
2011-2012 VICTORIAN STATE BUDGET SUBMISSION

NEW DIRECTIONS FOR SMART GOVERNMENT:
ACHIEVING A STRONGER, FAIRER VICTORIA

NOTES

This submission has been prepared by the Victorian Council of Social Service (VCOSS), the peak organisation of the Victorian social and community services sector. VCOSS raises awareness of the causes and effects of poverty and inequality and advocates for a fair and equitable society.

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“The Coalition Government has an extraordinary opportunity now, as a first term Government with a strong economic base, to really make a difference – to find new solutions to old problems, to tap into new thinking and research, and to look – as VCOSS’ state election platform urged all parties – at the causes, not the consequences of issues so we can really have the biggest impact in building a stronger, fairer Victoria.”

OVERVIEW

The relative strength of the Victorian economy and our growing population points to an exciting future for most Victorians.

This also provides a strong platform for innovation to address the challenges that will affect Victoria's future and the wellbeing of all Victorians.

Many of these challenges were highlighted in the recent state election campaign and result – not least the critical lack of quality services and cost of living pressures being experienced in Melbourne's suburbs and in rural and regional Victoria.

It is time to act for these parts of metropolitan Melbourne and rural and regional Victoria, and to strengthen the opportunities offered to other vulnerable people within the community who are struggling because they don't get the right support in the right place at the right time. Victorians also face the challenge of responding to the demands of a changing climate – we know only too well the impacts on our communities of the increasing frequency and severity of heatwaves, fires and floods, as well as the lasting impact of drought and dryness.

The Coalition Government has an extraordinary opportunity now, as a first term Government with a strong economic base, to really make a difference – to find new solutions to old problems, to tap into new thinking and research, and to look – as VCOSS' state election platform urged all parties – at the causes, not the consequences of issues so we can really have the biggest impact in building a stronger, fairer Victoria.

Many in the Victorian community sector recall a grim period in the 1990s when the then Coalition Government cut services and programs that were delivering

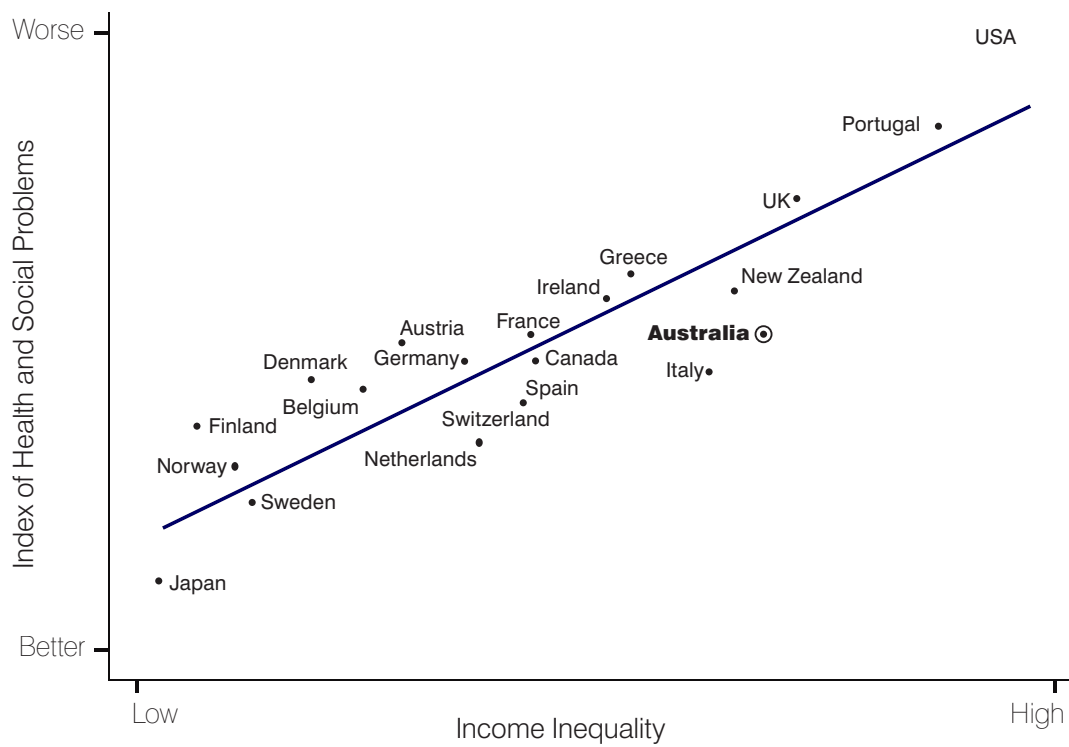
important supports to many. VCOSS has welcomed the Coalition's reassurances that these are different times, and believes that this is reinforced in key commitments of the new Government to improving supports for vulnerable Victorians and communities. The Coalition's support for pay equity in the Victorian community sector – by far the best response of any state or territory Government in Australia to date – is also a very welcome recognition of the important role of community services in Victoria.

The following pages of this submission provide more detail on the Coalition policy initiatives that VCOSS believes need to be prioritised in the 2011-12 State Budget, and ways that their impact can be strengthened.

VCOSS looks forward to working with the Coalition Government on all these important issues to support better outcomes for all Victorians and Victoria's prosperity.

International impacts of income inequality

Research by UK Professor of Medical Epidemiology Richard Wilkinson shows that Australia is more unequal than most other OECD nations and that it is inequality – not wealth overall – that drives poor social outcomes across the whole community.



Source | R Wilkinson & K Pickett, *The Spirit Level: Why more equal societies almost always do better*, London, Penguin Books, 2009.

CHILDREN & FAMILIES

THE ISSUES

Stopping abuse of children before it happens is one of the most important challenges to be met by the new Government and the Victorian community. Providing parents with the supports they need to do the best job they can, even in difficult circumstances, has proven the most effective way of protecting children.

The challenge is finding a balance between supporting the tertiary child protection system and the need for investment in integrated and early intervention family services. This means looking beyond tertiary child protection services that are required to respond to children and families at immediate risk, and examining why families are in crisis in the first place.

Families struggle for all sorts of reasons – poverty, mental and physical health issues, drug and alcohol problems, unemployment, and family violence, among other issues. Providing parents or other carers with the supports they need to do the best possible job, even in difficult circumstances, is the most effective way of protecting children. But it requires strong investment and an integrated response.

Over the past decade, successful initiatives in support for families and children have been trialled and robust models for service delivery created in Victoria. However the lack of investment by successive governments means that many families are only getting support once they reach crisis – families needing counselling or parenting help are put on waiting lists, often for months, resulting in problems escalating and leading to child protection interventions.

THE COALITION GOVERNMENT'S RESPONSE

The Coalition has made some strategic commitments in the area of children and families that recognise these challenges. These include committing to:

- better supporting vulnerable families through a focus on ante and post-natal support,
- a parenting strategy to assist parents to deal with children's specific behavioural and developmental challenges, and
- the re-focusing of adult services, such as drug and alcohol, housing support, family violence and mental health services, to be able to better meet the needs of children.

The community sector looks forward to working with the Government to build a stronger and more integrated service response that better meets the needs of all Victorian children and families, including specific supports for Aboriginal children and families.

VCOSS also welcomes the Coalition's recognition of the particular vulnerability of young people leaving out-of-home care, and the commitments to health and education assessments and enhanced leaving care supports. As in all areas of acute need, critical extra resources need to be supported by strong links between the education, health and human services that deliver them.

We also very much welcome the Coalition's commitment to an independent Children's Commissioner which, to fulfil its mandate, will need additional resources as well as independence.

STRENGTHENING THE IMPACT

Like many areas of service delivery in Victoria, supports for families and children have not kept up with population growth on the urban fringe and in fast growing regional cities. The result is pressured services which have to close their waiting lists and deny families access to critical early intervention.

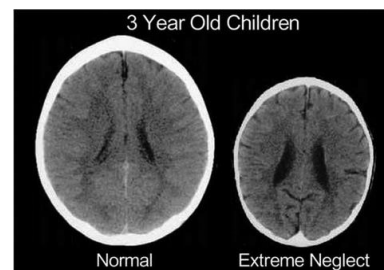
The development of a population-based funding framework for family services will turn this dangerous trend around and avoid entrenching disadvantage in new communities.

