

Media Release – Tuesday 5 May 09

Catholic Social Services Victoria



In challenging times, Victorian Budget focuses on jobs, and on those who are vulnerable

Catholic Social Services Victoria welcomes the focus by the Victorian Government in today's budget on the vulnerable sections of the community, and on investments that are linked to increased employment demand.

"In an economic downturn, the more vulnerable members of our society are most at risk," said Executive Director, Denis Fitzgerald. "Jobs are harder to find for those with less education and skills; loss of a job can easily turn into long term unemployment; and community support programs come under increased pressure. Our common good as a society, however, depends on our working together to assist those most in need: respect for their human dignity is linked to our health as a society."

The Government has responded through increased infrastructure investment, and it has responded positively in many areas where programs to assist those in need are already under financial pressure. These areas are numerous, and include:

- programs to address homelessness by preventative measures, working with people who are homeless, and increases in the levels of social housing
- additional support packages and increased levels of assistance for people with disabilities, and
- increased effort and funding for children and young people who cannot live at home.

"There are some very positive steps towards a more just and compassionate society, which we applaud," Mr Fitzgerald said. "The total package of initiatives and increased support is good news for those who are disadvantaged or marginalised in Victoria."

The Government has utilised increased levels of Commonwealth grants, and some increases in tax revenues, to enable it to increase recurrent expenditure by 8.3% to \$42 billion, while still retaining a budget surplus. Additionally, the Government has expressed confidence that the increased borrowing that will be needed over the next three years to fund infrastructure projects will not threaten their strong credit rating.

"Our preliminary analysis of the budget has also identified key areas where more needs to be done," Mr Fitzgerald said. "We urge the Government and the Parliament to continue their focus on these areas of pressing need."

"In out of home protection, for example, we as a community have accepted a responsibility to protect and care for these young people, and it is clear that we are not doing enough. The positive steps outlined in the budget are welcomed, and should make a significant difference to the lives of these vulnerable young people. But, the community and the Government must continue to work to guarantee the safety, personal development and future of our vulnerable children."

Gambling revenue remains problematic for the Victorian Government: revenue from gambling is budgeted at \$1.6bn, equivalent to 12.4% of taxation revenue. A large proportion of this derives from problem gamblers. Over the longer term, Government revenue from gambling needs to be channelled into special expenditures, to reduce the level of dependence that has developed.

Prison services are another area where developments are not positive. Prisoner numbers are once again budgeted to increase, as has been the pattern over recent years, due not to increased crime rates, but to longer sentences and fewer suspended sentences. Mr Fitzgerald said there is some increased focus on prevention, and on support for families and for re-entry into society, but these should be at the core of the Government's programs in this general area.

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Media inquiries: Denis Fitzgerald, Executive Director, Catholic Social Services Victoria on 0418 136 372.

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.