



**JESUIT SOCIAL SERVICES  
SUBMISSION**

**Victorian Parliament – Family and Community  
Development Committee:  
Inquiry into the handling of child abuse by religious and  
other organisations**

**September 2012**

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## Introduction

Jesuit Social Services thanks the committee for the opportunity to make a submission regarding the handling of abuse by religious and other organisations. We welcome this inquiry, and will follow its progress with interest. We believe that a full account and absolute scrutiny of the handling of child sexual abuse by religious and community organisations is overdue and hope that the inquiry will fulfil this role.

We begin by recognising the sensitivity of the issue that the committee is exploring and particularly the profound pain and anguish that has been inflicted upon the victims of child sexual abuse. We are deeply concerned that this pain and anguish has been deepened by failures to act in their best interests when dealing with allegations of abuse.

Jesuit Social Services works to build a just society by advocating for social change and promoting the health and wellbeing of disadvantaged people, families and communities. As part of this, we work with vulnerable young people involved in the criminal justice system or who are struggling to deal with substance abuse issues or mental illness. As such, we understand the importance of promoting an organisational culture backed up by policies and processes that prevents and responds to the abuse of young people in a transparent and caring manner. Through our work we have also seen the enduring and damaging legacy of abuse. In our Support After Suicide program we work with a number of people who are grieving the suicide of a loved one whose life had been impacted by abuse, including abuse by clergy.

This submission is, for the most part, informed by our experience working with vulnerable young people and individuals whose lives have been affected by abuse. However, as a Catholic ministry that is guided by the traditions and teachings of Gospel, Catholic Social Teaching and the Ignatian tradition, the inquiry's focus on religious organisations is highly significant for us. We believe that this inquiry has the potential to be a significant part of the healing process for those affected by abuse as well as church ministries and community organisations such as our own. We hope that opening ourselves up to scrutiny will allow us to restore the trust and integrity that forms the basis of our relationship with the community.

## Who we are and what we do

Jesuit Social Services works to build a just society by advocating for social change and promoting the health and wellbeing of disadvantaged people, families and communities. Our service has its origins in work with disadvantaged young people involved with the justice system in Victoria.

We do this by intervening directly to address disadvantage and by influencing hearts and minds for social change. We strengthen and build respectful, constructive relationships for:

- Effective services - by partnering with people most in need and those who support them to address disadvantage
- Education - by providing access to life-long learning and development
- Capacity building - by refining and evaluating our practice and sharing and partnering for greater impact

- Advocacy - by building awareness of injustice and advocating for social change based on grounded experience and research
- Leadership development - by partnering across sectors to build expertise and commitment for justice

Jesuit Social Services values every person and seeks to engage with them in a respectful way, that acknowledges their experiences and skills and gives them the opportunity to harness their full potential. Jesuit Social Services works where the need is greatest and where it has the capacity, experience and skills to make the most difference.

The promotion of **education, lifelong learning and capacity building** is fundamental to all our activity. We believe this is the most effective means of helping people to reach their potential and exercise their full citizenship, and to strengthen the broader community.

Our service delivery and advocacy focuses on the following key areas:

- **Justice and crime prevention** – people involved with the justice system
- **Mental health and wellbeing** – people with multiple and complex needs and those affected by suicide, trauma and complex bereavement
- **Settlement and community building** – recently arrived immigrants and refugees and disadvantaged communities
- **Education, training and employment** – people with barriers to sustainable employment

Currently our direct services and volunteer programs are located in: Victoria, New South Wales and Northern Territory. Services include:

- **Support After Suicide:** supporting people bereaved by suicide, including children and young people.
- **Brosnan Support Services:** supporting young people and adults in the justice system, and assisting them to make a successful transition from custody back into the community. Within the suite of services are Perry House, Dillon House and Youth Justice Community Support Services.
- **Jesuit Community College:** increasing opportunities for people constrained by social and economic disadvantage to participate in education, work and community life and reach their full potential.
- **Community Programs:** working with people, including the African Australian and Vietnamese communities, on public housing estates across metropolitan Melbourne.
- **Community development:** delivering social enterprise and other activities in the area of Mount Druitt, Western Sydney.
- **Connexions:** delivering intensive support and counselling for young people with co-occurring mental health, substance and alcohol misuse problems.
- **Artful Dodgers Studios:** providing pathways to education, training and employment for young people with multiple and complex needs associated with mental health, substance abuse and homelessness.

