

the Record

Autumn 2021



St Vincent de Paul Society
NATIONAL COUNCIL of AUSTRALIA Inc. *good works*





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The Society is a lay Catholic organisation that aspires to live the Gospel message by serving Christ in the poor with love, respect, justice, hope and joy, and by working to shape a more just and compassionate society.

This logo represents the hand of Christ that blesses the cup, the hand of love that offers the cup, and the hand of suffering that receives the cup.

Our Strategic Goals: Spirituality and Membership, Our Advocacy, Our Governance and Leadership, Our Work Together, Our Sustainability

The Record is published regularly each year by the National Council of the St Vincent de Paul Society in Australia.

National Council
PO Box 243
Deakin West, ACT, 2600

Phone: 02 6202 1200
Email: media@svdp.org.au
Web: vinnies.org.au

Editor: Toby oConnor
Design: Damon Carr
damon.com.au

The St Vincent de Paul Society in Australia acknowledges that we are on Aboriginal land. We pay respects to all traditional custodians. This publication may contain images of deceased members of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community. They are used with the greatest respect and appreciation.

Opinions expressed in this publication are not necessarily those of the publishers.

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



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On the cover... supporters of St Vincent de Paul Society joined the crowd at the Palm Sunday Rally for Refugees in Canberra to call on the Federal Government to release refugees from detention centres and to provide permanent resettlement. Photo: Robin Osborne

Challenges should give rise to opportunities: the COVID-19 lesson

BY CLAIRE VICTORY

Last winter, I wrote in this column about some of the things I had learned and realised about myself during lockdown. Now, in the personal and social sense, things have returned to near-normal in my little part of the world; even Adelaide Fringe Festival has now happened, which truly feels like the light at the end of the tunnel, as we mark one year since things started to change.

At times it is hard to appreciate that some people are still living in strict lockdown conditions, or suffering the consequences of governments having failed to mandate isolation and other protective measures sooner. It only takes a few minutes on a Zoom call with people overseas to remember how fortunate I am not to be confined within my home, and to not know multiple people who have died of the illness.

Especially with the gradual rollout of the vaccine, and the increased ability to gather with other people – whether to visit pubs and restaurants, attend a festival or sporting event, or to march in protest – it is starting to feel like the worst of the pandemic is behind us. This causes me to reflect on what we've learnt from the past year, and also the opportunities we've missed.

We've learnt that technology can do great things in terms of keeping us connected and facilitating flexible working arrangements. But we've also come to understand that there are some things that a Zoom meeting can never properly replace, that human presence and interaction is so important.

We've learnt how important travel was to us, or, perhaps,



Claire Victory

how much we'd overstated its importance in our lives. Friends, relatives and acquaintances may bemoan their inability to plan overseas holidays for the foreseeable future but there is an equal number who don't miss being constantly on the go and who are enjoying spending more time at home and exploring their local area.

We've learnt that some safety measures – hand sanitiser available at every turn, limiting density inside and enforcing physical distancing – can actually make life a little more comfortable and could perhaps be made a permanent feature even when the pandemic is a distant memory.

Unfortunately, there is one very clear lesson that our government has failed to learn from the pandemic year.

In our conferences across Australia we saw demand for household assistance drop significantly during 2020 as income support increased by virtue of the Coronavirus Supplement, which saw people in receipt of certain Centrelink payments finally receive the sort of increased support for which organisations like ours have long been calling.

As we have always said would happen, those in receipt of this enhanced income support spent that extra money on things that directly benefit the local economy: buying fresh food, much needed household items and school supplies. The Morrison government's recent announcement of a tiny increase to the previous Newstart rate, with nothing to replace the Coronavirus Supplement, can thus only be seen as deliberate cruelty, completely unjustified from an economic perspective.

The Society made our thoughts on this topic known in media releases and appearances following the government's announcement. We have emphasised that a permanent increase to JobSeeker would improve the lives of many people, and stimulate economic growth, as those who have the least are more likely to spend available funds on life's essentials. We maintain that the Federal Government should appoint an expert advisory group to advise them on the levels of social security payments, including unemployment benefits, needed to keep people out of poverty.

We hope that our sustained advocacy, coupled with the efforts of other experts and stakeholders and the evidence of what the Coronavirus Supplement did for those who received it, will eventually bring about a significant change in the government's approach to people living in poverty. Challenges should give rise to opportunities, and 2020 was nothing if not the ultimate challenge to our way of thinking and a golden opportunity to make a real difference to people in our community who are marginalised. ♦

Claire Victory is the National President of the St Vincent de Paul Society in Australia.

Finding Resurrection Moments in our Lives

BY SR THERESE HAYWOOD DC

Easter is one of my favourite times of the year. It is a time to stop and reflect on what life is about. Each day brings us moments of dying and rising, letting go and taking up, old and new. This special time of the year gives us an opportunity to reflect on where we are called to let go and where we can find new life in our lives.

St Vincent reminds us that we shouldn't be surprised by the ups and downs of life when he tells us that...

Man is made that way: today he's sad and humiliated, and tomorrow he's joyful and elated. The Son of God himself was willing to leave heaven to put himself in that state for a certain time (Correspondence, Conferences, Documents, vol 11, 330).

Jesus experienced the normal ups and downs of life. He experienced new life in the lives of those he healed, and he had moments of joy such as at his baptism and the transfiguration. He lost his friend Lazarus and then brought him back to life. All this was preparing him for his suffering, death and resurrection. St Vincent also reminds us...

We mustn't be surprised at seeing these changes in ourselves; but what we have to do is to thank God equally for one and the other state in which it will please His Divine Majesty that we may be – whether joy and consolation, or sadness and distress – and to love all the states in which God is pleased to place us, whatever they may be. (Correspondence, Conferences, Documents vol 11, 331)



These words are a little challenging to read but I think remind us of the need to accept the reality of life that we can't control. For example, the pandemic and its effects on the world around us. What we can change is our attitude to it, which can be a way for us to find new life. If we look with Easter eyes, we can see plenty of good amidst the suffering and find a way to make the best out of a difficult situation.

For Vincentians this time of Easter is a time to reflect and pray with Jesus as we journey through his experience of passion, death and resurrection. We can reflect on our own journey through life, our joys and sorrows, and draw strength from the journey we take with Jesus. Vincentians will also be particularly aware of the people we serve and all that we learn from them in their experience of the challenges of life, they teach us a great deal about how to find new life. ♦

Sr Therese Haywood DC is the National Council's Spiritual Adviser.

Unknown but not unsung - Darwin farewells a stranger



On a typically humid Darwin day last November an 82-year-old resident of the city walked into the Vinnies op shop in the inner suburb of Stuart Park saying he was feeling unwell. Concerned volunteers laid him down under the shade of a tree, performed first aid and called an ambulance.

Alas, Arpad Kiss could not be revived.

Not surprisingly, the event was deeply distressing to shop staff, but, as Fay Gurr, the then-president of St Vincent de Paul Society in the Northern Territory, said, 'Mr Kiss's last minutes left a huge impression on us all, knowing he came to Vinnies because he knew we would help'.

Our help wouldn't end there, as inquiries revealed that Mr Kiss apparently had no next of kin in Darwin, nor close friends.

Moreover, his place of residence was unknown.

From medical records and conversations with hospital staff, Ms Gurr discovered the man's name: 'It's Hungarian, and he was Catholic. He had been in the Territory for quite a few years. He may not have been homeless at the time that he came to us, but he had periods of homelessness. And he had an illness or a health issue that had been ongoing.'

Ms Gurr filed paperwork indicating the Society would provide a funeral service and cremation for Mr Kiss, an act of charity that moved some medical staff to tears. People were invited via email to a service on the last day of 2020, when Mr Kiss would have turned 83.

The service at St Mary's Cathedral was conducted by Bishop Charles Gauci and attended by a Federal MP, a retired bishop and handful of the last people Mr Kiss had

encountered, all of them strangers to him. Those attending found the unusual event deeply moving and a fitting farewell to a soul who had put his fate in the hands of the St Vincent de Paul Society.

Fay Gurr said, 'Those who came really felt that connection, how we were doing the best for this fellow, which is at the core of what we believe'.

Bishop Gauci invited attendees to share the fleeting interactions they had shared with Mr Kiss: 'He went with full honours. I asked those present to imagine their own funeral one day and what they would like people to say about them, and how that really affects how we live now.'

'We choose to do what is good and loving and virtuous, rather than the opposite. It was a good reflection for all of us, but also an expression of love and care for a fellow brother.' ♦

Let's do more to 'show our light'

BY KEVIN MCMAHON

I grew up in Thornbury, a suburb of Melbourne, and was one of five children. I now live in Greensborough, which was an outer Melbourne suburb when we settled here in 1974. My wife Sue is a great support to me in my role, and we have four married children, and 10 grandchildren.

My introduction to the St Vincent de Paul Society was as a Year 12 student at Parade College, a Christian Brothers school. All year 12s chose a 'sodality' and I opted for SVDP because it seemed the most 'hands on'. I can't remember much of what we did, except for visiting a pensioner and chopping wood for him in his tiny backyard.

The growth of our Mini Vinnies and college conference groups – and their involvement in our activities, such as the Christmas hamper provision – are vital parts of preparing young people to be aware of our work and later on to become adult volunteers.

During my working life, as a teacher, I was kept busy coaching my kids' sporting teams (basketball), serving on kindergarten and school committees, and with my own interest, umpiring AFL football.

