



Vinnies
good works

NSW SOCIAL JUSTICE
NETWORK



NSW SOCIAL JUSTICE STATEMENT

EASING THE COST OF LIVING AND REDUCING POVERTY



OUR VISION

Everyone should be able to access the essentials they need to live with dignity. Even when things go wrong, people should feel secure in the knowledge they can afford a roof over their heads and food on the table, to access affordable energy and pay bills, live in adequately insulated and energy efficient social housing and maintain their health. The St Vincent de Paul Society NSW fundamentally believes in this through the social principles of dignity of the human person. This means enabling life and human flourishing and prioritising the well-being of people experiencing poverty and disadvantage in all our actions.

Our governments can rebalance our social and economic systems so that everyone can access an adequate standard of living that will make our communities safer and stronger. By getting the basics right, we will empower more people to reach their potential, actively participate in society, and experience fulfilling lives.

OUR CONTRIBUTION

St Vincent de Paul Society NSW is a leading provider of frontline services with 100 services state-wide. In 2022-23, our professional services supported 28,250 people with respect to homelessness, domestic and family violence, rehabilitation and addiction, disability, refugee and migrant inclusion. Our members and volunteers distributed \$13.7 million in financial and material aid supporting more than 87,000 people, with food, clothing, household items, cost of living expenses and emotional support. Our fleet of Vinnies Vans, a mobile outreach service, provides meals and snacks, blankets, toiletries, hot drinks, companionship and referrals to people experiencing or at risk of homelessness, loneliness and hardship. Through our vans we delivered more than 70,000 instances of assistance over 2022-23, double the amount compared with pre COVID-19. We also provide the Energy Accounts Payment Assistance (EAPA) program which gives emergency or crisis payments relief for current residential energy bills.

OUR RECOMMENDATIONS

The Society NSW calls on the NSW Government to address sustained cost of living pressures for people on low incomes and experiencing disadvantage and strengthen our social safety net by:

- Guaranteeing access to a safe, secure and affordable place to call home, including by implementing the recommendations in our housing-related Social Justice Statements.
- Increasing funding to deliver emergency food relief to communities with high rates of food insecurity, and a taskforce to review and provide a fit for purpose food relief system.
- Improving support to families on low incomes to meet the cost of full participation in school education, including digital inclusion and appropriate resources like uniforms and school supplies.
- Lobbying the Federal Government to increase inadequate income support payments and significantly reform our income tax and superannuation systems to reduce wealth and income inequality; and providing secure work by reforming employment services and assisting the long term unemployed as outlined in our National Council's [Let's Build a Fairer Australia](#).¹
- Ensuring everyone can afford and access energy as an essential service by:
 - Revising the Low-Income Household Rebate to be a fixed percentage of a person's energy bill, instead of a flat rate.
 - Reviewing all NSW rebates to make them equitable, accessible and adequate.
 - Investing in more energy efficient retrofits of social housing.
 - Mandating minimum energy performance standards for rental homes.

See our Climate Justice statement for other related energy recommendations.

THE CHALLENGE

Many people in our community struggle just to afford the basics and make ends meet. Across Australia, more than one in eight people live below the poverty line.² In NSW, this equates to a staggering 1 million people.³

Our state's relatively stable poverty rate masks a deepening divide between rich and poor, with poverty highly concentrated in certain areas, such as Sydney's Western and South-Western suburbs. In rural and regional areas poverty is more widespread, with higher rates in the Riverina, New England and Far-North Coast.

People most likely to experience poverty include those relying on JobSeeker (60%) and working age pensions (26%), single parents (26%) and renters (17%).⁴ More people over 65 are now experiencing poverty but alarmingly, children are the group most affected with one in five children living in poverty.⁵ Other groups also more likely to experience poverty, including First Nations people, people with disability, carers, people from culturally and linguistically diverse communities and rural and regional communities.⁶

Whilst poverty manifests as an individual not having enough money, it has deeper structural causes stemming from inequality in the distribution of wealth and income.⁷ These structural causes include: unaffordable housing; economic factors such as the persistent cost of living crisis, low wages and unemployment; and social factors such as domestic and family violence.⁸ Our state's worsening poverty and inequality is reflected in the one in three people who come to us for support are doing so for the first-time, many of whom have a job. A strong social safety net can soften the impact and prevent people from becoming entrenched in poverty long-term.

THE FACTS

- More than 1 in 8 people live below the poverty line equating to 1 million people in NSW.
- More people over 65 are experiencing poverty but children are most likely to live in poverty.
- One in three people seeking our assistance did so for the first-time.
- People are going without food or essential medicines to pay their energy bills.