AT A GLANCE: PRIORITIES FOR THE 2011-12 BUDGET

Important Coalition commitments	How to strengthen the impact
Strengthen support for children and families.	Ensure specific support for Victorian Aboriginal children and families.
<p>Focus on ante and post-natal support for vulnerable families.</p> <p>The parenting strategy to help parents deal with specific children’s behaviour issues.</p> <p>Re-focus of adult services, such as drug and alcohol, housing support, family violence or mental health services, to better meet the needs of children.</p>	<p>Invest in population-based funding for family services. This will ensure services are distributed across the State – particularly on the urban fringe and in rural and regional Victoria.</p> <p>Develop these new services to complement existing supports – in partnership with the community sector and key stakeholders.</p>
Health and education assessments and enhanced leaving care supports for children and young people in out-of-home care.	Support strong links between the education, health and human services that deliver these services.
An independent Children’s Commissioner.	Ensure adequate resourcing for a fully independent Children’s Commission and supporting infrastructure, including staff with relevant expertise.

Brain development

Research has shown that severe abuse and neglect has a serious impact on the developing brain. The scans here show the difference between the brain of a 3 year old who has experienced extreme neglect and a ‘normally developed’ three year old.



Source | Based on the research of The Child Trauma Academy (www.ChildTrauma.org) led by Bruce D. Perry, M.D., Ph.D. Image found at: <http://www.earlyhomelearning.org.uk/brainDevelopment>.

YOUNG PEOPLE

THE ISSUES

The transition from childhood to adulthood is an exciting, difficult and confusing time for most young people. Those who have a safe and supportive home life and good educational opportunities are usually able to make the most of their potential and make the right decisions for a positive future. Others aren't so lucky and need extra support, guidance and encouragement.

Whether they are struggling to stay engaged at school because of family violence or homelessness, living away from home because of experiences of abuse, dealing with issues of sexuality, or struggling with peer relationships, evidence shows that young people who lack support at this crucial stage of life are more likely to end up making poor decisions, compromising their own life opportunities and potentially causing harm to others.

Recent state budgets have seen considerable decreases in funding for youth services. VCOSS looks to the Coalition Government to prioritise improving outcomes for young people in Victoria.

THE COALITION GOVERNMENT'S RESPONSE

Young Victorians require a training system that is accessible, affordable and flexible enough to accommodate changing pathways. VCOSS therefore welcomes the Coalition's commitment to re-establish concession fee places for students studying at Diploma and Advanced Diploma level. The impact of recent reforms also needs to be considered, particularly in relation to narrow eligibility criteria. This will provide young people more time to determine career pathways.

VCOSS welcomes the Coalition's commitment to targeted support for same sex attracted and gender questioning young people, along with mental health investment in *Headspace* and eating disorders programs.

A further positive step is the Government's commitment to work collaboratively with the community sector to prevent young people entering the youth justice system.

The announcement of a planned new youth centre in Bairnsdale has also been warmly welcomed by VCOSS members working in that community.

STRENGTHENING THE IMPACT

Currently the distribution of services that engage young people and link them into positive programs and activities is very patchy, with too few services delivered in particular on the urban fringe and in rural and regional Victoria. The planned youth centre for Bairnsdale will help fill these gaps in the Gippsland region and similar new centres are a priority for other locations where youth disengagement has been a challenge.

More intensive supports are also needed for young people who are particularly at risk. The evidence demonstrates that a case management approach that is able to link young people to specialist supports, such as mental health or drug and alcohol services, achieves the best outcomes.

AT A GLANCE: PRIORITIES FOR THE 2011-12 BUDGET

Important Coalition commitments	How to strengthen the impact
Re-establish concession fee places for students studying at Diploma and Advanced Diploma level.	<p>Reinstate \$100 concession rates for Diploma and Advanced Diploma courses.</p> <p>Expand the eligibility criteria for government-subsidised VET places to include students up to the age of 25.</p>
Work collaboratively with the community sector to prevent young people entering the youth justice system.	Better integrated support for young offenders will lead to improved rehabilitation, particularly if it comes with independent support and youth-specific legal advice.
Targeted supports for same sex attracted and gender questioning young people, along with mental health investment in <i>Headspace</i> and eating disorders programs.	<p>Ensure programs are available across Victoria, particularly on the urban fringes and in rural and regional areas.</p> <p>Invest in holistic case management supports for at-risk young people.</p>
Establish a new youth centre in Bairnsdale.	Expand this model across other areas of metropolitan and rural and regional Victoria, with investments in capital, workforce and services.

Brain research

Research shows that brain development during adolescence is just as significant as in the early years (see Children and Families section), with significant connections or 'wiring-up' occurring in the area of the brain responsible for such functions as behaviour, decision making, judgement, planning and impulse control. Much of this is influenced by a young person's experiences.

Source | A Fuller, *Don't Waste Your Breath – An introduction to the mysterious world of the adolescent brain*, viewed at: <http://www.andrewfuller.com.au>, 13 December 2010.

Department of Human Services, 2008, *Vulnerable Youth Framework Discussion Paper*, Victorian Government, Melbourne.

CHANGING CLIMATE & EMERGENCY MANAGEMENT

THE ISSUES

The demands of a changing climate, of the increasing frequency and severity of heatwaves, floods, bushfires and dryness facing Victorian communities, is a key challenge for government. These demands place pressure on all communities, but some communities and some people within communities are more vulnerable.

The Victorian Bushfires Royal Commission Final Report highlighted that nearly half the people who died in the 2009 bushfires were vulnerable due to age, acute or chronic illness, or disability. Similarly, the January 2009 heatwave preceding Black Saturday caused the deaths of 274 Victorians, many of whom were vulnerable.

Ensuring the safety and wellbeing of people who lack the supports normally available from family and friends, particularly those who are frail and elderly, chronically ill, or infants is an important priority for a government planning for and responding to a changing climate.

THE COALITION GOVERNMENT'S RESPONSE

As the heatwaves, in particular, demonstrated, quality housing is key to keeping people safe and well in a changing climate. The Coalition recognised this in a number of important commitments: to upgrade Victoria's existing housing stock to achieve an average 5-star standard by 2020, continue programs to upgrade public housing, and to review the *Residential Tenancies Act 1997* and consider introduction in the Act of minimum standards.

VCOSS also welcomes the Coalition's in-principle commitment to implement the recommendations of the 2009 Victorian Bushfires Royal Commission that specifically deal with the need for increased support to vulnerable members of the community. These supports will be most effective if they are developed in partnership with community members and with agencies delivering support, including the community sector and local government.

Also important are the commitments to resource local bushfire planning. This will achieve the most impact if there are also plans and resources put in place for community sector organisations to assist vulnerable clients to relocate or evacuate. Prior to the 2009 Victorian Bushfires many community sector organisations had not been actively engaged in local municipal emergency planning, resulting in a lack of clarity as to roles around the fires. This impacted on the capacity of organisations to organise and provide sufficient emergency relief, accessible transport, accommodation options and other services and supports such as counselling.

Emergencies such as droughts and fires affect people's health in ways that extend beyond the time of crisis. VCOSS welcomes the Coalition's recognition of the profound and lasting impacts of the 2009 Victorian Bushfires through its commitment to ongoing counselling.

STRENGTHENING THE IMPACT

Like fires, heatwaves are also potentially deadly, and people who are vulnerable may need to be relocated or directly assisted to ensure their safety. Yet many of the local plans put in place by the former Government failed to effectively provide assistance. Further evaluation and planning, and extra resources, are needed to ensure illness and deaths in future heatwaves are minimised.

People who are vulnerable to heatwaves are also more likely to be living in poor quality housing and to lack the capital required to improve the protective features of their homes. The Government has the opportunity to develop a program distinguished from the poorly managed federal insulation program by being well designed and targeted to households that are most vulnerable in heatwaves.

The long-term recovery of individuals and families affected by bushfires requires ongoing investment in a flexible range of supports to address ongoing and emerging needs for counselling, family violence services, drug and alcohol programs, and specific child and youth focused programs.

