



18 February 2020

Legislative Council Legal and Social Issues Committee  
Parliament of Victoria  
Parliament House  
Spring Street  
East Melbourne, VIC 3002

## Submission to the Inquiry into Homelessness in Victoria

Jesuit Social Services welcomes the Legislative Council Legal and Social Issues Committee's Inquiry into Homelessness in Victoria, in recognition that homelessness is a longstanding issue in the state. We appreciate the opportunity to make a submission to the Inquiry.

Our submission focusses on four interconnected areas of policy and practice relating to housing and homelessness:

1. Structural disadvantage and the need to increase Victoria's social housing stock, incorporating both public housing and community-managed housing;
2. Supporting people involved with or exiting from the justice system and the need for more supported and transitional housing programs;
3. Supporting people with complex and multiple needs and the need to expand the diversity and availability of housing options and support; and
4. The need to address climate change and its impacts in ways that do not exacerbate pre-existing inequities in housing for Victoria's most vulnerable people.

### Jesuit Social Services: Who we are and what we do

Jesuit Social Services is a social change organisation. Our mission is to build a just society where all people can live to their full potential. For over 40 years, we have been working in solidarity with people and communities experiencing disadvantage and marginalisation. We work where the need is greatest and where we have the capacity, experience and skills to make the most difference.

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

**Justice and crime prevention** – people involved with the justice system or at risk of becoming so involved.

**Mental health and wellbeing** – people with complex and multiple needs, including mental illness, trauma, homelessness 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.

**Gender and culture** – providing leadership on the reduction of violence and other harmful behaviours prevalent among boys and men, and building new approaches to improve their wellbeing and keep families and communities safe.

**Ecological justice** – inviting discussion on what practices, policies and actions can be taken by governments, individuals, organisations and the community services sector within Australia to build an ecologically just society. The pursuit of ecological justice underpins all that we do in our programs and advocacy.

Advocacy and policy underpin all that we do. It is coordinated across all programs and major interest areas of Jesuit Social Services. Our advocacy is grounded in the knowledge, expertise and experiences of program staff and participants, as well as academic research and evidence.

We seek to influence policies, practices, legislation and budget investment, as well as community members themselves, to positively influence people’s lives and improve approaches to addressing long-term social challenges. We do this by working collaboratively with the community to build coalitions and alliances around key issues, and by building strong relationships with business and government.

## 1. Structural disadvantage and the right to housing

Jesuit Social Services’ experience over several decades engaged in community development work, along with our series of *Dropping off the Edge* research reports<sup>1</sup>, has demonstrated that many Victorian communities experience significant and persistent disadvantage. This disadvantage manifests in high rates of disengagement from school, joblessness, homelessness, drug and alcohol misuse, family violence, child maltreatment, mental illness, pain and trauma, and intersection with the criminal justice system and statutory child protection and placement care services<sup>2</sup>. These are complex challenges, especially because they intersect, interact and are often inter-generational. However, without intervention now to address existing infrastructure and service deficits, the significant disadvantage experienced by particular cohorts and communities will compound, as will pressure on the public purse to address the negative consequences.

In this context, Jesuit Social Services has long called for more innovative responses to improving Victoria’s social housing system – that is, alternatives to the private rental market, including subsidised and supported housing models, which includes public housing managed by the government and community housing managed by not-for-profit agencies.

Access to adequate, safe and secure housing is a fundamental human right. As outlined in our [Submission to the 2020/21 Victorian State Budget](#), “Every person has the right to an adequate

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<sup>1</sup> Including: Vinson, T., & Rawsthorne, M. (2015). *Dropping off the Edge 2015: Persistent communal disadvantage in Australia*. Richmond: Jesuit Social Services; Vinson, T. (2009). *Dropping off the Edge: Mapping the distribution of disadvantage in Australia*. Richmond: Jesuit Social Services; Vinson, T., Rawsthorne, M., & Cooper, B. (2007). *Dropping off the edge: The distribution of disadvantage in Australia*. Richmond: Jesuit Social Services; Vinson, T. (2004). *Community adversity and resilience: The distribution of social disadvantage in Victoria and New South Wales and the mediating role of social cohesion*. Richmond: Jesuit Social Services; and Vinson, T. (1999). *Unequal in life: The distribution of social disadvantage in Victoria and New South Wales*. Richmond: Jesuit Social Services.

