



**JESUIT SOCIAL SERVICES
SUBMISSION**

Review of Australia's Welfare System

August 2014

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Introduction

Australia's income support system is the cornerstone of a safety net which protects the most vulnerable and disadvantaged people in our society. Jesuit Social Services welcomes any efforts to strengthen this system and to improve pathways to participation, including elements of the four pillars for reform identified in the Interim Report.

However, we have grave concerns about the current public debate around welfare reform. Government and media rhetoric demonising people accessing the income support system by referring to them as 'leaners, welfare dependents and rorters' is divisive and counter-productive; it undermines esteem and confidence necessary for individuals to move out of unemployment. This rhetoric demonstrates a lack of understanding of the lives and experiences of nearly all welfare recipients, the vast majority of whom aspire to decent and secure employment, but are prevented from securing work due to a lack of available jobs or skills, experience and personal circumstances.

Jesuit Social Services is also deeply concerned at cuts to programs such as Youth Connections, and the imposition of increasingly punitive restrictions on income support recipients, such as those that exclude young people from accessing income support for six month periods. These measures will fall most heavily on the most vulnerable in our community, and have the potential to lead to costly consequences in terms of homelessness, mental illness, and involvement in the criminal justice system.

Drawing on our experience, our Ignatian heritage, and the principles of Catholic Social Teaching, we call on the Reference Group and Commonwealth Government to demonstrate the leadership that is required to strengthen Australia's income support system by:

- Confronting misunderstandings and prejudices throughout the community - Australia already has a highly targeted income support system with a strong participation focus.
- Building real understanding of the life experiences of people accessing the system – for 37 years we have accompanied people exiting prison, refugees, people with mental illness and alcohol and drug problems, young people leaving care, Aboriginal people living in remote communities, and those excluded from education, many of whom rely on income support at difficult points in their lives. Many of the people we support have also experienced trauma, abuse and neglect from their earliest days, a lack of self-worth, an absence of family and support, and social exclusion.
- Seeking positive solutions that promote participation and inclusive communities and not resort to simplistic measures that further isolate and exclude vulnerable people. All of the people and communities we work with have aspirations and a desire to participate productively in society. The reality is that significant effort is often required in order to realise these aspirations. While we welcome elements of the four pillars for reform outlined in the Interim Report, we believe that the core functions of the income support system must be supporting civic participation, providing opportunities alongside obligations, and empowering communities to take action.

The context for reforms to income support

Current moves to reform the income support system are taking place against the backdrop of an Australian economy and society that has changed markedly over the past three decades. This includes an income support system that is much more targeted and participation focused than

previously. This is evident in the fact that the proportion of the working age population receiving income support dropped from 24.9 per cent in 1997 to 16.7 per cent in 2013. At the same time, Australia spends below the OECD average on social spending (19.5 per cent of GDP compared to OECD average of 21.9 per cent) and income support payments (8.6 per cent of GDP compared to OECD average of 13 per cent).

Reforms to the income support system must take into account the following two factors:

1. The importance of productive job opportunities – the state of the economy impacts on employment and participation rates, with research showing this is particularly the case for groups such as young people who are disadvantaged in the jobs market (Borland, 2013) (Davidson, 2011). Policy should be guided by the notion of inclusive growth, that is, economic growth directed towards a more inclusive society with productive employment opportunities at its heart. Action to achieve this that is explored in detail below includes a jobs plan.

2. The challenge of entrenched and overlapping disadvantage – Jesuit Social Services explored the nature of disadvantage in a series of studies culminating in *Dropping off the Edge* (Vinson, 2007). We found that in some communities there was a web-like structure of disadvantage with high levels of vulnerability in the 3% most disadvantaged localities in each jurisdiction (Vinson, 2007). The entrenched nature of structural disadvantage requires action beyond the income support system. In particular, evidence demonstrating the importance of parenting, children's early years and education demands investment in these areas.

Disadvantage and vulnerability are experienced by many of the people Jesuit Social Services works with. A recent snapshot of people we work with found that over 60 per cent of participants relied on income support as their primary income, the table below outlines the nature of other challenges they experience.