An important lesson from Victoria's experience with drought, floods and fires has been that the health impacts of change can be both unexpected and serious. Local government is required, under the *Climate Change Act 2010*, to consider the impacts of climate change in Municipal Health Plans, yet these health impacts are little understood. The Coalition Government can help drive that understanding with research to better inform planning and responses, at both state and local levels.

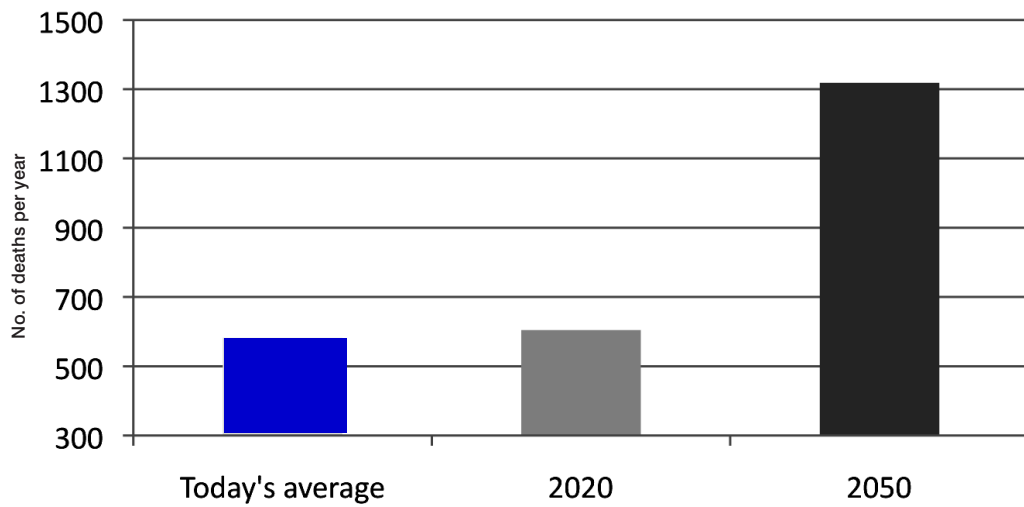
AT A GLANCE: PRIORITIES FOR THE 2011-12 BUDGET

Important Coalition commitments	How to strengthen the impact
<p>Upgrade Victoria's existing housing stock to achieve an average 5-star standard by 2020.</p> <p>Continue public housing upgrades to improve the energy and thermal efficiency of homes.</p> <p>Review the <i>Residential Tenancies Act 1997</i> and consider introduction of minimum standards.</p>	<p>Develop a package of advice and subsidies targeted to assisting the households that are most vulnerable in heatwaves to improve the thermal efficiency of their homes.</p> <p>Evaluate and improve Heatwave Plans and allocate extra resources to protect the health of people needing direct assistance or relocation.</p>
<p>Implement the recommendations of the 2009 Victorian Bushfires Royal Commission that specifically deal with the need for increased support to vulnerable members of the community.</p>	<p>Develop supports in partnership with community members, the community sector and local government.</p>
<p>Resource local bushfire planning.</p>	<p>Resource local community sector organisations to participate in local Emergency Management plans so as to best assist vulnerable clients to relocate or evacuate – including the necessary accessible transport and accommodation options – and to best meet the needs of local communities.</p>
<p>Ongoing counselling for people affected by bushfires.</p>	<p>Ongoing investment in a flexible range of supports to address existing and emerging needs for counselling, family violence services, drug and alcohol programs, and specific child and youth focused programs.</p>
	<p>Invest in research into the impacts of changing climate conditions on health to better inform statewide adaptation planning.</p>

Projected increases in heat related deaths

Increased frequency of heatwaves put vulnerable members of the Victorian community at risk, especially those who have fewer options to escape from the heat due to poor housing conditions, limited income and isolation.

Source | Victorian Department of Sustainability and Environment *Climate change in Victoria: a summary*, Victorian Government, Melbourne, 2006



COSTS OF LIVING

THE ISSUES

Rising prices for energy and water have put unprecedented pressure on household budgets, particularly for those on low and fixed incomes.

As the costs of living grow, struggling households are at risk of 'utilities stress': where they can't afford to heat or cool their homes, or must go without other essentials – such as food or medication – to pay utilities bills. Mounting unpaid or partially paid bills can also create long-term financial problems.

THE COALITION GOVERNMENT'S RESPONSE

The Coalition's 17.5 per cent year-round electricity concession will make a real difference for low and fixed income households, particularly aged pensioners, sole parents, and people with disabilities.

Considering minimum standards when reviewing the *Residential Tenancies Act 1997* offers an excellent opportunity to directly help vulnerable households cut energy and water bills and get better value from the year-round concession.

The commitment to provide better energy efficiency information and advice to consumers will also help households understand and take control of their energy consumption.

Along with other key community sector organisations, VCOSS campaigned for the moratorium on the roll-out by the former Government of smart meters until a full study could be undertaken on the impact of time-of-use tariffs on household budgets. We therefore welcome the Coalition Government's commitment to revise the cost recovery regulations of the smart meter project. VCOSS believes the short term costs should accrue to distribution businesses in proportion to the medium term benefits they stand to gain, rather than being passed through to consumers.

Government support for a number of water efficiency measures, in particular the commitment to move all existing housing stock to meet an average 5-star rating, is also welcome.

STRENGTHENING THE IMPACT

Electricity

The introduction of smart meters will be a penalty on most concession households unless they are provided with in-home displays as part of the roll-out and have their charge subsidised.

Poor quality housing also often causes high energy consumption. Outdated or faulty fixtures (such as heaters, toilets, showers and hot water systems) and appliances (air conditioners, heaters, fridges, washing machines), lack of insulation or heating, or poor weatherproofing can all lead to unavoidably high energy or water consumption.

Introducing minimum rental housing standards into the *Residential Tenancies Act 1997* and providing a coordinated package of subsidies and advice for low-income households to upgrade their energy and water efficiency would significantly reduce usage and thus bills.

Gas

The Government's plan to expand the reticulated gas network in some parts of rural and regional Victoria offers the promise of cheaper heating and hot water in those areas – so long as low-income households are assisted with the otherwise prohibitive costs of connecting their homes to the network and purchasing natural gas appliances, and the owners of low cost rental housing are provided with inducements to connect to the network.

To assist all Victorians to better manage the costs of living, the Government needs to continue the expansion of the reticulated gas network to all remaining areas of Victoria.

Water

Increasing the volumetric portion of bills threatens to add significantly to the costs of households that can't improve their water efficiency because they either can't afford or are not able to install water-efficient fixtures. Expanded audit and retrofit programs could assist these households.

Additionally, the cap on the volumetric water concession (around \$25 per bill) will limit its benefit to a larger group of vulnerable households, particularly rental households whose bills will double.

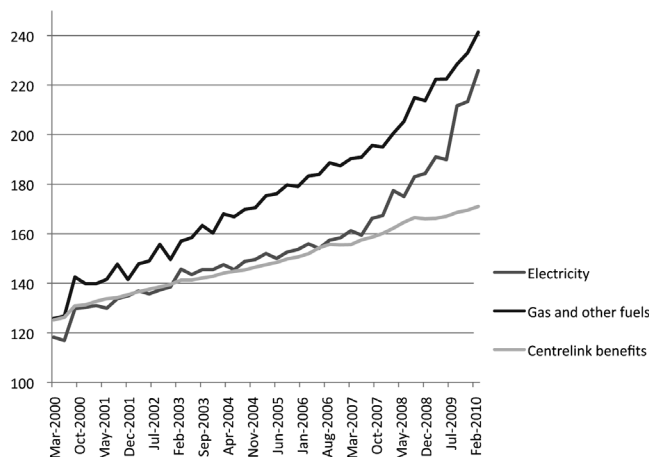
AT A GLANCE: PRIORITIES FOR THE 2011-12 BUDGET

Important Coalition commitments	How to strengthen the impact
<p>Implement the year-round 17.5 per cent electricity concession for low and fixed income households.</p> <p>Provide better energy efficiency information and advice so households can understand and act on energy consumption.</p>	<p>Introduce minimum rental housing standards into the <i>Residential Tenancies Act 1997</i> that include measures for energy and water efficiency.</p> <p>Provide integrated subsidies and advice to help low-income households upgrade the energy and water efficiency of their homes, and repair or replace inefficient, old or faulty appliances.</p>
<p>Revise the cost recovery regulations of the smart meter project.</p>	<p>Apportion more costs to distribution businesses to reflect the benefits they will gain.</p> <p>Provide free in-home displays and subsidise meter charges for low-income households.</p>
<p>Introduce water efficiency measures, particularly to move existing housing stock to meet an average 5-star rating.</p>	<p>Remove the cap on the water and sewerage concession, and review its effectiveness in the face of higher volumetric charges.</p> <p>Ensure tenants can benefit from efficiency measures.</p>
<p>Expand the reticulated gas network in regional Victoria.</p>	<p>Assist low-income households (and induce owners of low cost rental housing) to connect to network and purchase natural gas appliances, and continue expansion to all remaining areas of Victoria.</p>

The rising costs of 'the basics'

Increases in electricity and gas prices compared to the increase in Centrelink benefits.

