

**Address by Jack de Groot
CEO, St Vincent de Paul Society NSW
at the launch of the Australian Catholic Bishops’
Social Justice Statement 2018–2019**

***A Place to Call Home:
Making a home for everyone in our land***

St Patrick’s Cathedral Hall, Parramatta, 6 September 2018

I acknowledge the traditional owners.

I thank the Australian Catholic Social Justice Council, its Chair Bishop Vincent Long and its CEO John Ferguson for their work today in bringing the Church Community and Australia to the challenge of homelessness.

Australia has enjoyed its 27th year of consecutive growth. We are a rich nation. An advanced economy. And a society in denial.

Let me tell you about Linda. Vinnies has worked with Linda for the last seven years. She is 72 years old. In her working life, Linda was a high-achieving and well-credentialed mental health nurse with a Master’s Degree and a strong employment record. In her mid-50s her marriage broke down. In her early 60s, her health took a downward turn and it meant that she could not return to the work she loved and was good at. At 65, she reached out to Vinnies. She was homeless. She had lost her rental property due to inability to pay the rent. The divorce had meant she was not resourced to buy a property in Sydney. Illness had reduced her income. Linda had overstayed the welcome on friends’ couches over the last couple of years. Her story is not uncommon. Older women are homeless in increasing numbers. They are women who have worked but always earned less than men. They are women who do not fare well at the time of divorce and a bit of illness, which happens to us all as we age, but put her into the spiral to homelessness.

This week we saw the launch of our national progress report against the UN’s Sustainable Development Goals that are about ending poverty. The denial in this nation is breathtaking. Each night 116,000 of us sleep homeless – an increase of 12 per cent this century and over 10,000 more between the last two census figures. 875,000 households are under extreme housing stress. Insecurity of housing is an eroding of mental wellbeing amongst Australians. The ratio of house prices compared to household disposable incomes has increased by 51 per cent between 2000 and 2016. The latest Rental Affordability Index (RAI) found for the Greater Sydney Region (and yes that includes the fringes):

- the rent on a 1-bedroom flat is 94 per cent of a single pension,
- the rent on a 2-bedroom flat is 54 per cent of a couple pension,

- the rent on a 1-bedroom flat is 144 per cent of the Newstart allowance, and
- the rent on a 2-bedroom flat is 70 per cent of income for a single parent receiving income support.

In addition, if you are a couple on minimum wage or working on a moderate wage or student share-housing, rents are moderately unaffordable for you – that is over 30 per cent of your income.

We stand here this morning to launch a statement by the Catholic Church’s leadership in Australia on homelessness. It is clear that our words as leaders in Church are not enough. We are a church corrupted, broken and yet committed to action to meet a tremendous need in our community. This is what the Church does each day. It is in communities, touching the need of our brothers and sisters, acting and calling for transformation, that the Church is in its natural habitat.

Not far from here at Merrylands, at Penrith and further up the Mountains at Katoomba, the St Vincent de Paul Society in NSW is building 200 affordable and social housing units. This is part of the 500 houses we are building throughout the state that will all be on stream by the first half of 2020. It is done in partnership with the NSW government and Vinnies. A \$200+ million investment by Vinnies, with the support of our members accompanying tenants, and ‘wrap round’ care and support programs. It is a partnership with government funding for the next 25 years. More than 25 units in Dubbo will be open for tenants in November. We are building on our own land and purchasing ‘off the plan’. We have raised the capital. Whilst we are in the shadow of a Cathedral this morning, our chapels are the homes of those on low incomes. The members of Vinnie’s and our staff will support tenants and enable people to become the authors of their own stories of economic security that is premised on a ‘housing first’ approach. And, it is a drop in the bucket. As the ‘sell-off’ of public housing continues in an ‘asset recycling model’ of preferred government economics, there are 60,000 people on the housing waiting list with an average wait time of close to 10 years. The journey of Linda was seven years. The urgency for her was not as great as it is for families and for those living with disability. Therefore, whilst there is a challenge to Church to do more, there is the reality that this universal right to home places the obligation fair and square on government.

Last night here in Parramatta, in Newcastle, in Wollongong and the City of Sydney, our vans provided food, company, clothes and referral to those who are the street homeless, those in over-crowded boarding houses and couch-surfing. Last night, we provided emergency beds for people in Sydney and Newcastle. We provided transitional housing for families escaping domestic violence through our refuges and our residences for those managing in addiction in Wagga and Armidale. We cared for 80 men at the end of their lives who are homeless, disabled and dying at Frederic House.

This story is replicated by Church agencies every day throughout the nation. In the midst of the catastrophic failure of leadership throughout the child sexual abuse crisis, this was also our reality and has become the only point of credibility for the Church to speak from.

Today's statement makes this clear.

The direct provision of care creates a clear voice of advocacy within Church and to government and decision-makers at all levels.

Local government must curb their dependency on appeasing property developers and develop a mature community benefit relationship. All new developments throughout LGAs on private land must require that 15 per cent of the housing be dedicated to affordable housing. Developers will make their money, LGAs will get their rates and fees and the community will be housed. On public land developments (such as those at Barangaroo or Olympic Park), 25 per cent of those developments must be allocated to affordable and social housing. However, government has consistently failed its obligation. No more is it acceptable, in a rich nation, that housing affordability is the point of conversation amongst primary aged children and a cause of stress for adolescents, as they imagine their future.

The Church can allocate land, as it has already to these sorts of developments. Together, Church agencies in Sydney have formed a consortium to be concrete in the pursuit of funds for housing developments on Church land for social and affordable housing. Government, with the private sector, need to initiate Social Impact funding models for programs that will model community sector innovation to governments faced with a wicked problem.

State governments must set targets.

The Premier of NSW, on her first day in office, named the housing affordability crisis her number one priority. The release of land in a 'supply-based' economic model with no social housing targets is only a win for developers and not for the Australian community. The governments of Victoria, NSW and the Commonwealth face elections within six months. Their leadership on responding to housing affordability is more likely than ever to be the point of choice for the electorate.

This current and new Prime Minister must turn the rhetoric of his time as Treasurer, on creating avenues for finance, to housing targets, and he must aim to be goal accountable. The PM must take the housing affordability crisis of this country as his priority. Housing affordability is both economic and social development return. We the people challenge him to drive change in terms of targets for social affordable housing, increased funding to the social housing subsidies and to improve wellbeing for Australians.

Campaigns such as 'End Street Homelessness' by Catholic agencies and those of the Sydney Alliance are important. On 14 September, Dame Louise Casey, the UK's homelessness czar, will be in Sydney for the End Street Homelessness campaign.

In London, they have affordable housing targets on new developments. There are targets in New York. So here in Australia, with some of the least affordable cities in the world and 27

years of economic growth, it is time to rip off the shades of denial and set targets to overcome the housing affordability crisis and its impact in increasing inequality.

A Place to Call Home is timely. It suggests a program of action for Church, for government and industry. The program does have strategies. This is a moral, ethical and economic challenge. The God of our faith was born without shelter. The family he was born into and their ancestors wandered without home. That Holy Family's solidarity is the challenge to us all today to make sure each has *A Place to Call Home*.