St Vincent de Paul Society
NATIONAL COUNCIL of AUSTRALIA Inc.
good works

17 December 2025

The Hon Dr Jim Chalmers
The Treasurer
Parliament House
CANBERRA ACT 2600

cc: Minister for Employment and Workplace Relations
Minister for Finance
Minister for Home Affairs
Minister for Housing, Minister for Homelessness
Minister for Social Services

Dear Treasurer,

RE: Pre-Budget Submission 2026

The St Vincent de Paul Society (Society) is a partner of governments. Our charitable work couples with government assistance initiatives to promote resilience and unity in civil society in times of need.

The Society's focus is on addressing the root causes of disadvantage and poverty, reducing inequality and helping Australians reach their full potential. The Society's Members provide material assistance to those struggling with everyday living and they tell us that the number of people seeking assistance has significantly increased over the past 12 months.

The Society acknowledges the various Government initiatives aimed at addressing the cost of living and housing crises, from increased access to bulk billing and cheaper medicines, through to the energy rebate and various housing initiatives.

However, Australians are continuing to struggle to meet basic, everyday expenses.

In short, more people are seeking our assistance, and their needs have increased in complexity (around 15 per cent increase). This, along with increased costs, is making it harder to assist all those who need our help. The situation is also heightened in the lead up to Christmas and follows through to the start of the school year.

A recent survey commissioned by the Society found that over half (53 per cent) of Australians expect to experience financial stress during the festive season, and one in three anticipate needing financial or community assistance during this period. One in three Australians also admit that they have skipped meals or gone without food in the past 12 months to afford other essentials, and that this is more likely to be experienced by the younger generation and families with children. The survey findings align with our experiences, with around 80 per cent of those we help needing assistance with the basics like food, rent and utility costs.

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The Society therefore calls on the Australian Government to:

1. increase the base rate of working age income support payments (to 90 per cent of the Age Pension)
2. increase Commonwealth Rent Assistance (by another 15 per cent) and review it
3. increase base funding of Specialist Homelessness Services (by $671 million)
4. increase the Remote Allowance payment
5. extend the eligibility criteria of the Status Resolution Support Service and ensure people seeking asylum have visas with work and study rights, along with access to Medicare
6. increase the Community Refugee Integration and Settlement Program by 200 people and make it additional to Australia's annual humanitarian intake
7. fully implement and fund recommendations that assist the long-term unemployed outlined in the parliamentary report, Rebuilding Employment Services
8. target energy rebates to those who need them most and increase the energy efficiency of low-income households, and
9. fund the rollout of the Not-for-Profit Sector Blueprint, especially the establishment of a Digital Fund.

(1) Increase the base rate of working age payments

Just over 990,000 people on JobSeeker (Oct 2025) are living on a fortnightly income that is around $150 below the poverty line.

An increase to working age payments would not only help people to afford the basics but improve their self-esteem and stimulate the economy, as people spend immediately, and locally, on essentials.

We are particularly concerned about children living in low-income households. Growing up in poverty is a strong predictor of a child being developmentally vulnerable by the time they start school, potentially reducing good health, education and social outcomes.

Recent data has also found that inequality in Australia is at a 20-year high, with single parents hit the hardest.[1]

The Economic Inclusion Advisory Committee (EIAC) noted in its three previous reports that the base rates of working age payments 'are seriously inadequate... and that people receiving these payments face the highest levels of financial stress in the Australian community.' The EIAC has called for an increase equivalent to 90 per cent of the age pension.

In 2022, 2023 and 2025 the Society commissioned the Australian National University (ANU) to examine what needs to be done to lift people out of poverty. The most recent ANU paper, *A fairer tax and welfare system*, makes budget neutral recommendations similar to those of the EIAC, with changes to how superannuation is taxed covering costs to the welfare system. Increases to JobSeeker, Youth Allowance, Parenting Payment, the DSP Supplement, Commonwealth Rent Assistance and Family Tax Benefit (Part A) could lift between 95,000 and over 1 million people out of poverty. The report also recommends that these payments be linked

to the indexation of the Age Pension. Ninety percent of retirees would be better off due to higher superannuation balances, with high wealth, high income households only modestly affected.

UNSW/ACOSS research has also found that without major reform to housing, superannuation tax and income support, the divide between those with the most and those with the least will continue to deepen. Reducing tax concessions for negative gearing and capital gains, as well as superannuation, that speed wealth accumulation among the highest 10 per cent and increase housing prices, would help stem growth in wealth inequality.[2]

(2) Increase and review Commonwealth Rent Assistance

We acknowledge the Australian Government's 25 per cent increase to Commonwealth Rent Assistance (CRA). While these increases are welcome, we support the EIAC's calls for more work be done to address the long-term reduction in adequacy of the payment and better reflect rents currently paid. Commonwealth Rent Assistance should significantly improve rental affordability and reflect fluctuations in rents and local rental market circumstances.

