

## INQUIRY INTO PUBLIC DISTURBANCES AT MACQUARIE FIELDS

**Organisation:** St Vincent de Paul Society  
**Name:** Mr Owen Rogers  
**Position:** Chief Executive Officer  
**Telephone:** 95608666  
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**Theme:**

**Summary**



# St Vincent de Paul Society

NSW/ACT

*good works*

ABN 46 472 591 335 001

Ozanam Village  
Cnr West & Thomas Streets  
Lewisham NSW 2049  
PO Box 5  
Petersham NSW 2049

Tel: (02) 9560 8666  
Fax: (02) 9550 9383

Email: [vinnies@vinnies.org.au](mailto:vinnies@vinnies.org.au)  
Website: [www.vinnies.org.au](http://www.vinnies.org.au)  
Donation Hotline: 13 18 12

21<sup>st</sup> November 2005

Ms Jan Burnswoods MLC  
Committee Chair  
Standing Committee on Social Issues  
Legislative Council  
Parliament House  
Macquarie Street  
SYDNEY NSW 2000

Dear Ms Burnswoods

Greetings!

## **INQUIRY INTO PUBLIC DISTURBANCES AT MACQUARIE FIELDS**

Thank you for your letter, dated 7<sup>th</sup> October 2005, inviting the St Vincent de Paul Society to make a submission with respect to the terms of reference in relation to the above inquiry.

The Society is delighted to have received such an invitation and has pleasure in providing a submission, a copy of which is attached. I wish you and the Committee members well with the inquiry.

Yours sincerely

Owen Rogers  
Chief Executive Officer  
State Council NSW/ACT

Enclosure:



**St Vincent de Paul Society**  
*good works*

**SUBMISSION TO NEW SOUTH WALES LEGISLATIVE  
COUNCIL'S STANDING COMMITTEE ON SOCIAL ISSUES**

**INQUIRY INTO THE PUBLIC DISTURBANCES IN  
MACQUARIE FIELDS**

**ST VINCENT DE PAUL SOCIETY  
NSW/ACT STATE COUNCIL**

**NOVEMBER 2005**

## **The St Vincent de Paul Society's involvement in the Macquarie Fields district**

The St Vincent de Paul Society is a worldwide Catholic lay movement, committed to putting Christian faith into action by serving people in need. In NSW and ACT, the Society has been active since 1881 and now has a network of 20,000 volunteers and nearly 2,000 staff working in 602 local groups, 117 specialist programs and 269 shops.

The Society has had an active local group (or conference) based in Macquarie Fields since 1964 but has been giving assistance to people in need in the district since the establishment of our local conference in Liverpool in 1904. The Society's Macquarie Fields Conference is the most active local provider of financial and practical assistance to people in need.

In addition to its emergency assistance work, the Society is involved in a community development program across four public housing estates in the Campbelltown City area, including Macquarie Fields. The focus of this program, the Animation Project, is to encourage the development of local leadership, supporting local residents in their efforts to work for positive social change in their communities.

Across the Campbelltown City area, the Society also conducts:

- three Centres (or shops), providing low-cost clothing and furniture, with the main local centre located in Macquarie Fields;
- a network of services for people who are homeless or at risk of homelessness, including three refuges, three medium to long-term housing programs, a housing brokerage and assistance service and two programs which help people at risk of homelessness to maintain their tenancy;
- a drug and alcohol addictions recovery program; and
- two community centres involved in a variety of outreach and support services.

The Society's newest local outreach is Compeer, a program which recruits, trains and supports community volunteers to provide friendship and support to people living with mental illness.

In 2004-05, the Society provided emergency assistance to people living in the suburbs of Macquarie Fields and Glenfield on 1,031 occasions. The total value of assistance in food and financial assistance was \$27,716. Of the households receiving assistance, the majority is headed by single adults – 44% being single parent families and 30% single person households. All but 4% of those receiving assistance from the Society in the Macquarie Fields area rely on government benefits as their main or sole source of income.

