

Putting people back in the picture



V C O S S
 S T A T E
 B U D G E T
 S U B M I S S I O N
 2 0 1 6 - 1 7



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 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 debate.

Authorised by:

Emma King, Chief Executive Officer

© Copyright 2015

Victorian Council of Social Service

Victorian Council of Social Service

Level 8, 128 Exhibition Street

Melbourne, Victoria, 3000

+61 3 9235 1000

vcoss@vcoss.org.au

Media enquiries:

John Kelly

Media Coordinator

E: john.kelly@vcoss.org.au

M: 0418 127 153

VCOSS recognises the traditional owners of our land, and pays our respect to elders past and present.



Contents

Putting people back in the picture	2
Overarching strategies for lasting social change.....	4
Summary of proposals	6
Strengthen community organisations to help people fulfil their potential	9
Prevent, identify and respond to family violence.....	13
Deliver an equitable education system to help every child fulfil their potential.....	17
Help people facing disadvantage gain work and skills.....	24
Help make housing affordable for people facing disadvantage	30
Help vulnerable families nurture their children	35
Improve community health and wellbeing	41
Improve the lives of people with disability and carers	46
Prevent crime through a smarter justice system.....	51
Cut the cost of living for people on low incomes.....	55
Expand people’s transport options	59
Build cohesive and resilient communities.....	62



Putting people back in the picture

In its first year of office the Andrews Government began articulating an ambitious vision, in which Victorians could rely upon strong public and community services to help them build meaningful lives, in thriving, inclusive communities.



EMMA KING, VCOSS CEO

VCOSS sees reducing poverty and disadvantage as central to that vision. If Victoria is to flourish, it cannot leave people behind. Poverty, inequality and disadvantage impose a heavy social and economic cost. When people cannot fulfil their potential, their valuable skills, creativity and labour go underutilised, social cohesion is fragmented, and people can struggle to achieve what is ultimately everyone's aspiration: to live a good life.

Tackling entrenched social disadvantage in families and communities is difficult, because social problems are complex, with multiple, interrelated causes. There are no simple solutions; people need many services working together to change their life trajectory, and policy approaches need to reflect that. As long as we keep designing systems in discrete units, organised to treat one problem at a time, people will continue to fall through the cracks, and we are destined to fail in our aim of supporting people to overcome poverty and disadvantage.

The Andrews Government's first budget focused on delivering on election promises, including welcome investments in education, vulnerable families, employment, public transport and tackling family violence. The 2016–17 State Budget can build on this, including through expanding models of progressive universalism, where inclusive and accessible universal



Tackling entrenched social disadvantage in families and communities is difficult, because social problems are complex, with multiple, interrelated causes. There are no simple solutions; people need many services working together to change their life trajectory, and our policy approaches need to reflect that.

services seamlessly connect with specialist, targeted services for people who require more intensive assistance. Investing in prevention and early intervention is proven to address the cause of people's problems, and manage them far more effectively and efficiently, than waiting until symptoms appear or crises occur.

The Andrews Government can develop an improved social policy framework that better reflects the many complex, interrelated causes of disadvantage and people's experiences of it, to create lasting and effective social change. It can empower agencies to take more holistic and collaborative approaches by co-designing place-based initiatives and services with community organisations and the people who use them. It can better support people facing disadvantage by moving toward more person- and family-centred service systems.

The Victorian community sector currently employs about 97,000 workers, and generates an estimated \$13 billion annually. With significant growth expected from investment in the National Disability Insurance Scheme (NDIS) and an ageing population, supporting community sector development can contribute to economic growth, create jobs and improve people's wellbeing.

This submission identifies overarching strategies for creating lasting social change, and specific investment opportunities across a spectrum of social policy areas, including community building, tackling family violence, education, employment, housing and homelessness, children and families, health, disability, justice, the cost of living and transport.

Underlying all this, the *VCOSS State Budget Submission 2016–17* is about putting people back in the picture when designing social systems and delivering support.

Emma King

Victorian Council of Social Service
Chief Executive Officer



Overarching strategies for lasting social change

Too often, policy makers take a ‘spotfire’ approach in addressing social problems. Each time a new issue flares up, a response is sent down the pipeline to douse the flames, but the underlying causes of people’s problems continue to smoulder underneath, ready to flare up again. This approach doesn’t work. We need new ways of designing systems and delivering services to better reflect the many, complex and interrelated causes of inequality and people’s experiences within it, to better work with people and help them overcome poverty and disadvantage.

Expand progressive universalism models

Victoria’s public and community service system needs to offer people a seamlessly integrated suite of services that support and respond to their level and range of needs. Progressive universalism models achieve this, with a mix of universal, secondary and tertiary services that intersect and work together to change people’s lives and help them overcome disadvantage.^{1, 2} In progressive universalism models, inclusive and accessible universal services seamlessly connect with targeted and specialist services, tiered to people’s level of need.

Enhance prevention and early intervention

More and more people are experiencing hardship and asking for government and community sector support when they have reached crisis point. But this is the least effective and most expensive approach to achieving social change, as people’s complex difficulties are often more entrenched and difficult to shift at this point. Effective prevention and early intervention services that are universally available to improve people’s living conditions and environments can provide timely support when early warning signs emerge or risks develop.

Collaborate in place-based approaches

People experiencing disadvantage, living in areas facing disadvantage, or working directly with people facing disadvantage, often hold the experience and insight that can be key in overcoming it in those local areas. Place-based approaches bring people together to discuss issues, suggest ideas, make decisions and

align solutions to fit local needs, enabling them to be part of the solution. They are not a formula, output or outcome and cannot be imposed from outside or rolled out uniformly everywhere. Instead, they build on existing relationships and structures to identify community strengths and capabilities, and use them to create collaborative solutions that help create lasting change.

Co-design with people and community organisations

When service design happens behind closed doors based on theory and research, it can overlook the reality and complexity of people’s lives, and so fail to achieve the desired results when rolled out. Co-design involves working alongside people facing disadvantage to create services and programs that incorporate their circumstances, values and goals. It is a way of thinking that involves letting go of professional assumptions about people’s perspectives and experiences, and instead actively learn from them. Co-design involves transferring and sharing power with people affected by social problems. By working together through co-design, innovative and creative solutions can be discovered.

Take person- and family-centred approaches

People and communities facing disadvantage possess strengths that can be built on. By taking person- and family-centred approaches in service delivery, people’s whole story can be taken into account, and their strengths valued, reinforced and developed. Service professionals can better understand people’s lives and environments to determine the best way to support them. This approach requires sensitivity, the ability for interventions to be designed flexibly, and is more likely to bring lasting change.

1 Centre for Community Child Health, *Services for young children and families: an integrated approach*, Policy Brief No. 4, 2006.

2 Fair Society, *Healthy Lives: The Marmot Review*, 2010.

Create inclusive growth

Not all people have shared equally in the economic growth of recent decades, with those already the most privileged reaping the greatest increases in income and wealth. Responding to this, 'inclusive growth' involves employment-centred economic growth, universal social services, and the removal of inequality traps that arise from class, gender, ethnicity and location.³ Social issues such as poverty and inequality cannot be separated from economic growth. Creating jobs, providing skills and employment pathways for people facing disadvantage, and generating government revenue to support people living in poverty, will help make Victoria a fairer society, in which more people can participate fully in social and economic life.

Recognise difference and support diversity

People across Victoria are highly diverse, in cultural background, age, gender, sexuality, and physical and cognitive ability. Supporting all people requires supporting this diversity in ways of thinking, policy development, and service and infrastructure delivery. Aboriginal people are among those facing some of the highest rates of disadvantage in Victoria, and greater effort is needed to empower Aboriginal people to thrive and prosper. By taking a human rights approach, improving cultural competence and inclusive practices, and forming strong legislative protections and oversight mechanisms, we can better recognise people's difference and support their diversity.

Respond to climate change

Climate change will most affect people experiencing disadvantage, as they face the greatest risks and have the fewest resources with which to respond. Increasingly frequent extreme weather events are likely to leave vulnerable Victorians the most exposed to harm. The Victorian government can minimise these risks by reducing greenhouse gas emissions and also help vulnerable people and communities to become more resilient and adapt to the changes already occurring.

Respond to population growth and change

Victoria's population is growing faster than any other state or territory,⁴ with changing demographics including an ageing population, more people living alone, more young adults living in the family home, more single parent families and more people born overseas. These changes play out differently in different geographic areas and

regions, and services and infrastructure are struggling to keep pace. Developing a forward-looking integrated plan for growth will help anticipate and respond to future changes in the population, so that people can receive early support, when and where they need it.

Establish an adequate and sustainable revenue base

Australian governments are grappling with a narrow and stagnant revenue base that restricts their ability to fund essential services. VCOSS, along with ACOSS and the other state and territory Councils of Social Service have provided a joint statement mapping out the direction for tax reform in the Federation.⁵ We advocate for revenue generation levels being linked to a commitment to providing the services people need, and for governments maintaining a progressive taxation system, where people contribute based on their ability to pay. Reform should not reduce the living standards of people on low incomes. State-based sources of revenue should include cooperatively strengthened land and payroll taxes, avoiding damaging competition between states and territories.

Design a cooperative Federation

To best support people facing disadvantage and poverty, all levels of government must work together through a new model of cooperative Federalism, aligning policies and expenditure to achieve lasting social change. VCOSS, ACOSS and other state and territory Councils of Social Service, have together proposed a model for a Federal compact⁶ that sets out community service guarantees that would specify universal, secondary and tertiary services guaranteed for every Australian, underpinned by a strong revenue base. Services would be delivered by the best-placed tier of government, with some continued shared responsibilities.

3 Brotherhood of St Laurence, *Towards inclusive growth in Australia: Report arising from Inclusive Growth in Australia roundtable*, 2012.

4 Australian Bureau of Statistics, *Australian Demographic Statistics*, Cat. No. 3101.0 March 2015.

5 ACOSS et al, *Fit for purpose: A Federation that guarantees the services that people need*, 2015.





6 Ibid.



Summary of proposals

	Page
Strengthen community organisations to help people fulfil their potential	9
Support jobs growth with a community sector workforce plan	9
Establish a social innovation fund to support place-based strategies	10
Protect people's access to support by fair indexation	10
Protect service quality for people by offsetting superannuation rises	11
Secure people's access to services in a rapidly changing sector	11
Prevent, identify and respond to family violence	13
Implement the recommendations of the Royal Commission into Family Violence	13
Help people facing family violence to access early support	14
Ensure victims of family violence can access specialist help	14
Help children overcome the trauma of family violence	14
Provide specialist financial counselling for people experiencing family violence and financial abuse	15
Expand men's behaviour change programs	15
Deliver an equitable education system to help every child fulfil their potential	17
Help children succeed with more involvement in early learning	18
Help children get the most out of early learning and care by strengthening quality	19
Provide children and families holistic support from integrated services	19
Help children transition successfully to secondary school with 'middle years' plans	20
Help young people stay in education by expanding flexible learning models	21
Better support students with additional needs through the Program for Students with Disabilities	22
Help people facing disadvantage gain work and skills	24
Help young people find work through Local Learning and Employment Networks (LLENs)	25
Help people facing disadvantage to gain vocational skills	25
Develop a Workforce Participation Plan to help people facing disadvantage find work	26
Create job pathways for people facing disadvantage through inclusive public employment targets	26
Help people facing disadvantage find work through social enterprises	27

	Page
 Help make housing affordable for people facing disadvantage	30
Develop an affordable housing strategy to help people secure a home	31
Provide homes for people facing disadvantage through a social housing growth fund	31
Improve people's housing security and living conditions through rental reform	32
Halve the number of people facing homelessness through prevention, rapid rehousing and permanent support	32
Protect social housing tenants from extreme weather and high bills	33
 Help vulnerable families nurture their children	35
Improve children's health and development with better access to Maternal and Child and Health services	36
Help vulnerable families through intensive early years support	36
Help vulnerable families and children benefit from playgroups	37
Better support all Aboriginal children to thrive	38
Help foster and kinship carers give children a supportive home environment	38
Give every child in out-of-home care high-quality therapeutic placements	39
Support young people leaving care to achieve independence	39
 Improve community health and wellbeing	41
Help people access alcohol and drug rehabilitation when they need it	41
Help reduce pharmaceutical misuse with a real-time prescription monitoring system	42
Ensure community mental health services can continue assisting people as the NDIS is rolled out	42
Improve young people's access to community mental health services	43
Improve people's health through preventative programs	43
Give community organisations the tools to help vulnerable people quit smoking	44
 Improve the lives of people with disability and carers	46
Invest in a high quality NDIS workforce	46
Ensure people with disability receive continued support	47
Ensure carers receive continued support	48
Help people with disability live independently	48
Help people with disability advocate for their rights	49

	Page
 Prevent crime through a smarter justice system	51
Tackle underlying reasons for crime	51
Divert young people from the justice system	51
Reform bail processes to ensure young people are not remanded unnecessarily	52
Help offenders with drug and alcohol dependence rehabilitate through specialist courts	52
Improve people's access to legal assistance	53
Help people facing disadvantage deal with outstanding fines and debt	53
Help people in prison reintegrate into the community	54
 Cut the cost of living for people on low incomes	55
Help people on low incomes better manage their energy use	55
Help prevent people entering financial hardship by expanding financial aid programs	56
Increase people's access to No-Interest Loans Schemes	56
Extend concessions to asylum seekers	57
Reduce people's energy hardship by increasing and indexing the Utilities Relief Grant cap	57
Prevent people facing energy hardship from being disconnected	57
 Expand people's transport options	59
Expand people's mobility with more accessible public transport	59
Help people in rural and regional Victoria access public transport	60
Provide people with better bus services	60
Help people access transport through the Multi-Purpose Taxi Program	60
Ensure people facing disadvantage can pay for public transport	61
 Build cohesive and resilient communities	62
Build communities' social cohesion through neighbourhood houses	62
Build communities' resilience in the face of disasters and emergencies	63
Support refugees resettling in Victoria	64



Strengthen community organisations to help people fulfil their potential

Many people face barriers and hardship at different points in their lives. Community sector organisations support people when they need help to overcome these challenges and help prevent them becoming isolated, vulnerable and impoverished. By delivering a wide range of services and programs and also advocating for policies that help tackle the causes of poverty and disadvantage, Victoria's community sector helps create the foundation of a strong, cohesive and inclusive community, where everyone is supported to overcome barriers and fulfil their potential.

The community sector is also a significant and growing economic sector, contributing about \$13 billion to the Victorian economy every year,⁷ employing about 97,000 people,⁸ and being supported by about 135,000 volunteers. For many Victorians, the community sector will be their employment future, where they will work in a rapidly growing sector,⁹ pursuing a professional career, working for a diverse range of organisations.¹⁰

With rising inequality, unemployment, housing and energy costs, an ageing population and increased recognition of issues such as family violence, mental health and child protection, people are increasingly seeking help from community sector organisations to overcome complex, interrelated forms of disadvantage. To ensure people can receive high quality support, community organisations need a sustainable and appropriately indexed funding base to maintain and develop their services, and to account for the full cost of service delivery, including planning, infrastructure and administrative support. They must also be funded to meet mandated increases in employee entitlements.

Support jobs growth with a community sector workforce plan

The Victorian government can create jobs for people across the state, including in rural and regional areas and Melbourne's outer fringe, and for people facing disadvantage, by developing a workforce plan that prepares the community sector for the rapid growth projected.

The community sector aims for a fair and just Victoria and works to prevent and alleviate the causes and consequences of poverty and disadvantage. It is also a rapidly growing industry, particularly with the rollout of the NDIS and the growth of the aged care sector. The number of people aged 65 and over in Australia is projected to increase from 3.2 million in 2012, to roughly 5.8 million in 2031, and up to 11 million in 2061. Nationally, the health and social assistance sector is set to be the fastest growing employment industry in Australia over the next five years, however there are predicted to be shortages of skilled staff across most of the sector.¹¹

Victoria has the opportunity to position itself as the nation's leader in developing and delivering world-class training and education for a modern, rapidly growing industry to meet statewide, national and global demands for a professional social and community care workforce.

In its 2015–16 State Budget, the Victorian government fulfilled election commitments to focus on jobs creation, establishing the \$200 million Future Industries Fund, the \$500 million Regional Jobs and Infrastructure Fund and the \$500 million Premier's Jobs and Investment Fund. By expanding the scope of these funds to incorporate the community sector, the Victorian government could strengthen job creation in a rapidly growing industry, and at the same time alleviate poverty and reduce inequality in Victoria.

⁷ VCOSS, *Strengthening the State: A snapshot of Victoria's community sector charities*, 2015, p. 10.

⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 22.

⁹ Community Services and Health Industry Skills Council, *2015 Environmental Scan – Building a Healthy Future: Skills, Planning and Enterprise*, p. 11.

¹⁰ D Hayward, 'Shifting from social provision to social investment', *Insight 13: Community Sector: Climate of Change*, VCOSS, 2015.

¹¹ Australian Government, Department of Employment, *Industry Employment Projections: 2014 Report*, 2014.

Establish a social innovation fund to support place-based strategies

The Victorian government can help communities overcome entrenched disadvantage by establishing a social innovation fund to support community-led, place-based initiatives that combine government, non-government and private sector efforts to build on community strengths and raise social and economic activity.

The *Dropping off the Edge Report 2015* shows Victorians living in some areas are caught in a cycle of entrenched poverty.¹² However they also have great experience, insight and understanding to offer in developing solutions. According to the Australian Social Inclusion Board:

*“...turning around the most severe and entrenched disadvantage must start with allowing the affected communities to be part of the process. Appropriate support will still need to be offered by governments, but key decisions about what the problems are, and how they can best be solved need to be led by the local community.”*¹³

Community sector organisations can draw on their local knowledge and relationships to help develop and deliver place-based approaches. A social innovation fund could support place-based approaches and enable organisations to participate without needing to cut existing community services they deliver to people.



The Go Goldfields Alliance¹⁴

The Go Goldfields Alliance is a partnership of service providers in Victoria’s Central Goldfields Shire, created to deliver locally relevant responses to complex and entrenched social issues.

The place-based approach was initiated and implemented entirely by the community and has strong community ownership. The alliance has developed a suite of integrated strategies to improve social, education and health outcomes for children, young people and families, with a strong focus on prevention and early intervention.

Protect people’s access to support by fair indexation

The Victorian government can help people facing disadvantage receive the range of community services they need, by annually indexing community sector funding using an appropriate formula that accounts for the rising real costs of service provision.

Victorians deserve access to high quality, well-developed community services. Like all organisations, community organisations face rising costs associated with wages, salaries and other non-salary items needed to operate. If governments apply an indexation rate that falls below the rate at which costs increase, funding is cut in real terms, placing the quality and availability of community services at risk.

Over the past four years government funding for community services has not kept pace with the rising cost of service provision. Indexation has been set at 2.0 per cent per annum, while community sector minimum wage increases have been 2.5 to 3.0 per cent,¹⁵ and inflation has run at between 1.1 and 3.2 per cent.¹⁶

The community sector has already made significant productivity gains, and further gains would be difficult to achieve because of the labour-intensive, people-oriented nature of its services.

*“Underfunding is seen as having a range of effects on the efficiency and effectiveness of the sector – on the reach of services and their quality, on access to services in rural and remote areas, and on the scope for services to innovate.”*¹⁷

¹² See <http://www.dote.org.au/findings/victoria/>

¹³ Australian Social Inclusion Board, *Governance models for location based initiatives*, Australian Government, 2011, p. 57.

¹⁴ Go Goldfields Shire Council, *Go Goldfields: aspiring and achieving*, <http://www.centralgoldfields.com.au>

¹⁵ Fair Work Commission, *National Minimum Wage Orders*, 2012, 2013, 2014 and 2015, www.fwc.gov.au

¹⁶ Australian Bureau of Statistics, *Consumer Price Index Australia*, Cat. No. 6401.0, 2015.

¹⁷ Productivity Commission, *Contribution of the Not for Profit sector*, January 2010, p. 287.

About 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 commonly used by community organisations.

Protect service quality for people by offsetting superannuation rises

By covering the cost of the mandated increase in the Superannuation Levy Guarantee, the Victorian government can help community sector organisations maintain legislated entitlements without 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 were not covered by the Victorian government. This meant community organisations were forced to fund the increases from within their operating budgets, potentially meaning cuts to services for Victorians facing disadvantage. The 2016–17 State Budget is an opportunity for the Victorian government to provide an additional 0.5 per cent indexation on wages, to offset the historical cost increases from community sector workers' mandated retirement entitlements.

Secure people's access to services in a rapidly changing sector

The Victorian government can help ensure people facing disadvantage receive the high quality support services they need in a rapidly changing environment, by supporting community organisations to adapt to this change. The pace and extent of change in the community sector is now greater than ever, driven by government reform, the growth of for-profit organisations in community service delivery, increasing demand and complexity of need, and more consumer-controlled funding models.

Under the NDIS and aged care reform models, funding is increasingly being allocated to people, not service providers. This aims to enable people to decide for themselves on the support they receive, and who will provide it. It means many community sector organisations must transform their service delivery, planning, data collection, financial systems and employment models.

Community sector organisations have always adapted to change, while striving to improve services for people and communities. Support needed to help them continue this includes increased capacity for local level information sharing and planning; management and governance support for financial planning; budget forecasting and workforce development; staff training and development for new service models; and dissemination of good practice.