<sup>2</sup> We understand that the Victorian Department of Health and Human Services (DHHS) now refers to the out-of-home care system as ‘placement care services’. DHHS (2019). Department of Health & Human Services annual report 2018-19. Melbourne: DHHS.

standard of living, which includes the right to adequate housing.” Adequate housing helps provide a solid foundation for personal health, wellbeing and agency, and helps build more productive, cohesive and safer communities.

The Australian Housing and Urban Research Institute (AHURI) has made a compelling business case for social housing to be considered as public infrastructure.<sup>3</sup> Infrastructure Australia concurs that social housing is “an important piece of social infrastructure in Australia that serves both a social and economic purpose and contributes to the effective functioning of society”.<sup>4</sup>

Jesuit Social Services works with many vulnerable people who rely on social housing to meet their accommodation needs. We see many people – especially those with mental health and substance misuse issues, newly-arrived refugees and migrants, those exiting prison, and those leaving placement care services – who are experiencing or have experienced homelessness, housing instability and stress, as well as other forms of disadvantage in their lives. Positive outcomes experienced by our program participants support the conclusions of AHURI and Infrastructure Australia in relation to the importance of adequate housing in underpinning positive changes in their lives.

As at 30 June 2019, 28 per cent of all participants in Jesuit Social Services’ ‘justice and crime prevention’ and ‘housing and complex needs’ programs were homeless.<sup>5</sup> That is, the type of housing in which 28 per cent of participants were residing met the Australian Bureau of Statistics’ (ABS) primary or secondary homelessness criteria – including 1 per cent who were lacking conventional housing (primary homelessness), and 27 per cent who were residing in short-term or emergency accommodation due to a lack of alternative options (secondary homelessness).

Among the 27 per cent whose accommodation indicated secondary homelessness, we note a distinction between those residing in types of housing that are, in general, less safe and highly insecure<sup>6</sup> (comprising 8 per cent of participants) and those residing in types of housing with better features or the potential for security and safety, at least over the short-term<sup>7</sup> (comprising 19 per cent of participants). Based on our program data, we know that those in the most tenuous housing situations have poorer outcomes. In regard to their view of themselves, substantial improvement

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<sup>3</sup> Denham, T., Dodson, J., & Lawson, J. (2019). *The business case for social housing as infrastructure*. Melbourne: Australian Housing & Urban Research Institute.

<sup>4</sup> Infrastructure Australia (2019). *An Assessment of Australia’s Future Infrastructure Needs: The Australian Infrastructure Audit 2019*. Infrastructure Australia, Australian Government.

<sup>5</sup> The figures provided in this submission for Jesuit Social Services’ participants relate to the 2018-19 financial year; are sourced from Jesuit Social Services’ participant (i.e. ‘client’) database; and are based on the 1,894 participants in Jesuit Social Services’ ‘justice and crime prevention’ and ‘housing and complex needs’ programs whose address type was known both when they commenced participating in the respective program and at the end of the 2018-19 financial year (or at the time of exit from the program, if this occurred earlier), comprising 84% of all Jesuit Social Services’ program participants in the 2018-19 financial year. The housing data recorded by JeSS uses the same definitions of homelessness as the Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS): ‘primary homelessness’ (when a person lacks conventional accommodation, such as living on the streets/rough sleeping, sleeping in parks or cars, or squatting in buildings and improvised dwellings for shelter); ‘secondary homelessness’ (when people are forced to move from one temporary shelter to another, e.g. couch surfing); and ‘tertiary homelessness’ (when people live in accommodation that falls below minimum standards, e.g. single rooms in private boarding houses without their own bathroom, kitchen, or security of tenure). JeSS does not count instances of ‘tertiary’ homelessness or overcrowding.

