

Building a Victoria without poverty

VCOSS State Budget
Submission 2015–16



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About VCOSS

The Victorian Council of Social Service (VCOSS) is the peak body of the social and community sector in Victoria. VCOSS works to ensure that all Victorians have access to and a fair share of the community's resources and services, through advocating for the development of a sustainable, fair and equitable society. VCOSS members reflect a wide diversity, with members ranging from large charities, sector peak organisations, small community services, advocacy groups and individuals involved in social policy debates.

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VCOSS respectfully acknowledges the traditional owners of country throughout Victoria and recognises their continuing connection to the land, waters and community.



Executive Summary

In the lead-up to the 2014 Victorian election and in the months since taking office, the Andrews Government has articulated a vision of investing in the community to put people first.

The Victorian State Budget 2015–16 is now an important chance for the government to deliver on that vision, and also help build a Victoria without poverty.

The government has already outlined commitments and policies aimed at supporting people to overcome disadvantage and become part of strong, cohesive, self-reliant communities. It has prioritised tackling unemployment, education, family violence, healthcare and public transport. While welcoming this, VCOSS believes there is still more to be done to overcome entrenched and emerging disadvantage, and we look forward to working with the government on other critical areas; including housing, early intervention, early years support, child protection, justice, cutting the cost of living, building resilient communities and supporting a strong community sector.

With this in mind, VCOSS is pleased to present its 2015–16 State Budget Submission. Made in consultation with and on behalf of our community sector member groups, this submission puts forward many practical proposals under the following key areas, which would support Victorians to overcome disadvantage and build brighter futures. We look forward to working together with the government on these proposals, to help put people first and build a Victoria without poverty.

The top 12 priorities for the new Labor Government to tackle disadvantage and to build a Victoria without poverty are:

Strengthen the community sector to help people thrive

Community sector organisations are facing increasing demand from Victorians with increasingly complex needs. The sector needs a sustainable and appropriately **indexed funding base** to meet these challenges, and **funding to meet mandated increases in wage and superannuation entitlements** for employees.

Tackle unemployment

Many Victorians face multiple barriers to employment. The state government can build on its Back to Work plan to ensure a focus on supporting vulnerable Victorians into work, by developing and funding a **Workforce Participation Plan** as outlined in the VCOSS November 2014 paper *Tackling Unemployment*. The review of **Victoria's Vocational Education and Training system needs to focus on people facing disadvantage** and whether it provides effective and supportive pathways for them to gain qualifications for meaningful work. The government can also **tackle youth unemployment by funding a 'work ready' pre-employment training program for young people and Local Learning and Employment Networks**.

Help every child succeed in education

To get the best possible start in life, children and young people need access to high quality and affordable education, throughout their early, primary and secondary school years, as well as throughout their further education. The state government can support children's early development by working with the federal government to **ensure all children can access four-year-old kindergarten**, and by **supporting a high quality professionalised workforce**. It can also support vulnerable children by delivering on its election promises of the new **Camps, Sports and Excursions Fund**. **Targeted support for children and young people at risk of disengaging** or not being able to participate fully in education is also needed.

Prevent family violence

Increased political, community, media and police focus on violence against women and children has contributed to a dramatic increase in family violence reports. VCOSS welcomes the government's response to this, including the **Royal Commission and immediate support package** to help services meet overwhelming demand. We also highlight the need for the government to **ensure survivors, families and services are well supported to participate in the Royal Commission process**.

Invest in integrated support for children and families

New models of integrated service delivery are being developed to improve children's and families' wellbeing and education in areas of entrenched social disadvantage. Extending a range of these models across the state to match local community needs, including through **increasing the reach of maternal child health services, intensive playgroup and family services supports**, will help families build brighter futures and break cycles of intergenerational disadvantage.

Make child protection work

Urgent investment is required to meet the needs of children, young people and families in the child protection system. With the number of child protection reports continuing to rise to record levels, family services are struggling to meet demand, putting some of our most vulnerable children further at risk. **Expanding the capacity of Aboriginal community controlled organisations to care for at-risk children, improving foster care and kinship reimbursement rates and expanding therapeutic care to all children and young people in residential care** are key areas to focus on.

Create healthy and inclusive communities

A good health system needs more than hospitals, ambulances and elective surgery waiting lists. Primary and community health services are often the first point of contact for people needing care. It is far more efficient and effective to invest in these services than to treat later consequences of health issues in hospital. There are many areas of community health in need of government investment, including **alcohol and other drug treatment programs, community mental health and recovery services, individual support packages for people with a disability, carer supports and dental health**.

■ Tackle the housing crisis

Victoria is facing a housing crisis. Housing costs continue to rise to record levels and there is a severe shortage of social housing. This is making it increasingly difficult for low-income Victorians to find secure, stable homes. The Victorian government can tackle our housing crisis by **expanding social housing, creating a common housing register, introducing a rapid rehousing program and expanding the permanent supportive housing program**. Put together, these initiatives can help form the basis of a **whole-of-government strategy** aimed at ensuring every Victorian can have a safe, secure and affordable home.

■ Cut the cost of living

The rising cost of living, and particularly the rising cost of energy, is a significant issue for all Victorians and especially those on low incomes. The state government can help ease the costs of living for low-income families, by **maintaining the concessions budget, restoring the full value of concessions, lifting the cap on utility relief grants and helping low-income households improve their water and energy efficiency**. **Expanding support for asylum seekers living in the community and improving the capacity of no-interest loans schemes and financial counsellors** would also be valuable investments to help Victorians overcome disadvantage.

■ Expand transport options

Good transport options help people access the opportunities around them and build meaningful lives. But many areas of Victoria have little or no public transport available. **Implementing and expanding the government's bus funding package and Public Transport Accessibility Fund, as well as improving taxi accessibility** are key ways the government can expand people's transport options.

■ Make communities safer by addressing the causes of crime

Victoria's prison population has almost doubled in the last decade, however we haven't seen a corresponding drop in crime rates or increased community safety. Victoria needs a new justice reinvestment plan to stop people committing crimes in the first place, and to stop prisoners from reoffending upon release. Prisoners in Victoria have typically experienced significant disadvantage, often contributing to their offending behaviour. Investing in **youth diversion programs, post-release transition support, innovative models such as the Victorian Drug Court and the Koori Courts, and increasing funding for community legal centres** will help people steer themselves away from the path of offending and become positive members of the community.

■ Build resilient and engaged local communities

Adverse situations and emergency events such as natural disasters are on the rise and they hit socially isolated people and communities experiencing disadvantage the hardest. There is also a geographic disparity in communities, with new growth areas and rural and regional areas vulnerable to social exclusion. **Supporting the community sector to prepare for emergency events and funding more neighbourhood houses** can help people connect with their communities, build resilience and better cope with emergencies and adverse events.



Strengthen the community sector to help people thrive

The community sector helps people overcome disadvantage and become part of strong, cohesive, self-reliant communities, by delivering a wide range of services and programs and advocating for policies that help tackle the causes of poverty.

Community sector organisations are facing increasing demand from Victorians and increasing complexity in the issues these people are facing. The sector needs a sustainable and appropriately indexed funding base to meet these challenges and account for the full cost of service delivery, including planning, infrastructure and administrative support.

The sector is also facing mandated increases in employee entitlements. While these are important to keep attracting and retaining skilled, professional staff, community sector organisations must be funded to meet these obligations without putting services for vulnerable Victorians at risk.

Fund the Equal Remuneration Order

The state government can help community organisations continue providing quality services to help people overcome disadvantage by honouring its stated obligation and commitment¹ to funding the Equal Remuneration Order (ERO) through to the final increment in December 2019.

Fair Work Australia awarded the ERO in recognition of the historical under-payment of community service workers. It described its decision as an important step toward achieving equal pay for workers in the sector, and one which could strengthen the workforce by helping organisations attract and retain skilled staff.² Recruiting and retaining a highly skilled workforce requires pay and conditions that are comparable with competing sectors.

The ERO means community organisations must pay wage increases of between 23 and 41 per cent to workers over eight years, through to December 2019. However funding for the wage increases has not been included in state budget forward estimates after June 2015. Without new government funding to cover the prescribed wage increases, organisations may need to cut staff and services to cover these costs, causing greater hardship for those facing poverty. The onus is now on the state government to fund these mandated wage increases in the 2015–16 budget. The previous Minister for Community Services has stated this will cost \$160 million in 2015–16.³

By funding the ERO wage increases, the state government will be honouring its stated obligation and helping ensure the community sector can cover mandated employee entitlements while offering quality services to people facing disadvantage in the community.

- 1 J Merlino, VCOSS Annual General Meeting, 17 November 2014, <http://vcoss.org.au/2014-election-commitments-equal-remuneration-order-indexation/>
- 2 State Government of Victoria <http://www.dhs.vic.gov.au/funded-agency-channel/spotlight/pay-equity-implementation>
- 3 The Hon. Mary Wooldridge, MLA, Address to the Victorian Council of Social Service Annual General Meeting, 17 November 2014.

Provide fair indexation for community organisations

The state government can help community organisations meet the rising costs of providing services, by annually indexing its funding for the sector using an appropriate formula.

Approximately 80 per cent of community organisations' expenditure is on wages and associated costs. A fair indexation formula would index 80 per cent of funding to changes in wages. The remaining 20 per cent would be indexed to changes in prices of goods and services used by community organisations.

Over the past three years government funding for community services has not kept pace with the cost of service provision, due to inadequate indexation of only 2.0 per cent per annum.

Cost increases in this 2012–15 period have included:

- The National Minimum Wage Orders of 2.9% (July 2012), 2.6% (July 2013) and 3.0% (July 2014).⁴
- Increases in non-wage costs (e.g. transport, electricity, and office rent) that approximately correlate with the Melbourne Consumer Price Index (1.2% in the year to June 2012, 2.2% to June 2013, and 3.2% to June 2014).⁵

An independent report has found the community sector has already made significant productivity gains, and that achieving further gains would be difficult because of the labour intensive, people-oriented nature of its services.⁶ It is therefore unrealistic to expect community organisations to meet the rising costs of service provision, without providing fair funding indexation.

When asked about indexation prior to the 2014 state election, the Labor Party said it wanted to achieve “fair and reasonable outcomes” for the community sector to continue doing its important work.⁷ Adopting an appropriate indexation formula would help do this.

“This report argues that further productivity gains are unlikely in the sector without jeopardising service delivery outcomes. This is because community sector organisations have already made significant productivity gains in recent years and further improvements will be very difficult to achieve without the funding to do so... Unlike productivity gains in the rest of the economy, productivity gains in the community services sector are difficult to achieve given the labour intensive, people-oriented nature of the service.”⁸

Offset the cost of the Superannuation Guarantee Levy increase

By covering the cost of the mandated increase in the Superannuation Levy Guarantee, the state government can ensure community sector workers receive legislated entitlements, without organisations needing to cut services to people facing disadvantage.

The Superannuation Guarantee Levy increased by 0.25 per cent in July 2013 and by a further 0.25 per cent in July 2014. As is legally required, community organisations have paid these increased entitlements to employee superannuation funds, but in an unprecedented decision in Victoria, these increases have not been covered by the Victorian government. The 2015–16 State Budget is an opportunity for the new Victorian Labor Government to rectify this.

4 ABS, *Wage Price Index Australia*, Cat. No. 6345.0, 2014.

5 ABS, *Consumer Price Index Australia*, Cat. No. 6401.0, 2014.

6 Allen Consulting Group, *How many wheelchairs can you push at once? – Productivity in the community service organisation sector in Victoria*, Report to VCOSS, December 2008.

7 J Mikakos, published 3 December 2014, <http://vcoss.org.au/blog/alp-in-conversation/>

8 Allen Consulting Group, *How many wheelchairs can you push at once? – Productivity in the community service organisation sector in Victoria*, Report to VCOSS, December 2008.

Further policy directions

- **Develop a fairer service agreement for the community sector:** VCOSS has been working with the government and a range of other community service organisations and peak bodies on the 2015–18 Service Agreement, and has made extensive recommendations about improvements and changes required to make this a fairer agreement. Not-for-profit community organisations are independent, self-governing entities that have a range of legal and regulatory obligations. There is a lack of recognition of this in the current Service Agreement and the current agreement has extensive rights and very broad discretion in favour of the Department, and is not in line with the principles of partnerships and shared governance. There are a number of subjective clauses and vague standards in the Service Agreement. There is also concern about the power of the Department to vary, suspend, cease or terminate the Service Agreement and a lack of consistency and procedural fairness. The state government can work positively with the community sector to develop a revised agreement that reflects the true principles of fairness and the respective obligations of parties to the agreement.
- **Develop a community sector workforce strategy:** In Victoria, there are 237,000 employees in the charities and not-for-profit sector,⁹ making a significant and growing contribution to the Victorian economy. A workforce strategy would aim to strengthen Victoria's ability to help people overcome disadvantage, by continuing to develop a multi-skilled and expert workforce that can work with people from various cultural backgrounds and face complex social problems. The strategy would cover community sector workforce growth (including the peer workforce), qualifications, training and development.
- **Develop a mechanism for high level social policy discussion:** Social policy is complex and interlinked, and requires avenues through which the community sector can provide feedback and help develop an overarching direction with government. The Victorian government should consider the best mechanism to achieve this.
- **Collaborate to tackle vulnerability and entrenched disadvantage:** Government policy and programs work better if they draw from the community sector's on-the-ground experience, and expert analysis of complex problems and their potential solutions. Collaborative working processes at statewide, regional and local levels are needed to better help people overcome disadvantage.
- **Value long-term relationships between organisations and people:** Strong relationships are central for working with vulnerable people; however they take time to build. Sudden disruptions that sever connections between organisations and the people they work with risk destroying these relationships, which can then take many years to rebuild. There is a high risk people will fail to engage with a new service. Funding agencies must value the long-term relationships organisations have built with the people they work with, and aim to protect these relationships when designing policy and programs, or instigating change.
- **Adapting to change:** The community sector continues to evolve and change. The Victorian government should consider effective means to assist the sector in delivering optimal outcomes for the Victorian community.

9 P. A Knight and D. J Gilchrist, *Australian Charities 2013: The First Report on Charities Registered with the Australian Charities and Not-for-profits Commission*, Report for the Australian Charities and Not-for-profits Commission, Melbourne, 2014.



Tackle unemployment

People facing disadvantage can encounter multiple and complex barriers to employment. Within Victoria there are groups that experience higher rates of unemployment, underemployment and long-term unemployment than the general community. These include young people and people living in rural and regional areas, among others. With the overall unemployment rate rising in Victoria, it is people such as these, already vulnerable to unemployment, who are most likely to be the ones to lose their jobs and least likely to be able to find new jobs.

For many Victorians, paid work is central to their wellbeing. It provides a financial income, a source of pride and purpose, a means of engaging with and cooperating with others, and attracting recognition and respect. It enables people to hope for the future and make long term plans.

Increasing workforce participation among people facing disadvantage will help reduce long-term unemployment, strengthen families and break intergenerational cycles of poverty.

Table 1: Victorian employment trends¹⁰

Victoria	June 2011	June 2014
Unemployment rate	4.9%	6.6%
Underemployment rate	6.7%	7.9%
Youth unemployment rate ¹¹	9.1%	13.9%
Workforce participation rate	65.6%	64.4%

Develop and fund a Workforce Participation Plan for all Victorians

The state government can build on its *Back to Work* plan and ensure there is a focus on supporting people facing disadvantage into work, by developing and funding a Workforce Participation Plan, as outlined in the VCOSS November 2014 paper *Tackling Unemployment*.

In late 2014 Victoria's unemployment rate hit 6.8 per cent, its highest level in over a decade.¹² There are more than six unemployed people for every job vacancy.¹³ There are growing numbers of people who are long-term unemployed,¹⁴ and the workforce participation rate has been falling.

- 10 ABS, *Labour Force Australia*, Cat. No. 6202.0, October 2014.
- 11 ABS, *Labour Force Australia*, Detailed – Electronic Delivery, Cat. No. 6291.0.55.001 Data Cube: RM1 – *Labour force status by region (ASGS SA4), Sex and Age*, October 1998 onwards, September 2014.
- 12 Australian Bureau of Statistics, *Labour Force Australia*, Cat. No. 6202.0, December 2014.
- 13 Australian Bureau of Statistics, *Job Vacancies, Australia*, Aug 2014, Cat. No. 6354.0, Table 1: Job Vacancies, States and Territories; and Australian Bureau of Statistics, *Labour Force Australia*, Cat. No. 6202.0, December 2014.
- 14 Department of Social Services, *Labour Market and Related Payments: a monthly profile*, July 2014; and Department of Families, Housing, Community Services and Indigenous Affairs, *Statistical Paper No. 10 Income support customers: a statistical overview*, 2011.

Those most likely to be hit hardest and longest by rising unemployment include young people, older people, Aboriginal people, people with a disability, single parents and people in regional and rural areas. Government, business and the community sector can work together to develop a workforce participation plan that helps people facing disadvantage build their capacity to work, and create jobs they can fill, near the places in which they live.

Aboriginal Victorians are three times more likely than other Victorians to be out of work, with an unemployment rate at almost 19%.¹⁵

Australia ranks 21st out of 29 OECD countries in the employment participation rate for people with a disability.¹⁶

The VCOSS *Tackling Unemployment* paper outlines four strategies for supporting vulnerable Victorians back to work. These are: building vulnerable people's skills, creating jobs vulnerable people need where they need them, developing inclusive and flexible workplaces, and improving labour mobility and availability.

By working together with the community sector, employers and VET providers to develop these strategies, the state government can help ensure those Victorians affected most by rising unemployment are supported back into work.

Invest in a vulnerable youth re-engagement and employment program

As part of its commitment to getting all Victorians back to work, the state government can support people aged 17–24 who face barriers to employment, by funding a 'work ready' pre-employment and training program to provide intensive, case-managed support. This will complement its policy of reinvesting in the TAFE system, and help those most at risk of unemployment avoid long-term joblessness.

In 2013–14, Victoria's monthly average youth unemployment rate was about 15 per cent, its highest level in 15 years.¹⁷ This is putting young people at greater risk of long-term unemployment and poverty.

Young people who stay engaged with and complete secondary school have a greater chance of being employed and earning a higher income. However, students from disadvantaged backgrounds have a lower rate of year 12 completion.¹⁸ Early support is needed to help keep them engaged in education and training.

Young people who experience long periods of unemployment can suffer a life-long 'scarring' effect, with long-term unemployed young people at higher risk of long-term poverty and social exclusion for the rest of their lives.¹⁹

Prior to 2013, a number of youth employment programs were funded by the then Department of Business Innovation. These pre-employment training programs were specifically targeted at vulnerable young people who faced a number of barriers to employment, including young people involved with the youth justice, justice and out-of-home care systems, young mothers, early school leavers and young people experiencing mental health problems and family breakdown.

15 ABS, *Labour force characteristics of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Australians, Estimates from the Labour Force Survey 2011*, Table 1.

16 Directorate for Employment, Labour and Social Affairs, *Sickness, disability and work: keeping on track in the economic downturn – background paper*, OECD, 2009.

17 ABS, *Labour Force Australia*, Cat. No. 6202.0, October 2014.

18 Deloitte Access Economics, *The socio-economic benefits of investing in the prevention of early school leaving*, prepared for Hands on Learning Australia, 2012.

19 Brotherhood of St Laurence, *Australian Youth Unemployment 2014: Snapshot*, 2014.

The programs worked in partnership with business to place young people in training and employment, helped employers understand what supports were required to retain these young people in employment, and enhanced the young people's job readiness through help with education and training needs, health and wellbeing, and housing and family issues.

The loss of these programs in 2013, and the gap left by Youth Connections, as outlined in the 'Help every child succeed in education' section of this submission, mean many young people now do not have the support they need to re-engage with education and transition to employment.

By investing in a targeted youth employment program, the state government can provide young people, their families and employers, the support they require to ensure they are job-ready and better equipped to sustain employment.

Resource Local Learning and Employment Networks to tackle youth unemployment

The state government can help identify local strategies and opportunities for young people to complete education and find work by investing in Local Learning and Employment Networks (LLENs). With LLENs funding not secured beyond December 2014, this will require renewed investment of \$48 million over four years (indexed).²⁰

LLENs take a place-based approach to tackling youth educational engagement and pathways to employment. They identify service gaps and coordinate responses by forming networks and partnerships. LLENs bring together businesses, trainers, schools and communities in local solutions to youth employment issues. They work with about 5,000 organisations and businesses across Victoria, and are widely recognised as the main partnership brokerage bodies in this space.

Funding LLENs to continue their work is an opportunity for the state government to bring businesses, trainers, schools and communities together to help tackle Victoria's jobs crisis at a local level and support young people back into work.

Further policy directions

- **Implement *Back to Work* election policies:** During the election campaign, the ALP released *Back to Work*, which contains a range of jobs creation and skills development strategies for Victoria, which VCOSS welcomes.
- **Include focus on people facing disadvantage in VET review:** The ALP has announced a funding review of Victoria's VET system. To support disadvantaged job seekers, the review must examine whether VET is providing an effective and supportive pathway for people from disadvantaged backgrounds to gain qualifications for meaningful work.
- **Prioritise employment-intensive growth:** Putting a focus on supporting industries that can employ greater numbers of unemployed people in the areas in which they live, will help tackle unemployment.
- **A more inclusive public sector:** The Victorian public sector does not employ people with disabilities or Aboriginal Victorians in proportion to their representation in the population. The Victorian government should consider employment targets for these groups and developing stronger mechanisms to achieve them.

²⁰ Youth Affairs Council of Victoria, *Election Platform 2014*, 2014, p. 11.



Help every child succeed in education

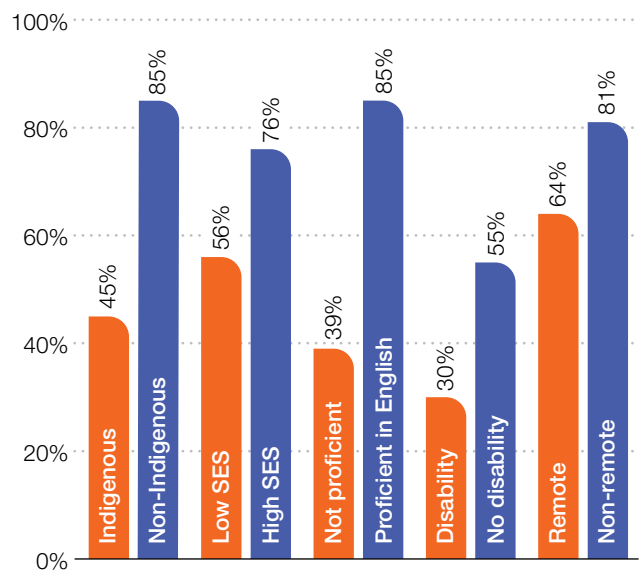
To get the best possible start in life, children and young people need access to high quality and affordable education, throughout their early, primary and secondary school years, as well as throughout their further education.