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| <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Only ten per cent had completed year 12 schooling• One third were victims of family violence• 24 per cent were homeless, living in rooming houses, or transitional/crisis accommodation• 37 per cent had been detained in custody in the previous 12 months• 11 per cent had an intellectual disability• 45 per cent had a diagnosed mental health issue• Over 60 per cent had current or past substance abuse issues• Of those who were employed, two thirds were in casual work. |
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Despite these challenges, the people we work with have aspirations. This is evident in the story of Brian a young man with significant drug use issues and involvement in the criminal justice system. Telling his story in our 2010 publication *Moving From the Edge*, Brian referred to starting an apprenticeship:

"I was a bit wary, you know, and apprenticeship for four years: how was I going to commit? I hadn't been out of gaol for more than a few months for over six years. That was a demoralising thought but I wasn't going to let it get me down. I had to be strong, mate. I was determined to give it a go, to challenge it."

Realising these aspirations can be challenging, with progress taking time and involving set-backs. Often support is needed to build people’s capability to move forward with their lives. Our experience and research tell us that this support is most effective where it is relationship-based, holistic, ongoing, and focused on building strengths. Unfortunately, as we demonstrate throughout this submission, the income support system has failed to provide the support that the most vulnerable people in our community require.

This failure results in wider costs to society, including contact with crisis services, hospitals, police and the justice system. Analysis of a group of people with complex needs in the New South Wales justice system found that lifetime institutional costs per person ranged from around \$900,000 to \$5.5 million (E, McCausland, & PwC, 2013). Our experience reflects the human costs of this, including an undermining of people’s agency, a diminished sense of worth, isolation, increased risk of exploitation, and ultimately an inability to realise hopes and aspirations.

Put civic participation at the heart of the income support system

<p><i>Questions from interim report discussed:</i></p> <p>Pillar 1 – Simpler and sustainable income support system</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• What is the preferred architecture of the payment system?• Should people with a permanent impairment and no capacity to work receive a separate payment from other working age recipients?• How could Rent Assistance be better targeted to meet the needs of people in public or private rental housing? <p>Pillar 2 – Strengthening individual and family capability</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• How should participation requirements be better matched to individual circumstances?• What is the best way of ensuring that people on income support meet their obligations?• In what circumstances should income management be applied?
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Recommendation 1: The income support system should focus on maximising civic participation. It should support and reward both employment and social activation including volunteering, learning, and other forms of independent participation.

The Interim Report has a welcome focus on the role of the income support system in supporting people to move towards employment. Given the significant disadvantage and challenges finding work that many people face, it is crucial that the income support system foster wider forms of civic participation. Employment is often achieved after a longer journey that involves stages of volunteering, learning, and other forms productive activity.

The importance of a wider notion of civic participation is confirmed by evidence showing the role social connections play in building resiliency, improving health and wellbeing, and moving people out of disadvantage (Australian Social Inclusion Board, 2011) (Furlong, 2013). In emphasising wider notions of civic participation, the Australian income support system can draw on the approaches in countries such as Belgium and the Netherlands where there is a strong focus on social activation of people in their local communities as part of wider strategies to promote economic participation.

Recommendation 2: Rates of income support must be adequate to meet the needs of people. Any reforms that result in people being transferred onto participation payments must not result in them being in a worse off net financial position.

A starting point for promoting civic participation must be meeting the immediate material needs of people. Failure to do this undermines participation by stigmatising people or exposing them to poverty. We have grave concerns that measures in the recent Federal Budget which restrict young people's access to the income support system risks exposing many to poverty, particularly the most vulnerable.

These reforms exacerbate existing inadequacies in the rates of payment of Newstart Allowance which declined from 26 per cent of the fulltime median wage in 1994 to 21per cent in 2012 (Senate Standing Committee on Education & Employment, 2012). It is clear that this results in material deprivation among people who, because of various barriers to finding work that they experience, are reliant on the system and unable to meet the costs of housing, medical, transport, education, and food.

Any reforms to the structure of the income support system must ensure that rates of payment are adequate and commensurate to individual need, particularly for people with higher needs who may require supplements. This adequacy should be preserved over time through a consistent approach across the income support system indexing payments relative to weekly earnings.

Recommendation 3: Participation requirements should emphasise a strengths-based approach over narrow or punitive mutual obligation measures. This should be realised through intensive engagement, assessment, planning and support.