When I retired in 2006, I joined my local conference, as I have some friends who were already involved. I was soon roped in as president and found that I enjoyed that role and my weekly home visits. I was pretty idealistic to start with but found my feet and started to grapple with the challenges presented in our work.

At the same time, I was approached to help start an after-school reading hub in West Heidelberg, an inner suburb with a high number of families living in tough circumstances. More than 15



Kevin McMahon

years later, we are going strong and I still look forward to the weekly sessions, especially after we had to conduct the sessions online last year during lockdown.

Our conference has always been very active and innovative, seeking new ways to address the issues presented to us during our weekly meetings. A few years ago, we approached the Anglican Church in Greensborough and asked if we could help with their monthly community lunch. Soon enough, we were picking up food from Foodbank, delivering to a local primary school for its breakfast club, and assisting on the day of the lunch.

I won the job of distributing fruit and veggies, as attendees were also given a small food parcel and fresh produce to take home. Sadly, this event could not be held last year, but we are looking forward to starting again soon. Another initiative was our small grants for families we had visited during the year with a child entering Year 7 the following year.

One of my passions in our work has been with our state Overseas Committee, and I am now chair of the National Overseas Partnership Committee. Having been lucky enough to do volunteer work in schools in India over a long period of time, I have seen at first-hand the value of what can be done with a bit of extra financial assistance. Our twinning grants and Assist a Student money goes such a long way!

A highlight of my visits to Shillong, in the far north-east of India (*pictured above*), was to be present at the opening of a medical clinic in a remote village – all sponsored by generous donations from conferences and members here in Victoria.

Membership and Conferences

As State President, I have become aware of the many challenges we face as a Society. The key one is the recruitment of new members. It is not enough to be financially strong, which we are, but we need to have the compassionate and experienced souls on the ground visiting and providing not only financial assistance, but encouragement and support to those in need.

As I spend time visiting the Vinnies shops, which provide a large part of our revenue, I am struck by the commitment of so many volunteers. The same story is repeated every night on our soup vans run.

Every day, everywhere, our members meet with and help so many. So, my key message during the last three years has always been why don't we do more to 'show our light'? When people see what we do, they will want to support us, and hopefully more will join us. We can be enormously proud of what we do – and the personal satisfaction of living out our faith can never be underestimated. ♦

Kevin McMahon is the Victorian State President of St Vincent de Paul Society, having completed three years of a four-year term. Kevin sits on National Council.

Membership

There are three categories of membership of the Society. **Conference members** are those who belong to the grassroots groups within the Society known as conferences. They live their Catholic faith in action through the spirit of Christian charity. **Associate members** are those who are committed to the ethos, mission, aims and objects of the Society and who assist the work of the Society, but do not attend conference meetings. **Volunteer members** are those who respect the ethos, mission, aims and objects of the Society and who volunteer in any of the Society's works. Associate and Volunteer members are registered by procedures established by the relevant State or Territory Council. Please visit the [Become a Member](#) section of this website for more information.

Conferences

A conference can be established within any community such as a parish, town, suburb, school, university, workplace, ethnic or social group providing they are endorsed by an appropriate Council within the Society. Conference members meet regularly, usually weekly but at least fortnightly and no work of charity is foreign to them. Together they visit people in their homes, in hospitals, institutions or wherever else they may be found needing aid or comfort. Conference work is not limited to home visitation; members also meet and pray together at other times. To read more about the role of prayer in conferences please visit [Spirituality of the Society](#). ♦

Meet the National Council

NATIONAL PRESIDENT

Claire Victory

NATIONAL DEPUTY PRESIDENT

Warwick Fulton

SPIRITUAL ADVISER

Sr Therese Haywood DC

VICE PRESIDENT

Maurie Ryan

VICE PRESIDENT

Patrick Wallis

VICE PRESIDENT

Jacob Miller

NATIONAL TREASURER

Paul Trezise

NATIONAL SECRETARY

Ryan Erlandsen

CANBERRA GOULBURN PRESIDENT

John Feint

NSW STATE PRESIDENT

Peter McNamara

NT PRESIDENT

Jocelyn Cull

QLD STATE PRESIDENT

Dennis Innes

SA STATE PRESIDENT

Brad Hocking

TAS STATE PRESIDENT

Mark Gaetani

VIC STATE PRESIDENT

Kevin McMahon

WA STATE PRESIDENT

Gladys Demissie

Read more [here](#). ♦

Inclusive Spirituality for our Vincentian Society



BY BRAD STEPHENSEN

In early March this year His Holiness, Pope Francis, addressed a crowd at an interfaith event in the archaeological city of Ur in Iraq (founded c 3800 BC), where Abraham is said to have originated from. Pope Francis was talking to representatives from the Abrahamic faiths, Judaism, Christianity and Islam.

'Hostility, extremism and violence are not born of a religious heart. They are betrayals of religion.'

His words are a call to inclusion; a call to see our similarities that bring peace. Not to highlight our differences that breed hostility which leads to extremism that leads to violence. This can be a challenge, because as humans we are hard-wired to notice differences.

From my own perspective, charity is the great similarity and common

thread that joins together all the Abrahamic faiths, and many other faiths and beliefs for that matter. This is exactly the reason our own St Vincent de Paul Society was born. The charitable works of the Christian churches are numerous. In the Islamic tradition, alms giving and charitable work is one of the five compulsory pillars of that faith, and similarly in Judaism the concept of Tzedakah, is one of obligatory-ethical acts of benevolence.

What does the Pope's message mean for us as a St Vincent de Paul Society here in Australia?

We are not in a war zone nor living with daily threats to our peace. Perhaps the message is one where we can make our own spirituality more inclusive. We can reach out to people and organisations who share different beliefs, so we can get more voices at the table.

Our calling, as from Frederic Ozanam, is to seek out, understand

and tackle poverty. The more diverse voices we have on the table, and the wider we collaborate with other like-minded organisations, then the more effective our Mission will surely be. We lose nothing by opening our hearts and minds to seek out people who are excluded in our Australian society.

We also can only grow stronger and more effective by finding solutions with others who have diverse experiences and spiritualities. The Catholic Church is one of the largest humanitarian organisations in the world, and here in the St Vincent de Paul Society we have both the opportunity and the challenge to help shape it to be more inclusive for the generations to follow. ♦

Brad Stephensen is Mission and Spirituality Manager, St Vincent de Paul Society Victoria

Video coverage of the Pope's visit to Ur is at <https://youtu.be/XylKuEkb-bQ>

A new focus on youth membership

BY JACOB MILLER

Youth and young people often seem a foreign concept to St Vincent de Paul Society, ironically, as the organisation was founded by young people (Blessed Frédéric Ozanam had just turned twenty when he and his confreres founded our charitable Society).

Why, then, do we now have only around 800 members under the age of 40 across the country?

Maybe it is time to review that definition of membership... when drawing on the same report in a different way and asking who under the age of 40 is engaged with the Society we find that around 28,500 individuals are listed as active. This includes mini-Vinnies, high school and university conferences, Vinnies shops, soup vans and Special Works.

In fact, young people make up over a third of the St Vincent de Paul Society in Australia.

In October 2020, the National Youth Team gathered to evaluate the way they support and engage with National, State and Territory Councils. The National Youth Team disbanded, and seven new committees were formed to increase conversations and better represent how young people choose to engage with the St Vincent de Paul Society.

'We must have the spirit of youth to be effective Vincentians' (R Hudson, NC Pres, 1987-1991)... drawing on the concept that the spirit of youth is implicit to the Society the new National Council Standing Committee took the name 'Spirit of Youth' and will encourage a 'Spirit of Youth' across the whole Society and promote the capacity and voice of young adults as current and future leaders.



Above: The Spirit of Youth Committee conducting a virtual meeting.

Left: Jacob Miller.



The National Vice President – Youth and Young Adults is chair of the committee, and the members includes Maria Nguyen, John Feint (Bailly) and Luke Brouwer (Oceania Youth Rep) and the chairs of the other six new committees, which are:

- Advisory Committee – Youth Reps, Chair – Rebecca Cassar, to support and develop state and territory youth Reps.
- Advisory Committee – Pathways, Chair – Dennielle Massang, to discover and create pathways to membership for young adults.
- Resource Committee – Youth Engagement, Chair – Ryan Andrews, to share and develop resources and opportunities to promote post school engagement.
- Resource Committee – School Communities, Chair – Stephanie

Reed, to share and develop resources and opportunities to promote school community engagement.

- Program Committee – Emerging Leaders, Co-Chairs – Wina Zhu and Nicole Ridler, to review and develop a national leader's program.
- Program Committee – Reconciliation, Chair – Lachlan Dent, to review, plan and lead the National Immersion Program and deepen the Society's relationship with Aboriginal Australia.

If you have any questions about these committees or would like to be involved please contact Jacob Miller, National Vice President, jacob.miller@svdp.org.au ♦

Jacob Miller is National Vice President – Youth and Young Adults.

Challenges Create Opportunities - National Council Federal Budget Submission

BY ROSE BEYNON

In response to The Treasury's call for 2021-22 Pre-Budget submissions, National Council has identified a number of priorities which would help lift people out of poverty and stimulate economic growth.

These include a substantial and ongoing increase to the base rate of the old Newstart payment, supporting people who are currently falling through the cracks and increasing access to affordable, safe and energy efficient housing.

Fiscal stimulus measures are most effective if you 'go early and go hard', especially if those measures are directed to households most in need.

The measures we have outlined in our budget submission support domestic production, target regional disadvantage and provide direct employment and co-benefits.

