

Pre-budget Submission

2022-23

Baptist Care Australia

28 January 2022

About Us

Baptist Care Australia is the national representative body for Baptist community service organisations and their clients in the national policy debate. Together, our members employ more than 11,500 staff, work with 3,000 volunteers and have an annual turnover of over \$1 billion.

We work to bring social justice to Australian communities, advocating nationally on issues important to our members. A core principle in our work is to make sure that the interests and voices of marginalised people are heard when decisions are made that affect them. Our vision is a nation of hope-filled, purposeful people, building communities where every voice is heard. Our advocacy work seeks to help realise this aspiration.

Baptist Care Australia members serve people in aged care, retirement living, those affected by family violence, experiencing homelessness, on low incomes, experiencing relationship breakdown, living with a disability, and affected by multigenerational disadvantage. Services include crisis accommodation, social and affordable housing, out of home care for children, counselling, education, no- and low-interest loan schemes, and other programs that help people rebuild their lives or live independently with the right support. Aged Care Services include home services (both through the Commonwealth Home Support Program and Home Care Packages), residential aged care and respite. Additional services provided by members include post-acute care with public hospitals, Veterans' home care services, and fee-for-service home care for clients.

Baptist Care Australia is a company limited by guarantee, a registered charity and a public benevolent institution.

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Introduction

We are pleased to provide our 2022-2023 Pre-Budget Submission to the Government. We acknowledge the Australian Government's commitment to foster an economic and social system where all Australians can thrive and be safe. The Budget is the primary platform of the Australian Government to commit to social equity and to support the most vulnerable members in our community. We note that the previous Budget did too little to systematically address the significant health, economic, and social challenges that Australia is facing.

In this submission, we identify a number of ways the Government could improve the lives and wellbeing of for those people in Australia who have been hit the hardest by the COVID-19 pandemic. As the final Budget of this Parliament, the current Government has one last opportunity to create a lasting legacy and tackle some of Australia's most serious challenges.

We have now reached two years since the first case of COVID was detected in the country, and the compounding impact of the instability and trauma of those years is taking a terrible toll on many people.

At the time of writing, Australia is experiencing the tragedy of a serious increase in COVID infection rates, dominated by the Omicron variant. The community is also working through the challenges of transitioning from the previous 'COVID zero' stance which applied suppression mechanisms such as lockdowns to eliminate COVID altogether, to a new approach of learning to 'live with COVID' with the goal of moderating its impacts by focusing on vaccination rates, face masks, and rapid antigen testing.

Australia's basic social and financial systems are faltering under the strains of such pressures. The illness is so widespread that it is estimated that at least 10 per cent of Australia's workforce are unable to work in any given week,ⁱ with higher rates in industries in which staff are more easily exposed to the virus.ⁱⁱ This has certainly been the experience of our Members. The rolling waves of absent staff in all parts of society are causing enormous challenges for the country's basic systems of support. Staffing shortages have recently caused disruption to the food supply chain for several weeks, with meat, fresh fruit and vegetables in short supply or selling out across the country.ⁱⁱⁱ

While there had been hopes that a post-COVID economic boom would arrive over the summer of 2022, it has become clear that such recovery is yet to materialise. For instance, instead of recovery, 88 per cent of restaurants and catering companies have instead experienced a major drop in revenue.^{iv} People working in lower paid, casual jobs have been hardest hit: many have experienced gaps in employment, and no access to the JobKeeper supports. The sharp rise in the costs of living, rising inflation and weak wages growth are exacerbating the pressures on households.^v More people than ever are experiencing financial and emotional distress, and are seeking support from an over-burdened social services sector.^{vi}

This Budget is an opportunity for the Government to demonstrate its solidarity with those people who need support the most. Baptist Care Australia believes that it is crucial that the Government takes the necessary steps now to ensure that all Australians get to have a *fair go* through equitable access to the basics we all need, such as a place to live and a living wage. The Government must ensure adequate funding of support services for those who are at a disadvantage, ensuring access to adequate financial resources, healthcare, aged care, education, employment, safe housing and domestic violence support. We anticipate that such urgently needed economic and social investments will *pay off* in the long run and create the Australia to which we all aspire.

Baptist Care Australia looks forward to working with the Government to create a nation where all people can equitably participate in the community, live in a country which is free of poverty, and where people have good reasons to be filled with hope.

