

Media release

September 14, 2011

National Social Justice Statement: the challenge of being just

Jesuit Social Services has backed calls from the Australian Catholic Social Justice Council for a reduction in the number of people being sent to prisons in Australia and for greater opportunities for diversion and support to be provided, at the launch of the Social Justice Statement in Sydney today.

Jesuit Social Services Chief Executive Officer, Julie Edwards, said the Australian Catholic Bishops' Social Justice Statement entitled "*Building Bridges, Not Walls: Prisons and the Justice System*" provides an educated insight into steps Governments can take to reduce crime rates.

"For example, minimum mandatory sentencing and the abolishment of home detention and suspended sentences in Victoria will not deter offenders from reoffending and it will not make the community safer.

"With 35 years of experience in the field working with people involved in the justice system, we know that once you have been to prison, you are more likely to return.

"Typically around two out of every three young people who have been in custody re-offend within two years. But over 80 per cent of people who have taken part in the Jesuit Social Services Community Group Conferencing Program – which brings young offenders, victims and other community members together to talk about a crime and its impacts - have not reoffended two years later.

"Locking people up serves little purpose if at the end of that sentence, they leave the institution without any support or capacity to reintegrate into society and not reoffend.

The Social Justice Statement also highlighted the sad reality that Indigenous Australians are imprisoned at a significantly higher rate than non-Indigenous Australians, and at a rate that is increasing rapidly.

"More needs to be done in Indigenous communities where many young people are caught in a cycle of reoffending and where sadly, incarceration has become a way of life.

"Prison should be the last option and other options such as Group Conferencing should be viewed as a viable alternative when sentencing," Ms Edwards said.

The Social Justice Statement outlines the five key challenges faced by the community in improving safety, lowering crime and imprisonment rates and breaking the cycle of re-offending.

1. Countering fear campaigns about law and order
2. Addressing social factors that contribute to crime
3. Maintaining the dignity of those in prison
4. Providing practical help for people coming out of prison
5. Providing realistic alternatives to prison.

Jesuit Social Services works with over 500 young people a year, the majority of whom are high risk young people with complex and multiple problems and needs; such complex needs include mental health problems, disability (including intellectual disability), drug and alcohol misuse, homelessness, and health problems.

Jesuit Social Services CEO, Julie Edwards is available for comment.

For all media enquiries, please contact Stephanie De Campo (Media) on 0432 828 004