



Te Ope Whakāora

## The Salvation Army

### Submission on the Green Paper for Vulnerable Children

#### 1. Background

The Salvation Army is an international Christian and social service organisation that has worked in New Zealand for over 120 years. The Army provides a wide range of practical spiritual, social and community services, particularly for those who are suffering, facing injustice, or those who have been forgotten and marginalised by mainstream society.

In Māori tikanga and practice, people or things that are considered important, prized or treasured are often described as taonga. The Salvation Army wholeheartedly believes that people, and in particular our children, are truly taonga. Indeed, children are *the* treasures for whom every New Zealander must accept a shared responsibility to nurture, protect and esteem. Furthermore, the Psalmist King David in the Holy Bible described children as a “heritage, a reward”—a treasured gift from God.<sup>1</sup> This is the effective starting point for this submission from The Salvation Army.

#### 2. Overview

This submission is prepared by the Social Policy and Parliamentary Unit of The Salvation Army (New Zealand, Fiji and Tonga Territory). The Social Policy and Parliamentary Unit was established in 2004 by The Salvation Army and situated at its Community Ministry centre in Manukau City, South Auckland. The principal purpose of the Unit is to advocate for policies that will alleviate poverty in New Zealand, and to undertake research and policy analysis to support this advocacy.

This is a general overview submission by The Salvation Army to help frame the key issues as the Army sees it. Other submissions are being made by various Salvation Army Corps and/or Community Ministry centres from around the country. The Army believes that a general submission, as well as location-specific submissions from our Corps and Community Ministries, will add context and valuable information to this brief discussion around the state of our children in New Zealand.

#### 3. Green Paper Discussion

The Salvation Army wants to salute the Government’s forward-thinking in developing this Green Paper for Vulnerable Children. The state of all our children is clearly a huge factor in shaping the current and future development of our nation. The Army, in particular, would like to acknowledge the following points from the Green Paper itself:

- The Government’s vision set out in page 2 of the Green Paper—Every child thrives, belongs, achieves (Ka whai oranga, ka whai wahi, ka whai taumata ia tamaiti) —is a strong, positive guiding statement for policy development and change

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<sup>1</sup> Psalm 127:3-5 (NKJV)

- The Government's four areas of proposed action (sharing responsibility, showing leadership, child-centred policy and practice changes) are solid areas where important changes can be researched, discussed and/or made. These areas should ideally provide the foundation from which other relevant debates and changes are implemented.
- The fact that a Green Paper has been developed again highlights that child welfare is an essential issue for our nation. This Green Paper has again thrust child welfare to the forefront of our collective consciousness and strengthens the already rich work and dialogue happening in this space.

#### 4. Shifting the Debate Further

The Green Paper obviously focuses on the predicament of vulnerable children. The Salvation Army *unequivocally* believes that child abuse and violence towards children in any form are definitely grave concerns for our nation and worthy of this Green Paper process. The Army does not dispute or diminish the importance of these issues, and wishes to partner with the whole community to stop the abuse.

The Army envisions that there will be a large range of informed submissions to this Green Paper from the New Zealand public. Consequently, we are confident that the specific questions posed within the Green Paper will be answered and discussed at length by those with a range of areas of expertise and experience in the field. We look forward with hope to a thoughtful and truly life-saving outcome that will bring a sustainable, community-wide approach to this issue.

However, The Salvation Army sincerely believes that there are important issues affecting our children that this Green Paper does not necessarily cover. The Army wishes to humbly submit that the Government would do well to ensure these other issues are an integral part of this crucial community conversation about the overall wellbeing of our children.

#### 5. Agenda For Children 2002

Albert Einstein once famously said that we need to “learn from yesterday, live for today, hope for tomorrow. The important thing is never to stop questioning”. The Army believes that it is helpful to review our progress in relation to previous attempts to improve the wellbeing of our children. This learning from our yesterday can indeed help shape the hope we create for tomorrow.

However, there seems to be a practice where robust (and often expensive in terms of time, effort and money) pieces of work, research or consultation developed in one political term are seemingly lost or shelved in the shift to the next new government. As the current Government develops these new child-centred reviews, policies and programmes like the Green Paper, should we not be continuing to learn from previous attempts to enhance the wellbeing of our children?

One such initiative is the 2002 document ‘New Zealand’s Agenda for Children: Making Life Better for Children’.<sup>2</sup> Developed by the then Labour-led government, this Agenda report provided a programme of action wherein the interests, rights and needs of those aged 0-17 years of age were to be given

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<sup>2</sup> Agenda for children reference

higher priority. This Agenda set out seven key action areas to improve and maximise the state of our children. These were:

- promoting a whole of child approach
- increasing children's participation
- ending child poverty
- addressing violence and bullying in children's lives
- improving central government structures and processes to enhance policy and service effectiveness for children
- improving local government and community planning for children
- enhancing information, research and research collaboration relating to children

At the time it was stated that "the Agenda is mainly for people who develop policies and those who provide services that affect children—in the public service, in local government and in community and voluntary organisations".<sup>3</sup> If this is indeed the case, then we implore the current Government to review this Agenda from 2002 and to take the time to measure our performance as a nation in fulfilling the lofty goals set out in this 2002 aspirational plan. The issues discussed and the potential solutions developed in this Agenda continue to be just as relevant in 2012 as they were in 2002.

