



Catholic Social Services Victoria

August 2008

About CSSV

Catholic Social Services Victoria is a peak body for Catholic social service agencies in Victoria. A list of our member agencies is attached. CSSV is auspiced by the Catholic Bishops of Victoria, and by our member agencies.

We work on behalf of 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.

Our work includes representation and dialogue with Government and Parliament on issues that impact on society and on the work of our members.

Catholic Social Teaching

Our policy analysis, and our response to marginalisation and disadvantage, builds on the principles of Catholic social teaching, principle among them being the inherent dignity of each person, and that the activity of Government and of society should be aimed at serving the common good. These principles 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.

Operations of members

CSSV members work across the spectrum of social services work in Victoria, including a wide range of services to address homelessness, aged care and disability care, out-of-home child support, refugee settlement, drug and alcohol rehabilitation, family support and family counselling, employment programs for the disadvantaged, prison ministries, women's refuges, relationship education, etc.

Areas of policy interest

The policy interests of CSSV and its members are also wide-ranging. Our policy analysis draws on, among other things, the experience of our members in assisting and advocating for those in their care. Our current active interests include the following.

- Geographical spread of disadvantage
- Mental health services
- Human rights and life issues
- Homelessness
- Disability funding
- Problem gambling
- Refugee settlement
- Prisoner wellbeing
- Utility pricing, including the impact of climate change



Overcoming the geographical concentration of disadvantage

Tony Vinson's 2007 report 'Dropping off the edge: the distribution of disadvantage in Australia' was sponsored by Jesuit Social Services and Catholic Social Services Australia. In that report Professor Vinson identifies the complex web of disadvantage that ensnares some Australians across generations, with a strong geographical correlation. When social disadvantage becomes thus concentrated, it can be impervious to the broad policy instruments of health, education and macro-economic growth – in such cases, general policies need to be supplemented by locality specific ones.

Place-based policy focus thus needs to be continued, and to be expanded in light of feed-back from the efforts in such areas as West Wendouree. A whole of Government approach, and one that is aligned between tiers of Government and with non-Government agencies, is needed. Solutions are necessarily long-term.

Mental health services

Mental health is a challenge to those who espouse the principles that underpin our commitment to a just and compassionate society. Respect for the dignity of each person demands that we work to provide mental well-being for all, and appropriate services to those who are unwell - 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.

Mental health issues are thus a key focus for most of our members, and they impact on many of our clients of our agencies. We welcome the priority that current Victorian Government policy places on effective and coordinated work in prevention, early intervention and acute services for mental health sufferers.

Funding is a major problem. More support is needed for community agencies, schools and specialized institutions if early intervention is to be effective and comprehensive. More support is needed to adequately fund current initiatives, and to enable them to be extended. Acute care too is under stress. This shortage of funds is exacerbated by the complexity that agencies can face when seeking financial support for clients whose mental health issues make it more challenging to address homelessness, aged care requirements, etc.

The long-term success of the mental health system will also rest on effective action in:

- changing 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 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 and nurturing environment is essential; as is an effective regime to address pressing issues of family violence that do arise.

Human rights and life issues

The Church is engaged with the Government and the Parliament on a number of life and human rights issues, including euthanasia and the proposed abortion legislation.



Catholic aged care providers in particular opposed the Medical Treatment (Physician Assisted Dying) Bill 2008 on the grounds that it would undermine the principles that each life has intrinsic value, and deserves due care and respect from the community.

Aspects of the tragedy of abortion in Victoria, and of the current Bill, include the lack of Government financial support for pregnancy support services, the absence of adequate counselling provisions, and the failure of the societal safety net to provide adequate housing and other support for marginalised, including pregnant young women.

A commitment to human rights is a very important element of a just society. The Church made submissions to the recent review of the Equal Opportunity Act, and to a related review on exemptions and exceptions provided in that Act. The general position taken is that current exemptions should be maintained, and that the Equal Opportunity Act and the Charter of Human Rights and Responsibilities Act should be fully consistent with each other. Among other things, the review recommends that the application of the Equal Opportunity Act be extended to volunteers - this could be a significant disincentive to volunteerism, and should only occur after specific consultation.

Homelessness

CSSV and a number of individual members have been active in responding to the May 2008 Commonwealth Green Paper on homelessness. This is an area where responsibility for better outcomes crosses jurisdictions.