Matching participation requirements to individual circumstances and ensuring these promote civic participation will require a significant change to the activation approach of the income support system. Currently, this approach:

- Is overly transactional - Job Services Australia providers spend up to 50 per cent of their time with any one jobseeker on administration and compliance (The Nous Group, 2010).
- Often fails to take into account a person's wider context - participation requirements can conflict with cultural factors such as familial obligations – we have seen this in remote Aboriginal communities where we work.
- Favours control over capability – there is evidence that emphasising participation can neglect capability building (Davidson, 2011) with an evaluation of income management in the Northern Territory finding that it *'operates more as a control or protective mechanism than as an intervention which increases capabilities'* (Buckmaster, 2013).

'The social and cultural effect of the market reforms [of public services] has been to intensify a transactional relationship, when what is actually wanted is something more human, carina and time rich.' (Cotton. 2011).

At the heart of change must be a transformation in how people are treated. Research and demonstration projects like the Department of Human Services' discontinued *Place-Based Services*, *Case Coordination* and *Local Connections to Work* trials have demonstrated the effectiveness of a strengths-based approach to supporting people move out of disadvantage (Gronda, 2009)

(Australian Social Inclusion Board, 2011) (Australian National Audit Office, 2014). This approach focuses on identifying and addressing social, personal, cultural and structural constraints to the development of people’s capabilities. Realising this approach in practice requires investment in service capacity, staff development, and culture within the income support system. It will lead to rigorous and ongoing engagement with people accessing the system and assessment of their needs. This will engender enhanced planning to set a range of flexible and realistic goals. Finally, holistic support must be in place to meet these needs, something explored under Recommendation 6.

Recommendation 4: Rent Assistance plays a key role in the income support system and must be strengthened, with reforms to apply rent assistance to public housing only taking place as part of comprehensive reform (similar to that outlined in the Henry Tax Review) that leaves no public housing tenants worse off.

A safe and secure place to call home provides the foundation for a stable life in the community. The Interim Report correctly identifies the important role played by Rent Assistance and the fact that rental cost growth has significantly outstripped the growth of Rent Assistance over the past decade. We urge caution in any reforms to move away from the income based rents in public and community housing unless they form part of comprehensive reform to strengthen rental assistance. The measures outlined in the Henry Tax Review (Commonwealth of Australia, 2010) offer an outline of an approach to reform that includes increases in payment rates, indexation tied to the growth in rental costs, and the provision of high-needs housing payments to housing providers.

A major challenge is the lack of affordable and appropriate housing options, which can only be addressed through housing policy. The Productivity Commission’s report into Geographic Labour Mobility noted that housing supply, affordability, and the structure of rent assistance could act as impediments to labour mobility (Productivity Commission, 2014). These issues are even more acute for the most vulnerable people in our community, particularly the young people we work with in the criminal justice system, many of whom lack access to safe and stable housing.

Opportunity alongside obligation

Questions from interim report discussed:

Pillar 2 – Strengthening individual and family capability

- How can programmes similar to the New Zealand investment model be adapted and implemented in Australia?
- How can a focus on ‘earn or learn’ for young Australians be enhanced?
- How can services be improved to achieve employment and social participation for people with complex needs?
- What can be done to improve access to literacy, numeracy and job relevant training for young people at risk of unemployment?

Pillar 3 – Engaging with employers

- How can business-led covenants be developed to generate employment for people with disability and mental health conditions?
- How can successful demand led employment initiatives be replicated, such as those of social enterprises?
- How can transition pathways for disadvantaged job seekers, including young people, be enhanced?
- How can vocational education and training into real jobs be better targeted?
- How can an employment focus be embedded across all employment and support services?

Recommendation 5: A jobs plan be developed that outlines strategies and invests in opportunities for vulnerable people to gain employment.

Over the past two decades the obligations placed on people accessing the income support system have increased. However, this has not been accompanied by investment in opportunities for these same people. Australia spends 0.3 per cent of GDP on employment programs, a lower portion than we did in the 1980s and well below the OECD average of 0.5 per cent. At the same time, unemployment and disengagement among vulnerable groups have remained a persistent problem. As an example, a study of people living with psychotic disorders in 2012 found that only 22.4 per cent were employed with no real change since a similar study in 1998 (Orygen Youth Health, 2013).