A person's early years fundamentally shape their life chances. Gaps in capabilities appear early in life between children from disadvantaged families and their more advantaged peers, and can set a trajectory for outcomes later in life.²¹ Students from disadvantaged backgrounds can be up to three years behind their peers.²²

About 10 per cent of Victorians aged 15–19 are not in education, training, or employment.²³ Students from disadvantaged backgrounds are over-represented among these early school leavers.²⁴ Causes for disengagement and poor educational trajectories are complex and need to be considered in the context of the child and young person themselves, their home and other environments, and factors both inside and outside school.

The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child recognises that signatories, of which Australia is one, need to take measures to encourage children's regular attendance at school and reduce drop-out rates.²⁵ Completing education leads to better labour market outcomes, better health, improved life satisfaction, enhanced civic and social engagement and reduced offending.²⁶

Figure 1: Year 12 attainment by disadvantage category



Data source: Deloitte Access Economics, *The socio-economic benefits of investing in the prevention of early school leaving*, prepared for Hands On Learning Australia, 2012, Chart 2.6.

The economic benefits of education are also clear. Access to high quality education from an early age²⁷, finishing school and progressing to further training or tertiary education results in increased work participation and improved health and welfare.²⁸

21 R McLachlan, G Gilfillan and J Gordon, *Deep and Persistent Disadvantage in Australia*, Productivity Commission, 2013, p. 2.

22 S Thomson, L De Bortoli, M Nicolas, K Hillman and S Buckley, *Challenges for Australian education: Results from PISA 2009: The PISA 2009 assessment for students' reading, mathematical and scientific literacy*, PISA national reports, Australian Council for Education Research, Melbourne, 2011, p. xiv.

23 DEECD, *Reforming Support to Vulnerable Young People: A discussion paper*, Melbourne, 2012, p. 1.

24 Deloitte Access Economics, *The socio-economic benefits of investing in the prevention of early school leaving*, prepared for Hands On Learning Australia, 2012, p. 9.

25 United Nations, *Convention on the Rights of the Child*, Article 28.

26 R McLachlan, G Gilfillan and J Gordon, *Deep and Persistent Disadvantage in Australia*, Productivity Commission, 2013, p. 109.

27 Committee for Economic Development, *The economic promise of investing in high-quality preschool: Using early education to improve economic growth and the fiscal sustainability of states and the nation*, Washington, 2006, p. 3.

28 Deloitte Access Economics, *The socio-economic benefits of investing in the prevention of early school leaving*, prepared for Hands On Learning Australia, 2012, p. 5.

Deliver the Camps, Sports and Excursions Fund and additional State Schools' Relief funding

The state government can support educational achievement for children from disadvantaged backgrounds by delivering on its election promises of the new Camps, Sports and Excursions Fund and additional resources for State Schools' Relief for uniforms and school materials. Delivering on these commitments in the budget will help ameliorate the loss of the former Education Maintenance Allowance.

Educational achievement is closely linked to socioeconomic status²⁹ and can also entrench cycles of poverty. To begin to overcome this, all children need equal access to a quality education. However, for many children and young people, the rising costs of education continue to limit their participation and exacerbate their educational disadvantage.

In the wake of the previous government's decision to scrap the Education Maintenance Allowance, VCOSS welcomed Labor's pre-election commitment to provide \$150 million to establish a Camps, Sports and Excursions Fund for students whose families hold Health Care Cards, and to establish a \$15.5 million partnership with State Schools' Relief for additional school uniforms, footwear and free eye tests and glasses for children at 250 disadvantaged schools.

During the 2013–14 financial year State Schools' Relief received almost 10,000 applications for 42,000 items from Victorian state schools on behalf of disadvantaged children. This represented an 18% increase on the previous year.³⁰

These funds must be delivered as soon as possible, and a payment policy developed, in consultation with schools, families, students and community organisations, so eligible students can access all the educational opportunities schools can offer.

Fund 3-year-old and 4-year-old kindergarten to make early learning truly universal

The state government can support the development of all children and prevent poor developmental outcomes and later disengagement from education by providing funding and working with the federal government to ensure all children can access 15 hours a week of high quality four-year-old kindergarten, and five hours a week of three-year-old kindergarten.

Enrolment in Victorian pre-school programs increased from 91.4 per cent in 2006 to 97.9 per cent in 2012.³¹ While this is to be commended, government investment must continue, to maintain universal access and ensure vulnerable children can participate in high quality early learning programs.

The federal government currently provides one-third of the funding required for 15 hours a week of four-year-old kindergarten. But there is no commitment to extend this funding beyond 2015. If it is not continued, Victoria faces a shortfall of \$109 million per year and four-year-old children in Victoria could lose access to the current five hours a week of federally funded kindergarten.

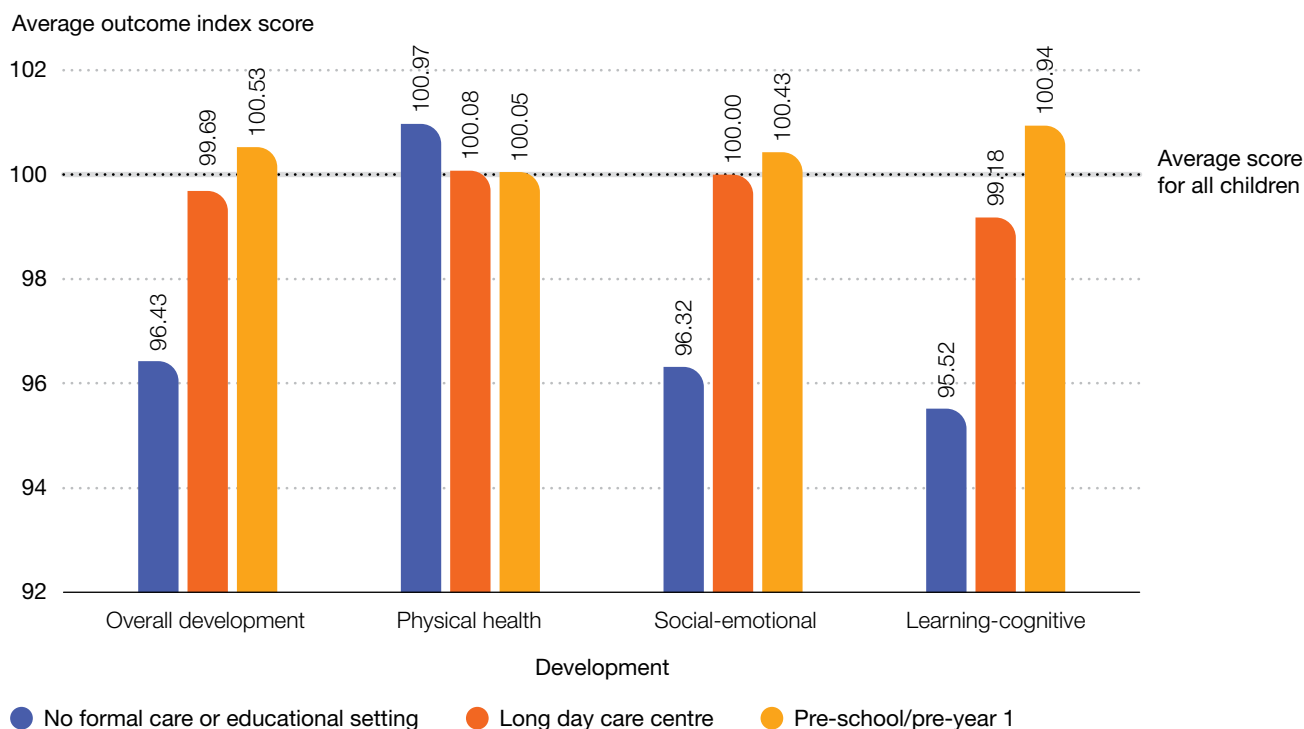
29 G Redmond, M Wong, B Bradbury & I Katz, *Intergenerational Mobility: new evidence from the Longitudinal Surveys of Australian Youth*, National Vocational Education and Training Research Program, Adelaide, 2014.

30 State Schools' Relief, *State Schools' Relief Annual Report 2014*, p. 7.

31 DEECD, *State of Victoria's Children Report, early childhood: A report on how Victoria's young children are faring*, Melbourne, 2012, p. 68.

In Victoria, 19.5 per cent of children are developmentally vulnerable in early childhood.³² Children who attend a pre-school or kindergarten program experience, on average, better overall development, learning and social-emotional outcomes than those who do not.³³ A comparison of Year 3 NAPLAN results and attendance at a kindergarten where teachers had a diploma or degree level qualification, demonstrates the benefits of kindergarten participation.³⁴

Figure 2: Participation in Australian pre-school and day care centres



Note: Pre-year 1 includes prep, kindergarten, transition, reception or pre-primary year, which is implemented at a school. Its label varies between states and territories. Pre-school is the year before a child attends school, and in some states and territories is called kindergarten or pre-prep. Long day care centres may include an early learning program. The data also includes a group of children with “other” care arrangements, which is not reported here due to low sample size. The outcome scores for the learning-cognitive domain have been standardised by five age groups, to allow for age differences to be taken into account. For further details, see the technical notes.

Data source: NATSEM Income and Wealth Report Issue 28 *Little Australians: differences in early childhood development*, Figure 4.

32 F McKenzie, S Glover and M Ross, *Australia’s Early Childhood Development System: What We Know*, Report for the Australian Futures Project, 2014, p. 4.

33 C Gong, J McNamara and R Cassells, AMP.NATSEM Income and Wealth Report Issue 28 *Little Australians: differences in early childhood development*, Sydney, AMP.NATSEM, April 2011, p. 9.

34 Department of Education and Early Childhood Development, *Early Bird Catches the Work: The Causal Impact of Pre-school Participation and Teacher Qualifications on Year 3 NAPLAN Outcomes*, 2013, p. 4.

■ Fund salary increases required for a high quality early childhood education workforce

The state government can support early years learning by funding the early learning sector to cover salary increases required to attract and retain a high quality professionalised workforce, while preventing cost shifting to families in the form of higher fees or reduced service provision.

The importance of high quality early childhood education has been recognised through the setting of worker qualifications and minimum skill requirements through the National Quality Framework and the National Quality Standard.

A high quality professionalised workforce requires appropriate salary structures. However, the Early Learning Association Australia and the Municipal Association of Victoria say employers can only pay wage increases of up to 2.5 per cent per annum because current state government policy caps potential wage increases at 2.5 per cent.

While the state government is not the employer, it provides funding for kindergartens and ultimately decides how much money is available for salaries through the kindergarten subsidy. Funding salary increases required for a professionalised workforce will help ensure the continuing high quality of early childhood education services in Victoria.

■ Better support children with disabilities and additional healthcare needs

The state government can improve support for children with disabilities and additional healthcare needs in their early years, by continuing to invest in strong early childhood intervention services (ECIS), funding additional Kindergarten Inclusion Support (KIS) packages and better supporting those children who are at risk of poor developmental outcomes but are not currently eligible for service through the rigid eligibility framework for services.

No child should miss out on early learning opportunities because they have a disability, developmental delay or other additional needs. ECIS support children with a disability or developmental delay from birth to school. They provide therapy, counselling, service planning and support to access kindergarten and childcare. ECIS support families and services to meet the needs of children and optimise their early development.

There has been welcome investment in ECIS places in recent state budgets but more is needed, particularly to ensure families on the waiting list are provided a minimum level of service until able to access a fully funded place. To maintain high quality, flexible and sustainable services, the current unit price of \$7,385 must be increased to better reflect the costs of delivering ECIS.

Additional KIS packages also need to be funded. KIS funding packages support children with disabilities and high support needs to access kindergarten programs for four-year-old children.

There is also a gap in services for children who do not meet strict diagnostic eligibility criterion for funding, but who have additional needs that make them developmentally vulnerable. Children with special healthcare needs (which sometimes fall outside early years support eligibility criterion) have, or are at risk of, chronic physical, developmental, behavioural, or emotional conditions with corresponding health and developmental concerns.³⁵

35 S Goldfeld, M O'Connor, M Sayers, T Moore and F Oberklaid, 'Prevalence and Correlates of Special Health Care Needs in a Population Cohort of Australian Children at School Entry', *Journal of Developmental Behavioural Paediatrics*, 2012, 33:319–327.

Research utilising the Australian Early Development Index (AEDI) suggests about one fifth of Australian children in their first year of school experience such additional healthcare needs: 4 per cent with formally diagnosed conditions (such as learning, speech, and behavioural difficulties) and 18 per cent with undiagnosed concerns (particularly speech difficulties, problems at home and emotional problems).³⁶

These children start school at a developmental disadvantage, which is compounded over the schooling years if their needs are not identified early and supports put in place, particularly for children who also experienced socioeconomic disadvantage. Identifying emerging issues early and developing funding models that recognise disability and additional needs on a continuum, not simply a diagnosis, is vital to address issues early before, or soon after, starting school, so appropriate supports can be put in place to maximise development and optimise outcomes.

Develop 'middle years' transition plans

The state government can help students stay engaged at school in their 'middle years' by enabling the Department of Education and Training to develop transition plans for students moving between primary and secondary school, to better identify any ongoing learning, development and support needs.

The middle years, when children are entering adolescence, between 8 and 14, are a time of significant physical, social, emotional and psychological change for children. They are also when children are moving from primary to secondary school, and when some start to disengage from learning.³⁷

The middle years are an important opportunity to identify and respond to early warning signs, but they have been virtually ignored in policy and program development. There is a yawning gap in the services available to children in that age group.

A child's transition from primary to secondary school may require substantial preparation, planning, adjustment and support. Victoria already ensures transition planning occurs for students moving from kindergarten to primary school³⁸ and for students with disabilities as they move into secondary school.³⁹

Similar planning is needed for all students moving from primary to secondary school, to better identify their learning and social needs and help identify and respond to any early warning signs. Evaluations of existing transition models could be used to inform the development of middle years transition planning.⁴⁰

"The earlier they can intervene with the kids and get them back into education and enjoying it, the better the school system will be. It's too late once they hit 15 to try and get them back into education. They have already have missed way too much."⁴¹

"There is a need for a transition program from primary school to high school ... If we could work with young people in primary school to build their capacity for resilience and tolerance, the work that we do around bullying and school refusal in the beginning of high school could be minimised."⁴²

36 S Goldfeld, M O'Connor, M Sayers, T Moore and F Oberklaid, 'Prevalence and Correlates of Special Health Care Needs in a Population Cohort of Australian Children at School Entry', *Journal of Developmental Behavioural Paediatrics*, 2012, 33:319–327.

37 VCOSS and YACVic, *Building the Scaffolding: strengthening support for young people in Victoria*, 2013, p. 80.

38 Department of Education and Early Childhood Development, *Transition: A Positive Start to School Resource Kit*, Victoria, 2009.

39 Department of Education and Early Childhood Development, *Transitioning from Primary to Secondary School: Supporting students with additional or complex needs that arise from disability when moving from primary to secondary school*, Victoria, 2014.

40 B Astbury, *Evaluation of Transition: A Positive Start to School Pilots*, Centre for Program Evaluation The University of Melbourne, 2009.

41 VCOSS and YACVic, *Building the Scaffolding: strengthening support for young people in Victoria*, 2013, p. 68.

42 VCOSS and YACVic, *Building the Scaffolding: strengthening support for young people in Victoria*, 2013, p. 68.

Develop and implement the Special Needs Plan for schools

The state government can help all children and young people fully access education opportunities and achieve better outcomes, by developing and implementing its Special Needs Plan for schools, as well as allocating more resources to support children with additional health and development needs, particularly those who are in socioeconomically disadvantaged settings, who are doubly disadvantaged.

Children and young people with a disability often cannot access education and other learning opportunities that are available to other young people. Schools may not be funded to meet the costs of supporting students with disabilities or developmental delays, staff may not have the requisite skills and training to work with students and develop appropriate programs, and buildings and transport may not be accessible.

The Victorian Equal Opportunity and Human Rights Commission's *Held Back: the experiences of students with disabilities in Victorian Schools* report highlights the barriers that still exist for students with disabilities in mainstream primary and secondary education environments.⁴³ We need to break down these barriers so all schools can provide high quality learning environments for children and young people with a disability or developmental delay.

Using data from the Longitudinal Study of Australian Children (LSAC) linked to AEDI data, it was found children with additional health and development needs, particularly those from disadvantaged backgrounds, start school at increased risk of poorer educational outcomes, and by the time they are aged 10–11, are more likely to be in the low or average performing academic trajectories.⁴⁴ However, it was also found that there were children with additional health and development needs with high academic achievement, which reinforces the potential of interventions to help these children reach their optimal learning potential.⁴⁵

VCOSS welcomes the Labor Government's election commitment to develop a Special Needs Plan for schools including:

- \$10m Inclusive Schools Fund to support students with additional needs
- Requiring all newly built government schools to accommodate students' diverse needs
- Requiring all new teachers to complete a special needs component at university, and existing teachers to undertake ongoing professional development
- Investigating the feasibility of establishing a Schools Commissioner to receive complaints from parents or students.

The Special Needs Plan should also allocate more resources to support children with additional health and development needs, particularly those in socioeconomically disadvantaged settings, who are doubly disadvantaged.

43 Victorian Equal Opportunity and Human Rights Commission, *Held Back: the experiences of students with disabilities in Victorian Schools*, 2014.

44 S Goldfeld, M O'Connor, J Quach, J Tarasuik and A Kvalsvig (in press), *Learning trajectories of children with special health care needs across the severity spectrum*, Academic Pediatrics, 2014.

45 S Goldfeld, M O'Connor, J Quach, J Tarasuik and A Kvalsvig (in press), *Learning trajectories of children with special health care needs across the severity spectrum*, Academic Pediatrics, 2014.

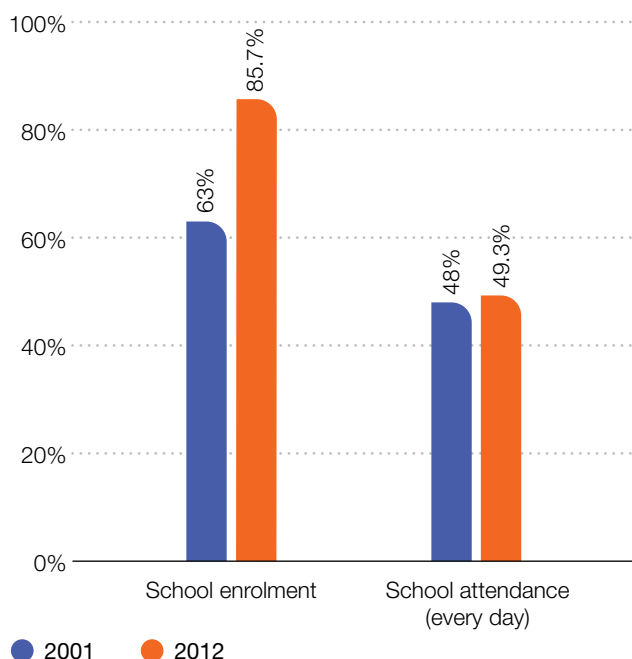
Expand flexible learning models to keep more young people engaged in education

The state government can prevent vulnerable students disengaging from education by expanding flexible learning options, in both mainstream and alternative settings, to address the complex issues students may experience, such as housing, transport, legal issues, family violence, health and childcare. More than 10,000 Victorian school-aged students disengage from school every year.⁴⁶ Schools are a key point of intervention⁴⁷ and flexible education programs can operate within mainstream schools, TAFEs and community colleges, as well as through

46 Department of Education and Early Childhood Development, *Reforming Support to Vulnerable Young People: A discussion paper*, Melbourne, 2012.

47 KPMG, *Re-engaging our kids: A framework for education provision to children and young people at risk of disengaging or disengaged from school*, 2009.

Figure 3: School enrolment and attendance among children in residential care



Source: Victorian Auditor-General's Office based on unpublished data (2001) and unpublished Educational Characteristics Report 2012 (2013) from the Department of Human Services.

St Luke's

St Luke's Educational Services Unit, part of Anglicare Victoria, supports people aged 12-17 who are unable to attend mainstream school, mainly due to extreme behavioural issues. Many students are living in out-of-home care or on statutory orders. Students remain enrolled at local mainstream schools and attend classes off-campus through St Luke's. Every student has an Individual Education Plan based on their strengths and interests that includes curriculum options and a focus on their wellbeing and self-confidence. Students attend the program for one to six years before returning to their neighbourhood school or being assisted to take another pathway, such as TAFE studies, apprenticeships or employment.

This is an edited version of a case study used as part of Putting the Jigsaw Together: Flexible Learning programs in Australia, see: <http://dusseldorp.org.au/priorities/alternative-learning/case-studies/>

The Pavilion School

The Pavilion School is a state secondary school for students who have disengaged from or been excluded by schools or education providers. With two campuses in Melbourne's north, The Pavilion School aims to give its students the opportunity to enhance their education and social development, and to negotiate their transition into further education, employment or training at their own pace. The Mill Park campus is co-located with the City of Whittlesea Baseline Youth Services and a range of other specialist services. This has been a highly successful model.

separate alternative programs for students who need more targeted options. These programs seek to enable young people for whom schooling previously has not worked well, to learn and achieve skills and qualifications, improved wellbeing, and enhanced life opportunities.⁴⁸ Flexible learning programs also provide supports that address the complex issues students may experience, such as housing, transport, legal issues, health, and childcare. Many are based on partnerships with business, social and health agencies, and local government.⁴⁹ Flexible options particularly benefit students who need additional support, such as those living in out-of-home care. Educational outcomes for children in residential care continue to be poor, with low participation rates.⁵⁰

The Framework of Quality Flexible Learning Programs model (as seen in Figure 4), promotes a set of principles that underpin high quality programs. These are not prescriptive, but can be used to guide programs that suit a specific context and purpose.⁵¹

Figure 4: Framework of Quality Flexible Learning Programs



Source: K Te Riele, *Putting the Jigsaw Together: Flexible Learning programs in Australia*, Final Report, 2014.

