

# Election Issues

New South Wales

2003

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## **Introduction**

The Uniting Church in Australia has always recognised that our faith in Jesus Christ has practical and political implications. We support social justice, shaped by a sense of human dignity and a commitment to human rights. This document summarises issues that have been a concern to UnitingCare NSW.ACT over the past four years. We encourage congregations to organise public meetings and deputations, preferably ecumenical, to discuss these issues with candidates in the lead up to the NSW Election.

## **Children at risk and need for Family Services**

The Department of Community Services is overwhelmed with the number of children at risk and families needing assistance. Many reports remain unassessed. Families are not being referred to the services they need. Many families live with poverty, isolation, drug and alcohol issues and mental health problems. Supportive family services provide these families with much needed help. They can improve parenting skills and assist the healthy development of children. Services have been shown to reduce child abuse and juvenile crime. Over 160 family services come under the umbrella of the Family Support Services Association. Other services are conducted by agencies like Burnside and Dalmar. Most services operate with very few staff and shoestring budgets. There needs to be a much greater investment in family services in NSW.

The next NSW Government must be committed to:

- Increasing funding to current family services to make them viable.
- Establishing 40 additional family services in the neediest areas.
- Establishing 10 Intensive Family Support Services in high need areas.
- Developing a respite care capacity for family services.

## **Education of children and young people in care**

Children and young people in foster or residential care experience multiple obstacles in life. Education is a key means to improving their life opportunities. Unfortunately, many young people in care experience very poor school outcomes. This is due largely to the disadvantage that characterised their early life, the impact of abuse and neglect and the impact of having multiple placements, which means frequently changing schools and all the disruption that entails. This group of children and young people (around 9000 in NSW) need particular support.

The next NSW Government must be committed to:

- Meeting the special educational needs of children in care.
- Funding adequate data collection on the educational needs of children in care, and tracking their progress.
- Providing one out-of-home care teacher in each school district in NSW to advise schools on how to support the education of children in care.

## **Transport and concession issues for young people**

The public transport system in NSW does not serve the needs of many of the people who depend on it. This increases the problems of many people who are already disadvantaged in society, including young people.

The next NSW Government must be committed to:

- Working with the Commonwealth Government and private transport operators, to provide a comprehensive concession system that meets the needs of all those who are on low incomes and need cheap transport to work, education and training.
- Ensuring that people who qualify for the full level of social security payments continue to have access to transport concessions while they are breached.

## **Housing**

Current residential tenancy legislation provides tenants with poor security of tenure; contains largely unworkable provisions for tenants to appeal against excessive rent increases; provides limited mechanisms for addressing the many problems that arise in share housing; permits the operation of

"bad tenant" listing agencies; provides no legislative coverage for residents of boarding houses. NSW has the lowest annual level of public housing commencements in over fifty years. There is also a continuing loss of permanent accommodation on residential parks.

The next NSW Government must be committed to amending the Residential Tenancies Act for the purpose of:

- Granting residential tenants greater security of tenure by requiring landlords to justify reasons for evictions by adopting the principle of "just-cause".
- Making market rents just one factor and shifting the onus of proof to landlords in cases of excessive rent increases.
- Addressing problems arising in share housing, particularly domestic violence.
- Providing tenancy rights for residents of boarding houses.

The next NSW Government must also be committed to:

- Providing additional funding from consolidated revenue for social housing.
- Stemming the loss of permanent accommodation on NSW residential parks.

### **Indigenous health**

The latest figures on life expectancy show that Indigenous men in NSW have a life expectancy of 56 years and women 64 years, compared to 77 years and 82 years for the general population. This reflects higher levels of health problems from infancy through to adulthood. For example, the infant mortality rate for Indigenous children is two and a half times that of non-Indigenous children.

The next NSW Government must be committed to:

- Making the first priority of the NSW budget the improvement of the health of Aboriginal people and Torres Strait Islanders living in NSW.
- Providing adequate funding for Aboriginal community-controlled health services for primary health care and culturally appropriate programs that address Aboriginal family well-being, including prevention, medical and dental services.

### **Mental health**

A person with an impairment can enjoy a high level of health. Often lower levels of health are a product of the stress and trauma of discrimination and uncoordinated services, rather than of the impairment itself.

The next NSW Government must be committed to:

- Ensuring community mental health services are adequately funded to provide the necessary level of support and treatment.
- Providing more appropriate treatment services for individuals with special needs – children and adolescents, older people, the homeless, women, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, people from non-English speaking backgrounds, those with dual or multiple disabilities, people in rural areas, and prisoners.
- Improving cooperation between government agencies in the delivery of services to people with mental illness (including treatment, income support, housing, and job placement).

### **Community mental health organisations**

There is insufficient funding for direct mental health services, in both hospital and community-based settings. The Government does not recognise and support key agencies that assist people with mental health issues, such as nonprofit non-government organizations in the disability, youth and family support fields.

Lifeline is a key service in NSW for people who are needing emergency help in times of stress and difficulty. Many callers are suffering mental illness and need appropriate attention and help. There needs to be much better coordination between the work of Lifeline and the Mental Health services in each of the Area Health Boards. The telephone volunteers at Lifeline need the training to cope with some of the more complex mental health issues that they face. Lifeline needs more resources from the NSW Government to do its work more effectively.