If mutual obligation is to remain a core principle of our income support system, then its focus must move away from crude punitive measures to providing the opportunities that people need to participate. A starting point should be a jobs plan to tackle the lack of work opportunities, particularly for the most vulnerable. Examples of measures that could form part of jobs plan include:

- A youth jobs guarantee – the ‘scarring’ effect of youth unemployment is well known (Productivity Commission, 2013), and should lead to direct action to provide work opportunities for vulnerable young people. A successful example of direct action is the UK *Future Jobs Fund* a program under which 100,000 people aged 18-24 were guaranteed paid work for six months. Additional ‘jobs’ were created in a range of government, community and private sector organisations. The long-term impact report of this initiative found that two years after starting their jobs with the scheme, participants were 16 per cent less likely to be on benefits than if they had not taken part and 27 per cent more likely to be in unsubsidised employment (Department of Work and Pensions, 2012). The scheme also generated a net financial benefit to society.
- Incentivise jobs growth for people living with a disability – measures that could be introduced here include meaningful and sensitive reporting on the numbers of people with a disability employed in organisations, governments favouring organisations with higher rates of employment in purchasing and procurement processes, expanding wage subsidies, and government affirmative action programs to arrest declining rate of disability employment in the public sector.

Recommendation 6: Invest in support that builds the capacity of people to participate in the economic and civic life of our community. For the most vulnerable this should be a highly coordinated and integrated support-learning-employment chain.

For people on income support, the opportunity to link-in with support that is directed towards building capabilities is crucial. Current levels of support are not effective, with evidence that the ongoing focus on participation measures over capability building is achieving diminishing returns (Davidson, 2011). We see this in the Job Services Australia system which, while capable of monitoring activation requirements, has arguably not provided the intense support and capability building that vulnerable and long-term unemployed people require (Davidson, 2013). Only 23.1 per cent of the most disadvantaged (Stream 4) jobseekers in Job Services achieve employment outcomes. Similarly, we are concerned about the effectiveness of some training approaches, with

the proportion of VET graduates who report improved employment status after training falling by almost five points between 2008 and 2012 (COAG Reform Council, 2013).

One key point we have learnt over many years supporting the most vulnerable people to access education and work is that success requires all aspects of the *support-learning-employment chain* to be tightly coordinated and integrated. Its components are:

- **Engagement** – building a trusting relationship with our participants and their communities.
- **Foundation Skills** - basic literacy, numeracy and communication skills.
- **Training** – entry level courses and supported pathways to mainstream education.
- **Work Experience** – flexible, intermediate labour market options to develop and practise skills
- **Employment and lifelong learning** – partnerships with educational providers, and working directly with employers.
- **Wrap-around support** – assistance to address barriers to participation, delivered by highly skilled staff with cultural competency

We have developed and influenced this approach through a range of programs and interventions, including the Gateway Program, the Jesuit Community College, our Social Enterprises and the Workplace Inclusion Program (including the African Australian Inclusion Program).

The Gateway Program (2003-2010)

Focused on building social and economic participation of young people with complex needs. Key features of the program were assertive and flexible engagement, ongoing and holistic support, as well as clear vocational and employment pathways including through social enterprises.

The *Gateway Program* evaluation undertaken by Professor Tony Vinson found:

- 94% of respondents were unemployed at intake; post program 38% had found paid employment, and 48% of respondents had engaged in education or training
- 71% of participants had been diagnosed with a mental illness; 60% of this group reported an improvement in their mental health
- Of those who had reported using drugs at entry to the program; 46% reported they had decreased their substance use.

Unfortunately, this holistic approach was considered to be costly (\$13,500 per participant). Gateway didn't fit into 'the box' of siloed government funding streams, and consequently it had to be discontinued.

The African Australian Inclusion Program (part of the Workplace Inclusion Program) (2009-Present)

Is a partnership between Jesuit Social Services and the National Australia Bank (NAB) that provides a professional bridging program for qualified African-Australians, including six months paid workplace experience.

The Program demonstrates an effective model of support for people who have moved into employment that is centred within the employer organisation. In the AAIP, each participant is paired with a mentor, a coach and a buddy, all of whom provide them with support throughout the duration of the program.

