

MEDIA RELEASE – OCTOBER 6, 2021

Worsening COVID crisis in Victorian prison system needs urgent intervention

The current COVID-19 outbreak within the Victorian prison system, which has spread to five prisons across Melbourne and regional Victoria, requires urgent intervention by the Victorian Government to prevent the crisis from worsening says Jesuit Social Services.

“Around the world, and here in Australia, we have seen how quickly COVID-19 can spread within prison systems and the potentially catastrophic consequences this can have for the health and safety of vulnerable people as well as staff. Prisons are crowded environments where it is extremely challenging to adhere to the important public health measures that is effective in preventing the spread of the virus,” says Jesuit Social Services CEO Julie Edwards.

“Generally speaking, people in prison have higher health care needs than the broader population. Close to one third of people entering the prison system report at least one chronic physical health condition, and the men and women who have contact with the prison system who are supported by Jesuit Social Services every day commonly report personal histories of complex health problems.

“Additionally, we know that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people remain greatly overrepresented in the prison system. The health gap between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians is well known, and further illustrates the complex vulnerabilities many people in the prison system experience.

“Ultimately, prison should only be used as a last resort. Non-violent offenders should not be in prison in the first place, they should be monitored in the community and supported to lead positive lives.”

Jesuit Social Services supports calls by the Victorian Aboriginal Legal Service (VALS) to provide regular, detailed updates about the COVID outbreak in Victoria’s prison, including the number of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people who have tested positive. This transparency and accountability can help to ensure there are no preventable deaths in custody.

Ms Edwards says the Victorian Government must also safeguard the health and safety of vulnerable people in the prison system by exiting people including Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders, women and people with disabilities into the community or supported accommodation. Jesuit Social Services stands ready to assist in finding and implementing alternatives.

“The Maribyrnong Community Residential Facility, which we deliver in partnership with the Department of Justice and Community Safety, provides safe and supported accommodation to men exiting prison who are at high risk of homelessness. This is a great example of how people can be provided with a secure roof over their head and support to access health services and learning and employment pathways to ultimately provide both short and long-term benefits,” says Ms Edwards.

“The program has made a tangible, positive difference to the lives of vulnerable people. To prevent further spread of COVID-19 in the state’s prison system, and protect health and safety of those who have contact with the system, we must ensure at-risk people receive the support they need in programs like this or in the broader community during this extremely challenging time.”

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