

We must protect children from COVID poverty

HELEN CONNOLLY

**COMMISSIONER
FOR CHILDREN AND
YOUNG PEOPLE**

WE all want to live in a fair society where the opportunity to thrive is available to citizens of all ages, regardless of background, postcode, or social and economic capital.

COVID-19 has reconfigured our lives in ways we could never have imagined. The focus is now on managing the severe economic downturn and the high unemployment it brings.

When unemployment is expressed as a number it becomes impersonal. Unemployment means living in poverty, and poverty happens to people. It happens to individuals, families and neighbourhoods – and that means it happens to children.

Unemployment may be the triggering event but disconnection is the result.

Disconnection not just from money but from the things money provides – the certainty and safety of a home, access to food and medicine, opportunities to travel, to celebrate significant events, and to be connected to others in meaningful ways.

According to the Australia Institute, one in four children in our state lives in poverty.

The Federal Government's COVID supplement eased the pressure on 7000 children across South Australia, giving them a short-term lifeline to escape the impacts of poverty for the time being. This is a reprieve from the stress they experience daily, but it's far from being a solution.

Children and young people across all ages talk about their worries around the cost of living and their need for financial support to buy necessities.

They tell me about the emotional and social aspects of the circumstances they face, including the difficulty "being poor" has on their opportunity to develop positive friendships, to participate in their communities, and to find work that is ongoing, let alone rewarding.

They tell me about the arguing, the distress of living in crisis, the humiliation of asking for help, the disappointment of not getting it, and the frustration of being "referred" on.

These can all affect a child's ability to make positive, safe life choices while experiencing rejection by adults who are supposed to care. To really protect these children, we need to ensure we are doing all we can to support them to stay connected to school, to sport, to fun and to their communities.

At the moment, it's the Federal Government doing the heavy lifting in addressing poverty but, as things shift, the state will be called on to look after its own.

Is it time for a state antipoverty plan and the establishment of a child-poverty group that can identify the levers available to stop a generation of children experiencing the worst impacts of poverty?

This Child Protection Week it's time to think about SA children who need us, as a community, to step up and provide them and their families with protection from poverty.

Let's protect them from missing out on opportunities and from feeling different, excluded and unhappy.

Let's ease cost-of-living pressures and make access to essentials much more affordable. It's time to provide free public transport for children from low-income families, nointerest loans for the home internet, and generic school uniforms and school lunches.

Everything should be put on the table as we consider the cost of not providing practical support that will protect thousands of children – SA children living in families who were financially vulnerable before COVID, as well as those who will be made so as a result of the economic recession that's officially here now.

Children talk about their worries around the cost of living and their need for financial support to buy necessities.