FURTHER POLICY DIRECTIONS

Collaborate to tackle vulnerability and entrenched disadvantage

Government policy and programs can be made more effective by drawing on the community sector's on-the-ground experience and expert analysis of complex problems and potential solutions. Collaborative working processes at statewide, regional and local levels can 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 also a high risk some people will not engage with a new service, as has occurred with the recommissioned alcohol and other drug sector.¹⁸ Funding agencies can value the long-term relationships organisations have built with the people they work with, and aim to protect them when designing policy and programs, or instigating change.

Cut red tape by aligning with the ACNC

Victorian government agencies can reduce the regulatory burden on community organisations by working with the Australian Charities and Not-for-profits Commission (ACNC) to become 'Charity Passport Partners'.¹⁹ Becoming a Charity Passport Partner would enable the ACNC to share information collected from registered charities with government agencies. This would reduce the number of reports registered charities need to submit to different government agencies, in line with the ACNC's 'report once, use often' framework.

Reduce compliance costs by harmonising and simplifying fundraising

The current plethora of state and federal laws around fundraising can be extremely difficult for many community organisations to navigate and comply with. The Victorian government could work with the ACNC and review its own legislation, to produce a simplified fundraising system that provides safeguards but allows genuine fundraising activities to proceed with a minimum of difficulty.

18 Victorian Alcohol and Drug Association, *Challenges & Opportunities Key findings from VAADA's Alcohol and Other Drug (AOD) Sector Recommissioning Survey*, 2015, p. 6.

19 See Australian Charities and Not-for-profits Commission, *Charity Passport*, webpage, Accessed 11 November 2015.



Prevent, identify and respond to family violence

Family violence is a community-wide problem; experienced by people across all cultural, ethnic and socioeconomic backgrounds. People who face family violence are also at greater risk of other forms of disadvantage, including homelessness, poor physical and mental health, unemployment, poverty and low income. Family violence is the biggest contributing factor to ill health, disability and death in Victorian women aged 15–44.²⁰

Aboriginal women, women with disability and women from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds are particularly vulnerable to family violence. They also experience complex barriers to seeking help, which our system can do more to address.

According to family violence services, the degree of violence being inflicted on women and children in Victoria is also escalating, increasing the depth of trauma and severity of consequences they face.

“We are in an invisible poverty. This is the economic legacy of family violence.”²¹

Tackling family violence requires a whole-of-government and whole-of-community approach, including collaboration with the community sector. Changing the social factors that contribute to family violence also requires a long-term approach.

Implement the recommendations of the Royal Commission into Family Violence

The Royal Commission into Family Violence is Victoria’s chance to drive lasting social change that will improve responses to family violence and challenge the ingrained attitudes and behaviours that foster and cause it.

The Victorian government has already taken important steps towards adopting a whole-of-government approach to addressing family violence, including by instigating the Royal Commission itself. Funding announcements in the areas of prevention, identification and response are already helping the system to better meet the needs of people experiencing or at risk of family violence, and progressing the work of organisations like Our Watch to prevent family violence.

However, family violence is complex, and is built on deeply embedded attitudes and inequalities. Achieving lasting change will require long-term effort, sustained resourcing and broad engagement with the community.

The imminent findings of the Royal Commission will provide clear guidance for investment to generate further long-term cultural and structural change. The Victorian government can build on the work already underway by accepting, funding and fully implementing all the recommendations of the Royal Commission when they are delivered in February 2016.

²⁰ VicHealth, *The health costs of family violence; measuring the burden of disease caused by intimate partner violence*, 2004.

²¹ Royal Commission into Family Violence, *Anonymous submission 415*.

Help people facing family violence to access early support

The Victorian government can help people facing family violence to access the support they need, when they need it, by ensuring workers and volunteers across the whole services system can identify and respond safely to family violence and refer people for support.

A family facing violence may deal with a wide range of community, education and health services, despite not reporting the violence. Many community organisations and local groups, including neighbourhood houses, playgroups and women's groups, also work with people facing family violence. They help reduce the risk of family violence through building connected and resilient communities, however rarely receive funding specifically for family violence activities.

To intervene early and appropriately, key workers and volunteers across these systems must know how to recognise and respond to signs of family violence. The Common Risk Assessment Framework (CRAF) enables this, however many community sector organisations are unaware CRAF training is relevant or available to them. More resources are needed to encourage early identification and appropriate family violence referrals and responses across the community, education and health sectors, including more consistent access to CRAF training and co-location of family violence specialist workers with other community services, such as child and family services.²²

Ensure victims of family violence can access specialist help

The Victorian government can help women and children escape family violence and start rebuilding their lives by ensuring crisis and specialist response services are available when and where they are needed.

Specialist family violence services, including crisis accommodation, referral, counselling, case management and court support provide frontline support to women and children in violent or dangerous situations, with a key focus on safety. However, services are struggling to meet the needs of the growing number of women and children seeking help. Victoria's safe steps Family Violence Response Centre reports a 130 per cent increase

in calls to its crisis line over the past two years, and an escalation of the level of violence faced by women, with more being assessed as being at high risk.

About one quarter of calls to the national family violence counselling service are going unanswered.²³

Since the announcement of the Victorian Royal Commission into Family Violence, the state government has increased funding to organisations providing referral, counselling and case management. Despite this, demand is still outstripping capacity to respond. For example, Domestic Violence Victoria recently reported that on average, agencies are funded for around 70 police referrals per year, but receive about 160 referrals per month.²⁴

The findings of the Royal Commission will provide government with detailed analysis of the gaps in the specialist family violence system that desperately need funding.

Help children overcome the trauma of family violence

The Victorian government can help children overcome the trauma of family violence and address developmental delays by expanding targeted therapeutic services.

The number of children exposed to family violence in Victoria is significant. About one quarter of Australian children have witnessed violence against a parent,²⁵ and children are present at about one third of family violence incidents reported to Victoria Police.²⁶ Children who have faced family violence are at risk of experiencing developmental disruption, mental health concerns,

22 Victorian Council of Social Service, *Roadmap to Reform: Strong Families, Safe Children, VCOSS Submission*, October 2015, p. 26.

23 J Ireland, 'Domestic violence calls going unanswered as demand spikes', *The Age*, 1 May 2015.

24 Domestic Violence Victoria, *Specialist Family Violence Services; The heart of an effective system, Submission to the Royal Commission into Family Violence*, 2015.

25 C Humphreys, *Domestic Violence and Child Protection: Challenging directions for practice*, Australian Domestic and Family Violence Clearinghouse, 2007, p. 3.

26 Victoria Police, *Family Incident Reports, 2009/10 – 2013/14*.

behavioural problems, and future victimisation or perpetration of family violence. Children who have faced family violence may need counselling, group therapy and other therapeutic programs like art and music therapy to help them recover.

“The worst thing is, we go through it but our babies are watching. They are feeling. They know. They know. And it doesn’t matter what age ... they know when there is something not right in the environment.” – Sarah²⁷

Currently, family violence services are funded to work with women, but not children. They often do not have training and expertise in child development. Children need specific therapeutic support to help them recover from violence and trauma.

Provide specialist financial counselling for people experiencing family violence and financial abuse

The Victorian government can help women experiencing financial abuse, a widespread, yet relatively unrecognised and under-reported form of family violence, by establishing a specialist financial counselling program.

Women facing family violence are often experiencing financial abuse. They may lack independent funds to cover basic living costs including mortgage or loan repayments, be dependent on income support payments, or find themselves responsible for a partner’s debts.

Submissions regarding the urgent need for funding, education, training and resources to address financial abuse have been presented at the Victorian Royal Commission into Family Violence. Financial counsellors can help women by negotiating with creditors and debt collectors, protecting assets from repossession, accessing financial hardship programs, and preventing ex-partners incurring further debt on joint credit cards.

A specialist financial abuse counselling program could include pilot programs placing financial counsellors within legal, health and family violence services, specialist training for financial counsellors, coordination and evaluation of pilot programs, and developing family violence protocols within other financial hardship programs.

Expand men’s behaviour change programs

The Victorian government can hold to account the men who inflict violence on their families, and reduce the risk of women and children facing further violence, by expanding men’s behaviour change programs.

Men’s behaviour change programs are vital for early intervention and response strategies. They aim to lessen the likelihood of men using violence, by changing the beliefs, values and discourses that support violence, and presenting alternative constructs of masculinity, gender and selfhood.²⁸ They can help address other issues that may contribute to family violence, including mental health issues, alcohol and other drug use, and unemployment.

More men are being referred to behaviour change programs, and waiting lists are often several months to a year long.²⁹ One service estimates that less than 20 per cent of potentially eligible men actually participate, because of a lack of funding. Regional areas and urban growth corridors report particular gaps, with some regions having no programs at all.³⁰

Men’s behaviour change programs could also be further tailored to identify men’s individual risk factors and learning styles. New funding models, including accommodation funding attached to men’s behaviour change programs, are also welcome; however, their capacity is limited and needs to be significantly expanded.

27 The Salvation Army Victoria Social Programme and Policy Unit, *Submission to the Royal Commission into Family Violence*, 2015, p. 51.

28 M Flood, ‘Changing Men: Best practice in violence prevention work with men’, *Home Truths Conference: Stop sexual assault and domestic violence: A national challenge*, September 2004.

29 No To Violence, *Holding men who perpetrate family violence accountable: A system near crisis point*, 2013.

30 During consultations for *Victorian Royal Commission into Family Violence: VCOSS Submission*, May 2015.

FURTHER POLICY DIRECTIONS

Adopt a whole-of-government, whole-of-community approach to tackling family violence

Preventing family violence, and responding holistically to the people who face it is complex and multi-dimensional, and beyond the capability of any single sector or organisation to achieve. Tackling family violence requires a whole-of-government and whole-of-community approach, including intensive collaboration with the community sector.

Implement the findings arising from the inquest into the death of Luke Batty

The inquest into the tragic death of Luke Batty at the hands of his father identified a number of gaps and flaws to address in criminal justice and family violence processes and systems. Coroner Ian Gray made 29 recommendations to improve the family violence prevention and response system, including holding perpetrators to account, improving collaboration and information sharing between different agencies within the system, and funding family violence advocacy positions.

Implement long-term primary prevention campaigns that address the causes of family violence

Victoria is already leading the way in family violence prevention work, through the combined efforts of organisations including Our Watch, VicHealth and others in the women's health sector. However, effective prevention campaigns that change deeply entrenched attitudes and behaviours are a long-term endeavour, requiring a sustained, multi-pronged and society-wide approach.

Embed a consistent, quality-assured approach to violence prevention and respectful relationships programs in schools

Educational settings are an important focus for violence prevention and gender equity programs that foster positive attitudes and relationship skills in young people. Despite the development of good primary prevention program models and good practice from some individual schools, implementation and quality of programs has been inconsistent. The Victorian government has recently announced plans to better embed gender equity and family violence prevention within the education system, and resources and implementation of this should be a priority.

Raise awareness and respond to elder abuse

Elder abuse includes physical, psychological, or financial abuse or neglect of elders by members of their family. It is an under-recognised form of family violence. Many of the policy and program responses to family violence are equally applicable to elder abuse, but need to embrace its different risk factors, more subtle forms of abuse and neglect, the role of powers of attorney and guardianship arrangements, and the prevalence of impaired cognition or decision-making ability among elder abuse victims. Public awareness campaigns and worker training programs targeting family violence also need to include elder abuse.



Deliver an equitable education system to help every child fulfil their potential

Educational achievement shapes people's life chances, including their future employment, health and wellbeing.³¹ A high quality education, throughout early childhood, school years and further education and training, helps people fulfil their potential and helps build a strong and inclusive society and economy.³²

Too many children and young people experiencing disadvantage have fewer opportunities and a lower quality of education than other students and achieve poorer results, or disengage from education altogether.

Children from low-income families, Aboriginal children, children with disability, those with low English proficiency and children living in remote areas are most at risk of receiving a poor or incomplete education.³³ Only 61 per cent of students from low socioeconomic backgrounds attain Year 12 or equivalent, compared to 89 per cent of students from the highest socioeconomic backgrounds.³⁴ Low socioeconomic status is a significant predictor of whether young people will undertake further education and training, especially university study.³⁵ There is also a significant gap in school attendance, engagement and performance between students in metropolitan and rural areas.³⁶

Approximately 10,000 Victorian students disengage from school every year³⁷ and disengagement appears to be starting earlier, often beginning early in primary school years.³⁸ Early school leavers are vulnerable to financial hardship, increased risk of physical and mental health issues, greater susceptibility to drug and alcohol misuse and homelessness, and have higher probabilities of being involved in the justice system.³⁹

Children and young people experiencing disadvantage benefit when a diverse range of support is provided early, before problems escalate and knowledge and skill gaps widen. To do this, early childhood services and schools need to be inclusive and accessible to all children, young people and their families, and connected to community and health services. This enables schools and services to provide holistic support and link vulnerable children, young people and their families with the additional, targeted support they need to fulfil their potential.

31 Committee for Economic Development of Australia (CEDA), *Addressing entrenched disadvantage in Australia*, CEDA, April 2015.

32 Ibid.

33 D Gonski, K Boston, K Greiner, C Lawrence, B Scales and P Tannock, *Review of Funding for Schooling: Final Report*, Canberra, December 2011, p. 28.

34 S Labn, J Jackson, A Walstab and S Huo, *Educational opportunity in Australia: who succeeds and who misses out*, Centre for International Research on Education Systems, Victoria University, for the Mitchell Institute, Melbourne, 2015, p. 42.

35 D Curtis, A Drummond, J Halsey and M Lawson, *Peer-mentoring of students in rural and low socioeconomic status schools: increasing aspirations for higher education*, NCVET, Adelaide, 2012, p. 25.

36 Victorian Auditor-General's Office, *Access to education for rural students*, Victoria, 2014.

37 Victorian Government, *Education State: Schools*, September 2015, p. 10.

38 Hume Whittlesea Youth Connections Consortium, *The Hume Under 16 Project: Out of School – Out of Sight, Final Report*, 2012, p.6; Hume Whittlesea Youth Connections Consortium, *The Whittlesea Under 16 Project*, 2012; Inner Northern Local Learning and Employment Network Inc, *U16: Invisible & Ineligible: The Moreland Under 16 Project*, 2012, p. 6.

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

Help children succeed with more involvement in early learning

The Victorian government can support children's learning and development, by improving access and participation in high quality, affordable early learning services, from birth through to school. This could include providing every child with at least five hours of high quality three-year-old kindergarten per week, and 15 hours of high quality four-year-old kindergarten, with additional support for children from vulnerable families.

Vulnerable children's life outcomes can be improved if they spend more time in high quality kindergarten.⁴⁰ Spending more time in kindergarten (in months) results in many benefits, including improved results in the final year of school.⁴¹

Current federal and state government funding to provide 15 hours of four-year-old kindergarten is only secured until 2017.⁴² This funding should be made ongoing and potentially extended to provide a minimum of three days per week of four-year-old kindergarten (i.e. 20 or more hours), especially for vulnerable children.

Many European countries have also expanded public funded pre-school education for three-year-old children, in recognition of its benefits.⁴³ But in Victoria, vulnerable three-year-old children participate in kindergarten at lower rates than other children.⁴⁴ Many eligible children are not benefiting from Early Start Kindergarten,⁴⁵ which provides 15 hours of free or low-cost three-year-old kindergarten to Aboriginal children and children known to child protection services.

Strategies to increase vulnerable children's participation rates may include outreach services, accessible, integrated and culturally safe family services, and transport to and from services. Lessons can be learnt from initiatives such as the Access to Early Learning pilot program.



Access to Early Learning⁴⁶

The Access to Early Learning pilot program works with Early Start Kindergarten to support vulnerable children and families to participate in early childhood education and care (ECEC). It also builds the capacity of ECEC services to respond to vulnerable children's needs.

Initial findings suggest the program has improved outcomes for children and built educators' capacity to engage vulnerable children and families.⁴⁷

40 K Sylva, E Melhuish, P Sammons, I Siraj and B Taggart, *Students' educational and developmental outcomes at age 16: Effective Pre-school, Primary and Secondary Education (EPPSE 3-16) Project Research Report, September 2014*, Institute of Education, University of London, 2014, p. 18.

41 K Sylva, E Melhuish, P Sammons, I Siraj and B Taggart, *Students' educational and developmental outcomes at age 16: Effective Preschool, Primary and Secondary Education (EPPSE 3-16) Project Research Report, September 2014*, Institute of Education, University of London, 2014, p. 18.

42 Department of Education and Training, *Preschool funding certainty delivered for Australian families*, Media Release: 12 May 2015.

43 OECD, *Education at a Glance 2014: OECD Indicators*, OECD, 2014, p. 324.

44 S Goldfeld, E O'Connor, M O'Connor, M Sayers, T Moore, A Kvalsvig & S Brinkman, *The Role of Preschool in Promoting Children's Healthy Development: Evidence from an Australian Population Cohort*, in press, 2015, p. 13.

45 Victorian Child and Adolescent Monitoring System, *VACAMS Indicators: Indicator 31.1c Number of Children in Early Start Kindergarten*, 2014.

46 Department of Education and Early Childhood Development, *Vulnerable children action plan: The department's plan to implement Victoria's vulnerable children action strategy 2013–2022*, p. 10.

47 Victorian Government, *Submission to the Productivity Commission Inquiry into Childcare and Early Childhood Learning*, February 2014, p. 15.

Help children get the most out of early learning and care by strengthening quality

The Victorian government can make sure children maximise the benefits of early education and care by maintaining Victoria's commitment to the National Quality Framework (NQF)⁴⁸ and resourcing early childhood services to meet or exceed it, especially in communities facing disadvantage.

The NQF ensures each child receives sufficient attention by mandating new staffing ratios from January 2016. VCOSS welcomes the Victorian government's \$83.7 million investment to help the sector meet the child-to-staff ratios.⁴⁹ However, feedback from the early childhood sector suggests further investment of around 10–15 per cent is needed to help the sector remain viable and continue to deliver quality services. As centres who serve a high proportion of vulnerable families are likely least able to increase fees, they are most likely to cut places. If centres do increase fees to families, this is likely to most affect families who have a low income, but don't qualify for the kindergarten fee subsidy. Either option would disproportionately affect vulnerable families, whose children benefit most from early childhood education and care. It could also lead to a drop in kindergarten participation rates.

Having more qualified educators also improves outcomes for children,⁵⁰ as qualified educators have a greater understanding of child development and are better equipped to lead activities that foster children's learning and development.

Many families rely on Outside School Hours Care, including before and after-school care and holiday programs, to enable parents to work or study while their children are in a safe and supported environment. These programs also provide children additional recreational and learning opportunities.

Outside School Hours Care could be strengthened by improving accessibility for families, and supporting provision of high quality services that meet or exceed the NQF.

Provide children and families holistic support from integrated services

The Victorian government can better support vulnerable children, young people and families by investing in integrated service models that provide holistic support. These models combine universal education and health services such as kindergarten, school and maternal and child health services, with other specialised community and health services, in culturally safe, welcoming and accessible settings. Vulnerable children and families often have difficulty finding out about and accessing the services they need. They may lack the skills to negotiate the service system, the confidence to seek help, or the networks to put them in touch with the services they need.⁵¹ They may face cultural or language barriers, or feel labelled as incapable if they use a service targeted for people experiencing disadvantage. As a result, many vulnerable children and young people do not receive the help they need and risk 'falling through the cracks', or only seeking support once a problem has escalated into a crisis.⁵² By integrating specialised services into a platform inclusively designed for the whole community, integrated service models help overcome these barriers and can engage children and families who might otherwise not attend specialised support services.

48 Australian Children's Education and Care Quality Authority, *National Quality Framework*, <http://www.acecqa.gov.au/national-quality-framework>

49 Victorian Premier Media Release, *Big Boost Will Give Kinder Kids More One-On-One Attention*, 22 June 2015.

50 OECD, *How do early childhood education and care (ECEC) policies, systems and quality vary across OECD countries?*, 2013.

51 T Moore and A Skinner, *An integrated approach to early childhood development*: Background Paper, Murdoch Childrens Research Institute and The Royal Children's Hospital Centre for Community Child Health, Melbourne, 2010, p. 6.

52 Ibid.

Innovative and effective integrated service models found in pockets across Victoria include:

- **Schools as community hubs:** health and community services working with schools to support children who face disadvantage or are at risk of disengaging
- **Extended school models:** working in partnership with government and community services to support students, families and the broader community
- **Full services community schools:** community schools open to entire community, before, during and after school and all weekend, providing a range of services.⁵³



Meadows Primary School and Early Learning Centre – Community Hub⁵⁴

The Meadows Primary School and Early Learning Centre brings together local education, health, community services to support children and their families, and the wider community. Breakfast clubs, supported playgroups, three-year-old activity groups, kindergarten, after-school activities and opportunities with the Melbourne Symphony Orchestra and Stephanie Alexander Kitchen Garden are provided. The hub is based in Broadmeadows, and supports families who are newly arrived to Australia as well as those experiencing intergenerational poverty. Activities and services are tailored to meet the needs of families, including having bilingual workers, and Arabic and Samoan facilitated playgroups. The hub encourages parent involvement and participation and has developed strong parent/school/community partnerships.