48 K Te Riele, *Putting the Jigsaw Together: Flexible Learning programs in Australia*, Final Report, 2014, p. 76.

49 K Te Riele, *Putting the Jigsaw Together: Flexible Learning programs in Australia*, Final Report, 2014.

50 Victorian Auditor-General's Office *Residential Care Services for Children*, 2014, p. 17.

51 K Te Riele, *Putting the Jigsaw Together: Flexible Learning programs in Australia*, Final Report, 2014, p. 76.

Vulnerable students also face other barriers to education, such as transport. Travellers Aid coordinates Pathways to Education as part of its emergency relief program. This gives travel passes to students who experience financial difficulties and who attend flexible education settings. In 2013–2014, Travellers Aid assisted 101 students at a cost of just over \$41,000. This program is no longer funded through the Federal Department of Social Services, and Travellers Aid cannot continue supporting students without additional funding.

Further policy directions

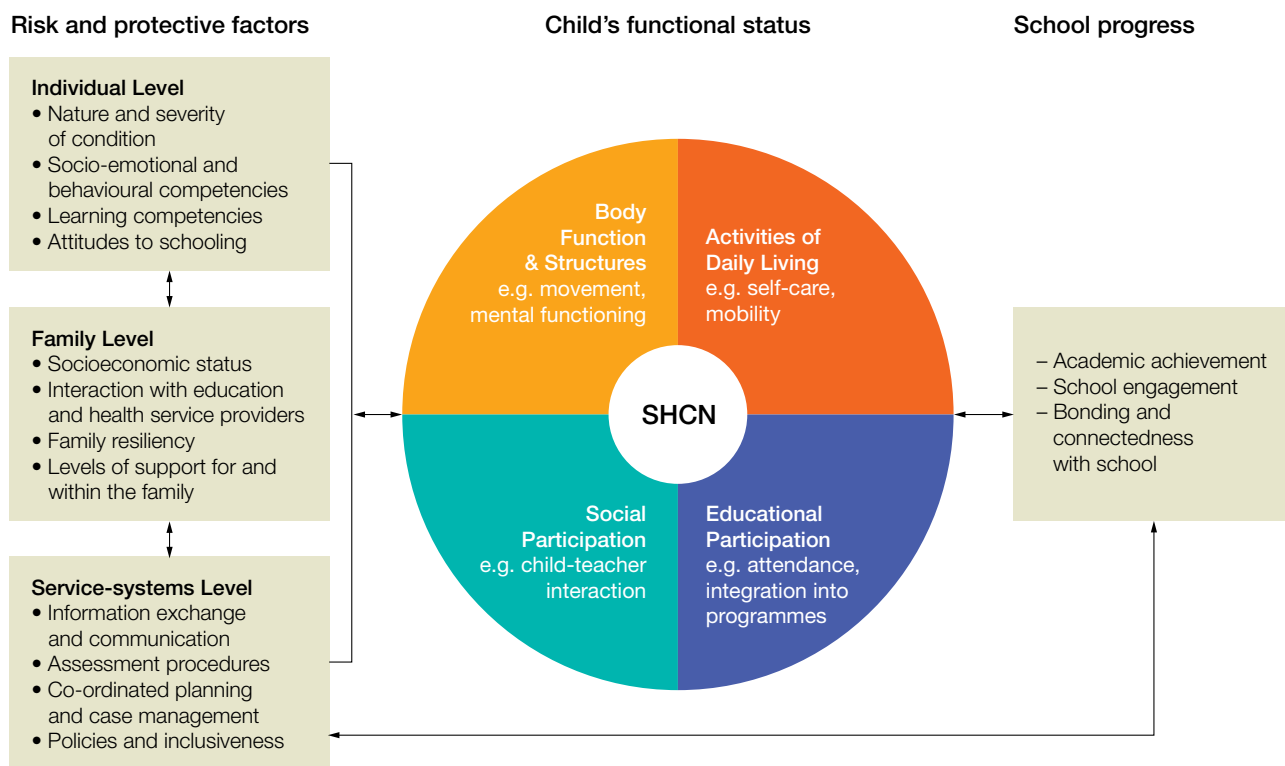
- **Improve vulnerable children’s access to and participation in Early Start Kindergarten and kindergarten:** Early Start Kindergarten provides free or low-cost kindergarten to three-year-old children who are Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander, or where their family has had contact with Child Protection, or have been referred by Child FIRST. Approximately, 3500 children subject to a child protection report are three years of age,⁵² however only about 520 children accessed Early Start Kindergarten in 2013, meaning a significant number of eligible children are not accessing the program.⁵³ The average participation rate in early learning services for four-year-old children in out-of-home care is 85 per cent.⁵⁴ *The Early Childhood Agreement for Children in Out-of-Home Care*, is a great start to improving the participation by children in out-of-home care in early childhood services, including kindergarten. This work should continue and additional resources be invested in supporting Aboriginal children and children known to child protection, to access early learning opportunities.
- **Support the National Quality Framework for Early Childhood Education and Care:** Continue the state government commitment to the National Quality Framework so all early learning services provide high quality programs for children. Services need appropriate funding to help them deliver programs that meet or exceed the National Quality Standard.
- **Support early childhood services to implement new ratios:** From 2016, kindergartens and childcare services must have a ratio of 1 educator for every 11 children aged 3–5 years. While many services are also ready working to this ratio, those that are not need support to make the necessary infrastructure and staffing changes.
- **Outside School Hours Care (OSHC):** Many families rely on OSHC, including before and after school care and holiday programs, to enable parents to work and/or study while ensuring their children are in a safe, supported and fun environment. These programs also provide additional recreation and learning opportunities for children. The availability of OSHC is ad hoc across Victoria with some areas, particularly in growth rural areas, having no care options available. All schools should be able to offer OSHC where demand is sufficient. This requires additional capital investment to enable schools to provide facilities and equipment and to employ OSHC coordinators and educators.

52 P Cummins, D Scott and B Scales, *Report of the Protecting Victoria’s Vulnerable Children Inquiry*, State of Victoria, Department of Premier and Cabinet, 2012, Melbourne, p. 41.

53 Unpublished data from Department of Education and Early Childhood.

54 Department of Education and Early Childhood, *Early Childhood Agreement for Children in Out-of-Home Care*, Victoria, 2014.

Figure 5: Conceptual model of the relationship between special health care needs and children’s school progress



Source: M O'Connor, S Howell-Meurs, A Kvalsvig and S Goldfeld, *Understanding the impact of special health care needs on early school functioning, a conceptual model*, Child: Care, Health and Development, May 2014.

- Review the classification framework of the Program for Students with a Disability:** The Victorian government has committed to review the Program for Students with a Disability (PSD) as part of its Special Needs Plan for schools election promise. Currently PSD funding is aligned with diagnostic categories, which can result in children with significant support needs being unable to access services. The PSD should move to a broader classification framework centred on children’s functioning, risk and protective factors and school progress (as seen in Figure 5), rather than relying solely on diagnosis.
- Secure funding for School Focused Youth Services:** Current funding for School Focused Youth Services (SFYS) will lapse in December 2015. The program guidelines were changed in 2013 but services received little implementation support and

there is concern that the intent of the program and reporting requirements remain unclear, resulting in program inconsistency across Victoria. However, there is clearly a need for a program that promotes partnerships between schools and community organisations to support young people at risk of mental illness, homelessness and school disengagement. Thirty per cent of adolescents have experienced a diagnosable depressive episode by the age of 18 years.⁵⁵ However, young people are less likely to seek help than other age groups, demonstrating support needs to be easily accessible.

⁵⁵ Slade et al, *The Mental Health of Australians 2: Report on the 2007 National Survey of Mental Health and Wellbeing*, Department of Health and Ageing, Canberra, 2009.

- **Include focus on people facing disadvantage in VET review:** The ALP has announced a funding review of Victoria's VET system. To support disadvantaged job seekers, the review must examine whether VET is providing an effective and supportive pathway for people from disadvantaged backgrounds to gain qualifications for meaningful work.
- **Support students to stay at school:** The state government can build effectively on the success of the Youth Connections program, by investing in a state-based service that provides targeted, intensive, case-managed support to young people who have disengaged or are at risk of disengaging from school early.

Youth Connections

Since 2010, the Youth Connections program has been highly successful in assisting vulnerable young people who have disengaged or are at risk of disengaging from school early, to complete Year 12 or its equivalent and transition to further education or work. The program provided intensive, case-managed support to address the barriers some young people face in completing their education. In Victoria about 4,600 young people were supported through Youth Connections each year. The loss of Youth Connections from 2015 as a result of federal government funding cuts means this important resource will no longer be available in Victoria. Youth Connections had excellent results: 94 per cent of young people who took part in the program were at school or engaged in learning or employment six months later and 81.5 per cent two years on.



Prevent family violence

Family violence is the biggest contributor to ill health, disability and death in Victorian women aged 15–44.⁵⁶

Family violence is deeply traumatic for the people and families involved, and has consequences for the justice, housing, health and corrections systems. It is a leading cause of homelessness for Victorian women and children, cited by one in three women who access homelessness services.⁵⁷ It also deeply affects children who witness or experience it and is a factor in more than half of all cases where children are removed from their families in Victoria.⁵⁸

Vulnerable women, including women with disabilities and Aboriginal women, are at increased risk of experiencing family violence. These women, and women living in rural and regional areas, can also face additional barriers to escaping violence and finding help; including fewer services available, discrimination and lack of culturally and disability sensitive responses.

Increased political, community, media and police focus on violence against women and children has contributed to a dramatic increase in family violence reports, as more women feel confident that perpetrators of violence will be held accountable by police, the court system and the community. Police and family violence services are now overwhelmed by demand, and a package of services and reforms is needed to meet this and combat violence against women and their children.

Responding to family violence was part of Labor's 2014 state election platform and VCOSS welcomes the government's range of commitments, including the announcement of a Royal Commission. The community sector looks forward to working with the government to help implement its commitments and the recommendations of the Royal Commission. We also highlight the need for the government to ensure survivors, families and services are well supported to participate in the Royal Commission process.

Put family violence commitments into action

The 2015–16 State Budget is a chance for the government to fund the family violence package it promised in the lead-up to the 2014 state election. This range of policies, some of which have already been delivered, includes:

- Establishing a dedicated Minister for the Prevention of Family Violence
- Relocating the Office of Women's Affairs to the Department of Premier and Cabinet to support a whole-of-government approach
- Establishing Australia's first Royal Commission into Family Violence

56 VicHealth, *The health costs of violence: Measuring the burden of disease caused by intimate partner violence*, 2004, p. 10.

57 AIHW, *Specialist Homelessness Services data cubes*, accessed 9 January 2015, <http://www.aihw.gov.au/shs/data-cubes/>

58 Department of Human Services, *Vulnerable babies, children and young people at risk of harm; Best practice framework for acute health services*, 2006, p. 3.

- Re-establishing the Family Violence Death Review in the Coroner's Court
- Providing urgent funding for a range of services to support women and children, including \$2.5m for services that provide practical support for women and children and are currently experiencing extraordinary demand and delays (such as crisis accommodation and transport)
- Holding perpetrators accountable, including \$500,000 to reduce waiting lists for court-ordered men's behavioural change programs.

The number of family violence intervention orders has more than doubled over the last 10 years.⁵⁹

Last year, 29 women and eight children died due to family violence.⁶⁰

The dramatic rise in the number of family violence reports and referrals has not been matched with increased resources for the services receiving them. Services have insufficient funds to support women and children beyond an immediate crisis response. There is significant need for additional supports to help address the long-term consequences women and children escaping family violence face; such as securing and sustaining housing and employment, and managing social and psychological repercussions of their experiences and to help meet the high demand for men's behavioural change programs that hold perpetrators to account. The Royal Commission is an opportunity to consider where additional funding, reform and support are required.

"We all need to take responsibility, to challenge ourselves, to test ourselves and to hold all parts of the system accountable; because it might be that the whole system needs an overhaul."⁶¹

Support family violence survivors throughout the Royal Commission process

The state government can support people with lived experience of family violence who tell their story to the Royal Commission by ensuring a range of counselling and support services are available to help them throughout the process. Hearing the voices of family violence survivors will help us understand the causes, the barriers to speaking out and the challenges in navigating complex systems that need to be overcome to prevent family violence occurring. However it is likely to be enormously difficult for many survivors of family violence to tell their story. They may be further traumatised by the experience of speaking to the Royal Commission and may also expect outcomes that it is unable or ill-equipped to deliver.

People telling their story must be well-informed about the hearing process and the possible outcomes of making a submission, and well-supported throughout the process. Family violence survivors will need access to advice, counselling and community support to help them decide whether to participate, and if they do, to support them during the hearing process and address any trauma experienced as a result. Some people may also benefit from legal advice or referral to other services, such as financial counselling.

The national Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse recognised the risk of trauma for those telling their stories and funded a range of support services, in areas including counselling, advocacy, legal assistance and representation, and case management.

59 Magistrates' Court of Victoria, *2012–13 Annual Report*, 2013, p. 52.

60 K Lay, 'Changing the Culture, Changing the System' (edited extract from speech to the May 2014 VCOSS Summit), *Insight 11*, October 2014.

61 K Lay, 'Changing the Culture, Changing the System' (edited extract from speech to the May 2014 VCOSS Summit), *Insight 11*, October 2014.

It is also likely that the publicity around the Royal Commission will encourage some people experiencing violence to seek help. A sudden increase in the number of people seeking support will put additional pressure on family violence services. Crisis response, family support, homelessness, legal assistance and other services will need additional capacity to respond to any surge in demand driven by the Royal Commission.

■ **Develop and deliver a comprehensive primary prevention program**

The state government can further combat the attitudes and stereotypes that lead to family violence by developing and delivering a primary prevention plan tackling the attitudes and stereotypes that lead to family violence.

Victoria cannot afford to only respond to family violence after it occurs. Given the social, economic and health consequences it poses for women, their children and communities, we must also develop and deliver a suite of strategies that help prevent it.

There is growing international evidence that the causes of this violence can be eliminated.⁶² Gender inequality has been found to be the fundamental driver of violence against women.⁶³ Some primary prevention strategies focus on changing individual behaviour or building individual people's knowledge and skills. However, the structural, cultural and social contexts in which violence occurs are also very important for primary prevention. This includes rigid gender stereotypes, and the attitudes and gender inequality under which violence against women and children is excused or minimised.

Up to one in five people believe there are circumstances in which violence can be excused and one in five believe there are circumstances in which women bear some responsibility for violence.⁶⁴

To be effective, a statewide primary prevention plan would be delivered through a range of settings, including schools, workplaces, the media and sporting clubs, and target many levels of influence – individual/relationship, community, and organisational and societal.

The previous Labor Government's Plan to Prevent Violence Against Women 2010–2020, *A Right to Respect*, was a well-regarded and comprehensive strategy to build upon.

■ **Deliver the Workforce Development Program on Gender and Disability**

The state government can help women with disabilities feel confident in reporting violence and seeking assistance, by extending the pilot funding of the Workforce Development Program on Gender and Disability, due to expire in August 2015.

Women with disabilities experience higher levels of all forms of violence than other women and are subjected to violence by a greater number of perpetrators. Over one third of women with disabilities experience some form of intimate partner violence and more than 70 per cent have been victims of sexual violence at some time in their life.⁶⁵

62 World Health Organisation, *Violence prevention the evidence; Promoting gender equality to prevent violence against women*, 2009, p. 4.

63 VicHealth, *Findings from the 2013 National Community Attitudes towards Violence against Women Survey*, September 2014, p. 16.

64 VicHealth, *Findings from the 2013 National Community Attitudes towards Violence against Women Survey*, September 2014, p. 17.

65 Women with Disabilities Australia, University NSW and People with Disabilities, *Stop the Violence: Improving Service Delivery for Women and Girls with disabilities*, 2013.

The Workforce Development Program on Gender and Disability is a training package aimed at improving the quality of gender sensitive practice among disability service managers and workers. It aims to prevent violence against women with disabilities and improve their wellbeing. This program was piloted in 2014. It is co-facilitated by women with disabilities, working alongside trainers with expertise in violence prevention and response.

Violence against women with disabilities often goes unreported and many women who have experienced violence are fearful or unable to access family violence support services. To support them, family violence support services need to ensure prevention programs and services are inclusive of women with disabilities. Similarly, disability services must be equipped to support women who have experienced, or are at risk of experiencing violence.

“I wanted to leave this house to just have time away and I got off my wheelchair to change... into my clothes and he came in to my room and took a wheel off my wheel chair so I couldn’t then leave.” – Michelle⁶⁶

“It was a case of, you know, ‘you can’t cook’, ‘you’ll never be able to look after yourself’, ‘you’re disabled’ and it was always an emphasis on the ‘dis’... To me it was just, well this is what it’s like in families.” – Louise⁶⁷

Further policy directions

- **Fully implement the recommendations of the Royal Commission:** The state government has committed to establishing a Royal Commission into Family Violence, advised by a panel of family violence survivors and service providers, and to implementing all recommendations.
- **Develop strategies to address the disproportionately high rates of family violence experienced by Aboriginal women and children:** Aboriginal women are 34 times more likely to be hospitalised as a result of family violence⁶⁸ and family violence is present in 64 per cent of child protection cases involving Aboriginal children.⁶⁹ Targeted strategies and expansion of existing services are needed to address the specific needs of this vulnerable group.
- **Pursue gender equity:** A number of social and economic factors combine over the course of women’s lives that lead to poorer health and economic outcomes, including gender stereotypes, workplace segregation, career choice and caring responsibilities.
- **Collect, analyse and publish gender disaggregated data:** Systemic collection, analysis and use of gender data across a range of health and social indicators will help identify trends and patterns and highlight better ways to promote gender equity.

66 D Woodlock, D Western, P Bailey, *Voices against Violence: Paper 6, Raising our voices—hearing from women with disabilities*, WDV, Melbourne, 2014, p. 36.

67 D Woodlock, D Western, P Bailey, *Voices Against Violence: Paper 6, Raising our voices—hearing from women with disabilities*, WDV, Melbourne, 2014, p. 32.

68 Productivity Commission, *Overcoming Indigenous Disadvantage Key Indicators: 2014*, 2014, Table 4A.11.22.

69 Victorian Government, *Indigenous Affairs Report 2007–08*, 2008, p. 51.



Invest in integrated support for children and families

New models of integrated service delivery are being developed to improve children's and families' wellbeing and education in areas of entrenched social disadvantage. There are a number of promising models of effective prevention and early intervention for vulnerable children and families. Extending a range of these models across the state to match local community needs will help families build brighter futures and break cycles of intergenerational disadvantage.

Vulnerable children and families often have difficulty finding out about and accessing the services they need. By integrating a range of services, families can more easily access services including maternal and child health, allied health, early childhood education, intensive family support services, income support and counselling services, if they need them.⁷⁰

Case study

Bubup Wilam for Early Learning, located in Thomastown, is an Aboriginal controlled and run child and family centre. It provides high quality early childhood education and care and integrated services for about 70 Aboriginal children aged from 6 months to school age. It provides a high quality curriculum centred on building strength and identity in Aboriginal culture and strong support for children and families. The health and wellbeing program includes early childhood transition to school programs, maternal and child health, and extra supports for children at risk of poor developmental outcomes. Low child to educator ratios are needed to support these sometimes highly vulnerable children who are facing complex issues at home.

⁷⁰ Department of Education and Early Childhood Development, *Evaluation of Victorian children's centres: Literature review*, Victorian Government, 2008.

Increase the reach of MCH services to vulnerable families

The state government can help more families facing disadvantage access Maternal and Child Health (MCH) services, and access more intensive services as required, by expanding universal and targeted MCH services. This could include delivering more MCH services co-located with early childhood community services and English language services, extending 'cultural competency' training for MCH nurses and increasing their ability to make home visits after the first visit.

Victoria's MCH service provides universal access to health and wellbeing supports in the important developmental stages of the early years of a child's life. The 2014 *Starting out Strong* maternal and child health strategy⁷¹ is a foundation for further developing this universal platform to ensure vulnerable families can use universal MCH services as a pathway into the broader service system, and receive early intervention and intensive support before problems become entrenched.

The annual birth rate in Victoria is 18 per cent higher than it was 10 years ago and is expected to rise another 9.6 per cent between 2010 and 2018.⁷² Growth is particularly strong in some urban growth corridors and regional areas.

In 2012–13 participation rates among Aboriginal Victorians dropped away at a greater rate than for the rest of the population, from birth to 3.5 years of age.⁷³ Approximately 80 per cent of culturally and linguistically diverse (CALD) mothers received the first home visit, but only 35 per cent made the 3.5 year visit.⁷⁴ Recent research has highlighted barriers for families from CALD backgrounds in accessing MCH services.⁷⁵

Starting out Strong is also a foundation for expanding targeted supports for vulnerable groups through the Enhanced Maternal and Child Health Service (EMCHS). The EMCHS needs to be expanded for vulnerable families and children beyond 12 months of age.

Incorporating the lessons from the evidence-based models currently being trialled in MCH for vulnerable children (including the right@home Sustained Home Visiting and Streamlining Ante-natal to Four Services for Vulnerable Children programs), into new areas and initiatives (such as Child FIRST, and Children and Youth Area Partnerships), will also help support vulnerable children to overcome disadvantage.

Fund supported playgroups to increase family engagement

The state government can support vulnerable children and families by expanding the Supported Playgroups and Parent Groups Initiative (SPPI), and other innovative supported playgroups across Victoria. This will increase opportunities for vulnerable children to learn and develop through play, and for parents to expand social networks and link to other services.

71 Department of Education and Early Childhood Development, *Starting Out Strong: Giving Victoria's children a great start through better maternal and child health*, Melbourne, 2014.

72 DEECD, *Starting Out Strong: Giving Victoria's children a great start through better maternal and child health*, Melbourne, 2014, p. 8.

73 Office of Aboriginal Affairs Victoria, *Aboriginal Affairs Report 2012–13*, 2014, p. 2.6.

74 E Riggs et al., *Accessing maternal and child health services in Melbourne, Australia: Reflections from refugee families and service providers*, BMC Health Services Research, Vol. 12, No. 1, 2012.

75 E Riggs et al., *Accessing maternal and child health services in Melbourne, Australia: Reflections from refugee families and service providers*, BMC Health Services Research, Vol. 12, No. 1, 2012.

Playgroups develop along a continuum, from the community playgroups, which are often parent-led, to more supported groups, which support families with identified vulnerabilities, and more intensive playgroups, which provide increased family support.

The SPPI, introduced by the previous state Labor government, is currently available in 29 of Victoria's 79 local government areas. It fosters a partnership approach between local government and a wide range of community service agencies working with vulnerable families and children.