<sup>6</sup> These housing types include Dillon House (a Jesuit Social Services’ facility), a head lease, transitional housing, temporarily staying with family or friends, and other emergency/transition/temporary housing.

<sup>7</sup> These housing types include couch surfing, a caravan park, rooming house or private hotel, and refuge or crisis accommodation.

was demonstrated through the period of their respective program involvement by 11 per cent of participants categorised as ‘housed’ and 6 per cent of participants categorised in the ‘stable short-term’ housing sub-group, compared with only 1 per cent of participants categorised in the ‘insecure/unsafe’ housing sub-group.

Program participants’ education and employment participation rates also varied with type of housing, but the highest rates of substantial improvement in education and employment participation in association with improved view of self were 11 per cent for participants in the ‘housed’ group and 8 per cent for participants in the ‘stable short-term’ housing sub-group, compared with only 1 per cent for participants in the ‘insecure/unsafe’ housing sub-group. Refer to Figure 1 below for a diagrammatic representation of these findings.

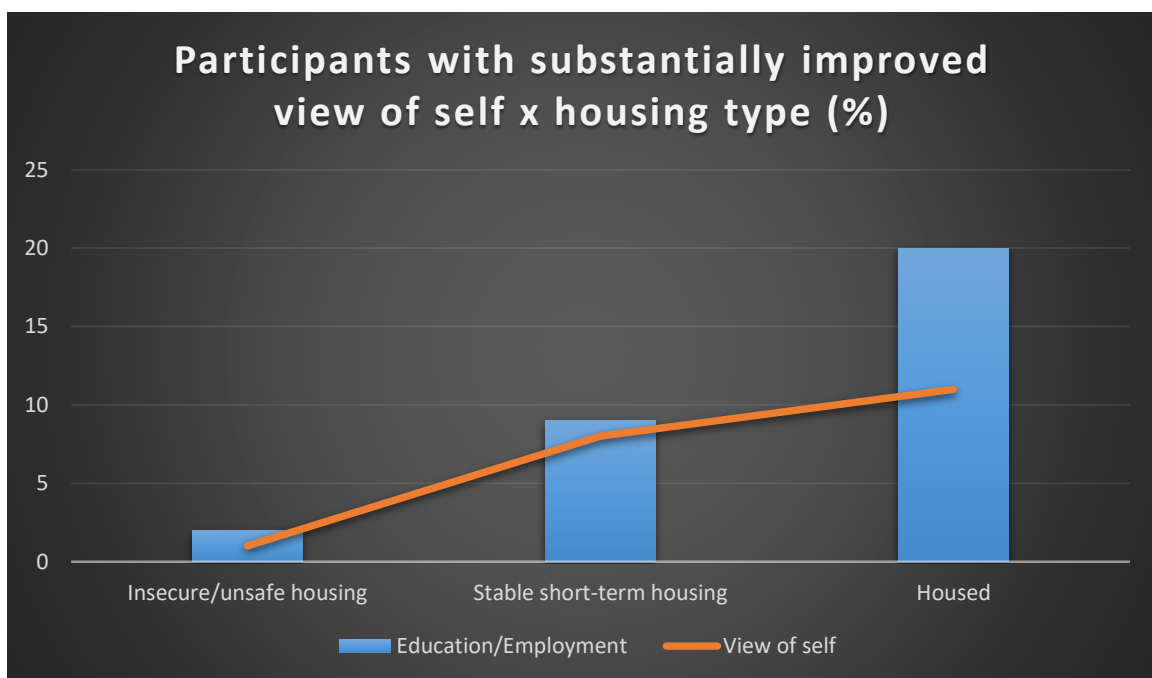


Figure 1: Jesuit Social Services’ program participants who experienced substantial improvement in their view of self by participation in education and employment (percentages)

Numerous research reports indicate that there is a significant undersupply of social housing across Australia and that this situation requires urgent attention.<sup>8</sup> For this reason, Jesuit Social Services strongly supports the national [Everybody's Home](#) campaign, which was launched by peak organisations in the social housing sector prior to the 2019 Federal election.