Help children transition successfully to secondary school with ‘middle years’ plans

The Victorian government can help all children successfully transition to secondary school and help prevent student disengagement, by supporting schools to develop transition plans for all students moving from primary to secondary school. This transition occurs during the ‘middle years’, between Grade 5 and Year 8, when children are entering adolescence,⁵⁵ a time of significant physical, emotional and developmental change and increased likelihood of experiencing difficulties increases.⁵⁶ Many children experience a drop in educational achievement and school engagement during this transition,⁵⁷ which can continue if not addressed.

While Victoria has developed a framework for early years transitions for students moving from kindergarten to primary school, a similar strategy does not exist for managing the transition for children moving from primary to secondary school. Research by VCOSS and the Youth Affairs Council of Victoria also identified significant gaps in policies and services for children during the middle years, which means they often go unsupported during this period.⁵⁸

53 S Sanjeevan, M McDonald and T Moore, *Primary schools as community hubs: A review of the literature*, The Royal Children’s Hospital Centre for Community Child Health and the Murdoch Childrens Research Institute, Melbourne, 2012.

54 Meadows Primary School, *community hub*, <http://meadows.networkings.com.au/community/community-hub/>; Centre for Community Child Health, *Community hubs Case study: Building relationships: Working with vulnerable families*, January 2014.

55 Victorian Council of Social Service and Youth Affairs Council of Victoria, *Building the Scaffolding: strengthening support for young people in Victoria*, Melbourne, 2013.

56 Australian Institute of Family Studies. *The Longitudinal Study of Australian Children Annual Statistical Report 2014*, Melbourne, AIFS, 2015, p. 83.

57 Victorian Auditor-General’s Office, *Education Transitions*, Victoria, 2015, p. 2.

58 Victorian Council of Social Service and Youth Affairs Council of Victoria, Op. Cit., pp. 68–70.

Some children, such as Aboriginal children, boys, children with disability, and children from low socioeconomic families, have a higher risk of a poor transition and need greater support.⁵⁹ VCOSS members suggest that where transition plans exist, they are often an insufficient ‘tick and flick’ exercise, not providing genuine support for children and their families. They focus narrowly on the weeks either side of the transition rather than spanning the year prior and afterwards. Developing comprehensive ‘middle years’ transition plans for all students moving from primary to secondary school would assist successful transitions and help identify and respond to early warning signs of disengagement.

Help young people stay in education by expanding flexible learning models

The Victorian government can help students stay engaged in education by expanding flexible learning models across Victoria, in schools or in community settings well connected to them. Some young people require more intensive and flexible models of learning than is available in mainstream schools, to address multiple, interrelated educational barriers, such as homelessness, family breakdown, poverty, and mental and physical health difficulties.

Flexible learning programs can provide wrap-around services to address the issues vulnerable young people face, while also providing a supportive learning environment that helps engage them in education.⁶⁰ They can be delivered as part of mainstream schools, in alternative schools, or in TAFE or community settings, such as community VCAL providers.⁶¹

Despite the benefits quality alternative education programs offer many young people, lack of access to them remains an issue, particularly in rural Victoria.⁶² VCOSS members suggest alternative education, including both VETiS and Community VCAL, is underfunded. This can result in ‘vocational loadings’ being placed on families, which can create a significant educational barrier for young people from low-income families.

An expansion of flexible education programs could be informed by resources such as the Framework of Quality Flexible Learning Programs⁶³ and models such as the Melbourne Academy and the Brotherhood of St Laurence Community VCAL Program.



The Melbourne Academy⁶⁴

Melbourne City Mission’s Melbourne Academy supports young people experiencing severe disadvantage and education gaps to reengage with education. It offers students foundation, intermediate and senior level VCAL and VET studies, while also supporting their wellbeing. A 2014 Victoria Institute evaluation found most students experienced significantly better educational and wellbeing outcomes.⁶⁵

Key characteristics include:

- Pairing a dedicated teacher and youth worker for each site, to provide holistic support
- Small classes (maximum 14:1 student-to-staff ratio)
- Co-location with other youth and community services
- High expectations of students, along with flexible, individualised support
- Longer timeframe offered to give students sufficient time to achieve credentials
- A welcoming environment, with students able to join a classroom immediately.

59 Victorian Auditor-General’s Office, *Education Transitions*, Victoria, 2015, p. vii.

60 K te Riele, *Putting the Jigsaw Together: Flexible Learning programs in Australia: Final Report*, The Victoria Institute, 2014.

61 Ibid, p. 15.

62 Victorian Auditor-General’s Office, *Access to education for rural students*, 2014, p. 4.

63 K te Riele, Op. Cit.

64 Melbourne City Mission, *Melbourne Academy*, website, accessed on 17 June 2015.

65 K te Riele, M Davies, A Baker, *Passport to a Positive Future: Evaluation of the Melbourne Academy*, The Victoria Institute for Education, Diversity and Lifelong Learning, Melbourne, 2015.

Better support students with additional needs through the Program for Students with Disabilities

The Victorian government can better support all students with additional health and development needs by making fundamental changes to the Program for Students with Disabilities (PSD).⁶⁶

The PSD currently supports about 4 per cent of the student population.⁶⁷ However, about 7 per cent of Australian children aged up to 14 have some level of disability,⁶⁸ and about 20 per cent have additional health and development needs⁶⁹ requiring additional support to fulfil their educational potential.⁷⁰ This means many students are unable to access the support they need through the PSD. Too many students with disability report “experiences of exclusion, poor education provision, and low expectations”.⁷¹ People with disability are less likely to have completed Year 12 or hold a tertiary qualification, and are more likely to be unemployed.⁷²

Educational outcomes are particularly poor for children with additional health and development needs from vulnerable families.⁷³ The combination of additional health and development needs and a low socioeconomic background can create a potential ‘double jeopardy’ for some children. If students’ needs are not adequately supported, particularly in the early stages of school, poor academic achievement, poor school adjustment and disengagement from school can result.⁷⁴

FURTHER POLICY DIRECTIONS

Increase the accountability of equity-based funding to support students facing disadvantage

The Victorian government can provide a fair and equitable school system by ensuring additional equity-based funding⁷⁵ is delivered transparently and effectively to improve outcomes for students facing disadvantage across the entire school system and to address the adverse effects of concentrated disadvantage within schools. The Victorian government could also increase the accountability of schools in tracking and reporting how equity-based funding is being used to support students facing disadvantage, and reporting the outcomes for students resulting from this investment.

66 As recommended in Victorian Council of Social Service, *Review of the Program for Students with Disabilities, VCOSS Submission*, September 2015.

67 PSD Review Team, *Program for Students with Disabilities Review: In-person Targeted Stakeholder discussions*, 2015, p. 3.

68 AIHW, *A picture of Australia's children 2012*, AIHW 2012, 2012, p. 26.

69 Students with additional health and development needs (AHDN) are those who have or are at increased risk of a chronic physical, developmental, behavioural or emotional condition and who also require health and related services of a type or level beyond that required by children generally.

70 S Goldfeld, M O'Connor, M Sayers, T Moore, F Oberklaid, ‘Prevalence and correlates of special health care needs in a population cohort of Australian children at school entry’, *Journal of Developmental & Behavioral Pediatrics*, 2012, 33(4), pp. 319–327.

71 S Robinson and J Truscott, *Belonging and connection of school students with disability*, Centre for Children and Young People, Southern Cross University and Children with a Disability Australia, Victoria, 2014, p. 9.

72 Australian Bureau of Statistics, *Disability, Australia, 2009*, Cat. No. 4446.0, 2011.

73 Australian Early Development Census (AEDC), *Research Snapshot: Shaping learning trajectories for children with additional health and developmental needs*, 2014, p. 1.

74 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.

75 VCOSS, *Education key to breaking the cycle of disadvantage*, September 2015, <http://vcoss.org.au/blog/education-key-to-breaking-the-cycle-of-disadvantage/>

Support children with disability and developmental delays through inclusive early childhood services

Investment is needed to ensure early childhood education and care teachers and carers and universal services are resourced to be inclusive of children with disability and additional needs. This includes providing relevant undergraduate and postgraduate course content; ongoing professional development and mentoring; widespread implementation of evidence-based approaches and enhancing existing inclusion supports, including Kindergarten Inclusion Support (KIS) and Preschool Field Officer (PSFO) programs.⁷⁶

Support families facing disadvantage to meet the costs of education

The rising costs of education can prevent children and young people facing disadvantage from participating fully in education, as families are being asked to spend increasing amounts on their children's education.⁷⁷ VCOSS supports Good Shepherd Australia and New Zealand's recommendation that the Victorian Department of Education and Training (DET) identify a 'standard basket of education goods', outlining the basic items required to provide free instruction to students at different levels of schooling.⁷⁸ DET can also reduce confusion and inconsistency around what schools can and do charge families for, by reforming its Parent Payment Policy,⁷⁹ providing schools with greater guidance and support about how to assist disadvantaged families, and ensuring all schools have a compliant parent payment policy and a financial hardship policy.

Better support schools to engage vulnerable students

VCOSS members have highlighted the need for DET to better support schools to assist students facing disadvantage, including through building stronger links with community services. This includes a need for more dedicated resources to help support vulnerable students and provide more 'joined-up' services.⁸⁰ This includes more funding for Student Support Services Offices (SSSOs), as the current ratio of SSSOs to schools is not meeting the growing need from students, particularly in growth corridors, and ensuring that the redesign of the School Focused Youth Service (SFYS) program builds on the program's strengths, to support students to remain engaged in education and facilitate partnerships between schools and community services.

Support trauma-informed approaches to working with vulnerable children and young people

Implementing trauma-informed approaches in schools will help improve the wellbeing and educational outcomes for students who have experienced trauma, including students in the out-of-home-care sector, children who have been exposed to family violence, refugees and asylum seekers. VCOSS members have raised concerns that some schools lack an understanding of how to best support these students, or of how to manage difficult behaviours that children may display. The experience of trauma can affect children's development and ability to succeed in the education system. DET could introduce measures to build the capacity of teachers and schools to understand trauma, to better support these vulnerable students.

Invest more in programs that support families of children with disability

The Victorian government can support families of children with disability by investing in family support programs that increase families' awareness and understanding of the child's needs, connect them to other support services, improve social connections and coping mechanisms by building relationships with other families, and help them share strategies. Demand for programs such as the Strengthening Parent Support Program has increased substantially across Victoria, yet funding has not increased in more than a decade.⁸¹

76 ECIA, *Early Intervention Best Practice discussion paper*, October 2014.

77 Victorian Auditor-General's Office, *Additional School Costs for Families*, 2015.

78 K Landvogt and S Maury, *Addressing the divide: submission by Good Shepherd Youth & Family Service to the Inquiry into the approaches to homework in Victorian schools*, 2014.

79 Premier of Victoria, *Parent School Payments Skyrocketed Under the Liberals*, Media release, 11 Feb 2015.

80 VCOSS, *The Education State: VCOSS Response to the Education State Consultation Paper*, July 2015.

81 Association for Children with Disability, *Victorian Budget Submission 2014–2015*, p. 3.



Help people facing disadvantage gain work and skills

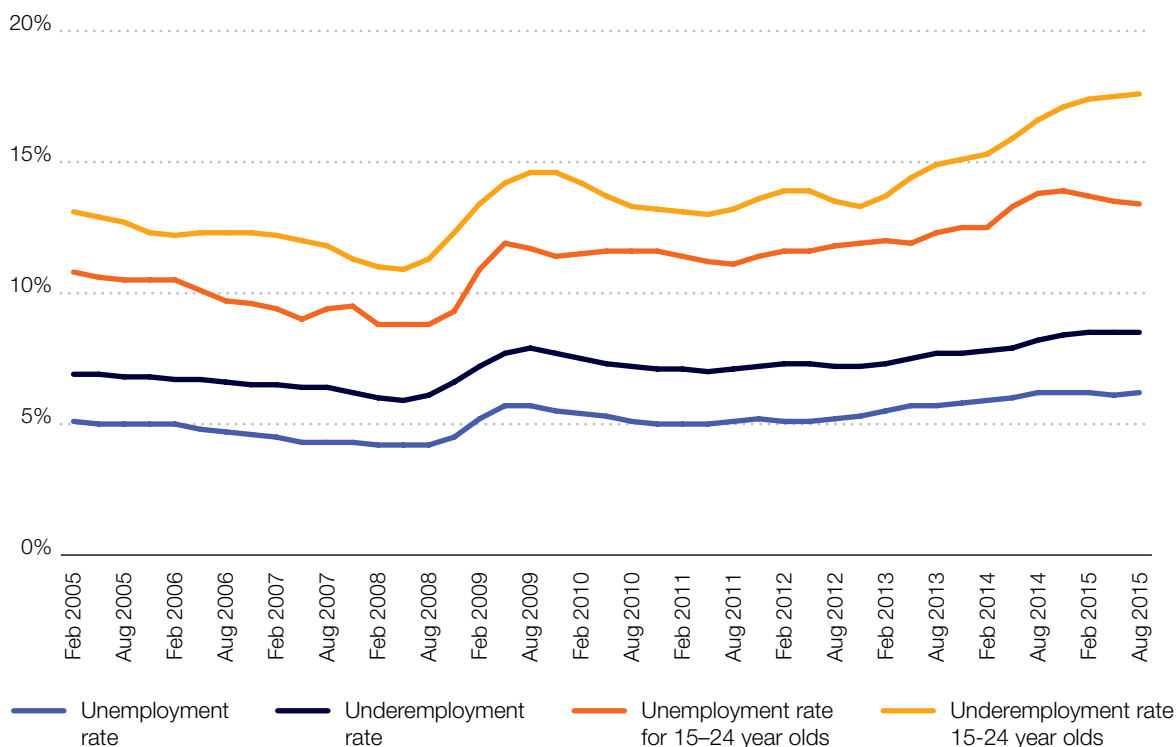
Work is a central part of Victoria's society and economy, and a central part of many people's lives. It provides people with an income and contributes to their sense of identity and wellbeing. It is also important in fostering social cohesion, helping people meet, learn from and collaborate with others who may be from different backgrounds and offer different perspectives.

However not everyone has the security of stable employment. People experiencing disadvantage may face multiple and complex barriers to employment and are most affected by rising rates of unemployment, underemployment, long-term unemployment and workforce exclusion. These can have devastating effects on people's lives, and across the community.

They can lead to people experiencing loneliness and disconnection, lower standards of living, financial crisis, homelessness, declining physical and mental health and contact with the justice system.

Victoria's unemployment rate increased from 4.7 per cent in June 2011⁸², to 6.2 per cent at September 2015.⁸³ There are now more than five unemployed people for every job vacancy.⁸⁴ Young people are experiencing significantly higher unemployment rates than the broader workforce, with the unemployment rate for 15–24 year olds across 2014 at 14.6 per cent⁸⁵, the highest it has been since 1999.⁸⁶

Figure 1: Unemployment and underemployment rates in Australia from 2005–2015



Source: Australian Bureau of Statistics, *Labour Force*, Australia, September 2015, Cat. No. 6202.0, 2015.

Help young people find work through Local Learning and Employment Networks (LLENs)

The Victorian government can help keep young people in education and training and reduce youth unemployment by increasing investment in LLENs. Every year LLENs facilitate more than 850 local partnerships between schools, training organisations, employers and community agencies, and have helped about 250,000 at-risk young people since 2011.⁸⁷

LLENs link schools with other education providers, health and community services, industry, local government and state government, providing 'joined-up' approaches to respond to community needs and local service gaps.

With adequate resources, LLENs can help lift school reengagement rates, tackle youth unemployment, and build partnerships between the education, community and employment sectors through place-based approaches to supporting vulnerable young people.

VCOSS welcomed the Victorian government's 2014 commitment of \$32 million over four years for LLENs in response to the loss of federal government funding. There is now an opportunity to build on this and return the capacity of LLENs to 2014 funding levels of \$48 million indexed, over four years.⁸⁸ With rising youth unemployment, and the loss of other youth services such as the VCAL Coordinator program and Youth Connections, LLENs are more important than ever to helping vulnerable young people develop skills and find employment.

Help people facing disadvantage to gain vocational skills

The Victorian government can help people facing disadvantage stay in education and training and gain meaningful skills and employment, by revising vocational education and training (VET) funding models to reflect the additional costs of providing education to vulnerable students and in rural and regional areas.⁸⁹

VET helps people tackle barriers to workforce participation, including long-term unemployment, early school leaving, low literacy or numeracy skills, and the need to retrain or upskill. It also provides an important pathway for Aboriginal students, students from rural

and regional areas, and students from culturally and linguistically diverse (CALD) backgrounds. However, funding changes, cuts, and inadequate quality control of VET providers have adversely affected the sector's ability to support people facing disadvantage. There have been considerable drops in enrolments for several vulnerable student groups, including students in regional areas, Aboriginal students, and young people without Year 12 or Certificate II who are not enrolled in school.^{90, 91, 92} Funding is also needed to help rural and regional students overcome distance barriers to accessing local education institutions including TAFEs.

VCOSS welcomes the proposed Community Services Obligation (CSO) scheme in the *VET Funding Review Issues Paper*, to adequately support the community service work of training providers. We recommend this scheme include provision of community infrastructure; student support services; individualised learning approaches and wrap-around support; disability access and support; and partnerships with community services to support student engagement, learning and wellbeing.⁹³

82 Australian Bureau of Statistics, 'Unemployment rate by states' *Labour Force, Australia*, Cat. No. 6202.0, June 2011.

83 Australian Bureau of Statistics, 'Labour force commentary September 2015', *Labour Force, Australia*, Cat. No. 6202.0, September, 2015.

84 Australian Bureau of Statistics, *Job Vacancies, Australia*, 6354.0, May 2015.

85 As measured by the 12-month average of 2014–15.

86 Australian Bureau of Statistics, *Labour Force, Australia*, 6291.0.55.001, 'RM1 – Labour force status by Region (ASGS SA4), Sex and Age, October 1998 onwards', June 2015.

87 LLEN Network, *Funding cuts hit youth hard*, 2014.

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

89 VCOSS, *VET Funding Review: VCOSS submission to the VET Funding Review Secretariat*, April 2015.

90 Department of Education and Training Victoria, *Victorian Training Market Report 2014*, Melbourne, 2015, p. 4.

91 *Ibid.*, p. 75.

92 *Ibid.*, p. 79.

93 VCOSS, *VET Funding Review: VCOSS Submission to the VET Funding Review Issues Paper*, August 2015.

Develop a Workforce Participation Plan to help people facing disadvantage find work

The Victorian government can help create meaningful employment opportunities, particularly for people facing disadvantage, by developing and funding a Workforce Participation Plan, as outlined in the 2014 VCOSS *Tackling Unemployment* paper. With just one job available for every five people looking for paid work in Australia,⁹⁴ high unemployment rates among 15–24 year olds,⁹⁵ and a continued rise in long-term unemployment,⁹⁶ more local job opportunities are needed to support people facing disadvantage to find and keep work.

People who face multiple and complex barriers to employment are more likely to be affected by unemployment. *Tackling Unemployment* outlines four interrelated strategies for supporting people facing disadvantage to get back to work:

- Build vulnerable people's skills and capabilities
- Create the jobs vulnerable people need, where they need them
- Develop inclusive and flexible workplaces
- Improve labour mobility and availability.

Create job pathways for people facing disadvantage through inclusive public employment targets

The Victorian government can lead by example and create jobs for people facing disadvantage through setting public sector employment targets for groups underrepresented in the workforce, including people with disability and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders. It can also encourage business and community organisations to set voluntary employment targets.

As many as 45 per cent of people with disability live in poverty or near poverty.⁹⁷ The difficulties experienced by people with disability in obtaining and retaining employment contribute to this. Only 54 per cent of people with disability participate in the Victorian labour force, compared with 82 per cent of people without disability.⁹⁸ Negative employer attitudes remain the biggest barrier to employment.⁹⁹

The proportion of public sector employees who reported having a disability that restricts their everyday activities is around 4 per cent,¹⁰⁰ while 5.5 per cent of Victorians

in the labour force report having a disability that restricts their employment.¹⁰¹ This provides an employment target opportunity for the Victorian State Disability Plan 2017–20.¹⁰²

Aboriginal people are almost three times as likely as non-Aboriginal people to be unemployed.¹⁰³ In 2010 the Victorian government set out to increase the number of Aboriginal people employed in the Victorian public sector to 1 per cent by 2015.¹⁰⁴ This deadline has since been extended to 2018.¹⁰⁵ At June 2014, Aboriginal employees comprised around 0.8 per cent of the Victorian Public Service workforce and between 0.3–0.7 per cent of the broader public sector workforce.¹⁰⁶

94 Australian Bureau of Statistics, *Job Vacancies, Australia*, 6354.0, May 2015.

95 Australian Bureau of Statistics, *Labour Force, Australia*, 6291.0.55.001, 'RM1 – Labour force status by Region (ASGS SA4), Sex and Age, October 1998 onwards', June 2015.

96 Australian Bureau of Statistics, *Labour Force, Australia, Detailed – Electronic Delivery*, Cat. No. 6291.0.55.001, 'Table 14B. Unemployed persons by duration of job search and sex – Trend, Seasonally adjusted and Original' August 2015.

97 Victorian Health Promotion Foundation, *Disability and health inequalities in Australia: Research summary*, 2012, p. 5.

98 Australian Bureau of Statistics, *Disability and Labour Force Participation*, 4433.0.55.006, 2012.

99 National People with Disabilities and Carer Council, *Shut Out: The Experience of People with Disabilities and their Families in Australia*, 2009, p. 38.