- **Community Detention Services:** delivering case management support to asylum seekers, including unaccompanied minors, in community detention.
- **The Outdoor Experience:** offering an alternative treatment service through a range of outdoor intervention programs for young people aged 15 – 25 years, who have or have had issues with alcohol and/or other drugs.

Research, advocacy and policy are advanced through our Policy Unit, coordinating across all program and major interest areas of Jesuit Social Services.

## Detailed responses to the Inquiry's terms of reference

### 1. The effects of criminal abuse of children within religious and other organisations

The Cummins report into Protecting Victoria's Vulnerable Children outlined the wide range of social costs that result from the neglect and abuse of children.<sup>1</sup> Jesuit Social Services has seen the lifelong consequences that abuse can have through our work with individuals in the criminal justice system, young people with substance abuse problems and mental illness, and families bereaved by suicide. Research has confirmed the extent of the adverse consequences which stem from child abuse, including increased risk of health problems, mental health problems, suicide, aggression, violence and criminal activity and homelessness.<sup>2</sup> At the heart of these tangible consequences lies victims' feelings of pain and anguish that stem from the abuse of relationships of trust and power. Child sexual abuse does not just victimise individuals; the impacts extend to families, friends and communities who must pick up the pieces for individuals and relationships damaged as a result of abuse. Sadly, these impacts extend across generations and often have negative consequences for the children of victims of abuse.

Sadly, as the Cummins Report summarised, '*public commentary on past incidents of child abuse within [church and religious] organisations and the perceived inadequacies with organisational responses is frequent and often damning.*'<sup>3</sup> The inadequacy of responses to child abuse demonstrates insufficient concern for victims who, more often than not, were in the care of particular organisations and for whom those organisations would have been purporting to work for. Sadly, the inadequacy of responses to child abuse can deepen the pain and anguish of victims. It can also have a wider impact upon the recovery of a young person from abuse, with research showing that the responses to disclosure of abuse can have a significant impact upon the long term wellbeing of victims.<sup>4</sup> When alleged abuse is disclosed to an organisation, it has a responsibility to ensure that due process is accorded to victim and alleged perpetrator. The organisation also has a responsibility to act in a transparent manner and in a way that does not deepen the impact of abuse on the victim.

We believe that sexual abuse, and the manner in which it has been responded to, has led to a crisis of community confidence in the integrity of some religious and community organisations. These

<sup>1</sup> The Hon Philip Cummins, Prof Dorothy Scott OAM, Bill Scales AO, 2012, 'Report of the Protecting Victoria's Vulnerable Children Inquiry', Pg 48-52

<sup>2</sup> Alister Lamont, 2010, 'Effects of child abuse and neglect for children and adolescents', Australian Institute of Family Studies Resource Sheet.

<sup>3</sup> The Hon Philip Cummins, Prof Dorothy Scott OAM, Bill Scales AO, above n.1, pg 352.

<sup>4</sup> Roesler, T.A. (1994). "Reactions to disclosure of childhood sexual abuse: the effect on adult symptoms". *Journal of Nervous and Mental Disease* **182** (11): 618–624

organisations can only work with and serve their communities effectively when they are trusted, as the relationship between community and organisation often involves responsibility for educating the youngest members of our community, supporting vulnerable individuals during times of crisis, or providing care to individuals with multiple and complex needs. The trust of the community in religious and community organisations must be rebuilt if these organisations are to continue to carry out their missions. We firmly believe that trust and confidence will only be rebuilt when religious and other community organisations are fully transparent and allow themselves to be scrutinised by the public.

## 2. Preventing and responding to abuse – Jesuit Social Services’ policy and practice

All of Jesuit Social Services’ activity is underpinned by our values of being welcoming, discerning and courageous. Jesuit Social Services has in place a range of processes and practices that promote the safety of all the vulnerable people with whom we work. In doing so, we seek to minimise the risk of child abuse and provide a transparent process for responding to any allegations of abuse. Our approach recognises that the processing of crimes against children should occur through the law enforcement institutions of the state, but that in doing so our organisation is both transparent and focused on minimising harm to victims.

