worst of COVID-19 is over.

2. RESPECT FOR INDIGENOUS PEOPLES AND CULTURE

2A. Children and young people thrive when they have the best start in life

Vinnies calls for urgent reform of the child protection system, in line with the recommendations of the [Our Booris, Our Way Inquiry](#). There is urgent need for reform of the child protection system in line with the recommendations of Our Booris, Our Way Inquiry. One of the starkest comparisons is the statistics for the rate of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children in out-of-home care in the ACT. That rate increased from 33.1/1000 children in 2008-09 to 90.1/1000 in 2016-17. At that time this was the highest rate of intervention in the country.

While the intention of the Child and Youth Protection Services (CYPS) in the ACT is to keep families together, statistics show that for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families the result of intervention is more often the removal of the child into the out of home care system.

Vinnies supports the principle that the best outcomes for any child, but particularly for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children for whom culture is so important, are gained if the child can be safely supported within his or her birth family.

Calls for major reform, through a range of reports such as [the 2004 Vardon report](#) and [The Glanfield report](#) produced in 2016, of the ACT Child Protection System date back many years. These reforms, amongst others, relate to a lack of sharing of critical information by CYPS to parents and other stakeholders.

A significant number of the recommendations in those reports have not been actioned by successive ACT Governments. A lack of an external review of CYPS and decisions also has not occurred. CYPS continue to resist the change and reforms.

In 2019 the ACT established the Our Booris, Our Way Inquiry (the Inquiry) that was tasked with recommending ways to reduce the overrepresentation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children in the child protection system. As the Inquiry stated, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children in the ACT in 2017-2018 were 16.3 times more likely to be in out-of-home care than non-Indigenous children.

The Inquiry made a broad range of recommendations essentially designed to better support Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families to reduce the number of children coming into the system, to ensure that the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Child Placement Principles were properly adhered to, and that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders were given a proper role in decision making in the system.

Given the history of delay in reform to the system, Vinnies calls on all parties to commit to implement the recommendations of the Inquiry within the first year of the new Government.

For reforms to be effective significant cultural change is required within the service charged with operating the system, the CYPS. As a number of reports have emphasised, one way of ensuring that change is to ensure that significant decisions taken by that service are the subject of external review. Vinnies believes that the ACT Civil and Administrative Tribunal is a suitable body to undertake such review.

The first calls for such reform were made in 2004. **Vinnies calls on all parties to this election to commit to providing for external review of significant decisions by CYPS within the first six months of the term of an incoming Government.**

2B. A fair and equitable justice system

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people are more than 16 times more likely to be imprisoned in the ACT than are non-Indigenous people. Further confronting is that this rate is continuing to increase every year even as the rate of imprisonment of non-Indigenous people plateaus.

Vinnies calls for urgent reforms to the justice and prison systems to reduce the appalling rates of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander imprisonment.

As Ms Julie Tongs, CEO of Winnunga Nimitija Aboriginal Health and Community Services, has recently highlighted, in the last decade there has been an increase of more than 250% in the Aboriginal prison population in the ACT. Ms Tongs also highlighted that by the Government's own admission 90% of Aboriginal detainees held in the Alexander Maconochie Centre had a prior history of incarceration in the ACT. **This is the highest rate of recidivism in Australia.**

Vinnies calls on all parties to support the key targets contained within the recently signed [National Partnership Agreement on Closing the Gap](#). An incoming Government must commit to implementing that National Agreement and particularly by establishing a formal partnership with the ACT Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Elected Body by negotiating an implementation plan that responds to high priorities particularly incarceration.

Vinnies also supports the adoption of the recommendations of the Australian Law Reform Commission in its [2017 report on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander incarceration rates](#). That report recommended:

- the establishment of an independent justice reinvestment body
- that legislation should allow for courts to take into account unique systemic and background factors affecting Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander when sentencing
- improved access to community-based sentencing
- repeal of mandatory sentencing laws
- fine default should not result in the imprisonment of the defaulter
- the introduction of culturally appropriate Throughcare programs
- programs and services delivered to female Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander offenders should consider their particular needs
- the Commonwealth Government, in consultation with state and territory Governments and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander organisations, should develop national criminal justice targets for indigenous persons.

3. NEW AUSTRALIANS ARE WELCOMED AND SUPPORTED IN OUR COMMUNITY

The St Vincent de Paul Society has a long history of helping refugees and people seeking asylum. Catholic social teaching places a special onus on our organisation to help those who seek protection from persecution, having fled war, injustice or intolerance.

Vinnies offers a 'hand up' to the most vulnerable and disadvantaged in our community. This includes supporting people who may have experienced an array of difficult challenges when seeking protection in Australia, including torture or trauma, being separated from family members and living through the detention system.

Today more than ever, it is vital that we stand with our vulnerable brothers and sisters who need protection.

The ACT has been designated a [Refugee Welcome Zone](#) to reflect our community's commitment to welcoming refugees, upholding their human rights and demonstrating our compassion towards them. The ACT also provides asylum seekers with a range of services and concessions principally through access to the [ACT Access Services Card](#). These include access to transport, education and library services, health care services and legal assistance.

People seeking asylum and refugees who have been a resident in the ACT for six months or more are also entitled to apply for social housing in the ACT. The ACT Government provides a range of assistance to asylum seekers and refugees through services delivered by a number of community organisations, including Companion House, the Migrant and Refugee Settlement Service and Canberra Refugee Support, as well through Vinnies.

Recent initiatives to support asylum seekers, which the St Vincent de Paul Society has welcomed, include: housing assistance to families with little or no income, financial support to those who've lost income during the pandemic and utility concessions.

Vinnies seeks a clear commitment that these services be maintained and expanded in the term of the next Government.

Vinnies calls on all parties to this election to commit to maintaining the ACT's status as a Refugee Welcome Zone. We ask that support to asylum seekers through the ACT Access Card and associated concessions, as well as access to social housing and community services, be maintained.