<sup>8</sup> For example: Compass Housing Services (2019). *Estimating Current and Future Demand for Housing Assistance: A discussion paper*. Hamilton, NSW; Daley, J., Coates, B., & Wiltshire, T. (2018). *Housing affordability: Reimagining the Australian dream*. Grattan Institute; Parkinson, S., Batterham, D., Reynolds, M., & Wood, G. (2019). *The changing geography of homelessness: A spatial analysis from 2001 to 2016, AHURI Final Report*. Melbourne: Australia Housing & Urban Research Institute; and Powell, A., Meltzer, A., Martin, C., et al. (2019). *The construction of social housing pathways across Australia*. Melbourne: Australian Housing & Urban Research Institute.

Likewise, Infrastructure Victoria's [30-Year Infrastructure Strategy](#) recognises the gravity of Victoria's current social housing situation and the urgent need to prioritise major investment in this important area of infrastructure:

Major investment over the next 30 years, and particularly the next 10, is essential to ensure the most vulnerable Victorians have access to one of our most fundamental needs – shelter. Without bold action, the number of Victorians living in insecure accommodation will increase to levels never seen before. While the cost of improving the provision of social housing for vulnerable Victorians will be significant, not acting will come with even greater costs to society and the economy, which will be felt by generations to come.<sup>9</sup>

We acknowledge the Victorian Government's funding allocation of \$209 million in the 2019/20 Budget as part of its commitment to build 1,000 new social housing properties over three years "to fight homelessness". Unfortunately, this will not provide enough new public housing stock to close the existing gap in supply for those in urgent need of public and community housing in Victoria, let alone address the projected increasing gap in future years.

In this context, Jesuit Social Services continues to call for a significant increase in access to social housing (public housing and community housing), as recommended in our [Submission to the 2020/21 Victorian State Budget](#).<sup>10</sup>

**We recommend that the Victorian Government prioritise increased investment in new public and community housing stock, including through funding the building of at least 3,800 new public and community housing properties each year over the next four years – as recommended by Victoria's peak housing organisation.**

Meanwhile, Jesuit Social Services is also collaborating with not-for-profit property developer, [The Barnett Foundation](#), to re-develop a site in Brunswick that our organisation has owned, and from where we have been operating a range of programs that support marginalised people to reach their full potential, since 1987. The proposed re-development incorporates approximately 57 high quality, sustainably designed, affordable apartments to be sold under the Barnett model – that is, to current public housing tenants who would otherwise be locked out of the private housing market; green spaces; communal gardens; and contemporary office spaces for up to 150 Jesuit Social Services staff. This project is in line with our vision of building a just and inclusive society and supports the Moreland Affordable Housing Strategy 2014–2018, which aims to maximise the supply of affordable housing in the area.

## 2. Supporting people involved with or exiting from the justice system with supported and transitional housing programs

Jesuit Social Services continues to be concerned by Victoria's soaring prison populations, and by the approach that involves building more prisons rather than investing in alternatives that are proven to be effective in reducing reoffending. We have long argued that building more prisons is unsustainable, does not create community safety, and does not address the drivers of offending behaviour in the first place.

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<sup>9</sup> Infrastructure Victoria (2016). *Victoria's 30-year infrastructure strategy, December 2016*. Melbourne: Infrastructure Victoria, p. 5.

<sup>10</sup> See Recommendation 3 on pages 5-6 and 11.

Almost one-third of people exit the justice system into homelessness.<sup>11</sup> People exiting prison are some of the most vulnerable and disadvantaged members of the Victorian community, yet the limited support available to them means they often cycle through the justice system again and again. The Victorian Ombudsman's *Investigation into the Rehabilitation and Reintegration of Prisoners in Victoria* completed in 2015 reported that only 700 of the approximately 6,600 people who leave prison each year (i.e. less than 11 per cent) receive between 3 and 22 contact hours of support.<sup>12</sup> The limited nature of support means people exiting prison do not have the opportunity to adequately address the problems they face, including their offending behaviour, and this, in turn, exacerbates their likelihood of reoffending.

