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Transfer of youth justice to Department of Justice counter-productive to community safety: Jesuit Social Services

The Victorian Government's decision to transfer the responsibility of youth justice from the Department of Health and Human Services (DHHS) to the Department of Justice will undermine community safety in the long run, says Jesuit Social Services.

"We are all concerned by the recent images we have seen of young people committing serious and violent offences in the community and rioting in youth detention facilities," says Jesuit Social Services CEO Julie Edwards.

"However we have consistently urged the Government not to lose sight of the fact that the number of young people committing offences across the state is actually decreasing, and that Victoria has previously led the country with its progressive approach to youth justice. We have repeatedly called on the Government to follow the evidence of what works with children and young people, and to treat them in an age appropriate way. We continue to make that call.

"While new approaches to deal with the very small number of young people committing serious and violent offences with frequency are urgently needed, the decision for DHHS to no longer operate the state's youth justice system erodes the very foundations of our successful system."

Ms Edwards says the Victorian youth justice system has been mishandled and neglected for years by successive governments, which has led to the current situation.

"In making the decision to transfer the management of youth justice facilities to Corrections Victoria, our political leaders have ignored the evidence about what works and given a knee jerk, politically driven reaction to a complex problem. The decision is short-sighted and Victorians will bear the consequences well into the future."

Ms Edwards says the vast majority of young people in the youth justice system are dealing with multiple forms of disadvantage including substance abuse issues and mental illness, and reiterates that almost all of these young people will one day return to the community.

"A successful youth justice system is one that helps young people address the broader circumstances of disadvantage behind their offending, to prepare them to become productive members of society.

This work is clearly best delivered within the framework of DHHS, and today's announcement is counter-productive to these aims," says Ms Edwards.

This decision, says Ms Edwards, follows a string of moves to treat children in the justice system as adults.

"From incarcerating vulnerable young people at Barwon Prison to last week's use of capsicum spray on juveniles – these decisions are moving us more and more towards the type of chaotic and dangerous youth detention system we have seen in the Northern Territory.

"All evidence around children's brain development shows that young people are more prone to risk taking and poor judgement than adults, and we know from our 40 years of working with vulnerable young people that the most effective way to reduce anti-social behavior and reoffending is to help connect young people with family, community and education."

As part of today's suite of announcements about Victoria's youth justice system, the Government confirmed plans for a new \$228 million youth detention in Werribee South.

"Clearly recent events at Parkville have shown that facility is unfit and unsafe, both for young people and for staff," says Ms Edwards.

"However we are concerned that this style of youth detention centre, which has more than 200 beds, could be in clear contrast to international best practice in youth detention which is moving away from large institutional settings - towards facilities with strong, secure boundaries that house smaller units where young people learn the skill to reintegrate into the community.

"Youth detention is an important part of any youth justice system, and clearly needed for the small number of young offenders threatening community safety, but detention must always remain a last resort when in many cases, community-based alternatives are more appropriate and effective.

"Today's announcements make for a very sad day for Victoria - for those who want to help young people turn their lives around and who prioritise community safety. There is no evidence that these knee jerk reactions announced today will do anything to create the safer communities we all want."

Media enquiries – Kathryn Kernohan, 0409 901 248 or kathryn.kernohan@jss.org.au