

the Record

Spring 2018



St Vincent de Paul Society
good works

It's time to raise Newstart.

INCREASE IN
NEWSTART ALLOWANCE
LONG OVERDUE

JOHN HEWSON

•
PAGE 6

GOING HUNGRY
IN THE LUCKY
COUNTRY

BRIANNA CASEY

•
PAGE 14

A FAIR DAY'S PAY:
FOR THE DIGNITY
OF WORKERS

BISHOP VINCENT LONG

•
PAGE 26



St Vincent de Paul Society
good works

The Society is a lay Catholic organisation that aspires to live the Gospel message by serving Christ in the poor with love, respect, justice, hope and joy, and by working to shape a more just and compassionate society.

This logo represents the hand of Christ that blesses the cup, the hand of love that offers the cup, and the hand of suffering that receives the cup.

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National Council of Australia
PO Box 243, Deakin West, ACT, 2600

Contact: Donna Scheerlinck
Phone: 02 6202 1200
Email: admin@svdp.org.au
Web: vinnies.org.au
Editor: David Halliday

The Record is overseen by an editorial committee.

Advertising: Donna Scheerlinck
Phone: 02 6202 1200
Email: admin@svdp.org.au
Design: Damon Carr
Ramesh Weeraratne
Design & Print Office
Catholic Archdiocese
of Melbourne

Phone: 03 9926 5759

Printing: Doran Printing
46 Industrial Drive,
Braeside, Victoria, 3195

Phone: 03 9587 4333

Email: sales@doran.com.au
Web: www.doran.com.au

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IN THIS ISSUE

4 Editor's note

5 Mission and values: WA State President Gladys Demissie

6 Increase in Newstart Allowance Long Overdue **John Hewson**

8 The cost of living **Juanita McLaren**

11 Year of youth: young member spotlight

12 Time for a lift: Australian Council of Social Service **Dr Cassandra Goldie**

14 Going hungry in the lucky country **Brianna Casey**

16 Advocating for a strong social safety net **Kym Duggan**

18 Campaigning from below: The AUWU battle of raise Newstart **Jeremy Poxon**

20 Spring—The season of starting over **Ann Rennie**

22 Budget standards research on the adequacy of Newstart Allowance **Peter Saunders**

24 Capturing poverty **Julia Martin Silversun**

25 Income, inequality and health **Sharon Friel**

26 A fair day's pay: for the dignity of workers and the good of all **Bishop Vincent Long Van Nguyen**

28 Vinnies 2020: Our plenary councils past and future **Nick Brodie**

30 Stories about life on the breadline **Colleen O'Sullivan**

32 Our own ways of giving back: QLD State President Dennis Innes

34 Newstart: Stories from the conferences

POEMS

25 Image, sleeping in the sun **Jan Price**

27 Leaders **Andrew Hamilton SJ**

29 Three transfigurations **Tony Brennan**

31 After purgatory **Reg Naulty**

33 Unconditional love **Andrew Hamilton SJ**



GOOD
NEWS
IS COMING

Photo: Jon / Unsplash

Editor's note

BY DAVID HALLIDAY

Welcome to the spring issue of *The Record*.

I'm new around here, and I have had the privilege of guiding this issue in to land.

This quarter, we've put together a single issue about a single issue: we're talking all things social security as we take a granular look at Newstart payments in Australia. If you're on Newstart, you're probably doing it tough.

Our society is built on giving a helping hand when someone needs it most. Key to this is an adequate income safety net that guarantees people can meet their basic needs when facing the toughest times of their lives. But in our lucky country, social security payments have slipped to such a low level that many people on Newstart struggle to put food on the table or a roof over their heads. Consider these truth bombs:

Newstart hasn't seen an increase since 1994.

Australia has the lowest unemployment benefit in the OECD.

It's a simple problem with a simple solution: we want to see Newstart, Youth Allowance and other related payments increase by \$75 per week.

Some might argue that the social security system in Australia has long been driven by a punitive philosophy; the idea that if you're in need of assistance, it's your own

fault and you should be grateful for any help you receive, regardless of how small. But this argument is hard to sustain when you consider that the biggest beneficiaries of taxpayer handouts are the wealthy in the form of tax concessions which, at \$135 billion, are costing Australia six times what Newstart does. And blaming people for their unemployment ignores the fact that there simply are not enough jobs, with eight underemployed or under-employed people for every job vacancy.

More fundamentally, forcing people into poverty and destitution undermines their self-worth, their wellbeing and their dignity.

And, while we're talking economics, the last few years has given rise to economist superstars like Thomas Piketty and Nobel prize winner Joseph Stiglitz. Thanks to their work, it has become clear that the neoliberal ideology that promotes financial inequality through a lack of investment into those who are the worst off is actually harmful to a country's economic growth. With growing recognition of the economic costs of inequality, calls to raise Newstart have come from across the political spectrum and from organisations such as the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development and the Business Council for Australia.

In the pages ahead, we'll crunch some numbers and also look at some individual stories. Over the years of volunteering with Vinnies,

I've met hundreds of individuals and families on social security who needed our help because Newstart payments are too scant to cover basic necessities like soaring rent, bills and groceries. Since Vinnies is about offering a hand up and not a hand out, part of our job is challenging injustice where we see it.

That's where this issue comes in.

In the following pages, we've collated some of the sharpest minds in Australia to present the case that Newstart in this country is too low to survive on. We turned to former federal Liberal party leader Dr John Hewson to give us a primer on the state of Newstart in this country; Bishop Vincent Long argues that it's time to reassess wage stagnation; CEO of Foodbank Australia Brianna Casey makes the case for a food security strategy; and Juanita McLaren lets us take a peek into the life of someone suddenly needing income support.

Raising the Newstart Allowance is a little gesture that would make a big difference to a lot of people. We encourage you to read through the magazine, consider the arguments and make up your own mind. And by the turn of the final page, we hope you can join us in celebrating an idea that will lift the living standards of over 800,000 Australians.

When you take a stand for those with the least in society, history has a way of proving you right. With that, I won't hold you back from reading through our latest. Enjoy. ♦

Mission and values: State President WA, Gladys Demissie

Name: Gladys Demissie

Position in the Society: State President Western Australia

Hometown: Perth, Western Australia

How did you first get involved with the Society?

I have had a long history with the Society. Growing up in Singapore, I was introduced to Vinnies at a young age as part of the Parish Youth Conference, as my Mother was a Vincentian. I was in the Girls' Conference, and we visited families with a focus on the children, taking them out on excursions to the beach and other local spots, along with running a little library from the temporary church for children in the local area.

Describe your experiences of being a conference member.

In 2009, I joined the local St Vincent De Paul Society at Our Lady Help of Christians Parish and became the Conference Treasurer soon after. As a member of a local conference, I participate in the principal activity of the organisation: visiting individuals and families in their homes when they seek assistance and support. With help from the local council, I set up a local forum in my community to meet with other emergency relief organisations in the area so we could network and work together to assist people in the local community. In 2012, I joined the Finance and Risk Committee, and in 2014 I was appointed State Treasurer of the Society and served on the State Council and Operations Committee. These roles have allowed me to have a better appreciation of the society's broader work and to influence strategic outcomes.

What are your key aims during your time as president over the next four years?

My aims are to build on the good work that has already been undertaken, to support people in the valuable role they play in the conference structure and to grow a stronger awareness of the Society's work in Western Australia. I would also like to ensure the work that we do as a Society continues to be as it is intended—determining how we can best support the less advantaged and finding innovative ways of working by being relevant to the needs of the community.

What are the challenges members of the Society face in carrying out good works?

I am a firm believer in our mission and values, as they provide us with a solid foundation and set the ground rules for what we are about and what we do to be a just and compassionate society. However, how we put this into practice can be challenging. Issues around growing our membership, the ageing population and the ever growing gap between the wealthy and poor are some of the other challenges we face.

Where would you like to see the Society in five years?

I would like to see the Society continuing its good works, but it may be doing so in different ways. We need to sustain our membership and volunteer base and ensure that what we do is both understood and championed by the community. I believe there will need to be greater collaboration and cooperation among similar not-for-profit organisations so that we build resilience among the people we support and help. ♦





Increase in Newstart Allowance long overdue

BY JOHN HEWSON

*Just as starfish are not fish,
strawberries are not berries, and
Chinese Checkers are neither
Chinese nor checkers, the Newstart
Allowance does not really offer a
'new start' to those struggling with
unemployment.*

There is now an overwhelming case for a significant ‘catch-up’ increase in the Newstart Allowance (and in the Youth Allowance) and for steps to be taken to ensure its real value isn’t so easily eroded again in the future. And importantly, it is time for a rethink and a refocus on the principal purpose and effectiveness of the Newstart Allowance.

The allowance has not increased in real terms since 1994. At \$275 per week, it is \$182 per week less than the aged pension and well below most accepted estimates of the poverty line. This is still disturbingly true even when factoring in rent assistance and the energy supplement—the payments remain well short of the minimum income a household needs to meet essential living costs and to stay healthy.

Successive governments have simply left this issue to drift from one year to the next—for a multiplicity of generally indefensible reasons that have varied as governments and the politics of the issue have changed and so-called ‘societal norms’ and expectations have fluctuated. There has been very little focus on the genuine needs of the unemployed and on what is required to get them back into the workforce.

The reasons proffered have varied from tight fiscal constraints and the priority of Budget repair to attacks on ‘dole bludgers’, ‘leaners’ and ‘welfare cheats’, and just about everything in between. The eligibility rules have also fluctuated, with significant variations in waiting periods, income and assets tests, training requirements, work proofs, concepts of mutual obligation, claims procedures and, more recently, drug testing and the cashless welfare card.

Governments are driven by the electoral need to be seen to be ‘doing something’ in response to a problem but are rarely assessed on what they actually achieve. In this area they have often achieved very little, except perhaps increased complexity, uncertainty and difficulty for the unemployed.

Governments are also focussed on scoring points over the opposition and shifting blame. The current government’s claim to have contained spending on Newstart compared with the Rudd/Gillard governments has been exaggerated, as it doesn’t take into account the impact of the GFC and certain shifting between the Parental and Newstart schemes. Their claim to have ‘moved people from welfare to work’ is also contestable.

There are now more than 700,000 Australians on Newstart payments, although this allowance is generally not designed for the long term—about half of all unemployed people find a job within 10 weeks. To put it into context, there are many more on disability support pensions and, of course, on the aged pension.