100 Victorian Public Services Commission, *The state of the public sector in Victoria 2013–2014*, p. 19.

101 Australian Bureau of Statistics, 'Disability, Ageing and Carers, Australia: Victoria, Table 9', *Disability, Ageing and Carers, Australia: Summary of Findings, 2012*, Cat. 4430.0, ABS 2013. 44300DO002_2012 Disability, Ageing and Carers, Australia: Victoria, 2012, Table 9.

102 Victorian Government, *Victorian State Disability Plan 2013–2016*.

103 Australian Bureau of Statistics, *Australian Social Trends, exploring the gap in labour market outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples*, 4102.0, 2014.

104 Victorian Public Sector Commission, *Aboriginal graduate recruitment framework: a pathway to increase participation of Aboriginal graduates in the Victorian graduate recruitment and development scheme*, p. 4.

105 Victorian Public Service Commission, *The state of the public sector in Victoria, 2013–2014*, p. 19.

106 Ibid., p. 11 and p. 19.

Table 1: Labour force, unemployment and underemployment rates of people with disability

	Labour Force Participation in Victoria	Unemployment in Australia	Underemployment in Australia	Percentage of people looking for a job 13 weeks or longer after they first started
People with disability	53.9%	9.4%	32.4%	65.5%
People without disability	82.2%	4.9%	27.1%	56.1%

Source: Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2012 Survey of Disability, Ageing and Carers.

Help people facing disadvantage find work through social enterprises

The Victorian government can help people facing disadvantage to gain employment experience and skills by supporting social enterprises that provide temporary or ongoing paid work¹⁰⁷ in supportive work environments. The open labour market can often exclude people with limited experience or those not considered ‘job-ready’. Social enterprises can provide people facing disadvantage with a job and income, and be a stepping stone to open market employment.¹⁰⁸

Social enterprises are businesses that operate to achieve a social purpose, and are often supported and developed by community organisations. They usually generate most of their income through their business activity, but may also receive some philanthropic and government funding. There are up to 20,000 Australian social enterprises.¹⁰⁹

To employ more people facing disadvantage, social enterprises need specialist support at different stages, and to network and learn from each other. Improving capital flow, start-up grant funding, funding flexibility, long-term funding streams, targeted use of purchasing power, mentoring and pro bono financial advice are among strategies that would help develop social enterprises.^{110, 111}

107 L Fowkes, H Middleton and Jobs Australia, *The contribution and potential of work-focussed social enterprises in Australia*, October 2012.

108 Ibid.

109 J Barraket, N Collyer, M O'Connor & H Anderson, *Finding Australia's Social Enterprise Sector: Final Report*, Australian Centre for Philanthropy and Nonprofit Studies, June 2010.

110 Social Ventures Australia, *The facts of life: evidence and experience in investing in social change*, November 2013.

111 Social Ventures Australia Consulting, *Solving Employment Exclusion using Social Enterprises*, prepared for Social Ventures Australia Employment Team, November 2012.



STREAT is a social enterprise that provides young people experiencing homelessness with the life skills, support networks, work experience and training needed to improve their lives and build sustainable, long-term careers in hospitality. STREAT provides young people with individual case management and links to specialist support, training and work experience in STREAT cafes and short courses, and support to find housing.

STREAT has so far supported more than 320 young people aged 16–25. Of those involved in intensive programs, 90% have improved wellbeing, 80% are employed or in further training and 95% have improved housing status.¹¹³

STREAT started in 2009 through philanthropy funding and has grown with support from the Australian government, philanthropists, business and individuals.

FURTHER POLICY DIRECTIONS

Support tertiary education pathways to help meet rapid community services workforce growth to professional and high quality standards

The Victorian government can help provide employment pathways for people to pursue long-term careers in a growing, high quality community service workforce, by enhancing the capabilities of Victoria's tertiary education sectors. Rapidly expanding provision of social support and care requires education and training on a scale we have not seen before, in courses and qualifications that in many cases, are yet to be developed. The tertiary education sector can help meet these training and development challenges by:

- Commissioning programs and courses designed to fill skills gaps and further develop the social and community sector
- Acknowledging and promoting social care and support as a valuable and respected career path
- Considering exemptions to government-subsidised training restrictions that prevent community sector workers attaining the multiple skills they require
- Identifying opportunities to recognise common skills across similar sectors of community service industries
- Ensuring community service courses provide meaningful student placement opportunities.

Protect and support VET students facing disadvantage, through improved quality control mechanisms and independent advice to students

VCOSS members have raised concerns about the provision of quality training from some private registered training organisations, suggesting current regulatory arrangements have failed to address serious quality issues in the for-profit VET sector.¹¹⁴ There are also reports of unscrupulous practices in relation to the recruitment of students by some providers.¹¹⁵ Of key concern is that some for-profit VET providers are signing up students to VET FEE-HELP loans¹¹⁶ they have little realistic prospect of repaying¹¹⁷ and in many cases for courses they do not complete.¹¹⁸

112 STREAT, *About STREAT*, website, accessed 10 October 2015.

113 STREAT, *Creating a fork in the road for young people (The first five years)*, 2014.

114 S Yu and D Oliver, *The capture of public wealth for the for-profit VET sector*, University of Sydney, 2015.

115 Media reports on this issue have been extensive. One recent example is H Cook, 'Public housing tenants lured into training courses with free ipads', *The Age*, 4 April 2015.

116 VET FEE-HELP provides loans to eligible students to pay all or part of their tuition fees for accredited VET courses.

117 S Yu & D Oliver, *Op.Cit.* pp. 4–5.

118 ANAO, Education and Training, accessed 4 November 2015, http://www.anao.gov.au/html/Files/Audit%20Work%20Programs/2015/section_2/education.html

VCOSS welcomes investment to improve the quality of Victoria's training system¹¹⁹ but believes the Victorian government can do more to protect and support vulnerable VET students by strengthening quality control and auditing processes of training providers.¹²⁰ This would also be supported by providing students with access to information and independent advice to make informed decisions about appropriate courses and providers.¹²¹

Support vulnerable young people to reengage with education or employment

Every year approximately 10,000 Victorian students disengage early from school,¹²² putting them at risk of poorer social and employment outcomes.¹²³ VCOSS welcomes the Victorian government's Navigator Pilot Program,¹²⁴ with its potential to incorporate the strengths of the former and highly successful Youth Connections program and inform a statewide expansion of the program.

With recent figures suggesting that close to one quarter of 24-year-olds in Victoria are also not fully engaged in education, training or employment,¹²⁵ the government could also expand similar programs supporting young people up to the age of 25.

Provide people with stronger pathways from education and training to employment

The Victorian government can help people facing disadvantage find work by better aligning the VET sector with employment opportunities, including through statewide and place-based approaches. This can take into account regional and rural job opportunities and skill needs, as well as considering entry level or re-entry workforce opportunities. The establishment of a Victorian Skills Commissioner¹²⁶ to oversee the training market and determine future skill shortage areas and appropriate workforce training needs is a positive step towards this.

Increase job opportunities for people facing disadvantage through social procurement targets

The Victorian Labor 2014 Election Platform includes a commitment to undertaking a strategic review of all Victorian procurement policies to ensure they promote the employment of groups who face additional barriers to employment, including people with disability and mature-aged employees. Setting social procurement targets that enable the state government to use its purchasing power to support the development of social enterprises and increase job opportunities for people facing disadvantage could become part of this review process.

119 Victorian Government, Media Release: *Labor Government Invests \$30 Million To Improve The Quality Of Victoria's Training System*, 20 September 2015.

120 VCOSS, *VCOSS Submission to the VET Funding Review*, April 2015.

121 VCOSS, *VCOSS Submission to the VET Funding Review Issues paper*, August 2015.

122 Victorian Government, *Education State: Schools*, September 2015, p. 10.

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

124 Department of Education and Training, *Navigator Pilot Program*, <http://www.education.vic.gov.au/about/educationstate/Pages/navigator.aspx>

125 S Lamb, J Jackson, A Walstab, S Huo, *Educational opportunity in Australia 2015: Who succeeds and who misses out*, Centre for International Research on Education Systems, Victoria University, for the Mitchell Institute, Melbourne, 2015. p. 71.

126 Department of Education and Training, *Victorian Skills Commissioner*, <http://www.education.vic.gov.au/about/departments/structure/Pages/vsc.aspx?Redirect=1>



Help make housing affordable for people facing disadvantage

Many people across Victoria, especially those facing disadvantage, are finding it increasingly difficult, if not impossible, to find a reasonable and affordable home to live in. The dramatic escalation of home prices over the last two decades is closing off the option of home ownership for many, especially young people.¹²⁷ Home price inflation has led to a significant redistribution of wealth, contributing to widening wealth inequality in Australia.¹²⁸

A third of renters have now been renting for more than a decade,¹²⁹ and many will likely become renters for life. Rental cost rises have followed home price increases, making affordable rental properties increasingly scarce for low-income Victorians,¹³⁰ and increasing the number of families and individuals living in rental stress.¹³¹ At the same time, the lack of growth in the number of social housing properties means nearly 35,000 households remain on social housing waiting lists,¹³² contributing to rising costs of living and homelessness among people facing disadvantage. As Victoria's population ages, more older people are retiring without owning a home or possessing sufficient superannuation, and risk housing stress or homelessness in old age if unable to find an affordable private rental home or enter social housing.

With the cost of buying or renting a home near the job-rich centre of Melbourne higher than in the city's fringe and Victoria's rural and regional areas,¹³³ a socioeconomic divide is also emerging between central Melbourne and the rest of the state,¹³⁴ with people living on low incomes forced to live in areas with fewer services, transport options and jobs. The Victorian government can help reverse this process of increasing division and inequality in our housing markets, so that every Victorian can live in an affordable home of reasonable standard, and access the opportunities and services they need to build a meaningful life.

The state government has already begun to take steps towards developing a more holistic housing policy, including considering rental reform, social housing and homelessness service changes, convening an Affordable Housing Task Force, and engaging with the Council of Australian Governments on improving housing affordability. By continuing to bring together the many areas that affect housing affordability, including social housing, homelessness services, planning and land use, tenancy law, taxation, and financing options, a more cohesive whole-of-government approach can be formed.

127 Grattan Institute, *The Wealth of Generations*, December 2014, p. 14.

128 Australian Council of Social Service, *Inequality in Australia: A Nation Divided*, 2015, p. 37.

129 Australian Housing and Urban Research Institute, *How has the private rental sector changed in recent decades, particularly for long-term private renters?* AHURI Research and Policy Bulletin No. 185, February 2015.

130 Anglicare Australia, *Rental Affordability Snapshot*, April 2015.

131 Australian Bureau of Statistics, *Housing Occupancy and Costs 2011–12: Additional Tables – low income rental households*, Cat. No. 4130, 2013.

132 Department of Health and Human Services, *Public Housing Waiting and Transfer List*, September 2015.

133 Reserve Bank of Australia, *Urban Structure and Housing Prices: Some Evidence from Australian Cities*, Research Discussion Paper, September 2011.

134 Interface Councils, *One Melbourne or Two?*, February 2013.

Develop an affordable housing strategy to help people secure a home

The Victorian government can expand affordable housing for people by developing a strategy that 'joins-up' disparate government reform levers and coordinates change across agencies.

People with low and modest incomes are struggling to find affordable housing across all segments of the housing market, from people experiencing homelessness, to people trying to find an affordable rental property, to people trying to enter home ownership.

An affordable housing strategy could include:

- Mechanisms to finance social housing expansion – examples include public expenditure and debt, government debt guarantees, social housing bonds, recurrent loan facilities and asset transfers to community housing.
- Leveraging affordable housing from public land – examples include a transparent mechanism for determining use of government-owned vacant land, and inclusion of social and affordable housing in urban renewal projects.
- Mechanisms to leverage affordable housing through the planning system – examples include expanding the inclusionary zoning trial, density bonuses, increasing density in middle suburbs, and removing unnecessary restrictions such as parking requirements.
- Improving housing development incentives – examples include transitioning from property transfer duties to land taxes, reducing property tax expenditures, and introducing value capture mechanisms to accompany rezoning and infrastructure improvements.
- Mechanisms to expand options for home ownership – examples include a public mortgage provider, shared equity schemes, and/or land rent schemes.

An affordable housing strategy could also include a social housing growth fund, rental reform, and a strategy to halve homelessness, as outlined further in this section below.

Provide homes for people facing disadvantage through a social housing growth fund

The Victorian government can help provide secure, affordable and appropriate homes for those most in need by expanding the number of social housing properties through a dedicated social housing growth fund.

Too often, the private rental market fails to provide affordable, appropriate homes for people. Either people cannot afford the rent required for reasonable standard properties, cannot secure a suitable property in a competitive market, or can only find or afford properties that are situated far away from their work or education provider. In Victoria, an estimated 44 per cent of low-income households are in housing stress,¹³⁵ and more than 22,000 people are homeless on any given night. Social housing is the solution to providing affordable, well-located and appropriate homes for people when the private market fails.

Government-owned and managed public housing is the backbone of the social housing system. More recently, community housing has grown to supplement social housing stocks. However, Victoria has low levels of social housing compared with the rest of Australia, and spends less per capita on social housing than other jurisdictions.¹³⁶ VCOSS and other Victorian housing and homelessness peak bodies estimate \$200 million a year would be needed to produce 800 new social housing properties each year.¹³⁷



Housing is the most common reason for emergency relief

A recent survey in the City of Whittlesea found the most common reason people seek emergency relief is housing costs, with the majority (57%) citing this as their primary reason. This has more than doubled since 2010 (26%). Respondents living in private rental accommodation were most likely to be spending more than 75% of their family income on housing costs (31%).¹³⁸

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

136 Productivity Commission, *Report on Government Services*, Volume G: Housing and Homelessness, produced for the Steering Committee for the Review of Government Service Provision, 2015.

137 Victorian Council of Social Service et al, *Making Social Housing Work*, March 2014.

138 Whittlesea Community Connections, *2014 Emergency Relief Survey: Investigating the community's changing needs and reasons for seeking emergency relief services*, p. 5.

Improve people's housing security and living conditions through rental reform

The Victorian government can improve the security of tenure and living conditions of people living in private rental housing by strengthening tenancy laws. VCOSS welcomes the Victorian government's current review of the *Residential Tenancies Act 1997*, which could enable significant reform to prevent hardship and protect the health, wellbeing and human rights of low-income tenants. The review is also an opportunity for the government to deliver on commitments to improve the regulation of boarding houses, protect the privacy of tenants, and improve mechanisms for resolving disputes.

There are more than 250,000 low-income Victorian households in the private rental market,¹³⁹ more than three times the number of households (78,000) living in social housing.¹⁴⁰ Victoria's private rental market has weak security of tenure compared with similar international jurisdictions, including weaker protections around lease terms, notice periods and reasons for lease termination.^{141, 142} There are also few requirements for rental properties to meet basic liveability standards. Poor quality housing results in higher living costs, including for energy¹⁴³ and water, and exposes people to health risks, including extremes of heat and cold.¹⁴⁴ Rental reform should include minimum standards for rental housing, to maximise energy and water efficiency¹⁴⁵ and minimise health, safety and extreme weather risks.

Halve the number of people facing homelessness through prevention, rapid rehousing and permanent support

The Victorian government can help halve the number of people facing homelessness by 2025^{146, 147} by investing in homelessness prevention, a rapid rehousing program, and a permanent supportive housing program.

The best way to reduce homelessness is to prevent people becoming homeless in the first instance. Prevention strategies include a housing guarantee for young people leaving out-of-home-care, 'Safe at Home' programs for women and children experiencing family

violence, and tenancy advice, mediation and advocacy programs. Increasing the capacity of community legal centres, family violence services, financial counselling services and emergency relief services will help support people to avoid eviction, manage rental arrears or mortgage repayment difficulties, and negotiate with real estate agents, financiers and landlords.

Rapid rehousing programs support people who have recently become homeless, having previously maintained a tenancy. It prevents people entering the homelessness service system for an extended period, with the associated stress, cost and uncertainty this involves. Rapid rehousing brings positive results,¹⁴⁸ using flexible resources to establish new tenancies quickly. It enables agencies to establish relationships with real estate agents, negotiate with landlords, provide guarantees, bonds or rental subsidies, and work with people to maintain their tenancies.

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

140 Department of Health and Human Services, *Annual Report 2014–15*, p. 54.

141 J-F Kelly, *Renovating Housing Policy*, Grattan Institute, 2013.

142 S McNeils, *Rental Systems in Australia and Overseas*, AHURI Final Report No. 95, June 2006.

143 The Essential Services Commission reports that energy customers on payment plans use more than twice the amount of energy compared to others in their postcode, in its *Energy Hardship Inquiry Draft Report*.

144 Victorian Council of Social Service, *Disaster and Disadvantage: Social Vulnerability in Emergency Management*, 2014, p. 18.

145 One Million Homes Alliance, *Energy and Water Efficiency Roadmap*, 2015.

146 Council to Homeless Persons, *Pre-budget Submission 2016–17*, November 2015, p. 3.

147 Mission Australia, *Homeless Policy 2015*, p. 2.

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

People who have a long history of homelessness, or multiple and complex needs, require specialist, long-term support to gain and maintain housing. This includes assistance with finding permanent housing options, such as social housing, and intensive support to manage complex difficulties such as trauma, mental health difficulties, substance use, disability and living skills. Evaluations of demonstration projects in Melbourne show intensive support helps people secure and maintain housing, as well as improving the health and wellbeing of people who have experienced chronic homelessness.^{149, 150}



Safe at Home programs

'Safe at Home' programs include enhanced family violence crisis and outreach support, partnerships and protocols developed between services, intensive coordination of police and specialist service responses, installation of security and alarm systems and the provision of dedicated emergency mobile phones.

The Bsafe pilot project, run through Women's Health Goulburn North East (WHGNE) was found to help most women involved to remain safely in their own homes, to resume participating in the community again, and to 'lead normal lives'. BSafe improved the physical and mental health of women and their children and cut their risk of homelessness, working effectively with women from a range of backgrounds, including Aboriginal women, women with disabilities and women with limited English language skills.

Despite three comprehensive evaluations, WHGNE has been unsuccessful in securing permanent government funding for Bsafe.

Protect social housing tenants from extreme weather and high bills

The Victorian government can cut social housing tenants' cost of living and improve their health and wellbeing by making social housing properties more energy-efficient.

Over 40 per cent of Victoria's public housing stock is more than 30 years old, and approximately 10,000 homes, or more than 1 in seven public housing properties are near obsolescence.¹⁵¹ This increases tenants' energy and water bills, and raises their risk of ill-health during extreme weather events such as heatwaves. It also adds significant cost to the government's energy concessions program.

VCOSS understands it remains government policy to install gas heating in public housing properties, and to remove air-conditioning from acquired properties. Current estimates show it is more cost-efficient to heat homes using efficient reverse cycle air conditioning,¹⁵² and this is likely to become more pronounced as Australia's domestic gas prices rise as they link to the international market.¹⁵³ Air-conditioning also protects older Victorians from heat stress. Improving the energy efficiency of public housing properties and appliances will help people facing disadvantage cut their cost of living, enjoy better health, and cut government expenditure on the energy concessions program.

149 G Johnson et al., *Sustaining exits from long-term homelessness: A randomised controlled trial examining the 48 month social outcomes from the Journey to Social Inclusion pilot program*, Sacred Heart Mission, 2014.

150 G Johnson & C Chamberlain, *Evaluation of the Melbourne Street to Home program: Final Report*, Melbourne, HomeGround Services, 2015.

151 Victorian Auditor-General, *Access to Public Housing*, 2012.

152 Alternative Technology Association, *Are we still cooking with gas?*, 2014.

153 Tim Forcey, *Switching off gas – An examination of declining gas demand in Eastern Australia*, Melbourne Energy Institute, 2015.

FURTHER POLICY DIRECTIONS

Meet people's specific housing needs with tailored strategies

The reasons people experience housing stress and homelessness are diverse, and bring varied consequences for different people. Strategies for improving people's access to affordable housing are most effective when they are tailored to the needs of different groups. VCOSS recommends that in developing housing and homelessness strategies and programs, the specific needs of specific groups should be considered, including Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, women, older people, young people, people with mental health difficulties, people with disability and chronic health conditions, people affected by family violence, refugees, asylum seekers, new migrants and international students, rural and regional Victorians, and people leaving institutions including residential care, hospitals, and correctional facilities.

Tenant advocacy and participation

Protecting tenants' rights is one of the most effective ways of ensuring they can maintain the affordability and security of their homes. Previous cuts to the Social Housing Advocacy and Support Program have decreased the availability of services to social housing tenants. The Victorian government could also examine methods of increasing feedback and participation mechanisms for social housing tenants, to give them a greater say in the management of their homes.

Maintain 'no wrong door' access to housing services

VCOSS welcomes the Victorian government's commitment to establish a common housing register so people do not need to apply to multiple social housing organisations. This will be most effective if a 'no wrong door' approach is taken, where people who require assistance can have their needs met as fully as possible when they first ask for help. Improving organisations' and government's capacity to share information about the availability of housing and support services will require consultation and cooperation to succeed.

Protect owners in multi-unit properties

VCOSS welcomes the Victorian government's announcement that it will review consumer property laws. We urge that any change to these laws protect the rights of unit-owners, particularly older people on low incomes, who fear they may be evicted and their homes sold without their consent.

