



St Vincent de Paul Society
CANBERRA/GOULBURN
good works

Election Statement

2024





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PRESIDENT'S MESSAGE

Brian Stacey

Territory Council President

St Vincent de Paul Society, Canberra/Goulburn

The Society's Statement for the 2024 ACT Election should not come as a surprise for any candidate. Its call for much better housing outcomes for the increasing number of people falling behind in the ACT including legislating to make housing a human right is not new. Nor are we alone in putting housing first and we know that other community organisations working on the frontline to support people in need across the ACT will also be calling for a much better response by an incoming ACT Government to our housing crisis.

In the meantime, we sincerely hope that every candidate will take the time to read this Statement and commit to its recommendations. They are based on the first-hand experience of our members who every day of the year volunteer to provide food, clothing, everyday essentials, assistance with bills, a listening ear, and much more. At the same time, our services including transitional housing, homelessness support services, education support for vulnerable groups, home energy efficiency and youth programs have been designed to be inclusive for those needing a hand-up including First Nations, migrants, and refugees.

Later this year the Society will be acknowledging 100 years since it first was established in Canberra. That is a lot of commitment, knowledge and experience! Humbly, we suggest this should be a good reason to listen to us. In that regard, the Society including myself is ready to meet with candidates and political parties to discuss our Election statement further.



DELIVER MORE AFFORDABLE HOUSING

Housing is a Human Right

The Society through its Community Housing provider, SVdP Housing Australia^a, aims to provide safe, secure, affordable housing and support to people in need of housing. SVdP Housing Australia is primarily responsible for property and tenancy management, while the Society facilitates access to services required by tenants. This enables the two organisations to provide appropriate housing to more households with high and complex needs. As of April 2024, SVdP Housing Australia manages 93 properties and supports 133 tenants in the ACT.

The Society supports a Housing First approach. A safe and secure home is a critical first step to overcoming the disadvantages that many face in our community. We believe that access to safe, secure, and affordable housing is a critical human right. Fundamentally, we believe that the right to adequate housing should be a basic human right.

Including the right to housing within the ACT Human Rights Act would publicly attest to the priority that the Government gives to the right to adequate housing. It would require ACT directorates to take the right into account in policy development and allow for accountability where that does not occur. It would ensure the right to housing is always included in legislative, policymaking, and administrative processes with respect to the ACT. This in turn should guard against policy or program decisions that inadvertently result in reduced availability of housing for those who are vulnerable.

The Society seeks an undertaking from all parties to this election to support an early amendment to the ACT Human Rights Act to add a right to adequate housing. The Society lends support to the call for the ACT Human Rights Act 2004¹ to be amended to treat rights to adequate housing in the same way that rights to freedom of speech and assembly are treated in the Human Rights Act.

^aRead more about SVdP Housing Australia here: <https://ameliehousing.org.au/>

Social and Community Housing

Access to affordable, energy-efficient and safe housing should be a reality for all who live in the ACT. The need for affordable social housing in the ACT is more pertinent than ever today as so many low-income households are priced out of the expensive² private rental market. The ACT Government has failed to significantly add to the existing stock of affordable housing.

According to the 2024 Report on Government Services³, public housing dwellings have reduced from 11,181 units in 2018 to 10,827 units in 2023. There were 3174 households and 661 households on the public and community housing waiting list respectively in the ACT in 2023. Out of this, 2188 households and 509 households were on the greatest needs list for public and community housing respectively. The proportion of overcrowded households in public housing in the ACT in 2023 was 4.7%, higher than the national figure of 4.1%.

The ACT Government under the Growing and Renewing Public Housing Program aims to deliver 1400 renewed or new public homes by mid-2027⁴. The ACT Greens aim to build and buy 10,000 public homes over the next 10 years⁵. Reforms and changes in the policy settings that aim to deliver more affordable social and public housing in the housing market are the most appropriate way forward.

The Society recommends that Parties prioritise increasing the existing stock of affordable social housing by building, at a minimum, an additional 3000⁶ social housing properties over the next five years. The Society also calls for a substantial investment to add to the existing stock of transitional and emergency accommodation in the ACT.

The Society notes that the ACT Government's Indicative Land Release Program (ILRP) 2023-24 to 2027-8⁷ supports the delivery of affordable, community and public housing and aims to deliver an equitable, diverse, and sustainable supply of housing for the ACT community.

Through the ILRP, the ACT Government is seeking to release land to deliver 16,935 new homes for people, aiming to do so within the existing urban footprint. The Government aims for private sector development to deliver 70 per cent of new housing.