A DEECD evaluation found participation in a supported playgroup had a positive effect on parents' social networks and helped build their confidence and skills. It found supported playgroups should be retained in the suite of services targeting families facing isolation and other risks. The evaluation identified a number of service developments that would improve outcomes, including funding for playgroup facilitators to undertake more intensive parental engagement.⁷⁶

■ **Expand intensive support for parents from pregnancy through to early childhood**

The state government can support vulnerable children who may be at risk of entering the child protection system, by investing further to build on intensive early intervention and prevention programs that support mothers and their families, from pregnancy into their child's early years of life. Intensive early support can help prevent families coming into contact with child protection agencies later on.

For example, the Cradle to Kinder and Aboriginal Cradle to Kinder programs provide intensive support to young mothers and families where several vulnerabilities have been identified, such as young mothers with a history of child protection or youth justice involvement. The programs aim to prevent the need for child protection involvement by connecting families with supports such as maternal and child health, housing, mental health and alcohol and drug services.

Importantly, support commences in pregnancy and continues until the child reaches four years of age. The main aim is to help young parents nurture their child's healthy and safe development and assist mothers with their own education, training and employment needs.

Currently 10 programs are funded and the program overall is being evaluated. Plans to expand intensive support programs could build on the outcome of this evaluation, and the right@home Sustained Home Visiting program, which is also being rigorously researched, to enable more vulnerable children and families to benefit from intensive support.

■ **Expand Child FIRST and Integrated Family Support Services to work with more families before they reach crisis point**

The state government can help families get the right support when they need it, by expanding the capacity of Child FIRST and Integrated Family Support Services to work with more vulnerable families before they reach crisis point.

Child FIRST (Child and Family Information, Referral and Support Teams) operates in 24 catchments across Victoria. It provides community-based referral points to connect vulnerable children, young people and their families to the community services they need to protect and promote their development. Some families require further support to manage concerns. If Child FIRST assess that a family requires a more intensive support service, a referral is made to Integrated Family Support Services to work with the family.

⁷⁶ DEECD, *Supported Playgroups and Parent Groups Initiative Outcomes Evaluation*, 2012.

To reduce the growing demand on the out-of-home care system, we need to focus more on programs such as these, which can help improve family environments and prevent vulnerable children and young people needing out-of-home care. Currently many family services provide *earlier* intervention rather than *early* intervention. Too many Victorian families only receive support once they reach crisis point, which may be too late. Expanding Child FIRST and Integrated Family Support Services will help services provide support to families earlier, as the need emerges.

Reports to child protection are expected to grow 11 per cent in 2014–15, from 81,000 to 90,000. The target for family services cases increases only marginally in that period from 33,167 to 33,600.⁷⁷

Expand integrated service models from the early years through to secondary school

The state government can help young people overcome barriers to learning by investing in integrated service models that take a holistic approach to supporting vulnerable children and young people through primary and secondary school. These models are showing strong outcomes in areas

of entrenched social disadvantage and could be extended across the state in a way that matches local community needs.

Integrated schools – sometimes called Extended Service Schools, Extended School Hubs and Full Service Schools – deliver mainstream education along with other community services, such as early childhood services, health services, and education and training support for parents. These extended supports are delivered in partnership with a range of organisations. Integrated schools aim to break down barriers to learning, and connect students and their families to support services that improve their learning, health and wellbeing.

These models have been found to achieve better results over traditional schools due to three main advantages:

1. They garner additional resources for the school and reduce demands on school staff.
2. They provide learning opportunities that develop both academic and non-academic competencies.
3. They offer young people, their families and community residents opportunities to build social capital.⁷⁸

⁷⁷ Victorian Budget 2014–15 Budget Paper No. 3, p. 168.

⁷⁸ McKinsey & Company, *Extended Service School Models: International Case Studies*, The Smith Family, 2010, p. 2.

Yuille Park Community College

In Ballarat, the Yuille Park Community College provides an integrated and holistic ‘hub’ approach to lifelong learning. The College involves a Prep–Year 8 school, kindergarten, and occasional childcare, an information technology centre for the community, adult education opportunities and partnerships with other community services. The college is based in Wendouree West, an area experiencing high unemployment, poverty and low levels of educational engagement.

Further policy directions

- **Further support place-based approaches to solving complex problems:** There is now a growing evidence base about place-based approaches to preventing and responding to vulnerability and disadvantage for children, young people and families.⁷⁹ Children and Youth Area Partnerships have been established to create new ways of working to join up social services and supports in Victoria to support better outcomes for vulnerable children and young people.⁸⁰ Go Goldfields, is an example of an innovative alliance of organisations, created to deliver locally relevant responses to complex and long-term social issues.⁸¹ These evidence-informed place-based approaches require resourcing, support and ongoing evaluation regarding how they are shifting trajectories for children and families who are facing disadvantage.
- **Invest in innovative early intervention models such as adventure playgrounds:** Adventure playgrounds provide a play space for children and their families who experience financial and other social barriers to accessing recreational activities. The playgrounds are supervised and many offer programs or provide referrals to help families access the supports they need early. There are

five adventure playgrounds in Melbourne linked to public housing estates in St Kilda, South Melbourne, Kensington, Fitzroy and Prahran. Adventure playgrounds were federally funded, until the 2014–15 Federal Budget cut this funding, at which point local councils stepped in to assist. However, funding for them is uncertain beyond June 2015.

79 T.G Moore, H McHugh-Dillon, K Bull, R Fry, B Laidlaw and S West, *The evidence: what we know about place-based approaches to support children's wellbeing*, Parkville, Victoria, Murdoch Children's Research Institute and The Royal Children's Hospital Centre for Community Child Health, 2014.

80 Department of Human Services, Children and Youth Area Partnerships <http://www.dhs.vic.gov.au/about-the-department/plans,-programs-and-projects/projects-and-initiatives/children,-youth-and-family-services/children-and-youth-area-partnerships>

81 See Go Goldfields website <http://www.centralgoldfields.com.au>



Make child protection work

Urgent investment is required to meet the needs of those children, young people and families in the child protection system. With the number of child protection reports continuing to rise to record levels, family services are struggling to meet demand, putting some of our most vulnerable children further at risk.

More than 82,000 reports of abuse and neglect were received by the Victorian Department of Human Services in 2013–14; a 12 per cent increase from the previous year.⁸² In the last 10 years, the number of children in out-of-home care has increased by 60 per cent and the number of children in residential care has grown by 10 per cent.⁸³ On an average day, around 7,200 children and young people in Victoria are in out-of-home care.⁸⁴

The residential care system cannot meet the level of demand and has been operating over capacity since at least 2008.⁸⁵ In 2012–13, there was a 10 per cent shortfall between funded capacity and actual demand for residential placements for these vulnerable young people.⁸⁶

Significant work has been done to address the pressure on Victoria's child protection system since the release of the 2012 *Protecting Victoria's Vulnerable Children Inquiry* report.⁸⁷ This work needs to continue, so all parts of the system better respond to vulnerable children, young people and families. VCOSS also supports the directions outlined in the 2014 *Victorian Labor Platform*, including a focus on stable and therapeutic placements, providing children in care with enhanced education opportunities and placing Aboriginal children in care with Aboriginal families where possible, to help them stay connected to their community and culture.

All families require support at different times to enhance the environments in which children are raised. Many families face complex challenges and it is important that support is available early before problems escalate and require the involvement of child protection services.

Family violence is one of the biggest reasons for children and young people needing out-of-home care.⁸⁸ Initiatives addressing this, outlined in the 'Prevent family violence' section of this submission, will help address the effect of this violence on children. Much greater investment is also needed in a broad range of prevention and early intervention initiatives to address issues early and reduce costs in the longer term. These are outlined in the 'Help every child succeed in education', 'Invest in integrated services' and the 'Create healthy communities' sections of this submission.

82 Victorian Budget 2014–15 Budget paper No 3 p. 168.

83 Victorian Auditor-General's Office, *Residential Care Services for Children*, 2014, p. xi.

84 Victorian Budget 2014–15 Budget Paper No. 3, p. 167.

85 Victorian Auditor-General's Office, *Residential Care Services for Children*, 2014, p. x.

86 Victorian Auditor-General's Office, *Residential Care Services for Children*, 2014, p. 23.

87 P Cummins, D Scott and B Scales, *Report of the Protecting Victoria's Vulnerable Children Inquiry*, State of Victoria, Department of Premier and Cabinet, Melbourne, 2012.

88 Commission for Children and Young People, *Annual Report 2013–14*, p. 5.

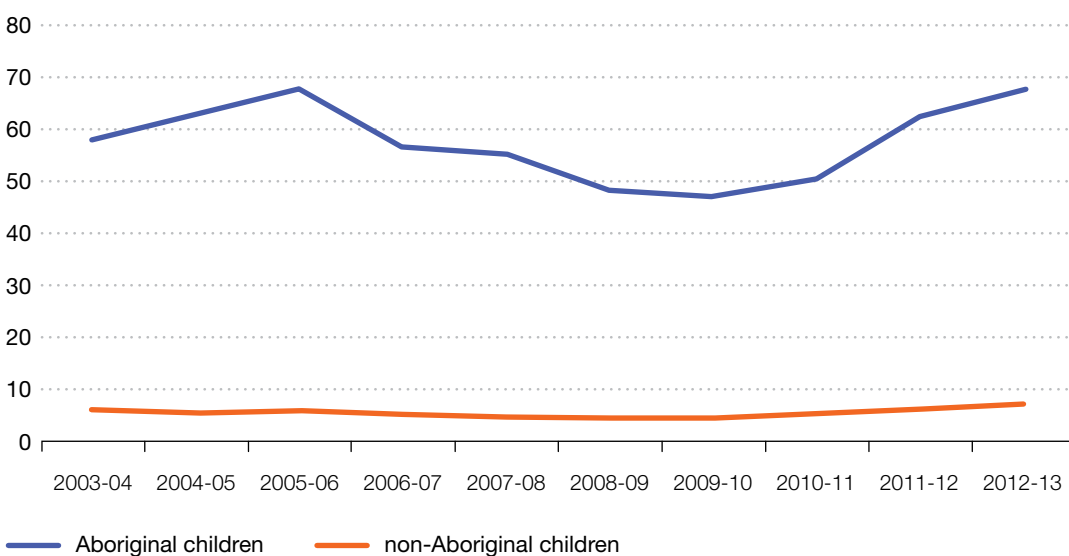
Expand the capacity of Aboriginal community controlled organisations to support vulnerable Aboriginal children and young people

The state government can improve the safety, wellbeing and connection to culture of Aboriginal children in out-of-home care by enabling Aboriginal community controlled organisations to provide more early intervention and intensive family support, participate in decision-making about care and placement options, and work with the Department of Health and Human Services.

Aboriginal children are 16 times more likely than non-Aboriginal children to be in out-of-home care.⁸⁹ The rate of Aboriginal children in out-of-home care in Victoria is one of the highest in Australia. At current levels, the rate of Aboriginal child removal in Victoria exceeds that at any time since white settlement.⁹⁰ About two-thirds of children are in child protection because of family violence.⁹¹

Child protection substantiations in Victoria 2003–2013

Figure 6: Rate per 1000 children aged 0–17 years where child protection notifications have been substantiated, Victoria⁹²



To reduce the number of Aboriginal children and young people entering out-of-home care, providing more early intervention support must be a priority. A key issue is ensuring there are enough qualified Aboriginal people to work in Aboriginal community controlled organisations and mainstream organisations that offer early intervention child and family support. A workforce plan needs to be developed to sustainably grow this workforce.

89 Commission for Children and Young People, *Annual Report 2013–14*, 2014, p. 37.

90 Commission for Children and Young People, *Annual Report 2013–14*, 2014, p. 37.

91 Commission for Children and Young People, *Annual Report 2013–14*, p. 5.

92 Aboriginal Affairs Report 2012–13, 2014, p. 32.

For families already in the child protection system, the Lakidjeka and Aboriginal Child Specialist Advice and Support Service (ACSASS) advises on culturally relevant ways of working with Aboriginal families and children on statutory orders in all significant child protection decisions. Funding to enable ACSASS to recruit and retain more skilled staff, provide an after-hours service in each region, and a new service in the eastern region, will help it support more families. ACSASS funding levels have not kept pace with demand and workers carry an unsustainable caseload: 110 caseloads per metropolitan worker and 60 per regional worker; far greater than the benchmark 35 cases suggested in a review of the service.⁹³

Increased ACSASS workforce capacity will also help ensure all Aboriginal children in out-of-home care have a Cultural Support Plan. This is a legal requirement, yet about 81 per cent of Aboriginal children in out-of-home care do not have a Cultural Support Plan.⁹⁴

■ Increase foster carer reimbursement rates to the national average to attract, support and retain carers

The state government can support Victoria’s most vulnerable children by attracting more foster carers into the system through improved carer allowances and supports, the rates of which have not increased for more than a decade.

The foster care system is struggling to recruit and retain enough carers for the vulnerable children who need out-of-home care. More foster carers are exiting the system than entering it; in 2012–13 442 carer households entered the system, but 616 exited.⁹⁵ The increased financial pressure on carers is a key factor in this.

Foster carer allowances have not increased in Victoria for more than a decade. In 2011 the cost of caring for a 10-year-old in foster care was estimated to be \$265 a week. Victoria provides just \$165 a week to foster carers – the lowest of any Australian jurisdiction.⁹⁶ The gap between the foster care allowance and the actual cost of caring for a child is now as much as \$5,356 per year.⁹⁷

Table 2: Summary of state/territory payment age bands and rates

State/territory	Number of age bands (a)	Payment range, \$ per fortnight (b)
Australian Capital Territory	3	434–652
New South Wales	3	413–622
Northern Territory	5	256–451
Queensland	3	410–480
South Australia	4	279–603
Tasmania	3	351–464
Victoria	4	262–419
Western Australia	5	323–438

- (a) Differential rates of payment based on age of child
- (b) Minimum-maximum, base rate only, rounded to nearest dollar

Source: Centre for Excellence in Child and Family Welfare: <http://www.cfecfw.asn.au/news/2014/11/election-latest>

93 Effective Change, *Review of the Lakidjeka (ACSASS) Service*, Melbourne, 2010 (unpublished).

94 Victorian Auditor-General’s Office, *Residential Care Services for Children*, 2014, p. 18.

95 Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, *Child Protection Australia: 2012–13*, Child Welfare series No.58. Cat. No. CWS 49. Canberra, 2014, p. 60.

96 Berry Street and Foster Care Association of Victoria, *Saving Victoria’s foster care system*, 2014.

97 <http://www.savefostercare.org.au/about>

The state government can help improve the foster care system's capacity to care for some of Victoria's most vulnerable children with a strategy that includes:

- Increasing foster care reimbursements to meet the true costs of caring for children
- Ensuring the education, medical, allied health and recreational expenses for children in foster care are covered
- Implementing and funding a coordinated, statewide foster care recruitment and retention program
- Developing professionalised models of care.⁹⁸

■ Increase kinship carer reimbursement rates to the same levels as foster care

The state government can support some of Victoria's most vulnerable children by increasing kinship carer reimbursement rates to the same levels as those provided to foster carers, to recognise the intense and complex needs of some children in kinship care.

Kinship care is provided by relatives or a member of a child's social network when a child cannot live with their parents. About half of children in Victoria's out-of-home care system are in kinship care.⁹⁹

More than half of Victoria's kinship carers report financial stress.¹⁰⁰ In foster care, there are three levels of care, general, intensive and complex, which attract different rates of reimbursement. Increased complexity attracts an increased allowance.

However, all kinship carers receive a 'general' level allowance, apart from those deemed to have exceptional circumstances. This means that there is a difference of about \$25,000 between the annual general allowance most kinship carers receive, and the highest allowance a foster carer can receive.¹⁰¹ Children in kinship care should be funded at the same differential rates as children in foster care, given they may have complex needs regardless of whether they are in kinship or foster care.

Table 3: Table of carer allowances – Foster Care

NB: Kinships carers can only access the general level allowance¹⁰²

Age (years)	Annual rate
General Level	
0–7	\$7,448
8–10	\$7,779
11–12	\$8,835
13+	\$11,916
Intensive level	
0–7	\$9,000 – 12,050
8–10	\$9,868 – 13,108
11–12	\$11,853 – 15,852
13+	\$16,654 – 22,210
Complex level	
Non-high risk	\$24,084
High Risk	\$33,707 – 37,647

98 M McHugh, A Pell, *Reforming the Foster Care System in Australia: A New Model of Support, Education and Payment for Foster Parents*, Berry Street, 2013.

99 Australian Institute of Health and Welfare. *Child protection Australia: 2012–13*, Child Welfare series no.58. Cat. no. CWS 49. Canberra, 2014, p. 48.

100 R Breman, *Peeling back the layers – kinship care in Victoria: Complexity in Kinship Care Research Report*, Bapcare, Melbourne, 2014.

101 OzChild, *Submission to the Senate Inquiry into Out-of-Home Care*, October 2014, p. 12.

102 Foster Care Association of Victoria, *FCAV Information Sheet: Carer Reimbursement Rates 2014–15*.

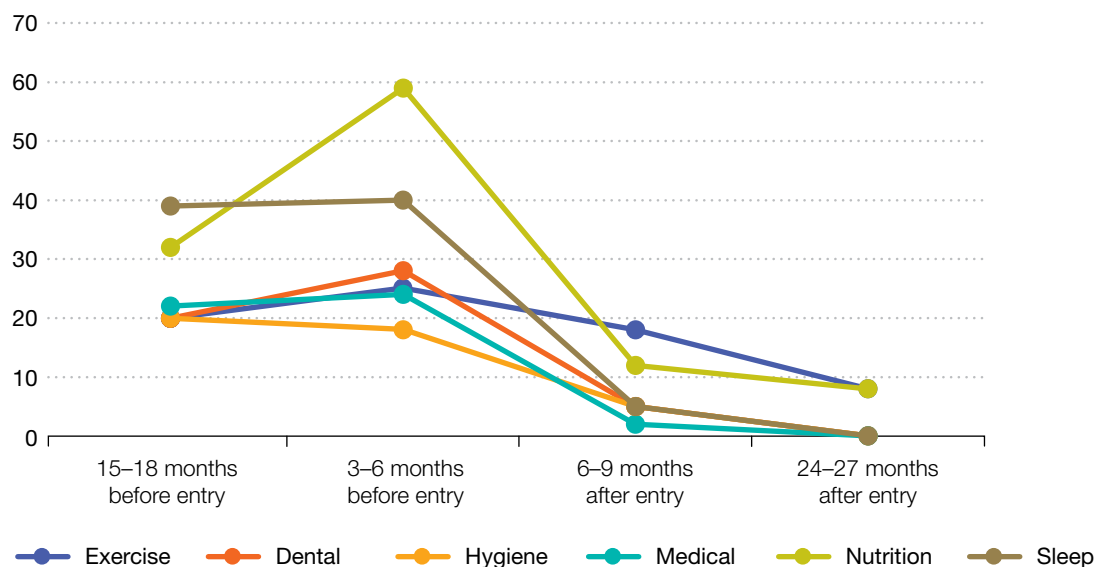
Expand therapeutic care to all parts of the out-of-home care system

The state government can help Victoria’s most vulnerable children overcome complex challenges by expanding therapeutic care to all children and young people in out-of-home care, which has been found to enhance their health, wellbeing and other outcomes.

One of the goals of the Department of Human Services’ *Out-of-Home Care Five Year Plan* is to make all residential care placements therapeutic. Therapeutic care provides a more intensive support model, with specialist staff helping to address the complex challenges that children and young people in out-of-home care have experienced and continue to face. It is a key to helping these children and young people¹⁰³ and has been found to improve their health, wellbeing and school attendance levels.¹⁰⁴

Figure 7: Health outcomes for children and young people in therapeutic residential care

Per cent of ‘poor’ or ‘very poor’ ratings



Source: Victorian Auditor-General’s Office based on Department of Human Services therapeutic residential care evaluation 2011.

Currently only 17 per cent of residential care placements are therapeutic. This is expected to increase to 30 per cent by the end of 2015.¹⁰⁵ We need to keep expanding and extending therapeutic care in residential care, and into foster care and kinship care, to promote healing and recovery from trauma for all children in out-of-home care.

103 Victorian Auditor-General’s Office, *Residential Care Services for Children*, 2014, p.xii.

104 Victorian Auditor-General’s Office, *Residential Care Services for Children*, 2014, p. 18.

105 Victorian Auditor-General’s Office, *Residential Care Services for Children*, 2014, p. 9.

Provide a housing guarantee to young people leaving care

The state government can support some of Victoria's most vulnerable young people by helping them transition successfully from out-of-home care to independent living.

Young people transitioning from out-of-home care to independent living continue to experience poorer outcomes than their peers, with over-representation in the youth justice system, poorer mental and physical health and lower education and employment participation rates.¹⁰⁶ Providing more supports for these young people as they exit care will help them pursue education and training, find stable work and housing, and build brighter futures.

All young people leaving care should be provided with support until at least the age of 21, and further support if they require it until the age of 25.

VCOSS supports the call by the Council to Homeless Persons, the Centre for Excellence in Child and Family Welfare, Victorian Aboriginal Child Care Agency and

The Anglicare *Children in Care Report Card* found:

- Only 33% of young people in care are able to organise 100 points of identification – a necessity for a number of activities most people take for granted, like getting a driver's license or opening a bank account.
- Only 22% of young people in care aged 15–17 can read and understand information on a payslip or Centrelink payment advice letter.
- Only 70% of young people in the report card were classified as having 'some' skills useful for employment.
- A much larger proportion of children and young people in care (53.4%) were at risk of developing clinically significant behavioural problems as compared to the general population (13.3%).¹⁰⁷

Berry Street to provide a housing guarantee for care leavers. This guarantee could be used for a range of supports, including a rent guarantee, to encourage more landlords to rent to young people, and a rent supplement, to assist the young person if they are studying and/or unable to work.

Further policy directions

- **Implement Section 18 of the Children, Youth and Families Act 2005:** The Government needs to make a commitment to implementing Section 18 of the *Children, Youth and Families Act 2005*, including a timeframe for implementation. The Act was introduced 10 years ago yet Section 18 is yet to be implemented. Section 18 enables the transfer of custody and guardianship responsibilities from the Department of Human Services Secretary to Aboriginal community controlled organisations.

The Establishing Section 18 project, run by the Victorian Aboriginal Child Care Agency, is trialling the transfer of guardianship with a small number of Aboriginal children. The project should be monitored and outcomes used to inform the implementation of Section 18.

