

Catholic Social Services Victoria's Spheres of Influence conference in early November 2005, focused on key social policy issues that could form the basis of campaigning prior to the Victorian State Government Election in 2006. Marilyn Webster, Policy Manager, Good Shepherd Youth and Family provided some reflections on the day.

Spheres of Influence was timely, looking ahead to the lead up to the State Election in November 2006. We began with a stimulating panel bringing together three different perceptions about the challenges in addressing disadvantage and injustice:

- The community worker.
- The academic.
- The big end of town.

At a time when some fundamental democratic institutions and processes appear to be under threat and when issues of personal safety seem uppermost we need to be able to do two things:

1. to maintain the message that justice, being, and the dignity of all are at the heart of what it means to be a democratic society
2. to harness the diversity of views we heard today toward a message about the common good: a message which can be heard by all parties.

Samara Pitt from Urban Seed spoke about the underclass in the heart of Melbourne. Her work with Urban Seed carries the stories of people on the margins out to young people in the comfort zones of the suburbs enabling those young people to identify with the needs of those on the margins.

Simon McKeon spoke of the role of business in reaching out and making a difference. His stories of generation Y making a difference and engaging with their workplace and other facets of their life are quite hopeful. There is a resurgence of influence, expertise, and money in the corporate and business world that can be harnessed to develop a community demand to address issues of inequity and inequality.

Mark Peel gave a very thoughtful piece about the interplay of policy and personal stories – that the way to building justice lies in the knowledge and ideas of those who are directly impacted.

There are challenges for all Catholic community agencies in these presentations. Their common themes are of building a story conveying hope, and transmitting the message that justice is possible through public policy.

John Thwaites gave us the challenge and opportunity of impacting on the further roll out of the *A Fairer Victoria* strategy. The Catholic sector is ideally placed to have influence here; indeed we were invited to put our suggestions forward. What are the priorities we might want to put forward? Perhaps we might want to say something about:

- government and community sector partnerships, especially the smaller organizations
- mental health issues

- gambling and gaming machines.

We hear talk of partnerships but we currently have legislation in our State Parliament which hands considerable control to the Minister of Community Services.

The workshops this morning threw up very diverse themes.

The Wendouree Communities that Care programme is an example of how good programmes can work. There were reservations about the Communities that Care programme but some five years down the track we have a detailed profile of community needs and an ongoing, successful intervention to address those needs, confirming that community development approaches do address inequity and unfairness at the local level. This was further demonstrated in the “More inspirational stories from the bush” workshop this afternoon.

Annie O’Rourke and Erik Locke gave valuable information from a media perspective on the campaigning required to get poverty and disadvantage back on the national agenda. The news is not good: the timing is difficult with a national debate on terrorism dominating. But we do need to get organized, and as Robert Doyle made clear, the intense campaigning will begin when the Commonwealth Games finishes.

As a sector it is important that we use the time we have to identify the issues and policy settings that are going to be most advantageous for our service users. While we might be quietly feeding this dialogue into Government and Opposition now, we need to have a well-developed campaign to bring into the public realm in April next year.

What are the issues?

1. The costs and impacts of State Government charges on services for people living on low incomes. The material arising out of Gavin Dufty’s presentation on cost pressure inequalities demonstrated that people with children and the aged are paying more.
2. Affordable housing. Gary Spivak and indeed Robert Doyle both pointed to the importance of activity to ensure equity of access to safe affordable housing.
3. Crime and justice. In the last few elections we have seen some very shonky debates around law and order in Victoria. Sure there have been increases in the personal injury crimes but we know more prisons and longer sentences are not the answer. As a sector we can do something about this by:
 - accurately reflecting of the problem
 - encouraging and providing the appropriate responses including restorative justice, anti-corruption, family services for family violence, and post release supports as described in Rosemary Sheehan’s presentation
 - telling the real stories from our experiences in our services.

4. Gambling. James Doughney and Gabriella Byrne spoke about what might be done on the supply side. Robert Doyle outlined the Liberal policy of a reduction of 5,000 poker machines, but will he last to the election?

5. Mental health. So many speakers addressed this issue which encompasses secure accommodation, support, counseling, and many other needs.

Finally, let us not forget the Federal arena where three major policy themes have the potential for major impact:

- Welfare reform
- Industrial relations changes
- Tax policy and the threats to the integrity of capacity for social spending.

State Government has limited control of the policy levers in these areas but we must challenge State Government and Opposition to do what they can. We want to ensure the best outcomes for those who are often forgotten in these debates.