The Society calls for all parties to commit at least 20 per cent of sites released for sale to have as a prerequisite accommodation for lower-income and vulnerable households. This we believe will ensure that the need for affordable housing is kept paramount in the delivery of housing targets.

INVEST IN HOMELESSNESS SUPPORT SERVICES

Long-Term and Expanded Funding for All Homelessness Support Programs

Many of the people whom the Society serves struggle to access safe and affordable housing, and for those who can, they have required support to maintain tenancy in the private rental market. The demand for material aid through the Society's Conferences⁸ has significantly increased in 2023. In December 2023 alone, we saw a 40 per cent increase in the number of calls to us for support. The majority of these requests are for accommodation support to prevent individuals and families from becoming homeless and for food. Between 2018-2022, the Society's Homelessness Programs⁹ observed a rise in the number of younger women within the age cohorts of 24 to 40 years rough sleeping or resorting to couch surfing with friends and family. These women are dealing with the threat of homelessness as a compound effect of the current cost-of-living crisis.

The Australian Bureau of Statistics in the 2021 Census report¹⁰, estimated that on Census night in the ACT, 1777 were homeless in the ACT. This was an increase from the 2016 estimate of 1596 people. The same report indicates that 76.9% of all people experiencing homelessness were under 44 years old, an indication of younger people experiencing homelessness in the ACT.

According to the 2024 Report on Government Services¹¹, 2407 people experienced homelessness for at least a month in the previous year in the ACT, with 1082 people in Canberra experiencing persistent homelessness. The report highlights that 11.5% of clients return to being homeless after achieving housing, and critically 1 in 4 people (686 out of 2781 clients) did not have their accommodation needs met in the ACT in this period.

The Australian Institute of Health and Welfare (AIHW) specialist homelessness services annual report 2022-23¹² reports that homelessness services supported 3800 clients across the ACT in the 2021/22 year. Further, it estimates that almost 85 per cent of clients at risk of homelessness were assisted to maintain housing. For homelessness services to be able to respond to everyone in need of assistance and to provide the professional level of support required, there is a need for a significant increase in investment in those services.

The Society calls for all parties in this election to commit to long-term and expanded funding for all homelessness support programs to ensure that no one is forced back onto the streets.



Addressing the Impact of Domestic Violence on Homelessness

Domestic and Intimate Partner Violence affects 8 out of 10 families referred to the Family and Young Parents Homelessness Services program from OneLink and the Vinnies Conferences^b. Homelessness, financial issues, mental health and Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) tend to follow in both the victim-survivor and the children after leaving a domestic violence relationship.

Our team observes that children can ‘normalise’ abusive, manipulative or destructive behaviour they witness, particularly where it comes from a perceived trusted caregiver or adult. If not addressed, children can adopt these negative actions as a template for their future behaviour, thus perpetuating the cycle of violence and homelessness.

Early Intervention strategies are needed to prevent further long-term issues from developing. Children must be taught what a healthy, respectful and non-abusive relationship is, what a healthy relationship looks like and what is not appropriate behaviour needs to be instilled early. Programs such as “Love Bites^c” should be standardised in all educational institutions.

The Society calls on Parties to standardise and include early intervention education on respectful relationships in primary and secondary curricula in the ACT.

The Society supports the call by the Domestic Violence Crisis Service for reforms to residential tenancy laws to support victim survivors of family violence in private rental to remain in their homes safely, and not bear the costs of damage or debt incurred by perpetrators of violence.

^b Conferences consist of volunteers, who attend regular meetings which include discussions about how to improve assistance given within their local communities. The Conference responds on a person-to-person basis, visiting people in their homes and providing companionship and the required assistance.

^c Love Bites is a Respectful Relationships Education Program for young people aged 15-17 years. It consists of two interactive workshops: one on Relationship Violence, and one on Sex and Relationships, followed by creative workshops and community campaigns. Access more information here <https://www.napcan.org.au/programs/love-bites/>

Oaks Estate Task Force

In December 2014 the ACT Government developed an Oaks Estate Master Plan¹³. Unfortunately, many of the issues identified in that document including transport, housing density, and ageing public housing remain unaddressed. The relocation of Oaks Estate out of the Inner South Canberra District into the East Canberra District in the Canberra District Strategy¹⁵ in 2023, exacerbated concerns that Oaks Estate issues would continue to go unaddressed due to its isolation.