The Army believes it is crucial to publicly reflect on and measure our progress *so far* before any new plans and policies are developed through this Green Paper process. Questions need to be asked about our performance and adherence to these actions from 2002 to ensure that we are not neglecting, omitting or duplicating important issues in 2012. Also, we need to ensure that decision and policy-makers, and the community as a whole, are challenged and guided to become truly accountable for the outcome of the 2012 consultation process.

What if, in another decade, another new government comes into power and community events suggest yet another review of child welfare is a priority? Why is it that we need a major review in 2012 after the work of 2002? How will the important, and relevant, issues not discussed in this Green Paper be addressed? It is highly unlikely that the key issues affecting our children and the solutions developed to address these issues will have drastically changed from 2002 to 2012, let alone from 2012 to 2022. Is this not a time to learn—and to change?

## 5. Other Critical Issues

As mentioned above, this submission focuses on some of the other key issues that The Army views as crucial in our current national discussions of child welfare.

### 5.1 The Government's Approach

The global financial crisis (GFC) is an ongoing reality for many nations. New Zealand is not an exception. The GFC coupled with our recent serious national tragedies have clearly put our nation in a very tough fiscal position. The National Government has responded with consistent messages of 'tightening the belt', 'being responsible' and 'fiscal efficiency' during these 'tough economic times'. Consequently, in response, there have been sweeping reforms of our public sector in the last three-plus years. In their 'Budget Policy Statement 2011', the National Government emphasised the need to *prudently manage the*

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<sup>3</sup> Ibid page 6

*Crown's balance sheet* and declared that their fiscal strategy is to increase operating surpluses and *decrease debt levels by reprioritising lower priority spending*' (emphasis added).<sup>4</sup> These statements, and numerous others like it from the current Government, have set the tone for cost-cutting measures that can affect, and have affected, the welfare of our children.

Overall, there was no new spending in the 2011 Budget as the Government took \$5.2 billion from existing Government spending. For instance, the public sector, including schools and hospitals, face over \$1 billion worth of cuts over the next three years. But the Government did not identify what sectors exactly, these cuts would come from. Additionally, the Working for Families (WFF) scheme is being tightened further and trimmed from \$2.8 billion in 2011 to \$2.6 billion by 2015. Over 400,000 families will be affected by these changes to WFF, most of them middle-income families.

The Salvation Army does not argue against these austerity measures. Fiscal wisdom and prudence is obviously needed for good management, as well as the challenging local and global economic conditions.

However, The Army *does* advocate for an approach to policy and decision making that seriously considers deeper social and wellbeing indicators, as well as economic factors. The Army believes that there needs to be a shift away from the primacy of the business-centric rhetoric, and a move towards a people-centred approach and methodology. There also needs to be more transparency and debate about how specific funding is actually spent. For instance, the cuts in the public sector and the changes in WFF over the next few years, might make sense fiscally. But socially, they will have far-reaching effects on thousands of children. There is a significant social cost to our families and children.

## 5.2 Child poverty

The story of the unacceptable levels of child poverty in New Zealand has been well documented. The Army ardently believes that addressing the rate of child poverty in New Zealand is absolutely critical in any discussion of child welfare.

In their report *Left Further Behind*, the Child Poverty Action Group New Zealand (CPAG) argued that child poverty is not inevitable, but the avoidable consequence of badly designed or inadequately considered policy.<sup>5</sup> The Army supports this statement.

The Salvation Army endorses the need to work towards the eradication of poverty, particularly child poverty, in New Zealand. It is beyond the scope of this paper to discuss the huge structural and policy shifts that could assist in ending child poverty. However, it is timely to note some of The Army's general stances around this issue.

The Army believes that:

- policy development or reforms must be directed at all children in New Zealand
- children living in the highest level of measured poverty must be supported directly by the state and by other groups working in this space such as The Army and local churches and charities

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<sup>4</sup> Budget Policy Statement 2011

<sup>5</sup> CPAG report pg 22.

### 5.3 Institutional Issues within CYF

The Salvation Army has an expert and dedicated team of social and welfare workers across the nation at our Community Ministry centres. These workers deal with vulnerable children and their families every day. The work is individualised, complex and always challenging.

The main Government department that works with young people progressing through a courts and/or justice process is obviously Child Youth and Family (CYF). CYF's work with children is mandated by the Children, Young Persons and their Families Act 1989. Overall, the majority of CYF staff work admirably well in a high-pressure environment and a rigid set of statutorily-defined processes.