The provision of support for people leaving prison is critical to reducing reoffending and building safe communities. Post-release support, including transitional facilities, are critical to ensuring that individuals do not exit prison into homelessness or unsuitable housing:

People discharged from prison need housing and employment for successful re-entry into the community and to reduce the likelihood of returning to prison. Dischargees without housing often cycle from prison into homelessness and back into prison, with prison dischargees who experience homelessness almost twice as likely to return to prison within 9 months of release<sup>13</sup>

Responding to this significant service gap, Jesuit Social Services delivers a diversity of transitional and supported housing programs to assist vulnerable adults and young people involved with, or exiting, the justice systems. Examples of these programs are ReConnect, Perry House, Next Steps, and Link Youth Justice Housing Program.

## ReConnect

The ReConnect program provides individually tailored support to high risk men and women to assist them transition back into the community from prison. ReConnect provides targeted (up to four weeks) and intensive (up to 12 months) reintegration outreach services for serious violent or sex offenders, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander prisoners, women prisoners, and other prisoners with high transitional needs. ReConnect creates individual transition plans for, and assertive outreach and practical assistance to, people exiting prison; assists them to address the underlying causes of their offending; and facilitates community reintegration, thereby reducing reoffending.

The post-release workers address housing and material supports; assist with family reunification; refer people to a range of specialist health and wellbeing services (including drug, alcohol, and mental health services); ensure people have pathways to economic and social participation; help connect people to community and culture; support people to comply with parole conditions and/or community orders; and emphasise empowerment in helping people overcome the legacy of negative experiences in their lives.

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<sup>11</sup> Australian Institute of Health & Welfare (2015). *The Health of Australia's Prisoners, 2015*. Canberra: Australian Institute of Health & Welfare.

<sup>12</sup> Victorian Ombudsman (2015). *Investigation into the rehabilitation and reintegration of prisoners in Victoria, September 2015*. Melbourne: Victorian Ombudsman.

<sup>13</sup> Australian Institute of Health & Welfare (2019). *Specialist Homelessness Services annual report 2018-19*. Canberra: Australian Institute of Health & Welfare, Australian Government, p. 66.

### Feedback from ReConnect participants

*"They helped me with the practical things that I needed in order to live my life and move forward."*

*"Self-esteem. Just leading me the way – I've never had a social worker or anything like that and so the encouragement and support was really important."*

*"My personal wellbeing – basically a secure place over my head and helping me getting back in touch with friends, and better mental health."*

*"Living in society without using drugs and alcohol – I used to be a fairly heavy drinker and now I'm not. Linking me in with my [recreational club] – I really enjoy it. You can't [engage in activity] when you're drunk. Finding people with common interests [...] I needed to find people that were interested in doing similar things to me – without using drugs and alcohol."*

Jesuit Social Services delivers the ReConnect program across Melbourne's north and western regions, as part of the Corrections Victoria Reintegration Pathway. The ReConnect program works collaboratively with Corrections Victoria and other community-based agencies to provide a continuum of care. This networked approach assists people's transition from prison into the community and reduces the chances that they return to prison. It also provides better outcomes for the families of people exiting prison, as well as the communities that prisoners are returning to.

As at 30 June 2019, 64 per cent of participants in the ReConnect program were experiencing homelessness. This represents a disproportionately high 55 per cent of all participants in Jesuit Social Services' 'justice and crime prevention' and 'housing and complex needs' programs who were experiencing homelessness.

### Perry House

Perry House is a supported housing program delivered by Jesuit Social Services for justice system-involved young people who are at risk of, or are experiencing, homelessness. Perry House provides a residential-based living skills program for young people with an intellectual disability who are involved with youth justice and correctional services and require support. Up to four participants at a time reside at the house for up to 12 months, and a further four months supported in an outreach capacity once they have left the house, while they are assisted to develop independent living skills and engage with activities.

### Next Steps

Jesuit Social Services' Next Steps program was recognised by the 2017 Victorian Homelessness Achievement Awards, winning the *Excellence in ending homelessness among young people* category. Next Steps was established in 2012 and is funded under the Victorian Homelessness Action Plan.