There are some 78 ageing public housing dwellings in Oaks Estate, representing a much higher proportion of public housing than any other suburb in the ACT. The vast majority of these are single units in multi-unit complexes and have a long history of challenges for the most vulnerable and disadvantaged residents that reside there. Many residents face multiple challenges in their daily lives including, disability, mental and physical illness, poverty and trauma.

The Society has been providing on-site support services at Oaks Estate since 2008. In 2022, the Society established a small Oaks Estate Working Group of representatives from the Society, SVdP Housing Australia and Housing ACT, to focus on issues arising at Oaks Estate. This group met bi-monthly throughout 2023 and is looking to do the same in 2024.

In recent years, the Society through the funding of the Commonwealth Department of Social Services (Information, Linkages and Capacity Building grant program) has delivered its Community Inclusion Program¹⁶ in the Oaks Estate. This funding ceased in June 2024. The Society congratulates the ACT Government on recognising the importance of onsite support services at Oaks Estate and for providing funding to enable its Community Inclusion Program to continue for a further two years. However, Oaks Estate continues to suffer from its remote and isolated location in the ACT.

The Society calls on Parties to establish an Oaks Estate Task Force to focus on developing and implementing an up-to-date Oaks Estate Master Plan, with long-term funding.



COMMIT TO A WELCOMING CANBERRA

As a member of the Welcoming Cities Network, the ACT is part of a network of cities, shires, towns, and municipalities committed to an Australia where everyone can belong and participate¹⁷. This is a welcome step for the Territory as in the 2021 Census nearly 30 percent of Canberrans were born overseas¹⁸. Furthermore, there were people of nearly 200 different nationalities¹⁹ resident in the ACT in 2015 when Canberra was officially declared a Refugee Welcome Zone^d.

Assistance to Vulnerable People Seeking Asylum

In 2016, the ACT joined the Safe Haven Enterprise Visa Scheme (SHEV)²⁰ and this enabled people who arrived in Australia without a visa to seek asylum, live, work, and study here albeit temporarily. And it is pleasing that the current Australian Government is now offering these people a pathway to permanent residency. Unfortunately, there are at least 200 people seeking asylum in the ACT who are still suffering under the unfair assessment of their refugee claims under the previous Australian Government's "Fast Track" process. The Status Resolution Support Services (SRSS)²¹ program is designed to provide support from the Australian Government to people seeking asylum who are unable to earn an income while they wait lengthy periods for the outcomes of their protection visa applications.

In 2017 severe and unfair eligibility limitations were introduced, and this has left at least 40 asylum-seeker households in the ACT in destitution. As a result, community organisations including Companion House, Canberra Refugee Support and Vinnies have had to take up support for these vulnerable people. We are grateful to the ACT government for the ACT Services Access Card²², the Refugee, Asylum Seeker, and Humanitarian (RASH) Coordination Committee Discretionary Funding (DF) program²³ and the ACT housing assistance program for asylum-seeker families and single people, with little or no income^e. Without these three programs, community organisations would be unable to support these vulnerable people on their own. The need to continue these programs at current levels is critical as the Australian Government has indicated no sign of repealing the eligibility limitations.

The Society seeks a clear commitment from all Parties that these services to people seeking asylum be maintained in the term of the next Government.

The Society calls on all Parties to this election to commit to maintaining the ACT's status as a Refugee Welcome Zone. We ask that support to asylum seekers through the ACT Access Card and associated concessions, as well as access to housing assistance and living expenses, including through the RASH DF program, be maintained at their existing levels.

^dA Refugee Welcome Zone is a local government area which has made a commitment to welcoming refugees into the community, upholding their human rights, demonstrating compassion for refugees and enhancing cultural and religious diversity in the community.

^eThese housing services are currently provided by the Migrant and Refugee Support Service (MARSS) on behalf of the ACT Government (<https://marss.org.au/housing-services/>) although tenders for the next phase of delivery are currently being evaluated.



Education Support for Migrants and Refugees

The Society delivers a Migrant and Refugee Program²⁴ which aims to connect and empower children from migrant or refugee backgrounds so they can thrive in their new communities. By connecting volunteers with more vulnerable children, we aim to build relationships between individuals, communities, and relevant service providers.

Through this program, we have observed a serious lack of coordinated, professional support for EALD^f students in ACT schools. We recognize the six months that some eligible students spend in Introductory English Centres (IEC) is invaluable to their ability to grasp the basics of English before they transition to mainstream school. However, when students transition from IECs to mainstream schools, the pastoral care support given to them appears to be ad hoc and its success is dependent on the mainstream school's capacity and willingness to provide the required support.