Source | Australian Bureau of Statistics (2010), *Consumer Price Index, TABLE 7. CPI: Group, Sub-group and Expenditure Class, Weighted Average of Eight Capital Cities*, Australian Government Canberra.



COMMUNITY
SECTOR
SUSTAINABILITY

THE ISSUES

There are many times when Victorians need help to get by. Community services are there for them at those times, whether it's at the frontline in a crisis like the 2009 Bushfires or in longer-term work to build stronger communities. The many supports provided by the sector include: helping people find emergency housing, supporting people with disabilities to lead independent lives, caring for children and helping families who aren't coping, and helping people address problematic drug and alcohol use.

As the Productivity Commission identified, the community sector also makes a significant contribution to the national economy – contributing nearly 7 per cent to annual growth, \$43 billion to Australia's GDP, and around 8 per cent of employment.

Yet, despite increasing demand and complexity in their work, community sector workers are among the lowest paid in Australia. That makes it difficult to attract and retain skilled staff. Lack of strategic funding for the sector also means that organisations are limited in their ability to invest in efficiency measures – for example ICT, management training, and legal resources – without pulling funds from service delivery.

THE COALITION GOVERNMENT'S RESPONSE

VCOSS welcomes the Coalition's recognition of the critical importance that community services play in caring for Victoria's most vulnerable individuals and their families and sees it as the foundation to strengthen the ability of community sector organisations to fulfil this role.

We also look forward to working in partnership with the Government on its commitment to develop a comprehensive community sector workforce strategy.

VCOSS also very much welcomes the Coalition's commitments to support the decision by Fair Work Australia regarding the pay equity case for community sector organisations undertaking work on behalf of the Victorian Government.

A further positive step is the Coalition's in-principle support for the introduction of a Community Sector Portable Long Service Leave scheme. The challenge to address will be to introduce a scheme that encourages highly skilled workers to stay in the sector while not diverting funds from service delivery.

STRENGTHENING THE IMPACT

Community sector organisations could strengthen the impact and outcomes of their work – as the Productivity Commission's research report on the *Contribution of the not-for-profit sector* identified last year – if they had better organisational supports, in ICT, legal, human resources, management and financial areas.

Funding for community services also should reflect the full cost of service delivery. Currently the unit price paid by Government for many services is far less than it costs to deliver them. All funding for service delivery by community sector organisations should be subject to whole-of-government rates of price indexation.

AT A GLANCE: PRIORITIES FOR THE 2011-12 BUDGET

Important Coalition commitments	How to strengthen the impact
Recognition of the critical importance that community services play in caring for Victoria's most vulnerable individuals and their families.	Fund the full unit cost of providing services. Introduce whole-of-government rates of price indexation.
Commitment to fund outcomes of the Fair Work Australia pay equity case for community service workers in Victoria for \$200 million over four years.	Fully fund the outcomes of the Fair Work Australia pay equity case.
Develop and implement a community sector workforce strategy.	Invest in community sector workforce initiatives as part of the workforce strategy.
In-principle support for the introduction of a Community Sector Portable Long Service Leave scheme.	Introduce a portable long service leave scheme that encourages highly skilled workers to stay in the sector while not diverting funds from service delivery.

Unfair wages

Australia's not-for-profit sector employs nearly 900,000 people and contributes \$43 billion to the nation's GDP – six times more than the mining sector, according to the Productivity Commission. Yet social and community service workers (covered by the SACS award) are paid far less than workers doing the same work but for different employers, such as government.

SACS WORKER (WAGES PER WEEK)	
Social worker, Class 2, Year 3	\$902.50
Social worker, Class 3, Year 1	\$922.26
Social worker, Class 4, Year 1	\$992.94

COMPARABLE WORKER	
Social worker in public hospital, Grade 2, Year 4	\$1,239.00
Sole Community Health Nurse, Grade 4A, Year 1	\$1,285.00
Child protection worker. Grade 5, Year 1 – Department of Human Services (DHS)	\$1,407.00

DISABILITY & SENIORS

THE ISSUES

People with disabilities and those who are frail and elderly continue to struggle to live life as they choose, with opportunities curtailed by gaps in crucial support services and by an inaccessible built environment.

The limitations and stress imposed by these barriers can also extend to carers.

THE COALITION GOVERNMENT'S RESPONSE

VCOSS warmly welcomes the Coalition Government's proactive support for the proposed National Disability Insurance Scheme (NDIS), which is currently under review by the Productivity Commission.

Immediate investment is also needed to address funding gaps and guarantee the availability of services, and consequently we welcome the Coalition commitments to new investments in supported accommodation, and to improving access to disability aids and equipment.

Also positive is the Coalition's commitment to review the options for accommodation of people with disabilities and enhance the accountability and transparency of services. Accommodation has long been a vexed issue with grossly inadequate investment, and service models that too often compromise people's ability to exercise control over who they live with and how their home life works. To be a success this review will need to engage people with disabilities, and community sector stakeholders.

STRENGTHENING THE IMPACT

The shift in service provision towards individual support packages – with their focus on individual choice and control – is a welcome and important move but comes with some risks. Investing in independent advice and advocacy alongside individual support packages, and ensuring that advice is provided by a different agency than the one delivering services, is important to safeguard vulnerable consumers.

Individual support packages also need to be complemented by investments in base funding to ensure a continued availability of specialist and local services, and be adequate to 'purchase' the supports needed to fully participate in life.

Tailored programs and reform are also needed in the justice system to ensure fair treatment of people with disabilities - particularly brain injuries and other cognitive impairments, and those with mental illness.

Addressing barriers in the physical environment is also critical if people are to be able to live independent lives. In the transport chapter we discuss strategies to ensure people can get to where they want to go, including investing in public transport accessibility, expanding the eligibility of the Multi-Purpose Taxi Program and developing a community transport plan.

Improving the accessibility of homes is another important strategy to enhance independence for people with disabilities and those who are frail and elderly, and also ensure scarce government resources are not wasted. Currently, many Home and Community Care resources are used for activities, such as showering, that many people could do independently if their shower was step-free. Inaccessible homes also mean many people cannot be discharged from hospital or must move early to supported accommodation, such as a nursing home. As the population ages, these unnecessary costs will rapidly increase.

The Victorian Competition and Efficiency Commission (VCEC) undertook a regulatory impact study in 2010 of building regulations that would ensure most new homes are built to include no-cost and low-cost accessibility features. Introducing these regulations in 2011 will enable growing demand for aged care and disability services to be effectively contained.