Further, the Taskforce 1000 project is focused on improving the experiences of Aboriginal children in care. The findings of Taskforce 1000 should inform the development of an out-of-home care plan for Aboriginal children and young people and work to reduce the numbers of children coming into out-of-home care.

- **Take a cross-sectoral approach to working with vulnerable families:** The *Vulnerable Children Strategy* adopts a cross-sectoral approach to working with vulnerable families and its emphasis on enhancing responses by universal and specialist services should continue, to ensure families' needs are identified early and appropriate supports provided.

¹⁰⁶ P Mendes, *Young people transitioning from out-of-home care: a critical analysis of Australian and international policy and practice*, Australian Social Work, In Press, October 2009.

¹⁰⁷ S Wise and T Smith, *Children in Care Report Card*, Anglicare Victoria, Melbourne, 2014.



Create healthy and inclusive communities

Health and wellbeing are influenced by social determinants – the conditions in which people are born, grow, live, work and age. In Australia, the higher your income and education level, the better your health will tend to be, creating health inequality.

People on low incomes, people in rural and remote areas and Aboriginal people, on average, have poorer health, die earlier and receive less healthcare than other Australians. Australians aged 25–44 in the lowest socioeconomic group are nearly five times more likely to have a chronic health condition as those in the highest.¹⁰⁸ Mental ill-health is closely associated with poor physical health, poverty, unemployment and homelessness.

The health system needs more than hospitals, ambulances, and elective surgery waiting lists. Primary and community health services are often the first point of contact for people needing care. It is far more efficient and effective to invest in these services than to treat later consequences of health issues in hospital.

The introduction of the National Disability Insurance Scheme (NDIS) should increase the level of care, choice and services for some people with disabilities. However, it will not address all the barriers they face, and many people with disabilities and mental ill-health will not qualify for its support.

Carers of people with disabilities provide hours of unpaid work, supporting vulnerable Victorians, often at the expense of their own health and life opportunities. Many carers are not well supported, and struggle to get the information they need, especially in the face of a system undergoing reform.

■ Target and expand alcohol and other drug treatment services

The state government can help fill treatment gaps for some target groups, including older people, lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and intersex (LGBTI) people and people in rural and regional areas, as well as reducing waiting lists across the broader community, by targeting and expanding resources for Victorian alcohol and other drug (AOD) treatment services.

Only 30 per cent of people who need treatment are currently receiving it.¹⁰⁹ Investment in the AOD treatment system will help people get treatment earlier and reduce demand for acute treatment.

Alcohol and drug use is a common contributor to health and other social problems in Victoria, such as family breakdown and violence, homelessness, unemployment and road accidents. One in four Australians report being victims of alcohol-related physical or verbal abuse.¹¹⁰

108 NATSEM, *Health lies in wealth; Health inequalities in Australians of working age, Report No 1/10*, September 2010, p. x.

109 P Buykx et al, *Planning alcohol and other drug services in rural and remote areas; the role of spatial access*, Drug Modelling Program Working Paper #2, 2013, p. 9 (and quoted in Victorian Alcohol and Drug Association, *Election Platform 2014*, 2014).

110 Victorian Department of Health, *Reducing the Alcohol and Drug Toll: Victoria's Plan 2013–17*, January 2013, p. 7.

Some population groups are at higher risk of alcohol and drug related harm and may face problems getting treatment. Older people experience more health problems, consume more pharmaceuticals and are more likely to consume alcohol daily, putting them at risk of alcohol and drug related harm.¹¹¹ However, there is only one AOD treatment program in Victoria specifically for older people. LGBTI people are more likely to experience alcohol and drug dependence and harm, and require targeted harm reduction messages and LGBTI sensitive services. People living in rural and regional areas have limited access to AOD treatment services, despite growing rates of alcohol and drug related harm, and high rates of suicide and drug related deaths.

New investment in community-based AOD treatment services will reduce the high rates of alcohol and drug related harm, target underserved and at-risk population groups and reduce general waiting lists.

As well as expanding general service availability, areas for targeted investment include:

- Pilot outreach and residential treatment programs for older people
- Harm reduction initiatives for LGBTI communities and piloting of a LGBTI specific treatment programs
- Expansion of existing services in rural and regional areas.

Resource Aboriginal community controlled health organisations to improve people's mental health and wellbeing

The state government can help close the gap and improve Aboriginal people's mental health and wellbeing by increasing funding targeted to mental health specific programs within Aboriginal community controlled health organisations. This funding can be targeted to mental health specific programs that are Aboriginal led, including by the community controlled health services, or where there are strong partnerships between mainstream organisations and the Aboriginal community to ensure the programs take account of Aboriginal people's circumstances, needs and values.

Aboriginal community controlled services have insufficient resources to provide mental health services to Aboriginal people, despite increases in funding for other health areas. Aboriginal Victorians continue to experience poorer mental health and receive less support than non-Aboriginal people.

More than a third of Aboriginal people in Victoria report high levels of psychological distress, a rate three times higher than for the non-Aboriginal population.¹¹² Rates of self-harm among young Aboriginal people are also disproportionately high.¹¹³

A recent Australian Institute of Health and Welfare (AIHW) report found that Aboriginal views of mental health and social and emotional wellbeing are different to the mainstream population's views, indicating a need for specialised programs. Programs that show promising results for Aboriginal social and emotional wellbeing are those that encourage self-determination and community governance, reconnection and community life, and restoration and community resilience.¹¹⁴

111 See AIHW, *National Drug Strategy Household Survey: detailed report 2013, 2014* and, Simon Ruth, 'Australia is ageing', *Older people and alcohol and other drugs*, Drug Info. 9 (2), August 2011.

112 AIHW, *Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Health Performance Framework 2012 Report: Victoria*, p. 40.

113 AIHW for the Closing the Gap Clearinghouse, *Effective strategies to strengthen the mental health and wellbeing of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people; Issues Paper no. 12*, November 2014, p. 2.

114 AIHW for the Closing the Gap Clearinghouse, *Effective strategies to strengthen the mental health and wellbeing of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people; Issues Paper no. 12*, November 2014, p. 3.

■ Create more mental health Prevention and Recovery Centres for young people and extended stays

The state government can help people better manage and recover from mental illness and keep people out of hospital by creating more mental health Prevention and Recovery Centres (PARCs) for young people (Y-PARCs) and extended stays (E-PARCs).

PARC programs are adult residential services that provide recovery care and intensive support, usually for short stays, to people struggling with mental ill-health. They provide early intervention opportunities, help prevent the need for more acute care, and give people a chance to further recover following hospital admission. More cost-effective and recovery oriented than hospital beds, PARCs have been shown to deliver positive outcomes.¹¹⁵

Mental health organisations estimate there are more than 500 people across Victoria who would benefit from access to PARC services, but are unable to access them.¹¹⁶ There is a particular need for E-PARCs, which provide the capacity for up to six-month stays.

“We can no longer afford to not have a proper understanding of the value of good mental health.”¹¹⁷

Young people are especially vulnerable to mental health issues. Youth services report that along with housing, mental health is the highest area of need for young people.¹¹⁸

In recent years, Y-PARCs have been established for young people, to provide specialist residential support. However, with only a handful available, many young people are unable to access this valuable support. New investment in infrastructure and program support is needed to increase young people’s access to residential services like Y-PARCs.

14% of Australia’s children and young people have mental health problems.¹¹⁹

52% of 20–24 year-olds with a mental illness have not completed Year 12 or attained a Cert II or above, compared to 15.5% for the general population.¹²⁰

115 See for example, J Petrenko, H Mildred, R Gedge, EHAMHS, *Evaluation of the PARC model of mental health care*, July 2009.

116 Mind, *Putting the Spotlight on Mental Health*, ‘Step up or step down; Prevention and Recovery Care services’, Spring 2014, p. 9.

117 A Fels, National Mental Health Commission, *A Contributing Life; the 2013 National Report Card on Mental Health and Suicide Prevention*, November 2013, p. 7.

118 VCOSS and YACVic, *Building the Scaffolding: Strengthening support for young people in Victoria*, 2013, p. 53.

119 National Mental Health Commission, *A Contributing Life; the 2013 National Report Card on Mental Health and Suicide Prevention*, November 2013, p. 29.

120 National Mental Health Commission, *A Contributing Life; the 2013 National Report Card on Mental Health and Suicide Prevention*, November 2013, p. 29.

■ Fill the gaps in mental health support for people experiencing homelessness

The state government can support some of Victoria's most vulnerable people by filling the gaps in assertive mental health outreach and drop-in services for people experiencing homelessness. Many of these people are at risk of not engaging in the newly reformed mental health community support services system and are more likely to seek help from services they know and trust.

The recent mental health community support services reform process has created single access points for services in each region. Some very vulnerable Victorians, including people experiencing homelessness and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, are less likely to gain support through this model or attend formal, appointment-based services.

Drop-in programs and homelessness services have established relationships with many of these hard to reach people and are well placed to provide holistic support or 'soft entry' points to people with mental illness.

The state government has committed to funding some programs in this area. This could be built upon to ensure an effective range of programs are in place for people with mental health needs who are at risk of homelessness.

■ Expand the Victorian Patient Transport Assistance Scheme

The state government can make it easier for people living in rural and regional areas to access specialist healthcare by expanding the Victorian Patient Transport Assistance Scheme (VPTAS) to provide subsidies that more fairly reflect travel costs incurred, and by making the system easier to navigate.

VPTAS subsidises patients travelling from rural and regional Victoria to access specialist healthcare; but still leaves people with out-of-pocket costs. High out-of-pocket costs disadvantage people on low incomes and contribute to poorer health.¹²¹ The Victorian government can make it easier for rural and regional Victorians to get the healthcare they need by increasing VPTAS payment levels and streamlining administration.

People are eligible for VPTAS if they travel 500 kilometres per week for five or more weeks to access specialist healthcare. This requirement is too onerous and means many people who are required to travel frequently are missing out. Payment rates and eligibility are also significantly tougher than in other jurisdictions. Victoria pays less per kilometre than both the NSW and Queensland schemes. Accommodation contributions are also lower than in both NSW and Queensland, while South Australia, whose rate is equivalent to Victoria's, is in the process of reviewing this in recognition of its inadequacy.¹²² The Victorian rates are far below the actual costs of travel and accommodation people face.

Administrative requirements place an additional burden on people already suffering from illness or poor health. The VPTAS system requires approval from medical specialists, maintenance of a travel diary, completion of forms and usually upfront payment, which is later reimbursed. This system needs to be reformed to ensure simple and timely access to financial support for rural and regional Victorians in need of specialist healthcare.

121 S Jan, BM Essue and SR Leeder, 'Falling through the cracks: the hidden economic burden of chronic disease and disability on Australian households', *Medical Journal of Australia* 196 (1), 16 January 2012, pp. 29–31.

122 D Filbey, *Review of the South Australian Patient Assistance Transport Scheme*, December 2013, p. 20.

■ Deliver on election commitment to give people with mental illness continued access to community mental health support

The state government can support people with a mental illness who are ineligible for support through the NDIS, by delivering on its election commitment to continue funding community mental health support and recovery services for this group.

While the NDIS covers people with a psychosocial disability associated with mental illness, to qualify for an individual support package people need to have a permanent impairment. Many people with episodic mental illness may not fit within this strict eligibility requirement. When the NDIS is rolled out statewide, it is estimated up to 10,000 Victorians living with mental illness will not be eligible for NDIS support.¹²³

However, unlike in other states, the previous Victorian Government committed all its mental health community support funds to the NDIS. The launch site in Barwon has already shown there are significant gaps for mental health consumers as a result.¹²⁴ There are now no state-funded community mental health services in Barwon for people who are ineligible for NDIS support packages. Community-based mental health services are vital to help people manage and recover from mental illness.

During the 2014 state election campaign, the ALP announced that people with mental illness who are not eligible for the NDIS will continue to have access to community mental health services. The state budget is an opportunity to deliver on this welcome announcement.

“To be eligible for NDIS funding one has to sign an agreement that one is permanently disabled. It’s a major moral dilemma. They don’t know what they’re asking us to sign. It’s saying ‘I give up, I’m never going to recover’.”¹²⁵

■ Increase the availability of Individual Support Packages and Disability Aids

In the interim period before the NDIS is fully rolled out across the state, the state government can better support people with a disability by funding at least 1000 new Individual Support Packages (ISPs) and expanding the Disability Aids and Equipment Program. This will help reduce long waiting lists and support people to live in the community. People with disabilities should not have to wait years for support.

VCOSS and the community sector strongly support the introduction of the NDIS and the additional funding accompanying it. However, according to current timeframes it will not be fully rolled out until 2019. In the meantime there are nearly 4400 people on a waiting list for ISPs, who are unable to find supported accommodation or live independently in the community. The waiting list has grown significantly from 3700 people two years ago.

There are also long waiting times for essential equipment under the Disability Aids and Equipment Program. Equipment and assistive technology is essential for many people with a disability to go about their daily lives, access education, employment and recreation, develop and maintain relationships, and participate in the community. The Victorian government should supplement this program funding to help it meet demand while people wait for the full rollout of the NDIS.

123 Based on Deloitte Access Economics, *PDRSS Demand Modelling Report*, October 2013, quoted in VICSERV, *Safeguarding outcomes for people living with mental illness*, 2014, p. 2.

124 See for example, Mental Illness Fellowship Victoria, *NDIS: Victorians with mental illness miss out*, 31 October 2014.

125 Participant in event, Mental Illness Fellowship Victoria, *NDIS: Victorians with mental illness miss out*, 31 October 2014.

■ Invest in specialist transition support and planning for older carers

The state government can help older carers to plan for the continued care of their children or loved ones after they become ill or die, by investing in a specialist support program for older carers.

There are more than 700,000 informal carers in Victoria, comprising about 14 per cent of the population.¹²⁶ But an ageing population means Victoria has a growing number of older carers. Ageing carers of people with a disability in Victoria struggle with the challenges of planning their loved one's care after their own death or onset of illness. They need support to develop succession plans, identify alternative supports, transition their loved ones to new arrangements and look after their own wellbeing throughout the process. A specialist support program for ageing carers incorporating a wide range of services would reduce stress on families and ensure the needs of people with disabilities are considered as family circumstances change.

VCOSS understands it is intended that NDIS support packages will include life transition planning where appropriate. However it is not yet clear how comprehensive and available this planning will be, and currently only Victorians in the Barwon launch site have access to this support. Victoria has an opportunity to lead the way by developing a specialist support program for older carers that includes:

- family counselling, mediation and life planning
- legal and financial planning
- housing
- disability support staff
- social support
- coordination of formal and informal support.

■ Deliver a statewide program to identify and refer carers

The state government can help ensure carers receive the referrals and support they need by rolling out a statewide program based on the self-funded Carers ID pilot by Carers Victoria. This pilot is equipping Victoria's health services to better identify carers and refer them to appropriate support.

Carers provide invaluable support to vulnerable Victorians, but it is often at the expense of their own health and wellbeing. Many do not self-identify, and of those who do, 60 per cent find it difficult to find the information and support they need¹²⁷. Many are not well supported in their caring roles. In 2012 the Victorian Auditor-General found carers were not being supported, because of a failure to identify their need and unclear referral processes.¹²⁸

The role of carers is an integral component to the efficient and effective operation of the health and human services systems. Supporting the sustainability and capacity of carers to maintain their role is therefore core business for system managers and service providers.¹²⁹

126 ABS, *Statistics of Disability, Ageing and Carers*, 2013, Table 36.

127 Quantum Research for Carers Victoria, *Caring Families Research Report; Quantitative and Qualitative Findings*, April 2012.

128 Victorian Auditor-Generals Office, *Carer Support Programs*, August 2012, p. viii.

129 Victorian Auditor-Generals Office, *Carer Support Programs*, August 2012, p. vii.

Significant reforms are now taking place in the disability and human services sectors, especially through the NDIS. Carers must be supported to understand how to access new systems.

The Carers Victoria pilot has shown success in improving health workers' awareness of carer issues and enabling early referrals to specialist services. By expanding the Carers ID pilot program statewide, the Victorian government can improve carer support and enable early referrals to specialist services.

Carers experience poorer physical and mental health, greater financial disadvantage and greater exclusion from life opportunities and activities than other people.¹³⁰

Invest in public dental health services

The state government can help vulnerable people access dental care earlier and prevent problems reaching acute stages, by expanding community dental facilities and increasing the availability of dental vouchers for vulnerable people.

Oral disease places a significant health burden on Victorians and is one of the most underfunded areas of healthcare. Tooth decay is Australia's most prevalent health problem¹³¹ and dental admissions are one of the highest causes of acute preventable hospital admissions.¹³² The burden is disproportionately borne by people experiencing disadvantage, with greater incidences of oral disease experienced by Aboriginal people, people on low incomes and people in rural and regional areas.¹³³ Access is particularly difficult for people in rural and regional areas.

Where people on low incomes have access to public dental services, wait times, especially for preventative measures, are very long.

Poor dental health can cause pain, discomfort, embarrassment and difficulties in participation in social and work activities. But unlike general medical services, which are about 70 per cent funded by government, only 27 per cent of dental care costs are funded by government.¹³⁴

A federal and state government National Partnership Agreement (NPA) helped cut waiting list times for general dental care from 18 months in June 2013 to 10 months in June 2014,¹³⁵ but in the 2014–15 Federal Budget, the second NPA on Public Dental Health Services, due to start on 1 July 2014, was deferred to 2015–16. The Victorian government should ensure waiting lists do not again blow out to rates seen before the first NPA, by expanding community dental facilities and increasing the availability of vouchers for people to see private dentists.

130 ABS, *Disability, Ageing and Carers: Summary of Findings*, Cat No 4430.0. 2012.

131 AIHW, *Oral Health and Dental Care in Australia; key facts and figures 2012, 2013*, p. 1.

132 Dental Health Services Victoria, *Quick Dental Facts*, https://www.dhsv.org.au/__data/assets/pdf_file/0015/2319/quick-dental-facts.pdf

133 Dental Health Services Victoria, *Quick Dental Facts*, https://www.dhsv.org.au/__data/assets/pdf_file/0015/2319/quick-dental-facts.pdf

134 AIHW, *Oral Health and Dental Care in Australia; key facts and figures 2012, 2013*, p. 38.

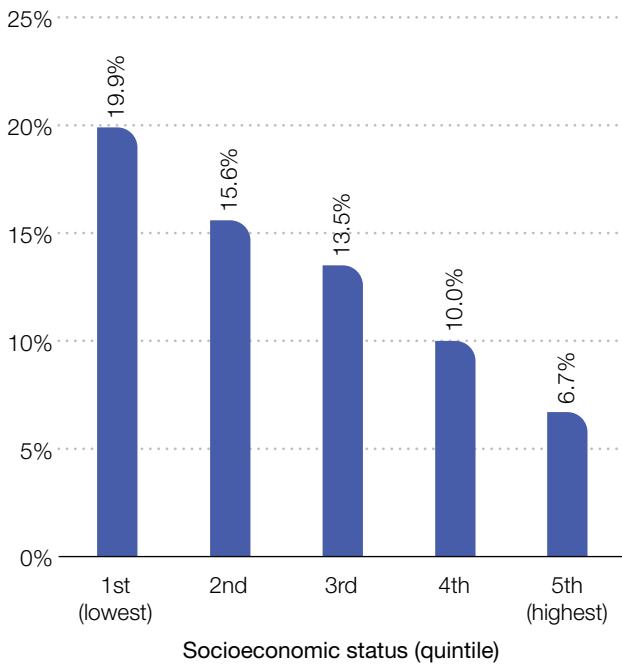
135 Department of Health Victoria, *Victorian Health Services Performance; Dental Care*, <http://performance.health.vic.gov.au/Home/Report.aspx?ReportKey=18>, accessed 11 November 2014.

Provide community organisations with the skills and tools to support vulnerable people to quit smoking

The state government can help vulnerable people quit smoking and improve their health, by working with the community sector to develop comprehensive smoking policies in organisations, and deliver training and resources to help staff work with clients to quit smoking.

Smoking rates in socioeconomically disadvantaged communities are higher than in the general population, entrenching health and economic inequalities. Community services have been identified as ideal settings for reducing smoking rates among disadvantaged groups, and the integration of ‘quit smoking’ programs in organisations working with disadvantaged groups has helped cut smoking rates.¹³⁶

Figure 8: Tobacco use by socioeconomic status 2013¹³⁷



Governments have already succeeded in working with the community to cut general smoking rates significantly over recent decades, but higher smoking rates remain among groups facing disadvantage, such as Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, people with a mental illness, unemployed people and people who are in prison or homeless.¹³⁸ As well as the increased health risks it brings, the rising costs of cigarettes means higher smoking rates in disadvantaged communities are also contributing to financial inequality.

Disadvantaged smokers face more barriers to quitting than other people, including being more likely to spend time in social environments where smoking is the norm. Many smokers already access community and health services, including in the mental health, community health, alcohol and drug, family support and homelessness sectors. Recent programs in Victoria (the Homeless Persons Program) and NSW (Tackling Tobacco Initiative) have shown many people are open to receiving help to quit smoking from community services they know and trust.

136 See Australian National Preventative Health Agency, *Smoking and Disadvantage; evidence brief*, 2013, p. 3, for a summary of different studies.

137 AIHW, *National Drug Strategy Household Survey Details Report: 2013*, Cat. No. PHE 183, 2014, Table 8.2.

138 See Australian National Preventative Health Agency, *Smoking and Disadvantage; evidence brief*, 2013, p. 3 for a summary of different studies.

Further policy directions

- Continue commitment to preventative health programs:** Despite the Federal Government's decision to abolish the National Partnership Agreement on Preventative Health, the Victorian government must stay committed to successful community level preventative programs that target the underlying causes of chronic disease, including smoking, poor nutrition, alcohol misuse and physical inactivity.
- Increase the proportion of funding that goes to community health:** Primary and community health services receive proportionately less of the Victorian health budget than they did 10 years ago.¹³⁹ The proportion of the mental health budget allocated to community managed mental health has also not increased in recent years. This trend should be reversed, by increasing the proportion of the health budget spent on community health.
- Develop a policy framework to address the needs of people living with mental illness as the NDIS is rolled out:** Victoria needs a clear vision and policy framework to ensure people with mental illness are not left behind in the transition to the NDIS and that the strengths of the community managed mental health system in Victoria are maintained.
- Ensure appropriate supports are available to people with disabilities and their carers who are ineligible for the NDIS:** There are a large number of Victorians with disabilities who will not qualify for the NDIS. They will still need access to appropriate specialist supports and accessible and inclusive mainstream services. Carers of people who are ineligible for, or do not access NDIS packages, may also lose support and specialised carer initiatives such as mutual support and self-help programs are at risk in the transition to NDIS.
- Enhance capacity for population health planning:** Population health planning helps address the social determinants of health, through integrated and collaborative responses. Expanding this approach among policy makers will help address future health challenges, by directing the health system away from just treating illness.

