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COVID-19 prison risk requires immediate action by Victorian Government

The Victorian Government must act swiftly to release low-level prisoners and other vulnerable groups from the state's prison system, following the news that six Victorian prisons are in lockdown after a staff member tested positive to COVID-19, says Jesuit Social Services.

"We have been deeply concerned about a potential COVID-19 outbreak in a prison setting, particularly given we know that people with underlying health conditions are at higher risk of severe illness. According to the Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, 30 per cent of prison entrants reported at least one chronic physical health condition, meaning a COVID-19 outbreak could have catastrophic consequences," says Jesuit Social Services CEO Julie Edwards.

The news of six prisons, including Ravenhall Correctional Centre and Barwon Prison, going into lockdown follows recent news of a similar lockdown at Malmsbury Youth Justice Centre.

Ms Edwards says that Victoria's prison facilities are not built to accommodate or respond to a challenge such as COVID-19.

"The use of isolation and lockdown as a way of 'managing' the serious health risks associated with COVID-19 is also very troubling. We have previously produced a report detailing the physical and psychological impact of isolation in prison settings, and our program participants have spoken to us about the toll isolation has had on them.

"This is not a humane way to treat anybody, let alone people who are already vulnerable and in many cases dealing with pre-existing, complex health concerns."

Jesuit Social Services calls for the Victorian Government to release groups including low-level offenders who do not pose a threat to community safety, people on remand, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and prisoners with chronic health conditions.

"We have seen other countries and cities across parts of Europe and the US take action to release some prisoners. Our political leaders taking a proactive approach now will protect the health and wellbeing of people who have contact with the system, including prisoners and staff, and may literally save lives."

"We must ensure people are released into safe and healthy environments with access to support to address the underlying problems they experience, which may include mental illness, family violence or chronic health conditions. Of course, it is also vital that we ensure we are protecting the health and safety of prisoners who will remain in the system and provide adequate support to people exiting into the community in the midst of an unprecedented pandemic."

"These are challenging times for everybody, and our political leaders are having to make difficult decisions every day. We are committed to working with Government and Corrections Victoria as they act decisively to protect staff, our most vulnerable people and the broader community."

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