

Mallee Family Care 2025 Federal Election Statement

Strengthening rural and regional
communities through place-based
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Rural and regional inequalities

Rural and remote communities are essential to Australia's well-being and economic strength. Although they make up only a third of the population, they generate approximately 80% of the nation's exports and supply over 90% of Australia's fresh food. Their contributions support national prosperity, sustain jobs in urban areas and reduce economic dependence on international markets.

Yet Australians living in rural and remote areas face significant inequalities compared to those in metropolitan regions. They experience poorer health outcomes, including higher rates of hospitalisation, disease, injury and premature death. Women in rural and remote areas are more likely to experience partner violence than those in cities. Lower levels of educational attainment, fewer employment opportunities in rural areas and higher costs for goods and services compound this economic inequality.

Reducing health, social and economic inequalities between urban and rural Australians benefits not only individuals in these communities but also the broader society. Stronger workforce participation in rural areas helps address skills shortages, boosts productivity and reduces long-term reliance on social security. Investing in infrastructure, education and healthcare in regional areas stimulates local economies, attracting businesses and narrowing the economic divide between metropolitan and rural regions. Improved access to preventative healthcare lowers rates of chronic disease, reducing hospital admissions and long-term healthcare costs while strengthening Australia's overall public health resilience, particularly during crises such as pandemics or natural disasters.

Addressing social disadvantage in rural and regional Australia also leads to lower crime rates, enhancing community safety and reducing strain on the justice system. Ensuring the health and wellbeing of rural populations supports the long-term sustainability of Australia's agricultural and resource sectors which is vital for national food security and exports. Strengthened rural infrastructure enhances disaster preparedness and response, while a well-supported regional workforce ensures continued productivity in key industries such as agriculture, mining and renewable energy, strengthening both national security and economic stability.

Election proposals

This federal election, Mallee Family Care (MFC) is calling on all candidates to support the following evidence-based, practical and cost-effective strategies to break the cycle of rural and regional disadvantage to create strong, productive and resilient communities.

For maximum impact, these strategies should be delivered through a place-based, whole-of-community approach that targets the root causes of disadvantage and is tailored to meet the specific needs of each community.

1. Addressing cost of living challenges

Australia is facing a cost-of-living crisis which disproportionately impacts upon the most disadvantaged. Individuals and families living under financial stress are at significantly increased risk of other adverse social and

health outcomes, such as addiction and mental illnesses. These compound other existing challenges and make breaking the cycle of disadvantage very difficult.

MFC calls on all political parties and candidates to support the following measures to reduce the adverse impact of cost-of-living increases on rural and regional Australians:

- Raise social security payments above the Henderson Poverty Line to ensure financial stability for vulnerable families.
- Mandate internet access as an essential service and expand low-income broadband programs for rural and regional communities.
- Reform the Remote Area Allowance to better reflect the higher costs of living in rural and remote areas.

2. Support for children at risk

Trauma and neglect in early childhood can have lifelong adverse social, emotional and mental health impacts. Reducing the rate of trauma for children at risk through providing the appropriate support and services, has long-term benefits to both them and the broader community.

MFC recommends the following strategies to reduce the adverse impacts of childhood trauma, with a particular focus on rural and regional communities and children in foster care:

- Increase the provision of mental health services for foster children, ensuring access to trauma-informed care and culturally appropriate services. Research suggests that over 90% of children in foster care have experienced trauma and current services are inadequate to meet demand.
- Support family reunification efforts by funding programs that address the root causes of family separation, such as housing insecurity and substance abuse. Evidence shows that family reunification results in better outcomes for most children in foster care but there is insufficient support for families who require additional assistance to make this possible.
- Enhance financial support for foster carers, including a National Foster Care Payment Scheme, expanded Centrelink benefits and superannuation contributions for long-term carers. This would make foster care a viable option for many potential carers and help ensure children needing to live apart from their families receive the best possible care.

3. Addressing housing insecurity and homelessness

Australia is facing a housing crisis which is exacerbated in rural and regional areas where there is a shortage of public housing and rental stock. This is leading to an increase in the numbers of individuals and families experiencing housing insecurity and housing stress, compounding other social, health and economic inequalities. Addressing housing and homelessness is critical before tackling other health and social challenges as stable housing provides the foundation for individual and community well-being. Without secure housing, efforts to improve health, employment, education and family stability are significantly less effective.

To help reduce the current high levels of housing stress, MFC is seeking a commitment from all political parties and candidates to:

- Reform capital gains tax and negative gearing to incentivise investment in social and affordable housing.
- Increase Commonwealth Rent Assistance and adjust eligibility to reflect real rental costs.
- Adopt a “Housing-First” model by increasing funding for homelessness services, prioritizing stable housing as a foundation for broader support.

4. Strengthening the community sector

Community sector organisations play a vital role in addressing rural and regional disadvantage. Place-based organisations, such as MFC, have the experience, knowledge and relationships to address the complex and interrelated impacts of multiple forms of disadvantage in their communities and to provide the tailored, local supports required to break this cycle.

To support the community sector to deliver maximum benefits to rural and regional communities, MFC recommends:

- Introducing longer funding and grant agreement cycles to provide stability and reduce administrative burdens.
- Increasing flexibility in grant agreements to allow for responsive service delivery based on emerging needs.
- Adopting a place-based funding model to ensure grants are tailored to the specific needs of disadvantaged communities.

By adopting these recommendations, the next Federal Government can take meaningful steps to reduce inequality, strengthen families and ensure that all Australians –regardless of their postcode–have the opportunity to thrive. Investing in targeted, evidence-based strategies will not only improve lives in the short term but also create long-term social and economic benefits for the nation.

Mallee Family Care looks forward to working collaboratively with political leaders, government agencies and policymakers in the next parliament to implement these initiatives and build a stronger, fairer and more resilient Australia.

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