- Develop a cultural safety for Aboriginal health strategy:** Aboriginal people access mainstream healthcare services at lower rates than non-Aboriginal people. Government plans and strategies to address accessibility are poorly implemented and evaluated, and lack regular review. A strategy should be developed that expands cultural safety training across the health system and develops cultural safety accreditation mechanisms for health services.

Aboriginal Victorians are hospitalised for diabetes and respiratory diseases at about twice the rate of non-Aboriginal Victorians.¹⁴⁰

Child mortality rates for Aboriginal children under 5 are more than twice the non-Aboriginal rate.¹⁴¹

It is estimated that the NDIS will support about 2% of Victorians. However, about 20% of Victorians have a disability.¹⁴²

139 Victorian Department of Treasury, *Victorian State Budget Papers*, 2005–06 to 2014–15.

140 AIHW, *Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Health Performance Framework 2012 report*, Canberra 2013, p. xiii.

141 J Fremantle et al., Lowitja Institute, *Victorian Aboriginal Child Mortality Study: Patterns, Trends and Disparities in Mortality between Aboriginal and Non-Aboriginal Infants and Children, 1999–2008*, November 2014, p. 7.

142 Australian Bureau of Statistics, *Disability, Ageing and Carers: State Tables for Victoria*, 2012, Cat. No. 4430.0, Table 1.



Tackle the housing crisis

Victoria is facing a housing crisis. Housing costs continue to rise to record levels and there is a severe shortage of social housing. This is making it increasingly difficult for low-income Victorians to find secure, stable homes.

A home is essential for people to live stable lives. Without the security and stability it offers, people facing disadvantage are unable to overcome the complex issues they may face. Without a home it is difficult to stay healthy, find employment, maintain relationships and give children a strong start in life. Housing stress can undermine people's ability to meet other costs of living and at its worst, can lead to financial crisis and homelessness. On Census night in 2011, more than 22,000 people were estimated to be homeless, including more than 3,500 children.¹⁴³

Young people are over-represented in homelessness statistics, with people aged 19–25 being 80 per cent more likely to experience homelessness than the general population.¹⁴⁴ Women and children escaping family violence are the largest group seeking support from homelessness agencies.¹⁴⁵ There are more than 34,000 people on the public housing waiting list.¹⁴⁶ Almost 90 per cent of very low-income households in private rental are estimated to be in housing stress.¹⁴⁷ With falling rates of home ownership, especially at younger ages,¹⁴⁸ these problems are likely to become more pronounced in the future.

The Victorian government can tackle our housing crisis with a number of initiatives, which put together, can help form the basis of a whole-of-government strategy aimed at ensuring every Victorian can have a safe, secure and affordable home.

■ Develop a whole-of-government affordable housing strategy

The state government can help cut rising levels of homelessness and housing stress by consulting on and developing a whole-of-government affordable housing strategy that aligns policies, maximises the supply of affordable housing and ensures those who require affordable housing can access it. This could include housing expenditure, financing options, planning and building, land use and public land disposal, taxation, local government, and tenant and social housing laws and regulation.

143 Australian Bureau of Statistics, *Census of Population and Housing: Estimating homelessness, 2011*.

144 Australian Bureau of Statistics, *Census of Population and Housing: Estimating homelessness, 2011*, p. 12.

145 Australian Institute for Health and Welfare, *Specialist homelessness services 2013–14, Supplementary tables – Victoria*, Table VIC2.14.

146 Department of Human Services, *Public Housing Waiting and Transfer List September 2014*.

147 K Hulse, M Reynolds and J Yates, *Changes in the supply of affordable housing in the private rental sector for lower income households, 2006–11*, AHURI Final Report No.235, 2014, p. 74.

148 J Daley, D Wood, B Weidmann and C Harrison, *The Wealth of Generations*, Grattan Institute, 2014, p. 14.

The Victorian housing market is becoming increasingly unaffordable. In the last decade, house prices in Melbourne escalated by 85 per cent,¹⁴⁹ and rents increased by 40 per cent¹⁵⁰. This is compared to inflation of 30 per cent over the same period.¹⁵¹

The proportion of Melbourne's private rental listings classified as 'affordable' by the Department of Human Services has plummeted over the last decade, from nearly 30 per cent, to less than 10 per cent.¹⁵²

The housing market is complicated and influenced by a host of policies, laws, regulatory bodies, expenditures, taxes and concessions across multiple portfolios at all levels of government. Decisions are often made at various agencies and levels of government without consideration of their effects on housing affordability, leaving housing agencies to try to solve problems created elsewhere.

Housing policy is set to be examined in the upcoming federal government review of the federation. By creating a whole-of-government strategy to guide the myriad of decision-makers and stakeholders, the state government can lead the way with a response that effectively tackles Victoria's housing crisis and helps ensure everyone can have a safe, secure and affordable home.

Expand social housing with a dedicated growth fund

The state government can improve the availability of social housing by providing a dedicated growth fund that provides, or helps secure capital investment towards, increasing the number of social housing properties in Victoria. This will improve the availability of social housing for people unable to secure appropriate and affordable private housing, reducing levels of homelessness and housing stress, which are rising.

More than 260,000 low-income rental households are estimated to be in housing stress in Victoria,¹⁵³ and more than 22,000 Victorians homeless on any given night.¹⁵⁴ With more than 34,000 people on the Victorian public housing waiting list,¹⁵⁵ and an estimated shortfall of more than 80,000 affordable rental properties across Victoria,¹⁵⁶ it is clear the affordable housing crisis is significant and growing. While affordable private rental and home ownership can meet many people's needs, there are many people experiencing disadvantage, especially those living on income support, who either do not have the resources or the capabilities to afford a home in the private market.

Expanding our social housing system is essential to tackling this crisis and providing vulnerable people with affordable, well-located, secure homes. VCOSS and other Victorian housing and homelessness peak bodies estimate \$200 million a year is needed for meaningful growth in social housing stock levels.¹⁵⁷

149 Australian Bureau of Statistics, *Residential Property Price Indexes: Eight Capital Cities*, Table 1: Residential Property Price Index, Index Numbers and Percentage Changes, Sep 2014, Cat. No. 6416.0.

150 Australian Bureau of Statistics, *Consumer Price Index, Australia*, Table 11: CPI: Group, Sub-group and Expenditure Class, Index Numbers by Capital City, Sep 2014, Cat. No. 6401.0.

151 Australian Bureau of Statistics, *Consumer Price Index, Australia*, Table 11: CPI: Group, Sub-group and Expenditure Class, Index Numbers by Capital City, Sep 2014, Cat. No. 6401.0.

152 Department of Human Services, *Affordable lettings by LGA March 2000 – September 2014*.

153 Australian Bureau of Statistics, *Housing Occupancy and Costs 2011–12: Additional tables – low income rental households*, Cat. No. 4130.0.

154 Australian Bureau of Statistics, *Census of Population and Housing: Estimating homelessness, 2011*.

155 Department of Human Services, *Public Housing Waiting and Transfer List September 2014*.

156 K Hulse, M Reynolds and J Yates, *Changes in the supply of affordable housing in the private rental sector for lower income households, 2006–11*, AHURI Final Report No.235, 2014, p. 77.

157 Community Housing Federation of Victoria et al., *Making Social Housing Work*, 2013.

A dedicated social housing growth fund could be used flexibly to maximise the number of new homes: for example, through innovative redevelopment, partnerships and financing models. Significant revenue could be generated by discontinuing the Deed of Agreement between the Commissioner for Housing and The Department of Treasury and Finance, which takes up to \$50 million from the housing system each year.

“Labor believes that all Victorians have a right to safe, affordable, and secure housing. Having a home provides the foundation for financial, social and emotional security. A strong and sustainable social housing sector is critical to ensuring that all Victorians can own or rent housing that meets their needs.”¹⁵⁸

■ Create a common housing register

The state government can make it easier for eligible people to get a suitable social housing property, and reduce inefficient administrative burdens, by developing a common housing register that matches prospective tenants with community and public housing vacancies.

Currently, individual housing providers have their own register of prospective tenants, or waiting list. This means if a person in need of housing is trying to find a home, they have to separately register with every housing provider. This is frustrating for the prospective tenant, who often has other urgent difficulties to deal with, and makes the allocation process ineffective, as an appropriate property may be available, but not offered, because the suitable tenant has not registered with that particular provider. Similarly, a person may be housed with one provider, but this information is not relayed to other providers, who then may waste time and resources offering a place to someone who has already found a home.

Ideally, the common housing register would be collaboratively developed and jointly managed by the public and community housing sectors. These arrangements are already in place in other jurisdictions, such as the NSW Housing Register, or Tasmania’s *Housing Connect*.

■ Make sure social housing properties have efficient heating and cooling

The state government can improve the efficiency and reduce the costs of heating and cooling in social housing properties by expanding and improving the audit and retrofit program. Efficient heating and cooling in social housing reduces the cost of energy, and helps protect the health of frail or unwell residents, especially during extreme weather events, such as heatwaves or cold snaps.

Many of Victoria’s most vulnerable people live in public and community housing. But many of these properties incur high energy costs due to their poor thermal performance, and inefficient fixtures such as heaters and hot water systems. The Department of Health and Human Services has a quality standard – including energy and water efficiency standards – that must be met when dwellings are overhauled at change of tenancy, but this does not help existing tenants. Investing in an accelerated audit and retrofit program that also covers the community housing sector will lower energy costs and reduce concessions expenditure.

The Department of Health and Human Services should also review aspects of its standard that rely on obsolete assumptions about the relative value of gas and electricity. In particular, its requirement to always use gas space heating and the prohibition on air conditioning prevents public housing tenants from having access to lowest cost heating (efficient reverse cycle air conditioners) and puts tenants at risk of heatwave-related health risks.

¹⁵⁸ Victorian Labor Platform 2014, p. 77.

■ Introduce a rapid rehousing program to reduce the harm from homelessness

The state government can help people facing homelessness due to a crisis establish a secure base more quickly, by establishing a rapid rehousing program that enables faster placement of those who can maintain tenancies in permanent housing, and frees up space in emergency accommodation and transitional housing for people with more complex needs.

A rapid rehousing program uses flexible resources to secure and maintain new tenancies quickly, such as establishing relationships with real estate agents and negotiating with potential landlords, providing guarantees, bonds or subsidies, and working with people to ensure their tenancies are successful. While scattered elements of this type of service exist, current arrangements tend to cycle people through relatively long periods of emergency accommodation and transitional housing before they gain permanent homes.

Homelessness often occurs after people fall through the gaps in multiple universal 'safety nets', compounded by the lack of affordable housing. While the crises that lead to homelessness are diverse: including family violence and conflict, mental health difficulties, problem substance use, unemployment, poverty and housing evictions, the response needs to be integrated, well-resourced and focused on making sure people are housed as quickly as possible, and receive the support they require to stay housed.

Increasing evidence supports a 'housing first' approach to reducing homelessness, where finding a long-term housing option is the first priority, and is combined with the support required to maintain tenancies and overcome other difficulties.¹⁵⁹ Rapid rehousing programs are based on the knowledge that most people who become homeless have been previously housed, and are able to maintain a tenancy.

■ Expand permanent supportive housing to reduce chronic homelessness

The state government can help people overcome bouts of chronic homelessness by providing additional permanent supportive housing, along with increased capacity to provide intensive support and assertive outreach to rough sleepers with complex needs.

Combined, these evidence-based approaches are likely to be effective in reducing homelessness in Victoria.¹⁶⁰ For people who have experienced chronic or repeat episodes of homelessness, and may have other concurrent difficulties, a more intensive support approach is required. These people need permanent housing options combined with intensive support, including through assertive outreach. As many have had highly disrupted lives and major health problems, more resources are required to help them adjust to a life after homelessness, including establishing daily routines and living skills.

159 National Alliance to Reduce Homelessness, *Rapid Rehousing: Creating programs that work*, Washington, 2009.

160 For example: P Goering et al, *At home/Chez soi: Interim Report*, Mental Health Commission of Canada, 2012; G Johnston and C Chamberlain, *Evaluation of the Melbourne Street to Home program: 12 month outcomes*, 2013, RMIT University; G Johnston et al, *Meeting the challenge? Transitions out of long term homelessness: A randomized controlled trial examining the 24 month costs, benefits and social outcomes from the Journey to Social Inclusion pilot program*, 2012, Sacred Heart Mission; S Tsemberis et al, 'Housing first, consumer choice and harm reduction for homeless individuals with a dual diagnosis', *American Journal of Public Health*, Vol. 94 no.4, pp. 651–656.

Further policy directions

- **Review the regulatory regime for social housing:** To become more transparent and accountable, we need to review and improve the accountability and efficiency of social housing providers, and separate social housing provider, funding and regulator roles.
- **Protect security of tenure and income-related rents in social housing:** The Victorian government should not extract additional revenue from public housing tenants by increasing rents, and should ensure that social housing rents remain affordable and directly linked to a person's ability to pay.
- **Review and reform the provision of disability accommodation:** The NDIS will radically reshape the housing options for people with disabilities, while revelations of abuse and neglect in disability accommodation have demonstrated the inadequacy of the current system. The Victorian government should proceed with its inquiry into disability accommodation, and map its future development in light of the NDIS, particularly to develop a plan to expand the availability and safety of housing options for people with disabilities.
- **Universal housing features:** The Victorian government should implement its election commitment to include basic accessibility feature requirements in building regulations for all newly constructed homes.
- **Planning and land use reform:** Additional planning and land use mechanisms should be introduced to increase the availability of affordable and social housing. Options include inclusionary zoning, density bonuses, and use of public land for social housing development.
- **Tenant participation and advocacy:** The Victorian government should review and improve existing tenancy participation and advocacy mechanisms, so that tenants are given a voice in the management of their homes, and receive independent advice and support in asserting their tenancy rights.
- **Review of tenancy law:** Significant numbers of people will be renters for life. We need to modernise tenancy laws to reflect this new reality, by strengthening security of tenure in private rental, adopting minimum rental standards and protecting tenants from unnecessary evictions.
- **Adopt minimum rental standards:** There are currently few enforceable standards for the basic amenity of rental properties, potentially allowing the lease of properties that pose threats to health and safety. The Victorian government should legislate minimum standards for rental properties so people can maintain good health and hygiene, properly heat and cool their homes, and are safe from household hazards.
- **Expand homelessness prevention capabilities:** Through tenancy laws, homelessness services, family violence services, health services, educational institutions, community legal centres, prison rehabilitation programs and financial counsellors, the government can help expand the capacity to identify and respond to people at risk of homelessness and form partnerships to work together to keep people housed.
- **Expand resources for homelessness access points:** The current homelessness access points are swamped by demand, and cannot service all those trying to access housing. Additional resources would allow homelessness access points to better help clients more efficiently and effectively.



Cut the cost of living

The rising cost of living, and particularly the rising cost of energy, is a significant issue for all Victorians and especially those on low incomes, who may have limited capacity to improve home energy efficiency measures and cut their energy costs.

The state government can help ease the costs of living and the stress it can put low-income families under, by providing appropriate concessions, and supporting people to improve their energy and water efficiency. Expanding support for asylum seekers living in the community and improving the capacity of no-interest loans schemes and financial counsellors would also be valuable investments to help Victorians overcome disadvantage.

■ Increase the Utility Relief Grants cap to \$1000

By lifting the cap to \$1000 in the next State Budget, and applying appropriate indexation in the future, the state government can better assist low-income households struggling with debts to energy and water companies. The government's Utilities Relief Grants are becoming ineffective at relieving financial stress, because they are capped at \$500 and are not keeping pace with increasing prices.

Utility Relief Grants help low-income households struggling to pay debts to energy and water companies. The grant pays off the debt, avoiding the problems and anxiety caused by disconnections, debt collectors, legal action, servicing debts or finding the money to pay debts on top of paying basic living costs. The grants give people the breathing space to focus on paying their regular bills and becoming financially sustainable.

But more than 60 per cent of customers who enter an energy company's hardship program have a debt of over \$500.¹⁶¹ The \$500 cap has not changed since 2010, despite electricity prices increasing by 38 per cent since then.¹⁶² This means that the grants cannot fulfil their purpose of enabling people to get on top of their financial situation, as even after receiving the grant, people may still have debts they cannot pay, and face the consequences of disconnection and legal action.

The Victorian government can help the Utilities Relief Grant program achieve its purpose by:

- Increasing the cap on grants to \$1,000
- Allowing up to 9 months' worth of bills to be covered by the grant
- Indexing the cap to the growth in energy prices.

■ Restore the full value of energy concessions

The state government can restore the full value of concessions for low-income Victorians by removing the carbon price compensation deduction and the energy concession cap from Victoria's energy concession program. This will make the concessions program simpler, fairer and more effective.

161 Essential Service Commission, Retail Comparative Performance Reports (Customer Service) 2013–14, p. 12.

162 Australian Bureau of Statistics, *Consumer Price Index, Australia: Table 11. CPI: Group, Sub-group and Expenditure Class, Index Numbers by Capital City*, Cat. No. 6401.0.

Concessions help low-income households cover the costs of cooking meals, staying warm and cool, washing, lighting their homes and running basic electronic equipment. The Victorian concession program is based on a flat 17.5 per cent concession rate. But changes to the program in recent years have cut the value of basic energy concessions. VCOSS understands that reversing these changes would have a relatively modest impact on expenditure, but make a real difference to the 700,000 Victorian households who rely on concessions to help them cover the cost of essential services.

Scrap the carbon price compensation deduction

As part of the now defunct national carbon pricing scheme, the federal government introduced the Energy Supplement, which is paid to Centrelink recipients at different rates, to help compensate for any rising costs related to the carbon pricing scheme. In response, the former Victorian Government introduced the carbon price compensation deduction, which reduced the value of the energy concession for Victorian pensioners and Health Care Card holders. However because not all Health Care Card holders and pensioners receive the full amount of the Energy Supplement, some have been made worse off as a result. At the same time, energy prices have increased at a greater rate than the Energy Supplement.

Scrap the energy concession cap

The previous Victorian government introduced an energy concession cap, forcing households that exceeded it to apply for the Excess Energy Concession. This requires extra bureaucratic steps, which are a likely barrier to people claiming their full concession. While VCOSS is not aware of public data on the take-up rate of the Excess Energy Concession, we estimate the similar NSW Family Energy Rebate has been accessed by less than 10 per cent of eligible households.¹⁶³ VCOSS understands that low-income households that use high levels of electricity often do so because they have large families, poor quality housing and inefficient appliances.¹⁶⁴ Scrapping the energy concession cap will support these low-income households to cover their costs of living.

Maintain the full value of the Victorian concessions budget

The state government can maintain concessions for low-income Victorians by continuing to top-up the concessions budget for 2015–16 and future years.

The 2014–15 Federal Budget axed the longstanding National Partnership Agreement on Concessions. This \$300 million program delivered indexed payments to the states and territories to help fund concessions for age pensioners, in return for states providing part-pensioners with the same concessions as full pensioners, and transport concessions for Seniors Card holders from other states.

The former Victorian government funded the \$73.7 million shortfall for 2014–15, guaranteeing no reduction in concessions as a result of the Commonwealth's actions. Most other state governments responded similarly. Given the essential nature of concessions for low-income Victorian households, the new state government should commit to continuing to top-up the concessions budget.

Improve energy and water efficiency in low-income households

The state government can improve energy and water efficiency in low-income households by investing in three strategies:

- Home energy and water audits
- An efficient appliance replacement program
- Upgrading home energy and water efficiency for low-income homeowners.

163 Estimate based on \$5 million expenditure in 2013–14, at \$125 per household (as reported in NSW 2014–15 Budget Paper No 2), considering that 538,901 households were eligible in June 2012 (*DSS Statistical Paper no. 11: Income support customers: a statistical overview 2012*).

164 Energy retailers' hardship program managers and workers in community organisations that delivered HESS (Home Energy Saver Scheme) programs tell us this, but in both cases (due to commercial confidentiality and Commonwealth Government directive, respectively) no data is available.

Low-income households face high and rising energy and water bills. An effective way to help cut their living costs is to help households cut their energy and water use, which will also help cut overall resource use and greenhouse gas emissions, and save public money spent on concessions.

Energy and water retailers report that one of the most common reasons low-income households experience hardship and difficulty paying utilities bills is high usage levels due to poor quality housing and inefficient major appliances, or simply poor energy and water literacy leading to wasteful energy and water use. Organisations involved in delivering energy saving programs report that teaching people how to use energy and water more efficiently results in substantial energy bill savings. Further savings were achieved when poorly performing appliances were replaced, or improvements made to the energy efficiency of their homes, for example, by installing ceiling insulation or window shading.¹⁶⁵

Providing free energy and water audits for concession households will improve their energy literacy and maximise the value gained from other energy efficiency programs, by giving people independent advice on what measures will work best for individual households. Requiring energy retailers to offer free audits to households in hardship would complement such a program and reduce the cost to government.

Some low-income households have high energy bills because they cannot afford newer, more efficient appliances. Previous government grant schemes that subsidised the purchase of efficient appliances by low-income households produced significant reductions in their energy and water use. An appliance replacement program could support low-income households, where their bill payment difficulties are verified by an audit as being exacerbated by faulty or poor quality appliances. This will help these households avoid debt, disconnection and hardship.

More than 234,000 owner-occupier households in Victoria are in the lowest equivalised income quintile.¹⁶⁶ These home-owners may not be able to afford energy-efficiency upgrades. The state government could help improve energy and water efficiency of homes and cut the costs of living for these people through a retrofit program targeting this group. Retrofits might require substantial investment – but the upfront costs may be defrayed by complementary policies, such as the Victorian

Energy Efficiency Target program and existing energy efficiency appliance rebate schemes. They could also be partly offset by reduced concessions expenditure, or largely recouped through low-interest loans repaid via municipal rates as an Environmental Upgrade Agreement,¹⁶⁷ or when the property is sold. This is also consistent with the *One Million Stars* policy in the *2014 Victorian ALP Platform*.

■ Provide concessions and emergency relief to asylum seekers living in the community

The state government can help asylum seekers in the community meet basic costs of living and improve community cohesion, by enabling them to claim the same concessions as other low-income groups, expanding resources for emergency relief and material aid for asylum seekers, and investing in programs that promote their meaningful engagement and social inclusion.