Next Steps is a housing program for young people (aged 16–24 years) who have involvement with the justice system and are experiencing, or are at risk of, homelessness. The program delivers intensive case management support and supported accommodation through Jesuit Social Services' Dillon House property, which is a key component of the program. At Dillon House, young people are supported to develop daily living skills, including cooking, meal planning, shopping, budgeting and banking. The focus is on building trusting relationships that are meaningful to each young person, and the program offers a therapeutic approach through a Family Practitioner that acknowledges the trauma that most of the young people have experienced.

## Link Youth Justice Housing Program

The Link Youth Justice Housing Program (Link) is an innovative pilot program launched in 2018 that supports young people (aged 16–22 years) exiting the criminal justice system who are homeless or at risk of homelessness. The program facilitates access to stable housing, and works to secure and sustain ongoing and stable living arrangements. It also provides a crucial after-hours support service to engage participants during the highest risk time for reoffending (outside business hours and on weekends) when they are also most likely to experience crisis and breakdown in their relationships and tenancies.

### Feedback from Link participants

*"I can call my worker at any time... they will pick up and help me."*

*"Other workers come around just when you have an issue, [Link support worker] will come just if you're stressed or low, you don't have to know why or anything, she just comes around and we figure it out."*

*"Sometimes I've just forgotten an appointment or something and I stress about it. It's good to have someone to call so they can tell you what to do and stop stressing."*

Link involves partner agency VincentCare taking out a private rental lease (head leasing) and then subletting to a participant, providing access to the normally exclusive private rental market. Rent is subsidised, making it equivalent to public housing (i.e. 25% of the young person's income), to make it affordable.

### Feedback from Link participants

*"I have a guaranteed roof over my head every day. What could make it better?"*

*"I have my OWN place, my OWN place... I get to live independently. I never thought I'd do that."*

*"Privacy. Like this is the first place I can have stuff sent and no one else touches it. It's also easier to enrol in school and get to school."*

*"I never really had my own fridge.... to cook and clean for yourself... it's hard you know... but it's pretty close to perfect."*

The young person continues to be supported by Jesuit Social Services after hours, and they are assisted to develop independent living skills.

### Feedback from Link participant

*"It's great having workers that don't live with you, when you have the choice about when they should be here."*

An evaluation of Link conducted after the first 12 months of program delivery found that over half the young people participating in the program showed improvement in relation to managing day-to-day, and their family connections and view of the future. Just under half the participants showed improvement in relation to their use of supports, participation in education and employment, goal setting, and view of self.



A specific strength of the Link program is that participants work closely with their support workers to identify a suitable property where they would like to live and with who they would like to share (friends or family), if appropriate, and they are directly involved in procuring their home. Learning these skills is an important aspect of maintaining housing in the longer-term, including the option to take on the lease at the end of the two-year program period.

Despite these positive outcomes, housing stability was found (through the evaluation of Link after the first 12 months of program delivery) to be the primary concern of participants in relation to their future:

#### Feedback from Link participants

*"Two years go quickly."*

*"Okay. So I'm a stress head. I stress about everything. The second I got into this house I started stressing about what I'm going to do when it's all over... I've been homeless a lot..."*

*"I'm worried about what will happen to this house. I'm worried about what will happen to me... I don't want to lose this."*

*"I don't want to go back to the street."*

#### More services are needed

A small number of male prisoners can access 25 beds at the Judy Lazarus Transition Centre, which has been found to reduce recidivism and better prepare people for transition back into the community. This model provides a staged release, which has been shown to help people develop the skills and confidence to live in the community.

**The recidivism rate for those who exit via the intensive support program at the Judy Lazarus Transition Centre is 10.4 per cent compared to 44.1 per cent for the overall prison population.<sup>14</sup>**

Meanwhile, the women's imprisonment rate has climbed by 138 per cent over the past decade<sup>15</sup>, and there is currently no comparable service to the Judy Lazarus Transition Centre for male prisoners available to women, and there is very limited tailored flexible transition support available to women.