## **The Macquarie Fields public housing estate**

While the residents of Macquarie Fields and Glenfield are predominantly on low to middle incomes, there is still quite a degree of diversity from one neighbourhood to another within the area. Average incomes are relatively high in the gated private housing estate of Macquarie Links and in the semi-rural area of Long Point. Much of the Society's local activity is concentrated in the large public housing estate east of Harold Street, Macquarie Fields – a neighbourhood with very low average household incomes and high levels of unemployment. This submission concentrates on the social conditions and needs of the Macquarie Fields public housing estate, as this is the neighbourhood in which the public disturbances of February and March occurred.

The Macquarie Fields public housing estate, constructed around 1973, was the first of five large public housing estates built in the Campbelltown City area. The estate, which includes

more than 1,400 cottages and townhouses, was poorly designed, based on the now discredited Radburn model. The then NSW Housing Commission's planners designed the estate to prevent houses being transferred easily into the ownership of tenants, with hundreds of houses built on a few super lots. This policy of not assisting tenants into home ownership ensured that the estate did not go through the natural stages of growth of many other neighbourhoods across Western Sydney.

Like other public housing estates in the Campbelltown City area, the housing in the Macquarie Fields estate is distinctly different from housing in neighbouring areas. The planning of the estate has compounded the local social stigma associated with living in public housing. Many local families living on very low incomes – unable to afford to maintain a car – find the estate's location and the cost of transport exacerbate their sense of isolation. Depending on where people live on the estate, facilities such as the railway station, swimming pool and main sporting facilities of Macquarie Fields are more than 2km and up to 4km away.

### **Social exclusion and public disorder**

Much public discussion of issues surrounding the public disturbances in Macquarie Fields has focused on policing issues. We note that local opinion is polarised, between those who strongly support the police and those who believe the police response was heavy-handed and paid little attention to the needs of the many local residents not involved in acts of public disorder. However, in our view, policing issues are secondary to the social conditions which created the need for a police response.

Through our work in the Macquarie Fields public housing estate, the St Vincent de Paul Society comes face to face, on a daily basis, with people for whom life is a constant battle to maintain the most basic level of financial subsistence. However, this situation is, by no means, peculiar to Macquarie Fields. Our organisation works in dozens of communities across New South Wales with similar levels of social exclusion and disaffection.

This sense of social exclusion is most marked for the many young people who are not participating either in work or in education, because they do not believe they will ever find and keep a steady and satisfying job. This deep pessimism about education and employment is now being shared across several generations of many families.

This level of social exclusion creates an atmosphere in which some people have little stake in wider Australian society. In the worst circumstances, some will respond to a perceived outside threat with violence, with little concern for the consequences for themselves or others. The US civil rights leader, the Rev Martin Luther King, noted in 1967 that: "A riot is, at bottom, the language of the unheard." This observation has been illustrated by the rioting and social disorder seen this month in many urban centres in France.

In noting the link between violence and social exclusion, we are not, in any way, seeking to condone or excuse the violence which occurred. No level of exclusion or disaffection can ever make acts of violence or criminal behaviour acceptable or excusable. However, any successful government and community response must address both the criminal behaviour and its underlying causes.

Few people in the Macquarie Fields community could claim to have known prior to the events that the public disturbances would occur. There did not appear to be anything happening in the community in the days and weeks beforehand which would have flagged that social disorder was just about to occur. During and after the riots, the great majority of local residents were deeply shocked that these events had occurred in their suburb. However, many

people acknowledge that the disaffection and anger which came to the surface during the riots had existed for some time among a significant group of local residents.

The fatal car crash in which young people lost their lives, and the rumours spread about what occurred and who was to blame, provided a flashpoint which ignited underlying anger and disaffection among a section of the local community. Local people believe that these events attracted the attention of some from other districts who saw it as an opportunity to join in the social disorder. Similar events could have occurred in any one of dozens of other communities in NSW where similar social conditions exist. Therefore, in considering what happened in Macquarie Fields and why, it is important to look both at the issues and needs of Macquarie Fields and the issues facing other communities with similar needs.