Strong employment growth was recorded last year and the measured unemployment rate is approaching the figure economists have long-regarded as the lowest sustainable rate. There are also reports from time to time of serious skill shortages in key professions and industries. But despite all this, the reality is that it is still very hard to get and keep a job right now—abundant jobs are simply not out there, especially for younger and older workers.

Governments are driven by the electoral need to be seen to be ‘doing something’ in response to a problem but are rarely assessed on what they actually achieve.

The nature of work is changing rapidly, reflected in the casualisation of the workforce and a significant increase in underemployment, where people are unable to get as much work as they would like. Few of these realities seem to have been considered in government thinking and responses regarding Newstart—both in terms of its level and structure.

Perhaps one of the most significant factors that has caught governments and policy authorities unprepared is several years of historically flat wage growth, despite a stronger labour

market, historically low interest rates, record corporate profitability and so on.

Indeed, if governments were thinking and planning for the medium to longer-term (rather than their typical short-term, opportunistic, populist approach), surely it would make sense to assume that wages would remain flat and unemployment intransigent, resulting in mounting community pressures in support of a living wage and a universal basic income.

I fear the bottom line of the political reluctance to address the inadequacies of the Newstart and Youth Allowances is an unwillingness to accept the emergence, growth and persistence in this country of a poor, mostly unemployed, welfare-dependent underclass—an underclass whose unfortunate prospect is, at best, more of the same, but more likely a worsening of their current plight. ♦

Dr John Hewson is a professor in the Crawford school of Public Policy at ANU and a former Leader of the Liberal Party and the Federal Opposition.



The cost of living

BY JUANITA MCLAREN

A single mother of three explains how anyone is at risk of suddenly needing welfare and how hard it can be to survive—let alone escape.

I often told the kids that I had eaten a late lunch so that I could skip meals myself and feed them more.

Seven years ago I was working full-time in a national management role while my husband of ten years stayed at home caring for our three sons under the age of seven. Then one day he left for another relationship.

Suddenly, the 48 hours we had as a couple each day to raise our kids was reduced to 24, with me having to wear many hats: primary carer, financial provider and household organiser. According to the Child Support system, the father of my children did not bear any financial responsibility as he had not been working for a few years, so I had to continue working full-time.

About 18 months later, things took a sharp turn when the children and I got a serious flu. I used up all my sick leave, carer's leave and most of my annual leave taking care of everyone, including myself.

Within a month of 'the great sickness', I couldn't handle the strain of full-time work. I was exhausted, my confidence was shot and I was losing my temper with my kids. I resigned, with a plan to pick up contract work that would give me time to focus on the kids and getting back on track in life. Over that year, however, I found I needed to start accessing Parenting Payment for financial support. All the jobs available at my level were full-time and required travel. I applied for lower level roles with less pay, but was told I was overqualified.

Eventually I went back to study a Masters. I thought studying would allow me the flexibility to be around for the children while making the transition to a new career, drawing on my established career for transferable skills that could get me better pay. It would be tough, but I'd find a way. Centrelink agreed to my studying but I would need to participate in the Welfare to Work program in order to stay on Parenting Payment Single, which paid a fraction more than Austudy.

I still needed to go to monthly meetings to comply with the job network agreement. But it soon became clear that they wouldn't be able to help me with any meaningful transition back to work. The whole mutual obligation activity was reduced to a box-ticking exercise that required me to satisfy ever-increasing conditions to meet my obligations. I had to maintain 12 job searches a fortnight and ten hours a week of voluntary work because I wasn't in paid work, all to prove that I was participating and therefore eligible for payments. All this while studying 30 hours a week and being the primary carer of three children in primary school.

The simple act of my youngest turning eight would mean I no longer had access to Parenting Payment and would be moved to Newstart Allowance for financial assistance—over \$100 a fortnight less. With 9 months to go before this pivotal birthday and 18 months left of study, I needed to plan for the financial transition.

Despite my best efforts, within 3 months of instigating this master plan for our future financial security, the money I got from Centrelink was no longer sustainable. The children started missing out—I couldn't afford for them to do sport, there was never enough food, and they just kept needing money for things like camp and excursions. I often told the kids that I had eaten a late lunch so that I could skip meals myself and feed them more. When my eldest started high school this year at a government school, I was still \$1200 out-of-pocket just to get him through the front door, even after all the subsidised uniforms and fees.

continued on page 10 ►

◀ continued from page 9

Sometimes I sold figs from my tree on a local food growing facebook page to be able to buy milk, bread and eggs. The gap between my expenses and what I was actually receiving was about \$400 per month, which I had to borrow from friends and family—I am still paying off payment plans to this day. I constantly felt guilty about pursuing this long-term plan and the effect it was having in the immediate time frame.

Then I received 3 months' notice to vacate the house I was renting. On the day I was due to move out, my youngest son would turn 8 years old.

So here I was, an unemployed, full-time student and single mother with three sons, looking for a place to live. I was committed to staying near the kids' schools, but with that came the expense of living in the inner west, where two houses came up each week in my price range and the same 20 to 30 people were attending each opening. I applied for a house after a friend tipped me off before the lease went public, only to be told that the owners were looking for a family with fewer children and at least two jobs.

Thankfully, I was at last offered a contract role for three days a week where I was doing my research placement, and it would start around my youngest son's eighth birthday! This helped me secure a three-bedroom apartment just two weeks before my current lease was due to end. My best friend set up a GoFundMe page to help pay for the move.

DHS would probably like to think that I am a successful product of the Welfare to Work program—the financial, emotional, physical and mental impact the program had on me has certainly convinced me never to go back there. Most of the time, though, I reflect on how I was following a natural process of grieving, starting over, learning to be a single parent, and planning for my future and that of my children. I can't imagine how I would have done it any other way, regardless of the conditions and pressures put on me by the various policies I encountered along the way.

Eighteen months down the track, I have finished one contract position and started another. My Masters degree is still unfinished, and I have missed out on jobs that I could easily do because of those elusive three units I am short to complete the Masters. Financially, I am still just getting by week to week, although I have been able to afford for the kids to participate in some extracurricular activities, and I have been able to put away a buffer of a month's rent, just in case.

If Newstart can't be increased, payments need to continue for at least a month or two beyond commencing a job to allow people who have started jobs after experiencing poverty to create a buffer and so not have to continually re-register when insecure jobs stop and start. Starting a job costs money too, and the call for more money isn't a lifestyle choice, just as being on Newstart isn't a lifestyle choice. The cost of living in this country continues to rise. The cost of *living*. Not partying, not pampering, just living. ♦

Juanita McLaren is a single mother of three boys from Melbourne's inner west and now commits herself to advocate for those in the social welfare system who may not have the voice to call out how crushing it is. You can read more about her lived experience of the entire system through www.powertopersuade.org.au.



Photo: Julie Johnson/Unsplash

Year of Youth: Young member spotlight

Name: Rebecca Hughes

Where do you volunteer with Vinnies and for which programs?

I currently volunteer with Vinnies Youth. Youth runs a number of camp programs including kids, teens and our vocational youth pathway, and at the moment I'm really passionate about volunteering on kids' camps. I also sit on our State Youth and Young Adult Advisory Committee with a focus on facilitating fundraising for our programs.

How long have you been with Vinnies?

My involvement with Vinnies started when I was about eight years old in 2008. My school had a Mini Vinnies conference that did work with the local parish conference. When I was old enough, I started volunteering on camps. That was in 2016. I've been with Vinnies for about 10 years now.

What is your favorite thing about being a Vinnies volunteer?

I love the community aspect of Vinnies, and the fact that there are so many people that want to come together from all different backgrounds to serve those in our community who are struggling. We all need a hand to help us out sometimes and I love that Vinnies allows people to come together and do just that; I think that's really special about being a Vinnies volunteer.

Your favorite story of success or inspiration?

As a volunteer in Youth, the majority of my work is with children. It's hard to pinpoint a specific moment, but something that continues to give me hope and affirms the work that we do is when a child says 'thank you'.



There have been a few times when kids have turned around at the end of a camp and said 'thank you', plain and genuine. While those two words are simple, they affirm that we've given the kids what they need from us—whether it was a few days of fun or a safe forum in which to talk and be heard. It's always a show of the success of camps when they come back to the next camp. It allows us to see the amazing growth of the kids from camp to camp. My inspiration to continue doing the works of the Society is in the proof that the work we do makes an impact.

What does your typical day look like?

As a camp volunteer, we normally get up at around 6.30am and wake the kids at 7am. The day is filled with activities which the Vinnies Youth volunteers organise and run for the kids. They include anything from treasure hunts, crazy science experiments, water fights or arts and craft. It is a lot of fun, but it can be extremely challenging.

It can be very confronting, especially when we're assisting children who have experienced trauma early on in their lives. You really have to give the kids 110 per cent of yourself. They deserve

to have your attention and to be heard even though it can be challenging. Our job is to be there for them. It can be hard when you have a roomful of kids, but one of the beautiful things about camp is the fact that the kids have the opportunity to be listened to. The day then wraps up with a debrief for the leaders to share highlights and challenges from the day. Once we've done everything we need to do in preparation for the next day, we get to bed at around midnight to get a good night's sleep to start again the next day!

What has volunteering at Vinnies taught you?

I think being a Vinnies volunteer has taught me how to really listen. To be able to truly connect with someone, take in their concerns, let them know that they are heard and that I can support them if they would like that.

What does being a Vincentian mean to you?

Being a Vincentian is about putting my faith into action, by giving my heart, skills and time to those we assist. It is really about showing my love for humanity, for my community, and for others. Being a Vincentian is understanding that service can go a long way.

How does the Year of Youth align with what you do with Vinnies?

As a young person of faith, I know the capabilities of youth. I'm constantly amazed by my fellow volunteers and the absolute skill and dedication they display, often giving up weeks away from their normal lives every year. The Year of Youth really drills home that Youth has to go out, connect and serve others to be a vital part of society. It's great that the Year of Youth is drawing a focus to that. ♦

Time for a lift: Australian Council of Social Service

BY DR CASSANDRA GOLDIE

A man recently shared his story with us about living on Newstart. He received the payment for three months, and in that time became malnourished and underweight because he could not afford to eat more than one meal per day. After rent and other bills, he had around \$40 per week left. This man was starving but still had to fulfill his job search requirements. Luckily, he found a job, but most people receiving Newstart spend more than 12 months on the payment; a payment so low that it literally starves people.

The last time Newstart was increased above inflation was in 1994, when it went up by \$2.95 per week. To give an idea of just how long it has been since Newstart received a real increase: 24 years ago *Muriel's Wedding* was showing in cinemas; petrol set you back around 60 cents a litre; and Nelson Mandela became president of South Africa.