Although the Federal Government's short-term welfare, cash flow and wage subsidy measures have been welcomed, ongoing support that reflects the losses incurred and is specific and targeted to those who need it most, is now essential.

The Society has strongly encouraged the Federal Government to include the following.

Raise the base rate of JobSeeker as a permanent feature of the income support system

Every dollar the Government invests in JobSeeker generates a significant economic return, helping to pave the road out of recession. Providing people without paid work with enough to get by is a highly effective economic stimulus, as they have little choice but to spend straight away on essentials.



The CEO of St Vincent de Paul Society National Council, Toby O'Connor met with ACTU President Michele O'Neil before the Fair Work Bill was introduced to Parliament.

Support asylum seekers, refugees and temporary visa holders

Assistance should be targeted to people most impacted by the Coronavirus namely those who cannot access income support or health care. These people's needs have remained unaddressed during the pandemic. Casual workers who have lost their jobs, asylum seekers on bridging visas and temporary visa holders including refugees, temporary migrant workers and international students have approached the Society for assistance during the pandemic, often for the first time.

Support people being moved from community detention to Final Departure Bridging Visas

The Society is concerned about the movement of 188 people to date (and up to 515 people) from community detention to Final

Departure Bridging Visas by the Minister for Home Affairs. Moving people from community detention, at this time, only exacerbates difficult living conditions of vulnerable people, namely asylum seekers who were transferred from Papua New Guinea and Nauru to receive medical treatment not available in those countries. Most of these people were given refugee status in PNG or Nauru under refugee status determination processes established with Australian Government support.

Removing access to the Status Resolution Support Service (SRSS) also means that these people are being forced to find accommodation within a short time period (usually around three weeks). With no rental history or reliable income source, this is an unrealistic and unattainable outcome. Expecting people to find work during this period, for a group that has been unable to access education or training (for

those people aged over 18 years), is an equally insurmountable hurdle. Further, it is unclear whether Medicare will cover their ongoing medical needs.

Support the Status Resolution Support Service

The changed eligibility criteria and over 85 percent funding cut to the SRSS since 2017-18 have adversely affected asylum seekers on bridging visas and refugees on temporary visas, well before the pandemic set in. In one jurisdiction, over 100 additional asylum seekers and refugees have sought the Society's assistance. In another jurisdiction, finding sustainable housing and covering rental costs continue to be a significant issue for this group. We know that changes to the SRSS have forced asylum seekers and refugees into situations of material poverty rather than assisting them to find employment.

Almost four in five people are at risk of homelessness and only one in five are job ready. The changes have shifted federal welfare costs and responsibilities to state agencies and community-based organisations, at an estimated cost of between \$80 to \$120 million per year.

Fund social housing to stimulate the economy and address the housing shortfall

The most common issues affecting people accessing community social services are housing pressures, homelessness (observed by 74 percent of staff) and inadequate rates of income support (69 percent). Levels of unmet need are high particularly in regional and rural areas, where people also struggle to meet energy costs. Even prior to the pandemic, demand for safe, secure and affordable

housing was not being met. There is currently a shortage of almost 430,000 homes that are affordable (135,000 in NSW, 100,000 each in Vic and Qld, 38,500 in WA, 32,500 in SA, 11,400 in Tas, 7,700 in NT and, 3,000 in ACT).

Overhaul Commonwealth Rent Assistance (CRA) to address the housing shortfall and housing stress

The uncertainty that lies ahead with respect to income support, wage subsidies and the lifting of eviction moratoriums and mortgage freezes has led to estimates that homelessness will increase by 9 percent, with 24 percent more families experiencing housing

affordability stress. The number of people living in housing affordability stress is estimated to rise by a further 124,000, with 73 percent of these households being private renters. [Addressing CRA alone](#) is insufficient to fully mitigate the impacts of an economic downturn. A combination of CRA and a 25 percent rent relief scenario has the most powerful impact on simulated numbers of people living in housing affordability stress.

[A copy](#) of the National Council's Pre-Budget Submission 2021-22 is available [here](#). ♦

Rose Beynon is National Director Policy and Research, St Vincent de Paul Society National Council and Bushfire Liaison Officer.

Put Fair Work Bill on hold

The National Council of the St Vincent de Paul Society in Australia called on the Federal Government to put consideration of the *Fair Work Amendment (Supporting Australia's Jobs and Economic Recovery) Bill 2020* on hold until a report on related legislation has been tabled in June.

However, the Bill, significantly amended, was passed by both Houses on 22 March 2021.

In a submission to Federal Parliament, National Council President, Claire Victory said the Society is concerned about the timing of the Bill given that the Senate Standing Committee on Economics' Unlawful underpayment of employees' remuneration inquiry's final report is not due until 24 June 2021.

'In its current form, the Fair Work Bill strongly favours big business at the expense of

already vulnerable workers and does nothing to restore job security, improve workers' pay and conditions or address wage stagnation,' Ms Victory said.

'The Federal Government must urgently consider significant labour market reform to ensure vulnerable workers have access to meaningful, long-term employment in the wake of the pandemic.

'The Society is particularly concerned about the increasing casualisation of the workforce and what this means for job security and workers' rights. Consultations must recommence with a range of stakeholders, including not for profit organisations.'

The National Council's Submission to the Senate Standing Committee on Education and Employment is available [here](#). ♦

JobSeeker decision condemns thousands more to poverty

BY CLAIRE VICTORY

The National Council of the St Vincent de Paul Society in Australia has repeated its call for the Federal Government to establish an expert advisory group to monitor and advise government on appropriate levels of income support to ensure no one is forced to live in poverty.

Important decisions as well as legislation such as the inaptly named Strengthening Income Support Bill, which was rushed through the Federal Parliament, should be properly informed by the evidence and not driven by political ideology. A parliamentary inquiry, extensive research and the recent COVID-19 experience all demonstrate the benefits of increasing the base rate of JobSeeker and Youth Allowance.

The social service sector, academics and big business all support a higher rate, but the Federal Government has failed to act appropriately. An additional \$4.00 a day will make little difference and the demand for assistance from services such as ours will inevitably escalate in the coming months.

Each reduction in the Corona Supplement in recent months has seen a corresponding increase in requests for assistance from the Society.

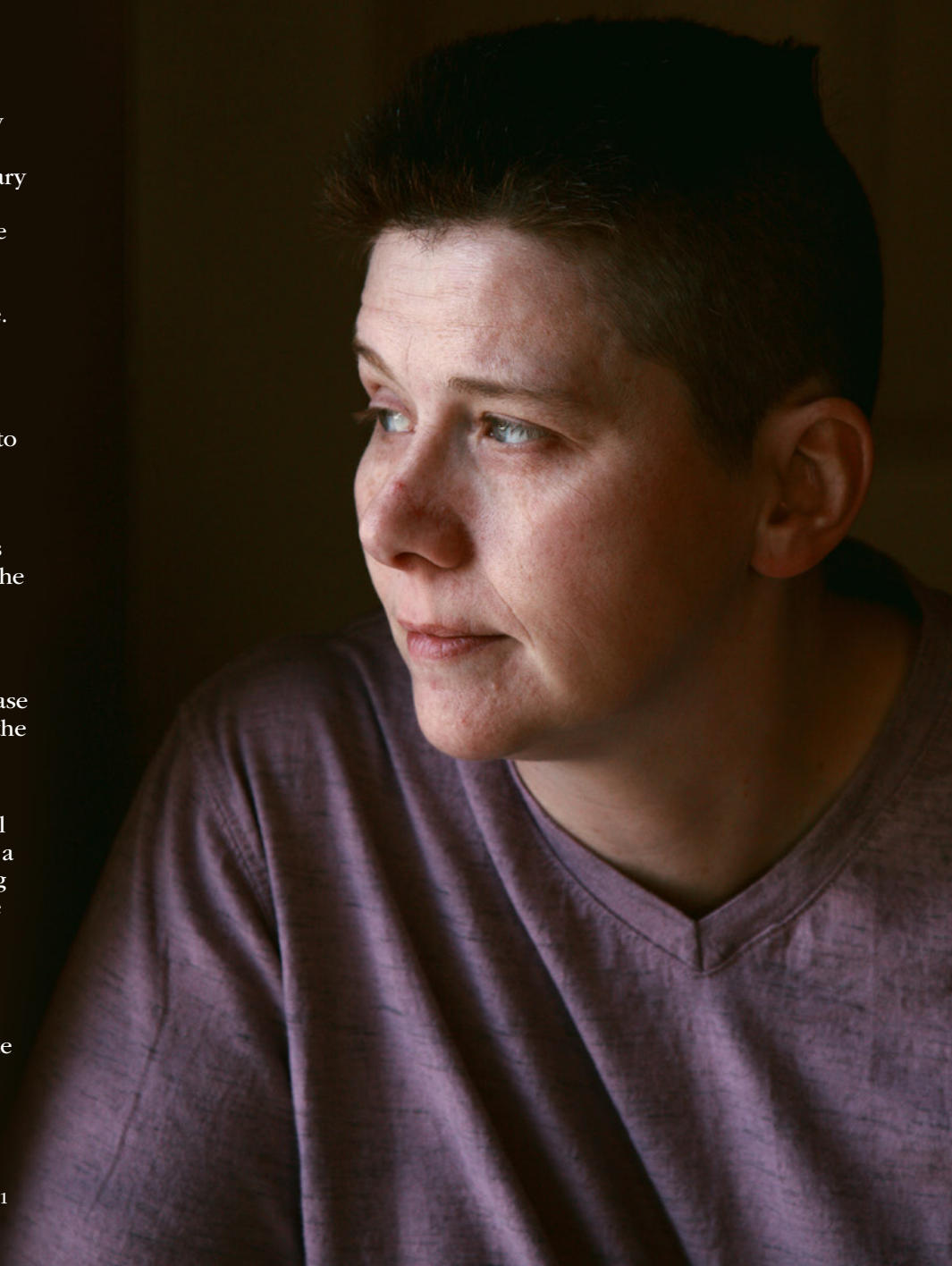
Until the expert group is established the National Council is calling for an increase of \$25 a day – not \$25 a week – bringing JobSeeker and Youth Allowance in line with the aged pension. Once established, working age payments must be indexed in line with wages, which have historically grown at a faster rate

than CPI, thus maintaining the real value of those payments.

