



PROPOSED CHANGES COULD THREATEN CHARITIES' FREE SPEECH

10 May 2021

Catholic Social Services Australia is deeply concerned that new regulations could silence charities' advocacy on behalf of vulnerable groups for fear of having their charitable status revoked.

The Australian Parliament is expected to soon consider the expansion of one of the Australian Charities and Not-for-profits Commission's governance standards.

CSSA chief executive officer Dr Ursula Stephens says the rationale offered for the change "fails to demonstrate why such an expansion is needed". If introduced, it risks "unintended consequences regarding the right of our members to freedom of expression and opinion".

"Our ultimate concern with the proposal is that Standard 3 may be misused to inhibit legitimate public dialogue by charities or persons associated with charities to the detriment of Australian representative democracy," said Dr Stephens.

"We believe that the proposal as drafted will leave us in the position of having to monitor and 'punish' staff, volunteers, and those of our members, or face the constant threat of our charitable status removed."

CSSA represents dozens of Catholic social service agencies across Australia, employing more than 15,000 staff and 7,500 volunteers, and serving more than 850,000 people annually.

"The worst-case scenario is that this threat might be made in response to the criticism of a government policy affecting our members or those they serve," Dr Stephens said.

"This situation is unreasonable, undemocratic and likely offends against the implied constitutional freedom of political communication."

Catholic Social Services Australia, along with other faith-based organisations, raised their concerns in a letter to Prime Minister Scott Morrison last week.

The letter, signed by Dr Stephens and the heads of Anglicare, The Salvation Army, UnitingCare and the St Vincent de Paul Society National Council, expressed fears that their work would be put at risk.

The groups argue that the potential damage the charities would face if the regulation was broadened are not ones the Coalition Government would support.

They make the case that the amendments be shelved, arguing that charities – which have been heavily relied upon during the pandemic – should not have their work curbed by burdensome regulations.

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The national network of Catholic social services