Since 1994, wages and pensions have risen well above inflation (and in 2009, the former Labor Government increased the Age, Disability Support and Carer pensions by \$32 per week). Since 1994, of course, housing costs have skyrocketed, as have other essential costs of living, including energy bills and out-of-pocket health care costs. But successive governments have expected people who are unemployed, studying or looking after children to cover the cost of living with a payment that was not even enough in the '90s, let alone in 2018.

This is why people on Newstart skip meals and cannot heat their homes in winter. This is why they cannot afford to travel to job interviews. This is the main reason why people sleep in their cars, couch surf or sleep on the streets—because Newstart and Rent Assistance are not enough to keep a roof over your head.

ACOSS is calling for Newstart, Youth Allowance and other similar payments to be lifted by a minimum of \$75 per week, to help people cover the cost of the absolute basics. Our position is based on research done by the University of NSW where they looked at the minimum level of income someone who is unemployed needs to cover housing, food, transport and clothing. They found that Newstart and Rent Assistance falls \$96 per week short of what is required for a single person. ACOSS therefore calls for Newstart to rise by \$75 and Rent Assistance for a single person by \$20 per week to bring people up to this benchmark.

Lifting these payments would give people a chance to eat enough and to cover the cost of the bus ticket or fuel to get to that job interview. It would help pay for school shoes for the kids (there are more than 110,000 single parents on Newstart). It would right a longstanding wrong that has impoverished people in Australia for more than a quarter of a century.

It is also good for the economy. Deloitte Access Economics has looked at the economic benefits of a \$75 per week increase to Youth Allowance and Newstart and unsurprisingly, it is extremely positive. This policy would deliver 12,000 new jobs across the country and wages would rise by 0.2%. Government revenue would increase by around \$1 billion. Rural and regional Australia would be the biggest beneficiaries because of the number of people outside of our cities needing these payments, and almost every cent would be spent locally.

Lifting Newstart and other allowances would do more to reduce poverty in Australia than any other policy. It is the bare minimum required to reduce inequality and help people with important aspects of their lives, like giving their little ones all they need and finding paid work that is sustainable and fulfilling.

We all benefit if we ensure that we all have access to enough money to live with dignity if we lose our job, get sick, need to care for children or are studying. We should not lose everything if we are not able to be in paid work for a range of reasons at some stage in our lives.

This is why we must Raise the Rate and give people enough to put food on the table and keep the lights on. We can change lives if we Raise the Rate. Show your support here:

<https://www.acoss.org.au/raisetherate/joinus/> ♦

Dr Cassandra Goldie is the CEO of ACOSS, a national advocate for action to reduce poverty and inequality and the peak body for the community services sector in Australia.

The economic benefits of a \$75 per week increase to Youth Allowance and Newstart are unsurprisingly extremely positive. This policy would deliver 12,000 new jobs across the country and wages would rise by 0.2%. Government revenue would increase by around \$1 billion.



Going hungry in the 'lucky country'



BY BRIANNA CASEY

Despite its reputation as the 'lucky country', Australia has a hunger problem. In fact, not just a problem but a crisis. The *Foodbank Hunger Report 2017* revealed that a staggering 3.6 million Australians experienced food insecurity at least once in the previous 12 months. More recently, Foodbank's first ever research report on food insecurity in children, *Rumbling Tummys*, found that more than one in five children in Australia has experienced food insecurity in the last year. These shocking statistics should serve as a wakeup call to all levels of government as well as the broader community, and prompt the development of a long-term, whole of government strategy on food security.

Foodbank Australia sees food insecurity as the ultimate canary in the coal mine. When something is going wrong in a household, a community, an industry, the workforce, a region or the economy more broadly, food tends to be the first thing to become a discretionary item. At the moment, 'bill shock' arising from an unexpected expense or large bill (especially gas and electricity) is the top cause of food insecurity in Australia, closely followed by not having enough money in the first place, and rental/mortgage payments. With so many Australians living on or near the poverty line, it's not surprising that utility costs, support payments not keeping pace with costs of living, and housing affordability are catalysts for food insecurity. Put simply, when you're living pay cheque to pay cheque, it doesn't take much to tip the household budget out of balance.

Food insecure Australians come from a diverse range of backgrounds, but the most

common group assisted by Foodbank's charity network is categorised by some as the 'working poor'. In fact, almost half of food insecure Australians are employed in some way. Underemployment is often more of a problem than unemployment and is becoming increasingly so. The second largest demographic is young people, with young Australians, including children, more likely to experience food insecurity than the general population. Children represent more than a quarter of those receiving food relief from our charity network. The third largest demographic is rural and regional Australians. Almost a third of Australians experiencing food insecurity live in regional and remote areas, and that's before we even take into account the current drought devastating large swathes of the eastern seaboard.

As Australia's largest food relief organisation, providing essential food and groceries to more than 2400 frontline charities, including St Vincent de Paul Society, Foodbank has a unique window into the circumstances that can tip vulnerable Australians into food insecurity. We also have the scale, capacity and expertise to ensure more than 239 000 school breakfasts are delivered a week across 1750 schools nationally, and that food relief is provided to more than 652 000 people a month. But we know that's not even close to meeting the growing demand, with only 37 per cent of our charities meeting the full needs of the people they are assisting. We have to do better.

Foodbank Australia is calling on the Australian Government and Opposition to support the development of a food security strategy. This strategy should look not only at the causes of food insecurity—which will necessarily

mean raising the rate of Newstart—but also innovative policy solutions to deliver increased volumes of food and groceries through the food relief sector, such as meaningful incentives for farmers, manufacturers and transporters to donate and transport more food and grocery products rather than dump them (which is often a cheaper option). The strategy must also look at the capacity of the charity/volunteer sector to accommodate more food and grocery volumes, factoring in an ageing volunteer base, geographic gaps and high utility costs for charities themselves. Above all, we need all levels of government to play a part and acknowledge that it requires a whole of government approach. Food insecurity is far from being a Social Services portfolio problem. The problems and solutions lie as much in Treasury, Education, Health and Agriculture as they do in Families and Social Services.

We have a wonderful opportunity to tackle this issue head on. We have an impressive record of partnering with people and businesses all the way along the supply chain to source and distribute more food, and we have a passionate and determined network of fellow members of the Australian Council of Social Services advocating for long-overdue changes to support services and payments. By harnessing our collective expertise and enthusiasm, we may finally be able to stop treating the symptoms of food insecurity, poverty and inequality and actually start treating the causes. Now there's a federal election commitment we'd like to see! ♦

Brianna Casey is Chief Executive Officer of Foodbank Australia. For more information on Foodbank Australia, visit <https://www.foodbank.org.au/>

Advocating for a strong social safety net

BY KYM DUGGAN

As followers of Christ, we cannot fail to be concerned for the welfare of the weakest; we must also draw the attention of society and the civil authorities to their plight.

Pope Francis

You must not be content with tiding the poor over the poverty crisis. You must study their condition and the injustices which brought about such poverty, with the aim of a long-term improvement.

Frédéric Ozanam

Advocating for social justice is central to the work of the St Vincent de Paul Society. It is embedded in the mission statement of the Society and is a defining element of what we do. The ways in which conference members carry out their volunteer work, assisting those in need, embodies the essence of social justice. However, as *The Rule* indicates, 'the Society is concerned not only with alleviating need but also with identifying the unjust structures that cause it' (*The Rule* 2012, p. 26: 7.1).

Identifying and overcoming the unjust structures that give rise to poverty and inequality is central to the Society's National Social Justice Committee. The committee, which comprises representatives from each state and territory, supports the Society's advocacy for social change. The committee is guided by the Society's National Social Justice and Advocacy Policy Statement posted on the national website. That policy highlights advocacy on the lack of an adequate income and helping to reduce poverty as some of the major goals for the Society.

The St Vincent de Paul Society has a very strong reputation within our community for the good works that it undertakes. When the Society speaks on issues, politicians listen. This privileged position carries with it a responsibility to speak out for the rights of those we serve. At a time when much of the Church is under challenge, the Society is free from those pressures and there is an even greater need for us to be heard on the injustices affecting our companions.

Our social justice advocacy is also at its most compelling when we speak directly from our experiences dealing with the disadvantages suffered by our companions. Our members witness every day the hardships and indignities that arise from inadequate income support payments such as Newstart Allowance. Those in receipt of Newstart struggle to survive on a payment that hasn't kept up with rising costs of living and is well below any poverty measure used in Australia. Often the only way they can survive is to call on us for help.

The Society has long campaigned for an increase to meagre income support payments and for those payments to be indexed to wages and price increases as an urgent priority. The Newstart Allowance has not been increased since 1994, and inadequate indexation has meant that payments and allowances have fallen behind wages growth and behind the costs of essential services.

The current payment of just \$39 per day is simply not enough to meet basic living costs. The single rate of Newstart is \$145 per week below the poverty line, while the single rate of Youth Allowance is \$197 below the poverty line.

The Society has joined with the Australian Council of Social Services and many other organisations and individuals to call on both political parties to commit to raising the rate by an amount of \$75 per week. In addition to gaining support from social services and charities, the campaign has been endorsed by a wide cross-section of the

community including prominent economists, former prime ministers (including John Howard) and business leaders (including the Business Council of Australia).

To highlight the challenges of surviving on Newstart, the Society has partnered with an animation company to produce an interactive animation. This animation draws upon existing research on the costs of living to show how inadequate current income support payments are. In addition to launching this animation, an accompanying website has been developed (<https://raisetherate.vinnies.org.au/>) which includes a range of supporting materials for the Newstart campaign: factsheets and policy briefings; case studies and stories of life on Newstart; and template letters and guidance for members and supporters to assist them in contacting their elected representatives.

We urge all members and supporters of Vinnies to sign up to the campaign and to contact their local elected members to get their commitment to this long overdue reform. ♦

Kym Duggan is Chair of the St Vincent de Paul Society National Social Justice Committee.

Campaigning from below: The AUWU battle to raise Newstart

BY JEREMY POXON

Since forming in late 2014, the Australian Unemployed Workers' Union (AUWU) has dedicated itself to protecting the rights and dignity of unemployed workers and pensioners. Tired of the social and financial deprivation that comes with being unemployed, this voluntary crew of job seekers support one another, exchange advice on how best to navigate the welfare system, and pressure the government for much-needed changes in social policy.