### **The provision of services in Macquarie Fields**

Because of the relative isolation, low levels of car ownership and cost of public transport, many residents of the Macquarie Fields public housing estate rely heavily on the services provided in the estate and in the area immediately next to it. The main focuses of the local community are the three schools – Guise Primary School, Curran Primary School and James Meehan High School. Despite many difficulties, the schools are well regarded within the local community, respected for their efforts in providing both education and social support.

Other State Government and local government services in or near the Macquarie Fields public housing estate are limited and have been heavily affected by constantly changing government funding priorities. Among residents, there is a strong sense that much of the government service provision and the government funding of community services is short-term. There is much local cynicism about government services and government-funded services making promises or creating expectations which are not met, because of funding uncertainty and changes in service provision. Key services which operated in the past in community development and family support have lost funding, had funding reduced or have lacked outside support at times of crisis.

Too often, services which have made a real difference to community life have been cut or have struggled from year to year with long-term funding remaining uncertain. One of the most valued local programs, the Primary Connect program at Guise Primary School, will lose its funding from December. The funding of the Schools As Community program is uncertain. Local people find it difficult to believe that services such as these can be lost while the State Government is making public statements about its commitment to supporting the Macquarie Fields community.

This is indicative of a wider problem with the security of funding for community services through the State and Federal Governments. Much of the funding available is offered only for two years or three years. However, good quality community development in communities of high need requires careful long-term relationship-building and mentoring – something which cannot be achieved in two or three years. Many excellent community services – not only in Macquarie Fields but across NSW – have been lost because of endlessly changing government funding priorities.

One of the greatest long-term funding needs in Macquarie Fields – a common concern across the state – is the provision of mental health services. Residents of the Macquarie Fields public housing estate report that local people with serious mental health issues have great difficulty accessing services at times of personal crisis.

Residents also report concerns about the provision of council services such as rubbish removal and dog control and the maintenance of street lighting. Many people feel that the council-run Youth Centre in Macquarie Fields does little to meet the needs of young people. Few social alternatives are available. For some years, young people have been seeking support for the construction of a local skate park, without success.

### **The media portrayal of Macquarie Fields and of public housing**

The way in which Macquarie Fields has been portrayed in the media – both during and after the public disturbances – has created much local anger and dismay. Residents report that some media teams exacerbated an already difficult situation by harassing young people, provoking angry reactions (which were subsequently portrayed in media coverage).

In the months since then, a number of media outlets have presented “investigative” coverage or articles which have presented false, distorted or heavily skewed coverage of life in Macquarie Fields. As part of the research for these programs and articles, some journalists have spent considerable time interviewing and filming some of the many people involved in positive community initiatives in the area. However, in most cases, the final program or article has given no coverage to activities or views which portray a more positive or balanced view of Macquarie Fields. The end result is that many local people feel betrayed by the media and feel that they have no opportunity to have their voices heard in wider public debate.

The negative media coverage of Macquarie Fields is part of the almost endless negative portrayal of public housing by sections of the media. By contrast, every day, our organisation’s volunteer members and staff meet people whose lives are changed for the better through the provision of affordable public and community housing. Every day, we are also assisting thousands of NSW families who are living in permanent financial crisis because there is no affordable housing available for them.

The endless denigration of public housing is a matter of deep concern to the St Vincent de Paul Society. We see this as influencing the gradual withdrawal of political and financial support for public and community housing, at a time when the need for affordable and secure housing is greater than ever as the state’s housing affordability crisis worsens.

### **Management of public housing**

In managing the Macquarie Fields public housing estate, the NSW Department of Housing has given priority in the past decade to refurbishing cottages and reconfiguring public spaces, to address some of the issues which arose from the estate’s original planning. In the Campbelltown City area, the Department focused on this program of refurbishing and renewal, known as the Neighbourhood Improvement Program, in Macquarie Fields and Airds. This program has brought many benefits for individual tenants and has opened up possibilities which didn’t previously exist for transferring housing from public housing into private ownership.