Nationwide, the proportion of renting households is rising, having increased from 26 per cent to 31 per cent between 1995 and 2020. Housing costs for renting households have also risen over the same period, faster than for homeowners.

In 2019-20, 42 per cent of all low-income households were in rental stress, up from 35 per cent in 2008. When considering only the private rental market, this rises to 58 per cent of low-income households being in rental stress.[3]

The Society supports recommendations made by the Australian Housing Urban Research Institute and National Shelter Australia to review Commonwealth Rent Assistance to include low-income households who are currently not eligible. The Productivity Commission has recently reiterated this call, noting that some payments are not targeted to people in greatest need and some people in similar circumstances might be treated differently because of their eligibility for income support. The review should cover all aspects of the payment design (including minimum and maximum rates, the co-payment rate, indexation, income tapering and eligibility) with the aim of improving the sufficiency, fairness and effectiveness of the payment.

(3) Increase base funding of Specialist Homelessness Services

The Society provides the full range of housing services, from short-term crisis accommodation to transitional, medium and long-term community housing, accessible housing for people living with disability and specialist homelessness services. We know that the effective transition of people from homelessness to more permanent housing solutions must include resourcing wrap-around, resident-led and trauma-informed support services.

Research by St Vincent de Paul Society NSW (SPRC, 2023) found that people transitioning to the Society's community housing had often experienced insecure and unsustainably expensive housing, with around half exposed to some form of homelessness. Loss of employment, accidents, injury, mental health crises, domestic and family violence and death were recurring topics.

Vincentcare Victoria and other Intake Assessment Providers participated in a seven-year longitudinal study (RMIT, 2024) of households experiencing a form of housing crisis. The research found that one-third of those seeking assistance had mental health issues and the number of those with

medical issues and substance misuse had doubled. Households experiencing family or domestic violence also doubled to nearly 16 per cent.

We acknowledge that funding was redistributed under the new National Agreement on Social Housing and Homelessness, with the allocation for homelessness services doubled to $400M. However, as there was no increase in overall funding, the reallocation will likely impact capital projects (modifications) and maintenance of social housing. For these reasons, the Society calls for increased needs-based funding of homelessness services.

Recently released AIHW data shows that every day, specialist homelessness services receive an average of 353 requests for help that they cannot meet, with almost 4 in 5 requests from women and children, many leaving family violence. Daily unassisted requests have surged 18 per cent in a single year. People are reaching services too late, with the number of those seeking assistance who are already homeless rising by 6 per cent in the last year. This is an avoidable tragedy because where specialist homelessness services intervene early, they prevent homelessness in more than 80 per cent of cases. Children now make up more than one quarter (27 per cent) of all clients and together with their mothers, account for almost three quarters (73 per cent) of people seeking support.[4]

The Society supports Homelessness Australia's calls to increase funding of specialist homelessness services by $671 million to address the current gap in service provision.

(4) Increase the Remote Area Allowance Payment

The cost of living and housing crises have hit people hard, especially those in remote communities. Many of these communities have experienced complex and entrenched disadvantage for years, with little change,[5] and as confirmed by the Government's digital atlas of the Socio-Economic Index. Groceries cost more than twice as much in remote First Nations communities in NT and WA.[6] And it is estimated that living costs in remote areas are almost 40 per cent higher on average than costs in urban areas.[7]

Currently the Remote Area Allowance Payment is not indexed at all and is set at $18.20 for a single person and $15.60 each for a couple per fortnight, with an extra $7.30 per fortnight for each dependent child. We understand that it has not been increased for many years and, as in previous years, we ask that this be addressed in the 2026 Budget. Other organisations, such as ACOSS, have made similar calls.[8]

(5) Extend eligibility for the Status Resolution Support Service and other supports for people seeking asylum

People seeking asylum in Australia, those waiting for the Government to recognise their claim, receive the least amount of government assistance.[7] They have access to little or no social safety net, including income support, health care and housing.

One of the few forms of support available to asylum seekers is the Status Resolution Support Service (SRSS) which, over the last nine years, has been cut by 93 per cent (from $300 million in 2015-16 to $20 million). Restrictive eligibility criteria have significantly reduced recipient numbers from 13,000 to around 2,000. This has resulted in welfare costs and responsibilities being shifted from federal to state agencies and community-based- organisations, at an estimated cost of between $80 to $120 million per year.[8]

The SRSS should match financial assistance levels available through Centrelink. Case management

should be core, along with trauma support and training. Eligibility criteria should be broadened with terms such as 'exceptional circumstances' and 'significant health/mental issues' defined. The application process should be streamlined and bridging visas renewed if they lapse during the SRSS application process. Finally, and in line with social security procedures, unsuccessful applicants should have access to procedural fairness via a statutory review process.