Now, with over 50 branches across all states and territories, we are the only truly national organisation run by the unemployed, for the unemployed. Through our national advocacy hotline, we've helped thousands of Australian job seekers secure their entitlements, hold their job agents accountable, and find safe pathways into secure work.

As welfare recipients and job seekers, we are leading the fight against a wave of policies and ideologies that stigmatise us, police our behaviour, and make receiving (and living off) entitlements increasingly difficult. Here, we galvanize low-income communities (who are poorly represented by political parties and labour unions), arm them with information, and build grassroots campaigns for living-wage jobs and a strong, secure safety net. One of the longest-running, and most important, of these struggles has been our campaign to raise the punishingly low rate of Newstart.

Despite being a prosperous nation, it's staggering that Australia's social security payments to the unemployed are the second-lowest in the OECD. At \$275 per week for singles, Newstart remains fixed at \$145 per week below the poverty line. As a result, Australia has the second-highest rate of poverty among the unemployed in the OECD.

Each week, we hear dozens of stories from unemployed workers who are struggling to cope on Newstart. Many speak about how being on the payment makes it impossible to actually find work, because they can't afford travel, access to the internet, phone credit or decent clothes. On Newstart, each day is a battle for our unemployed just to put food on the table.

Since forming, we've tried to amplify these voices and stories—the personal, often hidden, experiences of our unemployed—in the hope of convincing our leaders in Canberra to increase the rate of Newstart. Sadly, to date, this has mostly fallen on deaf ears and cold hearts (even Labor is only willing to commit to a 'root and branch' review of the pitiful payment).

Given the reluctance of our federal leaders to lift Australians out of poverty, the AUWU's campaigning around Newstart has begun to focus more on building power and support from below, instead of waiting, fruitlessly, for more aid (and humanity) from those at the top.

This year, the AUWU, in partnership with the Anti-Poverty Network, has started lobbying and petitioning local councils to start publicly advocating for an increase to Newstart. So far we've successfully lobbied over a dozen local councils in South Australia and Victoria, who have now joined the #RaisetheRate campaign, and are standing up for their local, unemployed residents.

Through this campaign, job seekers have been given a platform to share their stories with councillors about how difficult it is to survive, day-to-day, on Newstart. Crucially, the councillors have been listening—and stirred into action. This has been a hugely important display of support and solidarity for our members, many of whom have never witnessed a government body so committed to hearing their concerns and advocating on their behalf.

For the foreseeable future, this is what our Newstart campaigning will entail: recruiting local governments and councillors into the fight to #RaisetheRate until we build the kind of burning platform for change that the big brothers in federal government simply cannot continue to ignore. ♦

Jeremy Poxon is the media officer for the Australian Unemployed Workers' Union.

A photograph of a narrow, cobblestone street in an urban setting. The walls are covered in colorful graffiti and murals. A teal bicycle is parked on the sidewalk in the foreground. In the background, several people are walking down the street. The lighting is bright, suggesting daytime.

Despite being a prosperous nation, it's staggering that Australia's social security payments to the unemployed are the second-lowest in the OECD

Spring—the season of starting over

BY ANN RENNIE

The day the Lord created hope was probably the same day he created spring, writes Bern Williams. The woe of winter becomes the prayer of spring. After months of cold and damp, melancholy skies and short grey days, buds burst into flower. The snowdrop raises its gentle head and blossoms decorate trees. Daubs of wattle, like swags of saffron silk, brighten dour suburban streets. The sun begins to warm our backs and birds break into a chorused chortling, the sombre notes of winter being replaced by chirrups and canticles. A gentle greening of the earth takes place, a soft and verdant shimmer. It is a glad awakening.



Winter is in retreat. The odd day is coloured by her last gasp of wind and her fitful rainy rantings. Somehow spring has taken hold, imperceptibly, immutably, establishing the order of the new. It is the season of rebirth and resurrection; the season of the bubbling, surging tide of sap, as D H Lawrence observed. It is the season of hatching and sprouting and emerging, a faithful fecundity that has not yet been despoiled by human intervention. Still, we need to be vigilant if we want this most hopeful of seasons to retain its primordial constancy in the unfolding human story.

In parks, parents push toddlers on swings, dogs fetch balls, games of cricket are played. A rash of hoardings advertising spring fetes sprouts along main roads. The Mr Whippy van trundles around crescents and cul de sacs, its tinny tinkling an invitation to the casual joys of life not so buttoned up or battened down. The churlish chill is thawing out and smiles begin to replace the frozen smirk of winter.

The colours of spring delight. They are the greens of mint and moss, of pine and fern and clover, the gentle hues of God's giant garden. They are the soft pastels that hint at the full-blown and full-bodied. They are the glimpses of what is to come. Spring is the gentle enchantress that leads us to the smorgasbord of summer. Pale pink blossoms whisper of long, silky afternoons; perky pansies, little floral paint pots, decorate verandahs. The quiet of the deserted schoolyard is replaced by the joyful vocalese of children laughing.

Spring is a time of rebirth, regeneration, the slow ripening. Nature triumphantly awakens, its fertility the miracle of Mother Earth. Pope Francis reminds us of the importance of caring for our common home, this tiny blue marble that swirls in the indigo ink of the expanding universe. In *Laudato si'* we are reminded of the importance of ecological conversion—that awareness of our responsibility to those who come after us. In a speech in Manila, Philippines, in January 2015 the pontiff said, 'As stewards of God's creation, we are called to make the earth a beautiful garden for the human family. When we destroy our forests, ravage our soil and pollute our seas, we betray that noble calling.' As spring approaches let us be reminded of that calling to care for our planet, Earth, home to us in the scintillating starry soup of space.

And, we spring clean our hearts. The hard, hibernating heart of winter thaws to become the hopeful heart of the spring season of starting over. It is the season of new growth, of life reviewed and renewed, the chance for us to start with a clean slate, to put the winter days away. Perhaps in this season of the new we can allow our hearts to frolic—to find delights and diversions that enlarge and embolden us, to move on from hearts that might have become stale and stuffy with old ideas and predictable patterns. Our true hearts are warmed up again as the days lengthen.

The theologian Thomas Merton believed that human beings must experience all the times and moods of one good place. For me, it is the here and now in our antipodean spring in a Melbourne full of festivals and carnivals and the joy of shaking off the cold encumbrance of winter.

*It is the season
of new growth,
of life reviewed
and renewed, the
chance for us to
start with a clean
slate, to put the
winter days away.*

Spring is in my step and my heart is gladdened by the hum of nature going about its business—the ladybird skittering; daffodils nodding breezily; ladies in lavender sitting at a pavement café sharing their crossword clues under the bright blue swatch of sky; schoolgirls hitching up their dresses as they wait hopefully at tram stops for young love to notice them; the poetry of the blossom tree in the jungle of the suburban back garden; the days stretching into pearly nights under the southern stars.

Spring is a giant prayer, the only prayer, of nature alive and renewed in the miraculous rhythm of life. It is, says Frank Robson, God thinking in gold, laughing in blue and speaking in green. ♦

Ann Rennie is a Melbourne-based writer and teacher.

Budget standards research on the adequacy of Newstart Allowance

BY PETER SAUNDERS

It has long been accepted that the level of Newstart Allowance (NSA) is too low. The number of organisations that have urged the government to address this glaring inadequacy has increased steadily since The Henry Tax Review proposed almost a decade ago an increase of ‘about \$50 a week’ in the payment for single people to restore parity with the couple rate. A similar increase has since been proposed by others, but the passage of time and rising prices add urgency to the need for action.

A recent report from the Social Policy Research Centre (SPRC) applied a budget standards approach to assess the adequacy of NSA and other components of the Australian social safety net. The approach has a long history in Australia, having been first used by Justice Higgins to cost the basic needs of working families and set the basic wage in the 1907 Harvester Judgement.

The approach involves the painstaking task of identifying every single item that a family needs to achieve a specified standard of living, pricing those items and adding them up to derive the weekly cost. The budget obviously varies with the size of the family and with the standard itself and these will affect how the budgets are specified, costed and developed.

The standard underpinning the new budget standards is designed to allow each individual to lead a full and healthy life in all of its dimensions. This has obvious implications for what people consume, own and do. It means, for example, omitting items like tobacco products, too much ‘junk food’ and excessive consumption of alcohol that are inconsistent with



Photo: Victor Garcia/Unsplash

healthy living, but also including a modest allowance for some form of regular exercise (in our case, going to a local swimming pool every week).

Some items will also vary in price according to where they are located, housing being the most obvious example, while others will depend in subtle ways on family circumstances. Furniture, for example, will incur more ‘wear and tear’ when there are children in the family, leading to a reduced lifetime that will increase the weekly cost of a given item.

There is no ‘correct’ way to develop the budgets, but the best that can be done is to draw on the wide range of data that is available from surveys and to draw on decades of hands-on research experience.

This means that the budgets are not a panacea and should always be used in conjunction with other adequacy benchmarks, including poverty lines and relative income thresholds (expressed as percentages of average earnings, for example). They need to be firmly grounded in everyday experience, as ours were, by reflecting information provided by focus groups held with low-income Australians who talked about how they go about making ends meet on a frugal budget. The budgets are conservative and provide no allowance for even the smallest luxuries.

The biggest single item is housing costs, which are based on data on rents collected by the Real Estate Institute of Australia. Each family is assigned a dwelling and location

Table 1: New Budget Standards and Safety Net Incomes for Unemployed Families, June 2016

Family type	Estimated Budget Standard (1)	Safety Net Income (2)	(2) minus (1)
Single adult	433.68	337.68	-96.00
Couple with no children	660.25	552.84	-107.41
Couple with one child	766.74	708.28	-58.46
Couple with two children	940.37	814.13	-126.24

Politicians are often asked if they could live on Newstart.

A more telling question to ask is whether they could live on \$100 a week less than the new budget standard.

(within a capital city) and the average rents for those dwellings in Australia’s three largest cities (Sydney, Melbourne and Brisbane) were used.

The new budgets have been derived for families where the main (male) breadwinner is unemployed and receiving NSA. Budgets were estimated for single people, and couples with zero, one and two children. The first child in each family is a six-year-old girl and the second child a 10-year-old boy. Table 1 compares the estimates with what each family would receive if receiving NSA plus any relevant add-ons. The weekly

budgets vary between \$434 a week for a single person and \$940 a week for the couple with two children. In all cases, they are well below the safety net incomes: the gap varies between \$96 a week below for a single person and \$126 for a couple with two children.

These figures were produced several years ago and are already somewhat out of date. The CPI increased by just over four per cent between June 2016 and June 2018, so that the adequacy gap for a single person would now be almost exactly \$100 a week, while that for a couple with two children would be \$131.