Aged Care

Baptist Care Australia supports an aged care system that is fair, sustainable, equitable and which supports the needs of all older Australians regardless of their background, culture, location or entry point. Collectively, Baptist Care Australia members are the fourth largest not-for profit aged care provider in Australia.

We note that quality aged care is a Top 3 priority for Australians. In a poll published in November 2021,^{vii} quality aged care is the second most important issue for Australians, the number one priority for voters in the states of Queensland, South Australia and Tasmania, and the number one priority for Coalition voters.

We acknowledge large commitments by the Australian Government at the conclusion of the Royal Commission into Aged Care Quality and Safety – but this is not enough to meet the expectations of the community. The sector is facing an unprecedented crisis. The enormous strains of protecting older Australians during the COVID pandemic has only exacerbated pre-existing problems in workforce supply and financial sustainability.

Staffing loss and shortages

Aged care providers are facing gaping staffing shortages as a result of the departure of staff from the sector, inability to access overseas staff, as well as the short-term absence of those staff who are temporarily unable to work due to isolation requirements imposed through COVID.

The sector is hemorrhaging staff, losing around 30 per cent of the workforce in the 12 months to November 2020.^{viii} This trend shows no signs of abating. This week, aged care providers within the Baptist Care Australia network confirmed that workers continue to leave the sector to seek employment that offers higher wages, lower risk, and less stress. One aged care residential facility lost 32.6% of staff in the seven months to 25 January 2022, and hit a casual turnover rate of 50% for the first time. According to the 2021 staff survey of another provider, which operates multiple residential aged care facilities, 35% of residential staff and 22% of at home staff indicated they are unlikely to be working for the organisation within two years. The organisation's rolling 12-month average turnover rate for permanent employees is 29% (residential) and 34% (at home).

Some of the measures our providers report taking to try and slow this trend include paying higher wages, offering sign-on bonuses, and providing accommodation in regional areas. However, the impact of such large increases in operational costs is affecting the financial sustainability of the businesses.

Financial sustainability

On average, residential aged care providers across Australia were operating at a loss of \$7.30 for each resident every day in the quarter ending September 2021.^{ix} The additional Basic Fee Supplement of \$10 per day moderated this outcome. Adjustments that took such supplements into account showed "the normalised underlying operating result for Sept-20 is a deterioration \$12.24 pbd year-on-year."^x Given these numbers, it is not surprising 56% of aged care homes are running an operating loss.

Several of our providers report using increased pay rates and other financial incentives to try and combat current staffing issues. One provider reported rates for certain roles, such as a RAC Manager, have risen by 20% and even 30% in some instances: "we are now paying over \$200K for a regional manager. We have never paid that kind of money before." Another reported they are now having to implement a sign on bonus to be competitive, and are exploring retention payments of 25-40% (or \$100 per shift) if a site is in lockdown. Another chose to extend the reach of the Government's aged care retention bonus in mid- to late-2020 to cover all staff in Residential and At Home, not just frontline workers to whom the grant applied.

While the Government's substantial investment in aged care announced in the previous budget was very welcome, it is not enough to ensure the wellbeing of people as the age in Australia. The budget should focus on this essential task of protecting the wellbeing of older people – particularly those from vulnerable groups – as the utmost priority. We recognise the reforms will be expensive, not least due to the growing size of our aged population. It will be

necessary to secure adequate funding sources for a world class system. Aged care providers are committed to supporting the changes necessary to ensure Australians can age in a way they choose and with comfort and dignity.

Recommendations

As a member of the Australian Aged Care Collaboration, we have worked with five other aged care peak bodies to develop a set of budget recommendations that would better support and protect older Australians. We have divided the measures into two packages: a COVID-19 package, and a workforce and sustainability package.

COVID-19 package

1. Testing

- Government must ensure that there is adequate testing available in both home and community care and residential care. This includes in outbreak scenarios and to provide ongoing screening of staff, clients and (in the case of residential care) visitors.
- There should be sufficient supply of sufficient rapid antigen tests to allow screening every 72 hours and more frequently where there are outbreaks or exposures.
- Access to PCR testing must also be available for more rigorous screening, particularly of asymptomatic exposures, to rule out infection and minimise the need for isolation.

