

BUILDING BETTER LIVES TOGETHER

A newsletter for our valued friends and supporters



Brotherhood
of St. Laurence

Working for an Australia free of poverty

ISSUE 78 April 2020

“Our greatest concern is for the most disadvantaged in our community who need help now, and even more than ever.”

Conny Lenneberg
Executive Director, Brotherhood of St. Laurence

**COVID-19
CRISIS EDITION**

We are living in extraordinary times.

Now even more than ever, people in our community who are facing disadvantage need our help.

The Coronavirus (COVID-19) health emergency is changing our lives in ways that we could not have imagined only a few weeks ago. Too many of us are already dealing with the daily hardship of poverty and disadvantage, and now this crisis will push countless more into suffering and deep distress.

The health crisis will magnify problems of social isolation and disconnection, bringing along with them risks to health, especially mental health. People are at risk of disconnection and isolation more than ever.

The Brotherhood of St. Laurence (BSL) continues to be a strong voice for those experiencing disadvantage. We are committed to maintaining delivery of our essential services, to ensure our community is safe and well.

We have an active connection with communities vulnerable to these risks. For those of us in frontline services, such as NDIS Local Area Coordination and Care at Home, we are checking in on the people we serve, offering extra help where we can. Our team is working to ensure that people with disability can adapt and access the supports that they need. We have also facilitated new infection training in Aged Care so our staff can keep up safe client contact, checking in more regularly with the most vulnerable participants in our programs.

We support the new measures both federal and state governments have taken to support those in need and will continue to advocate for further social justice measures. To help those facing disadvantage brought on by COVID-19 shut downs, we believe social security should be extended to protect marginalised groups, energy concession rates should be increased, debt collection and evictions should be put on hold, internet connectivity should be supplied to those most at risk of social isolation, new Home

Care Packages should be released to support older people on waiting lists, and training for support work should be fast tracked to enable micro-crediting for care workers.

As the crisis unfolds, BSL will continue to be a strong voice for those who are facing hardship. We remain staunchly committed to our cause to advocate for those most disadvantaged in our community, and our mission for a fairer, more compassionate and just society. We need to support those already experiencing disadvantage **now and in the future**. It is so important that nobody gets left behind when our country emerges from this health crisis and the economic impacts become clearer.

It's time to stand together and be the community that we aspire to be. Please join us in our mission and **make a tax-deductible donation today**.

Conny Lenneberg
Executive Director,
Brotherhood of St. Laurence

Now is the time for compassion. Please join us in supporting the most disadvantaged in the community today.

Donate today
bsl.org.au/donate



Join ANZ in supporting us to help the most disadvantaged in our community today.
bsl.org.au/donate

ANZ pledges funds to community partners supporting Australia's most disadvantaged

We are very happy to share with you that BSL is one of three of community partners to receive \$500,000 from ANZ to support the financial wellbeing of vulnerable Australians in the wake of the crisis.

ANZ CEO Shayne Elliott said: "Many Australians who were already doing it tough before COVID-19 will need additional help to get through this crisis. Our charity partners are experts in their respective fields and are best placed to make sure these funds are distributed where they will make the biggest difference."

We know that in the recovery from this, the most disadvantaged will bear the greatest burden. The most

disadvantaged in our community need help, **now even more than ever.**

We're committed to maintaining delivery of our essential services. BSL's Crisis Response Team has estimated that we need \$1.8 million this financial year to ensure that the needs of the most disadvantaged are met. That means ensuring:

- The continuity of essential services to older people
- Helping parents (often single parents or recent arrivals) with the resources to support their children's education and development while they're at home
- Job seekers can be assisted into new employment opportunities.

Can you help us bridge the gap?

Every day as the crisis unfolds, more and more people are being pushed further towards poverty. We are all uncertain of what tomorrow might hold, but whatever happens, we know we'll be there, with you by our side.

Please donate now. bsl.org.au/donate

Staying connected is more important than ever right now

Pat Parker has been a participant with BSL for 42 years. In the late 1970s, Pat found herself needing to reach out to BSL for support.

She got the help she needed and ended up working in our Family Centre Project – helping disadvantaged families with housing, income subsidy, welfare and community support – and we haven't been apart since.

Pat attended the Coolibah Centre, BSL's Fitzroy social connection hub, five days a week before the centre temporarily closed last week.

Although she does have family, Pat says the centre gave her an extra sense of community and support. She's also a passionate advocate for social justice and likes to share ideas with staff, other members and visitors through our school engagement programs.