Politicians are often asked if they could live on Newstart, and they generally say ‘Yes’, although as one famous miscreant once said, ‘They would say that, wouldn’t they?’ A more telling question to ask is whether they could live on \$100 a week less than the new budget standard. In order to do this, they would have to make savings from the already very conservative budgets each and every week. This would involve, for example, spending nothing on either transport or personal care, or nothing on either food or recreation, since these budgets add up to around the \$100 that would need to be saved.

Savings of this magnitude might be possible for a week or two, but they’re not sustainable without compromising the healthy living concept on which the budgets have been constructed. Yet this is precisely what decades of inaction by our politicians have condemned those unfortunate enough to depend on NSA to go through—each and every week. No wonder that even conservative bodies like the Business Council of Australia and the OECD are now calling for an increase.

The new budget standards show clearly what many have been saying for years: that the level of Newstart is woefully inadequate. We estimate that an increase in the single payment rate of around \$100 a week is urgently needed to restore its ability to support a minimal level of decent living. Once restored, the adequacy of NSA (and other payments) should be constantly reviewed—as is done with the minimum wage, which seems to work well and attracts wide community support.

The current practice of automatically indexing NSA to the CPI has let politicians off the hook by allowing them to avoid making the tough decisions that improve adequacy but at a cost to the budget. There is nothing ‘automatic’ about how safety net payments are indexed since the method reflects the choices of those responsible for the system. Improving the adequacy of the incomes received by unemployed Australians and their families should be the first step in any concerted effort to address overall economic inequality. The evidence is in and now we need to get on with it! ♦

Peter Saunders holds a Research Chair in the Social Policy Research Centre, University of New South Wales.

Capturing poverty: animation shows daily life on Newstart

BY JULIA MARTIN, SILVERSUN

Translating complex data about poverty and income into easily understood visuals has always been a challenge, for researchers and advocates alike. What does a decent standard of living 'look' like? How do we depict poverty without unwashed, sad faces looking up at a lens?

These were the kinds of questions faced by SilverSun Pictures when creating a video for the St Vincent de Paul Society National Council of Australia about the reality of living—or trying to live—on the current Newstart Allowance.

'When we met with Corinne and Samara at Vinnies, we were shocked to discover how inadequate Newstart has become,' says Tamzin Nugent, Producer at SilverSun. 'It made us determined to find the most visually arresting way to show how impossible it was to live on the current allowance.'

Deciding that interactive animation would be an ideal medium for the project, Tamzin brought in writer/researcher Julia Martin and animator Jacinta Joe to create a video that would be factually correct as well as emotionally engaging.

'As part of our research process, we looked closely at the latest household budget standards set by the Social Policy Research Centre,' says Julia. 'We needed to compare Newstart with the minimum amount a single person or family requires to live basically but decently. We also checked the most recent Newstart Allowance entitlements, as well as poverty line and minimum wage figures.'

Faced with a large amount of data and research, the SilverSun team decided to develop a story about a young, single job-seeker, 'Jess',



trying to live one day on \$39.30, the maximum daily Newstart Allowance for someone in her situation. Titled 'Australia on \$39.30 a day!', the animation features a cash-register style meter running down as Jess looks for work. While the day begins well, by mid-afternoon, Jess is struggling to survive.

Jacinta Joe's beautiful animation of Jess and her world brings home the message that even when a Newstart recipient does everything 'right'—living frugally, actively looking for work, and watching every cent—the allowance falls far below the minimum required. By day's end, despite being on a maximum benefit with rent and energy assistance, Jess is on a knife-edge between poverty and homelessness, a situation alarmingly, and increasingly, seen by the St Vincent de Paul Society.

Recognising that its message relies on accurate, up-to-date data, 'Australia on \$39.30 a day!' features interactive flags that direct viewers to the source of every figure and data point used in the story. Concluding with a simple graphic showing the contrast between the current Henderson poverty line, minimum wage and Newstart

Allowance, the video poses the question, 'Could you make a new start on Newstart?' For Jess, we already know the answer.

'Working on this project for the St Vincent de Paul Society meant so much to the team at SilverSun,' says Tamzin. 'The insights of the Vinnies team prompted us to apply some new techniques to storytelling and to think carefully about how we presented the messages. We all reflected on what it would be like to be in Jess's situation, just struggling to buy a packet of minute noodles. In watching and interacting with the video, we hope viewers will go on the same journey.'

With the adequacy of Newstart Allowance shaping up to be an important debate in the next federal election, 'Australia on \$39.30 a day!' is part of St Vincent de Paul's #RaisetheRate campaign to increase the Newstart Allowance by \$75 a week for single adults. Although this increase will still not bring payments near the poverty line, it will be a start in restoring dignity to the lives of the nearly 850,000 Australians that Jess represents. ♦

Visit <https://raisetherate.vinnies.org.au/> for more information on the #RaisetheRate campaign

Income, inequality and health

BY SHARON FRIEL

Having the freedom to lead a life we have reason to value with dignity and respect is very unequally distributed in Australia. Such freedom comes from three basic things: sufficient material resources for a decent life, a sense of control over our lives, and participation in the policy decisions that affect the conditions in which we are born, grow, live, work, age and die.

People's health and wellbeing are affected by these three things. The fact that they are so unequally distributed really matters for the health of people lower down the social ladder—for people living in poverty, people with disabilities, those living in housing stress, and many Indigenous Australians. We already have a society where the opportunity to live a long and healthy life is unequally distributed. The poorest 20 per cent of the population can still expect to die younger (six years on average) compared to the richest 20 per cent of the population.

Income inequity itself is bad for society and for people's health and the gap between the poorest and the wealthiest will continue to widen if Newstart levels are not raised. This inequity reduces trust, self-worth, sympathy and community within societies, which gives rise to feelings of social exclusion, insecurity and stress. The health of people living on Newstart will also be affected through the loss of control over their lives that they will experience. This sense of a lack of control is a recognised stressor; it has, for example, been found to increase the risk of coronary heart disease by 50 per cent.

It does not have to be like this. These three things are influenced by public policy and the way in

Image; sleeping in the sun

A fetal figure on a footpath
sleeps in grey on grey
with fingers and one thumb cast
over eyes
as if the sculptor couldn't face
the lowered lid stare where
acceptance nurses homeless
pain in its own arms.

A wheezy woman is talking
like a story
outside the frame.
Some of her words embark
the rumble hiss and zoom
of public transport
but a merciful autumn
lures other words to float
traces of a Happy Prince
persuading a swallow

*Swallow ... little swallow
peck the jewels one by one
from my memorial statue
and fly them to windowsill and
table
for the poor of my kingdom
to silence the oncoming winter
as my feet seem made of stone
and I cannot walk.*

A seagull lands drops a bread
crust
at the sleeper's feet
flaps up and away
after the click
of the image. ♦

Jan Price

which society chooses to organise its affairs. Now is the time for organising—and organising around a goal—the society that we want. Imagine a time when we have macroeconomic policies that are designed to improve the lot of everyone, and economic growth becomes a means to an end rather than the end itself; a time when conditions of life—education, employment, housing, health care, disability care, aged care—support, nurture and enable everyone to flourish, regardless of their postcode, gender, abilities or colour.

Pursuit of such a vision requires changing the status quo. It requires

challenging issues of power and redressing the inequities in income and resources and in people's daily living conditions. This is not straightforward, given that some people and institutions benefit from the status quo. Harnessing political consciousness around a shared vision is important and can lead to transformative change. People like Martin Luther King and Nelson Mandela have shown how a clear, collective vision and collective hope can lead to emancipation. ♦

Sharon Friel is Professor of Health Equity and Director of the School of Regulation and Global Governance (RegNet) at the Australian National University.

A fair day's pay: for the dignity of workers and the good of all

BY BISHOP VINCENT
LONG VAN NGUYEN

Here in Australia, the notion of a fair day's pay was championed for a good part of last century through institutions of industrial arbitration, wage setting and defence of vulnerable workers. Together with the provision of income support for unemployed workers, this made up a social safety net that protected the most vulnerable members of society. Over the past thirty years, however, there have been major changes in the world of work, including globalisation, the deregulation of the labour market, casualisation of jobs and the changing composition of the workforce. Together, these have placed competitive pressures on wages.

Currently we are facing a wage crisis. Since 2012, wages growth has slumped to record lows, with increases of only two per cent each year—well below previous levels of 3.5 per cent. This stagnation is affecting all states and territories, all industries and all categories of job.

Vulnerable workers are less protected in casual jobs and a burgeoning 'gig economy'.

Why is this happening? Where unemployment is low, it usually means that employers offer higher wages to attract and hold on to staff. We have seen exceptionally strong jobs growth over the past year, and unemployment is at just 5.6 per cent. Why, then, do these developments not translate to higher wages? There is evidence that the unemployment rate is no longer an adequate measure of surplus labour. A truer measure would take account of *underemployed* workers who want more work. An underutilisation rate of 14 per cent gives a better picture of the competition for work.

Furthermore, workers' bargaining power has been eroded. With household debt now nearly double household disposable income, many workers are reluctant to upset their job security by pushing for a wage increase. The threat of jobs being automated and competition from overseas markets increases the job insecurity already felt by workers. Trade union membership has fallen to less than 15 per cent and tight restrictions on industrial action, particularly during wage negotiations, further reduces the collective power of workers. Vulnerable workers are less protected in casual jobs and a burgeoning 'gig economy'.

These are the kind of structural issues holding back significant wage increases now and for the foreseeable future.

A challenge for all of us

This poses challenges not just for workers and their families but for the strength of the economy and the health of our society.

Rising costs of living are becoming a real concern for ordinary Australians, with the real value of wages only just keeping up. Some find themselves falling

behind as the prices of some goods and services, including childcare, electricity, gas, health and education, have increased dramatically. There is a general feeling that it is harder to balance the household budget.

While this is a challenge for most families, there are some who struggle in poverty, finding it virtually impossible to make ends meet: the 'working poor' and those unemployed workers who subsist on meagre income support. It has been estimated that over 1.5 million workers and almost 2 million people who are unemployed or who have withdrawn from the labour market are in poverty or at risk of it. Low-paid workers and their families who rely on the National Minimum Wage and award safety net are falling into poverty.

The recent cuts to penalty rates of workers in the retail, hospitality and fast-food industries give but one indication of the precarious circumstances of the low-paid. And 760,000 people on the Newstart Allowance are trying to survive, many on just \$40 a day. Newstart has not been increased in real terms since 1994.