Other intersecting policy issues that require attention include asylum seekers' access to work rights, study rights and childcare, visa decision time frames, length of bridging visas and disability support for those who cannot work.

And while some people seeking asylum have work rights, others do not. Those who are allowed to work often find it difficult to find safe non-exploitative work, particularly if they have limited access to childcare.

The Society supports the recent Asylum Seeker Centre's[9] calls to:

- ensure access to Medicare for all people with a claim for protection
- restore means-tested support (SRSS) for all vulnerable people seeking asylum, at every stage in the process
- grant the right to work to all people seeking asylum in the community, and
- support states and territories to open up access to emergency and temporary housing.

Vinnies Refugee and Asylum Seeker Centre (VRASS) case study

In South Australia, VRASS provides emergency relief and other essential support to people seeking asylum on temporary or short-term bridging visas. Despite a 50 per cent budget cut in 2024–25, the service continued to pay rent and a modest living allowance to asylum seekers unable to work or ineligible for social security.

In 2025–26, VRASS continues to support 10 highly vulnerable priority companions and families who have lived in legal limbo for up to 10 years, often with no income or valid visa, and many unable to work due to lack of work rights, injury, poor mental health, age, or illiteracy. For this group, VRASS is frequently the sole safety net, providing rent and utility payments, medical bills, transport cards, Foodbank vouchers, fresh food, and for four individuals/families, a modest monthly living allowance of $120.

To reduce overheads and maintain operations, VRASS has relocated to a local Community Centre free of charge, improving accessibility, service delivery, collaboration, and providing a welcoming, sustainable environment for staff, volunteers, and companions. Operating four days a week with one staff member and 20 volunteers, the service faces growing demand, placing increasing pressure on our most vulnerable community members.

VRASS primarily supports asylum seekers on bridging visas and expired visas, with some assistance extended to Safe Haven Enterprise Visa SHEV holders and those transitioning to Resolution of Status ROS visas. The service is funded almost entirely by community and business donations, with limited emergency relief funding from the Federal Government. Services include:

- visa and settlement information and support
- legal referrals and assistance
- emergency relief for rent and utilities (criteria apply)

- foodbank vouchers, fresh and non-perishable food
- material support, including Vinnies cards for clothing
- housing support, applications, referrals, and advocacy
- employment services, resumes, and job application assistance
- vocational education support and referrals
- financial counselling
- English language classes for refugee backgrounds, and
- popup health clinics and referrals (dental, optometry, medical).

The primary challenges faced by this cohort are chronic mental and physical health problems caused by years of uncertainty and the constant threat of being returned to countries from which they fled. No other group in Australia is expected to survive under such conditions without support.

VRASS emphasizes that these individuals must have access to SRSS, a valid bridging visa with associated work and study rights linked to Medicare, and that the bridging visa renewal process should be automated to reduce uncertainty and support self-reliance.

(6) Increase the Community Refugee Integration and Settlement Program (CRISP)

While the CRISP is now a permanent program, the Society continues to call for it to be considered in addition to the humanitarian intake, not within it.

The Society supports community sponsorship under CRISP because it is significantly cheaper per person per annum than the fully Government-funded Humanitarian Program

According to our estimates (and with reference to Refugee Council of Australia documents),[10] the average cost per person per year to Government under the Humanitarian Program is $39,500 compared to $6,000 under CRISP, or 6.6 times more. If other costs borne by Community Support Groups under CRISP (such as accommodation and case workers) are factored in, we estimate that CRISP costs the Government about half as much to welcome a refugee as does the Humanitarian Program.

With the recent severe cutbacks to the United States intake of refugees, Australia should do more to help these vulnerable people. Therefore, as a trial, the Society recommends a modest increase in CRISP of 200 people per year, additional to the Humanitarian Program. Based on our estimates above, the cost of that increase could be offset by reducing the Government's fully funded Humanitarian Program by 100 people per year. Australia would then be accepting 100 extra refugees per annum at no extra cost to the Government.

(7) Fully implement and fund Rebuilding Employment Services

The Society welcomes the Australian Government's commitment to implement recommendations made by the House of Representatives Select Committee on Workforce Australia Employment Services in its report, Rebuilding Employment Services.

In our federal policy statement, Let's Build a Fairer Australia!, we ask that strategies, funding and improved case management and support services be prioritised to assist the underemployed and long-term unemployed. This call was reiterated in our 2025 federal election statement, Justice and Compassion.