2. PPE

- Providers need reliable access to PPE. Commitments to supply PPE in the event of outbreaks should not be made unless they can be fulfilled.
- Government should invest in strengthened logistics chains and provide additional outbreak stock that can be stored onsite by services in the event that outbreaks occur.

3. Surge staffing

- Surge staffing solutions need to be designed to be capable of addressing shortages on the scale experienced during the Omicron wave (i.e., an average 25% of shifts unfilled). Agency workforce is not sufficient for this task and largely draws on the same pool providers already have access to.
- There is likely little that can be done to dramatically increase staff availability in the current wave. However, scalable solutions such as arrangements with nursing schools to access nursing students, access to private hospital staff, military personnel, volunteers, and training of a migrant surge workforce need to be explored and ready for deployment in future waves.

4. Shift allowances/retention

- There must be financial recognition of the immense efforts that staff undertake in responding to COVID-19, in home and community care as well as residential care.
- Previously the Government has paid one-off retention bonuses.
- Moving forward there needs to be an allowance paid for each shift that a staff Member has to work in full PPE, and additional payments for staff in the event of outbreaks.

5. Precautionary costs

- Current funding for COVID-19 costs is largely through grant arrangements that remain linked to responding to COVID-19 exposures rather than preparing for them.
- Previously general funding uplifts have been made available in residential care and home care.
- With the likelihood of ongoing COVID-19 cases these funding increases need to be added to base funding for the sector. This can be adjusted as needed in future through the pricing authority.

6. Vaccines and antivirals

- We do not have an accurate estimate of the mortality rate for COVID-19 among aged care residents, but it appears to remain relatively high. Ongoing booster clinics should reduce that risk significantly.
- With evidence emerging from other jurisdictions that immunity granted by boosters may also wane, plans must be in place to ensure further doses can be delivered ahead of when they are needed.
- With antivirals now being approved by the TGA, there must also be clear plans to ensure that people in aged care can access this medicine where appropriate.

Workforce and sustainability package

We urge government to adopt the package of workforce measures put to the in November 2021, including:

1. Supporting aged care providers to pay a competitive wage

- Increase indexation payments to ensure they cover, as a minimum, the Fair Work Commission Minimum Wage increase for 2021-22 and 2022-23 as recommended by the Royal Commission
- Commit to support any aged care pay rise approved by the Fair Work Commission in the current wage increase case

2. Incentivising nursing students to work in aged care

- Subsidise university fees to undertake a nursing degree
- Require graduating nurses to work for a period at an aged care facility prior to gaining a qualification
- Create incentives for registered nurses to work in regional and rural areas

3. Incentivising prospective care and support workers

- Have a re-skilling program for people in other sectors who are unemployed because of COVID who may come across to aged care
- Redesign the right training with credentials that are recognised and allow for career progression
- Incentivise older students and school leavers to become aged care workers through improved financial conditions, training, paid re-education fees, etc

4. Implementing a plan for foreign workers to fill vacancies on a short and long-term basis

- Include skilled occupations for aged care workers (ANZSCO Unit Codes 4231 and 4233) on the Immigration Skilled Occupation List Medium and Long-term Strategic Skills List (MLTSSL)
- Remove the restrictions on aged care providers, in line with what is already in place in the Designated Area Migration Agreement (DAMA)
- Establish pathways to Permanent Residency (include partners)
- Provide exemption, reduction, or simplification of the Skilling Australian Fund (SAF) levy
- Provide visa concessions for Regional Australia
- Reduce/remove the VISA application fee for aged care providers in regional Australia
- Expand the reach of the Seasonal Worker Program to include aged care

5. Develop a VET pathway program for secondary school students into aged care

- This would be undertaken in conjunction with State and Territory Education Departments
- This with a particular focus on a pathway into home care.

6. Offering subsidies to upskill enrolled nurses

- Offering enrolled nurses subsidies to upskill as registered nurses

Excerpts from an open letter to the Prime Minister

27th January 2022

Dear Prime Minister,

As a not-for-profit provider, BaptistCare exists to serve our community and protect the vulnerable older people in our care. Our teams have been valiantly fighting the pandemic on multiple fronts for two years, but we are exhausted, and we are fast losing ground.

