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Vulnerable people need urgent support to navigate Omicron crisis: Jesuit Social Services

The ongoing Omicron crisis, which has seen tens of thousands of new COVID-19 cases each day, severe shortages of rapid antigen tests and low-income areas lagging in booster vaccination rates, must serve as an urgent reminder that new and equitable approaches are needed to support vulnerable people and communities through this challenging period, says Jesuit Social Services.

“The lives of all Australians have been drastically impacted throughout the pandemic and this is no different in early 2022 as the Omicron variety has placed significant pressure on health systems across the country and, tragically, taken many lives,” says Jesuit Social Services Acting CEO Sally Parnell.

“It is also true that the most vulnerable members of our community have been hardest hit over recent months, such as people who cannot afford or access rapid antigen tests, casual or insecure employees who continue to experience disruptions to their work and high levels of infections and low booster rates in many disadvantaged communities across the country.

“Throughout the pandemic, we have seen some initiatives that serve to create a fairer, more cohesive Australia like the temporary increase to the Jobseeker payment which allowed recipients to live a dignified standard of life. Some of our program participants told us that the Coronavirus Supplement meant they no longer had to choose between paying for food or medication. It is devastating that not only was this payment cut, but there has been no commitment to permanently raise the Jobseeker level to allow recipients to live above the poverty line,” says Ms Parnell.

In addition to Jesuit Social Services calling for a permanent increase to the Jobseeker rate, restoring the paid pandemic leave and placing a hold on mutual obligations, the organisation says rapid antigen tests should be provided for free to the whole community.

“The shortage of rapid antigen tests has been a major problem over summer, particularly given there are changes to eligibility for PCR tests. Even concession card holders who are eligible for a number of free rapid antigen tests are struggling to access them. Once the supply issues are under control, we believe that tests should be freely available to everybody, and that there should be priority access to community sector organisations to allow them to continue to deliver vital services and programs safely.”

Jesuit Social Services also supports [ACOSS's call](#) for the establishment of a civil society COVID Rapid Response Group consisting of ACOSS, unions, business peaks and public health experts to work closely with National Cabinet to devise and implement policy response.

“This is an opportunity to put in place the policies and supports that will help us all to continue to navigate the pandemic and ensure no vulnerable Australians are left behind.”

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