How to address the challenge

The Commonwealth Government is currently seeking to reduce corporate tax rates from 30 to 25 per cent to increase investment and, among other things, lift wages growth back to the levels enjoyed before they stagnated. These cuts are estimated to cost \$65 billion over ten years, and there is concern that spending would be cut in other important areas to meet the shortfall in revenue. Many doubt that the benefits would flow to significant wage increases, with indications corporations would give preference to shareholder returns

Building an economy that is inclusive and serves all is a key challenge of our times.

and capital investment before wage increases and jobs. This would be unfair when taking into account the fact that company profits have far outpaced wages growth for almost two decades.

Others have suggested that substantial increases in education and training are the solution to wages stagnation, as the resulting boost in productivity will increase workers' bargaining power. While education and training are vital over the long term, our first priority must be the crisis of poverty experienced by low-paid and unemployed workers. We must repair the social safety net of wages and income support.

Around 20 per cent of employees are on awards and the pay of a further 10 to 15 per cent of workers is influenced by the wage decisions of the Fair Work Commission. In its interventions in the Annual Wage Review, the Australian Catholic Council for Employment Relations has consistently called for substantial increases to the minimum wage and award rates for low-paid workers. Similarly, Catholic Social Services Australia and the community sector are calling for an increase in Allowance payments to protect unemployed workers and increase their capacity for work.

Time for a new consensus

Beyond an improved social safety net of minimum wages and income support, what more could be done to reawaken Australia's commitment to a just wage? In a world of work so often characterised by antagonisms and competing claims, can we find a meeting place where government, workers and business can come together to work for the good of the whole community?

It has been done before. In the 1980s, business, unions and government agreed on the Prices and Incomes Accords, which limited wage demands, reduced industrial action and lifted the profitability of businesses. Social wage entitlements like Medicare and superannuation benefited workers and the broader community. However imperfect the Accords, they did show the possibility of competing parties coming together to strike a balance between wages and profits. Then, business profits needed to be restored; today it is workers' wages.

Building an economy that is inclusive and serves all is a key challenge of our times. The impasse of wage stagnation will be harder to solve without the cooperation of all parties working for the common good. The common good will never be served unless we ensure the greatest support to those most in need. Ultimately, the just wage is the means of verifying the justice of the whole socioeconomic system. ♦

Most Rev. Vincent Long Van Nguyen OFM Conv STL DD is Bishop of Parramatta and Chairman of the Australian Catholic Social Justice Council.

This is an edited version of the pastoral letter for the Feast of St Joseph the Worker, published by Australian Catholic Social Justice Council. To read the full letter, visit www.socialjustice.catholic.org.au.

Leaders

Though so different, you would have understood one another:
he, smoothly spoken, and you with your coffee-grinder voice.

After looking in the eyes of those who slaved and starved,
and seeing villagers hunted down,
he took their cause, came late to arms,
and led his troop though Morazan,
ate beans with them and slept rough.
He asked much of them, expected little,
knowing their weakness and his own.

He was as smooth as you were rough,
but like him, you too knew what mattered,
knew who mattered:

the likely lads in Richmond to whom you gave respect,
the battling mothers whose kids you helped to feed,
the good men lost whose eyes you opened.
Good news, bad news you met with your wattlebird laugh
that said you'd seen it all
and would never cease to give. ♦

Andrew Hamilton SJ

Vinnies 2020: our Plenary Councils, past and future

BY NICK BRODIE

A time of preparation is underway. Australia's bishops, with the approval of Pope Francis, are holding a Plenary Council in 2020. We are being asked to listen for what the Holy Spirit is saying. In this, Vinnies has a special role to play.

Vinnies is, after all, part of the breath of the Church. As liturgists well know, Mass starts with the ingathering of people and ends with their outgoing, back into the world. Each week the Church breathes in, then out, blowing us Vincentians on our particular way into the streets and homes of our towns and cities. As part of this breathing Church, it is time to raise our voices.

The St Vincent de Paul Society predates the first Plenary Council in Australia. When the assembled bishops issued a Pastoral Letter to the faithful after that first Plenary of 1885, they referred to 'the St Vincent de Paul Society for the succour of the bodily or spiritually destitute' in a section about Catholic Associations.

A decade later, the Society was not singled out for such mention in the Pastoral Letter that followed the second Plenary Council held in 1895, but our charism was evident: 'The Church loves the poor for their sufferings,' the bishops wrote, 'but does not wish their poverty.' This greater concern with the poor reflected the changed times. Since the first Plenary Council, the Australian colonies had become gripped by widespread economic depression. The second council had to speak to these conditions.

A long boom period was over, unemployment and under-employment were rife, and workers were agitating for a fairer go. Against this backdrop the bishops remembered the Church's humble

origins: 'She is not ashamed to be stigmatised as the Church of the poor', they wrote in those challenging times.

With the passing of another decade, the third Plenary Council of 1905 once again spoke of Vinnies, putting the Society at the forefront of the Church's regular breath:

Charitable organisations, such as the Society of St Vincent de Paul, can do much good, especially in the larger centres of population. Combining as they do, in the spirit of genuine Christian charity, the relief of spiritual and of bodily needs, they are a source of numerous unrecorded blessings to the objects of their assistance as well as to the members themselves. We heartily wish to see these charitable organisations widespread and active.

By this time Vinnies had grown from being merely one among many Catholic associations to being recognised as a distinct 'source of numerous unrecorded blessings', a leading light of the Church in Australia.

'The Church loves the poor for their sufferings,' the bishops wrote, 'but does not wish their poverty.'

A World War and another great Depression separated the third Plenary Council from the fourth, held in 1937. Here again Vinnies attracted specific mention, the bishops writing that, 'for the relief of the indigent we warmly commend the work of the St Vincent de Paul Society, and we exhort all Catholic men who can do so to become active members of its ranks.' While the admittedly gendered language now sounds dated, the wider charitable focus of this Catholic pronouncement still feels imminent:

The existence of unemployment to the extent to which it is found even in Australia calls for the attention of all who can in any way contribute to its abatement, for not only is it a serious blot on our social system on account of the suffering it entails on the poor, but it supplies a fertile ground for the fostering of spurious remedies more dangerous than the disease. It is the duty of governments and employers to remove as far as possible the cause of unrest, discontent and revolt among the wage-earners by giving them the fullest measure of justice. Working men whose paramount interest is in their homes and families have no desire to become revolutionaries, but they must be treated fairly in all respects.

It was, in short, a sort of 'fair go' theology.

This line of thinking had eminent origins. The Plenary pronouncements of the past were, after all, not straightforwardly local affairs. Leo XIII's encyclical *Rerum novarum* of 1891 likely inspired the bishops to speak of being 'the Church of the poor' in that decade, for instance; and Pius XI's *Quadragesimo anno* of 1931 probably nudged the bishops to view wage justice as the best weapon against Communism in

‘The Church cannot be indifferent to the sufferings of the poor,’ wrote the bishops in 1937.

the 1930s. Evidently, the workings of the hierarchy informed the Plenaries of old.

But the Australian experience undoubtedly also contributed something to the drafting, of which Vinnies was a prominent part of the background hum: ‘The Church cannot be indifferent to the sufferings of the poor,’ wrote the bishops in 1937. ‘She cannot witness miserable and degrading institution without raising her voice against it’, they added. These lines could almost be a Vinnies’ mission statement.

Such past charitable synergy between people, popes and episcopacy is surely a source of great hope. Generations have passed and much has changed, but Vincentians can look to the next Plenary with the optimism borne of long Plenary association. Ours is an age of homelessness, at home and abroad. Ours is an age where workers endure tenuousness instead of ‘the fullest measure of justice’. But ours is also an age where a pope is prominently going to the margins, and where the bishops of Australia have announced a readiness to listen. Which is good because, at least some of the time perhaps, the Holy Spirit speaks with a Vincentian accent. ♦

Three transfigurations

1. Vincent de Paul’s

On a Sunday in 1622,
on a royal barge on the Seine,
Vincent is chaplain to the galleys
and can promenade in the sun with the wealthy ladies
in their golden brocaded gowns.
This day he is below decks with the galley-slaves
when one exhausted oarsman expires.
The huge oar is coming down and will crush three men.
No time to think, Vincent pushes the man aside,
seizes the oar and the seat of a slave.

2. Dorothy Day’s

On a Wednesday in April 1906,
when Dorothy was only eight,
the San Andreas broke the earth.
She woke to see fire everywhere
and buildings swaying like trees.
In her journal she recalled sad people
coming over in boats from Oakland
to the shore of San Francisco Bay,
being received with blankets and mercy.
She was struck that grown-ups could care for strangers,
and so, she grew up to do that.

3. Thomas Merton’s

On a Tuesday in March 1958,
a monk goes to a doctor’s appointment
in Louisville, Kentucky.
At the corner of Fourth and Walnut
he is waiting for the lights
when, suddenly shaken,
he sees all of us
shining like suns,
shimmering with divine radiance.
Shuddering in incarnate joy,
he delights and laughs,
grateful to see our secret beauty.
But how can he tell us? ♦

Tony Brennan

Stories about life on the breadline

BY COLLEEN O'SULLIVAN

In recent times, the St Vincent de Paul Society has thrown its support behind the #RaiseTheRate campaign to raise the Newstart Allowance by \$75 by calling on its supporters to sign a petition and by setting up a new microsite at <https://raisetherate.vinnies.org.au/>.

The National Council office is always on the look-out for personal stories so people can better understand the struggles experienced by people living below the poverty line. Obtaining these personal stories can be a long haul but an immensely rewarding one. It involves seeking the appropriate permissions and working with members to ensure the Society's companions are comfortable sharing their experiences.

Many of these case studies are used by the Society's Director of Policy and Research, Corinne Dobson, when she is writing submissions to Federal Parliament on social security legislation and advocating for the rights of low-income people. The Society's dedicated communications and marketing teams also work diligently alongside their colleagues and members to ensure the personal stories are shared through the mainstream media in a way that upholds the dignity of all involved and promotes the Society in the best possible light.

Similarly, *The Guardian's* 'Life on the breadline' series has captured the stories of people who have struggled to live on the Newstart Allowance, which is the equivalent of approximately \$38 a day. The beauty of this series is the stories are told in first person, while case studies are often told from the point of view of a third party. That third party, possibly a Vinnies member, can of course do their very best to relate the circumstances, but it



After reading these stories you will understand more about the campaign to #RaiseTheRate. The Newstart Allowance urgently needs to be increased.