[Once] again our residents have been isolated in their rooms or restricted to smaller areas of the home for weeks on end without family, without the social interaction and physical activity so essential to their wellbeing. It means our staff have cancelled holiday plans for yet another year and are working long hours, in full PPE, with the leanest of teams and carrying all the heightened emotional and practical pressures that come with that

In a press conference you suggested the solution was to simply “push through”... The simple truth is that we cannot maintain the standard of care our community expects if the situation continues and all we do is “push through”.

Firstly, we need a new playbook to manage the crisis - traditional infection control is no longer a viable strategy.

The government and regulators need to introduce new guidance and settings to support living with COVID.

Endlessly isolating residents in their rooms and preventing visits from friends and family is not sustainable. But under the current health advice, this is what we must do. In one situation, residents have been forced to keep to their rooms for over 21 days.

Aged care residents who are vaccinated deserve the dignity of choice around their mobility – just like we have in the broader community. And family members are a critical partner in our care model – we cannot simply remove them from the equation without serious consequences.

Secondly, frontline aged care workers must receive fair and competitive compensation for the critical work they do.

One of the biggest challenges we face today was a problem long before the pandemic arrived on Australian shores and it will continue to be a problem unless it is addressed.

The sector is critically underfunded, the workforce is significantly underpaid for the value of their work and staff shortages have only been accelerated by the Omicron variant. We are exploring every avenue to help shore up our teams ... However, with the ongoing pressure of the pandemic and without increasing award wages and improving the remuneration of aged care workers, we will continue to lose valuable people and experience. We can hardly expect workers to stay in aged care when their qualifications and experience will earn them more money in hospitals or in disability care.

I write to you today because we cannot keep “pushing through”. We need change from the top and we need support from our communities to ensure Australia’s vulnerable and elderly receive the standard of care and services they deserve and expect.

...

We ask that, through your leadership of our nation, you ensure the aged care sector has the appropriate resources to push through this wave, and beyond. We also ask that your government and health experts ensure that plans and guidance for managing the pandemic in the aged care setting remain fit for purpose as the situation evolves.

Yours Sincerely,

Charles Moore
Chief Executive Officer
BaptistCare NSW & ACT

Full letter available at: baptistcare.org.au/open-letter-to-prime-minister

Housing and Homelessness

Baptist Care Australia believes every person deserves a safe and affordable place to live. Our Members provide a range of homelessness services targeted towards the most disadvantaged, including First Nations peoples, and social and affordable housing services across many states in Australia, including a registered Tier 1 housing provider.

Baptist Care Australia is concerned Australians on low and moderate incomes are not able to access the housing they need in the current market. Over a million lower income households are spending more than 30% of their household income on housing, exceeding the affordability benchmark.

Australian needs over 430,000 additional dwellings in our affordable and social rental housing supply to ensure all households living on low incomes have a safe place to live. This gap in supply is growing rapidly, and is expected to reach nearly 730,000 dwellings within 15 years. Despite this, the construction rate of non-private dwellings is the lowest on record and the Commonwealth's financial contributions to our social housing systems is deteriorating. Noticeably, Government support mechanisms, such as the National Rental Affordability Scheme,^{xi} have been removed without appropriate and adequate replacements.

Recommendations

In line with partner agencies who also represent not-for-profit housing and homelessness supports, we recommend the Government:

1. Build more social and affordable housing

- Specifically, build 25,000 social housing properties each year
- This would develop a pipeline of supply that will meet both current and projected demand
- This realistic ask recognises the Australian Government's duty to resolve this national social crisis

2. Develop a national housing strategy

- The Australian Government should facilitate a process to develop a national housing strategy, including a National Homelessness strategy, to be overseen by a Cabinet-level Minister, with work conducted in a central agency.
- Such a strategy would benefit from a revised National Housing and Homelessness Agreement, a greater role for the National Housing Finance and Investment Corporation, and new partnerships between federal and state governments, community housing providers and the private sector.
- Commitment to provide sufficient funding and appropriate funding mechanisms to implement

3. Reconstitute the National Housing Supply Council (NHSC)

- The NHSC should be reinstated to guide responsible policy and funding decisions

4. Strengthen the capacity of the private rental market to cater for low- and moderate- income households

- Increase the maximum rate of Commonwealth Rent Assistance by at least 50 percent, broadening eligibility for the payment, and ensuring that everyone who gets it is given equal treatment.
- Providing Commonwealth leadership to make renting fairer. This needs to include enshrining tenants' rights, such as making minor and reversible modifications, and ending no-cause evictions.

