



Brotherhood
of St Laurence

Working for an Australia free of poverty

COVID-19 – Opportunities for a better future

The massive shock of COVID-19 presents both huge risks and huge opportunities for Australia. Those among us with the fewest resources to draw on are most vulnerable now and into the future. The policy choices made during this crisis and as we emerge out the other side can deliver a better, more equitable and sustainable future for our nation.

A decent social safety net

Most Australians rely on social security at some point in their lives. The current crisis is a stark reminder that periods of unemployment can happen to anyone in our changing economy. How the system treats people when they need support is all important. Temporary improvements to our safety net announced during the COVID-19 crisis are most welcome, but significant holes remain to be plugged. Permanent repairs are essential to ensure we build a social security system that is fit for purpose. Many more households will be without work, have reduced wages or be reliant on a sole wage earner for some time. A return of income support payments to the sub-poverty levels before COVID-19 would be so damaging.

Needed now

- Extend eligibility for income support for people in need, regardless of visa status. (Asylum seekers face extreme vulnerability)
- Make all people living in Australia eligible for Medicare (a public health imperative)
- Suspend compliance requirements and related penalties for those on income support throughout the crisis

Towards a just future

- Ensure all social security payments are sufficient for people to live with dignity and participate in community and economic life
- Establish an independent Social Security Commission to set, monitor and review social security payment rates
- Legislate principles to reframe Australia's social security system as an investment that is enabling, capability building, respectful and fair.

A focus on creating decent, sustainable work, and helping people into jobs

Australia is rapidly heading towards double digit unemployment – the highest since the Great Depression. A long tail of high unemployment is expected to persist for some years. Whole sectors have been gutted, but new opportunities are emerging. Cross-sector collaboration; stimulus measures; aligning the skills, training and jobs agenda; and mobilising local efforts to drive regional opportunities can all underpin positive, sustainable structural changes to our economy. Young people, older workers, those with lower levels of education and English, jobseekers with disability, and those living outside our major cities will be hardest hit and require special measures.

Needed now

- Extend the JobKeeper wage subsidy scheme to all employees, regardless of visa status
- Rapidly expand Employment Based Training into sectors with workforce shortages to enable people to work and train at the same time

Towards a just future

- Target public stimulus towards job generation that delivers positive social and environmental outcomes
- Improve employment security for workers in sectors characterised by precarious conditions, notably those in key roles through the COVID-19 crisis

- Offer stood-down workers and jobseekers free vocational training to maximise their job prospects after the crisis
- Provide specialist employment support to young people. Open the Transition to Work program to 15-24-year-olds not fully engaged in work or study
- Establish a network of TAFE-based vocational exploration and guidance hubs, linked to the National Careers Institute, to assist young people and displaced workers navigate the changing labour market
- Mobilise local efforts through place-based collaborations of employers, TAFEs, local governments, employment services and community organisations to foster economic development and strengthen regional labour markets
- Expand social procurement across Australia to ensure jobseekers experiencing disadvantage benefit from employment opportunities generated by public expenditure
- Introduce a jobs and training guarantee for people facing extended unemployment (paid work experience/placements, vocational education and training, placement support)

Secure and affordable housing

Almost one-third of Australian households are renting. High house prices mean increasing numbers are renting for the long term; many low-income households will rent for life. Before COVID-19 over half of low-income households renting in private rentals were in rental stress (paying more than 30% of income on rent). This adversely impacts health, educational attainment, productivity and community life, as well as putting people at risk of falling into homelessness. COAG directives aimed at keeping a roof over renters' heads during the crisis are welcome – but protections introduced by different states and territories vary considerably. Levels of rental stress will likely skyrocket in the aftermath of COVID-19, exacerbated by the dire shortage of social and affordable housing. Addressing Australia's increasing levels of homelessness has become a public health imperative during the crisis. This points to the urgent need, as well as the potential, to make real advances.

Needed now

- House people who are sleeping rough, living in overcrowded or precarious conditions, or experiencing family violence, with options that go beyond the COVID-19 crisis
- Closely monitor and enforce the moratorium on rent increases and evictions during the crisis

Towards a just future

- Undertake a sustained program of investment to substantially lift the number of social & affordable rentals. This will stimulate regional economies, drive productivity, and address affordability challenges
- Expand the use of inclusionary zoning to deliver affordable housing within future property developments.
- Establish a coherent, evidence-driven approach to homelessness underpinned by shared principles and governance; a focus on prevention and early intervention; tailored responses for distinct groups; and embedded connections with employment, education, health services
- Recast support for young people at risk of homelessness to include a primary focus on education and training to change their life trajectory. TAFE-based Education First Youth Foyers are a proven model

Supporting children and families

With parents losing work in the current crisis, Australia's already high rates of child poverty are expected to increase. Vastly different experiences of home learning during lockdown are widening the educational divide, with children in low SES and vulnerable households, and those with disability, at risk of the poorest outcomes. More children and young people are likely to fall further behind academically and be at risk of disengaging from school.