Additionally, families from migrant or refugee backgrounds are not always comprehensively informed about the ACT school system. The approaches to teaching and learning are often quite different in their home countries. Trauma and mental health issues can have a direct impact on their choices and the educational progress of their children.

The Society calls on all Parties to commit to:

- ***Provide long-term funding to every ACT school where there is a cohort of students from a migrant or refugee background to have at least one full-time trained EALD teacher***
- ***Funding ACT schools to provide ongoing and coordinated support and pastoral care to students transitioning from IEC to mainstream schools for the first two years from the initial transition.***
- ***Fund a Community Co-ordinator position in all ACT Schools to support parents and families to connect with the school and wider community.***

^fEALD here means "English as an Additional Language/Dialect".

COMMIT TO MAKE ENERGY AFFORDABLE

Team members of the Society's Home Energy Efficiency program²⁵ have visited many low-income ACT households where occupants no longer use their heating and have turned off their hot water. In these households, occupants go to bed early in winter, waking up in temperatures that are below zero and have no other option than to suffer through increasing heatwave temperatures in summer.

This is an all-too-common response to rising electricity and gas charges, which can contribute substantially to household energy costs. Data from the Australian Bureau of Statistics indicates that prices for most goods continued to be higher than they were 12 months ago²⁶. The data counts automotive fuel (+7.2%), Electricity (+4.2%), and Rent (+2.2%), as among the most significant price rises. It additionally states that gas tariffs have seen a recent increase of as much as 7 per cent in the ACT²⁷.

ACT Government data indicates that around half of the energy used in an average Canberra home is for heating and cooling, and in an uninsulated house, up to 35 per cent of heat is lost through the ceiling over the colder months²⁸. The ACT Government's investment in energy efficiency improvements for existing Housing ACT properties as part of the implementation of the minimum ceiling insulation standard²⁹ is a measure that will greatly assist Canberrans in saving on energy bills.

The Society acknowledges the ACT Government's commitment to supporting Canberrans to better understand their energy use, reduce this use and support households to access cleaner energy through the "Everyday Climate Choices" initiative.

The Society calls on Parties to continue to commit more funding to energy efficiency programs that support vulnerable households to reduce their energy use.

The Society calls on Parties to commit to an inclusive energy transition process that supports low-income earners as part of actions towards the implementation of the Integrated Energy Plan.



BETTER JUSTICE OUTCOMES FOR FIRST NATIONS PEOPLE

The Productivity Commission's 2024 Report on Government Services³⁰ shows Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people are 25 times (24.6 times crude ratio) more likely to be sent to prison in the ACT than non-Aboriginal people. This is 7 points above the national rate (17.4). This crude ratio is an increase from the 2021-22 rate of 20.5 in the ACT. The Report further highlights the overrepresentation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people in the ACT child protection and justice systems is continuing. Among young people aged 10–17 years, the average daily time spent in detention and in community-based supervision is nearly 15 times longer for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander young people³¹.

For children under the age of 17 years, 353.1 per 1000 children of Indigenous status received children protection notifications. This compares to 50 per 1000 children for their non-indigenous counterparts. For children on care and protection orders, the rate stands at 85.7 per 1000 children as compared to 6.6 per 1000 children for their non-indigenous counterparts or almost 13 times more likely for Indigenous children³².

The Society applauds the appointment of the first ACT Commissioner for First Nations children³³ and the establishment of the ACT Government's independent review into the over-representation of First Nations people in the ACT criminal justice system³⁴.

The Society calls on all parties to commit to prioritising the implementation of all 28 recommendations from Our Booris, Our Way Report³⁵. We call on all parties to explore an effective partnership with the Community that aims to improve the systemic failures of Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander children involved with child protection in the ACT.

The Society supports the call by the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Community in the ACT for a Royal Commission-style Inquiry into the lived experience³⁶ of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. We call on parties to commit to conducting this inquiry that should explore the connection between the levels of poverty within the Aboriginal community and the impacts and consequences on the education of Aboriginal children. The inquiry should also seek to establish possible linkages between poverty and contact with childcare and protection, homelessness, and contact with the justice system.

The Society supports the call by the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Community in the ACT for the ACT Government to explore a Cross Border Justice Scheme³⁷ with the NSW Government. This has the potential of improving the rehabilitation measures implemented with the Alexander Maconochie Centre (AMC) and can have a great impact on reducing the recidivism rates in the ACT and among the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Communities in the ACT who are calling for this initiative to be prioritised.

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