AT A GLANCE: PRIORITIES FOR THE 2011-12 BUDGET

Important Coalition commitments	How to strengthen the impact
<p>Proactive support for a National Disability Insurance Scheme.</p> <p>Additional investment in aids and equipment.</p>	<p>Invest to address funding gaps and guarantee the availability of services.</p> <p>Strengthen the unit prices for disability services.</p> <p>Increase the availability and adequacy of individual support packages, and invest in base funding of services to ensure a continued availability of specialist and local services.</p> <p>Resource independent advice and support to protect consumers of individual support packages.</p> <p>Meet the <i>Disability Discrimination Act</i> requirements for access to public transport, expand eligibility of the Multi-Purpose Taxi Program, and develop a community transport plan.</p>
<p>Additional investment in supported accommodation and a review of accommodation options and models.</p>	<p>Implement building regulations to ensure minimum accessible housing standards for new residential housing.</p> <p>Engage people with disabilities and community sector stakeholders in the review.</p>
	<p>Fund appropriate treatment and services for people with disabilities in correctional facilities.</p>

EDUCATION
& EARLY
CHILDHOOD
DEVELOPMENT

THE ISSUES

A quality, flexible, accessible and integrated education and early childhood education and care system best supports the learning and development of all children and young people, giving them the tools to succeed in life.

Yet many Victorian children and young people miss out because programs don't meet their particular needs.

In Victoria, inadequate resourcing of Government schools also means that education comes with many costs that limit the full participation of children and young people from struggling families.

THE COALITION GOVERNMENT'S RESPONSE

The Government has made a number of important commitments that recognise how important it is for all children and young people to fully participate in education and early childhood development.

Early childhood development

In early education, VCOSS has welcomed the Coalition's commitment to improve access to kindergarten for children with a disability or developmental delay, especially through increased funding for Kindergarten Inclusion Support Services (KISS) and the broadening of the narrow KISS eligibility criteria.

The recognition that there is a gap between kindergarten funding and the actual operating cost for rural and regional kindergartens is an important step to strengthening these programs. Extending operational grants to all funded early childhood services, and investing in the skills and capacity of the early childhood workforce, would go a long way to taking the financial pressure off kindergarten committees and improving access to kindergarten and the quality of programs.

VCOSS also commends the Coalition's commitment to the importance of universal access to early childhood education and to Victoria's leadership in early childhood, particularly in the COAG National Quality Reform Agenda.

Education

A key challenge in education will be ensuring that mainstream primary and secondary education environments become more inclusive and are better supported to provide high quality learning environments to all children and young people. The education system as a whole, including schools, needs to provide more comprehensive and flexible learning environments to better meet the needs of all children and young people, including Aboriginal students, students with a disability or developmental delay, those in out-of-home care, and those who are experiencing a range of social issues. Improved approaches are also required for students in the middle years to better prevent disengagement.

The Coalition has made some welcome commitments that will better support the education of all Victorian children and young people. A key initiative for schools is the welcome commitment to additional Primary Welfare Officers (PWOs) to provide early diagnosis and referral for students and families needing help. Their appointment alone, however, will not make the difference that is needed – to achieve the most impact, support services must be available when the PWOs make a referral. Partnerships and working arrangements between schools and local community sector organisations can better provide seamless support for the many issues that students and their families face.

Alongside this support, many young people still struggle with school and may disengage for a range of reasons, such as family disruption, poverty, mental health issues, and drug and alcohol problems. Re-engaging them is vital but challenging, and consequently we look forward to the Coalition's promised flexible learning pilot program to address this critical issue, alongside the commitment to improve Year 12 retention rates in rural and regional areas.

STRENGTHENING THE IMPACT

Early childhood development

In 2011-12 early childhood urgently needs capital investment to keep Victoria at the forefront of providing world-class early childhood facilities and programs, particularly as the COAG commitment to 15 hours of 4-year old kindergarten is being rolled out.

Education

Broader investment is needed to strengthen partnerships between schools and local community sector organisations. These partnerships have been demonstrated to support better outcomes for children and young people, and to help them remain engaged or to re-engage with education.

Investment is also needed to sustain and build on existing programs that have demonstrated success across the state in supporting young people to remain engaged or to re-engage in education.

The Brotherhood of St Laurence recently found the annual cost of full participation in education in Victoria was \$3,624 for primary school and \$3,928 for secondary school. These costs are impossibly prohibitive for struggling families and too often mean children miss out. Providing class sets of text books and no-cost camps and excursions reduces the pressure on families while delivering critical educational opportunities to vulnerable children and young people.

AT A GLANCE: PRIORITIES FOR THE 2011-12 BUDGET

Important Coalition commitments	How to strengthen the impact
<p>Resource 150 new Primary Welfare Officers.</p>	<p>Allocate to schools most in need, and work closely with classroom teachers and community sector organisations with expertise in working with vulnerable groups.</p> <p>Invest in the specialist services that can deliver support to primary school children, and in the partnerships and networks that sustain effective collaboration to support better outcomes.</p>
<p>Roll out \$5 million program over four years to improve Year 12 retention rates in rural and regional areas.</p> <p>Introduce pilot program for disengaged students.</p>	<p>Support the development of partnerships between schools and local community sector organisations to better support young people to remain engaged in education.</p> <p>Provide additional resources to create flexible learning environments system-wide to better support the education outcomes of all children and young people, including Aboriginal students, students with a disability or developmental delay, those in out-of-home care, and those who are experiencing a range of social issues.</p> <p>Implement improved approaches for students in the middle years to better prevent disengagement.</p> <p>Invest to sustain and build on existing programs across Victoria that have demonstrated success in supporting young people to remain engaged or to re-engage in education.</p> <p>Allocate funds so all families can afford essential education items, such as textbooks, camps and excursions.</p>
<p>Commitment to the importance of universal access to early childhood education, in particular the COAG National Quality Reform Agenda.</p> <p>Reduce the gap between kindergarten funding and the actual operating cost for rural and regional kindergartens.</p>	<p>Provide capital investment for early childhood centres.</p> <p>Invest in the skills and capacity of the early childhood workforce.</p> <p>Extend additional operational resources to all kindergarten programs.</p>
<p>Increase funding to the Kindergarten Inclusion Support Subsidy (KISS) and expand the narrow eligibility criteria.</p>	<p>Create a well-supported place for every child and young person with a disability in the early childhood program or school of their choice.</p>

The relationship between education participation, school outcomes and family income.

<p>High University Entrance Score</p>	<p>Higher VCE scores Elite Knowledge Fields Abstract or symbolic learning Selective entry schools Students from wealthy families</p>
<p>Low Family Income</p>	<p>High Family Income</p>
<p>Lower VCE scores Non-elite Knowledge Fields Hands-on or practice-based learning Open entry schools Students from low income families</p>	<p>Low University Entrance Score</p>

Source | Summary of Richard Teese’s findings detailed in Kruger, T. 2009, The Standpoint Project in *Good Policy: Newsletter of Good Shepherd Youth & Family Service Social Policy Research Unit*, Volume 5, No 1, Winter 2009.

Economic benefits

There are significant economic benefits of ensuring participation by young people in education, training and employment.

Source | Access Economics, *The economic benefit of increased participation in education and training*, Dusseldorp Skills Forum, Melbourne, 2005.

Young people in out-of-home care

Research highlights that the 47 per cent of young people in out-of-home care leave school before the age of 16.

Source | Centre for Excellence in Child and Family Welfare, *Children in out-of-home care in Victoria: Numbers in care and educational outcomes achieved*, Centre for Excellence in Child and Family Welfare, Melbourne, May 2008.

HEALTH & WELLBEING

THE ISSUES

Good health and wellbeing are fundamental to our quality of life and bring substantial community and national benefits, including higher productivity and stronger communities.

Victoria can be justifiably proud of its world-class health system, built on strong foundations from primary care through to acute care, yet while Victorians generally have better health than other Australians, good health – and good access to health services – is not shared equally across Victoria. Victorians living in rural and regional Victoria, Aboriginal Victorians, and people living on low incomes can expect to have poorer health, die earlier and receive poorer care for their health issues.

The challenge for the Coalition Government is to address the gaps in the healthcare supports that prevent many Victorians from accessing appropriate health support when they need it.

THE COALITION GOVERNMENT'S RESPONSE

10 year health system plan

VCOSS applauds many of the Coalition Government's election commitments to strengthening healthcare in Victoria, including developing a 10 year health system plan. A *Health Services Plan 2022* is a valuable opportunity to develop a more strategic and integrated approach to the provision of healthcare, from primary to acute services.

Primary healthcare

To best address the gaps in health services, a greater emphasis on primary healthcare is required, alongside the needed focus on hospitals. Primary healthcare plays a pivotal role in health promotion, prevention and early intervention and reduces demand for acute health services.