A more coherent child and family support system could actively address disadvantage and vulnerabilities before they accumulate. Early learning needs to be elevated as a crucial measure to support child development and a key plank in our education system – including through attention to the home learning environment. A sharp focus on access and equity in early learning and schools will pay strong dividends for our shared future.

Needed now

- Provide home learning support to low SES and vulnerable families to ensure they are not disadvantaged by remote learning
- Give priority to children behind in their learning, children with disability, and those with challenging home learning environments when staggering school re-opening
- Provide catch-up support, including intensive tutoring, to children who have missed a critical chunk of their education

Towards a just future

- Extend universal preschool access to the two years before school across Australia, prioritising communities and children experiencing disadvantage
- Increase participation in early learning by children from low SES backgrounds and vulnerable groups by expanding the base entitlement for Early Learning & Care regardless of parental employment and strengthening access and equity measures
- Boost support to build the capacity of parents as first teachers and strengthen the home learning environment (HIPPOY is an example of this)
- Invest in multi-generation approaches to tackle child and family disadvantage. Extend place-based models that align education, employment, health and wellbeing support for children and families

Economic and social participation for people with disability

People with disability (and their families and carers) continue to experience deep disadvantage and social exclusion at much higher rates than other Australians. This translates into poverty, insecure housing, poorer education and employment outcomes, and higher levels of mental ill-health, violence and discrimination. The COVID-19 pandemic risks exacerbating these. However, innovative responses by governments and communities to the crisis point to opportunities for greater inclusion and participation of people with a disability and their families and carers, including through leveraging the NDIS as a platform for community solutions.

Towards a just future

- Embed strong governance and co-design by people with a disability across all public policy.
- Realise the potential of the NDIS Partners in the Community program (Local Area Coordination and Early Childhood Early Intervention) to strengthen inclusion of all people with disability. Efficiency in a period of high government debt will come from leveraging unfunded community supports and breaking down barriers to inclusion in the community.
- Continue to improve the NDIS participant experience by tailoring the planning process to participants' personal aspirations and makes use of community supports to progress goals.

- Redouble efforts to lift the employment of people with a disability through national levers that stimulate local change
- Ensure the next iteration of the National Disability Strategy and the National Disability Agreement makes all levels of government accountable for measurable improvements in outcomes for people with disability.

Support for vulnerable older people

Existing issues in Australia’s aged care system have been exacerbated by COVID-19. Many social connection programs have moved to home-based or online delivery; community and family supports have been displaced by social distancing requirements; and greater restrictions have been placed on residential facilities. The federal government’s COVID-19 aged care package is welcome, but significant issues remain. More than 125,000 people on the waiting list for home packages are not receiving the care they need; social isolation and digital disconnection are serious barriers; providers have new challenges in delivering quality care; and older people already experiencing deep disadvantage are particularly vulnerable.

Needed now

- Provide interim care and case management to people waiting for aged care
- Introduce income protections for casual and self-employed care workers to remove economic pressures to come to work when unwell or self-isolating
- Support aged care providers to meet the additional challenges of delivering safety and quality services in the current crisis
- Invest in measures to rapidly deploy additional care workers through training incentives, fast-tracking of qualifications and micro-credentialing of key skill sets (e.g. infection control).

Towards a just future

- Address long waiting periods for Home Care Packages – particularly for those with high care needs
- Invest in workforce development and improve employment conditions and security
- Introduce a place-based program that helps older people and their families navigate the complex services landscape, access and coordinate the support they need
- Invest in age-appropriate affordable housing options to enable people to age in their communities and prevent premature entry into residential care.

Climate change and energy

Notwithstanding the current focus on COVID 19, the imperative to act on climate change is more urgent than ever. COVID 19 has demonstrated our collective capacity to take the necessary rapid action to protect the community in response to crisis. With the right choices, we can stimulate the economy with win-win-win opportunities that generate local jobs, improve the wellbeing of households and communities, and reduce emissions. This will strengthen our economic and community resilience and set Australia to play a lead role in avoiding climate catastrophe.

Needed now

- Introduce an economic stimulus package, which creates jobs, improves energy efficiency and shifts us towards a low carbon future
- Fund a large-scale Home Energy and Water project that provides advice on how to stay warm through the winter, lower bills and use energy efficiently and funds relevant

Towards a just future

- Commit to fair, ambitious emissions reductions which limit warming as close as possible to 1.5 degrees or below.
- Invest in healthy, affordable housing by:
 - large scale programs to support energy efficiency upgrades in low-income, public and community housing, with increased support for the most vulnerable

energy upgrades in the most vulnerable households

- Increase energy concessions for low income households who have to spend more time at home during the crisis

- mandating energy efficiency standards for rental properties

- building new, energy-efficient social housing

- Introduce enabling policies to foster high quality, low carbon employment and renewable energy infrastructure
- Develop and implement local climate change adaptation and resilience plans

Prepared May 2020
Brotherhood of St Laurence
67 Brunswick Street
Fitzroy, Victoria 3065
Australia

ABN 24 603 467 024
Ph: (03) 9483 1183

www.bsl.org.au