THE IMPACT

Poverty negatively impacts people's social and emotional well-being and physical and mental health. It affects their education and employment. It removes people's individual agency and independence and causes deep social isolation and stress. The intersecting effects of poverty compound hardship and create a cycle that traps people in poverty and entrenches it across generations.⁹

Living in poverty means people must make impossible choices between paying for food, a roof over their heads and healthcare. People are reporting malnutrition from skipping meals and are cutting back on their medicines to make their money last longer.¹⁰ Others are at imminent threat of homelessness because they cannot afford the cost of rent. Families are struggling to pay for school uniforms, recreational activities and extra-curricular activities.¹¹ Energy bills in particular can be a 'hidden hardship'. Many of the people we assist cut down on their energy use by not using lights at night or not using heating and cooling appliances, which can have serious health implications in extreme weather.¹²

The effects of poverty are worse on children. Not only is their long-term health and wellbeing undermined, but they are also more likely to face food insecurity, lack meaningful relationships and miss out on learning. These effects are lifelong. Children who experience poverty are more likely to experience disadvantage as adults, with adverse impacts on their education, employment and health outcomes in later life.¹³

Ending poverty starts with state and federal governments addressing key drivers of poverty – housing, health, education, income and employment and costs of living such as energy affordability.



ANNA'S STORY

"It's been debilitating," laments Anna, a single mum receiving a disability support pension and raising two children. With the cost of living going up, but not her income, Anna faces an uphill battle every week and can never get financially ahead. The struggle to stay on top of her rent, household bills, groceries and unexpected expenses on an income below the poverty line led Anna to reach out to the Society NSW for support.

Hoping to gain assistance to purchase a school uniform for her son, Anna received much more when she met Grace, a staff member at one of the Society's support centres. Receiving immediate assistance with a school uniform, food vouchers and groceries, Anna felt seen, heard and treated with dignity at her most vulnerable time of reaching out.

For Grace, who has spent the past 15 years supporting people in need as part of the Society, stories like Anna's are becoming commonplace and occurring across all walks of life. "It's not just one group of people that are doing it tough – we're talking about age pensioners and older people and single mums and families and single men and older single women – it is everyone," explains Grace. The current crisis is the worst Grace has experienced in her time with the Society NSW.

Anna has remained in contact with the Society NSW and received continued support with food and housing from our staff, who work alongside dedicated members giving their time and support to people like Anna and her family in local communities. Her greatest comfort has been the reassurance that she won't be alone during hard times.



FOR MORE INFORMATION

- [Society NSW's reports and submissions](#)
- [NSW Tariff-Tracking reports](#)
- [National Council's energy advocacy and reports: https://www.vinnies.org.au/advocacy/housing-and-homelessness/policy-paper](https://www.vinnies.org.au/advocacy/housing-and-homelessness/policy-paper)
- [National Council's Let's Build A Fairer Australia and A Fairer Tax and Welfare System](#)

¹ Philips B. Webster R. and Joseph C. (2023) *A Fairer Tax and Welfare System for Australia*, St Vincent de Paul Society NSW

² ACOSS, *Poverty – Poverty and Inequality*. Accessed on 8 April 2024.

³ For the information cited in this paragraph, see generally NCOSS and NATSEM report, *Mapping Economic Disadvantage in New South Wales 2023*.

⁴ St Vincent de Paul Society National Council, *“Let's Build a Fairer Australia”, Fast Facts sheet (Sept 2023)*. Australian statistics are quoted.

⁵ *Mapping Economic Disadvantage in New South Wales 2023*, pp9-12.

⁶ The Senate Community Affairs References Committee (2024) *The extent and nature of poverty in Australia*, Final Report, Commonwealth of Australia,

⁷ ACOSS, *Inequality in Australia 2024: Who is affected and how (April 2024)*

⁸ The Senate Community Affairs References Committee (2024) *The extent and nature of poverty in Australia*, Final Report, Commonwealth of Australia,

⁹ The Senate Community Affairs References Committee (2024) *The extent and nature of poverty in Australia*, Final Report, Commonwealth of Australia,

¹⁰ ACOSS (2023) *Community attitudes towards poverty and inequality*.

¹¹ NCOSS (2023), *Barely Hanging on: The Cost of Living Crisis in NSW*

¹² ACOSS, (2023) *Energy and Cost of Living Snapshot*.

¹³ Esperanza Vera-Toscano and Roger Wilkins (2020) *Does poverty in childhood beget poverty in adulthood in Australia?* Melbourne Institute: Applied Economic & Social Research, University of Melbourne.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT OF COUNTRY

The St Vincent de Paul Society NSW acknowledges Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples as the Traditional Custodians of this land, with deep respect. May Elders, past and present, be blessed and honoured. May we join together and build a future based on compassion, justice, hope, faith, and reconciliation.

St Vincent de Paul Society NSW is a lay-Catholic member and volunteer-based organisation that has been assisting people experiencing disadvantage and hardship in NSW for over 140 years. Our aspiration is an Australia transformed by compassion and built on justice.



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