



LET'S BUILD A FAIRER AUSTRALIA!

Who we are

St Vincent de Paul Society is a lay Catholic charity with over 45,000 members and volunteers and 3,000 employees operating in Australia. Our people are locals who help all people in need in their communities. We are a registered charity, regulated by the Australian Charities and Not-for-profits Commission (ACNC).

Our work is informed by the teachings of our founder, Frederic Ozanam. Our Mission and Values draw on Catholic Social Teaching principles and we follow *The Rule* which sets out the Society's international charter.

What we do

Through our conferences and centres, emergency relief is provided to help people cover everyday basics, such as food, accommodation, utilities, clothing, transport, medical and educational costs. We also provide social support by lending an ear and connecting people with other networks and services, depending on their needs.

Our policy positions are approved by National Council. They are informed by the experiences of those we assist and our members, through the National Council's Social Justice Advisory Committee and the Vincentian Refugee Network.

We advocate for policies and funding that improve people's lives. We do so in a way that aligns with our charitable purpose and is politically non-partisan.

Why it's important

Through generous donations, sales through our Shop Network, and some government funding, we are able to distribute over \$50 million each year in emergency relief alone. Additionally, we provide short-term, emergency and longer-term community housing options, meals, clothing, and support services.

While providing material support to people, we also empower them to achieve their full potential.

Our 2022 Federal Election Statement, *A Fairer Australia*, has been updated to cover social justice priorities related to Australia's First Nations Peoples, People Seeking Asylum, Secure Work, Combatting Homelessness and Increasing Affordable Housing and Income Support, Poverty and Debt. This booklet summarises our advocacy position with respect to Australia's First Nations peoples. More information is also available on our website.

Our service to others, and advocacy on their behalf, is inspired by the words of St Vincent de Paul:

Deal with the most urgent needs... Teach reading and writing, educate with the aim of giving each the means of self-support. Intervene with authorities to reform structures... there is no charity without justice.

St Vincent de Paul Society National Council of Australia acknowledges the traditional custodians of country throughout Australia; recognises their continuing connection to land, waters and culture and community; and pays its respect to elders past, present and emerging.

LET'S BUILD A FAIRER AUSTRALIA! AUSTRALIA'S FIRST NATIONS PEOPLES

The Society stands in respectful solidarity with Australia's First Nations peoples.

We honour First Nations peoples' cultures, lands, waters, histories and rights to live in a society free of economic, social and cultural oppression.

Our members, volunteers, and staff acknowledge and adhere to these values in all aspects of their work. We celebrate the deep, abiding pride that Australia's First Nations peoples have in their diverse cultures and we greatly value the contributions they make to Australian society.

We recognise and admit past and continuing injustices as the first step towards reconciliation.

We support the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples. Improved outcomes will only be achieved when First Nations Peoples are able to 'live in dignity, to maintain and strengthen their own institutions, cultures and traditions and to pursue their self-determined development, in keeping with their own needs and aspirations'.

We are committed to providing employment and procurement opportunities for First Nations peoples and strive to ensure our workforce and supply chains reflect the diversity of the communities we serve.

The Society supports:

- the Uluru Statement from the Heart in full, including constitutional recognition
- funding of, and commitment to, Closing the Gap targets by all governments
- raising the age of criminal responsibility
- community-led policies on justice reinvestment and keeping children safe, with ongoing funding

Uluru Statement from the Heart

The Society welcomes the Australian Government's progress towards constitutional recognition of Australia's First Nations peoples and implementing a Voice to Parliament. Our call for constitutional recognition started in 2012, by supporting the Constitutional Recognition Bill and then in 2014, in a submission to the Senate Select Committee on Constitutional Recognition. Recently, we supported the 2023 Constitution Amendment Bill.

Our position aligns with the National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Catholic Council, the Australian Catholic Bishops Conference, and the Fifth Catholic Church Plenary Council of Australia's First Decree, *Reconciliation: Healing Wounds, Receiving Gifts*.

We are a member of the Allies for Uluru Coalition and are committed to working with First Nations peoples towards recognition, reconciliation and justice. We have joined with

Anglicare Australia, BaptistCare Australia, Catholic Social Services Australia, The Salvation Army, and Uniting Care Australia to pledge our support to the Uluru Statement from the Heart: truth, treaty and voice.