Australia is on the cusp of significant change – with JobSeeker set at \$44 per day, JobKeeper winding up and the moratorium on rental evictions and the freeze on mortgage payments being lifted in the weeks ahead.

Underemployment increased in the last month to 8.5 percent and we expect that as these changes kick-in, more people will need the help of family, friends, community and charities to get by. ♦

Claire Victory is the National President of the St Vincent de Paul Society in Australia.



Slavery is a continuing shame

BY ROBIN OSBORNE

The Society has released a policy on modern-day slavery that describes ways to avoid supporting this brutal practice.

Slavery still exists in many places – the Uyghurs in Chinese factories being one example – although the images are less obvious than those of kidnapped Africans (or South Sea Islanders) being transported in chains to distant plantations for forced labour.

The modern-day definition of slavery is more encompassing than the historical view: '[It is] any conduct where a person is being exploited to work and is unable to leave of their own will, due to threats of violence, coercion, abuse of power or deception... [it] includes the worst forms of child labour, forced labour, slavery, servitude, debt bondage, human trafficking, deceptive recruitment and forced marriage.'

Such practices remain common in many places, with the goods produced in those conditions being consumed in many 'fairer' countries, including Australia where the Society has added its weight to the campaign to combat modern slavery in the operations and supply chains of all its entities.

The 'Combatting Modern Slavery' policy, released by the National Council recently, requires all entities that make up the Society in Australia to put in place systems to:

- Identify and assess potential areas of risk of modern slavery occurring in our supply chains.
- Mitigate the risk of slavery and human trafficking occurring in our supply chains.
- Monitor potential areas of risk in our supply chain.



'The Society is committed to acting ethically and with integrity in all our commercial relationships and to putting in place effective systems and controls designed to identify whether slavery or human trafficking is likely to be taking place anywhere in our supply chains,' the policy notes.

'Where slavery or human trafficking is likely to be taking place in a supply chain, we will look to sourcing the goods or services from an ethical supplier.'

The Commonwealth's *Modern Slavery Act (2018)* applies only to entities based or operating in Australia with annual consolidated revenue of more than \$100 million, a threshold met by a number of, but not all, Society entities operating in Australia.

In response the policy urges Councils and any related entities that do not meet the legislated threshold to endeavour to carry out domestic and overseas screening of supply chains.

Matters that could be clarified with suppliers/contractors include whether they hire low-skilled foreign or domestic

migrant workers (directly or through recruiters), and have policies prohibiting child labour, withholding worker identity or immigration documents and using recruiters who do not comply with local labour laws of the country in which the recruiting takes place.

National Council has also recently prepared a submission in support of the Customs Amendment (Banning Goods Produced By Uyghur Forced Labour) Bill 2020.

The submission supports banning the importation of goods from Xinjiang or other provinces in the People's Republic of China that are produced in whole or part by forced labour. China's treatment of the Uyghurs and other Muslims is strongly counter to its international human rights obligations. We have called on the Australian Government to join other countries, such as Canada and the United Kingdom, in banning goods produced by Uyghur forced labour.

See the National Council's [statement](#) and [submission](#). ♦

Robin Osborne is National Publications Officer, St Vincent de Paul Society National Council.

March4Justice unites Australian women

BY CLAIRE VICTORY

I write this column mere days after joining at least 100,000 other people in the March4Justice rallies across the country, calling for an end to gender-based violence and workplace abuse.

The media was rightly saturated with accounts from survivors and advocates, most notably Australian of the Year Grace Tame and Brittany Higgins, who was allegedly raped by a staffer in Parliament House in Canberra.

Thousands of women shared their stories of rape, assault and harassment.

Sadly, these stories are not newsworthy because of being recent or extraordinary but because they are evidence of an ongoing systemic and cultural malaise that festers in the face of entitlement and the abuse of power.

We know that only one-in-ten women takes these matters to court and of those, only three per cent get a conviction. The law as it stands, in the context of a toxic and deeply flawed system, cannot be relied on to protect victims of abuse or to convict perpetrators.

I'm writing about this because so many of the people who visit our services are women whose safety has been breached, and whose confidence has been undermined by violations which are nothing less than an abject abuse of power.

But the abuse of power manifests itself in many ways – the abuse of children, gender-based violence and abuse, and bullying. This is not just something experienced by our companions, but also by people within the Society; both in their personal lives and sadly, at times, through their work within the Society.



All organisations must take responsibility for historic breaches of the law. The Society has joined the National Redress Scheme on the back of revelations from the [Royal Commission](#) because we understand the importance, above all other considerations, of listening to victims and survivors, acknowledging our wrongdoing and doing whatever is in our power to address the suffering of those we have wronged.

However, we cannot assume that such wrongdoing – the sort of harm done to vulnerable people through bullying and harassment and so often enabled or worsened by an inherent power imbalance – is a thing that belongs only in the past. The Society must constantly strive to do better. It is not enough to simply have policies that sit on the shelf; we must ensure that our actions reflect our values and that, through our everyday words and behaviours, we:

- minimise the risk of harm to our members, volunteers, employees and companions;
- empower and enable people to make complaint or call out abuse, harassment or other bad behaviour as they experience or witness it;

- listen to people when they say they have been treated unfairly and support them personally, professionally and spiritually while ensuring that their complaints are taken seriously and the investigative processes and outcomes are thorough, fair and just.

National Council is striving to ensure that the Society in Australia is and remains a place that is safe and fair. We are working on our Safeguarding policies and processes to ensure that all members, volunteers and employees are aware of the importance of respectful working relationships and know how to raise concerns if they experience or witness poor behaviour while engaged in good works for the Society.

The National Council of the St Vincent de Paul Society in Australia stands with the international community as we celebrate the achievements of women everywhere on International Women's Day. Read the statement [here](#). ♦

Claire Victory is the National President of the St Vincent de Paul Society in Australia.

Social housing petition debated



Social Justice advocate Sr Carmel Hansen, State MP for Charlestown, Jodie Harrison, NSW CEO Jack de Groot and the Society's Executive Director for Membership, Volunteers and Regional Operations, Sam Crosby at NSW Parliament.

The Society's 13,000-signature petition urging the NSW Government to build an additional 5,000 social housing properties each year for the next decade (see *The Record*, Summer 2020) was debated in NSW Parliament on 18 February 2021. MPs from all sides spoke on the importance of social housing across the state.

Jenny Leong, MP for Newtown, spoke passionately on the responsibility of government to ensure residents have a safe and secure place to live: 'If we are in this place to do one thing then

surely it should be to deliver safe, affordable, habitable and secure homes for the people of New South Wales.'

The Minister for Water, Property and Housing, Melinda Pavey said 'If I could just wave a magic wand I would love nothing more than to do 5,000 homes every year for the next ten years; but let's be realistic to the Treasury and the responsibilities we have.'

MP for Sydney, Alex Greenwich hosted an event attended by ministers and shadow ministers where Vinnies NSW CEO, Jack de Groot spoke on the quality of life

that comes with having a place to call home: 'Sometimes we get confused in NSW about the value of property. We forget about the fundamental value of a life that flourishes in a home – that's what we're about.'

The current waitlist for social housing in NSW totals 51,000 applicants, the equivalent of more than 100,000 people in need of a home. For many the time spent waiting can run up to ten years.

'Build Homes, Build Hope' is a social justice campaign supported by Vinnies members, volunteers and staff. ♦

Releasing (some) detained refugees is only a start



PHOTO: THE CATHOLIC LEADER

Nades and Priya Murugappan with their daughters, Kopika and Tharunicaa, who were born in Australia.

BY TIM MCKENNA

Recently our National Council President, Claire Victory, issued a media release on this theme welcoming the January release of 58 refugees (previously medically transferred to Australia) who had been detained in Melbourne, and called for further steps to improve the situation for refugees and people seeking asylum in Australia.

This update discusses the wellbeing of these vulnerable people, both in Australia and those still on Nauru and in Papua New Guinea (PNG) and provides further detail on what needs to happen next.

People in Australian detention

Thankfully in March about 50 more people were released from detention in Brisbane and Darwin. But about 100 people (also medically evacuated) remain in Australian detention, with no reason given about why they have not been released.

A major concern is their mental health. In 2019 doctors assessing people for medical evacuation from PNG and Nauru found 91 per cent had psychiatric health problems, with 28 per cent having Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD). Those evacuees

remaining in Australian detention are likely to have similar levels of mental illness.

Not surprisingly, doctors say it is impossible to effectively treat mental illness in the environment (in this case, detention) which caused the illness.