To date, **118 participants have completed the program with 86 per cent** securing full time employment after completing the program, either with NAB or externally.

To make economic and civic participation a reality, there needs to be a shift from narrowly focused and highly rationalised services to more holistic support that genuinely builds capabilities. This can be challenging in reality. For the most vulnerable, it will require involves some form of investment in *support-learning-employment chains*, but it also requires a rethink in how communities respond to the challenges of civic and economic exclusion, something that is considered in more detail below.

Empower community action

Questions from interim report discussed:

Pillar 4 – Building Community Capacity

- How can disadvantaged job seekers be encouraged to participate in their community to improve their employment outcomes?
- How can community capacity building initiatives be evaluated to ensure they achieve desired outcomes?
- What strategies help build community resilience, particularly in disadvantaged communities?
- How can innovative community models create incentives for self-sufficiency and employment?

Recommendation 7: Empower local communities to improve social and economic outcomes through investment in local leadership, coordination and governance mechanisms. A long-term goal should be community capacity to plan and resource efforts to promote participation.

Community often plays a crucial role in tackling economic and social challenges. Furthermore, there is evidence that the social environment of community contributes to well-being over and beyond the benefits wrought by effective services to individuals and households (Vinson & Rawsthorne, *Lifting our Gaze: The Community Appraisal and Strengthening Framework*, 2013). Given this, it is pleasing that the importance of community was endorsed in the Interim Report, as this corresponds with findings from Commission of Audit and the perspectives of prominent academics (Mendes, 2012) (Borland, 2014).

However, achieving genuinely local responses is something that is often elusive in practice. We see this with social services, including employment services in Australia, which are increasingly rationalised, market-orientated, and often delivered by private-sector organisations. Too often the notion of community is invoked as part of reform when all that is really attempted is the relocation of services and their provision.

Centring a participation support system on communities must involve more than simply rebranding the same old systems. Instead, genuine efforts should be made to empower communities and facilitate locally led responses. A useful starting point for understanding what these efforts should focus on is a framework developed by Vinson and Rawsthorne (2013) that identifies the attributes that influence the functioning of communities, and how these interact. The framework comprises four important clusters of activity:

- The substance and style of decision making in a community,
- The way in which resource are generated and allocated within a community,

- The integration of people, groups and community organisations,
- How direction, energy and motivation is maintained within a community.

Genuine community strategies to improve more social and economic outcomes should strengthen the attributes identified in the Community Strengthening Framework. The examples of the Gwydir Learning Region and Opportunity Chicago demonstrate how this occurs in practice.

Gwydir Learning Region

This is a partnership between stakeholders from government, education, business and the community in Gwydir, New South Wales, that commenced in 2000. It focuses on improving educational, social and economic outcomes for residents of the local community.

The GLR developed a series of shared goals and brought together different forms of support from across the community. It sought efficient use of scarce resources whilst creating new support networks.

Quantifiable successes included increases in participation in learning and training among young people, better youth transitions from school to work, and involvement of local businesses in the training system.

Opportunity Chicago

Is an exemplar of the ‘collective impact’ approach from the United States that focuses on supporting people living in public housing to move into work.

The project recognised that a range of disjointed approaches were not making a difference to the employment prospects of vulnerable people in the local community. In response to this, a collaborative framework for the development and integration of local resources and services was developed. Opportunity Chicago was the leadership platform that set strategic direction, fostered collaboration, guided the allocation of resources, and measured progress. The approach evolved over time.

The outcomes of Opportunity Chicago in supporting people into work were impressive with over 5,000 public housing residents moving into work. It is challenging however, to make direct comparisons with Australia. What can be learnt from this example though, is the process through which outcomes were achieved.

Recommendation 8: The local leadership, coordination and governance mechanisms must have adequate resources and skills to engage with different groups across communities, particularly the most vulnerable. Unique approaches for particular locations and cultures should be developed.

A crucial element of community action is the voice and participation of different groups throughout communities, particularly the most vulnerable. Putting in place inclusive local participation and governance approaches can be challenging.

Jesuit Social Services has experience in building the voice and capacity of different groups to engage in life of their communities. This diverse work includes Jesuit Community College’s engagement with

residents of public housing estates in Melbourne and also our work in remote Aboriginal communities in Central Australia.