For the last five years the Society has advocated for employment services to be refocused to support job seekers into work that aligns with their aspirations, abilities, skills, and interests, and which enables personal agency.

The 2025 budget included $54 million over five years for a new employment pathways package aimed at assisting those at risk of long-term unemployment through the Real Jobs, Real Wages pilot and WorkFoundations. However, this does not equate to full-scale structural reform as outlined in the Rebuilding Employment Services report, for which further significant resources are needed if the report's recommendations are to be implemented in a timely manner.

(8) Target energy rebates to those who need them most and increase the energy efficiency of low-income households

The Society has seen an overall increase of around 15 per cent in requests for help in the last year, with most people (80 per cent) seeking assistance with everyday basics such as food, rent, and utilities.

The Society welcomed the energy bill rebates announced in 2025 Budget ($1.8BN). In Let's Build a Fairer Australia! (pp.22-23), the Society outlines the benefits and cost effectiveness of supporting energy efficiency in low-income households and of its importance in ensuring that no one is left behind as we transition towards net zero.

The Society's tariff tracker reports further demonstrate how the electricity market continues to rise.

Australian Energy Regulator (AER) data indicates overall residential energy debt remains higher than before the recent price shocks. Average debt for customers on hardship programs, and for those entering hardship, has increased over the past year. Many hardship customers are staying in programs for longer periods, indicating more persistent financial stress for those who need support. There is also a substantial cohort of customers exiting hardship programs because they cannot meet payment conditions, rather than because their debt has been cleared.

A more effective use of Government resources is to target energy bill relief to those who need it most and to do more for those already in energy debt (whether or not they are registered in hardship programs). AER analysis highlights that cost of living pressures and prior high bills are leaving many hardship customers in long term debt, despite recent price relief.

We welcome the Australian Government's commitment of $800 million to co-fund the $1.1 billion Social Housing Energy Performance Initiative in partnership with all state and territory governments. We ask the Federal Government to continue to work with states and territories so that they meet their commitments which, combined, would retrofit an estimated 220,000 social housing properties.

We support ACOSS' call to state and territory governments to match this funding but note that a shortfall of around 180,000 social housing properties remains. We also call for similar solutions to be found for people in private rentals and low-income homeowners, including mandating energy performance standards for rental properties.

(9) Fund the Not for Profit (NFP) Sector Blueprint and establish a Digital Fund

Volunteering is essential to the fabric of Australian society, yet the 2025 Budget saw no new measures for the volunteering ecosystem, and no funding to implement the 10-year National Strategy for Volunteering. Without adequate support, the vital contributions of millions of volunteers to Australia's resilience are at risk.

The Society also calls for funding to implement the Not for Profit Sector Blueprint, an independent 10-year roadmap which outlines what is needed to support:

- an enabling operational and regulatory environment for the sector to thrive
- a people-led and purpose-driven sector
- an adaptive and dynamic forward-focused sector.

One area of growth is cybersecurity, which is essential to organisational resilience. The Society is having to dedicate more of its limited resources to act quickly on increasingly frequent and sophisticated scams. These include fake pages and websites to solicit donations and/or personal information, and ads popping up offering “loans” in the Society's name, along with links to non-existent online shops. These scams damage our reputation and the community’s trust in us and are redirecting our resources from helping those in need to managing this growing online threat. We are not alone. The National Anti-Scam Centre’s Scamwatch data shows that reported losses for fake charities scams have increased by 94 per cent compared to the same period in 2024.

We are aware of the resources already available namely the Scams Awareness Week 2025: Stop. Check. Protect. | ACNC, the Government’s Scamwatch site and the Home | National Anti-Scam Centre, but more resources are needed to stay on top of these malicious activities.

The Society is ineligible for many of the programs open to small to medium enterprises. We call on the Government to invest in the NFP sector’s digital capabilities and systems, a need identified in the recently released National AI Plan.

Pillar 3, Initiative 13a of the NFP Sector Blueprint also calls for an investment in and promotion of effective supports that enable NFPs to achieve a minimum level of data, cyber security and digital capability and data-informed management decisions.

It states that ‘understanding and investing in minimum standards for the NFP sector will reduce risk and elevate opportunities for innovation. These must be considered as part of pricing of services government funds or procures from the NFP sector. Investment to support NFP sector innovation will be comparable to small business investment of similar purposes.’[11]

The Society supports ACOSS’ calls for a Digital Fund to be established. A cross-sector collaboration led by Infoxchange has worked for the last 12 months to co-design a Digital Futures initiative for the NFP sector, building on the work of the NFP Sector Blueprint. The estimated cost is $25 million in 2026-27.

We thank you for considering the Society’s 2026 Pre-Federal Budget submission.

Yours sincerely

Mr P Toby oConnor
Chief Executive

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