

- MEDIA RELEASE -

Full marks for Sisters of St. John of God and Sisters of Mercy Parramatta in first NCSS safeguarding audits for 2023

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Australian Catholic Safeguarding Ltd (ACSL) has this week published safeguarding audit reports for two orders of religious women, the Sisters of St. John of God and Sisters of Mercy Parramatta.

The safeguarding audits, conducted by ACSL, assessed the progress of both entities in implementing the National Catholic Safeguarding Standards (NCSS), a framework for the safety and protection of children and adults at risk in Catholic organisations.

Sisters of St. John of God

The Sisters of St. John of God operate the Sisters of St. John of God Heritage Centre in Broome, WA; the St. John of God Retreat Centre in Safety Bay, WA; and The Open Door in Dandenong, VIC, all of which are primarily focused on adults and potentially adults at risk.

Speaking after the report's publication, ACSL CEO Dr Ursula Stephens said that the audit of the Sisters of St. John of God is the first to be completed against NCSS Ed.2 which includes an assessment of the safeguarding policies, procedures and practices associated with adults at risk.

"In December last year ACSL launched NCSS Ed. 2 covering adults at risk as well as children, representing a major step forward in the Australian Catholic Church's commitment to creating a safe Church for everyone. While Church Authorities will still be assessed on safeguarding children until July 2024 unless they request otherwise, the Sisters of St. John of God have little contact with children and wanted to have their safeguarding program for adults at risk assessed as their most urgent priority."

"Given the Sisters' ministries fall outside the scope of current statutory safeguarding frameworks, the NCSS audit was a real opportunity to holistically review the safeguarding operating practices across the congregation's work," Dr Stephens said.

The Sisters received a 100 per cent compliance rating, meaning that all NCSS indicators have been implemented or substantially progressed in their implementation throughout the Sisters' ministries at the time of writing.

"What we found was that the Sisters take safeguarding seriously and had thoroughly prepared for the audit."

"The Sisters were able to use the NCSS Self-Assessment Portal to self-rate their implementation of the NCSS in the months leading up to the audit and used the safeguarding work plan it generated to address the safeguarding gaps uncovered through the self-assessment."

"By the time of their audit, we could see the results of this work. We were then able to add our own recommendations to further strengthen the congregation's ability to provide a safe environment for adults at risk and have provided the congregation with five areas for improvement to which they have committed over the next 6-12 months."

The Sisters of St. John of God's audit report is available on [ACSL's website](#).

Sisters of Mercy Parramatta

The second audit report published by ACSL this week is Sisters of Mercy Parramatta's audit report.

One of Sisters of Mercy Parramatta's major ministries is an Art and Family Therapy Program which involves contact with children. An assessment of safeguarding practices in this ministry was included in the Sisters' NCSS audit, which measured progress in implementing the child-focused components of the NCSS.

Dr Stephens said that the audit team found a deep commitment to child safeguarding evident in the Sisters' child safeguarding framework. Sisters of Mercy Parramatta received a 100 per cent compliance score, with five recommendations for further improvement provided by ACSL's audit team.

"Sisters of Mercy Parramatta have done an excellent job in ensuring that the children, families and carers who access their service are aware of their rights to feel safe and be safe. They've also put substantial work into their human resource practices to ensure they are stringent in their approach to child safety."

"As with all audits we conduct, our audit process with the Sisters included a final meeting where we discussed areas for improvement and agreed on time frames for action, so over the next 12 months we will be able to check in with the Sisters to track their response to our recommendations," Dr Stephens said.

Sisters of Mercy Parramatta's audit report is available on [ACSL's website](#).

ACSL's risk-based audit and review framework works to assess practical safeguarding risks for individual entities. The framework, centred on the National Catholic Safeguarding Standards (NCSS), considers the mission activity of the entity, the context in which it operates, and its current membership. This means that entities who undergo a self-assessment, review or audit are assessed against the NCSS criteria and indicators that directly relate to them. Entities commit to a three-year cycle for review/audit to support continuous improvement and integrate new legislative requirements and emerging best practice.

ACSL is working with Australian Catholic Church entities to reach the goal of having all Catholic entities audited or reviewed against the NCSS by 2025. Australian Catholic entities have the choice of engaging ACSL as an auditor or selecting from a range of audit providers on the newly established [NCSS External Auditor Register](#).

ACSL works with Catholic entities to promote and oversee a nationally consistent, comprehensive and sustainable framework for the protection of children and adults at risk within the Church in Australia.