It is The Army's view that more transparency and, if necessary, reform, is needed within at least some CYF processes. For example, the application process for people to be caregivers is an area of interest for The Army. The Army believes that most caregivers do an amazing job with children. The Army also understands that all caregivers are subject to annual reviews, police checks, and they are assigned a CYF support person. But there have been incidents within the experience of our own welfare and social workers, and within the media,<sup>6</sup> that raise some ongoing questions about the robustness of this process for all vulnerable children.

Two specific questions:

- are whānau or family members always the most appropriate people to care for children after family group conference discussions?
- is there a need for an independent complaints process for families or people who disagree with CYF decisions?

As we advocate for a broadening of the debate, The Army believes that a process for an ongoing independent review of the various agencies and processes developed for working with our children is crucial, at a time when new child welfare plans and policies are being developed.

### 5.4 Invisible vulnerable children (children of overstayers)

Some of The Army's social and welfare workers have expressed concern about the plight of children of overstayers or illegal immigrants in our communities.

In 2010, changes to the Immigration Act allowed for all children to access education, even if they are children of overstayers. The Ministry of Education requires that parents have to be overstayers for at least six months before their children can access compulsory education. The Human Rights Commission is now involved in several cases where children of overstayers want to go to school, but are effectively barred from doing so because of the this Ministry requirement.

The Army is seeing these families and children arrive at our food banks and other support services. Action is needed now.

Where are these children? Will their parents take them back to school when their effective 'six month stand-down period' from school is over?

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<sup>6</sup> <http://www.stuff.co.nz/national/5089754/CYF-caregivers-accused-of-wire-brush-abuse>

Are these children accessing the other services (eg. health, sports teams etc) they need to ensure their healthy development? What about the state of their parents? What kind of life do parents create for themselves and their children as they live in fear of deportation? Is an amnesty needed for these parents and their children?

The Army urgently encourages more discourse about this issue as a matter of priority.

### 5.5 Early Childhood Education

For a number of years, The Salvation Army has been asserting the need for greater ECE services in specific communities. In The Army's State of the Nation annual report in 2010, we reported that access to quality ECE services was extremely difficult for some of New Zealand's poorest families and communities, particularly Māori children.<sup>7</sup> In the Ministry of Education's 2010 annual report on early education, the enrolments in licensed ECE centres were noted:<sup>8</sup>

Table 5 - Percentage of Year 1 students who attended early childhood education services, by ethnic group (2006-2010)

Ethnicity	2006	2007	2008	2009	2010	Difference 2006-10
European/ Pākehā	97.2	97.3	97.5	97.6	98.1	0.9
Māori	87.9	88.5	88.4	89.3	89.4	1.5
Pasifika	82.8	82.6	83.4	84.0	85.3	2.5
Asian	96.3	96.3	95.6	95.9	96.7	0.4
Other	91.4	93.3	93.6	94.5	96.1	4.7
Total	93.4	93.6	93.6	93.9	94.5	1.1

As the figures above illustrate, the figures for Māori and Pasifika enrolments remain noticeably lower than other groups. Māori and Pasifika children are accessing ECE, but there are still large numbers of children missing out on this crucial time of development.

In 2010, the Teachers Council established an Early Childhood Education Advisory Group (ECEAG) to provide advice and information about the ECE sector. The Army encourages ECEAG, the Ministry of Education and all other key agencies to provide more detailed information and creative solutions to the accessibility issues to local early childhood education that some of the most marginalised and impoverished in our communities, and thus our precious children, continue to face.

### 5.6 Justice processes involving children

Any involvement that the State has with a child's life has the potential to either be a positive experience or something very traumatic. Court and justice processes can be particularly damaging for children if they are not handled well.

In early 2011, the Ministry of Justice was directed the Government to review the Family Court. The then-Minister of Justice commented that a review was necessary to ensure the fiscal efficiency of the court and to

<sup>7</sup> SON 2010 p 15

<sup>8</sup> MOE report on ECE pg 4

ensure it is sustainable, cost effective and responsive to the needs of those who use it and the taxpayers who pay for it.<sup>9</sup> This review process is now underway, ending in 2012.

Again, the Army appeals to those involved in this process to give primacy to the welfare of all children who might be impacted by a courts/justice process, and to ensure that the human cost is a focus in any discussions about financial cost-cutting measures being promoted.

## 6. Conclusion

As stated above, this is an overview submission from The Salvation Army, made alongside the Community Ministry-specific submissions that Salvation Army centres and corps are making on this Green Paper for Vulnerable Children.

The Army applauds the creation and focus of this Green Paper.

But also, The Army wishes to ensure that the debate around child welfare gives due attention to other issues that might not necessarily garner the same political, national and media focus that abuse issues have gained—but that are essential to the ongoing wellbeing of many of our children. The Salvation Army is, without reserve, committed to the welfare, development and safety of all children in New Zealand. Our children are truly a gift and a taonga for us to cherish. The Salvation Army looks forward to the progression of this Green Paper process.

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<sup>9</sup> <http://www.stuff.co.nz/national/politics/4908427/Blowout-sparks-Family-Court-review>