Jesuit Social Services delivers effective transition support to high risk men and women leaving prison through our ReConnect program, and effective supported housing programs for justice system-involved young people through our Perry House, Next Steps, and Link Youth Justice Housing Programs. However, the scale of these programs is not commensurate with the overall need. Therefore, we continue to call for more investment in such programs, as outlined in recommendations made in our [Submission to the 2020/21 Victorian State Budget](#).

**We recommend that the Victorian Government invest more in the provision of more intensive transition services for highly vulnerable people exiting prison.**

<sup>14</sup> Victorian Ombudsman (2015). *Op. cit*, p. 102.

<sup>15</sup> Corrections Victoria (2018). *Prisoner Profile*. Melbourne Corrections Victoria.

**We also recommend that the Victorian Government:**

- **provide recurrent funding for the *Link Youth Justice Housing Program* and expand it statewide;**
- **recurrently fund a housing model similar to our *Next Steps* program for young women transitioning from prison back into the community and make it available statewide;**
- **expand the Judy Lazarus Transition Centre to enable a greater proportion of the male prisoner population to access intensive transitional support; and**
- **establish an equivalent transitional support facility for women prisoners, especially those with mental health issues, drug or alcohol misuse issues, intellectual disability or cognitive impairment.**

### 3. Supporting people with complex and multiple needs with diverse options

The availability of safe, secure and stable housing is a major issue for many in our community, but particularly for people with mental illness, alcohol and drug problems, and other complex and multiple needs. As highlighted in our [Submission to the Royal Commission into Victoria's Mental Health System](#), mental health interventions will not be successful if a person does not have appropriate, safe, secure and stable housing.

In particular, there is a lack of housing options and integrated supports for vulnerable young people with multiple and complex needs, including those who may be dealing with drug or alcohol misuse issues, who may be experiencing mental ill health, who have experienced trauma, and/or who may be transitioning from placement care services or the justice system.

Jesuit Social Services provides a range of programs for people with complex and multiple needs. Across Jesuit Social Services' 'housing and complex needs' programs, of the participants categorised as homeless as at 30 June 2019:

- 91 per cent had used substances (drugs or alcohol) since their referral;
- 81 per cent were experiencing mental health symptoms – 61 percent had a mental health diagnosis and 20 percent were exhibiting mental health symptoms;
- 58 per cent had experienced family violence; and
- 56 per cent had (known) child protection involvement at some point in their life.

Many people who participate in our programs are also eligible for, or participate in, the National Disability Insurance Scheme (NDIS), but fall into the cohort of people with 'psychosocial disabilities' who are poorly served by the NDIS.<sup>16</sup> This cohort is particularly vulnerable, commonly experiencing challenges with communication, social exclusion, finding suitable housing and employment, and maintaining physical health. People "with psychosocial disability require higher levels of support to engage with support services and face some specific challenges understanding and accessing the NDIS."<sup>17</sup>

Regardless, participation in the NDIS does not facilitate access to social housing for people with psychosocial disabilities – the NDIS does not provide them with any capital funding to increase the supply of suitable supported housing, and so they must compete for access to the limited existing social housing stock in Victoria.

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<sup>16</sup> See Tune, D. (2019). *Review of the National Disability Insurance Scheme Act 2013: Removing red tape and implementing the NDIS Participant Service Guarantee*. Canberra, ACT: Australian Government.

<sup>17</sup> Tune, D. (2019). *Op. cit.*, p. 87.

Examples of Jesuit Social Services' programs for people with complex and multiple needs include Perry House, described above, and Connexions.