A growing number of asylum seekers live in the Victorian community, on temporary bridging visas and community detention.¹⁶⁸ Many have no work rights, and those who do are often on short-term visas that pose a barrier to secure employment. Those without employment survive on Centrelink payments that are lower than the unemployment payment, or basic living allowances provided by welfare agencies, which are lower still. Many live in poor quality and insecure housing with little knowledge of their rights. They experience multiple layers of disadvantage, and face language and cultural barriers to accessing support.

165 J Borell and S Lane, *Kildonan UnitingCare Energy Audit program Evaluation*, Kildonan Uniting Care, 2009; V Johnson, D Sullivan and J Totty, *Improving the energy efficiency of homes in Moreland: Warm Home Cool Home and Concession Assist social research final report*, Brotherhood of St Laurence, 2013.

166 Australian Bureau of Statistics, *Victorian Housing Tenure by Income and Wealth 2011–12*, from the Survey of Income and Housing, commissioned by VCOSS.

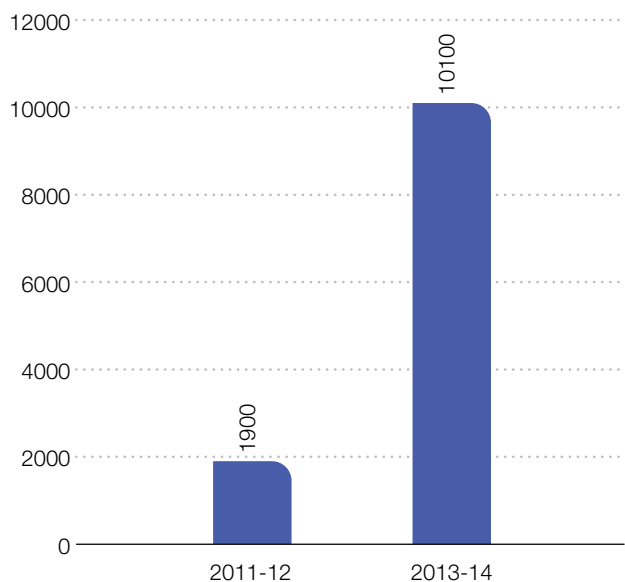
167 For example, the City of Melbourne provides Environmental Upgrade Agreements, where a loan is provided for an upgrade, which is then repaid through an additional municipal rates charge.

168 Victorian Department of Health, *The Victorian Refugee and Asylum Seeker Health Action Plan 2014–18*, June 2014.

Asylum seekers are also usually ineligible for the concessions that other low-income households receive to help meet essential living costs, such as energy and water concessions. Public Transport Victoria issues an asylum seeker concession card to eligible asylum seekers living in the community, allowing them to travel on public transport at concession rates. This principle should be extended to all Victorian government concessions, including the energy and water concessions.

Community service organisations provide assistance to asylum seekers living in the community, ranging from emergency relief and material aid like food, clothing and household goods, to community development and social inclusion programs. Demand for these services increased dramatically in the last year.¹⁶⁹ Community services are spreading their limited resources across a growing asylum seeker population, meaning people are receiving inadequate levels of support. Access to meaningful engagement and social inclusion programs is also at risk, as agencies are forced to prioritise crisis support.

Figure 9: Estimated number of asylum seekers who arrived by boat living in the Victorian community¹⁷⁰



Expand the financial counselling program

The state government can help meet increased demand for financial counselling services from vulnerable Victorians, by funding more financial counselling positions across the state.

There is a need for another 20 financial counselling positions in high population growth areas and another 10 co-located with family violence support services. Demand for support from Victoria's 200 financial counsellors has increased by 10–20 per cent in the last year, particularly in high population growth areas, where the average waiting time to see a financial counsellor is now about 45 days.¹⁷¹ The specialist financial counselling needed for women escaping family violence can also be difficult to access, and this puts extra pressure on general financial counselling services.

Support no-interest loan schemes (NILS) to improve access to capital

The state government can help low-income households overcome disadvantage and cut their cost of living by increasing the number of no-interest loan schemes (NILS) in existing agencies across the state, to further leverage available loan capital.

NILS assist families overcome disadvantage by helping them afford to take steps such as upgrading appliances and household fixtures, and repairing vehicles. NILS are highly effective in improving the lives of vulnerable households.

169 UnitingCare Victoria Tasmania, *How can we live? Uniting Care's emergency relief and crisis support for asylum seekers living in the community*, Updated Edition, September 2014.

170 Victorian Department of Health, *The Victorian Refugee and Asylum Seeker Health Action Plan 2014–18*, June 2014.

171 Advice from the Financial and Consumer Rights Council, December 2014.

The most recent independent evaluation found that 82 per cent of clients experienced improved economic outcomes, 74 per cent experienced improved social outcomes, 47 per cent improved their ability to budget and save money, and 80 per cent of those who had previously used fringe credit providers (such as payday lenders and pawnbrokers) stopped doing so. Overall, every dollar invested in NILS programs yields \$2.54 of social and economic value.¹⁷²

The number of NILS loans made is not limited by the loan capital available – which is provided by a number of financial institutions and large corporations – but by the availability of dedicated staff and resources in the 112 mostly small community organisations across the state that run NILS programs. Increasing the number of NILS workers in existing agencies across the state will leverage much more value from the private sector and benefit thousands of disadvantaged Victorian families.

Further policy directions

- **Implement the One Million Stars program:** Along with a range of measures to materially improve energy efficiency for low-income Victorians, including low-income tenants.
- **Retain the Victorian Energy Efficient Target scheme:** With adjustments to improve its effectiveness and facilitate greater assistance for low-income households.
- **Strengthen regulation of the energy retail market:** The ALP made a number of policy commitments during the 2014 election campaign, which should be implemented, including:
 - Doubling the Wrongful Disconnection Payment (WDP) to \$500 a day, introducing a \$5,000 penalty for each breach leading to a wrongful disconnection, and publicly reporting all WDPs made.
 - Allowing the Essential Services Commission (ESC) to publicly name and fine retailers up to \$20,000 for certain systemic breaches of energy retail laws, and to impose court-enforceable undertakings on retailers.
 - Having the ESC publish retail compliance reports twice yearly and report quarterly on systemic issues, and investigate the financial hardship policies and practices of energy retailers.
 - Shortening the period for which energy retailers can backbill customers from nine months to six months.
- **Improve energy literacy and energy efficiency information:** People are still confused by the deregulated energy market, and many are paying far more than they need to for energy. Initiatives like the ‘Switch On’ energy information website and ‘My Power Planner’ price comparison website can be built upon so more people can make affordable choices. For example, making information available in other languages, developing information sources that do not require web access, tailoring information for particular groups, developing public awareness campaigns and promoting gas versus electric appliance comparators would all raise energy literacy and allow people to pay less for essential energy use.
- **Maintain the prohibition on prepayment metering:** Prepayment meters are often proposed as a mechanism to control consumer debt. VCOSS believes this can be better achieved through methods that do not threaten the continued electricity supply of low-income households, and that prepayment meters should not be allowed.
- **Review the Energy for the Regions program:** This program subsidises the connection of new homes to the gas network, at a cost of up to \$10,000 per dwelling. Given changing energy prices, it is likely that better cost reductions for regional customers could be achieved through a regional energy and affordability program.

172 S Bennet, M Georgouras, L Hems, A Marjolin and J Wong, *Life Changing Loans at No Interest: An Outcomes Evaluation of the Good Shepherd Microfinance’s No Interest Loan Scheme (NILS)*, Centre for Social Impact (CSI), University of New South Wales, 2013.



Expand transport options

Transport helps people to access the opportunities around them and build a meaningful life. The more limited a person's transport choices are, the more limited their opportunities are. People need good transport options to find and keep a job, go to school, further studies or training, attend health and community services, connect with their families and friends, and be a positive part of their communities.

People on low incomes may not be able to afford a car or cover running costs such as petrol, servicing, registration and insurance. If they do own a car this spending may crowd out their ability to cover other costs of living. Other people are unable to drive, such as children, some people with disabilities, and some older people.

But despite the perception that public transport is mainly used by lower income groups, statistics show it is people in higher income groups who use public transport most often.¹⁷³ A good public transport system designed for universal access, with good coverage in outer suburban Melbourne and rural and regional Victoria, and linked as a network through fast, frequent services, can address this disadvantage. Public transport planning should focus on providing a quality network at accessible prices.

By expanding and improving Victoria's transport options, we can help people to access more job and educational opportunities, health and community services, and connect with family and friends. This would give people more opportunities to participate in community and economic life, and improve their physical, mental and social wellbeing.

■ Implement and expand the bus funding package

The state government can build on its election commitment to a bus expansion package, which identified a number of specific local changes to the

bus network, such as increasing frequencies and reinstating previously discontinued services.

The bus service expansion package, including an investment of \$100 million over four years, would be very welcome after many years of little growth in services. This commitment needs to be built on by further expanding Victoria's bus services. The Auditor-General has stated that in Melbourne alone, \$197 million of recurrent funding is needed to address identified bus network service gaps.¹⁷⁴

Further expansion could create a truly multimodal public transport system with seamless interchanges, which operates as an integrated network. The changes proposed by Public Transport Victoria (PTV) in December 2014, which begin to map out a network of faster, more frequent bus routes, are a first step in this direction.

Improving bus coverage and frequency is the fastest and most cost effective way to expand public transport access, as it requires less dedicated infrastructure, and can be upgraded relatively quickly. The bus network reaches more Victorians than any other mode of public transport, and provides local access opportunities, as well as linking to the train and tram networks for longer journeys.

Expanded public transport coverage is particularly required in outer suburban Melbourne and rural and regional Victoria, where there tend to be fewer and infrequent services – or none at all – and where communities often experience higher levels of disadvantage.

173 Australian Bureau of Statistics, *Household Water and Energy Use, Victoria*, October 2011.

174 Victorian Auditor-General's Office, *Developing Transport Infrastructure and Services for Population Growth Areas*, August 2013, Victorian Government Printer, p. ix.

■ **Extend and expand the public transport accessibility fund**

The state government can work towards meeting the milestones laid out in the *Accessible Public Transport in Victoria Action Plan 2013–2017* and enable people with a disability to better access public transport, by extending and expanding the transport accessibility fund.

The current transport accessibility fund is fully committed, and is only funded until June 2015. Its capacity of \$5 million per annum is also not enough to make substantial accessibility improvements to the public transport network, or to meet the 2017 milestones laid out in the state government's *Accessible Public Transport in Victoria Action Plan 2013–2017*.

PTV has committed to integrating accessibility considerations into its work across the organisation. This will help develop a more accessible system in an integrated way. But dedicated funds for specific accessibility improvements remain essential to enabling greater access to the system. The state government could improve public transport accessibility for Victorians with a disability, by extending the transport accessibility fund beyond June 2015 and expanding it to enable substantial network accessibility improvements.

■ **Set up a central booking system for accessible taxis and improve the Multi-Purpose Taxi Program**

The state government can help bring the quality of taxi services up to the level that people with a disability deserve and require, by creating a central booking service that better coordinates services for people requiring wheelchair-accessible taxis.

In 2013 the Victorian government's Taxi Industry Inquiry found that the Victorian taxi industry was "not delivering the levels of service quality, availability, accessibility and value expected by the community".¹⁷⁵ People with disabilities continue to report taxi service delays and denials, high travel costs, poor customer service and occasional assault and abuse from taxi

services. While the implementation of the Taxi Industry Inquiry recommendations is going some way to addressing these issues, there is more work to be done.

The Inquiry recommended creating a central booking service for wheelchair-accessible taxis, which, if implemented, could improve trust and service quality for people with a disability.

Further, the Multi-Purpose Taxi Program, which offers subsidised taxi fares for people with severe and permanent disabilities, is currently under review. VCOSS looks forward to participating in this review to help expand the program to improve taxi service affordability, access and efficiency of funding.

■ **Expand public transport material aid for disadvantaged groups**

The state government can assist vulnerable people who are stranded, distressed or need financial assistance for essential transport, by expanding emergency relief providers' capacity to offer material aid.

The provision of financial assistance for essential transport to people experiencing disadvantage is an important part of the support provided by emergency relief and material aid agencies. It may be needed because people have become stranded without any money, are homeless, or need assistance travelling to school or medical appointments, or navigating the public transport system. The transition to myki has affected the ability of some agencies to provide assistance, while recent changes to the federal Department of Social Services tenders for emergency relief has significantly affected the provision of emergency relief and material aid for transport across the state.

While the introduction of the public transport daypass is a welcome move, it has not solved all problems, and emergency relief providers need additional capacity to help people to get home safely or reach important appointments.

¹⁷⁵ Final Report: *Customers First – Service, Safety, Choice*, Taxi Industry Inquiry, September 2012, p. 7.

Further policy directions

- **Develop community transport:** Community transport covers an important gap in the transport system by providing services to people who have difficulty using private and public transport. Community transport is underdeveloped in Victoria compared with other states, and by expanding community transport services, the state government can help meet the transport needs of vulnerable groups more efficiently and effectively.
- **Improve travel training and assistance:** Many people facing disadvantage are not using the public transport system because they don't know when, where or how to access it, or require additional help to do so. These people limit their transport options or use more expensive options. Travel training and assistance programs could help expand the use of public transport services and the opportunities for these groups to participate more fully in community life.
- **Improve ticketing services:** Problems remain with both the myki ticketing system and the daypass system for emergency relief. The state government could help improve the operation of myki, including by adding a single use ticket option. This could reduce difficulties using public transport, expand patronage and improve access for people facing disadvantage.
- **Review fares and public transport concessions:** The current system of public transport fares, concessions and free travel passes is unnecessarily difficult to understand, meaning many people pay more for public transport than they need to. By simplifying fare structures, concession eligibility and streamlining application processes, the system would require less bureaucracy and attract fewer complaints, and people could avoid overpaying.
- **Reduce punitive approaches to fare evasion:** Too many people are being caught up in our justice system because of public transport fines, often because they need to travel but have no money to pay, or because they are homeless, or have cognitive impairments or psychiatric disabilities. The Victorian government needs to work with community services to find sustainable solutions so these groups do not get caught up in the justice system as a result.
- **Improve access to school buses:** The school bus system provides the most extensive public transport coverage across rural and regional Victoria, but many people who could benefit from this travel option are prevented from using the system to make valuable journeys. Expanding access to school bus travel has the potential to cover some gaps in the public transport network.



Make communities safer by addressing the causes of crime

In recent years, Victoria has taken the 'tough on crime' approach of imposing longer and harsher sentences. This has cost hundreds of millions of extra dollars running prisons and building new prisons. It has led to our prison population growing more than 40 per cent over the last decade.¹⁷⁶ But we haven't seen a matching drop in crime rates¹⁷⁷ or increased community safety.

There is a multitude of evidence showing longer sentences and harsher treatment do not reduce crime.¹⁷⁸ The Victorian Sentencing Advisory Council has found that prison has little deterrent effect and often results in a higher rate of recidivism.¹⁷⁹ Victoria needs a new justice reinvestment plan to stop people committing crimes in the first place, and to stop prisoners from reoffending upon release.

Prisoners in Victoria have typically experienced significant disadvantage, often contributing to their offending behaviour. They have low rates of educational attainment, literacy and employment before entering prison. Many have histories of abuse, mental illness and substance use. There are cost-effective, efficient and sustainable alternatives to locking up more disadvantaged Victorians for longer periods, such as investing in services that address underlying issues of mental health, unemployment, homelessness and drug and alcohol use.

Adopting this justice reinvestment approach to community safety requires different areas of government to work together, including those responsible for housing, healthcare, workforce participation and education.

Only 5.6% of male and 14.1% of female Victorian prisoners completed secondary, trade or tertiary education.¹⁸⁰

87% of women in prison have previously been sexually, physically and/or emotionally abused.¹⁸¹

176 ABS, *Corrective Services Australia*, Cat. No. 4512.0, June 2014.

177 Victoria Police, *Crime Statistics 2013/2014*, 27 August 2014.

178 For example, Andrew von Hirsch, Anthony Bottoms, Elizabeth Burney, and P-O. Wikstrom, The Institute of Criminology, Cambridge University, *Criminal Deterrence and Sentence Severity: An Analysis of Recent Research*, Oxford: Hart Publishing, 1999.

179 D Ritchie, *Does Imprisonment Deter? A review of the evidence*, Sentencing Advisory Council, April 2011, p. 61.

180 Department of Justice, *Statistical Profile of the Victorian Prison System 2006–07 to 2010–11*, 2011, p. 38.

181 Smart Justice, *More prisons are not the answer to reducing crime*, November 2011.

Justice reinvestment in the United States

In the United States, funding has been diverted through justice reinvestment, from prison spending to community programs addressing systemic disadvantage, substance abuse programs and halfway houses for those on parole, increased access to education in prisons and expanded specialist courts such as drug courts.¹⁸²

- Using this approach Texas halted the growth of its prison population by a projected 9,000 people, saving \$443 million.¹⁸³
- New Hampshire is currently implementing justice reinvestment policies, projecting savings of \$160 million in construction and operating costs.¹⁸⁴

Give every young person the chance to be diverted from crime

The state government can reduce young people's contact with the justice system, and steer them on a path away from offending, by funding a range of embedded programs to divert them from crime at every point in the justice continuum; from first contact with the police through to attending court.

To make real change, the Victorian government must make youth diversion programs available statewide. At the moment, rural and regional areas often miss out. Diversion programs like the Youth Support Service, which supports young people and their families who have had contact with the police to address issues before they become more serious, and Ropes, which brings young offenders together with police to participate in a rope-climbing course followed by education about the impact of a police record, are only available to some young people. These programs aim to support young people who have had contact with the justice system and steer them away from further court involvement or offending.

Community-based diversion costs 10 per cent or less of the amount required to detain someone in a juvenile justice facility.¹⁸⁵

Effective diversion programs help young people address the underlying causes of their offending by tackling issues such as substance use, housing, mental health issues, education and training needs. They aim to help reduce reoffending rates, improve community safety and save money on police, courts, prisons and legal services resources.

182 Oakshott G, 'True Justice' *About the House*, 2010, p.47.

183 Justice Centre; Council of State Governments, *Texas; Overview*, <http://csgjusticecenter.org/jr/tx/> accessed 28 January 2015.

184 Justice Centre; Council of State Governments, *New Hampshire; Overview*, <http://csgjusticecenter.org/jr/tx/> accessed 28 January 2015.

185 KPMG, Department of Human Services, *Review of the Youth Justice Group Conferencing Program*, 2010.

However, Victoria's approach to diversion for young people has been described as "somewhat ad-hoc", with no statewide funded programs.¹⁸⁶ Some existing youth diversion programs, like Right Step, which diverts young offenders from re-entering the court system by providing case management that identifies and addresses the issues contributing to offending behaviour, have struggled to secure recurrent funding and been forced to close down. Similarly, the Youth Support Service has been successful in working with young people to prevent further contact with the court and child protection services. However it only operates in some regional cities and is not available in any rural courts; young people appearing in courts including Bairnsdale, Horsham, Sale and Wodonga, miss out.

Expand young people's bail support services

The state government can help prevent young people being unnecessarily remanded by expanding bail support programs statewide and providing support during all non-business hours.

Victoria's Intensive Bail Supervision Program and the Central After Hours Assessment and Bail Placement services support young people on bail, and prevent them being remanded unnecessarily. The Intensive Bail Supervision Program supports young people who are at high risk of remand, but is only available in some metropolitan areas. The Central After Hours Assessment and Bail Placement Service is for children and young people aged 10–18 across the state who are being considered for remand, and operates outside business hours until 2am. Its hours should be extended to 9.30am, when court services resume.

About 23 per cent of children and young people in detention are unsentenced and on remand.¹⁸⁷

Remand has significant impacts on young people's lives, including disruption to everyday life and relationships, stigma, and exposure to the risk of further criminalisation.

Significant numbers of these children and young people are being detained on remand unnecessarily because bail support services are not available to them. This is particularly so in rural and regional

Victoria, where there are fewer mental health, youth, accommodation and drug and alcohol services available, and greater barriers to accessing them.

64% of all remand admissions for young people in 2010 were for less than 21 days. 25% were for three days or less.¹⁸⁸

Increase post-prison release transition support

The state government can help people released from prison to reintegrate more safely and successfully back into the community by increasing the number of transition support packages available, especially for vulnerable groups, such as women and Aboriginal prisoners. More flexible and longer term support, improved access to cultural and gender specific programs and better integration between transition and other support services would also improve outcomes for prisoners.

Appropriate support in the initial post-release period helps reduce the risk of those released reoffending, becoming homeless, committing suicide and or having a drug overdose. A 2012 report found that 43 per cent of Australian prisoners leave prison into homelessness¹⁸⁹ and experts estimate that every month a person dies from drug overdose soon after leaving prison.¹⁹⁰ However, transitional support and rehabilitation services are under-resourced and struggle to meet demand. In 2013–14, 4489 prisoners were released from Victorian prisons but only 695 places were available in the Intensive Transitional Support Programs.

186 Sentencing Advisory Council, *Sentencing Children and Young People in Victoria*, 2012, p. 28.

187 AIHW, *Youth Justice Factsheet No. 29: Unsentenced Detention 2012–13*, 2014.

188 Jesuit Social Services, *Thinking Outside: Alternatives to Remand for Children*, 2013, p. 61.

189 AIHW, *The Health of Australia's Prisoners 2012*, 2013, p. 28.

190 See for example, *The Age*, *Life outside jail proves fatal*, 30 May 2014.

Victoria's recidivism rate also remains high, with more than half our prisoners at any one time having previously served a prison sentence.¹⁹¹ Reducing reoffending and reimprisonment will not only make the community safer, it is also sound economic policy. Jesuit Social Services recently found that a 15 per cent cut in the reoffending rate among adult men would save Corrections Victoria's budget more than \$15 million.¹⁹²

The Victorian Ombudsman is investigating rehabilitation and transitional services offered to prison before and after their release. The discussion paper released in late 2014 highlights the lack of pre-and post-release support for prisoners, and the disproportionate burden borne by Aboriginal and women prisoners.

■ Fund a culturally specific residential diversion service for Aboriginal women

The state government can improve outcomes for Aboriginal women in the justice system and help them maintain connections to their family, community and culture by expanding the pilot diversionary program for Aboriginal women, into a stand-alone, culturally safe service.

Aboriginal women are the fastest growing sector of the prison population, doubling from 24 to 48 between June 2011 and September 2014.¹⁹³ However there are few diversionary services available to this group.