Refresh Melbourne's planning strategy

VCOSS welcomes the Victorian government's announcement to refresh Plan Melbourne. We advocate using this opportunity to include additional mechanisms to expand affordable housing, and consider options to intensify middle suburbs and slow the expansion of housing on the urban fringe.

Role of the Commonwealth in housing policy

Housing policy requires all levels of government to work together to solve problems, with many policy levers lying at the Commonwealth level affecting housing affordability. VCOSS, along with ACOSS and the national COSS network, advocates for the federal government's continued role as a partner in developing and funding housing policy.¹⁵⁴

154 ACOSS et al, *Fit for purpose: A Federation that guarantees the services that people need*, 2015.



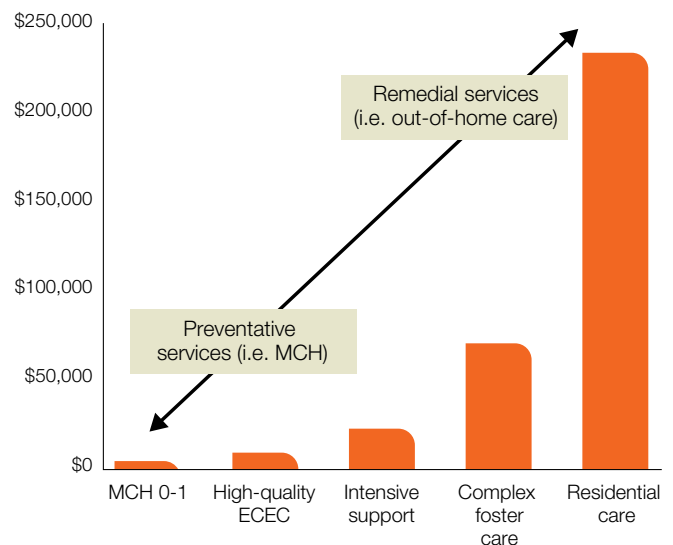
Help vulnerable families nurture their children

Children's early years shape how they learn, develop and form relationships, and can influence their long-term health, social adjustment, educational achievement and life expectancy.¹⁵⁵ Children who are exposed to increased stress or trauma such as family violence, neglect and extreme poverty can face long-lasting learning, behaviour and emotional regulation difficulties.¹⁵⁶ Secure parent-child attachments, access to parent support and parental coping skills are protective factors for children's development.¹⁵⁷

The best way to foster children's healthy development is to invest in early intervention and prevention strategies.¹⁵⁸ Warm and responsive relationships from caregivers bolster children's success; as do educationally supportive home environments; attendance at high quality early learning services; and access to health and social care services.¹⁵⁹

Too often vulnerable families only receive support once they reach crisis. Many fall through the cracks because services are overstretched and underresourced. The number of child protection reports has doubled in the last seven years.¹⁶⁰ Resources are being directed to the most pressing needs in the statutory system, without enough attention being given to prevention and early intervention. More support is needed particularly for Aboriginal¹⁶¹ children who are 16 times more likely to be in out-of-home care than non-Aboriginal children.¹⁶²

Figure 2: Maximum annual unit cost of children's services



Source: Department of Education and Early Childhood Development, *Early Years Strategic Plan: Improving outcome for all children 2014–2020*, Melbourne, 2014, p. 8.

155 M McDonald, T Moore and R Robinson, *Policy Brief No. 26: The future of early childhood education and care services in Australia*, Murdoch Childrens Research Institute, Centre for Community Child Health, 2014.

156 Centre on the developing child, Harvard University, *In brief: The science of early childhood development*, 2007.

157 Australian Institute of Family Studies (AIFS), *Risk and protective factors for child abuse and neglect*, 2013.

158 S Fox, A Southwell, N Stafford, R Goodhue, D Jackson and C Smith, *Better Systems, Better Chances: A Review of Research and Practice for Prevention and Early Intervention*, Canberra, Australian Research Alliance for Children and Youth (ARACY), 2015.

159 Ibid.

160 Victorian Auditor-General's Office, *Early intervention services for vulnerable children and families*, March 2015, p. vii.

161 The term "Aboriginal" is used here to refer to both Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples.

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

Improve children's health and development with better access to Maternal and Child and Health services

The Victorian government can support the development of healthy children and families by increasing vulnerable families' access to Maternal and Child Health Services (MCH), as well as providing more intensive support where required. This could be achieved by enhancing MCH nurses' ability to make home visits to vulnerable families, forming stronger links between MCH and other early childhood and adult services, and extending the Enhanced MCH Service (EMCHS) to children up to two years of age.

MCH is a universal, primary care service for all children and their families, also providing a pathway to early identification and referrals to more targeted services. However, many vulnerable families start to disengage from MCH after the first home visit.¹⁶³ Increasing MCH nurses' ability to make home visits to vulnerable families, as is done through the right@home sustained home visiting program, could help vulnerable families stay engaged with MCH services. This could be combined with intensive outreach to vulnerable families, as well as co-locating MCH with other early childhood and adult community services to create stronger referral processes. Increasing the cultural competency of services to be more inclusive and welcoming of all families, as well as increasing service flexibility, may also encourage more vulnerable families to keep engaging.



right@home sustained home visiting program¹⁶⁴

right@home is a nationwide program, currently being evaluated through a trial that will provide intensive home nursing visits to vulnerable expectant mums, including 300 in Victoria across Dandenong, Frankston, Ballarat and Whittlesea. Mothers will receive regular home visits from the same local MCH nurse from when they are 16 weeks pregnant, until their children turn two years of age.

Similar nurse home visit trials in the US showed a:

- 67% drop in behavioural and intellectual problems in six-year-olds
- 56% drop in emergency department visits for accidents
- 50% drop in language delays in 21-month-old children.

Help vulnerable families through intensive early years support

The Victorian government can support children's early development and wellbeing by further investing in early intervention and prevention programs. Early parenting programs that support vulnerable families have been shown to reduce parent stress, anxiety and depression, child abuse and child behavioural problems.¹⁶⁵

Programs that support children's early years development are likely to have long-lasting positive outcomes,¹⁶⁶ particularly for children from families facing disadvantage. Access to additional support can help vulnerable families build stronger parenting skills, develop nurturing environments and form strong parent-child relationships.

Investment should be based on the best evidence available and incorporate lessons from initiatives such as right@home, Cradle to Kinder, the Aboriginal Cradle to Kinder program and Bumps to Babes and Beyond Program.

The government could also consider extending the support available through these programs, such as Cradle to Kinder, until children reach school age.

163 Department of Education and Training, *Maternal & Child Health Services Annual Report 2013–2014 Statewide*, p. 8.

164 The Royal Children's Hospital Melbourne, *RCH News: Home Nursing Help for New Mums*, 30 April 2013; Australian Research Alliance for Children and Youth (ARACY), right@home, accessed 21 October 2015, <https://www.aracy.org.au/projects/righthome>

165 A Burrows, B Allen and S Gorton, *Evaluation of the Bumps to Babes and Beyond Program*, A Partnership Between The Queen Elizabeth Centre and Mallee District Aboriginal Services, December 2014.

166 Australian Early Development Census, *Research Snapshot: The impact of socioeconomics and school readiness for life course educational trajectories*, ED14-0193, 2014.



Bumps to Babes and Beyond¹⁶⁷

Bumps to Babes and Beyond (BBB) provides parent education and holistic support to mothers and families, starting from 26 weeks of pregnancy, until their child turns 18 months. BBB aims to develop strong parent-child relationships, improve child health, development and parenting capacity, and reduce the risk of children being placed in out-of-home care. BBB was developed by the Queen Elizabeth Centre in partnership with Mallee District Aboriginal Services (MDAS) to meet the needs of Mildura's Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community.

A recent program evaluation¹⁶⁸ found all children remained in the care of their family at the program's end; mothers experienced lower levels of depression and full antenatal attendance; 86% of mothers breastfed on discharge from hospital (compared to 45% of Aboriginal mothers); participants had significantly increased community supports and networks; and all children were up-to-date with their immunisations and milestone visits with the MCH nurse.

Help vulnerable families and children benefit from playgroups

The Victorian government can support vulnerable children's development by funding supported playgroups, and increasing the number of regional development workers, to better support the continuum of playgroups and increase participation rates of 0–4 year children. Playgroups are ideal for engaging parents early and preparing them for ongoing involvement in their child's education, as well as for setting children on a positive trajectory. Children who consistently attend playgroups are better prepared for kindergarten and school, especially children experiencing disadvantage.¹⁶⁹ Playgroups are also effective in connecting vulnerable families to targeted supports as they provide a 'soft' entry point into community services.

Victoria has community playgroups run by parents, and supported playgroups run by professionals for families facing disadvantage. Community playgroups operate across most of Victoria, for more than 30,000 families.

Supported playgroups work with families ranging from those with less complex developmental and parenting issues, through to highly vulnerable families.¹⁷⁰ They increase opportunities for vulnerable children to learn and develop through play, for parents to expand social networks, and provide valuable links to other health and community services. However there is currently no state or federal funding for supported playgroups in Victoria for highly vulnerable families involved in child protection and out-of-home care.

Regional development workers play a key role in increasing playgroup participation. Expanding the number of regional development workers, particularly in areas with low participation in community playgroups, would help raise participation rates across the state.

167 Queen Elizabeth Centre, *Bumps to Babes and Beyond*, <http://www.qec.org.au/news-and-events/news/bumps-babes-and-beyond>

168 A Burrows, B Allen and S Gorton, *Evaluation of the Bumps to Babes and Beyond Program*, A Partnership Between The Queen Elizabeth Centre and Mallee District Aboriginal Services, December 2014.

169 K Hancock, D Lawrence, F Mitrou, D Zarb, D Berthelsen, J Nicholson, S Zubrick, 'The association between playgroup participation, learning competence and social-emotional wellbeing for children aged four–five years in Australia', *Australasian Journal of Early Childhood*, Volume 37, Number 2, 2012.

170 Playgroup Victoria Inc, *Policy Brief 4: Transition Playgroups*, Playgroup Victoria Inc, 2014.

Better support all Aboriginal children to thrive

Being strong in culture and deeply connected to their families and communities helps Aboriginal children thrive. The government can help prevent Aboriginal children and young people from entering the child protection system and improve outcomes for those that enter care by implementing all nine of the agreed priorities from the Victorian Aboriginal Children's Summit.¹⁷¹ This includes providing every Aboriginal child and family with full access to holistic prevention and early intervention services, building the capacity of Aboriginal families, communities and Aboriginal Community Controlled Organisations (ACCOs) to better care for their children and young people; better supporting carers to provide culturally competent placements, growing the pool of Aboriginal carers, and ensuring compliance with the *Children, Youth and Families Act 2005*.

Current approaches to reducing numbers of Aboriginal children in child protection are failing. Aboriginal children are 16 times more likely to be in out-of-home care than non-Aboriginal children.¹⁷² The rate of Aboriginal child removal in Victoria currently exceeds that at any time since white settlement.¹⁷³ Connection to community, family and culture is fundamental to the wellbeing of Aboriginal people, however two thirds of Aboriginal children in out-of-home care in 2013–14 were placed with non-Aboriginal carers¹⁷⁴ and 81 per cent did not have a cultural support plan, despite this being a legal requirement.¹⁷⁵ It is critical that the Aboriginal Child Placement Principle is applied in every case involving Aboriginal families, to ensure the removal of children from their families is a last resort and that where required, every effort is made to ensure children grow up with a strong connection to their cultural identity.

The government can help improve the wellbeing of Aboriginal children in out-of-home care and retain their connection to culture, by implementing Section 18 of the *Children, Youth and Families Act 2005*, which transfers guardianship of Aboriginal children from the Department of Health and Human Services to the care of ACCOs. The Act was introduced 10 years ago but has yet to be implemented. Amendments to the *Children, Youth and Families Act 2005* passed in November 2015, to address the limitations that impede implementation of section 18, is a positive step.

To increase ACCOs' and the mainstream system's capacity to support Aboriginal children, more qualified Aboriginal staff are needed, from early intervention child and family support services through to the out-of-home care system. A workforce development plan is needed to sustainably grow this workforce, including funding to enable Aboriginal workers to undertake formal qualifications, as well as supporting organisations in recruitment and training strategies.

Help foster and kinship carers give children a supportive home environment

The Victorian government can support vulnerable children and young people in out-of-home-care and help prevent them entering residential care, by increasing foster and kinship carer allowances and providing carers with greater training and support.

More children are entering out-of-home-care, at the same time as the foster care system is struggling to recruit and attract carers. In 2013–14, 610 foster carers exited the system and only 400 households commenced caring.¹⁷⁶ An estimated 60 per cent of potential carers are deterred from the system due to the financial cost.¹⁷⁷

VCOSS welcomes the state government's \$31 million, four-year investment to help address carer allowances. However feedback from VCOSS members suggests a gap of around \$4,000 a year will remain between foster carer allowances and the actual costs of caring for a child.¹⁷⁸

171 *Aboriginal Children's Summit Communique*, 13–14 August 2015.

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

173 *Ibid.*

174 AIHW, *Child protection Australia 2013–14*, 'Table A33: Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children in out-of-home care, by Indigenous status and relationship of carer, states and territories, 30 June 2014', Canberra, 2015.

175 Victorian Auditor-General's Office, *Residential Care Services for Children*, Melbourne, 2014, p. 18.

176 AIHW, *Child Protection Australia 2013–14*, 2015 p. 59.

177 Foster Care Association of Victoria and Berry Street, *Save Foster Care*, accessed 23 October 2015, <http://savefostercare.org.au/about>

178 Foster Care Association of Victoria, *Foster Care 2014 Log of Claims*, 2014.

Currently about half of all children and young people in out-of-home care in Victoria are in kinship placements.¹⁷⁹ Research indicates 52 per cent of kinship carers experience forms of financial stress, including inadequate housing and poverty.¹⁸⁰ Within foster care, there are three levels of care: general, intensive and complex, each attracting different rates of reimbursement. However, kinship carers are only able to receive a general level allowance, the lowest level of support, regardless of the carer's own circumstances or the complexity of issues experienced by the children they care for. Giving kinship carers access to differential levels of care and allowance rates would help alleviate carers' financial stress and better support the children in their care.

Providing carers with more consistent access to brokerage funding to meet children's education, medical and health expenses, as well as upfront placement costs, would also help support children in out-of-home care, as would establishing a comprehensive learning and development strategy for all foster and kinship carers.

Give every child in out-of-home care high-quality therapeutic placements

The Victorian government can better support children and young people in out-of-home-care by providing them all with high quality therapeutic care.

Therapeutic care models provide children and young people in care with specialist support to address the underlying trauma they have experienced and help them recover from the effects of abuse, neglect and separation from family. Evaluations of residential setting therapeutic care programs show they help improve children's health, education and family connections.¹⁸¹ Similarly, an evaluation of the Circle Program, a therapeutic approach in foster care, has shown it helps children form relationships, regulate their emotions and participate in community activities.¹⁸²

VCOSS welcomes recent government investment to increase the number of therapeutic care places for children in out-of-home care. Continued investment could ensure all children and young people in care receive therapeutic care.

Support young people leaving care to achieve independence

The Victorian government can help support young people leaving care to transition to independent living by providing them with holistic case-managed support, combined with an education and housing guarantee. Young people generally are often financially supported by their families well into their 20s and are also living in their family homes longer, largely due to financial reasons.¹⁸³ It is reasonable to extend this type of support to young people leaving out-of-home care, who are at greater risk of poor transitions to independence.

When compared to their peers, young people leaving care are more likely to experience housing instability or homelessness, unemployment and low incomes, poorer educational outcomes, involvement in the criminal justice system, poor physical and mental health, and substance abuse.¹⁸⁴ Few have a supportive network to assist them.

"Once a child has turned 18 and leaves residential care, they are on their own and do not necessarily have the skills or accommodation options to be able to live independently and safely."¹⁸⁵

179 AIHW, *Child Protection 2013–14*, p. 48.

180 R Breman, *Peeling back the layers – kinship care in Victoria: 'Complexity in Kinship Care' – Research Report*, Bapcare Research Unit in partnership with OzChild and Anchor, 2014.

181 Victorian Auditor-General's Office, *Residential Care Services for Children*, Melbourne, 2014, p. xii.

182 M Frederico, M Long, P McNamara, L McPherson, R Rose and K Gilbert, *The Circle Program: an Evaluation of a therapeutic approach to Foster Care*, Centre for Excellence in Child and Family Welfare, Melbourne, 2012.

183 Australian Bureau of Statistics, 'Home and away: the living arrangements of young people', *Australian Social Trends*, 4102.0, June 2009.

184 Uniting Care, *Young people transitioning from out-of-home care to adulthood: Review of policy and program approaches in Australia and overseas*, July 2014, p. 2.

185 Victorian Auditor-General's Office, *Residential Care Services for Children*, Melbourne, 2014, p. 19.

While there are several effective supports, such as the Springboard to Learning program, Post Care Support, Information and Referral Services and Berry Street's Stand By Me pilot program, they are not coordinated and offered statewide. The government could help develop a statewide, integrated, holistic leaving care support model for all care leavers up to the age of 21, with the option of it being extended to the age of 25 where required.

To help care leavers find stable housing, pursue education and training, and gain stable employment, the state government could also provide all care leavers with a housing and education guarantee, including a rent guarantee, a rent supplement,¹⁸⁶ and access to fee-free education including both VET and university courses.¹⁸⁷ This could be supported by expanding the Youth Foyer initiatives, which provide vulnerable young people with accommodation and educational support.

FURTHER POLICY DIRECTIONS

Protect vulnerable children in the out-of-home care system by implementing the recommendations of the Commissioner for Children and Young People's report "...as a good parent would..."

The Victorian government can help ensure all children and young people in residential care are safe and cared for by fully implementing all of the recommendations in this report. VCOSS welcomes the government's in-principle support for the report recommendations¹⁸⁸ and its commitment to review and reform the out-of-home care system to improve outcomes for vulnerable children and young people.

Greater support for asylum seeker mothers and babies who have been detained

VCOSS members have identified a growing need to provide early parenting services to mothers and their babies who have sought asylum in Australia and have spent time in detention. These families are likely to have experienced trauma resulting in poor mental health, with depression, anxiety and post-traumatic stress symptoms common among them.¹⁸⁹ This can adversely affect their ability to form secure parent-child attachments¹⁹⁰ vital to a child's social, emotional and cognitive development. The government can better support the wellbeing and development of these vulnerable children by investing in targeted early intervention for these families.

Giving children in out-of-home-care placements matched to their needs

As part of the Roadmap to Reform project, it is important the Victorian government considers how the out-of-home-care system can ensure children and young people are matched to the most appropriate care option. Feedback from VCOSS members suggests vulnerable children and young people are not always given placements suitably matched to their needs. This can lead to poor outcomes and/or placement breakdown, further adding to the trauma these children experience. This was confirmed by the Commissioner for Children and Young People's report, which found examples where "children are poorly matched to placements" with decisions "often based on where there is an available bed, rather than on the needs of the child".¹⁹¹

186 Council to Homeless Persons, *Young people leaving care need a safety net*, <http://chp.org.au/young-people-leaving-care-need-a-safety-net/#.VhICmPmqBc>

187 Berry Street, *Submission in response to: Senate Inquiry Out-of-Home Care*, November 2014; Centre for Excellence, *2014 Election Statement*, October 2014.

188 Victorian Government, *Repairing The Support System For Our Most Vulnerable Children And Young People*, 19 August 2015.

189 AIFS Seminar Report, *Seeking Asylum in Australia: Mental health and human rights of children and families*, March 2012.

190 Ibid.

191 Commission for Children and Young People, *"...as a good parent would..." Inquiry into the adequacy of the provision of residential care services to Victorian children and young people who have been subject to sexual abuse or sexual exploitation whilst residing in residential care*, Melbourne, Commission for Children and Young People, 2015, p. 12.



Improve community health and wellbeing

Good health underpins everyone's ability to live a good life. It averts the distress and discomfort of disease, and the costs of treating illness, as well as enabling people to make the most of their lives and maximise their capability to work, learn, play, socialise, volunteer and care for loved ones. A healthier community is more productive, resilient and cohesive.

The social determinants of health are the conditions in which people are born, grow, live, work and age, which influence their health and wellbeing. In Victoria, the higher someone's income and education level, the better their health tends to be. People on low incomes, people in rural areas and Aboriginal people, on average, have poorer health, die earlier and receive less healthcare than other Australians.

Providing people with equitable, affordable and timely access to health services is crucial to reducing health inequities and enabling early intervention to prevent or manage illness and ill-health. Primary and community health services are often the first point of contact for people needing care. However, long waiting lists, confusing or overly strict access requirements and entry points, lack of transport and a lack of cultural responsiveness can all be barriers to people accessing health services.

Health promotion and prevention is also an essential part of a sustainable health system. Victoria has developed internationally recognised preventative health programs that tackle risk factors for chronic disease, including tobacco use, unhealthy diet, physical inactivity and harmful alcohol use. However there is room to substantially increase the focus and investment in preventative health programs, through an approach that considers broad social determinants of health.

Help people access alcohol and drug rehabilitation when they need it

The Victorian government can help people overcome problem drug and alcohol use and reduce drug-related community harm by making residential rehabilitation beds available to people when and where they need them.

*Alcohol and cannabis use accounted for about 65 per cent of alcohol and drug treatment episodes in 2013–14.*¹⁹²

Effective alcohol and other drug (AOD) treatment enables people to regain control over their lives, potentially re-engaging with work, education, family, friends and community, and caring for children and loved ones. It can also reduce harmful drug use, hospital costs, drug-related harm, violence and welfare costs. Investment in the AOD treatment system will help people access treatment earlier and reduce demand for acute services.