Closing the Gap

The Society welcomes the Australian Government's National Agreement on Closing the Gap and its commitment to work alongside the Coalition of Peaks and state ministers to meet the 17 targets.

We support the *Change the Record* campaign, the only Aboriginal-led justice coalition of experts aimed at ending the incarceration of, and family violence against, First Nations peoples.

The Society supports:

- capacity-building sector plans for disability, housing, community and early childhood care developed by the Joint Council on Closing the Gap and calls for additional funding to support their implementation
- additional funding of \$1.9BN over 5 years (2023 Budget), \$424M to support the second Closing the Gap Implementation Plan (February 2023), and \$1.2 BN announced in October 2022
- Aboriginal led initiatives and continued review and investment by all governments

Ongoing investment and review are needed to ensure progress is being made. The annual Closing the Gap data report shows that only four of the 17 targets are on track (July 2022). In some areas, the gap is even worsening such as adult imprisonment rates, deaths by suicide, children in out-of-home care and not being developmentally ready for school.

The Australian Human Rights Commission's annual *Close the Gap Report* chronicles the success of culturally safe and place-based, Aboriginal-led initiatives and calls for urgent investment in community-led services. The Society supports this call wholeheartedly.

Age of Criminal Responsibility

All children should be safe and have access to resources and networks that help them make good life choices. The entry of children into the youth justice system disproportionately impacts First Nations children, with too many being locked away in juvenile detention facilities and even adult prisons.

The Society supports the Justice Reform Initiative and believes that 'punishing away' the issue by increasing penalties and building more detention facilities are not the solution. Evidence shows children remain in cycles of disadvantage and imprisonment due to a lack of early critical

support services including health, disability, rehabilitation and family supports. Holding children in prison also begins a cycle of criminalisation - the younger the child is when first having contact with the justice system, the more likely they are to go on to reoffend.

The United Nations Committee Against Torture is seriously concerned about Australia's very low age of criminal responsibility, the practice of keeping children in solitary confinement and the use of physical restraints to discipline children.

The Society supports:

- the Law Council of Australia's call for all governments to raise the age of criminal responsibility to 14 years
- ongoing funding of community-led solutions and early support services that help children to learn from their mistakes, grow and thrive.

The Society welcomes the re-convening of the Age of Criminal Responsibility Working Group, reporting to the Standing Council of Attorneys-General. While we are heartened by progress made in the ACT, Northern Territory and Victoria, progress elsewhere is slow, and messages are mixed. Tasmania is committed to raising the age but is exploring how reforms can be prioritised. Queensland also supports a national approach (but to 12 years) and seeks a framework to manage harmful behaviours.

The Society calls for continued funding of culturally led early-intervention and support services, including the Justice Policy Partnership's development of community-based pathways away from the criminal justice system for children under 14 years.

Justice Reinvestment

The Society welcomes the Australian Government's commitment to justice reinvestment and strengthening access to justice, with responsibility shared between all governments.

The Society supports:

- the establishment of an independent National Indigenous Justice Reinvestment Unit to monitor justice reinvestment outcomes
- ongoing funding of community-led justice reinvestment initiatives and custody notification services

We welcome the Government's \$81 million commitment over four years for up to 30 communities to establish locally tailored justice reinvestment initiatives, but ongoing funding is needed. Ongoing funding is also needed for custody notification services, which continue to operate on yearly funding. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Legal Services have also called for a significant increase in funding (\$250M in NSW alone) to meet current demand.

Keeping Children Safe

The Society supports the first Action Plan under *Safe and Supported: The National Framework for Protecting Australia's children (2021-31)*, developed by First Nations young people, families and organisations. Commonwealth funding of Aboriginal Community-Controlled Organisations through the Closing the Gap Evidence and Outcomes Fund to reduce the rates of children in out of home care is also supported.

We welcome all governments delegating powers of child protection services to grassroots Indigenous organisations and supporting kinship connection. We hope that the transformed system, with its focus on prevention, will reduce the number of at-risk children going into child protection.

We call all governments to provide ongoing funding to support changes to child protection services and the provision of parenting programs, alcohol and drug rehabilitation and mental health support for families.