Aboriginal Victorians

Aboriginal Victorians continue to experience poorer health across all age groups and all health measures and receive lower levels of health care than other Victorians. VCOSS warmly welcomed the Coalition signing the *Statement of Intent to Close the Gap* with the Victorian Aboriginal Community Controlled Health Organisation (VACCHO) in August 2008 and the commitment to cut the gap in health outcomes between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal Victorians.

Mental health

The Coalition has made significant and valuable commitments to deliver better mental health care, with an emphasis on intervening early and the role of community-based support. Evidence shows that mental illness is better identified and more effectively managed – for both adults and children – when there is early intervention rather than waiting for a crisis.

VCOSS particularly welcomes the moves to enhance services provided by Psychiatric Disability Rehabilitation and Support Services (PDRSS) and community mental health teams. People living with mental illness can obtain better outcomes when they have access to support services in their community.

The piloting of dedicated housing, education and employment officers will also better support people recovering from mental illness, and we welcome the expansion of Prevention and Recovery Care (PARC) services – three in this term, including trialling a PARC specifically for women.

VCOSS also applauds the Coalition's commitment to improve mental health services and supports for young people, particularly plans for new *Headspace* services in Bendigo and Collingwood and support for same sex attracted and gender questioning young people.

Drug and alcohol

The Coalition's commitment to a comprehensive plan in relation to drug and alcohol issues is a welcome step. Currently, many Victorians who want to address drug and alcohol issues find themselves placed on waiting lists for up to three months, particularly on the urban fringes and in rural and regional Victoria.

STRENGTHENING THE IMPACT

10 year health system plan

To achieve improved health outcomes, the health system plan needs to include two key components – health equity and strengthening the infrastructure of Aboriginal community controlled health organisations. Accountability should also be a key component of the plan, with health services required to measure and report on steps taken to improve access to care and health outcomes, particularly for disadvantaged population groups.

Primary healthcare

Victoria leads the way in the provision of primary health care, due to our strong community health services and primary care partnership networks that have demonstrated successful delivery of services that meet the needs of local communities. Strengthening primary healthcare services and infrastructure is critical to improving the health of all Victorians, including those provided through community health services.

Aboriginal Victorians

Victoria is well-positioned to *Close the Gap* in health outcomes, as it is able to draw on the expertise and position of 25 Aboriginal Community Controlled Health Organisations (ACCHOs) across Victoria, each with strong local knowledge and connection with their communities. Strengthening ACCHOs by better supporting their workforce, leadership and infrastructure needs will improve health outcomes.

Moreover, mainstream health services also have a responsibility to *Close the Gap*. Some provide a poor level of service to Aboriginal Victorians – failing to provide them with even the same health interventions

provided to non-Aboriginal Victorians. Mainstream health services need to take steps to ensure they meet the specific health needs of Aboriginal communities in a culturally respectful way.

Mental health

Access to mental health services and supports is particularly difficult in rural and regional areas. New mental health investment needs to flow to rural and regional areas as a priority to fill the current serious service gaps.

To achieve the most impact on the mental health needs of all young people, a multi-pronged approach is required. Alongside the hub-approach that programs like *Headspace* provides, young people need services and supports that are located where they live.

Drug and alcohol

Increased funding is urgently needed for the alcohol and drug treatment system, particularly in the area of detox services' bed capacity, residential rehabilitation services, hospital based-services and follow-up and ancillary services on release.

Increased funding is also required to increase the availability of services and supports in both outer metropolitan and rural and regional areas. Increased investment into services will enable the most effective, multi-disciplinary approaches to be adopted and increase the success rate of those that engage such models.

Targeted investment in drug and alcohol treatment, prevention and education services for young people is also urgently required.

AT A GLANCE: PRIORITIES FOR THE 2011-12 BUDGET

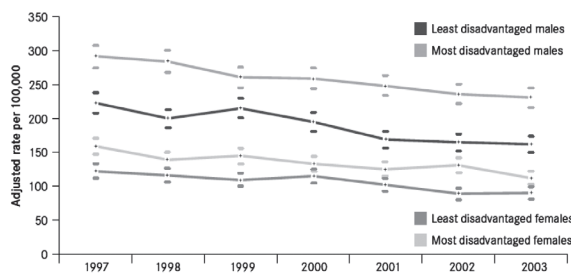
Important Coalition commitments	How to strengthen the impact
Develop a 10 year health system plan.	<p>Include health equity as a core principle.</p> <p>Ensure the Plan strengthens the infrastructure of Aboriginal community controlled health organisations.</p> <p>Require all health services to measure access to care and health outcomes, particularly for disadvantaged population groups.</p>
Strengthen health services in Victoria.	Increase investment in primary healthcare services and infrastructure to improve the health of all Victorians.
Signed the <i>Statement of Intent to Close the Gap</i> in August 2008	<p>Invest in infrastructure for Aboriginal community controlled health organisations (ACCHOs).</p> <p>Increase the number of qualified Aboriginal Health Workers and the availability of training.</p> <p>Strengthen the leadership and partnership capacity of ACCHOs, including resourcing a Victorian Aboriginal Community Controlled Health Organisation (VACCHO) CEO Network.</p> <p>Improve the cultural competence of mainstream health services, particularly hospitals and community health services.</p>
<p>Investment in Psychiatric Disability Rehabilitation and Support Services and community mental health teams.</p> <p>Piloting of dedicated housing, education and employment officers in mental health facilities, and expansion of Prevention and Recovery Care services, including trialling a PARC specifically for women.</p>	Prioritise investment to rural and regional and outer metropolitan areas.
Investment in mental health services and supports for young people, including new <i>Headspace</i> services in Bendigo and Collingwood and support for same sex attracted and gender questioning young people.	Expand the availability of mental health services and supports where young people live and ensure strong linkages across local services and supports.
Develop a comprehensive plan in relation to drug and alcohol issues.	<p>Additional funding to increase the availability of services and supports in both outer metropolitan and rural and regional areas.</p> <p>Invest in detox services' bed capacity, residential rehabilitation services, hospital based-services and follow-up and ancillary services on release.</p> <p>Targeted investment in drug and alcohol treatment, prevention and education services for young people.</p>

Avoidable mortality rates

Graph shows total Victorian avoidable mortality rates by sex and disadvantage from 1997 to 2003.

Source | DHS, Fair Health Facts 2009, Victorian Government, Melbourne, 2009, p15

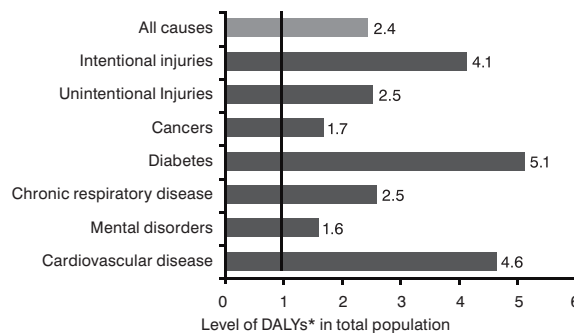
Total Victorian AM rates by sex and disadvantage from 1997 to 2003



Disease burden for Indigenous Australians

The relative risk of disease burden in Indigenous Australians compared to the total Australian population by broad cause groups.

Source: Barker, B., Lopez, A.D., Stanley, L., Vos, T., *The burden of disease and injury in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people: Policy briefs*, School of Population Health, The University of Queensland: Brisbane, 2003. p4



* DALY=disability adjusted life years

HOUSING AFFORDABILITY

THE ISSUES

Many Victorians struggle with the high cost of housing whether they are renting or attempting to purchase a home. Over the last decade this pressure has worsened, with median house prices in Melbourne now eight times average income and rents rising 41 per cent over the last five years.

Meanwhile opportunities to rent social housing have narrowed as population growth has outpaced the development of new social housing and recent one-off investments have only partly addressed the chronic underfunding of this sector.

This crisis of affordability is putting huge pressure on individuals and families. It also constrains economic growth, as more and more of people's disposable income must be spent on housing. Meanwhile people's labour market mobility is restricted by their inability to afford a home where they can work.