Jesuit Community College runs the *Bridges out of Poverty/Getting Ahead* program that aims to empower people who live in poverty or unstable situations to improve their economic stability and participation in the community. Participants play the role of co-investigators of their own lives and experiences of poverty as well as the wider community context in which they live. Local government, business and civil society stakeholders also complete training as part of the program and play a key role by attending sessions run by the participants. Through this process new ways of responding to local problems are discussed and the capacity of local services to meet the needs can be enhanced. Often this leads to the development of local solutions to some of the immediate challenges facing disadvantaged communities.

Since 2008, Jesuit Social Services has been engaged accompanying Eastern and Central Arrernte peoples as they work to gain more control over their lives. Our capacity building work with these communities stems from an invitation from community to form a relationship, going out to communities and being with them in their space and place; and based on an appreciation of and respect for their unique value systems and culture. As a result of this work, the Atyenhenge-atherre Aboriginal Corporation (AAAC) was established and corporate, philanthropic and government partnerships have been developed.

Jesuit Social Services: Who we are and what we do

Jesuit Social Services works to build a just society by advocating for social change and promoting the health and wellbeing of disadvantaged people, families, and communities.

Jesuit Social Services works where the need is greatest and where it has the capacity, experience and skills to make the most difference. Jesuit Social Services values every person and seeks to engage with them in a respectful way, that acknowledges their experiences and skills and gives them the opportunity to harness their full potential.

We do this by intervening directly to address disadvantage and by influencing hearts and minds for social change. We strengthen and build respectful, constructive relationships for:

- Effective services - by partnering with people most in need and those who support them to address disadvantage
- Education - by providing access to life-long learning and development
- Capacity building - by refining and evaluating our practice and sharing and partnering for greater impact
- Advocacy - by building awareness of injustice and advocating for social change based on grounded experience and research
- Leadership development - by partnering across sectors to build expertise and commitment for justice

The promotion of **education, lifelong learning and capacity building** is fundamental to all our activity. We believe this is the most effective means of helping people to reach their potential and exercise their full citizenship. This, in turn, strengthens the broader community.

Our service delivery and advocacy focuses on the following key areas:

- **Justice and crime prevention** – people involved with the justice system
- **Mental health and wellbeing** – people with multiple and complex needs and those affected by suicide, trauma and complex bereavement
- **Settlement and community building** – recently arrived immigrants and refugees and disadvantaged communities
- **Education, training and employment** – people with barriers to sustainable employment

Currently our direct services and volunteer programs are located in: Victoria, New South Wales and Northern Territory. Services include:

- **Brosnan Services:** supporting young people and adults in the justice system, and assisting them to make a successful transition from custody back into the community. Within the suite of services are Perry House, Dillon House and Youth Justice Community Support Services.

- **Jesuit Community College:** increasing opportunities for people constrained by social and economic disadvantage to participate in education, work and community life and reach their full potential.
- **Community Programs:** working with people on public housing estates across metropolitan Melbourne, including the African Australian and Vietnamese communities, and supporting remote Aboriginal communities in governance and capacity building initiatives in Central Australia
- **Connexions:** delivering intensive support and counselling for young people with co-occurring mental health, substance and alcohol misuse problems.
- **Artful Dodgers Studios:** providing pathways to education, training and employment for young people with multiple and complex needs associated with mental health, substance abuse and homelessness.
- **The Outdoor Experience:** offering an alternative treatment service through a range of outdoor intervention programs for young people aged 15 – 25 years, who have or have had issues with alcohol and/or other drugs.
- **Support After Suicide:** supporting people bereaved by suicide, including children and young people.
- **Community Detention Services:** delivering case management support to asylum seekers, including unaccompanied minors, in community detention.
- **Western Sydney Program:** delivering social enterprise and other community building that provide affordable food, training and employment opportunities to people living in the area of Mount Druitt, Western Sydney.
- **Just Leadership:** Working in partnership with community and corporate enterprises to foster leadership for a just society. This includes the African Australian Inclusion Program, a professional bridging program developed in partnership with the National Australia Bank.
- **Capacity building** activities in Alice Springs.

Research, advocacy and policy are advanced through our Policy Unit, coordinating across all program and major interest areas of Jesuit Social Services.

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