Aboriginal women in prison often have histories marked by trauma and disadvantage. Nine out of 10 have experienced mental illness, few were employed or finished secondary education prior to their imprisonment and a majority have been victim of physical or sexual abuse.¹⁹⁴ Eight out of 10 are mothers or primary carers of children.¹⁹⁵ As a result of their mother's imprisonment many children are forced into the child protection system, with potentially long-term impacts on their own wellbeing and connection to community.

The Victorian Aboriginal Justice Agreement Phase 3 prioritises the diversion of Aboriginal women from further contact with the justice system and recommends strengthening community-based alternatives to prison.

In 2014 the Department of Justice funded Odyssey House to run a one-year pilot, with four residential treatment beds for Aboriginal women at risk of incarceration. These beds can be made available to women on remand, on community-based orders, prior to sentencing, or as a post-release transition option. Expanding this program to become a stand-alone, culturally specific residential service (in the model of Wulgunggo Ngalu Learning Place for Aboriginal men) with long-term funding will help produce better outcomes for the growing number of Aboriginal women imprisoned in Victoria, and their children.

■ Fund legal representation and support for Aboriginal clients in every Koori Court

The state government can help ensure Aboriginal people in the Koori Court system are able to fully participate in the court process, by providing Aboriginal legal services with one full-time equivalent staff member for each Koori Court, to provide legal representation, advocacy and support.

The Koori Court system is a more informal court setting that aims to lower Aboriginal imprisonment rates and address the complex underlying issues that lead to Aboriginal people offending. In recent months the program has expanded to the Melbourne and Heidelberg Magistrate's Courts.

191 Productivity Commission, *Report on Government Services 2014: Volume C: Justice*, p. 8.41.

192 Jesuit Social Services, *Strengthening Prisoners Transition to Create a Safer Victoria*, June 2014, p. 2.

193 ABS, *Corrective Services Australia, September Quarter 2014*, Cat. No. 4512.0, December 2014, p. Table 13.

194 Victorian Equal Opportunity and Human Rights Commission, *Unfinished Business; Koori women and the justice system*, 2013, p. 29.

195 Victorian Equal Opportunity and Human Rights Commission, *Unfinished Business; Koori women and the justice system*, 2013, p. 18.

To be most effective, clients in Koori Courts should be represented by informed, engaged and trusted advocates. The Koori Courts focus on therapeutic outcomes and are based on the involvement of Elders and respected community members. Supporting clients through this complex process requires more time and resources than representing clients in mainstream courts. People before the courts often have long histories of trauma and disengagement from services, meaning significant time must be invested in building trust and strong relationships between community workers and clients.

Legal and other support services have not received additional funding to meet the legal and related needs of clients accessing the expanding Koori Court system. With the Aboriginal community growing, demand for support services is already high and increasing. The state government can build on the success of the Koori Courts model in helping Aboriginal people address underlying issues through the court system, by increasing the capacity of community legal and other services to respond to this growing demand.

Roll out the Victorian Drug Court statewide

The state government can build on the success of the Victorian Drug Court model in reducing recidivism and increasing post-completion outcomes for offenders, by rolling it out to every Magistrate's Court jurisdiction in Victoria.

The Victorian Drug Court, operating for more than a decade in Dandenong, is an evidence-based, cost-effective initiative that reduces reoffending by helping offenders address alcohol and other drug (AOD) issues. It provides a multi-disciplinary and multi-departmental response to AOD dependency and related crime.

70% of prisoners report a history of illicit drug use, usually including intravenous drug use.¹⁹⁶

While most people who use drugs do not commit serious offences, many people who do commit offences do so either under the influence of alcohol or drugs, or to support their drug use. As a result, the demand for AOD treatment in prisons is high and continues to increase. Some people in need of treatment are missing out, as there are not enough places available. Rather than building more prisons and locking up more people, who are then not able to access the support they need to prevent reoffending, we need to shift our thinking to diverting people from prison and addressing the causes of crime.

An evaluation of the Victorian Drug Court has not been released since 2005, but that report showed offenders who completed a Drug Treatment Order were less likely to reoffend and had higher rates of employment post-completion than those who did not complete a Drug Treatment Order.¹⁹⁷

In 2008, an independent evaluation of the NSW Drug Court Completion Program found participants to be 38% less likely to be reconvicted for a drug offence.¹⁹⁸

196 AIHW, *The Health of Australia's Prisoners 2012, 2013*, p. 74.

197 Acumen Alliance, *Benefit and Cost Analysis of the Drug Court Program; final report*, Victorian Department of Justice, 2006, p. 4.

198 NSW Bureau of Crime Statistics and Research, *Crime and Justice Bulletin*, Number 121, 'The NSW Drug Court: A re-evaluation of its effectiveness', September 2008, p. 9.

Expand prison health services

The state government can improve the health of prisoners as well as community safety and wellbeing, by expanding prison health services, especially alcohol and other drug treatment services, psychiatric care services and preventative programs targeting the transmission of blood-borne viruses.

Prisons are one of the unhealthiest places to be in Victoria, with high rates of mental illness, alcohol and drug addiction, and infectious diseases among prisoners. In a 2013 report, 70 per cent of Australian prisoners reported using illicit drugs in the previous 12 months.¹⁹⁹ There are high rates of blood-borne viruses and health problems associated with substance abuse.

Inadequate provision of prison health services means these conditions are often not being treated, diminishing the chance of prisoners returning to the community healthy and able to reintegrate safely. Left untreated, blood-borne viruses can quickly spread to the broader community when prisoners are released. Mental health, alcohol and drug issues can increase the likelihood of reoffending and diminish community safety and wellbeing.

The Victorian Auditor-General recently found that mental health services across the justice system are under-resourced and fragmented, with gaps in planning, coordination and collaboration.²⁰⁰ Over the last five years, prisoner numbers have increased by 29 per cent, but there has been no increase in the number of prisoner mental health beds.²⁰¹

Deliver on election commitment to a community legal centre assistance fund

The state government can assist Victorians facing disadvantage to access legal assistance by fulfilling its election commitment to provide an additional \$2 million to community legal centres; this would begin to address the gaps left by federal government funding cuts and assist the community legal sector to meet demand.

Vulnerable people are more likely to face legal issues in their lives than other people and often experience multiple legal problems at the same time.²⁰² The Auditor-General recently reported that changes to Victoria's sentencing laws, increased police focus on family violence, increases in child protection notifications and a deteriorating economic environment, have all contributed to growing demand for legal assistance.²⁰³

However, community legal centres are underfunded and struggling to meet demand for services. The 2014 ACOSS Community Sector Survey found that more than 95 per cent of community legal service providers were unable to meet demand.²⁰⁴

The state government can help vulnerable Victorians access legal assistance when they need it, and prevent costly legal delays or escalation of problems, by maintaining funding to existing services and making available, at a minimum, \$2 million to fill the gap left by federal government funding cuts, before community legal centres are forced to cut services.

199 AIHW, *The Health of Australia's Prisoners 2012, 2013*, p. 74.

200 Victorian Auditor General's Office, *Mental Health Strategies for the Justice System*, 15 October 2014.

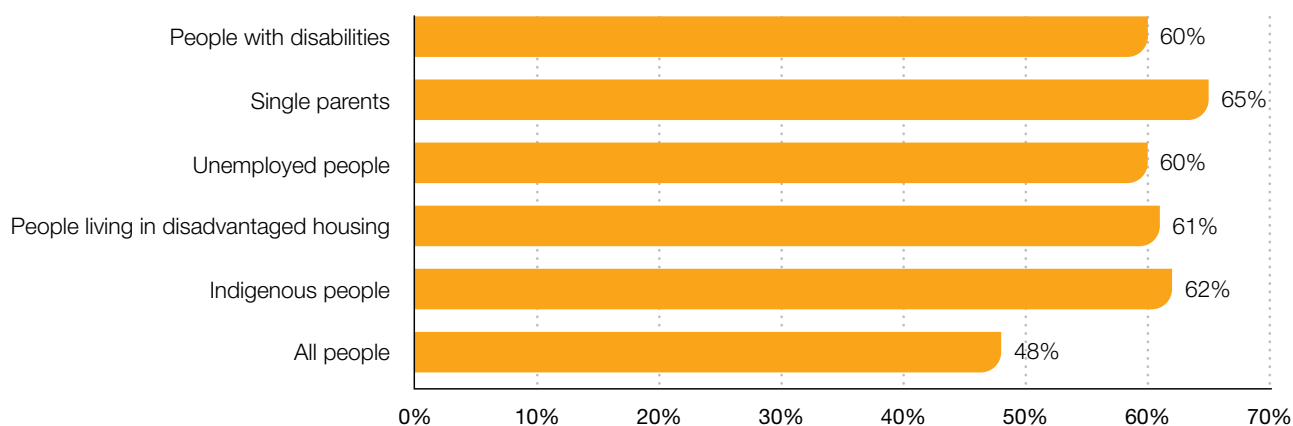
201 Victorian Auditor General's Office, *Mental Health Strategies for the Justice System*, 15 October 2014, p. 35.

202 C Coumarelos et al. *Legal Australia-Wide Survey: Legal Needs in Victoria*, 2012, p. 1.

203 Victorian Auditor-General's Office, *Access to Legal Aid*, 20 August 2014.

204 Australian Council of Social Service, *Australian Community Sector Survey 2013 National Report*, 2013, p. 9.

Figure 10: Incidence of legal problems in Victoria, selected groups



Source: C Coumarelos et al., *Legal Australia-Wide Survey: Legal Needs in Victoria*, 2012, p. 67.

Further policy directions

- **Cut crime through justice reinvestment**

approaches: Justice reinvestment strategies redirect funding from prisons to community initiatives that target the causes of crime.

A cross-government and community reform group should be established to develop and implement a justice reinvestment plan.

- **Continue to develop innovative court models:**

Specialised courts like the Neighbourhood Justice Centre and the Koori Courts aim to provide new responses to crime by addressing the behaviour underlying many offences. The community would benefit from wider coverage of these and other specialised courts.

- **Develop a Disability Justice Plan:**

People with disabilities are overrepresented in the criminal justice system and are often not receiving appropriate support to manage their disabilities. A Disability Justice Plan is needed to divert people from the prison system and provide them with the right support and care to meet their needs.

- **Legislate to enshrine diversion for young people:**

There is no legislative framework for youth diversion. Legislation should be introduced to enshrine pre-plea diversion for young people from first police contact through to court attendance. Pre-plea diversion for adults has been enshrined in legislation since 2009.

- **Pursue fine reform:**

Thousands of people become caught up in the justice system by failure to pay fines for relatively trivial offences. The Victorian government could address this by implementing recommendations contained in the Sentencing Advisory Council's Report on *The Imposition and Enforcement of Court Fines and Infringement Penalties in Victoria*.



Build resilient and engaged local communities

Victorian communities must build their resilience if they are to prepare for, respond to, and recover from the emergencies and adverse events that we now see occurring more frequently. The *State of the Climate 2014* report shows the overall Australian climate has warmed by 0.9°C since 1910. There are more heat and cold extremes. While Australia experienced very hot weather just 2 per cent of the time in the 1950s, it now experiences it 10 per cent of the time. There is also more extreme fire risk weather, and longer fire seasons. Vulnerable people are hardest hit by emergencies and adverse events. The reasons for this, and what needs to be done to protect and improve their recovery, is outlined in the VCOSS report *Disaster and Disadvantage: Social vulnerability in emergency management*.

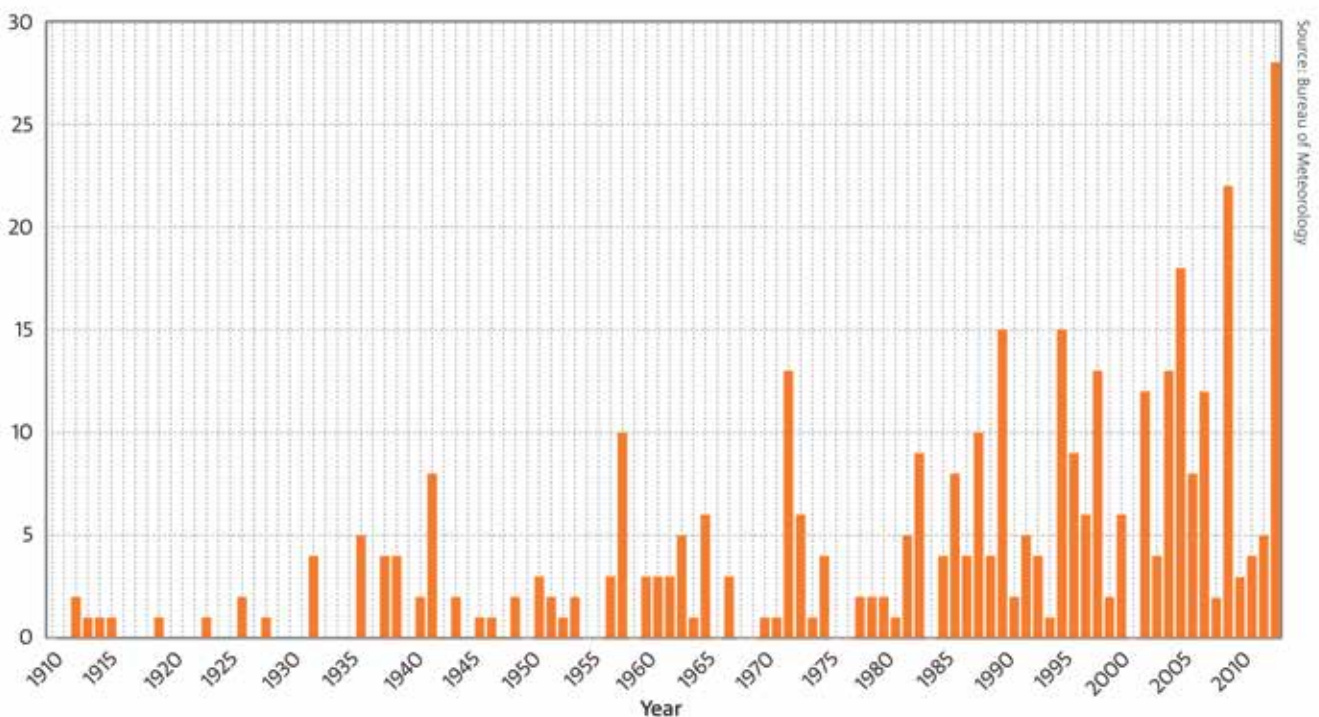
Some areas experience greater disadvantage than others. Tony Vinson's report, *Dropping off the edge: The distribution of disadvantage in Australia in 2007*

highlighted this. An association between disadvantage and poorer outcomes has been found in children's development²⁰⁵, youth social exclusion²⁰⁶ and a range of other areas, with those in more disadvantaged communities having poorer outcomes. Growth areas are also vulnerable to social exclusion, as there is a lag between when people move into growth areas, and when local services, transport and jobs are established there. Neighborhood houses can help overcome this by engaging people and connecting them with their community.

205 Australian Government Department of Education, *Australian Early Development Census 2012 Summary Report*, November 2013, p. 6.

206 A Abello, R Cassells, A Daly, F D Souza and R Miranti, *Developing an Index of Youth Social Exclusion for Australian Communities*, Presentation to the Australian Conference of Economists, 13 July 2013, p. 11.

Figure 11: Number of days each year where the Australian area-averaged daily mean temperature is above the 99th percentile for the period 1910–2013. Source: Australian Bureau of Statistics, *The State of the Climate 2014*.



■ Help the community sector to prepare and plan for emergencies to enable it to support people most in need during emergency events

The state government can increase vulnerable people's ability to prepare for, respond to and recover from disaster and emergency events by supporting emergency planning within the community sector that builds disaster preparedness and resilience, both within the sector, and the broader community.

Experience and research tells us that disasters are profoundly discriminatory in where they strike, and the way they affect people. For people who are already facing disadvantage, they can be overwhelming.

About 80 per cent of Victorian frontline agencies are unable to meet current levels of demand with the resources they have.²⁰⁷ This limits their capacity to undertake emergency planning, especially in terms of service continuity and surge demand.

It is estimated that in an emergency event, about half of all community sector organisations would be out of operation for a week if they sustained serious damage, and a quarter might never provide services again.²⁰⁸ This indicates a significant risk for those who rely on the services community organisations provide before, during and after an emergency.

This gap was evident during the 2014 Hazelwood Mine fire, with financial implications for community sector organisations relating to relocation costs, staff leave, and reduced or increased demand for services. There were also impacts to their business continuity and continuity of care, disruption to day-to-day activities, as well as service delivery, clean-up and repair issues, transport issues and impacts on staff. Supporting community organisations in emergency planning across the state would help prevent these disruptions and the services gaps they create.

"The (domestic violence) women's refuge was evacuated as it was in the path of fire. We moved clients into motels and hotels but then that area was being evacuated as well and we had to find alternative locations. There ended up being a 3–4 week loss of short term accommodation for domestic violence refuges as all the hotels and motels were booked out. This put women and children at real risk." – Morwell community organisation²⁰⁹

■ Support neighbourhood houses in growth corridors and other priority areas

The state government can help vulnerable Victorians engage and connect with their communities by funding 32 neighbourhood houses that are currently unsupported by the Neighbourhood House Coordination Program, and supporting new neighbourhood houses in other areas facing disadvantage and in new growth areas.

Victoria has around 370 neighbourhood houses funded by the Neighbourhood House Coordination Program. However there is no mechanism to coordinate new neighbourhood houses that emerge in response to community need or in high growth areas. There are now 32 that have emerged unfunded in response to community need, in areas such as Carrum, Geelong West and St Andrews, and in other of Melbourne's fastest growing areas. Funding these new neighbourhood houses will give vulnerable Victorians the chance to engage and connect with their community through a range of social, health, wellbeing and educational activities and programs.

207 ACOSS, *Australian Community Sector Survey 2014*, Australian Council of Social Service, Sydney, 2014.

208 K Mallon, E Hamilton, M Black, B Beem and J Abs, *Adapting the Community Sector for Climate Extremes*, National Climate Change Adaptation Research Facility, Gold Coast, 2013.

209 VCOSS, *Submission to the Hazelwood Mine Fire Inquiry*, 2014, p. 11.

Every neighbourhood house has the potential each year to:

- Support more than 20,000 community engagements
- Support 1,400 programmed opportunities for social, community and economic participation
- Leverage a 6:1 value from every dollar invested
- Provide 5,800 hours of employment
- Provide 2,600 hours of volunteering opportunities.²¹⁰

VCOSS and the Association of Neighbourhood Houses and Learning Centres (ANHLC) estimate funding for these 32 neighbourhood houses would cost \$3.1 million in 2015–16.

■ Align neighbourhood house funding with need

The state government can strengthen communities and better align neighbourhood house funding with community need by applying a formula that accounts for population size, level of disadvantage, level of geographic isolation and the rate of change in communities.

Historically, neighbourhood house investment has been ad hoc. Further, the Victorian population has grown by more than 5.4 per cent in the last six years, but it has been many years since neighbourhood house funding saw any real growth.

Applying the new formula would result in more people engaged in opportunities for social, community and economic participation, and additional programs and services being leveraged and supported across more than 340 Victorian communities.

People who attend neighbourhood houses are as diverse as the communities they come from and are also more likely to face disadvantage. A 2013 Victorian survey showed that out of 46,720 neighbourhood house participants:

- 20.4% identified as having a disability or long-term impairment, compared with 18% of the general population
- 1.5% identified as Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander, compared with 0.9% of the general population

- 18% did not consider English as their primary language, compared with 19.6% of the general population
- 52% had a Health Care Card or concession card, compared with 23.8% of the general population.²¹¹

Neighbourhood houses deliver individual and community health and wellbeing benefits by enabling people of all abilities, backgrounds and ages to come together to connect, learn and share in an inclusive environment.

Research also suggests that investment in strengthening individual and community wellbeing reduces the need for spending in curative health and other interventionist services.²¹² Neighbourhood houses offer a cost-effective opportunity to strengthen communities.

■ Fund volunteer coordinators in all community information centres

The state government can boost the ability of Victoria's 38 community information centres to provide critical support and financial assistance to people experiencing hardship, by funding volunteer coordinator positions at each centre.

Community information centres leverage many millions of dollars in Commonwealth emergency relief funds, but lack operational support. These centres are vital not just to delivering emergency financial aid, but also to referring people with a wide range of needs to appropriate local services. Typically operating from premises provided by local councils and staffed almost entirely by volunteers, they offer enormous value at very low cost. But demand for their services generally exceeds their capacity. Funded volunteer coordinators would boost staff recruitment, enable longer operating hours, and allow these agencies to assist more people.

210 ANHLC, *Neighbourhood House Survey 2013*.

211 ANHLC, *Neighbourhood House Survey 2013*.

212 For example see I Kawachi, *Social Capital and Community Effects on Population and Individual Health*, *Annals of the New York Academy of Sciences*, 1999, 896: 120–130.

Further policy directions

- **Support Victorians in emergencies:**
 - Ensure statewide heatwave planning addresses the needs of Victorians facing disadvantage
 - Support and resource key community organisations to participate in emergency planning, networks and training
 - Improve municipal emergency planning to include community sector organisations that support people facing disadvantage
 - Prepare a state framework to address the needs of disadvantaged Victorians before, during and after emergencies.
- **Develop a plan for Victorian communities to help prevent and overcome entrenched geographic disadvantage:** The ‘One Melbourne or Two’ report by the Victorian Interface Councils (Cardinia Shire Council, City of Casey, City of Whittlesea, Hume City Council, Melton Shire Council, Mornington Peninsula Shire Council, Nillumbik Shire Council, Shire of Yarra Ranges and Wyndham City Council) identified the infrastructure and service needs of outer Melbourne.²¹³ This requires significant planning and investment for the future. Rural and regional areas are also changing dramatically, in light of climate change, globalisation, loss of skills and local employment opportunities.
- **Enhance volunteer support, resources and management across the sector:** In Victoria, there are 542,000 volunteers working in not-for-profit community organisations,²¹⁴ who are essential in strengthening the community. Enhanced volunteer management would help maximise and further leverage the contribution of these volunteers across the sector.
- **Review the *Equal Opportunity Act*:** The *Equal Opportunity Act* should be strengthened to help prevent discrimination, including through the removal of exemptions that allow discrimination against LGBTI people.

213 Essential Economics, *One Melbourne or Two: Implications of Population Growth for Infrastructure and Services in Interface Areas*, Report Prepared for the Interface Councils, 2013.

214 Presentation by Susan Pascoe AM, Commissioner of the ACNC, Australian Charities 2013, *Rethinking the sector*, October 2014.

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