THE COALITION GOVERNMENT'S RESPONSE

VCOSS welcomes the Coalition Government's commitment to establish a new unit focused on housing affordability. This unit has the capacity to develop a powerful agenda if it activates the breadth of policy levers available to government, including direct investment in social housing, incentives for private sector investment in affordable housing, inclusionary zoning and innovative models to reduce the cost of home ownership, such as shared equity.

We have some concerns that the focus of policy commitments to date on stamp duty cuts for first home buyers and on further urban expansion may have unintended adverse consequences.

Continued urban expansion, without the necessary investment in social infrastructure, from transport to community services, risks creating new communities that fail to prosper.

Initiatives like stamp duty rebates add to inflationary pressure on house prices and, according to the Productivity Commission, could have more impact on affordability if funds were directed to supporting the housing needs of low-income households.

STRENGTHENING THE IMPACT

As well as having fewer people able to afford to buy a home, Victoria faces a crisis in availability of affordable rental housing that urgently requires a supply focused strategy.

To ensure public housing waiting lists go down and stay down, new construction of social housing is critical. Less than 4 per cent of housing in Victoria is made up of public and community housing, compared to a national average of 5 per cent. Ongoing projections for rapid population growth mean the proportion of social housing will continue to decline.

In addition to direct investment, there are exciting opportunities to develop new housing models that deliver real affordability. Victoria has the capacity to support institutional investment in private rental housing by building on models such as the National Rental Affordability Scheme (NRAS). Funding an additional 400 NRAS incentives by 2012 would secure Victoria's fair share of this program at a cost of just \$3.2 million over the next term of government, taking the total new affordable rental properties delivered through NRAS to 12,500.

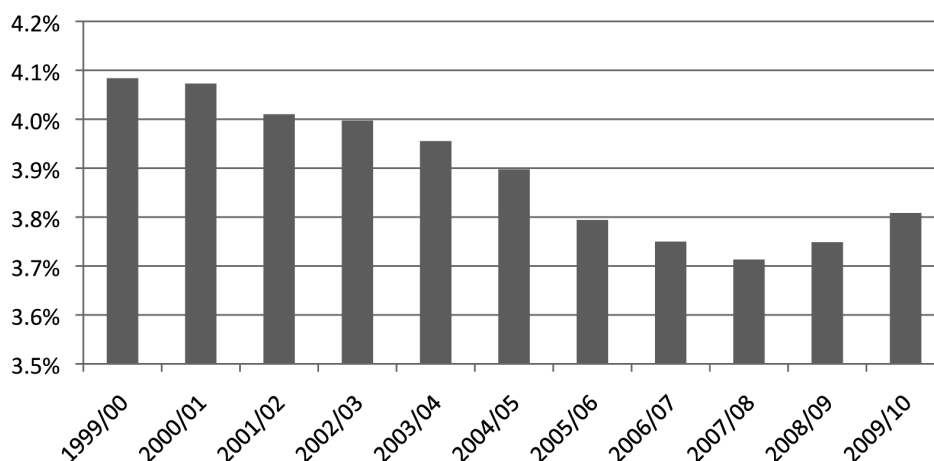
AT A GLANCE: PRIORITIES FOR THE 2011-12 BUDGET

Important Coalition commitments	Strengthening the impact
<p>New Housing Affordability Unit in the Department of Planning and Community Development to advise on reforms to improve housing affordability.</p>	<p>Housing Affordability Unit to explore the breadth of policy levers available to government, including direct investment in social housing, incentives for private sector investment into affordable housing, inclusionary zoning and innovative models to reduce the cost of home ownership, such as shared equity.</p> <p>Invest in an additional 400 NRAS incentives by 2012 at a cost of just \$3.2 million over the next term of government, taking the total new affordable rental properties delivered through NRAS to 12,500.</p> <p>Provide an ongoing and sustained investment in affordable housing. For example, quarantining just 10 per cent of stamp duty revenue annually could provide a growth fund for approximately 1,400 new properties a year.</p>

Victorian public and community housing

Percentage of all housing in Victoria that is public or community housing.

Source | Office of Housing, 2000 to 2008, *Summary of Housing Assistance*, Department of Human Services and Department of Sustainability and Environment, 2008, *Victoria in the Future*, Victorian Government Melbourne.



HOMELESSNESS

THE ISSUES

The crisis in housing markets means that homelessness is touching the lives of more and more Victorians. Now one third of homeless Victorians are aged under 18 and growing numbers of individuals and families do not have a safe place to sleep on any given night.

More housing is vital to addressing this crisis, but that must go hand in hand with support for the individual issues affecting people who are experiencing homeless.

THE COALITION GOVERNMENT'S RESPONSE

VCOSS welcomes the Coalition Government's commitments to support young people experiencing homelessness, including three new Youth Foyers and improving support for young people leaving care.

The Coalition has also made important and urgent commitments to improve access to housing for people experiencing mental health issues, through both dedicated housing workers and an innovative private rental program.

These commitments recognise the importance of homelessness programs that address people's specific needs. International evidence overwhelmingly shows that these personalised programs are most likely to prevent or end homelessness. Focusing these interventions around life stages – so that people receive the right kind of interventions at the right time – will have the most impact.

STRENGTHENING THE IMPACT

While the causes of homelessness are complex, it is a simple equation that homelessness cannot be solved without access to housing. This means that new affordable housing supply is critical to fulfilling the objectives of new Coalition programs.

For example, the Government's housing program for people with mental health issues will need to include private rental brokerage assistance to achieve the desired outcomes – and would have more impact with additional dedicated social housing options. In the United States, 'housing first' models to addressing homelessness, including 'rapid rehousing' programs, have worked well by engaging with the private housing sector to secure stable housing outcomes for people experiencing homelessness. The new Government has opportunities to pilot these kinds of rental brokerage assistance systems to overcome the current bottlenecks in the housing and crisis accommodation system, particularly for families with young children, and to expand support for women and children fleeing family violence.

AT A GLANCE: PRIORITIES FOR THE 2011-12 BUDGET

Important Coalition commitments	How to strengthen the impact
Support specialist programs for young people, including three new Youth Foyers, and support for young people leaving care.	Invest in strengthening the capacity of all homelessness services to address the specific life stage needs of people experiencing homelessness, such as young people, families, older people and single individuals. Invest in 'housing first' models that secure long term stable housing for people to address homelessness.
Dedicated housing workers and innovative private rental program for people with mental health issues.	Fund the construction of new housing to be linked to the mental health housing model to complement the private rental initiatives.

Changes to the homeless population

In Victoria, 19 per cent of people experiencing homelessness are aged between 12 and 18; and 14 per cent are children under 12 years accompanied by one or both parents.

Source | Chamberlain C, MacKenzie D 2009. *Counting the homeless 2006*: Victoria. Cat. no. HOU 203. Canberra: AIHW.

CHANGES IN THE COMPOSITION OF THE HOMELESS POPULATION

	2001	2006	% change
Families with children	22 944	26 790	+16.8
Youth aged 12 to 18 (alone)	22 600	17 891	-20.8
Adults (singles and couples)	54 356	59 995	+10.4
	99 900	104 676	+4.8

Source | Census of Population and Housing 2001, 2006; SAAP Client Collection 2001, 2006; National Census of Homeless School Students 2001, 2006.

JUSTICE

THE ISSUES

A safe community with fair and just outcomes for all Victorians supports and promotes social and economic development.

There is little evidence that harsher penalties deter crime; in fact, sending more offenders to jail can actually increase crime rates. Addressing poverty and disadvantage – homelessness, drug and alcohol use, low levels of education, and child neglect – is the most effective way to reduce crime and imprisonment rates.

Additionally, the *Victorian Charter of Human Rights and Responsibilities* has supported improved government transparency and accountability, so that the laws and policies of government and of those agencies acting on behalf of government are fairer and just.

THE COALITION GOVERNMENT'S RESPONSE

The Coalition's focus on ensuring safe communities across Victoria provides an opportunity to drive important prevention and early intervention initiatives that tackle the underlying causes of crime, including disadvantage, homelessness, and mental health and drug and alcohol issues.