Because social connection hub members are socialising and engaging



Above A school engagement participant shares time with Pat.

in activities together, it can help them avoid developing mental health issues that can come from isolation, such as depression and cognitive decline. That's why in the COVID-19 outbreak, by increasing hygiene and protective measures, we have kept our social connection hubs open as long as we could.

Pat's now staying at home, but we're visiting her regularly to check in and have a chat about the state of things. We understand this is a very distressing and difficult time for Pat and other members of the centre, so we are doing everything possible to stay connected and to keep them comfortable during this unprecedented time.

COVID-19 – we continue to support and advocate for most disadvantaged

During this unprecedented time, BSL remains dedicated to our cause of advocating for those most disadvantaged in our community. The situation continues to evolve, but we would like to share a snapshot of what we are currently doing:



Children and families

BSL is helping parents – often single parents, or recent arrivals – navigate the very rapidly changing situation. Parents are finding themselves increasingly isolated, without the resources or skills to support their children's education and development.

We know that the social isolation as a result of COVID-19 will lead to a rise in family violence.

While we can no longer meet families in community centres, our teams have mobilised to reach out to parents to provide support in other ways and help them support their children's learning and development in the home.



Emergency relief

While BSL does not deliver emergency relief, we are trying to assist colleague organisations address the huge spike in demand.



Aged Care services

Older people already experiencing deep disadvantage remain at greatest risk of COVID-19. With our social connection and respite centres closed, we are moving to outreach services to target social isolation. BSL is also working on significant program redesign so we can continue to support the most vulnerable that need our help more than ever.

It is essential that the government develops mechanisms now to rapidly address workforce shortages as workers become sick or need to self-isolate.



Employment

The Victorian Government is establishing a \$500M Working for Victoria Fund. BSL is seeking to partner with this state government initiative to redeploy workers who have lost their jobs to opportunities in vital areas (e.g. cleaning public infrastructure or delivering food) and help Victorians find short-term or casual roles.



Energy affordability for the vulnerable

As people spend more time at home, they will use more energy. We are currently engaged with both the Victorian and federal governments over the need to increase gas and electricity concessions for low-income households. We already know that people avoid using heating in cold weather to reduce their energy bills, and research shows that living in cold homes exacerbates respiratory conditions – which is particularly dangerous in the current circumstances.



People seeking asylum and non-resident migrants

This group remain ineligible for social security. This lack of a safety net leaves people without work destitute. BSL has engaged in cross-party lobbying on this issue and has written to relevant government ministers seeking urgent action.

Our youth team is reporting that the current pandemic situation is triggering trauma experiences for both the young refugee participants and their parents. We are actively campaigning for better access to rapid torture and trauma mental health services.



National Disability Insurance Scheme (NDIS) and disability services

We welcome the government's crisis response for people with disability, including declaring disability support as an essential service.

As a Partner in the Community, we are pivoting to focus on any urgent plan changes, to monitor the wellbeing of participants, to conduct outreach to vulnerable participants and moving to phone service wherever possible.

Because people with disability need more support to understand and navigate the shut-down of non-essential services, they may be at risk of being penalised for failing to comply with social distancing and quarantine requirements. We can leverage existing infrastructure to provide support and active outreach.



First Nations Communities

BSL is supporting the advocacy of the National Aboriginal Community Controlled Health Organisation. The organisation is speaking out on the potential for COVID-19 to heavily impact First Nations Communities and wipe out a generation of Elders.



Above Rukiya and Kis at the Connie Benn playgroup

Help bridge the digital divide

It's common these days to take easy access to internet for granted. But as people go into isolation and support networks move to online platforms, Australia's digital divide will widen.

To address this, BSL is looking at ways to access phone/data plans and computer equipment for vulnerable communities. We are also advocating (with ACOSS) for supporting connectivity.

In Fitzroy, our playgroup is on pause. That doesn't stop the mums from keeping in touch. "I am staying in touch with other mums in the group by ringing them and asking them how they are feeling. We are helping to get

things from the shops for each other. I think we might start using WhatsApp video calling so the children can see and talk to each other," says Rukiya.

Across Australia, Home Interaction Program for Parents and Youngsters (HIPPY) home tutors are keeping up home tutoring visits via video or phone contact. They will continue to stay connected with families and help find fun ways to continue to "love to learn".

We must not let students and families miss out as a result of school shut-downs and the transition to distance learning. It is critical not to further entrench educational inequities in the long term through inaction during this crisis. **Help us bridge the digital divide by donating today**
bsl.org.au/donate

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Conny Lenneberg

Executive Director,
Brotherhood of St. Laurence

Your gift today is
urgently needed
**so we can support
those most in need.**
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