By contrast, in the Claymore and Minto public housing estates, the Department followed a much lower cost strategy of working with a variety of non-government organisations and residents groups on community building. While these strategies did not address the need for structural changes to housing stock and public areas, the social impact was significantly more positive for Claymore and Minto residents than the focus on buildings through the Neighbourhood Improvement Program in Airds and Macquarie Fields. This difference was quantified in research conducted for the NSW Department of Housing by Dr Judith Stubbs and

Max Hardy <sup>1</sup> in comparing the social impact of the differing approaches taken on different estates.

The “Reshaping Public Housing” reforms, introduced this year by the NSW Department of Housing, will contribute to a further destabilising of life on public housing estates. The decision to introduce limited tenure from July 1, 2005 for new Department of Housing tenants will have a particularly negative impact in large areas of concentrated public housing. By subjecting each new tenant on a public housing estate to regular income and eligibility tests, the Department will ensure that any tenant who finds regular work with a moderate income is forced to move out of the estate. Local role models will be removed because of their success.

Security of tenure in a community provides a stable population, allowing a gradual maturing of the population profile. A stable and maturing population promotes greater cohesion and lower crime rates. At a public meeting in Campbelltown in September on the “Reshaping Public Housing” changes, tenants said they feared the removal of security of tenure would result in a decrease in social cohesion, morale, neighbourhood pride, volunteerism and local role models and an increase in local conflict, mistrust, stigma, social isolation, mental illness, family breakdown, vandalism and crime.

While the State Government has begun a program of redeveloping some public housing estates, the long time frames and the high costs involved will greatly restrict the speed at which redevelopment occurs. A significant part of the state’s public housing stock will continue to be on public housing estates for some time to come.

According to the NSW Department of Housing, 30 per cent of public housing stock is on what it classifies as “estates”. The St Vincent de Paul Society believes, from our experience across NSW, that this 30% of public housing on estates needs to be managed more carefully than public housing which is less visible and better integrated with privately-owned housing. In some areas, the NSW Department of Housing and non-government organisations have been able to work together effectively to support local residents in significantly improving social conditions in public housing estates. These positive examples must be drawn together to develop a clear strategy for the management of public housing estates across NSW.

Key elements of this strategy, which could be piloted in Macquarie Fields, would include:

1. Offering long-term tenure to people who choose to move to a public housing estate, allowing people to stay and contribute to a community even if they no longer meet the tight new eligibility criteria.
2. Allowing more flexible criteria in allocations strategies for different estates. Each estate could have particular criteria relevant to its needs, allowing the community to maintain a mixture of family profiles and ages.
3. Giving priority to public housing applicants who demonstrate a positive interest in moving to a particular estate, even if they don’t meet all eligibility criteria. This approach was used effectively by Argyle Community Housing in Proctor Way, Claymore from 1997 and by the NSW Department of Housing’s “Hill Project” in Minto prior to the redevelopment which commenced in 2002.
4. Developing an effective local strategy to address maintenance issues, to tackle the primary source of dissatisfaction of public housing tenants.
5. Working with government and non-government agencies to ensure each estate has a strong network of social programs, with emphasis given to services which meet the

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<sup>1</sup> Stubbs, J. & Hardy, M. 2000, *Evaluation of Three Neighbourhood Renewal Strategies Employed by the South West Region of the NSW Department of Housing*, NSW Department of Housing.



- needs of children and families and organisations which promote community-building and foster leadership skills among residents.
6. Case management of tenants who are at risk of losing their tenancy. This case management and support can be conducted either by specialist NSW Department of Housing staff or by a contracted non-government organisation. An excellent local example of this is the St Vincent de Paul Society's Housing Options and Personal Endeavours (HOPE) program in the Campbelltown district.
  7. Increasing the staff to housing stock ratios and giving local Department of Housing teams greater flexibility in developing local policies and in managing relationships with tenants.
  8. Introducing other housing providers, such as community housing organisations, to manage housing stock in sections of the estate, to provide greater options for tenants – as has occurred in Claymore and Airds-Bradbury with Argyle Community Housing.
  9. Early intervention to try to solve neighbourhood disputes.
  10. Economic development and education programs, including involving unemployed tenants in direct employment schemes.
  11. Encouraging tenant-led solutions to local problems and neighbourhood improvements. A number of non-government organisations, including the St Vincent de Paul Society's Animation Project in the Campbelltown area, have developed experience and expertise in developing community leadership in public housing estates.
  12. Promoting long-term stability by providing tenants with a variety of options to purchase their homes, including shared equity and retrospectively recognising rent paid as payment towards a home purchase. This measure would be of particular value in a large estate like Macquarie Fields where offering more tenants the opportunity to remain as owner-occupiers would contribute significantly to community stability.