But apart from the humanitarian issue, the Government has already conceded that it is cheaper for these people to be in the community, particularly as they are also no threat to the community. And this logic must also apply to the Murugappans, the Tamil family from Sri Lanka removed three years ago from Biloela, Central Queensland,

and sent via Melbourne to Christmas Island, where their detention costs an estimated \$1.4M per year. All these people should be released immediately.

People still held offshore

We should not forget the 264 people still held in PNG and Nauru, many of whom were unable to be evacuated after the Medevac law was repealed in December 2019.

The death in February of Abdirahman Ahmed Mohammed is a sad reminder of the toll of Australia's offshore regime. He died of a heart attack in Perth, a day after his 39th birthday. He first reported chest pain and received heart tests in 2014 while in PNG but was not transferred to Australia for treatment until he suffered a heart attack on Nauru in April 2019. Mr Mohammad's death is the fourteenth among people seeking asylum, who have endured our offshore processing regime.

It is notoriously difficult to get information about workings on Nauru, while access to PNG has been complicated by the onset of COVID-19. I visited in March last year and reported on the situation in the 2020 Winter edition of *The Record*. In that article I reported that 'all the men I met had some degree of mental illness, which cannot be treated in PNG'.

Since then, my principal source of independent information has been from Father Giorgio Lucini, General Secretary of the Catholic Bishops Conference of PNG and the Solomons, and his assistant for refugees, Jason Siwat, who works for Caritas PNG. Both work tirelessly to

support the 137 men still in PNG as best they can within very limited resources. Recently Jason described his experience of the mental health problems of the men there.

I also contacted a few of the men on messaging apps and asked what message they had for all of us. One of my friends told me: *'I have been separated from my family for eight years and I am lonely. My mind is in a state of anxiety. I am in a state of depression.'* Another said simply: *'I don't want... more life in PNG please.'*

The recent spike in COVID-19 cases in PNG, centred on Port Moresby, where almost all the refugees live, emphasises the continuing risks to safety and health faced by these vulnerable people

If the Morrison Government wants to save money, closing its offshore processing regime must surely be a candidate: it has cost about one billion dollars every year for the past seven years. So, in line with Father Giorgio's call, the Government should also immediately remove all people from Nauru and PNG and quickly find a safe place for their permanent re-settlement, including, as Claire Victory noted, accepting the long-standing offer for resettlement in New Zealand.

People in the Australian community

The 100 people recently released from Melbourne and Brisbane on bridging visas now join tens of thousands of others on similar bridging visas and temporary protection visas.

The fundamental problem is that these thousands have no

path to finding a safe country as a permanent home, and the Morrison Government has no plan to find them that home. As our President said, the Government 'must now release its plan for a permanent resettlement solution for all these people'.

The Society continues to do its best for these vulnerable people and is advocating for greater Federal Government support to them, most recently through our 2021 Federal Pre- Budget Submission. In December 2018, Archbishop Mark Coleridge, chair of the Australian Catholic Bishops Conference, spoke on refugees held offshore: 'Enough is enough. Let's find them a home'. To help make this call a reality I suggest you consider joining and working with:

- The *Time for a Home* Campaign to get the release and resettlement of the remaining refugees and people seeking asylum in immigration detention in Australia.
- The *Game Over* Campaign to get all those held by Australia on Nauru and PNG to safety.
- The *No Child Left Behind* Campaign to put pressure on the Federal Government to ensure adequate support to some 16,000 children in families seeking protection in Australia, many of whom have no income and whose only support is inadequate emergency relief. ♦

The National Council of the St Vincent de Paul Society has welcomed the appointment of Karen Andrews to the Home Affairs portfolio, calling on her to release the Sri Lankan family from detention on Christmas Island as a matter of urgency. Read the statement [here](#). ♦

JobSeeker rise a ‘pittance’ driving people to charities

The St Vincent de Paul Society NSW is continuing to call for JobSeeker to be raised above the poverty line by highlighting its five-year report showing how inadequate support leads to recipients turning to charity.

NSW CEO Jack de Groot said the report, *Filling the Gap: The relationship between the rate of unemployment benefits and charity assistance for JobSeekers*, paints a bleak picture of how one-in-10 people in NSW who receive JobSeeker approach Vinnies for assistance, mostly for food.

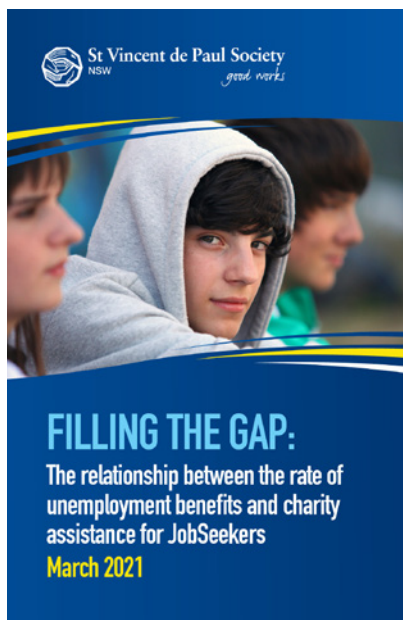
‘The St Vincent de Paul Society NSW maintains that the measly increase proposed by the Federal Government is too low and JobSeeker needs to be raised above the poverty line. You cannot afford to look for a job if you don’t have enough money to pay for food, accommodation, and other basics,’ Mr de Groot said.

Another pressing issue is that the proportion of people receiving unemployment support has been growing over the past five years.

‘One in three people who ask the Society for help have JobSeeker as their primary source of income,’ Mr de Groot said, adding, ‘It doesn’t have to be this way, as the COVID supplement to JobSeeker has shown us. In the April to June quarter of 2020, there was a 75 per cent drop in calls for assistance from people receiving JobSeeker compared to the same time the previous year.

‘This corresponded with the immediate aftermath of the introduction of the full COVID supplement. It was a significant enough payment to break the cycle of reliance on charities that JobSeeker usually creates.’

Mr de Groot described the Government’s permanent Jobseeker increase of \$3.57 a day



as ‘a pittance... while the COVID supplement almost doubled the rate of JobSeeker, the permanent increase is a boost of less than 10 per cent for a single person with no children.

‘The increase is not enough to have anywhere near the same effect,’ Mr de Groot said.

The Society in NSW is expecting to see a surge in demand when the COVID-19 supplement is removed entirely from the end of March, saying it had already seen demand for assistance climbing back up.

Members of the Social Justice Network are also deeply concerned, according to Brooke Simmons, St Vincent de Paul NSW Vice President Social Justice, who said, ‘We need to keep up pressure from the community to make sure that JobSeeker is increased to a level where people can afford the basics.’

So that people who experience un- or under-employment as a result of illness, injury, or job losses, can continue to afford the essentials in life, and live with dignity, the report recommends that the Australian Government should:

- establish a Social Security System Expert Group to advise and report to Parliament on whether the Australian Government is meeting its responsibilities and to ensure that eligible recipients are not living in poverty
- bring all pensions and payments above a minimum income floor, in line with the current pension rate, until the Social Security Commission is established (this would see mean that a single person on JobSeeker should receive an additional \$25 per day or \$350 per fortnight)
- index payments properly, to wages and price increases, to ensure they maintain their real value over time and keep up with community standards and the costs of living.

The Filling the Gap report can be viewed [here](#).

National Council has also continued to advocate for an increase in the base rate of JobSeeker, including its recent submission to the Senate Standing Committee on the Social Services Legislation Amendment (Strengthening Income Support) Bill 2020.

The submission is accessible [here](#).

We appreciate the efforts of Andrew Wilkie, Helen Haines, Zali Steggall, the Greens, Centre Alliance, Rex Patrick and Jacqui Lambie for urging the Government to lift the base rate above the poverty line. The Strengthening Income Support Bill was passed on 18 March 2021, with little time provided for proper parliamentary process. Senator Rachel Siewert was forced to table a printed version of her speech because she was not allowed to present it in person. ♦

Public policy opportunity

BY TOBY O'CONNOR

By the time we publish, the Federal Government's COVID-19 financial assistance packages for people who have no work and for most employers who have had to close or downscale their businesses because of the pandemic will have ceased. It is true that the cost of delivering this assistance has been staggeringly high, and our Government was indeed courageous in addressing the economic and social dislocation that accompanied the virus.

That was the good news. Less welcome is the reality that everyone in our communities will be challenged as all parts of our local, regional and national economies begin to move back towards what could be regarded as business as usual. However, not everything will return to 'normal'. Social distancing is here to stay until the vaccine program is fully rolled out. Some businesses will never reopen.

Our Members and Conferences are eager to emerge from the virtual assistance modes that we have had to adopt and return to human contact with the people who seek the Society's help. Like Frederic Ozanam and his friends we walk with people in need. We do not stand on the sidelines. We stand side by side with our neighbour on this side of the road and with our neighbour on the other side. This is what it means to be Vincentian. This is our discipleship.

Unfortunately, we know already that as the JobSeeker supplement has been wound back more people in financial hardship are seeking assistance from charities. Our colleagues in NSW have documented this fact. We anticipate there will be markedly more requests for assistance in

the coming months. Not only has Newstart increased by the most meagre margin off a very low base but many more individuals in low paying and insecure jobs will struggle to return to the hours of work they had pre-COVID-19. Their struggle will be reflected in the returning difficulties their families will face to find a decent and acceptable standard of living.

The short period of alleviating the poverty of our most vulnerable people has suddenly disappeared. This is bad news for bringing about a more just and fairer Australia.

