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New community-led research hopes to improve essential services in the care economy

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Australian Catholic University

Australian Catholic University will fund new research to understand the unique challenges being faced by workers and care recipients of health and social services providers.

ACU experts will undertake new research through the Stakeholder Engaged Scholarship Unit (SESU) in partnership with three organisations to better understand how they support the health and wellbeing of vulnerable Australians.

In partnership with Catholic Social Services Victoria, sociology expert Dr Haydn Aarons from ACU's National School of Arts and Humanities (NSAH) will lead an interdisciplinary team of researchers in the social sciences, law, and public policy to determine how the rising cost of living and housing stress is affecting workers in the care economy.

The study with Dr Aarons, Dr Bill Swannie from the Thomas More Law School, and Dr Daniel Casey from the NSAH will survey social service agency workers in Victoria to explore the impact of housing affordability on workers and their financial ability to stay in the sector. The study will also assess the impact of the sector's lower than average salaries on workers' choices to stay in their jobs in the future.

While the Victorian Government has prioritised affordable housing supply for workers who are considered "essential", it is unclear whether the current definitions make housing for social and community service workers affordable.

Deputy Head of the School of Nursing, Midwifery and Paramedicine (Blacktown) Associate Professor Fiona McDermid and exercise physiologist Megan McMinn will lead a study evaluating a cancer wellness centre in regional Queensland that offers integrated oncology care for cancer patients at no out-of-pocket expense.

Charity and community funded organisation Hope Horizons will work with ACU to understand the broader benefits of integrated cancer services for patients living in regional and remote Australia.

Hope Horizons is one of only a handful of integrated cancer services supporting vulnerable Australians with cancer living in rural and regional parts of Queensland.

The final research project will evaluate a new model of nursing care by the Brown Nurses, an independent ministry of Eileen O'Connor's Our Lady's Nurses of the Poor.

Serving some of Sydney's most vulnerable people, the Brown Nurses' Associate Clinical Professor, Dr Elisabeth Black and Nurse Manager Robyn Williams will work in partnership with ACU nursing experts including Professor in Nursing Jenny Sim, Professor Kim Foster, Dr Kelly Lewer, Associate Professor Toby Raeburn, and research fellow Dr Johanna Boardman to evaluate the impact of the ministry's unique nurse led community-based care.

SESU Advisory Group chair Professor Br David Hall fms said ACU's strength was leading collaborative research that supported underrepresented groups in the community.

"The SESU is proud to support research in collaboration with three distinctive organisations who at their core seek better outcomes for Australia's most vulnerable people," Br Hall said.

"This year's successful research projects will investigate the financial stress being felt by Victorian social service workers, understand the significance of care and compassion offered freely to cancer patients in regional Queensland, and finally boost the unparalleled care of nurses following in the footsteps of Australia's possible next saint."

"The works of these local organisations deserve attention and considerable study to ensure their modes of caring continue well into the future."

ACU is ranked first in Australia for research quality in the Times Higher Education 2026 World University Rankings.

The SESU has supported community-engaged research since 2020.

THE SUCCESSFUL 2025 SESU RESEARCH PROJECTS:

Envisioning a hopeful future: Evaluating a holistic approach to care for people living with cancer

This project in partnership with Hope Horizons Inc examines the integrated cancer care services offered at the Jenny Black Cancer Wellness Centre, which opened its doors in 2017 in Toowoomba, in regional southwest Queensland. Hope Horizons provides allied health and wellbeing services at no out-of-pocket expense to those living with cancer, and their families and carers – aiming to diminish the impact of cancer and improve quality of life by addressing their physical, psychological and social and practical needs in a non-clinical setting. This research will speak with people affected by cancer, staff and service providers connected to the program to understand its outcomes. It is hoped that this evaluation study will inform advocacy on integrated and holistic treatment services for people living with cancer.

Caring for Carers: Impacts of the cost of living and housing crisis on workers in the care economy

Catholic Social Services Victoria (CSSV), as the peak body for Catholic social services across Victoria, is partnering with ACU and working with their member organisations to understand how the cost of living and housing crisis is impacting social service workers' ability to access affordable housing.

By collecting aggregated salary data across the sector and surveying staff, they hope to understand workers' housing costs and concerns, and the factors influencing their decision to remain in or leave the sector. CSSV hope to use the findings to advocate for policies that support the wellbeing and housing needs of workers in the sector, assist workforce recruitment and retention, and ensure social services continues to be effectively delivered in difficult times.

Caring for the disenfranchised and vulnerable in inner city Sydney: An evaluation of the Brown Nurses Model of Care

Brown Nurses is a nurse-led, community nursing service funded independently to provide community-based care to vulnerable people in Sydney, Australia. Founded as Our Lady's Nurses of the Poor by Eileen O'Connor in 1913, the Brown Nurses is one of Australia's oldest continuously running not-for-profit, community nursing services. Brown Nurses has a long tradition of working with and supporting vulnerable populations. As a Catholic health care provider, they work to deliver and enliven their mission to ensure clients' dignity and self-worth, build trust and provide hope, compassion and equitable access to care.

Through their partnership with ACU, Brown Nurses hope to evaluate their nurse-led model of care and use project findings to optimise clients' experience of care, personal wellbeing, and engagement in and connection to community. This project aims to report on the Brown Nurses' person-centred services and intends to share this unique nursing care model with other health care services working with vulnerable populations.

Source & references

Tags: Affordable housing, Australia, Australian Catholic University, cancer patients, Catholic, community service, Foster, housing affordability, Johanna, personal wellbeing, quality of life, Queensland, social services, Sydney, Toowoomba, University, Victoria, Williams

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