

MEDIA RELEASE

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

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.

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