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Urgent action required to support vulnerable people in NSW’s prison system: Jesuit Social Services

The NSW Government must protect the health and safety of vulnerable people in prison by moving to immediately release some people into the community, as COVID-19 outbreaks in the state’s prisons continue to worsen, says Jesuit Social Services.

“Throughout the pandemic, across Australia and beyond, we have been extremely concerned about the potential catastrophic consequences of COVID-19 entering prisons,” says Jesuit Social Services CEO Julie Edwards.

“We know that about 30 per cent of prison entrants report at least one chronic physical health condition and also that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people remain shockingly overrepresented in our prison systems. Men and women exiting the prison system, who Jesuit Social Services works with every day, often report personal experience of complex health issues including cardiovascular disease and diabetes.

“These marginalised people are particularly vulnerable to COVID-19 – and at the same time prisons are not environments that are generally conducive to the type of important health measures to prevent the spread.”

With a growing number of COVID-19 cases linked three prisons in NSW - Parkela Correctional Centre, Silverwater Correctional Complex and Bathurst Correctional Centre – Jesuit Social Services urges the NSW Government to take urgent action to protect the health and safety of prisoners and staff in prison.

“We call on the NSW Government to immediately find alternatives to prison, both in the community and in supported accommodation, for vulnerable groups including Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, people with disabilities and the elderly. We also support calls for non-violent, low-level offenders to be exited from prison during this particularly dangerous time.”

In Victoria, Jesuit Social Services partners with the Department of Justice and Community Safety to deliver the Maribyrnong Community Residential Facility. This program, which provides safe and supported accommodation to men exiting prison who are at high risk of homelessness, was established last year in response to the pandemic. The program was recently re-funded by the Victorian Government for a further 12 months.

“This wrap-around model provides residents with support such as learning and employment pathways, assistance to engage with health services and support to secure longer-term housing, in addition to a safe and secure roof over participants’ heads.

“This program has already proved successful and makes a tangible, positive difference to the lives of vulnerable people. The NSW Government could look to establish a similar program for vulnerable people to be moved out of the prison system and into a facility that will better protect their health and safety, while others could be exited into the community with adequate support.”

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