Only 30 per cent of people who need AOD treatment receive it.¹⁹³ In the 2015–16 State Budget, the Victorian government invested an additional \$18 million in AOD treatment services as part of the Ice Action Plan, including welcome investment in innovative non-residential services. However there are still only 208 public drug residential rehabilitation beds in Victoria, compared with more than 800 in NSW. Waiting times for residential rehabilitation in Victoria can be up to six months.

¹⁹² AIHW, *Alcohol and other Drug Treatment Services in Australia 2013–14*, 2015, p. 16.

¹⁹³ 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).

Long waiting times are a significant barrier to people engaging in treatment.¹⁹⁴ The state government can encourage people to engage in AOD treatment by increasing the number of residential rehabilitation beds available, reducing waiting times and barriers to access.



Residential rehabilitation shows strong results

Residential rehabilitation is an important long-term option for preventing problem alcohol and drug use in Victoria. The Australian Treatment Outcomes Study suggested residential rehabilitation services often work with people with longer-standing drug problems or a history of failed treatment, lack of social support, and complex comorbidities.¹⁹⁵ The 24-month follow-up study found 71 per cent of study participants did not use illicit drugs in the month before their follow-up interview. It also showed significant declines in criminal behaviours and needle sharing among participants and improvements in their health and wellbeing.

Help reduce pharmaceutical misuse with a real-time prescription monitoring system

The Victorian government can help prevent people misusing the pharmaceutical system and identify problematic prescribing by implementing and evaluating a real-time prescription monitoring system.

While Australia's pharmaceutical system is used appropriately by many people, misuse of the system is growing. In 2014, more than 380 Victorian deaths were attributable to alcohol and drugs, with prescription drugs contributing in more than 80 per cent of cases investigated.¹⁹⁶ This is far higher than the state's 2014 road toll of 248 deaths.¹⁹⁷

A prescription monitoring system would inform prescribers about a person's prescription history and their current filled prescriptions. This can help identify when someone is developing a dependency, and alert prescribers to possible harmful interactions between prescribed drugs. It can also discourage people from visiting multiple prescribers. The call for a prescription

monitoring system has been supported by the Victorian Coroner:

*"I recommend the Victorian Department of Health progress the implementation of a Victorian-based real-time prescription monitoring system as a matter of urgency to prevent ongoing harms and deaths associated with pharmaceutical drug misuse and inappropriate prescribing and dispensing of pharmaceutical drugs."*¹⁹⁸

Funding announced in the 2015–16 State Budget will support the evaluation and planning of a prescription monitoring system. Additional funding is required to roll out a system across the state. Alongside a prescription monitoring system, a robust referral process is needed and greater capacity within the AOD treatment system to respond to people referred as a result of the prescription monitoring system.

Ensure community mental health services can continue assisting people as the NDIS is rolled out

The Victorian government can help prevent people's mental health deteriorating and support their recovery by providing community mental health support services outside the NDIS.

Community mental health services provide psychosocial rehabilitation and support services, helping people with a range of mental health issues stay well and able to work, study, care for their children and families, and participate in community life. However, unlike in other states, all of Victoria's mental health community support funds have

194 D Lubman et al., *A study of patient pathways in alcohol and other drug treatment*, Turning Point, June 2014, p. 121.

195 J Ross et al, *Twelve month outcomes of treatment for heroin dependence: Findings from the Australian Treatment Outcomes Study*, National Drug and Alcohol Research Centre, 2004.

196 Coroner Audrey Jamieson, *International Medicine in Addiction Conference*, Royal Australian College of General Practitioners, 22 March 2015.

197 Ibid.

198 Judge Ian Gray, Coroners Court of Victoria, *Finding into the death of Anne Christine Brain*, 30 October 2014.

been committed to the NDIS. VCOSS is concerned that if people currently using community mental health services are deemed ineligible for NDIS support, they will no longer be able to rely on their current support services. The NDIS trial site in Barwon has already revealed significant gaps for mental health consumers and carers.

To be eligible for an individual support package (ISP) under the NDIS, people must have a permanent disability or condition. Some people with a mental illness are uncomfortable describing their condition as permanent, because their aim is to become well and live as unaffected by their mental health condition as possible. The episodic nature of some mental illnesses may also not meet the 'permanent' criteria. When the NDIS is rolled out, it is estimated up to 10,000 Victorians living with mental illness will not be eligible for ISPs.¹⁹⁹

*"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 are asking us to sign. It's saying 'I give up, I'm never going to recover'."*²⁰⁰

Improve young people's access to community mental health services

The Victorian government can improve young people's mental health and wellbeing by supporting early intervention services and reducing barriers that prevent young people accessing support.

Young people are particularly vulnerable to mental ill-health. Mission Australia's *Youth Mental Health Report* found more than 1 in five young people who responded to the survey met criteria for a probable mental illness.²⁰¹ More than 40 per cent of Year 12 students report symptoms of depression, anxiety and stress that fall outside normal ranges. Half of all lifetime mental illnesses emerge by age 14, and three quarters by age 24.²⁰²

However, the *Youth Mental Health Report* also found less than 1 in four young people with a diagnosed mental illness accessed a health service for support in the previous 12 months. Sixty per cent reported they were not comfortable seeking information, advice or support from professional services, including community organisations and counsellors.²⁰³

It is important to remove barriers that prevent young people seeking mental health support. Community sector representatives report concerns that the recommissioned community mental health support services (CMHSS) central intake system is confusing for young people. There are also concerns that eligibility for support through the CMHSS and NDIS usually requires a permanent disability and a diagnosis, which are usually not provided to people under the age of 24. Clear pathways are needed for young people to access community mental health services, along with targeted youth mental health services across the state, outside of the NDIS.

Improve people's health through preventative programs

The Victorian government can improve the health of people facing disadvantage by maintaining preventative health programs. This includes Healthy Together Victoria programs previously funded through the now terminated National Partnership Agreement on Preventative Health (NPAPH).

Chronic disease including heart disease, cancer, lung disease and diabetes causes nine out of 10 Australian deaths.²⁰⁴ Rates are higher in communities already facing disadvantage, including people on lower incomes and people in rural and remote Australia. The World Health Organisation estimates at least 80 per cent of all heart disease, stroke and diabetes are preventable, as are 40 per cent of all cancers.²⁰⁵

199 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.

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

201 Mission Australia, *Youth Mental Health Report*, June 2014.

202 Ibid.

203 Ibid.

204 AIHW, *Australia's Health 2014*, 2014, p. 94.

205 World Health Organisation, *Prevention chronic disease: a vital investment*, 2005.

*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.*²⁰⁶

A 2003 Department of Health and Ageing study estimated a 30 per cent decline in smoking between 1975 and 1995 prevented more than 400,000 premature deaths, saving over \$8.4 billion, more than 50 times the amount spent on anti-smoking campaigns over that period.²⁰⁷ However in recent years Australia has invested a lower proportion of its health expenditure in prevention than most other OECD countries.²⁰⁸ In 2014, the federal government terminated the NPAPH, four years early. Many successful programs will now be forced to wind up, including those funded through the Healthy Together Victoria program.



Healthy Together Victoria – City of Whittlesea

In Whittlesea, where 1 in 3 people are categorised as overweight and 1 in 5 as obese,²⁰⁹ Healthy Together Whittlesea (a partnership between the City of Whittlesea and Plenty Valley Community Health, funded by the NPAPH) has worked for the past two years on programs including:

- More than 550 people learning to cook with Jamie Oliver's Ministry of Food
- About 120 residents taking part in free personal training
- More than 100 people registered as Health Champions
- 4,500 students from nearly 30 schools participating in VicHealth's Walk to School program
- Nearly 30 workplaces registered for the Healthy Together Achievement Program, supporting the health and wellbeing of over 12,000 employees.²¹⁰

Give community organisations the tools to help vulnerable people quit smoking

The Victorian government can help people facing disadvantage quit smoking by working with the community sector to develop comprehensive smoking policies in organisations, and training and resourcing staff to help clients quit smoking.

People facing disadvantage, including those who are unemployed, have a mental illness, are in prison, or are experiencing homelessness, have higher smoking rates than the general population.²¹¹ With the cost of cigarettes high, this leads to both health and economic inequalities.

Community organisations are ideal settings for reducing smoking rates among groups facing disadvantage. 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.

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

207 National Preventative Health TaskForce, *Australia the healthiest country by 2020: National Preventative Health Strategy*, 2009, p. 10.

208 AIHW, *Health Expenditure 2010–11*, September 2012.

209 Victorian Department of Health, *Population Health Survey 2011/12*.

210 City of Whittlesea <https://www.whittlesea.vic.gov.au/your-council/news-and-publications/news/healthy-together-whittlesea>

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

FURTHER POLICY DIRECTIONS

Focus on people's recovery in the 10-year mental health strategy

With the Victorian government developing a 10-year mental health strategy, it is important it be recovery-oriented, consumer-focused and build on the strengths of the community mental health system, which should not be lost in the transition to the NDIS. The 10-year strategy can articulate a vision for the mental health system that includes components that would form a comprehensive, integrated system: recognising the vital role of community managed mental health support services, and the importance of service models that are flexible and responsive to help people with multiple and complex needs.

Establish a mechanism for monitoring the mental health system and driving reform

The Victorian government can help drive systemic change, raise the voice of consumers and carers and monitor the effectiveness of reforms by establishing an effective mechanism to oversee and implement reforms. Mental health commissions have been established at a national level and in several states and territories in recent years. Victoria could benefit from establishing an independent agency, such as a mental health commission responsible for monitoring the system and driving reforms.

Increase the AOD treatment system's capacity to intervene earlier with people at risk

The community sector reports the recommissioned AOD treatment system has less capacity to intervene early with people at risk of harm. Failure to intervene early means people can spiral downward into poorer health, requiring more costly and intensive acute treatment, or interventions by the justice and homelessness systems.

Adopt a harm minimisation approach to alcohol and drug policy

Harm minimisation approaches reduce the harms of alcohol and drug use by providing education and information, reducing the risk of health problems and injuries for drug users, and effective treatment for problematic use.

Provide a culturally safe health system for Aboriginal people by developing a 'cultural safety' strategy

Aboriginal people access mainstream healthcare services at lower rates than non-Aboriginal people. Government plans and strategies to address accessibility require improved implementation and evaluation. A strategy could be developed that expands cultural safety training across the health system and develops cultural safety accreditation mechanisms for health services.

Provide capital investment to help community health services meet the needs of Victoria's growing population

Victoria's registered community health services provide vital primary healthcare and community support services and make a significant contribution to improving health equity. For community health services to meet the needs of Victoria's growing population, significant capital investment is required. Across the state, community health services lack fit-for-purpose infrastructure. In some cases, they are instead renting premises that are expensive, inefficient and not fit-for-purpose.

Support peer workforce development

The peer workforce refers to people employed in roles that require them to identify as being, or having been, mental health consumers or carers. Benefits include reduced social isolation and stigma, increased service access for substance use and health difficulties, improved social functioning, and enhanced empathy, acceptance and hope.

Enhance population health planning capacity

Population health planning addresses the social determinants of health, through integrated and collaborative responses. Expanding this approach will help address future health challenges, by directing the health system away from just treating illness.



Improve the lives of people with disability and carers

People with disability are an important part of our diverse society, and have much to contribute through their activity, employment and insights. By removing barriers that prevent people with disability from fully participating in society and employment, and supporting the important role of carers, all Victorians benefit.

Despite positive changes in recent years, many Victorians with disability still experience systemic disadvantage and report being socially, culturally and politically isolated.²¹² For people with disability, barriers pervade all aspects of life, including access to services, health and wellbeing, education, employment, the built and natural environment, accommodation, transport and community participation.²¹³ There is much more that can be done to tackle the barriers to participation people with disability face.

The introduction of the NDIS is a profound change, and should provide greater choice, control and certainty for people with disability, their families, carers and advocates. However, it is not a panacea, and universal mainstream services must continue to remain or become inclusive. The accessibility, eligibility and range of support available for individual support packages (ISPs) under the NDIS is also uncertain.

Carers provide invaluable support to people with disability or illness and older people, but often at the expense of their own health and wellbeing. In 2015, there were 2.86 million people in Australia providing informal care to an older person or someone with a disability or long-term health need.²¹⁴ Together carers provide about 1.9 billion hours of care annually, equivalent to each carer providing 13 hours per week.²¹⁵ The role of carers needs to be recognised and adequately supported, particularly in the transition to the NDIS.

Invest in a high quality NDIS workforce

The NDIS will require the rapid expansion of a highly skilled workforce, with the Productivity Commission estimating the funding for disability services will need to double to provide the necessary support and reap the economic benefits of the scheme.²¹⁶ Organisations will also need to redesign their operations and service models, requiring the development of new skills, expertise, and education and training services. At the same time, inquiries into the abuse and neglect of people with disability will affect the regulation of the sector, requiring cultural change and higher standards of staff quality, behaviour and competency.

Victoria can prepare for the rapid growth of the disability support sector, by ensuring there is a qualified, professional workforce available to meet demand and deliver high quality services to people with disability, with care and respect. The NDIS presents opportunities to spur jobs growth and invest in the future workforce of Victoria, however, to be able to take advantage of these opportunities people need to be adequately trained and supported to move into these jobs.

This will require a detailed and strategic workforce plan, developed in partnership with the community sector, with appropriate funding for implementation.

212 National People with Disabilities and Carer Council, *Shut Out: The experience of people with disabilities and their carers in Australia*, 2009, p. 1.

213 *Ibid.*, p. 3.

214 Deloitte Access Economics, *The economic value of informal care in Australia in 2015*, Carers Australia, June 2015, p. ii.

215 *Ibid.*, p. iii.

216 Productivity Commission, *Disability Care and Support*, Report no. 54, Canberra, 2011, p. 3.

Ensure people with disability receive continued support

The Victorian government can provide continuity of support to people receiving disability support services by ensuring they continue to receive the same, or improved levels of service, in the transition to the NDIS. While the NDIS will bring improved services to most people with disability, there is a concern among VCOSS members that some people with disability may miss out on services, or have services reduced.

From July 2016, funding and management of the Home and Community Care (HACC) Program will be divided between the federal and Victorian governments.²¹⁷ Services for people aged 65 and over will be directly funded and managed by the federal government, and services for people aged under 65, and under 50 for Aboriginal people, will be funded by the Victorian government, until the NDIS is in full operation. There is concern some people aged under 65²¹⁸ with less severe disability may not qualify for an ISP under the NDIS and will lack the support needed to help them remain living at home.

Evidence from the Barwon NDIS launch site also suggests some people with disability who transition to an ISP under the NDIS are at risk of reduced access to services. Some people have NDIS plans with new restrictions on the types of care they can access. While some have had these restrictions overturned, there is concern that some people may not be aware they can challenge the system, or have the capacity to advocate for greater support.



Experience with the Barwon NDIS trial site

Kylie was receiving an ISP to assist with the management of Spina Bifida and Scoliosis, including chiropractic treatment. With the help of treatments Kylie eliminated the need to use a walking frame and wheelchair.

When Kylie transitioned to the NDIS, her new plan did not include funding for chiropractic care, as it was not deemed a “reasonable and necessary support”. Kylie stated that without this chiropractic treatment her mobility decreased markedly. She became increasingly reliant on her wheelchair, had to stop work and cease her studies. She was no longer able to clean her house, walk her daughter to school, or visit friends’ houses, which were not wheelchair-accessible.

Kylie took her case to the Administrative Appeals Tribunal of Australia, which ruled chiropractic treatment was a reasonable and necessary support for Kylie, most appropriately funded by the NDIS.²¹⁹ While this was positive for Kylie, she went through a significant period without this support and had to fight to regain access to it.

217 Victorian Government, *Victoria's HACC system in transition*, accessed 7 October 2015, <https://www2.health.vic.gov.au/ageing-and-aged-care/home-and-community-care/hacc-transition>

218 Or under 50 for Aboriginal people.

219 Administrative Appeals Tribunal of Australia, *McCutcheon and National Disability Insurance Agency [2015] AATA 624 (21 August 2015)*, 24 August 2015.

Ensure carers receive continued support

The Victorian government can better support the health and wellbeing of carers, and support them to continue in their caring role, by ensuring they receive continued respite and carer support under the NDIS. It can also improve carers' access to information, support and early referrals to specialist services by expanding the Carers ID pilot program and continuing to invest in the Victorian carer portal.

Carers' support across Australia is valued at \$60 billion per year.²²⁰ Yet carers often experience poorer physical and mental health, financial hardship and isolation, or miss out on employment, education and recreation opportunities.²²¹ NDIS ISPs are framed to meet the needs of the person with disability, making it difficult for carers to also meet their own needs. Carers of people ineligible for NDIS may also lose support and access to health and wellbeing supports. Carer assistance under the NDIS is limited to respite care and carer skills training, compared with current support including counselling, education and training, peer support, financial support and advocacy. This full suite of options should continue to be provided.

The Victorian government can support carers' wellbeing by ensuring appropriate supports remain available, and ensuring the NDIS planning process engages with families and carers, and recognises their needs.

The Carers ID pilot is a carer-specific, simple identification and referral process to connect carers to relevant support services and networks and has helped health workers identify and refer carers to specialist services. The Victorian government can better support carers by expanding the Carers ID pilot project statewide.

The Victorian carer portal brings together carer support organisations, peer support and online resources to provide carers with a single point of entry to find the resources they need. The Victorian government can provide funding to transform the prototype into a fully functioning online portal.

Help people with disability live independently

The Victorian government can better support people with disability by providing at least 1000 new ISPs and expanding the Disability Aids and Equipment Program ahead of the NDIS being fully operational in 2019. People with disability should not have to wait years for support.

There are more than 4,700 people on a waiting list for ISPs, who are unable to find supported accommodation or live independently in the community. VCOSS welcomed the significant investment in the 2015–16 State Budget for up to 830 additional ISPs, however this still falls short of meeting rising demand. The number of people added to the Disability Support Register has increased by about 10 per cent a year over the last four years, up from 3,245 people in June 2011 to 4,737 people in June 2015, an extra 1,492 people.

Table 2: Number of people on the Victorian Disability Support Register

June 2011 ²²²	June 2012 ²²³	June 2013 ²²⁴	June 2014 ²²⁵	June 2015 ²²⁶
3,245	3,600	3,949	4,392	4,737

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 disability to go about their daily lives, access education, employment and recreation, develop and maintain relationships, and participate in the community.

220 Deloitte Access Economics, *The economic value of informal care in Australia in 2015*, Carers Australia, June 2015, p. iii.

221 Australian Bureau of Statistics, *Disability, Ageing and Carers: Summary of Findings*, Cat. No. 4430.0, 2012.

222 Victorian Department of Human Services, *Annual Report 2010–11*, September 2011.

223 Victorian Department of Human Services, *Annual Report 2011–12*, September 2012.

224 Victorian Department of Human Services, *Annual Report 2012–13*, September 2013.

225 Victorian Department of Health and Human Services, *Annual Report 2013–14*, September 2014.

226 Victorian Department of Health and Human Services, *Annual Report 2014–15*, October 2015, p. 58.

Help people with disability advocate for their rights

The Victorian government can help people with disability protect their rights and have a stronger voice, by investing further in independent disability advocacy. Strong, independent advocacy enables people with disability to communicate their needs and have them met, and is particularly important at times of great change.

The introduction of the NDIS is highly likely to increase the need and demand for disability advocacy services. Professional, independent advocacy will help people with disability and their carers navigate the new system and engage with services. VCOSS members report that disability advocacy services at the Barwon launch site have experienced significant increases in demand.

Independent, professional advocacy is complemented by helping people with disability and their carers to self-advocate, through the provision of information and resources, peer support and peer advocacy programs.



The importance of advocacy²²⁷

Harold* is 93, has low vision and sometimes experiences confusion. He lives alone and does not receive any disability or home care services. When he approached a local home care assistance provider, Harold was told there was no available funding to assist him. He engaged an advocacy provider to seek a better outcome. The disability advocacy organisation learned the home care provider had conducted Harold's assessment over the phone and that Harold had not disclosed his vision impairment. It was determined that Harold was eligible for home care support, which he now receives weekly.

* Name changed to protect the identity of individuals.

FURTHER POLICY DIRECTIONS

Improve housing options for young people with severe disability

The Victorian government can improve the lives of young people with severe mental and physical disability by investing in appropriate supported disability accommodation in the interim period before the NDIS rollout. More than 1,800 young people²²⁸ with severe mental, physical or intellectual disability are currently living in residential aged care facilities in Victoria.²²⁹

Residential aged care facilities focus on supporting older people, and have limited capacity to meet the physical, social and rehabilitation needs of young people.²³⁰ They are not aimed at supporting young people to participate in education, employment and recreation.²³¹

Make the NDIS accessible for all people with disability

The Victorian government can ensure all people with disability are able to access NDIS supports by making the services system culturally safe and welcoming, and by providing outreach services to engage with people not accessing the system. People with disability on low incomes should also be supported to obtain relevant disability assessments required to apply for the NDIS.

Ways of making services culturally safe include increasing the numbers of Aboriginal and CALD employees at disability services, and adequately training and building the cultural competence of all staff. Organisations can adopt inclusive practices and policies, such as openness to working with families, not just individuals, and including outreach support to help engage vulnerable people.