### Organisational values and culture:

Evidence suggests that the values and culture of an organisation, for example patriarchy, can undermine the ability of victims and individuals within an organisation to respond to abuse.<sup>5</sup> At the heart of Jesuit Social Services’ approach lies a focus on building relationships that acknowledges the unique value of all persons and gives them the opportunity to harness their full potential. Consequently, the relationships with the individuals we work with are grounded in respect, a desire to promote safety and security of the person and empowerment. This approach extends beyond our practice areas to the relationships between staff as well as our business processes. Members of staff are provided with opportunities to become familiar with and enhance their practice in accordance with our values through a comprehensive induction process, through training, whole staff days, and supervision. We also have in place a range of policies and procedures that preserve our values and ensure we promote the safety and welfare of all those with whom we work.

### Policies and procedures:

Jesuit Social Services has a wide range of policies and procedures in place to minimise any potential for the risk of child abuse and also to provide a means to respond to any disclosure of abuse. In particular, we have:

- Code of Conduct – prohibits unethical conduct (including sexual relationships or conduct with young people with whom we work) and imposes an obligation on staff to disclose this conduct through a process outlined in the policy.
- Participant-Worker Relationship Policy and Procedure – prohibits sexual contacts between staff and program clients with dismissal upon breach.

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<sup>5</sup> Mel Irenya, Leah Bromfield, Lorraine Beyer, Daryl Higgins, 2006, ‘Child maltreatment in organisations: Risk factors and strategies for prevention’, Pg 15

- Feedback and Complaints Policy and Procedure (for clients and other stakeholders) – outlines a process for allegations of serious misconduct and outlines how assistance is provided to clients to report any crimes committed against them to police. Information about the feedback and complaints process is accessible to our stakeholders via our website and printed complaints brochure which includes contact details of external bodies who can also assist with complaints made about the organisation. See the Feedback and Complaints section of our website <http://www.jss.org.au/about-us/contact-us>.
- Practice Framework – Duty of Care Policy and Procedure – acknowledges the duty of care that the organisation owes to its program participants.
- Dispute and Grievance Policy and Procedure (for staff).
- Participants Rights and Responsibilities Poster.
- Anti-Discrimination, Harassment and Bullying Policy and Procedure.

#### Staff recruitment, supervision, and development:

Jesuit Social Services seeks to develop and support its staff to ensure that practice reflects the values and culture of our organisation. We ensure that potential new staff recruits have relevant qualifications, experience and ability to work with our clients and also undertake Working with Children Checks, Police checks and Referee checks for all new staff. In addition to this, new staff undertake a formal orientation process which includes familiarisation with the organisation and its values as well as our policies and procedures. New staff have a six month probation period with a performance review during this period. Finally, we provide regular ongoing training and supervision of frontline workers.

#### Independent accreditation:

We recognise that independent and external standards can provide an external benchmark through which we can ensure that our organisation complies with best practice standards within the community sector. Jesuit Social Services is Quality Improvement Council (QIC) Accredited which confirms that the organisation meets the QIC Community and Health Standards through an external review (auditing) process by QICSA (Quality Improvement and Community Service Accreditation Inc.) The organisation was first QIC Accredited in April 2010 and is due for re-accreditation in April 2013. Jesuit Social Services has also recently been certified against the Department of Human Services' Standards for Disability Services in Victoria (SDSV) by Health and Disability Auditing Australia (HDAA).

### **3. Supporting victims of sexual abuse**

Support After Suicide is a Jesuit Social Services program that provides individual and group counselling and support to families and individuals bereaved by suicide including particular programs developed for young people. It also builds the capacity of the community and existing services to respond effectively and appropriately to people bereaved by suicide through education, training and secondary consultation. The program was first established in 2004 and over the past eight years almost 1,000 people affected by a suicide have received counselling and support and over 1,400 people have engaged in education and training sessions.