Family and Domestic Violence

Baptist Care Australia is concerned for the many women and children in Australia who are not safe in their own home. The Australian Institute of Health and Welfare has reported that 2.2 million Australians have experienced physical or sexual violence from a current or previous partner since the age of 15.^{xii} Notably, 1 in 2 women and 1 in 4 men have been sexually harassed, while 1 in 6 women and 1 in 16 men have experienced stalking.^{xiii}

We welcome the development of the next National Plan to End Violence Against Women and Children as an opportunity to strengthen both preventative measures and adequate responses to instances of domestic violence. We note the short consultation period allowed for engagement has been disappointing, but we are particularly concerned that the next plan does not yet have funding attached to enable implementation.

We are concerned at the over-representation of First Nations women and children amongst the population of Australians who have experienced violence and abuse. Indigenous people were 32 times as likely to be hospitalised for family violence as non-Indigenous people in 2016–17.^{xiv} We recognise that the levels of domestic violence amongst First Nations communities is an expression of the legacies of their colonisation and dispossession. We support the proposal put forward by the First Nations delegates at the recent Women's Safety Summit that government resource and support a stand-alone national action plan, written for and by First Peoples.

Recommendations

Baptist Care Australia recommends that the Australian Government use this budget to:

- Fund the next National Plan to End Violence Against Women and Children
- Resource and support a stand-alone plan to end violence against First Nations women and children, to be written for and by First Nations peoples

Income Support

Baptist Care Australia advocates for policies that improve equality and opportunity for people who are marginalised and disadvantaged, and join with many other agencies in calling on the Government to ensure all people in Australia have an income above the poverty line by permanently increasing the baseline social welfare payments.

We are deeply concerned by the widening household income gap and increase in wealth inequality in contemporary Australia.^{xv} One of the mechanisms available to the Government to stall this unwelcome trend is to ensure that social security benefits adequately cover the costs of living. The community expects the Australian Government to ensure those who need support during periods of unemployment, whether due to redundancy, illness or age, are not forced into unacceptable levels of poverty.

When the Government doubled JobSeeker payments during the early periods of the COVID pandemic, it acknowledged that such payments are usually well below the standard of living of most Australians. Despite this, for many who were recently unemployed, this payment was still a significant drop in the usual income. In contrast, for the many people who are unable to enter the workforce due to illness, the responsibilities of single parenthood, or advanced age, this was experienced as a reprieve from their usual deprivations. People reported the relief in being able to afford their rent, buy fresh food, and pay for medical care that was otherwise unaffordable.^{xvi}

We are highly concerned that the recent spike in the costs of basic necessities, such as food, housing and petrol, will disproportionately affect those people who rely on Government income support.

Recommendations

For these reasons, we join the many voices across the political spectrum calling for an increase in the rate. Specifically, this includes that the Government:

- Significantly and permanently increase JobSeeker, Youth Allowance and other income support payments
- Index these payments to the growth of wages and cost of living.
- Urgently extend JobSeeker payments to over one million non-citizens who are otherwise ineligible.
- Increase the maximum rate of Commonwealth Rent Assistance by 50% to more adequately subsidise private rental costs for low-income tenants.

Conclusion

Hope has taken a beating lately. The pandemic is rolling through our communities at a devastating rate, with no clear end in sight. The illness has claimed nearly 3,500 lives in Australia, with more than 1,100 deaths in the past month.^{xvii} We all hoped life would be ‘back to normal’ by now. But it’s not.

These are tumultuous times, and the Government must avoid the temptation to return a ‘business-as-usual’ budget. The country needs the Government to step up and buffer the toll of the pandemic on us all, with a particular responsibility for people who do not have savings and other supports to draw upon. If the Government fails to respond to the scale and significance of the current situation, the long tail of COVID may leave a devastating legacy on our society. The pandemic has been hard enough on us all. We ask the Government to do all it can to make sure that, when it really is over, we don’t have to face a fresh set of crises.

The Baptist Care Australia network is committed to our vision of hope-filled, purposeful people who are building communities where every voice is heard and valued. With Government commitment, and the strength of our society, we know Australia can get through this together with hope.

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