227 Disability Advocacy Resource Unit, *Disability Advocacy by the Numbers*, June 2014, p. 12.

228 Considered to be people under the age of 65.

229 Australian Government Productivity Commission, *Report on Government Services 2015*, Table 14A.68.

230 Melbourne City Mission, *Submission to Senate Community Affairs References Committee Inquiry into the adequacy of existing residential care arrangements available for young people with severe physical, mental or intellectual disabilities in Australia*, 11 March 2015.

231 The Senate, Community Affairs, References Committee, *Adequacy of existing residential care arrangements available for young people with severe physical, mental or intellectual disabilities in Australia*, June 2015.

Better support children with disability and developmental delays

Early childhood intervention provides specialised support and services for infants and young children with disability or developmental delay (aged from birth through to school age), and their families, to optimise children's wellbeing and development. The number of these services is set to increase significantly under the NDIS. VCOSS members advise that the development of quality standards for early childhood intervention providers could be adopted across the state, and nationally once the NDIS is fully implemented, to ensure high quality services are delivered to all children. It is recommended the sector be provided with guidance and training around these standards.

Help vulnerable children who are ineligible for the NDIS access early intervention support

It is important that all children with additional health and development needs, including those who are not eligible for ISPs under the NDIS, continue to receive early intervention support. Through early intervention, children's life-long trajectories can be significantly improved in a highly cost-effective way. Community health services will play a key role in providing early interventions to children with disability and developmental delays who are not eligible for the NDIS, and need continued investment to maintain these services.

Better support families and carers of people with disability through carer advocacy

The Victorian government can support the health and wellbeing of families and carers of people with disability through funding for carer advocacy support. Early experiences with the NDIS have shown many carers will need advocacy support under the NDIS. However, there is currently no state or federal government funding directed at individual carer advocacy needs.



Prevent crime through a smarter justice system

It is time for a community conversation about how to cut the rate of crime by preventing people from committing crimes, and ensuring prisons can be places for rehabilitation. People who end up in prison have overwhelmingly faced one or more forms of disadvantage, and addressing this can help prevent people committing crimes.

Victoria's prison population has grown exponentially in recent years. 'Tough on crime' policies have led to overcrowded prisons and justice streams, leading to poor rehabilitation and reintegration outcomes. Reforms to bail, sentencing and parole have meant more people in prison, and more barriers to people accessing programs and supports both within prison and after their release. As a result, recidivism rates are high, with past offenders often returning to crime and cycling in and out of the system.

Since the last Victorian election, the state government has invested in improving prisoner rehabilitation. It has increased funding for prisoner health, education and rehabilitation services and facilities, and shifted the focus from spending on prison beds, to reducing recidivism. This year's state budget is an opportunity to build on this and increase the effectiveness of government spending, by expanding diversion opportunities and other programs that steer people away from offending and address the underlying causes of crime.

Tackle underlying reasons for crime

The Victorian government can help tackle the underlying reasons people commit crime and improve community safety by shifting prison funding to community-based programs. Adopting this justice reinvestment approach means investing in communities facing disadvantage, rather than prisons, and working with them on local, place-based solutions to the economic and social risk factors behind offending.

Most of Victoria's prisoners have experienced significant disadvantage, often contributing to their offending behaviour. They have low rates of education, literacy and employment. Many have histories of abuse, mental illness and substance use. One quarter come from just two per cent of Victorian postcodes.²³² About a quarter of children on youth justice orders or on remand in 2010 came from between 2–3 per cent of Victoria's poorer postcodes.²³³

The 2015–16 State Budget showed the cost of running Victoria's prisons is now more than \$1 billion per year.²³⁴ This is a 44 per cent increase in two years. However the increased spending has not led to lower rates of crime. Conversely, the crime rate rose 12 per cent between 2010 and 2015. Forty-five per cent of people now reoffend and return to prison within two years.²³⁵ The Victorian Sentencing Advisory Council has found prison has little deterrent effect and often results in a higher rate of recidivism.²³⁶

Divert young people from the justice system

The Victorian government can steer young people on a path away from offending by expanding the youth diversion pilot program statewide. Effective diversion programs help young people address the underlying causes of their offending by tackling issues including substance use, housing, mental ill-health, education and training needs.

232 T Vinson and M Rawsthorne, *Dropping off the edge 2015*, Jesuit Social Services and Catholic Social Services Australia, 2015.

233 Jesuit Social Services, *Young People on Remand in Victoria*, 2010.

234 Victorian Department of Treasury and Finance, *Victorian State Budget Paper No. 3*, 2015–16.

235 Ibid.

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

Diversion recognises that young people's contact with the criminal justice system increases their risk of offending, that they have a 'unique capacity to be rehabilitated' and that their criminal behaviour is not necessarily a calculated action, but often largely a product of circumstances such as their age, maturity, background and social context.²³⁷

Diversion makes it less likely young people will reoffend. Almost 90 per cent of young people who completed the ROPES diversionary course for first offenders and 61 per cent who completed the Right Step eight-week program did not reoffend within two years, compared to 43 per cent of young people detained in a youth justice facility.²³⁸ It is also cost-effective. Community-based diversion costs 10 per cent or less of the amount required to detain someone in a juvenile justice facility.²³⁹

A 12-month youth diversion pilot program commenced in May 2015 in the Dandenong, Broadmeadows, Werribee, Ballarat, Ararat and Stawell courts. There is an opportunity to build on the findings of this pilot program evaluation and expand the program statewide, to ensure all young people in Victoria have access to pre-plea diversion and early intervention.

Reform bail processes to ensure young people are not remanded unnecessarily

The Victorian government can help prevent young people being remanded unnecessarily by amending the Bail Act to exempt children from the provision making it an offence to breach a bail condition.

In 2014–15, the number of children and young people on remand increased 37 per cent from the previous year.²⁴⁰ VCOSS members report that one reason for this is the number of young people refused bail because they breached a bail condition. These breaches are often 'technical' breaches that do not involve any new charges, cause harm, or affect community safety.

The state government can amend the Bail Act to ensure these vulnerable children and young people are not remanded unnecessarily for 'technical' breaches.

Some young people are also being held on remand unnecessarily because bail support programs are not available to them. In August 2015, 75 per cent of young people in the Parkville Youth Residential Centre were on remand.²⁴¹ Remand significantly affects young people's lives, including disrupting relationships, creating stigma and increasing the risk of further criminalisation.

Expanding bail support services like the Intensive Bail Supervision Program could help prevent young people being unnecessarily remanded.

*"Locking a child up disconnects them from family and community and that disconnect can become permanent. It also means that that person, without choice, is pushed into a cohort of young people who are all struggling to survive themselves and, quite frankly, they learn extremely bad habits from each other."*²⁴²

Help offenders with drug and alcohol dependence rehabilitate through specialist courts

The Victorian government can help offenders with alcohol and other drug (AOD) dependencies rehabilitate by expanding the Drug Court of Victoria and the Family Drug Treatment Court statewide.

The Drug Court of Victoria (DCV) operates out of the Dandenong Magistrates' Court, sentencing offenders with AOD dependencies who have committed an offence under the influence of drugs or alcohol, or to support their dependency. A recent DCV evaluation showed participants improve their health, wellbeing and connectedness to the community, which improves their chances of staying off drugs and alcohol, their family relationships, housing stability, and other life skill areas such as time management and accountability.²⁴³ DCV participants were also about a third less likely to reoffend.²⁴⁴

237 T Overall, 'Why diversion leads straight to crime prevention' *Insight 8: Crime and Justice*, Victorian Council of Social Services, June 2013.

238 Smart Justice for Young People, *Diversion factsheet*, July 2014.

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

240 Department of Health and Human Services, *Youth Parole Board Annual Report 2014–15*, 2015, p. 25.

241 Commissioner for Children and Young People Bernie Geary, quoted in 'Children languishing on remand 'scandalous': child commissioner', *The Age*, 24 August 2015.

242 Ibid.

243 KPMG, *Evaluation of the Drug Court of Victoria: Final Report*, prepared for the Magistrate's Court of Victoria, 2014, p. 4.

244 Ibid.

The Family Drug Treatment Court is a three-year pilot in the Children’s Court of Victoria. It aims to help parents address their problem drug and alcohol use and promote family reunification. A formal evaluation is underway, but the court is already reporting progress among participants, including improved health and wellbeing, reductions in drug and alcohol use and some examples of family reunification.²⁴⁵ The Family Drug Treatment Court’s catchment area is currently limited to the northern metropolitan region of Melbourne.

Improve people’s access to legal assistance

The Victorian government can help people access timely and affordable legal assistance by increasing funding to community legal centres. The 2014 ACOSS Community Sector Survey found more than 95 per cent of community legal centres were unable to meet demand.²⁴⁶ Community legal centres report demand is particularly high in civil and family law areas, including family violence, child protection, debt and fines, tenancy, workplace mistreatment and discrimination.

People facing disadvantage are more likely to face legal issues and often experience several legal problems at the same time.²⁴⁷ Changes to Victoria’s sentencing laws, an increased police focus on family violence, increases in child protection notifications and a deteriorating economic environment have all contributed to the growing demand for legal assistance.²⁴⁸

It is estimated more than \$200 million a year is needed across Australia to narrow the growing ‘justice gap’ of people who are missing out on legal assistance.²⁴⁹ However, community legal centres in Victoria face federal funding cuts of about 26 per cent over the next three years. Family violence related legal issues are a large and growing portion of community legal centres’ work. Recent state and federal funding announcements will assist community legal centres to help more people facing family violence in some areas of the state, but will not reach everyone, nor fill the gap left by the federal funding cuts.

Help people facing disadvantage deal with outstanding fines and debt

The Victorian government can help people facing disadvantage with outstanding fines and debt by expanding the Work and Development Permit system to cover infringement and enforcement stages.

Fines can significantly and disproportionately affect people facing disadvantage, who are often unable to pay them. Young people, people experiencing homelessness, people with mental illness and people living in poverty are also more susceptible to fines for public space, public order and public transport related infringements.²⁵⁰

The Work and Development Permit system, recommended by the Sentencing Advisory Council in its *Imposition and Enforcement of Court Fines and Infringement Penalties in Victoria* report, allows people facing disadvantage to discharge outstanding fine debt by voluntary work or agreed programs or treatments. The system is based on a NSW model that has been found to deliver benefits including reduced reoffending, reduced costs to government and reduced feelings of stress and hopelessness among participants.²⁵¹ The Victorian system is limited to the 28 days after an infringement notice is issued and is not available once the matter proceeds to enforcement. Making the program more flexible and accessible at the enforcement stage will assist more people facing disadvantage to discharge their debts.

The state government can also pursue the other outstanding recommendations from the Sentencing Advisory Council report, including amending the definition of special circumstances to include people experiencing family violence or financial hardship.

245 K Marshall, ‘Revolutionary new drug court reuniting parents with children, saving cash’, *The Age*, 7 June, 2015.

246 Australian Council of Social Service, *Australian Community Sector Survey*, 2014.

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

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

249 Productivity Commission, *Access to Justice Arrangements: Inquiry Report Overview*, September 2014, p. 63.

250 Public Interest Law Clearinghouse, *Disadvantage and fines*, 2003.

251 New South Wales Law Reform Commission, *Penalty Notices Report 132*, 2012, p. 9, 40.

Help people in prison reintegrate into the community

The Victorian government can help people released from prison reintegrate into the community by increasing transition planning and support available to prisoners. Prison health and rehabilitation programs, transition planning and post-release support all help prevent people reoffending, becoming homeless, committing suicide or having a drug overdose after their release.

Victoria's recidivism rate remains high, with 45 per cent of people returning to prison within two years of release.²⁵² The Australian Institute of Health and Welfare (AIHW) has found 43 per cent of Australian prisoners are homeless upon leaving prison²⁵³ and it is estimated that every month someone dies from drug overdose soon after leaving prison.

Post-release services help people released from prison to find housing and work, and access health and other support services. The 2015–16 State Budget contained initiatives that shifted funding away from prisons, towards programs aimed at supporting prisoners to rehabilitate. However, only 1 in five prisoners receive post-release support from Corrections Victoria, and less than 2 per cent have access to housing through state government programs specifically for former prisoners.²⁵⁴ VCOSS members report that existing services target the most serious offenders and those most likely to be a risk to the community. This leaves many other offenders with only limited access to post-release support.

The Victorian Ombudsman has recommended the Department of Justice investigate options to address post-release housing for former prisoners, ensure the specific needs of women prisoners are recognised, and investigate a 'throughcare model' from prison to community services to address the health needs of prisoners being released into the community.²⁵⁵

Staged release programs can also help people develop skills and confidence to live in the community. A small number of male prisoners can access the 25 beds available in the Judy Lazarus Transitional Centre, which has been found to reduce recidivism and better prepare people for transitioning back to the community. There is no comparable service available to women. The state government can improve reintegration for women prisoners by establishing a transitional support facility and staged release program for women.

FURTHER POLICY DIRECTIONS

Continue to develop and expand access to problem-solving courts

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

Legislate to enshrine diversion for young people

Pre-plea diversion for adults has been enshrined in legislation since 2009, but there is no legislative framework for youth diversion. The state government can introduce legislation to enshrine pre-plea diversion for young people from first police contact through to court attendance.

Ensure independent and robust investigation of serious police complaints

The state government can improve public confidence in and accountability of the Victorian police force by legislating to ensure people making serious complaints against police have access to a strong, independent process.

Identify age-appropriate justice system responses for children aged 10–12 years

The state government can support vulnerable young children by raising the minimum age a child can be charged with a criminal offence from 10 to 12 years of age, and identifying more age-appropriate interventions than incarceration. This would bring Victoria into line with United Nations recommendations.

252 Victorian Department of Treasury and Finance, *Victorian State Budget Paper No. 3*, 2015–16.

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

254 Victorian Ombudsman, *Investigation into the rehabilitation and reintegration of prisoners in Victoria*, September 2015, p. 7.

255 *Ibid.*, p. 156.



Cut the cost of living for people on low incomes

Despite an increase in average living standards in Australia, not everyone is benefiting. People earning low incomes, especially those renting, experience greater cost-of-living increases and slower income growth, than people on high incomes. By investing in activities that help low-income households reduce their costs, protect them from predatory business practices, and support people in times of financial crisis, the worst effects of this inequality can be averted.

Between 1995 and 2012 the real incomes of Australia's top 5 per cent of income earners increased on average by more than \$2,000 each week, while for the lowest 20 per cent of income earners, the average weekly increase was less than \$200. At the same time, the cost of living is rising faster for low-income households, with the National Centre for Social and Economic Modelling estimating in its 2013 *Household Budget* report, that in the five years to 2013, low-income households experienced a 12 per cent increase in the cost of living, while high-income households only experienced a 7.5 per cent increase.

As a proportion of their income, low-income households spend twice as much on electricity and gas than middle-income households. Energy market data shows significant growth in hardship over the last five years, with the rate of disconnections doubling. The rate of wrongful disconnections has also tripled.

VCOSS members also report that asylum seekers living in the community on bridging visas, and international students, are increasingly facing disadvantage. This is further compounded by their ineligibility for concessions and the barriers they face to accessing emergency financial assistance.

The emergency relief sector is important in developing responses to financial hardship. Emergency relief is 'the last safety net'²⁵⁶ for people in financial crisis, supplementing assistance given by other support services and cushioning those who fall through service

delivery gaps. It also plays a major role referring clients to relevant support services, including housing assistance, family violence support services, financial counselling and youth services.

Help people on low incomes better manage their energy use

The Victorian government can help people on low incomes lower their energy costs by helping them overcome barriers to improving their home energy efficiency. The recent energy efficiency and productivity statement *Saving energy, growing jobs*, identified home energy efficiency as being essential to addressing people's financial hardship.

Households vulnerable to hardship (those on payment plans or in hardship programs) use on average more than twice as much energy as other households in their area.²⁵⁷ Poor quality appliances²⁵⁸ and poor thermal performance of many public housing units and low-cost private rental dwellings^{259, 260} are among the reasons for this.

256 Community Information and Support Victoria, *The last safety net*, accessed 1 November 2015, <http://cisvic.org.au/publications/last-safety-net>

257 Essential Services Commission, *Supporting Customers, Avoiding Labels: Energy Hardship Inquiry Draft Report*, ESC, Melbourne, 2015, p. 32.

258 J Borrell and S Lane, *Energy Audit Program Evaluation: 2004–2006 data*, Kildonan Uniting Care, Melbourne, 2009; Roy Morgan research, *Victorian Utility Consumption Household Survey 2007: Final report*, Department of Human Services, Melbourne, 2008.

259 J Campbell, *Green Apartments Too Hot to Handle*, The Sunday Herald Sun, Victoria, 29 March 2009.

260 Energy Consult, *Housing condition/energy performance of rental properties in Victoria*, Department of Sustainability and Environment, Melbourne, 2009; VCOSS, *Decent Not Dodgy: 'Secret shopper' survey*, Victorian Council of Social Service, Melbourne, 2010.

The Essential Services Commission's proposed framework for assisting households facing payment difficulty includes requiring energy retailers to advise and assist these households. VCOSS recommends complementary programs, such as those proposed in the One Million Homes Alliance *Energy and Water Efficiency Roadmap*:²⁶¹

- An energy efficiency information program for low-income households, complemented by a low-cost loans program to finance upgrades, and a funded retrofit program.
- A major-appliance replacement program for concession households.
- Expanding the public housing asset maintenance program to bring non-compliant dwellings up to the energy and water efficiency standard.

Help prevent people entering financial hardship by expanding financial aid programs

The Victorian government can help prevent people entering financial hardship by establishing a state-based emergency relief program to add capacity to existing services. Currently the emergency relief sector is largely comprised of small community-run agencies with minimal budgets, relying almost exclusively on volunteers to assess and assist clients in crisis with complex needs. Federal funding provides money for disbursement to clients, and local governments frequently provide office space and funding for (often part-time) paid coordinators. However their capacity is often limited by insufficient funds.

This is exacerbated by recent state and federal government changes to financial counselling and emergency relief programs that have led to more centralised service delivery, leaving many households, especially in regional areas, much further away from support services. Smaller local organisations, some with long histories and deep local connections, have lost funding. The effect of these changes should be assessed, and geographic gaps identified.

Emergency relief, financial counselling and microfinance services work closely with a range of Department of Health and Human Services funded support services for clients with complex needs. Better integration between the health and community service sectors and the financial support sector is needed, including cross-sector networking and service delivery mechanisms.

Providing additional relief funds and operational resources could help under-resourced agencies meet demand, improve access, and improve service integration.

Increase people's access to No-Interest Loans Schemes

The Victorian government can help people on low incomes improve their financial situation by increasing the availability of affordable and appropriate credit through No-Interest Loans Schemes (NILS).

NILS can help low-income households meet urgent needs, such as repairs to vehicles or household fixtures, or invest in major household items that cut costs of living or improve quality of life, such as energy-efficient appliances or computers. When appropriate financial products such as NILS are not available, low-income consumers can be forced to either go without essential goods, or access expensive financial options including payday loans and other predatory lending products.²⁶²

The number of NILS loans made is not limited by the loan capital available, which is provided primarily by the National Australia Bank. But it is constrained by a lack of staff and organisational resources. Over the last four years, annual state government funding of \$500,000 has enabled a 51 per cent increase in the number of loans given each year, but NILS programs are still only able to access half the loan capital available to them, due to limited operational resources. Additional state government funding would enable more loans to be given each year, helping make full use of the available loan capital.

In the 2015–16 State Budget, the Victorian government committed \$7.2 million over four years to support the three *Good Money* stores operated by Good Shepherd Microfinance in Collingwood, Dandenong and Geelong. This was a positive investment in areas of high disadvantage. There is still great need for access to affordable credit for low-income households in other areas across Victoria.

261 One Million Homes Alliance, *Energy and Water Efficiency Roadmap*, 2015.

262 T Corrie, *Microfinance and the Household Economy: Financial inclusion, social and economic participation and material wellbeing*, Good Shepherd Youth & Family Service, Collingwood, 2011; M Banks, G Marston, H Karger and R Russell, *Caught Short: Exploring the role of small, short-term loans in the lives of Australians*, Social Policy Unit, The University of Queensland, Brisbane, 2012.

Extend concessions to asylum seekers

Victoria is home to more than 10,000 asylum seekers living in the community on bridging visas facing extreme financial hardship. Some are ineligible for government-funded welfare and support services and must rely on charitable organisations to survive. Others are eligible for a living allowance that is equivalent to 89 per cent of Newstart.

However, despite rises in the cost of essential services such as energy and water, asylum seekers on bridging visas are not eligible for concessions on these. In 2013–14, Public Transport Victoria (PTV) introduced an Asylum Seeker Concession Card.²⁶³ Extending energy and water concessions to Asylum Seeker Concession Card holders would help asylum seekers living in the community afford essential services such as energy and water.²⁶⁴

Reduce people's energy hardship by increasing and indexing the Utilities Relief Grant cap

The Victorian government can reduce the hardship experienced by people unable to afford their energy bills by increasing the Utilities Relief Grant cap and indexing it.

The Utilities Relief Grant is a means-tested grant that households can use to pay off up to two bill's worth of accumulated debt. However, it has been capped since 2010 at \$500, which is now substantially less than two quarterly bills, and less than half the average debt of customers entering utilities hardship programs.²⁶⁵ By raising the cap to a level commensurate with two typical quarterly bills, and indexing it against energy and water prices, the Utilities Relief Grant will help more people repay their debt and avoid disconnection from essential services.