Photo: fancycrave/Unsplash

does not compare to hearing lived experiences of poverty. Empowering the people the Society assists to tell their stories can be linked back to the Society's Strategic Plan 2016–2020 that states:

National Council will develop strategies to create a greater awareness within the Australian community of all that we do and why we are impelled by the Gospel to stand with people who are disadvantaged, isolated or marginalised.

At the time of writing, the 'Life on the breadline' series has comprised six stories of Australian women and men. The first story in the series was published in May 2018 and featured the life account of a young woman from Adelaide, Nijole Naujokas, who described how the 'internal war of what we should and should not have is ever-present for people living below the poverty line' when she wrote about debating whether to buy \$6.50 crackers for a friend's birthday.

The Australian Council of Social Service defines the poverty line as \$343 a week for a single person to live on after housing costs, and \$720 a week for a couple with children.

According to *The Guardian*, the series is designed to give a platform to people living on Newstart and other income support payments. The Australian Council of Social Service defines the poverty line as \$343 a week for a single person to

After Purgatory

It was Saint Vincent de Paul who tells us that when St Jeanne de Chantal died, he saw her soul rising like a globe of fire, and, coming down from above, another and larger globe [St Francis de Sales] in which the first was lost. So, God showed his approval of this wonderful friendship, as he received the two souls eternally united to each other.

– W R Ainsworth sdb, *St Francis de Sales: the gentle saint.*

For those who have shed
pettiness
and animosities and reached
saintliness,
they will, like Saint Vincent,
have a capacity for visions.
And like St Jeanne de Chantal,
be ready for a union that is
immortal.
Like St John Bosco, who was
creative and heroic,
they will be able to project
images of themselves to earth.
Then, with other saints in the
universe,
pass beyond description;
guesses and speculation
suggest they may exist without
form,
though whole, in the mind of
the creator,
part of the light which outshines
night. ♦

Reg Naulty

live on after housing costs, and \$720 a week for a couple with children.

The two other women featured in the series are Amethyst DeWilde, a middle-aged woman who also lives in Adelaide and has been on a disability support pension since being diagnosed with bipolar disorder, and Tara Rose, a single mother of three teenagers from Western Australia. Amethyst says 'pride is a luxury she can no longer afford': 'There is so much about being poor that you never admit to anyone due to its embarrassing nature. You hope that others have open hearts and don't judge too harshly, but the daily realities for poor people show otherwise.'

In her own words, Tara describes her turning point into poverty occurring three years ago following a separation after 14 years of marriage. In her story, Tara touches on topics of hunger, mother-guilt as she says 'no' to her children's request for new shoes or jeans, and regret as she realises she might receive high bills for cooling the kids off with a garden hose over summer. Tara also reflects on the satisfaction she receives from growing veggies in her garden and knowing her children are nourished.

The other stories in the series have varied themes. Mick Smart, a young man from regional Victoria, has one big meal a day as he puts aside money to treat chronic pain. Tasmanian David Samuel* is in his 50s and has been unemployed long-term and must navigate the private rental market, which has scarce options for people on Newstart. David was widowed 20 years ago and brought up his son as a single father. 'It's easy to feel the anxiety start rising when you think about the major decisions to make as you get older,' he says.

The most recent story in the series is from Indigenous man and Sydney artist Gavin Ritchie. He injects some humour into his piece, describing how he didn't realise he was poor growing up: 'Whenever I heard them say the breadline, all I could imagine was that someone had lined up bread rolls in the sky. To this day I still haven't seen it.' He puts an unusual twist on people's perspective of what poverty is: 'I know many people who are of a higher socioeconomic status than myself and I feel for them deeply. I said to one, "If your credit card don't work and mummy and daddy don't pick up the phone, you're screwed. I on the other hand have learned to subsist on less than nothing. I survive".'

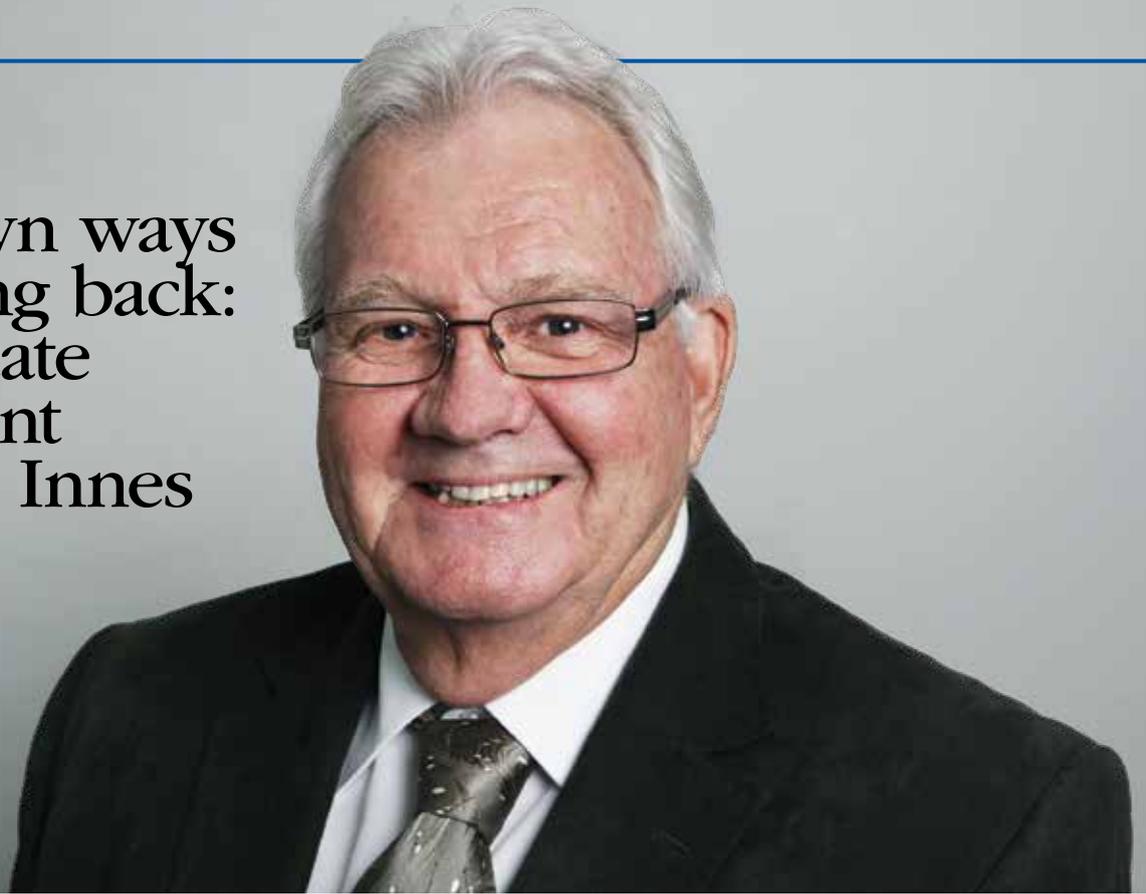
A common theme through all the stories is the all-too-human worry about 'what other people will think', so great is the stigma of living in poverty in Australia in 2018. After reading these stories you will understand more about the campaign to #RaiseTheRate. The Newstart Allowance urgently needs to be increased by a minimum of \$75 a week—a figure calculated by Professor Peter Saunders from the University of New South Wales in his budget standards research and deemed to allow for the necessities in life.

Visit the Society's website at <https://raisetherate.vinnies.org.au/> for more information about the campaign and consider adding your name to the petition at <https://www.acoss.org.au/raisetherate/joinus/>. ♦

*Name has been changed.

Colleen O'Sullivan is a Communications Advisor for the St Vincent de Paul Society National Council. She is currently on parental leave.

Our own ways of giving back: QLD State President Dennis Innes



Name: Dennis Innes

Position in the Society:
State President, St Vincent de Paul
Society Queensland

Day job: Retired

Hometown: Cairns

**How did you first become
involved in the Society?**

I retired in 2005 and began delivering emergency relief through a provider who was not connected to the Society. After a period, I began to feel I was not really making a difference. In Society terms, I felt I was providing a hand-out and not a hand up. So, I parted company with that provider and went back to being retired. My wife joined our local conference in 2008 and when they were short on Vincentians for home visits, I was asked to join to assist. Was that God calling me to be 'more'? Perhaps it was, because 10 years later here I am, thoroughly committed to the Society's mission of serving Christ in the poor.

**What do your family and
friends think of your
involvement with the St Vincent
de Paul Society Queensland?**

I've never sought comment on how they feel—I've never had a need for affirmation. However, I do know I have their love and support in what I do in the Society. Many of my friends have commented on my willingness to commit and be involved, but upon reflection I see that they're in the same boat. We all have commitments and our own ways of giving back. Yes, there are times that events or happenings in the Society clash with very important occasions with family and friends, and I am not able to be present. I feel secure in the knowledge that we have sufficient deposits in our 'emotional bank accounts' so that we can accept we cannot be everywhere every time. We make the most of the times we share together and, when necessary, my good wife reminds me in good humour that 'it's not all about you, princess'.

**Can you describe the attributes
of those leaders whom you
admire most?**

At 70, my life has been influenced by so many people I admire. However, my father faced some very difficult situations in his early life, and I am ever grateful for his devotion and love of family. My mother passed away when I was approximately 18 months old. Her death was attributed to the complications of childbirth, which I understand was fairly common around the late 40s and early 50s. My father faced the prospect of raising four children under the age of nine. I look back on his life and can only be inspired by his honesty, commitment, passion, decision making and the accountability he faced with Children's Services in his role as a single dad. He was an extremely good role model to me.

Last year, the Society assisted 306,000 Queenslanders—that is one in 15 Queenslanders who were supported in some way.

Besides my father, there have been many leaders I admire; teachers who encouraged me to be a better student and bosses who created opportunities for me to advance my career. Sometimes it is the simplest of words that matter most. A postmaster once said to me (I was once a telegram boy) *'You will go through life doing good, and you will also make mistakes. You will not be remembered just for the good you did, but also for the mistakes you made; but most importantly, you will be remembered for how you corrected those mistakes with the people you let down.'*

In terms of the Society, I pay reverence to those from the past: our founder Frédéric Ozanam and all those who worked so hard to spread the Society throughout the world, especially those who began the first conference in Red Hill, Queensland in 1894. My admiration goes to everyone who belongs to the Vinnies family—the volunteers, members and staff who provide support and give their time and talents to make it possible for the Society to be there every day for Queenslanders. Last year, the Society assisted 306,000 Queenslanders—that is one in 15 Queenslanders who were supported in some way. That does not happen without people stepping up to the plate and putting into action our Society's values of respect, advocacy, integrity, empathy, compassion, courage and commitment.