Just as our Members bring the light of the Gospel message into the lives of the many people who will be looking for a hand up, so do the Society representatives who are working hard with governments across Australia to try to bring about a fairer country. National Council continues to advocate in Parliament House for the many groups of people we see dropping over the edge – the homeless, those living on the streets of our communities, refugees, university students, including overseas students who have been forced into low paying, sometimes dangerous, employment in the 'gig economy' and, migrant communities where many people face obstacles in everyday living because they lack familial support networks.

We are particularly concerned for our younger generation. We know from the statistics that young people are being hit hard by not just the pandemic but by shrinking job opportunities, especially entry-level jobs, and the high rate of casualisation that is accompanying the recovery path. Not only are employment pathways constricting but capacity to pay rent and own a house is also vanishing for our younger people.

During the pandemic National Council has worked closely with

other major Australian charities. Our members share stories of hardship and disadvantage with us. And other charities also add to the growing narrative of increasing poverty and disadvantage. It is this comprehensive picture which informs our advocacy work.

We are a group united around what Frederic called the protection of the weak. From this platform we highlight to governments a range of strategies designed to respond to the present and emerging challenges. This collaboration has seen a strengthening of the charity sector and recognition by governments of the good works carried out by the memberships of charities across this land. We continue to give advice on how best to respond to the pandemic's impact on a growing number of people in our communities.

As our nation continues to respond to the challenges of moving out of the pandemic, we pray for the well-being of our companions, members, volunteers and employees. Those of us who work with government will continue to seek the views and feedback from members, volunteers and employees offering pastoral care on the frontline so that we can properly inform decision-makers about the state of affairs in the real here-and-now.

I leave you with this Irish blessing, not only because I am writing on St Patrick's Day but because these are the things we wish for our many companions.

May you always be blessed with walls for the wind.

A roof for the rain.

A warm cup of tea by the fire.

Laughter to cheer you.

Those who love near you

And all that your heart desires. ♦

Toby O'Connor is CEO St Vincent de Paul Society National Council.

Tick of approval for drought fund management



An evaluation of how the Society implemented the federal government's Drought Community Support Initiative (DCSI) has found that the distribution of vital funding to thousands of farming households across the country was well targeted and administered effectively.

National President, Claire Victory said the detailed evaluation by the Australian National University provides further evidence of what works when helping people in crisis.

'The urgently needed payments were taken up by over 15,000 farmers, farm workers and contractors and most was injected directly back into local communities,' Ms Victory said.

'Although the \$3,000 grant was

small compared to debt levels, the assistance was welcomed and provided some peace of mind, despite a strong culture of not accepting 'hand outs', especially from a charity.

'The ongoing nature of the current drought in many parts of the country has significantly reduced the output of properties. Many farming households are experiencing deepened financial hardship and acknowledge it will take years to recover.

'Given these difficulties, it is not surprising that over a quarter of recipients are also experiencing significant mental health issues. However, recipients are proud of their communities, stating that they are resilient and watch out for and support each other,' Ms Victory added.

'The evaluation used both quantitative and qualitative data from the people who were assisted and from the Society's members, volunteers and staff who provided that support.

'The findings also point to the benefits of engaging services and people who are well connected to, and understand the needs of local communities to distribute assistance.

'The Society's members, volunteers and staff provided significant additional financial support from the Society's reserves to just over half of recipients as well as referrals to local support services such as financial counsellors,' Ms Victory said.

The ANU Report is available [here](#). ♦

Cold feet, warm hearts... CEO Sleepouts set for mid-Winter

After raising a national total of \$5.7M last year, despite the need for a combined 'virtual' event because of COVID-19 restrictions, the Vinnies CEO Sleepout will be a series of state events on the night of 17 June 2021.

Hundreds of CEOs, business owners, community and government leaders will sleep outdoors to show solidarity with the estimated 120,000 Australians who are experiencing homelessness or are at risk of homelessness. Each sleepout participant aims to maximise their fundraising support to help Vinnies provide essential services to the people who need them.

A range of well-known venues will be hosting their city's sleepouts – The National Arboretum Canberra, Lot Fourteen Adelaide, UTAS Stadium Launceston, White Bay Cruise Terminal Sydney, Wollongong's UOW Innovation Campus, Newcastle's McDonald Jones Stadium, Optus Stadium



Perth, and The Timber Yard Port Melbourne. Venues for the Brisbane and Gold Coast CEO Sleepouts are yet to be announced.

Business leaders in regional areas outside of these centres can register and join their state sleepouts as a virtual participant.

After last year's complex hook-up (the livestream is on the website) the technology will enable good viewing for anyone wanting to watch and donate to this unique fundraiser.

Information on the 17 June CEO sleepouts, including state targets, is [here](#). ♦

Community sleepouts on again

This year's NSW community sleepouts will be held in 11 statewide locations on Friday 27 August, with participants and supporters raising funds and awareness for vulnerable people in their local areas.

Homelessness is often portrayed as a city problem but a significant number of people who are homeless, or at serious risk, are in regional, rural and remote Australia. This is because of low incomes, high living costs and poor housing

options relative to regional and metropolitan centres.

From Tweed Heads (in support of Fred's Place homeless drop-in service) down to Albury, from Western Sydney to western NSW and all points in between, community members can participate individually or join as a team with their local sports club, business, or social group. The combined goal is \$240,000.

Please help spread the word about these wonderful communal events. Location details [here](#). ♦

Recording the Society's work in the NT

The Society is in the process of documenting its proud history in the Northern Territory, including information about the many members and staff involved, and the relevant timelines. The dedicated volunteers from the Archives team would appreciate anyone with information about their own or others' involvement with the Society in the NT to contact them at members.
volunteers@svdnpnt.org.au ♦

Helping rebuild cyclone-shattered communities in Fiji

BY BR SEMESA VILISE & BR FRANK BRASSIL

Like many parts of the Pacific, Fiji is no stranger to natural disasters, but Tropical Cyclone Yasa, which swept through the island nation in mid-late December 2020, was the strongest in four years and the fourth most intense ever.

The main northern island of Vanua Levu was particularly affected, where reports soon emerged of widespread and extensive damage to homes, farms and public infrastructure such as power and roads. The Society is represented locally by the Northern Regional Council of Fiji, whose President Br Semesa Vilise, quickly became involved with the recovery effort, providing regular updates to our Oceania Team and to the National Council of Fiji.

Like their fellow Vincentians along the Australian seaboard, far to the west, who had been central to helping communities stricken by bushfire, the Fijian Conferences and the Society's Committee for International Aid and Development mobilised to make valuable contributions to restoring the lives of the affected people.

On 18 December Br Semesa sent the following response to inquiries about the situation:

Thank you for all the prayers and thoughts. Movements in Labasa just opening up slowly and relevant authorities trying their level best to restore power, water and roads. The main Labasa town is closed while people are trying to get their pieces together. We only managed to drive a couple of kilometres within Labasa area and we could already sense the devastation on homes and farms in the interior of Bua and Savusavu.



Next day, the Oceania team requested a €3,000 grant from CIAD to support local Conferences with emergency relief. Br Semesa was supported by the National Council of Fiji, which helped with the supply of tarpaulins for the victims' temporary shelter while they try to rebuild, plus funds to buy 40-litre drums for drinking water storage. Other Conferences in Fiji assisted with 44 bags of secondhand clothes, household items and financial support.

Br Semesa offered a big *Vinaka vaka levu* (thank-you in Fijian) to all Society members across Fiji and the Pacific for helping those on the ground to provide a semblance of Christmas for the suffering families who were struggling to gather basic necessities to move on with life.

'Our small team was able to travel to Savusavu and have the rations loaded on hired trucks to reach out to those affected areas, and I was fortunate enough to experience a night with affected families in Dawara, and Christmas with another affected family in Valeni village.

'Dawara was one of the most affected due to destructive winds and flooding. I was able to gather more information on the immediate needs and managed to come up with the second phase of assisting in building temporary shelter to those that completely lost their homes.

'We were also able to establish that some villages and homes had tarpaulins and tents delivered on the same day.'



After consultations with the village heads and family members it was decided to purchase 64 corrugated roofing iron sheets for six families that lost their homes, plus chainsaw fuel to enable the harvesting of native-hardwood for building temporary homes until the National Disaster Team could arrive.

Further relief phases included more building materials, and addressing concerns over depleted family savings and ruined cash crops. Many families worried about how to get their children back to school in the new year, and arrangements were made to assist families with school stationery, prompting expressions of gratitude to the Society worldwide.

Other aid included medical kits for remote villages, donated

secondhand clothing and women's sanitary packs, delivered on the Napuka School Truck run and accompanied by our volunteer Br Dan.

Amidst all this, heavy rain in late January 2021 produced major flooding, not uncommon in 'cyclone season', but a further demand on the dedication and resources of Conferences and their supporters.

'Our Team managed to restore another family home that was covered with tarpaulins in the midst of rain and strong wind,' recalls Br Semesa.

More clothing and young children's garments and toys were brought and distributed, some at Labasa Hospital where young mothers were assisted with newborn babies' needs.

'Fiji is a beautiful country far from most of the world but where the need is genuine and the Vincentians are deeply committed to the work of the Society,' said Frank Brassil, International Territorial Vice President for Oceania for the International Council General of the St Vincent de Paul Society.

'The Society reaches out to those in need anywhere around the world. Through the support of our Commission for International Aid and Development (CIAD) a real difference is made to those in the greatest need.' ♦

Br Semesa Vilise is the President of the Society's Northern Regional Council in Fiji; Br Frank Brassil is International Territorial Vice President for Oceania for the Society's International Council General.