### **Developing a broader anti-poverty strategy**

The St Vincent de Paul Society sees greater financial support for, and more careful management of, public housing as an important element of a broader strategy to tackle issues of poverty. In our work, we see that a section of the Australian community has missed out on the benefits other Australians have received through the growth in the national economy over the past 20 years. We see that the section of our community being excluded from the benefits of growing national affluence is growing, as young people find the transition from school into stable full-time work increasingly harder to achieve and as many workers of all ages are affected by the increasing casualisation of the Australian workforce.

For some years, the St Vincent de Paul Society has been advocating a national anti-poverty strategy to focus on and tackle these issues. This approach was taken up by the 2004 Senate inquiry into poverty and financial hardship when it recommended:

*That a comprehensive anti-poverty strategy be developed at the national level and that this involve:*

- *an initial summit of Commonwealth, State and local governments, the welfare sector, unions, the business sector, community groups, income support customers and relevant experts in the field to be held to highlight the importance of the issue and agree on a timetable for action;*
- *a commitment to achieve a whole of government approach. That is, coordinated action across policy areas such as employment, health, education, income support, community services, housing and other relevant areas to reduce poverty and poverty of opportunity;*

- not longer than a 12-month period of consultation.<sup>2</sup>

While this recommendation was not taken up by the Federal Government, we believe that the NSW Government could provide national leadership on this issue, by working with the sectors mentioned above to develop a more focused state strategy to fight poverty and to advocate with other State Governments and the Federal Government for the development of a national strategy.

### **The Society's commitment to the Macquarie Fields community**

For its part, the St Vincent de Paul Society – as probably the longest-established local organisation involved in providing community services – will continue its local work in emergency financial assistance and community development in Macquarie Fields and its regional services in housing support, addictions recovery, mental health and community services.

In 2006, our organisation will establish an additional community outreach, based in the Macquarie Fields public housing estate. Committing funds raised within our organisation through public donations, we aim to provide additional support to families under stress and socially isolated individuals and couples and to become even more actively involved in promoting opportunities for local community and volunteer opportunities. We will do this by developing:

- an enhanced local home visitation program, to provide outreach and support to socially isolated families, single people and couples; and
- an additional community development outreach, specifically aimed at engaging adults and young people not regularly in other community activities.

We are in the process of developing partnerships with a number of local non-government organisations and community groups to help us develop as effective a program as possible. We hope that, in the future, we may be able to gain some government funding support to help us maintain this long-term commitment to the Macquarie Fields community.

### **Recommendations**

The St Vincent de Paul Society recommends the following:

1. That the NSW Government convene a summit of government representatives, the welfare sector, unions, the business sector, community groups, income support customers and relevant experts to develop a statewide anti-poverty strategy, focused on coordinated action to reduce poverty and improve equality of opportunity through employment, health, education, community services, housing and other relevant policies and programs.
2. That the NSW Government advocate actively with the Federal Government and other State and Territory Governments for the development of a national strategy to reduce poverty.
3. That the NSW Government review the likely long-term impacts of the “Reshaping Public Housing” reforms on large public housing estates and develop a revised strategy incorporating the 12 key elements mentioned on pages 6 and 7 of this report, with a view to piloting this strategy in Macquarie Fields.

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<sup>2</sup> Recommendation 94, *A Hand Up Not a Hand Out: Renewing the Fight Against Poverty*, Community Affairs References Committee, The Senate, March 2004, page 434.