The next NSW Government must be committed to:

- Requiring the health department to follow a collaborative approach, working with and funding

non-profit non-government organisations that provide services to people with mental health issues.

- Providing adequate funding for Lifeline.

## **Health**

There is need for a health care system for all citizens that balances prevention, acute care and community care. This requires: more spending on health services in the community; evaluation of the services in terms of outcomes for consumers rather than services provided; improved provision and follow-up of discharge plans; and improved conditions for nurses to ensure that there is an adequate supply of well trained and experienced hospital and community nurses.

No NSW resident should have to wait more than 24 hours to receive emergency dental care. Treatment should be available for decayed teeth and oral health diseases in time to prevent expensive, complicated dental care or tooth loss, generally within one year. Regular dental check-ups should be available at least every three years.

The next NSW Government must be committed to:

- A more balanced health care system with better services in the community.
- Better mechanisms for consumer and community participation in shaping health services, including funding a Consumer and Community Forum on Health.
- Better funded oral health services.

## **Hospital Chaplaincies**

Religious chaplaincy plays a vital role in the well-being and recovery of hospital patients. It is no longer appropriate for such an important service as chaplaincy to be provided at hospitals on a volunteer and *ad hoc* basis. There needs to be a proper State-wide system to ensure that adequate chaplaincy is provided across all hospitals in NSW. This chaplaincy must be broadly-based and include Christian, Muslim, Buddhist, Jewish, and other religious groups.

The next NSW Government must be committed to resourcing religious chaplaincy in hospitals.

## **Law and Order**

Political parties seeking to outbid one another for toughness on crime and length of sentences do not serve the community. Inappropriately “tough” policing and sentencing policies can rebound on the community. Policies must be evidence-based and focus on effective reduction of crime. Government must take into account the wide range of reasons why people engage in crime, if they are to reduce crime effectively.

NSW has a much larger prison population (compared to population) than Victoria. The difference largely relates to different lengths of imprisonment. NSW also has a higher crime rate. Longer prison terms do not necessarily better protect society from crime.

The next NSW Government must be committed to:

- Reducing the over-representation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people in NSW prisons and juvenile detention centres.
- Maintaining judicial discretion in sentencing, to take account of the various factors that impact on the appropriateness of a sentence to the particular offender (no mandatory minimum sentences).
- Reducing the NSW prison population to levels comparable to Victoria.
- Further developing alternatives to juvenile detention or gaol for young offenders.
- Putting more emphasis on crime prevention by reducing social disadvantage and improving access to relevant programs such as drug rehabilitation, both inside and outside of prison.

## **Environment**

Poor air quality in our cities is a serious health issue that is not being adequately addressed. Small increases in pollution levels, especially where the level of pollution is already high, can have a significant effect on the morbidity and sickness level of the population, through cancer and respiratory diseases. Other illnesses related to air pollution include asthma attacks, genetic mutation, and birth defects.

The next NSW Government must be committed to:

- Educating the public about the risks of air pollution.

- Investing more money in public transport rather than building more roads.
- Ensuring that road tunnel emission stacks incorporate effective exhaust filtration equipment to protect the health and well-being of the people living around them.

Other environmental policies that the NSW Government will need to support are:

- Maintaining established forest reserves, wilderness areas and heritage areas.
- Reducing greenhouse gas emissions in accordance with the Kyoto Protocol.
- Restoring water quality and the river systems of NSW.

## **Outworkers**

Six years of voluntary codes for the clothing industry have not led to any change in the situation of outworkers. The Ethical Clothing Trades Act gives the Minister for Industrial Relations the power to declare a mandatory code. Education, training, information and community development programs for outworkers are essential to the success of the Behind the Label Outworker Strategy. They provide tangible, immediate benefits from the strategy while providing opportunities to increase outworkers understanding of their rights and new remedies available to achieve those rights.

The next NSW Government must be committed to:

- Introducing a mandatory code of practice which requires retailers and manufacturers in the clothing industry to open relevant commercial records to scrutiny from the Textile Clothing and Footwear Union so that the clothing production chain is transparent from outworker to retailer.
- Continuing the funding for outworker education and information programs for a further 2-3 years beyond the 3-year Behind the Label strategy, which ends in June 2004.

## **Trade**

The federal government is considering World Trade Organisation (WTO) proposals on trade in services, competition policy and government procurement that would limit the policy choices of present and future governments at all levels. State governments need to insist that Australian trade agreements not undermine their ability to fulfil their traditional roles in providing services and protecting the public interest.

The next NSW Government must be committed to:

- Insisting that all public services, community services, cultural services and water services be excluded from the General Agreement on Trade in Services (GATS).
- Opposing any proposed trade agreements that would limit the right of state governments to legislate in the public interest; any WTO competition policy which requires more commercialisation and privatisation of state public services; and any WTO government procurement agreement that removes the right of state governments to use government purchasing to assist local development.
- Insisting that Australia only agree to trade regulations that are consistent with human rights, labour rights and the protection of the environment.

## **Human Rights**

In November 2002 the police refused permission for peaceful marches in the city of Sydney during the time of the WTO meeting. This was a betrayal of the right to assemble and the right to freedom of speech. The presence of international leaders should be a time to showcase democratic freedoms, not suspend them.

The next NSW Government must be committed to human rights, including the right to peaceful assembly and right to freedom of speech at public rallies at all times, including when international events are held in NSW.

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