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Unwinding of dual track erodes foundations of Victoria’s youth justice system: Jesuit Social Services

The passing of the Victorian Government’s *Children and Justice Legislation (Youth Justice Reform) Bill 2017* contains reforms that will erode the foundations of Victoria’s youth justice system, says Jesuit Social Services.

“An effective youth justice system is one that holds young people accountable for their actions while working to rehabilitate and re-socialise them, to ultimately prevent re-offending,” says Jesuit Social Services CEO Julie Edwards.

Ms Edwards says Jesuit Social Services, which has 40 years of experience working with young people who have contact with the youth justice system, is particularly concerned about the unwinding of the dual track system which is one of the cornerstones of the Victorian justice system.

Dual track allows young people aged 18 to 20 to be sentenced to a youth detention facility if a court believes they are vulnerable or have reasonable prospects for rehabilitation. Once the new reforms are implemented, there will be a presumption that young people between 18 and 20 convicted of particular offences will be sentenced to adult prison unless exceptional circumstances apply.

“Evidence shows us that young people who spend time in adult prison are more likely to re-offend on their return to the community than young people exiting youth detention,” says Ms Edwards.

“Dual track has been a vital element of our youth justice system which supports judicial discretion and the ability for judges and magistrates to determine the most appropriate way to facilitate the rehabilitation and re-socialisation of a young person.”

Ms Edwards says Victoria is moving further and further away from the types of successful youth justice systems which leaders from Jesuit Social Services explored during a recent #JusticeSolutions study tour.

“Our recent #JusticeSolutions study tour found that successful youth justice systems overseas place emphasis on education and rehabilitation and are staffed by qualified and well-supported people. The unwinding of an initiative like dual track is sending Victoria in the wrong direction.”

Ms Edwards says the organisation is pleased to note that the Bill contains a review mechanism which means amendments within the Act will be reviewed after three years.

“This mechanism means that the impact these reforms are having on the wellbeing of children and young people, as well as the best way to achieve safer communities, will be considered.”

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