Over the course of the eight years that we have worked with people bereaved by suicide, we have supported people who are grieving the loss of a person who was sexually abused as a child. Some of these were sexually abused by clergy of the Catholic Church. They have described to us the lives of loved ones, whether it was a daughter, husband or brother, who were profoundly and negatively impacted and 'defined' by the sexual abuse. They will often also describe lives characterised by alcohol and drug use, mental and emotional instability, and disruptions to employment, family and intimate relationship. The difficulties often become increasingly evident in teenage years and continue into adulthood, and can be attributed to the impact of sexual abuse. They are the characteristics of a person in pain, who cannot seem to escape the inner turmoil and harm done to them in terms of damage to trust, self-worth and their identity. Because children will tend to blame themselves and feel responsible for the abuse and its aftermath, it creates a self-defeating and self-destructive pattern of behaviour and relationships. Relatives of victims describe loved ones as not being able to find themselves, their direction, purpose and meaning in order to gain a foothold in life.

The people we see have also been impacted by the sexual abuse of the loved one who suicided – the effects ripple out and hurt others' lives. The parents, siblings, partners of those who were abused suffer deeply. They feel powerless to help and support their loved one. They keep trying but often are not able to prevent the self-destructive and self-hating thoughts, feelings and behaviours they see. It is deeply distressing for them to witness the suffering and not be able to alleviate it. Some express feeling guilty that they were not aware of the abuse and so did not prevent it. Some express feeling inadequate in terms of how to speak to their loved one about what happened. The stigma around sexual abuse means that it can be difficult to be open about it and so many people do not feel able to engage in conversations about it. Family members can also be impacted by the trauma of their loved one – if they do know some details of the abuse they may experience forms of vicarious traumatising such as intrusive imagery.

The profound breach of trust experienced by those who have been abused has ongoing implications for organisations that seek to build relationships with victims as well as their family and loved ones. Jesuit Social Services has sought to build relationships of trust with victims through Support After Suicide and other programs such as Connexions and the Artful Dodgers Studios. We have seen that it takes time and effort to ensure a sense of safety, and that they will be respected, listened to and understood. It is also important to be open – to questions from clients, to scrutiny without defensiveness, and to be flexible in your approach to ensure that it is accommodating and comfortable for the client. It is paramount to have the best interests of the client first and foremost and to be asking clients what they might need to build their sense of safety. At the heart of any approach must be a deep sense of empathy as to how they way things are done may be impacting on them – and to anticipate how protocols, policies, ways of doing things may be experienced by people who have been abused, and their families – and to make changes where necessary.

#### 4. Recommendations for reform

We believe that a culture of transparency, accountability and concern for victims of childhood sexual abuse must be promoted in church and other community organisations. We believe that there has been progress in developing a minimum standard of protections through reforms such as mandatory reporting and the requirement that employees undertake Working With Children Checks. We have also been encouraged by the example of many community organisations that have acted to strengthen workplace culture and practice that is protective of children.

A culture of transparency and accountability must be active and evident, and should inform the first response to any allegation of abuse. Clearly articulated policies and procedures must be in place that spell out precisely what steps are to be taken when an allegation is made. Importantly, the empathetic and sensitive application of such procedures sends a critical message to the person making the disclosure that he/she is believed, and will be supported and empowered to act. This response lays the foundation for potential healing over time.

Further, we believe that there is merit in the committee considering making it an offence for any organisation (including religious and community organisations) that works with young people under the age of 18 or individuals above the age of 18 lacking legal capacity to fail to report disclosure of abuse by members of staff to police. This reform would be in line with recommendation 47 of the Cummins report into Protecting Victoria's Vulnerable Children. It would complement mandatory child protection reporting requirements that most community sector workers must already comply with. We believe that such penalties would create a pressing incentive for organisations to act to ensure that they had best practice policies and procedures in place to deal with disclosure of abuse. It would also ensure that perpetrators of abuse are held publically responsible for their acts.

Finally, from our experience working with people directly abused, and their loved ones, we have seen the need to provide more support for both victims and their loved ones to recover from abuse. We believe that victims support groups and counselling services need to be adequately funded over an extended period of time to provide the support that victims and their loved ones need, irrespective of how proximal or far in time from the abuse. An integral part of this support is to focus on rebuilding trust and relationships that have been broken by abuse.