Canberra/Goulburn kicks off ambitious campaign

BY KATHRYN MAIDEN

The St Vincent de Paul Society Canberra/Goulburn has launched an ambitious new campaign aimed at educating people and raising awareness about the work of the Society; recruiting more members and volunteers; and raising funds for the Society's good works.

To give added 'grunt' to the campaign – called the 'Vinnies Knock On Effect' – support has been gained from the Canberra Raiders NRL club and Canberra Toyota.

The campaign kicked off in February when Vinnies employees and members along with Raiders players ran onto the field through a huge banner symbolising the breaking down of barriers that Vinnies does every day.

Star forward Sia Soliola made his entry aboard Toyota's newly released Hilux ute.

The launch also attracted a large turn-out of Vinnies supporters, sponsors and media.

'The 'Knock On Effect' represents the impact that the Society has through its good works, e.g. not just providing a meal but the impact of being supported through tough times which provides a 'hand up' to companions,' said John Feint, President of St Vincent de Paul Society Canberra/Goulburn.

'It also refers to the impact a contribution can have on our companions. Like a ripple effect, one hour of volunteering may not look like much but can have a significant impact on someone who has turned to the Society for help. Five dollars may not seem like much, but many donations of \$5.00 can significantly assist in continuing Vinnies' services and programs.'



Top: Vinnies staff members Katie Turrise, Simon Felgate, Ray Akhurst and Gwen Goon with Raiders players Ryan James and Curtis Scott (and at rear Sia Soliola).

Bottom: Now safe and sound in Australia... Iraqi refugee Sameer with his children.

The 'Knock On Effect' will be run in a manner similar to the CEO Sleepout, whereby someone signs up to be a fundraiser for Vinnies and then spends a month spreading awareness of the Society amongst their peers, colleagues, friends and families to explain why they're raising funds for the cause. People can participate either as an individual or as part of a group.

One local family, who came to Australia as refugees from Iraq, have expressed appreciation of the 'knock on effect' of the Society's programs and services: 'We love Vinnies. We are very grateful. We want more families to know what they do, and that they can get help from them,' said Sameer whose family was struggling to get by.

'Within days of making the call, two Vinnies members arrived at our house to help us. They gave us food vouchers which was so

helpful, because it meant the money we would pay for groceries we could instead use to pay the energy bill.'

To ensure the family wasn't faced with the same situation again, the Members also referred them to the Home Energy Efficiency program funded by the ACT Government, which supports low-income households to reduce their energy bills through practical measures such as draught proofing. The Members also suggested the St Joe's youth program might be beneficial for the family.

'The youth program helped my kids so much. It helped build their personalities, to become more independent and to make friends,' Sameer said.

'The support of the community has a knock on effect to all those we assist. Sameer's family is just one of thousands Vinnies assists every year through our varied programs and individualised assistance,' John Feint said.

'We couldn't do what we do without our members, volunteers and donors. We encourage the community to get involved with our new campaign, the Vinnies Knock On Effect, and help us open doors to opportunity for those who turn to us for help.' ♦

Kathryn Maiden is Marketing & Communications Coordinator with the St Vincent de Paul Society Canberra/Goulburn.

Pets enhance the human touch

Not all homeless men are alone... those with children and pets are welcome at Matthew Talbot Homeless Service in Newcastle.

Vanessa Taylor (pictured) has spent twenty years working with the men who find their way to the Matthew Talbot Homeless Service in Newcastle, and she has seen plenty of changes, not least in her own roles. She started as a cook, then retrained with Vinnies help at TAFE, became a support worker, and is now a case worker.

‘The facility has also evolved,’ Vanessa said.

‘While continuing to provide short-term accommodation we also focus on assertive outreach where service users are helped to obtain and sustain tenancies, to stay in their houses longer, attend their appointments with mental health, drug and alcohol, and all those support services that we wrap around them.’

Another change is that men can not only bring along their children but also their pets.

‘We’re an animal friendly environment nowadays, whereas in the past people either would have to surrender their companions, or they wouldn’t get support. We started with two villas with little courtyards that have been approved for keeping pets onsite. We have guys come through with dogs or cats.’

Vanessa said the animals provide wonderful cheer for the men and their families who stay at the Matthew Talbot as well as for the staff.

‘We’ve had some fantastic animals come through. Very friendly dogs. It’s been great to just go out after a stressful meeting and be able to pat a dog or see it playing. Dogs bring that calmness to all the guys.’



Helping visitors find long-term housing, many with their kids and pets, brings Vanessa particular joy.

You get a warm feeling when you’ve been able to help someone who’s been down and out to settle in a proper house. It’s unbelievable that people can change old habits and become so houseproud and able to sustain the tenancy.’

Vanessa’s team works with partner agencies to properly fit out houses, delighting in seeing the new tenants’ faces when they arrive at a home set up with new appliances and furniture.

‘These people know they couldn’t afford to buy beds and fridges and stuff like that, and to have a service come in and do that is one of the highlights, it’s one of the biggest buzzes you could ever get. And the kids are so excited about

their new rooms, it just blows you away.’

Finding long-term accommodation also helps men keep their sobriety, not returning to drug or alcohol use, which Vanessa finds especially heartening.

‘Someone who’s finally got to see a doctor, something we all take for granted – these people don’t actually have that opportunity. If they’ve been placed on medication and are starting to feel a lot better... it might have been depression, or anything, but to see them recovering is just amazing.’

‘I think it’s such a blessing seeing these companions, I love the interaction with them. These people are down and out and they just need that hand up. And once we give it, off they go.’

‘I love the job, I really do.’ ♦

Tasmania opens Community Hub to all in need

BY LARA ALEXANDER

The St Vincent de Paul Society has opened the doors to its new Vinnies Community Hub in Somerset on Tasmania's North-West coast. The Hub will offer support and advice to disadvantaged individuals and families with specific needs.

Services offered include assistance to mitigate against homelessness, Emergency Relief, financial literacy, and assistance with applications for the No Interest Loan Scheme (NILS). The Community Hub will also serve warm meals and offer companionship as part of the Vinnies Dining with Friends program.

Other charities that require a convenient space to deliver services and engage with the communities will be invited and encouraged to use the Hub. The Somerset opening follows the successful opening of the Vinnies Community Hub in Launceston.

Speaking about the initiative, St. Vincent de Paul Society (Tas) State President, Mark Gaetani, said that the Vinnies Community Hubs stem from an idea tabled at a forum of charities hosted by the Society in October 2019.

'The purpose of the forum was to encourage collaboration and to identify ways charities could work together to benefit the community, especially people who require urgent Emergency Relief. The roll-out was slower than we anticipated, due to COVID-19 in 2020,' Mr Gaetani said.

'By working with other charities, we hope to provide additional services, such as direct financial counselling or parental and youth counselling programs, which we normally do not provide.

'The Community Hubs will still assist those in need with access to



'Vinnies Community Hubs are safe spaces, where anyone in need can visit and seek assistance without fear of judgement.'

Members and staff at the new Community Hub in Somerset, Tasmania (l-r): Leab Morrow, Norah Maguire, Hugh Maguire, Melissa White, Mark Gaetani (Tasmanian State President), CEO Lara Alexander and Corey McGrath.

food, household items, clothing, assistance with utility bills and medical prescription costs, urgent travel needs, and help with budgeting via our Fresh Start program, which is linked to NILS (No Interest Loans Scheme).

'The Society has the advantage of operating state-wide. Our offices in Hobart, Launceston and Burnie have great street-frontage; as does the new Vinnies Community Hub, where our Members, staff, and volunteers deliver direct services and make on-the-spot referrals to government agencies or more appropriate charities.

'Vinnies Community Hubs are safe spaces, where anyone in need can visit and seek assistance without fear of judgement.

'Families and individuals in need require more than a hand-out,

they need to build resilience, and to be encouraged, supported, and empowered to take charge of their future. Vinnies' Community Hubs can assist them in this regard.

'By encouraging other charities to work together, the Society hopes to offer a holistic approach to empowering and building capacity within our communities,' Mr Gaetani added.

Emergency Relief Assistance, complex case management, Fresh Start's financial literacy and budgeting support, assistance with accessing online applications, identifying training opportunities, and accessing 'My GOV' and Centrelink are a few of the services available at Vinnies Community Hubs in Tasmania. ♦

Lara Alexander is Chief Executive Officer, St Vincent De Paul Society Tasmania.

Palms are open for more overseas placements

The Australian faith community is being asked to spread the word about more opportunities for overseas professional placements with community partner organisations in low-income communities. Spearheading the endeavour is Palms Australia, which for 60 years has been recruiting, preparing, sending and supporting Catholics from all around Australia to lend their skills for between one and three years to provide effective and sustainable solutions to poverty.

Normally Palms would hold gatherings to brief and recruit qualified Australians for mission, according to its Executive Director Roger O'Halloran, but COVID-19 restrictions have meant a more direct approach to this important initiative.

'It is difficult to be precise, but we need to be ready to meet partner requests and begin sending people again in the second half of this year, or early 2022,' Mr O'Halloran said.

'Palms thoroughly prepares and supports those recruited for mutual development and welcomes enquiries to ensure an appropriately paced preparation. It is anticipated that even more requests from partners will be added in coming months.'

The [Palms website](#) provides background to positions currently available.

'Please have a look on your own behalf but also let your friends, family and others know about the many and varied opportunities,' Mr O'Halloran added.