Reducing the over-representation of particular groups of Victorians in the criminal justice system will also promote a safer and fairer community. Aboriginal Victorians are one such group and VCOSS welcomed the Coalition's signing of the *Statement of Intent to Close the Gap* with the Victorian Aboriginal Community Controlled Health Organisation (VACCHO) in August 2008.

The Aboriginal justice reforms begun by the previous Coalition Government in 1997 following the Communiqué of the national *Ministerial Summit on Indigenous Deaths in Custody* provide a solid foundation to improve justice outcomes for Aboriginal Victorians. Strategies to impact on justice outcomes for Aboriginal Victorians will be best achieved through partnership between the Victorian Aboriginal community and Government.

The scheduled four-year review of the *Victorian Charter of Human Rights and Responsibilities* in 2011 provides the opportunity for the Coalition Government to objectively assess the Charter and the ways in which it could be strengthened to improve the promotion and protection of human rights in law, policy and practice. This is critical as the promotion of human rights and non-discrimination not only has strong socioeconomic benefits, but is a key driver in preventing crime and improving community safety.

STRENGTHENING THE IMPACT

International research demonstrates that imprisonment rates are driven by inequality. Addressing the causes of crime and anti-social behaviour – poverty and disadvantage, homelessness, drug and alcohol use, low levels of education, and child neglect, is the most effective way to reduce crime and imprisonment rates.

In Victoria, there has been a gradual shift towards court and prison diversion programs and community corrections orders for minor offences, including drug and alcohol related offences, as recognition grows that these programs are more cost effective and make our community safer and fairer.

The Government can expand on these programs and trial best-practice initiatives from across Australia and internationally to best respond to the causes of crime. VCOSS and community sector organisations working in the justice field would welcome the opportunity to work closely with the Government to produce better outcomes by addressing the causes of crime.

Of particular urgency is the need to reduce the current over-representation of young Aboriginal women in Victoria's criminal justice system, with a focus on developing life skills to improve overall health, improve job prospects and reduce the likelihood of re-offending. An approach similar to the successful Wulgunggo Ngalu Learning Place for young Aboriginal men is required.

AT A GLANCE: PRIORITIES FOR THE 2011-12 BUDGET

Important Coalition commitments	Strengthening the impact
<p>Create a safer and fairer community.</p>	<p>Strengthen court and prison diversion programs so as to best address the causes of crime.</p> <p>Implement a targeted program for young Aboriginal women focused on developing life skills to improve overall health and job prospects, and reduce the likelihood of re-offending – similar to the successful Wulgunggo Ngalu Learning Place for young Aboriginal men.</p> <p>Undertake an inclusive review of the <i>Victorian Charter of Human Rights and Responsibilities</i> that actively engages key stakeholders, including advocates and representatives of marginalised and disadvantaged communities and groups.</p> <p>Strengthen transitional supports and treatment options for people leaving prison.</p>

Factors driving crime

Research by UK Professor of Medical Epidemiology Professor Richard Wilkinson shows that imprisonment rates are driven by inequality. This means that reducing crime and imprisonment relies on addressing poverty and disadvantage – and not on tough sentencing or more police.



Source | R Wilkinson & K Pickett, *The Spirit Level*.

PUBLIC TRANSPORT

THE ISSUES

The election clearly demonstrated that Victorians are dissatisfied with a public transport system that hasn't kept pace with population growth or increasing cost of living pressures – leaving many outer suburbs with serious service gaps and rural and regional Victoria left behind in service provision.

Our public transport has also failed to respond to the changing needs of the population with growing numbers of older people and families with young children now also trying to deal with the problem of an inaccessible public transport network.

THE COALITION GOVERNMENT'S RESPONSE

During the election campaign, the Coalition made a number of important commitments to back up its promise to deliver Victorians a public transport system they can rely on. VCOSS believes all Victorians should have access to public transport that gets them where they need to go in a way that is safe, reliable, affordable, accessible, frequent and comfortable.

VCOSS welcomes the focus on building transport capacity in under-serviced areas and regions – including the promised rail feasibility studies, and the delivery of 40 additional metropolitan trains. VCOSS also notes that the \$100 million *Putting Locals First Fund* account of the Coalition's \$1 billion regional growth fund includes expenditure for local transport solutions.

VCOSS looks forward to the creation of the Independent Public Transport Development Authority, which has the potential to improve connectivity between transport modes, strengthen network-wide planning and reform decision processes to enable critical issues, such as accessibility, to be addressed at the beginning of project design.

We also support the move for transport services and infrastructure to be considered in an integrated way with the wider needs of Victorians, and to be informed by a Melbourne Liveability Audit and Victorian Population Plan.

STRENGTHENING THE IMPACT

The proposed investments in trains represent an important step to improving the public transport network. However their radial nature means they primarily deliver access to central Melbourne. In order to link people in under-serviced suburbs and in rural and regional Victoria with local and cross-town job opportunities, shops and services, new investment will also be needed in bus routes.

In Melbourne urgent resources are needed to fund the outcomes of the bus reviews, while bus service growth in regional areas needs to keep pace with population growth, particularly in the fast growing cities of Ballarat, Bendigo and Geelong.

Lack of investment by the former Government also means that public transport has not adapted to the demands of our ageing population nor met the legal obligation for 55 per cent of services to be disability accessible by 2012. As well as extra resources for this critical level of transport provision, decision-making needs to be better – to date, too many investments in *Disability Discrimination Act (DDA)* compliance have actually not delivered real accessibility – such as train stations built without ramp access to platforms.

For a modest investment, the Government could also provide a real and immediate benefit to people who are no longer able to drive. The former Government restricted access to the Multi-Purpose Taxi Program (MPTP) to those with a severe and permanent disability, and imposed caps on taxi use for some users and not on others – without any clear rationale. Aside from

these restrictions unfairly restricting people's mobility, their implementation resulted in confusing and complex forms and processes.

Community transport is another important and existing transport resource, particularly for people living in areas where it's not feasible to run commercial services or for people who need help to board or use a service. The former Government failed to capitalise on the potential of community transport and, therefore, current services are ad hoc – some large areas have no service at all. A community transport plan is needed to clarify purpose, service levels, and coordination between providers.

Better information about the transport options available is also needed to inform people transitioning from driving to non-driving.

AT A GLANCE: PRIORITIES FOR THE 2011-12 BUDGET

Important Coalition commitments	How to strengthen the impact
<p>Provide 40 additional metropolitan trains.</p> <p>Upgrade Ringwood Station and construct stations at Southland and Grovedale.</p>	<p>Ensure community consultation processes involve people with disabilities.</p>
<p>Create an Independent Public Transport Development Authority, with responsibility to co-ordinate network planning and maintain transport infrastructure.</p>	<p>Ensure the Authority has a dedicated fund to deliver on public transport accessibility for everyone, including older people, families with young children, and people with disabilities.</p>
<p>Improve the coverage of the public transport system to under-serviced areas by planning for rail extensions to Rowville, Doncaster, Tullamarine and Avalon airports, and the Geelong-Ballarat-Bendigo corridor.</p> <p>Integrated transport planning and analysis to be informed by a Melbourne Liveability Audit and Victorian Population Plan.</p>	<p>Provide funding to implement the outcomes of the recent bus reviews, and to ensure buses are provided in new suburbs in fast growing cities such as Ballarat, Bendigo and Geelong.</p>
<p>Improve mobility for Victorians who are no longer able to drive.</p>	<p>Provide funding to widen eligibility for the Multi-Purpose Taxi Program to ensure that people who can't use public transport are able to qualify.</p>
<p>Include potential for transport application of the <i>Putting Locals First Fund</i>.</p>	<p>Develop a community transport plan in partnership with the community transport sector to address purpose, service levels, and coordination between providers.</p> <p>Develop a central information portal to provide information about community transport and other flexible or local transport options.</p>

Public transport supply in Melbourne.

Public transport supply in Melbourne is concentrated centrally – with poor service frequencies in areas of social disadvantage.

Currie, G and Senbergs, Z (2007), *Identifying spatial gaps in public transport provision for socially disadvantaged Australians – the Melbourne ‘needs-gap’ study*, Australasian Transport Research Forum, 2007