What do you think the year ahead will hold for the St Vincent de Paul Society in Queensland?

The year ahead will present many challenges—importantly, having the courage and the commitment to adopt action plans developed by and for each diocese. Some of the presentations at the end of our recent Queensland Congress focussed on reconciliation with Australia's first peoples, social inclusion, new ways of fundraising, recruitment, embracing cultural diversity, and youth engagement—just some of the many opportunities we now have to create a 'new beginning'.

Challenges or quirks you've noticed that are unique to either charities, the Society or Queensland in general?

There are many challenges we face, including developing new leaders to take on duties in conferences as our current members age, and governance around compliance and reporting as members seek to simply be there for our companions. There are also challenges around funding new technology to ensure we keep up in an ever-changing world, raising our profile in the community, achieving balance so members feel part of and have ownership of the change, and the need for conferences to demonstrate how our actions relate to outcomes. Decreased funding through donations or government cutbacks is a challenge, as is changing the focus of our retail operations so that we become the charity of choice; and finally, sourcing more material donations so the Society can continue to fund new and existing programs that make a real difference.

How do you spend your spare time?

Family and travel. ♦

Unconditional love

Walking the curve of the beach,
hearing the sea and cicadas
in concert,
watching galahs wheeling red
in the morning light,
whitebait coruscating in the
rise of the waves
and a forelock of cloud
hanging over Coolangatta,
you might easily believe love
rules, ok.

But on a closer view you
might well wonder,
as you sniff the stink of a
flathead gutted on the sand,
or glimpse a vixen tracking
through the dunes,
sea gulls plunging into a
shoal of whitebait,
and shovel-billed pelicans
waiting at the river mouth.

Some, no doubt, find right
and just
the harmonies of being killed
and killing.
But love led you to know the
name of each small fish,
never baiting hooks, never
rising to bait:
you got whitebait off the
hook—
that is what love does. ♦

Andrew Hamilton SJ

UNTIL
TEAR US

Newstart: stories from the conferences

The clients who come to Vinnies in need of food are commonly on Newstart, Disability and Family Payments. These incomes are small and become inadequate at times when clients have any added financial demands such as rising utility costs, vehicle registrations or medical expenses. To get a sense of the reality of daily life on Newstart, we turned to some Vinnies volunteers to share some stories of clients on Newstart.

Melanie is on Newstart and lives with her husband Tony in regional Australia. Tony has been unable to secure full-time or ongoing work and has been cycling in and out of short-term and casual jobs for the past two years. He has also been struggling with a chronic illness for some time and recently had to travel to a bigger centre for hospitalisation. This involved the added expenses of travel, accommodation and food while they were away from home. Tony and Melanie also had to register their car. St Vincent de Paul Society was able to help with Melanie and Tony's travel and accommodation costs, but the couple have had to also ask for food assistance, as they had nothing left from their payments after these additional expenses. *FORBES, NSW*

Our conference (St Mary's Star of the Sea Milton/Ulladulla) is located in the southern Shoalhaven region and caters to many Newstart clients—people who would otherwise be in crisis without our support. Many are in such financial hardship they are close to homelessness. They often have outstanding debts and juggle their income from one fortnightly payment to the next, trying to pay the most urgent debt at the expense of others. Within the last fortnight, 10 out of 13 clients seeking assistance were on the Newstart Allowance, with most of them in arrears with both their energy accounts and their rent.

ULLADULLA, NSW

James has been on Newstart for over five years and has needed food assistance on a regular basis. He lives in an old rental property and pays \$290 per week in rent, which is about 80 per cent of his income. He uses candles instead of electrical lighting to reduce electricity costs, but still has a large energy bill due to electrical faults and outages; he has reported these issues to his landlord but no repairs have been made. James has found it difficult to meet his energy costs over the past few years and has had dealings with the Energy and Water Ombudsman and his energy retailer. He is severely depressed and is worried his part-time custody of his child is at risk due to his ongoing financial hardship.

ULLADULLA, NSW

Bel has been on Newstart for 12 months, following the termination of her cleaning business due to financial overheads. She has been struggling to pay off outstanding debts and has accrued additional arrears with both electricity and rental commitments. She is now at risk of homelessness and has been issued with an eviction notice. We are encountering more clients asking for rent assistance to avoid homelessness. One client is paying \$320 per week for their rental property (over 80 per cent of their income). Allowing for the daily essentials, it is hard to imagine the client will ever regain financial independence—even with ongoing food assistance.

ULLADULLA, NSW

Sue is single, 63 years old and is on Newstart Allowance. She needed a loan for car registration. When assisting her with her budget, I found that she has no outstanding loans, she doesn't buy alcohol or cigarettes, and doesn't buy anything other than food and petrol. She has a total weekly income of \$366 including rent assistance and \$300 of that goes towards rent. Her weekly budget deficit is \$53. Occasionally she gets a few weeks' temporary work which stops her going under, but it's very precarious.

CAMPBELLTOWN, NSW

DEBT APART

Chris has been on Newstart for over two years, and seeks regular support for medication and food assistance. Rent accounts for 76 per cent of his income, and he is in arrears with his rent, energy and telephone accounts. He lives outside of town in an old rental property without an off-peak hot water system. Travel expenses for out-of-town medical appointments have placed an additional burden upon his budget. *ULLADULLA, NSW*

Sam is a single 24-year-old on Newstart, living in a privately rented share house with three others. He is currently unemployed and looking for work, and is also studying to obtain an Aged Care Certificate at TAFE to provide future employment opportunities. His share of the rent is \$140 per week. Other household expenses such as electricity and water are also shared. He has other personal expenses such as phone and internet. He has made requests to Vinnies for help with food. 'Bills keep coming in and it is difficult to make ends meet', he said. His situation recently deteriorated when a housemate left suddenly, leaving his bills unpaid. Sam has no savings or family able to help him, and any unplanned costs put him in dire circumstances. *WOLLONGONG, NSW*

Megan is a 22-year-old who moved to Wollongong from interstate to do a music degree. She lives in an old share house with three other students. She has no family or friends here to support her. She receives \$220 per week in Youth Allowance, \$150 of which goes towards rent and \$15 towards shared household expenses. This leaves Megan with \$55 per week for food, transport and other expenses. She was not managing, so St Vincent de Paul provided food and a list of places she could go to get free meals. *WOLLONGONG, NSW*

Carol is single and 64 years old and is on Newstart Allowance. She had previously been homeless due to illness. After being placed on an emergency housing priority list, she found a private rental, with the help of an agency, that the Department of Housing will subsidise. She is now just able to survive. She had a zero-interest loan granted for a washing machine, TV and microwave, and is currently sleeping on a mattress on the floor. She is physically disabled to the point that I had to hold her handbag while she grasped the railing to get up the stairs, but Centrelink has determined that she is only eligible for Newstart, not the Disability Support Pension. *CAMPBELLTOWN, NSW*

Tina is a single 43-year-old on Newstart Allowance. She was unable to pay simple expenses beyond the essentials such as rent and car registration. She lives in subsidised community housing and pays \$114 in weekly rent. She doesn't buy anything fancy yet she still has a budget deficit. *CAMPBELLTOWN, NSW*

Liz is a single 55-year-old on Newstart Allowance. She was a registered nurse, but illness caused her to give up her nurse's registration. She was getting a small amount of casual work as a support worker in NDIS, but needed to register her car so she could get additional work. Her mortgage repayments are \$264 per week, and the bank has agreed to suspend her repayments for three months. She has no non-essential expenditure and does not receive any concessions because Newstart is not considered a pension. She has been running a weekly deficit of \$140, and is now in serious danger of homelessness. If she had to sell her place, her rent would be higher than her current mortgage payments. Now Liz is trying to cash in her superannuation to keep her going, but her superannuation payout will not cover her remaining mortgage liability. *CAMPBELLTOWN, NSW* ♦



Applications NOW OPEN



St Vincent de Paul Society
good works

National Indigenous Immersion Program

6 – 21 April 2019

Program

The National Immersion Program is an intensive two-week cross-cultural experience in a remote Indigenous community. The program is run in Ngunmariyanga (Palumpa), home to approximately 500 people and located in the Northern Territory's far north-west.

The program begins with a three-day orientation in Darwin before flying into the community by light aircraft. The time in community involves a mix of activities organised and run by the Immersion group. There are also opportunities to immerse in daily life with local community members, including school and parish activities. The program concludes with a two-day debrief in Darwin.

The Immersion Program focuses strongly on relationship – with the community, with fellow Vincentians, with self and with God.

Living conditions

The program will involve living simply in community and being away from most of the conveniences of modern life for two weeks. This includes sleeping on inflatable mattresses, simple food and definitely no TV, internet, or mobile phones. Participants must have a willingness to live in a communal environment.

Costs

Participants will be required to cover the cost of their flights to and from Darwin, and a contribution toward the program's running costs of \$400 (\$250 for full time students and pensioners). Once in Darwin, accommodation, meals and travel to and from the community is covered by the program.

Key Dates

1 October 2018 – Applications open

16 November 2018 – Applications close

Mid to late November 2018 – Phone interviews

December 2018 – Successful applicants notified

6-21 April 2019 – Immersion Program

Who can apply

The program is open to all current St Vincent de Paul Society members and volunteers aged 18-79. The group will comprise 8-10 people including a spiritual adviser and program coordinator.

Participants must have an interest in sharing themselves and learning from our Indigenous brothers and sisters in community. They will be team players and must be actively involved with preparation of activities leading up to, during and after the program. Participants must have a willingness to participate in Vincentian spirituality and reflection. Participants will need excellent communication skills, a keenness to interact with a broad range of people and be flexible and adaptive to different conditions and experiences. We strongly encourage members and volunteers with experience leading kids camps or buddies days to apply.

"Having come back after ten days in a remote Aboriginal community I feel somewhat embarrassed as an Australian to have not known really anything about Aboriginal peoples." – Brendan, past participant

More information and application forms are available from the Vinnies National Office or the Vinnies website

National Immersion Program, St Vincent de Paul Society National Council, PO Box 243 Deakin West ACT 2600

Web: https://www.vinnies.org.au/page/Our_Impact/Indigenous_Australia/Immersion_Program_2019/

Email: immersion@svdp.org.au Phone: (02) 6202 1213

This program is open to members and volunteers of the St Vincent de Paul Society in Australia