Prevent people facing energy hardship from being disconnected

The Victorian government can help households struggling to pay energy bills avoid disconnection by responding to the Essential Services Commission's recent Hardship Inquiry findings.

The Essential Services Commission's proposed hardship framework prioritises early intervention on unpaid bills, to help people establish payment plans before debts escalate. This can help households facing temporary financial difficulties. However households experiencing chronic financial hardship, whether due to low income relative to household expenses, or very high energy expenditure (potentially due to poor quality housing or appliances), may be less well served.

Several energy retailers have recently fundamentally changed their hardship responses and are now responding well to customers in chronic financial hardship. A new overly prescriptive framework may discourage the expansion of these practices. In its response to the Inquiry's draft report,²⁶⁶ VCOSS proposed an alternative framework that:

- Prioritises early intervention when bills are not paid
- Is premised on constructive engagement between retailers and customers
- Gives retailers scope for innovation to best meet the needs of customers in hardship
- Prescribes debt repayment schedules to be offered to customers if constructive engagement or innovative assistance does not occur
- Obliges retailers to give practical and responsive assistance with improving energy efficiency for customers whose very high energy use is causing financial hardship.

263 Public Transport Victoria, *Asylum Seeker Concession Cards*, accessed 1 November 2015, <http://ptv.vic.gov.au/tickets/concessions/asylum-seeker-concession-cards/>

264 R McKeon, *Identifying budget savings to fund an asylum seeker utility concessions portfolio: A report for The Consumer Action Law Centre*, Economists at Large, Melbourne, Australia, 2015.

265 Essential Services Commission, *Energy Retailers Comparative Performance Report – Customer Service, 2013–14*, Melbourne, 2014.

266 Victorian Council of Social Service, *Supporting Customers, Avoiding Labels: VCOSS Submission to the Energy Hardship Inquiry draft report*, October 2015.

FURTHER POLICY DIRECTIONS

Complement energy efficiency programs with targeted policy

Further initiatives to help people on low incomes cut their energy costs include mandatory disclosure of the Residential Energy Efficiency Scorecard rating at point-of-sale and -lease, a staged introduction of minimum efficiency standards for private rental dwellings accompanied by a means-tested low-cost loan program to help low-income landlords comply, and improving the Victorian Energy Efficiency Target (VEET) scheme's ability to support low-income households by addressing barriers to their participation, and including ceiling insulation and energy audits as Prescribed Activities eligible for VEET certificates.

Bridging the digital divide

More than 40 per cent of households with an annual income below \$40,000, and 57 per cent of older people, are still without home internet access.²⁶⁷ It is likely that for many of these households, internet access will always remain unaffordable. The internet has become the default method for interacting with government agencies, accessing public transport information, paying bills, choosing an energy retailer or insurance provider, and finding local services. Email and online social networks are also increasingly replacing social mail and telephone contact. The state government could consider strategies to improve internet access among low-income households and older persons, addressing cost barriers as well as education needs. Successful internet literacy programs run by a number of neighbourhood houses could be evaluated to inform part of this process.

A comprehensive review of the concessions framework

Evaluating, reviewing and restructuring the concessions framework could help better direct concessions to the people who most need them and reduce government expenditure in other social policy areas. A review of concessions should be comprehensive and evidence-based, articulate the concessions framework objectives and principles, include independent analysis of current effectiveness and involve consultations with community service organisations, consumer advocates, and the businesses that deliver concessions.

Appropriate regulation of pawnbrokers

Pawnbrokers are regulated by the state government, and are not subject to any substantive requirements for responsible lending, limits on fees and charges on small loans, or to resolve disputes. Regulation of pawnbrokers is among the weakest of any type of consumer credit provider. The state government could review its pawnbroking laws to provide strong consumer protections that prevent exploitation of vulnerable consumers, or those experiencing financial crisis.

Minimise the harm from problem gambling

Victoria has nearly 50,000 poker machines, often concentrated in communities facing disadvantage. Poker machines continue to be the largest source of problem gambling, and the Victorian government could examine options to reduce the prevalence of poker machines, especially in communities facing disadvantage, and introduce additional measures to reduce the harms associated with them.

267 Australian Bureau of Statistics, *8146.0 – Household Use of Information Technology, Australia, 2012–13*, 2014.



Expand people's transport options

Without reliable, affordable and accessible transport, people may not be able to fully access opportunities around them. People need good transport options to attend education and training, go to work, attend appointments, access health and community services, see friends and family, and take part in social and recreational activities.

Not everyone has their own car, and to ensure everyone in Victoria can access opportunities, a range of transport alternatives are needed. To ensure these options are affordable and accessible for people facing disadvantage, they should include high quality public transport, point-to-point options including taxis and community transport, and good pedestrian infrastructure for walking or use of mobility aids.

The Victorian government is investing significantly in transport, including in major public transport projects. It has also signalled a more consultative way of working to improve people's experience of the transport system. These directions are welcome.

For new services to offer benefit to all Victorians, they must be universally designed so that a wide range of people can use them, including people with disability, older people, parents with prams or strollers, or people carrying luggage or groceries.

Work also needs to be done beyond major projects. By examining the best use of the bus network, including in regional Victoria and outer suburban Melbourne, ensuring ticketing, fares, concessions and revenue protection practices do not prevent people using transport, and upgrading existing public transport infrastructure to make it fully accessible, the state government can help a range of people facing disadvantage use public transport to access opportunities and live meaningful lives.

Expand people's mobility with more accessible public transport

The Victorian government can help all people access public transport by adopting universal design principles in new and existing public transport projects. The government has announced a range of new major public transport projects, including the Melbourne Metro Rail Tunnel, extending the South Morang railway line to Mernda, and new trains and trams.

By adopting universal design principles, from planning through to construction and operation, including in infrastructure and carriage design, the government can help ensure these new transport services meet people's diverse accessibility needs.

At the same time, making new infrastructure universally accessible will fall short if problems with existing infrastructure are not addressed. People need their whole journey to be accessible, from beginning to end, and any barrier along the way means the journey cannot be made. If existing stops or stations remain inaccessible they will prevent people using the network. While there have been some small, welcome initiatives, progress remains slow. Public transport agencies appear increasingly willing to consult and engage people with disability. However, Victoria remains behind Disability Standards for Accessible Public Transport (DSAPT) targets, especially for the tram network, and is unlikely to meet 2017 targets.

There is also some concern over the direction the Australasian Railways Association, of which Public Transport Victoria is a member, has taken in regard to accessibility standards. Instead of working with people with disability to enable them to use public transport, the association has argued for ways to exempt itself from doing this, and to lower the standard people should expect of public transport services.²⁶⁸

268 Victorian Council of Social Service, *Australasian Railways Association application for exemption from DSAPT: Submission to the Australian Human Rights Commission*, 2015.

● Help people in rural and regional Victoria access public transport

The Victorian government can help people in rural and regional areas access work, education, community and health services and activities, by investing in transport improvements in regional areas.

VCOSS welcomes the state government's commitment to developing a Regional Transport Development Plan, as people living in rural and regional Victoria are highly car dependent, with fewer public or alternative transport options. This creates additional disadvantage for people who cannot drive, afford to run a car, or those who wish not to. People may have to rely on friends and family for transport, or simply not make the journeys they need to at all.

Every part of regional Victoria is different, and solutions will need to be developed through consultation. It is likely that more detailed consideration of the use of assets, timetable and service coordination, and flexible transport options, including local buses, school buses, community transport services and taxis will be needed to improve transport options in regional and rural Victoria.

● Provide people with better bus services

The Victorian government can improve transport options for people in Melbourne's outer suburbs and in rural and regional areas, by expanding and improving the bus network to more areas, offering faster and more frequent services over expanded hours of operation.

Parts of Melbourne's outer suburbs and rural and regional areas experience high levels of disadvantage, while also being poorly served by public transport. This contributes to high-income groups using public transport more frequently in Victoria than low-income groups.²⁶⁹ Victoria has invested significantly in its train and tram networks, however, these do not reach every locality. Given the extensive road network, it is often more cost effective to expand bus services, which can reach more people, more often, and connect them to local destinations and rail and tram networks.

Victoria's bus network remains difficult for people to navigate, and often duplicates train and tram services. It could be redesigned to provide more services in underserved areas, better connect with other transport modes, and run faster and more frequently. VCOSS welcomes the state government's decision to defer implementing recent bus network restructure proposals, as these often replicate journeys to Melbourne's CBD, rather than linking to the rail network.

By consulting further with the community, the state government can improve Victoria's bus network to provide services that are more useful to people, and attract greater patronage.

● Help people access transport through the Multi-Purpose Taxi Program

The Victorian government can improve people's ability to access transport by expanding the eligibility and options available through the Multi-Purpose Taxi Program (MPTP). VCOSS welcomes the current review of the MPTP, as this program can be further expanded and reformed to improve people's access to affordable transport.

Broadening the MPTP to enable program members to use funds for transport services beyond taxis, such as hire cars and community transport, would give people more options to better meet their transport needs. VCOSS suggests considering ways of expanding services able to transport wheelchairs.

VCOSS has also advocated that people's eligibility for the MPTP be assessed more holistically than just on medical grounds. This means not only considering a person's physical characteristics, but basing eligibility on people's individual needs, including their resources, the availability of private motor vehicles, and their local access to public transport options.

²⁶⁹ Australian Bureau of Statistics, *Household Water and Energy Use, Victoria*, Data Cubes: Public Transport, October 2011.

Ensure people facing disadvantage can pay for public transport

The Victorian government can help people facing disadvantage access public transport by boosting emergency relief transport assistance, and reviewing fares, concessions and fare evasion responses.

People on low incomes face tight budgets and financial hardship. Emergency relief organisations spend significant resources providing people with public transport assistance. This is compounded by a ticketing system that remains complex and sometimes difficult for people to understand, as well as a complicated fare and concessions structure. Approaches to fare evasion can also discriminate against people facing disadvantage, such as the \$75 evasion penalty fare, which is only available to adults who have capacity to pay \$75 immediately using a credit or debit card, while those who cannot do so are required to pay a much higher fine.

By expanding the resources available to emergency relief organisations, and making it easier for them to provide public transport tickets, they can provide more people experiencing hardship a valid ticket for travel. By reviewing and streamlining the ticketing system, and fare and concessions structure, more people may be able to understand the system and ensure they purchase tickets at the lowest cost for their travel. By reviewing the penalty fare and fine structure, as well as improving the interaction with authorised officers, more people can be helped to use the system correctly, directed to appropriate support, and minimise their accrual of unnecessary fines.

FURTHER POLICY DIRECTIONS

Develop community transport

Compared with other jurisdictions, Victoria's community transport services are underdeveloped. The community transport system can provide people more individualised, innovative and cost effective mobility solutions through mechanisms such as the Multi-Purpose Taxi Program review, the NDIS, and the Home and Community Care program.

Extend travel training, education, promotion and assistance

Many people do not use public transport because they are unfamiliar with services. By improving awareness of public transport, and providing opportunities for vulnerable groups to try it in a safe environment, more people can be helped to use the service. Community organisations are well-placed to provide travel training support for people facing barriers in accessing public transport.

Improve access to school buses

The school bus network provides Victoria's most extensive public transport coverage, especially in rural areas. Many people who could benefit from using these services such as tertiary students or apprentices and trainees are prevented from doing so by the current structure. Expanding access to school buses could expand people's transport options in areas where there are currently, very few, if any, public transport alternatives.



Build cohesive and resilient communities

With economic, social and environmental change occurring at an unprecedented pace, it is increasingly necessary for communities to work together and build their resilience, to enable them to influence and prepare for these changes.

Cohesive and resilient communities can use their resources to help avert and better respond to challenges posed by disaster and emergency events, and fluctuating economic and social circumstances. Conversely, inequality, distrust, social isolation and exclusion erode community cohesion and resilience, contributing to marginalisation and entrenched social problems.

Some parts of Victoria experience greater disadvantage than others,²⁷⁰ adversely affecting children's development, young people's educational attainment, social inclusion and rates of crime.

By investing in community organisations' capacity to build social capital and connections, providing places and activities that enable communities to interact and bond, and building resilience, the state government can strengthen Victoria's social fabric and be better prepared to face future challenges.

Build communities' social cohesion through neighbourhood houses

The Victorian government can help people facing disadvantage engage and connect with their communities by supporting neighbourhood houses in growth corridors and other priority areas.

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

cost-effective way to strengthen communities, as improving people's wellbeing reduces the need for spending in acute health and other interventionist services.²⁷¹

Victoria's Neighbourhood House Coordination Program funds about 370 neighbourhood houses. More than 30 neighbourhood houses have now emerged unfunded in fast growing areas such as Carrum, Geelong West and St Andrews. The current regional Neighbourhood House Networks funding formula leaves rural and remote neighbourhood house committees particularly under-resourced to meet complex governance requirements and ensure sustainability.

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.²⁷²

270 T Vinson and M Rawsthorne, *Dropping off the Edge 2015*, Jesuit Social Services and Catholic Social Services Australia, 2015.

271 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.

272 Association of Neighbourhood Houses & Learning Centres, *Neighbourhood House Survey 2013*.

Build communities' resilience in the face of disasters and emergencies

The *National Strategy for Disaster Resilience*²⁷³ states that non-government and community organisations are at the forefront of strengthening disaster resilience in Australia, with people turning to these organisations for support. The strategy commits Australian governments to continue partnering with these organisations, to strengthen communities' disaster resilience.

Victoria faces increased risk of bushfires, floods, heatwaves and storms. Other recognised risks include energy supply disruption, hazardous materials emergency, insect pest incursion, marine pollution, mine failure, pandemic or transport infrastructure emergency.

Most community sector organisations are themselves highly vulnerable and at risk of shutting down following an emergency event, potentially leaving vulnerable people without support when they need it most. Research shows about half of community organisations would be out of operation for a week if they sustained serious damage in an emergency event, and up to a quarter might never provide services again.²⁷⁴ High levels of under-insurance and inadequate planning are also common due to limited resources and capacity.



Facing disaster: Hazelwood Coal Mine Fire

Following the February 2014 bushfires, the Hazelwood Coal Mine fire burned for 45 days, blanketing the town of Morwell with acrid smoke and ash. Residents of a local aged care facility were highly vulnerable, with limited mobility and significant care needs.

Initially residents remained in the facility for their safety. Windows were closed, wet towels were used to block gaps under doors, and the air conditioning and ventilation were run only occasionally to prevent smoke infiltration. After three weeks, the Chief Health Officer of Victoria made the decision to evacuate vulnerable people from Morwell. The aged care residents were relocated to three separate facilities in neighbouring towns, coordinated in partnership with several organisations. Staff attended residents in their temporary accommodation. The facility's operations were severely affected for nine weeks, costing about \$400,000 and causing great stress and anxiety for staff, residents, and their family members.

273 Coalition of Australian Governments, *National Strategy for Disaster Resilience*, Commonwealth Attorney-General's Department, Canberra, February 2011.

274 K Mallon, E Hamilton, M Black, B Beem & J Abs, *Adapting the Community Sector for Climate Extremes: Extreme Weather, Climate Change and the Community Sector – Risks and Adaptations*, National Climate Change Adaptation Research Facility, Gold Coast, 2013.

Support refugees resettling in Victoria

The Victorian government can support increasing numbers of refugees set to resettle across the state in coming years by expanding existing programs. People from refugee backgrounds have often lived through trauma, torture, abuse and long periods of deprivation without access to adequate water, shelter, food, healthcare, education or safety. The many challenges of resettlement can also affect their health and wellbeing, leaving them needing specialist support.

Victoria already has the largest intake of refugees and asylum seekers in Australia, settling about one third of all arrivals. The state government currently funds services for refugees living in the community, and supports mainstream services working with refugee families. There are specialist trauma and torture services operating from community health centres, and a schools support program, offering specialist consulting services to schools across Victoria. Expanding these services will help respond to the needs of newly arriving refugees.

FURTHER POLICY DIRECTIONS

Strengthen the Victorian Charter of Human Rights and Responsibilities

The most vulnerable and disadvantaged people in our society are among those most likely to have their human rights infringed or violated. The VCOSS submission to the eight-year review of the Charter recommends fostering a cultural change across government and the community that more deeply embeds human rights.²⁷⁵ Developing this type of culture requires ongoing community and government support and leadership, broader access to human rights training and education, and mechanisms to monitor, implement and enforce rights.

Support asylum seekers to live meaningful lives in the community

There are more than 11,000 asylum seekers in the Victorian community awaiting determination of their refugee status. With help to participate in training, employment and community life, asylum seekers can contribute substantially to local communities. The resettlement of 160 Karen refugees from Burma in the small town of Nhill in regional Victoria contributed \$41 million to the local economy.²⁷⁶

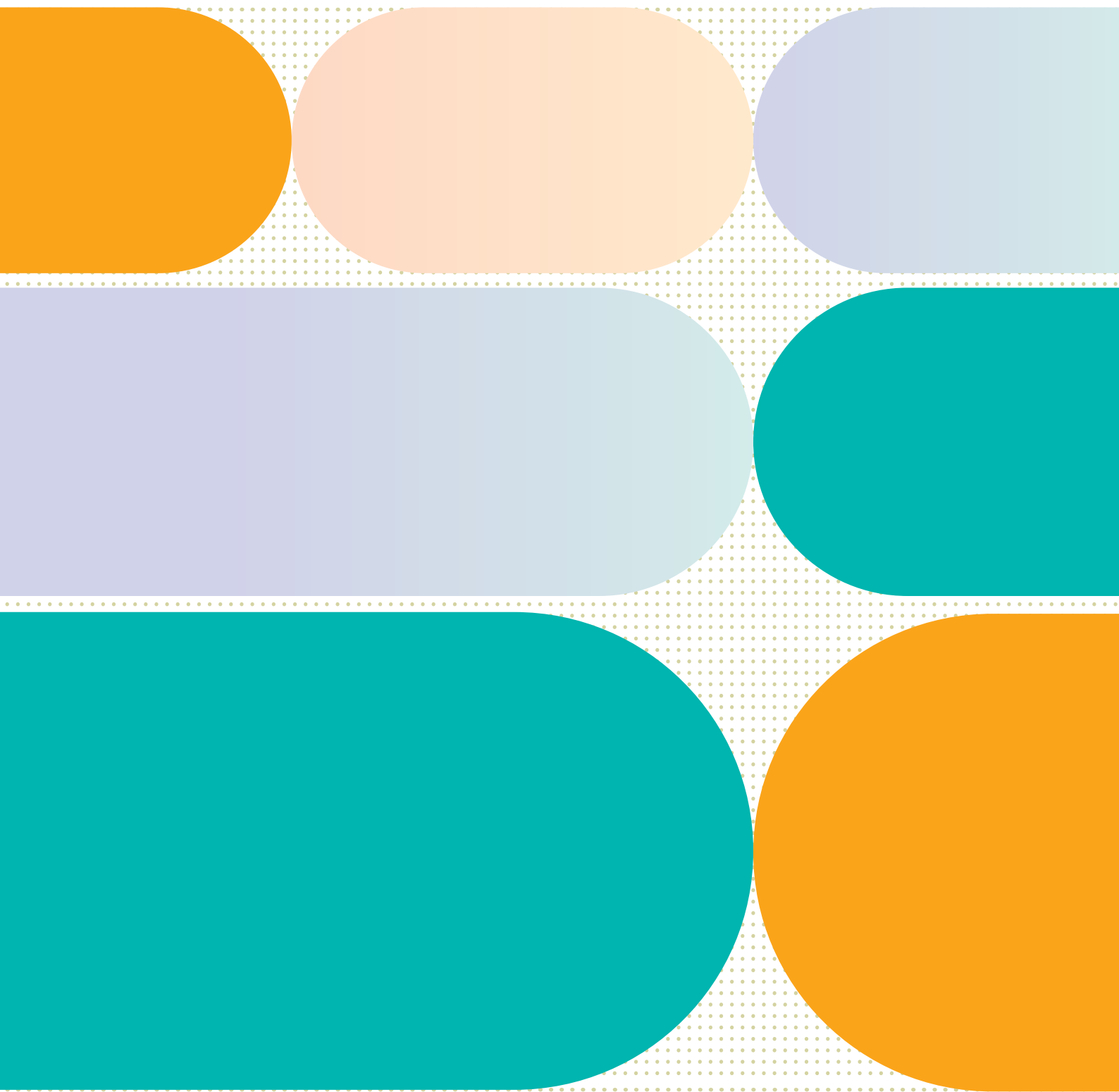
Enhance volunteer support, resources and management across the community sector

In Victoria, there are about 135,000 volunteers working in community sector charities,²⁷⁷ who are essential to strengthening the community. Enhanced volunteer management would help maximise and further leverage the contribution of these volunteers.

275 VCOSS, *VCOSS Submission to the 2015 Review of the Charter of Human Rights*, 2015.

276 AMES and Deloitte Access Economics, *Small towns Big returns; Economic and social impact of Karen resettlement in Nhill*, 2015.

277 VCOSS, *Strengthening the State: A snapshot of Victoria's community sector charities*, VCOSS, 2015, p. 18.



Victorian Council of Social Service

Level 8, 128 Exhibition Street,
Melbourne, Victoria, 3000

e vcoss@vcoss.org.au

t 03 9235 1000

www.vcoss.org.au