The Palms program provides living allowances and accommodation in placement,



Australian teacher Liz O'Sullivan is working in a Palms-arranged placement in Thailand, near the Myanmar border.

with return airfares and insurance for placements of two-three years covered as well. All placement requests are scoped in-situ ensuring that those sent are matched to appropriate roles. Experienced Palms staff

provide personal and professional support, from enquiry through to placement and returning home.

For more details go to www.palms.org.au or call Palms Australia on (02) 9560 5333 or 0422 472 567. ♦

Your overseas support really counts

BY JUDE BLACKLOCK



How can we ensure that money sent overseas is really making a difference in people's lives? It's a fair question because conferences assisting twinning and specific projects, and individuals contributing to the Assist A Student (AAS) program, deserve assurances that their support is truly helping those in need.

While seeking feedback is not always easy, and many heart-warming personal stories come back, I am pleased to share just one of them with our generous supporters.

Chritra is a young woman from East Java in Indonesia who received sponsorship for her education in 2014 when she was 14 years old. We discussed her family and school situation before she received support from the AAS program.

'In 2014, I was just a little girl living in a small village with my parents who were farmers with an unstable income. But I had a big dream. I was a student in Catholic Junior High School Sint Yoseph Muncar, going every morning on my bike, the

only vehicle my family had. I tried to do my best in every subject and be active in any extracurricular activity. I was an active and smart student, especially in English, but my family could not afford my tuition.

'I was so afraid – what if I have to drop out of school? What if I can't continue my study to a higher level? What if I can't reach my dreams? But I believed that I could make it because God will help me, and I know that he won't leaving me.

'In my final year, my science teacher invited me to be a part of the Assist A Student program. He called me to his room and asked me to tell my parents to meet him the next day and bring some necessary documents. He told my parents that through the sponsorship of the AAS Program I could continue my study until I graduated from my junior high school.

'We were so happy! It was one of the best days in my life. It was just like an absolute answer to my prayers.'

What have you done since you received the funding?

'In 2015, I continued to Senior High School, and did my best in school, especially in English. I competed in

'I can't thank you enough for your kindness. You saved my life...'



English Debate Competition in Banyuwangi and won an award as the Best Speaker. I also worked as an English Teacher after returning home from school until late into the night because my father was sick and couldn't work anymore.

'It was hard but thank God I could make it. I graduated from Senior High School in 2017.

'I could say the best year in my life was 2018. I worked as Volunteer in international sport events in Indonesia such as the Asian Games, International Tour de Banyuwangi Ijen cycling race, Asian Para Games 2018 and AFC U-19 Championship Indonesia.

'Meeting athletes from all over the world, working in such big stadiums and meeting a lot of new friends was such a blessing. In 2019 I continued my study to Banyuwangi University - my

bucket list was almost complete. I am majoring in English and have several parttime jobs to support myself and my family.

'I work at Snooze Hostel Banyuwangi every evening and as a Football Scout Reporter for Genius Sport Indonesia every weekend.'

COVID-19 has hit Indonesia badly. How has the pandemic affected you and your family?

'Being a student with several part-time jobs is really hard. But I know, my life will get better when I graduate from university and get my bachelor's degree. I have written down every wish that I want to achieve in 2020.

'Unfortunately, in March 2020 the hostel where I work had to shut down and every football match was postponed due to the pandemic. It was sad, but I told myself that

if we work hard, everything will be fine. So I applied for jobs, such as small cafes and restaurants, even in grocery stores, but no one accepted me.

'The saddest part is I have to drop out of my university because I can't afford to pay my tuition. I know the world will get better one day. For now, I'm teaching English again to earn some money to support myself and my parents.'

If you could meet sponsors of the AAS program, what would you tell them?

'I'm so grateful and I can't thank you enough for your kindness. You saved my life. Your contribution has helped me and my family significantly. In a society where it is easy to lose sight of education as a blessing and a gift, I would like you to know that I am so thankful. Thank you for investing in my future.

'I am proud to say I worked hard to be where I am, but I certainly could not have done it without your help. I am forever grateful for your generosity.' ♦

Jude Blacklock is the Overseas Development Program Facilitator.

To donate to the Assist A Student program and help young people like Chritra in one of several regional countries please go to our [website](#). You can download a donation slip [here](#).

If you'd like to read about other aspects of the overseas program, including twinning and projects, please visit our [website](#).

If you'd like to join a mailing list to receive a two-monthly update on the overseas work of the Society, please email overseasadmin@svdp.org.au ♦

Utility prices starting to get on track...

But Australians are missing out on over \$500 million of savings

BY GAVIN DUFTY

The St Vincent de Paul Society has been tracking changes in gas and electricity prices across Australia for over ten years now and during that time we have seen some modest price reductions. More commonly, however, the market trend over a long period has been for significant price increases.

At last, some things seem to be changing, with the findings from the most recent Vinnies [tariff tracking](#) showing that for the first time in many years electricity prices have genuinely fallen.

Depending on where you live – in other words, where you are ‘positioned within the national energy market’ – these falls range between \$100 and \$200 per annum for households with average consumption.

Surprisingly, when you add up all the households that haven’t revisited their billing plans with their retailer, there is over \$500 million of savings that Australians are missing out on. As many people are struggling to pay their power bills, this is unfortunate, to put it mildly.

Unfortunately, similar price changes are not occurring for those with reticulated gas: recent announcements showed modest increases in household gas prices.

For solar-equipped households we are seeing a downward trend in feed-in tariff rates: as wholesale energy prices start to fall the value of energy exported to the grid

reduces. It is recommended that these households, where possible, use appliances during the day when their solar is capturing the sun’s rays. This will provide a bigger bill benefit than the revenue obtained through the reducing feed-in tariffs. Battery storage would be of value, too, although purchase costs remain high.

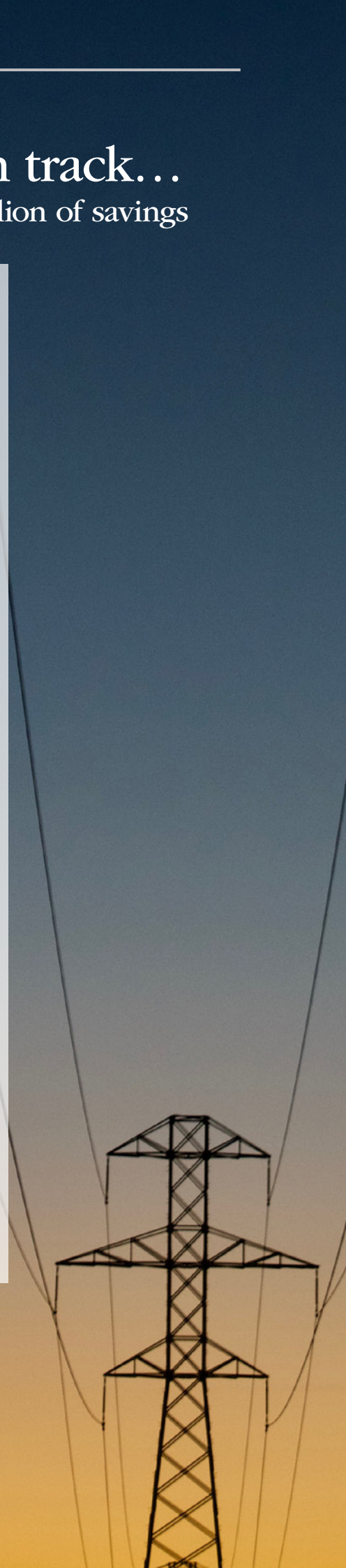
In this uncertain world we encourage people to refresh their energy account by going to the [Australian energy regulator’s website](#) to make sure that they are able to pocket any potential savings. We particularly encourage people with concession and pension cards to make sure they are getting the energy concession entitlements that each state and territory offers.

Vinnies will commence our 2021 review of energy prices across Australia this July when the energy industry re-prices gas and electricity contracts due to changes in the cost of the electricity polls and wires and gas pipes that deliver the energy to your home.

Hopefully energy prices will continue to fall. Meanwhile, as in other aspects of life, it is wise to shop around and to seek impartial advice.

The St Vincent de Paul Society undertakes [research](#) into issues that have the potential to impact the lives of low-income people and families in our community. ♦

Gavin Dufty is Manager Policy and Research, St Vincent de Paul Victoria.



From the Heart – Enshrining an Indigenous Voice to Parliament through the Australian Constitution

The Australian Government is currently running a co-design process to decide what an [Indigenous Voice](#) to Parliament should look like. Submissions are open until 30 April 2021.

The Society will be preparing a submission that supports the campaign being run by From the Heart, an education project created to show Australians that an Indigenous Voice to Parliament needs to be enshrined in the Australian Constitution.

From the Heart is guided by the [Uluru Statement from the Heart](#) and there are three key positions:

1. The Australian Government must honour its election commitment to a referendum once a model for the Voice has been settled.
2. Enabling legislation for the Voice must be passed after a referendum has been held in the next term of Parliament; and
3. The membership model for the National Voice must ensure previously unheard Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people have the same chance of being selected as established leadership figures.

National Council supports this approach because it is fair and practical and will deliver meaningful constitutional recognition and reform for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. It will give Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people a say on the policies and laws that impact their lives. It will also ensure that Parliament and government are better and more appropriately informed in their approach to Indigenous affairs policy and law-making. This will result in better outcomes for Indigenous people.

Information on how to prepare a submission that supports From the Heart is available [here](#). ♦

FROM THE HEART

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