## Connexions

The Connexions program, established in 1996, was Victoria's first dual diagnosis service working exclusively with young people (aged 16–28 years) dealing with concurrent mental health and substance misuse issues. The demand for such a service response to marginalised young people experiencing high and complex needs is captured by a Connexions staff member:

*“Over the last 5 years I have been in the Connexions team, I have heard of numerous experiences where a young person cannot access treatment for mental health due to their substance use, which happens the opposite way when referring into AOD services – young people get rejected due to complex mental health issues. It is crucial that these two service systems work closer and more collaboratively, rather than in silos, which results in a number of people not being able to access a service they are in need of and expressing a desire for.”*

– **Becky, Connexions staff member**

The Connexions program seeks to engage participants in relationships of trust and understanding. It provides a professional service that integrates counselling, casework and advocacy, and enables engagement tailored to the individual needs of the young people accessing the service – including from the *Artful Dodgers Studio*, an arts and music program (also provided through Jesuit Social Services) that offers a flexible, supportive and welcoming space for young people to work on projects while building a stronger sense of belonging and self-esteem.

The Connexions program, based at sites in Collingwood and Sunshine, provides services throughout the Melbourne metropolitan area. It delivers a flexible model of support to assist young people in meeting their personal goals, understanding and working alongside them, to improve their quality of life through counselling and case management support.

As at 30 June 2019, 34 per cent of participants in the Connexions program were experiencing homelessness. This represents 10 per cent of all participants in Jesuit Social Services' 'justice and crime prevention' and 'housing and complex needs' programs who were experiencing homelessness.

## More services are needed

The substantial rates of (primary and secondary) homelessness experienced by participants in Jesuit Social Services' programs<sup>18</sup> – especially in the ReConnect and Connexions programs – illustrates that the people we serve are among the most disadvantaged in Victoria. It also highlights that considerably more supported accommodation programs and cross-sector initiatives are required to ensure that the housing needs of vulnerable and disadvantaged Victorians are met.

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<sup>18</sup> All participants in Jesuit Social Services' housing programs are homeless.

**We recommend that the Victorian Government invest in:**

- **expanding the range (diversity) and availability (quantity) of supported housing options for different cohorts of people with complex and multiple needs – including specific initiatives for young people, single people, women, people with experience of trauma, and people with mental ill-health; and**
- **cross-sector initiatives (such as housing-employment services) to create a more integrated response for people in crisis.**

#### 4. Ecological justice and housing

Jesuit Social Services is concerned to ensure that pre-existing inequities in housing in Victoria are not exacerbated by the impacts of climate change.

We are particularly concerned that without access to appropriate transitional, stable, quality supported housing arrangements, the most vulnerable Victorians will continue to be at risk of long-term homelessness and will face an ever-greater challenge in overcoming any other issues they are facing. As we collectively face increasingly harsh climatic conditions, the lack of adequate housing for sections of our community is an inequality that will exacerbate social discord and undermine cohesion.

The bushfire crisis currently being experienced in Victoria – and more widely across Australia – highlights that the specific impacts of climate change are not predictable, can be volatile, and can have variable impacts in different regions and localities. Widespread concern has already been expressed in the community services sector that the current bushfires crisis is increasing homelessness and the health challenges faced by low-income earners and rough sleepers.<sup>19</sup>

As outlined in our [Submission regarding the proposed Residential Tenancies Regulations 2020](#), we call for the Victorian Government to strengthen support for vulnerable households and communities in Victoria by:

- prioritising increased investment in new public and community housing stock, as well as access to supported housing, as recommended above;
- ensuring equitable access to affordable energy through targeted programs to assist marginalised groups (e.g. Energy Savvy Upgrades Program, Victorian Healthy Homes, and Energy Smart Public Housing Program);
- ensuring equitable access to energy-efficient housing, including through strengthening rental minimum standards;
- effective implementation of climate safe and energy efficient design in the planning and construction of all new public and community housing in Victoria, as provided for in the *Climate Change Act 2017*; and
- funding and supporting emerging and innovative community-led projects aimed at trialling, testing and implementing climate change adaptation, mitigation and transformation activities, alongside the development of longer-term structural changes.

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<sup>19</sup> See, for example, Michael, Luke (2019, 15 January). ‘What impact will the bushfire crisis have on homelessness?’ PRObono Australia: [link](#).

We appreciate you taking our views into account and would be pleased to present our experiences directly to the Committee.

Yours sincerely

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Sally Parnell". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style.

**Sally Parnell**  
**Acting CEO, Jesuit Social Services**