

Mental health a key to a compassionate and a just society

Respect for the dignity of each person demands that society works to provide mental wellbeing for all, said Catholic Social Services Victoria in its submission to the Victorian Government's mental health system review.

Responding to the Government's consultation paper, *Because Health Matters – a new focus for mental health and wellbeing in Victoria*, CSSV Executive Director Denis Fitzgerald said mental health presents a challenge to those who have a commitment to creating a just and compassionate society.

"Unless a person can achieve mental health, then it is much harder for them to achieve the other elements that we associate with wellbeing: education, employment, health, freedom from violence, and strong family ties and relationships generally," Mr Fitzgerald said.

"Further, the promotion of the common good of our society is in the interests of all. No one section can truly flourish if other sections of society are unable to achieve their human potential. Mental health issues on the scale that persists in Australia is evidence that we have not yet achieved a fair balance."

Mental health is a significant focus for the work of many of the Catholic social service agencies in Victoria, impacting on nearly all the work that CSSV member agencies are engaged in.

Key issues arising in response to the consultation paper raised include:

- The need to change the public's perception of mental illness. Breaking down the stigma of mental illness is needed if sufferers are to be encouraged to identify problems at an early stage, and if we as a community are to work more positively with those affected.
- The need to increase current levels of funding. More support is needed for community agencies, schools and specialized institutions if early intervention is to be effective and comprehensive. At the same time, funding levels for acute care also need to be increased, in order to meet current levels of need.
- The need to analyse the 'big picture'. Mental health difficulties arise out of a cultural setting and out of family and other institutional settings. Strengthening of the family as a safe, supportive institution in society, and impacting on such cultural norms as living standards and desired lifestyles is a necessary part of a lasting difference to mental health outcomes.

"Our members welcome initiatives to give a higher priority to the achievement of positive mental health outcomes in the Australian community, and we look forward to services and approaches that are stronger, more comprehensive and better funded as a result of this particular consultation process," Mr Fitzgerald said.

"Effective and coordinated work in prevention, early intervention and acute services for mental health sufferers is crucial to a just and compassionate society. Adequate funding is one of the keys to this outcome.

"The long-term success of the new mental health system will rely on a genuine commitment from both Commonwealth and State governments."

A full copy of the submission is available at www.css.org.au

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Catholic Social Services Victoria is a peak body for Catholic social service agencies in Victoria. We work with member agencies, as part of the Catholic Church in Victoria, to fulfil the gospel imperatives to stand with and serve the poor, disadvantaged and marginalised, and to work for a just, equitable and compassionate society. Further information about Catholic Social Services Victoria can be found on our website www.css.org.au

Our policy analysis, and our response to marginalisation and disadvantage, builds on the principles of Catholic social teaching. These are based on gospel values and the collective reflection and experience over time of the application of those values in working with the poor, the disadvantaged and the marginalised. Our members continue in this tradition in applying these principles to contemporary issues.

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