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Youth justice system must protect vulnerable young people from COVID-19: Jesuit Social Services

Victoria's youth justice system must prioritise the health and safety of vulnerable young people by safely exiting some young people into the community, following a worrying increase in confirmed COVID-19 cases connected with the system, says Jesuit Social Services.

It has been reported that 11 young people at the Parkville youth detention facility have tested positive to COVID-19 since entering the system less than two weeks ago.

"The news that COVID-19 has entered Victoria's youth detention system is deeply troubling for everybody involved, including young people, their families and staff," says Jesuit Social Services CEO Julie Edwards.

Ms Edwards says the Victorian Government should explore the immediate exit of a number of young people from detention into safe and supported alternatives in the community. Children aged under 14, young people with chronic health problems, young people on remand and young people involved in the residential care system are among the groups that should be considered for release.

"Some young people will have safe and secure housing to exit to, such as with family, and others can be supported to access suitable alternatives. There are options available to Government to monitor young people and ensure they are where they need to be, and complying with current lockdown restrictions.

"Keeping young people safe in the community, not keeping them locked up and potentially exposing them to COVID-19, must be the goal during this extremely challenging time."

Ms Edwards says that young people involved in the state's justice system are among Victoria's most vulnerable.

"A snapshot of young people in detention, featured in the Youth Parole Board's current annual report, shows that almost half [48 per cent] of young people presented with mental health issues, 54 per cent had a history of alcohol and substance use and 67 per cent were victims of abuse, neglect and trauma. Additionally, 36 per cent have been subject to a child protection order at some point.

"Overseas, some of the most successful youth justice systems are the ones where detention is regarded as a last resort and young people are supported in the community wherever possible. We know through our own work, and the successful systems we've observed in parts of the US, Europe and New Zealand, that there are ways to hold young people accountable for their actions while supporting them to turn their lives around and connect with family, education and the broader community."

"This is a template Victoria can work towards once we get through this crisis, and a great place to start would be here and now to immediately exit vulnerable young people from the system to keep them as well as youth justice staff safe during the pandemic."

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