The current level of homelessness in Australia – generally estimated at 100,000 on any one night – is not acceptable. There is general agreement around a number of steps that need to be taken to solve this issue. They include:

Availability of safe, affordable housing. There is currently an absolute shortage of housing stock, and rents are rising on existing stock. A concerted, adequately funded strategy to produce adequate stock is needed: one estimate is that this would require around \$1.7bn a year from the Commonwealth and a similar amount shared among the States, for ten years. Absent the availability of safe, affordable housing, homelessness cannot be remedied.

Additional funding and enhanced programs are also needed at identifiable stages:

- Prevention, both by strengthening the fabric of society and of families; and by a focus on the needs of groups that are known to be at risk of becoming homeless: children in out-of-home care; prisoners; indigenous Australians, etc.
- early intervention, including case management and effective funding for training, health care, including mental health care;
- emergency housing and transitional housing to address the immediate and short term needs of the homeless, coupled with long term program support to build the social and other skills needed to enable people whose homeless developed over a period of time to be equipped to settle into a settled community.

Disability funding

Australian society has made significant advances in its care for people with disabilities, but there is much more to be done if this vulnerable sector of society, plus their families and immediate communities, are to enjoy the life opportunities that are taken for granted by other Victorians. Pressing issues include:



- the time delays in the provision of residential accommodation. Availability of funding is a key cause of this.
- the adequacy of individual support packages, in terms of payment per hour, and hours provided for.
- availability of funding for 'community respite care'
- Greater flexibility in accommodation funding, to provide, in appropriate circumstances, support for facilities or common services; and the right to choose who to share a house with
- Staffing challenges for agencies. Again, funding levels are an element in this.

As a society we also need to address the right to move out of home, and to be funded for independent living.

Problem gambling

The latest estimate is that 1.9% of Victorians suffer as problem gamblers (which would translate into a negative impact on many more employers, family members etc of this problem gambling cohort.) There is a strong socio-economic bias in the geographical distribution of problem gambling: to illustrate by example: the prevalence in Greater Dandenong is 2.8%, but in Boroondara 0.3%.

Victorian government revenue from gambling increases to \$1.65bn in 2008/09, equal to 4.4% of total revenue, and 12.3% of taxation revenue. This proportional dependence has reduced in recent years, but is still unacceptably high: reliance on this amount of revenue from the industry complicates the task of Government in setting public policy in the interests of all Victorians.

Utility pricing, including the impact of climate change

The St Vincent de Paul Society has undertaken ground-breaking work in this area. Unless careful analysis and adequate adjustment measures are put in place, the poorer and more vulnerable members of our society will carry a disproportionate share of the cost of adjusting our economy and social system to address factors causing climate change.

Estimates are that peak electricity prices could increase by 80% over the next 5 years, from 16.9 cents/KwH to 27 – 29 cents. This is expected to be due to tariff reallocation, carbon trading, and the additional cost of the introduction of smart meters. Pensioners spend twice the proportion of their income on energy than does the average household. Much of this is non-discretionary. We need to develop responses, such as provision of a cheap minimum level of consumption.

The structure of water price increases also need to take into account the basic needs of users, and their ability to pay. A more finely-tuned use of the current stepped tariff is advocated. This would restrict tariff increases for basic levels of water usage (for bathing, drinking and disposal of sewerage.) This approach would meet social equity objectives while recovering costs and sending appropriate price signals to impact on consumption levels and support alternatives such as use of grey and tank water.

Denis Fitzgerald
Executive Director



CSSV member organisations

Bethlehem Community
Catholic Chaplains Association for Health Care
Catholic Solo Parents
Centacare Ballarat
Centacare Bendigo
Centacare Catholic Family Services
Centacare Gippsland
Corazon
Corpus Christi Community
Early Education Program for Hearing Impaired Children
Good Shepherd Aged Services
Good Shepherd Youth & Family Services
Jesuit Social Services
John Pierce Centre for Deaf Ministry
Justice Unit, Archdiocese of Melbourne
Kewn Kreestha - Rest Home for Mothers
Larmenier
MacKillop Family Services
Marillac House
Mercy Health and Aged Care
Nazareth House
Project Dreaming Tracks
Regina Coeli Community
Sacred Heart Mission
Sisters of Charity Community Care Ltd
Society of St Vincent de Paul
Southern Cross Care (Vic)
St Mary's House of Welcome
St Vincent's Health
Villa Maria Society
Wellsprings