



Building our *fairer* future

Submission to the 2021 Victorian Budget



VCOSS is the peak body for the community service sector in Victoria.

Through advocacy, policy development and capacity building activities we work to eliminate poverty and disadvantage and achieve wellbeing for all Victorians and communities.

We advocate for a fair and equitable society by supporting the social service industry and representing the interests of Victorians living in poverty or facing disadvantage.

We welcome the opportunity to help shape the 2021 Victorian Budget and the state's post-COVID recovery.

VCOSS acknowledges the traditional owners of country and pays respect to past, present and emerging Elders.

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Building our *fairer* future

The global movement to 'build back better' after COVID is picking up pace. Intrinsic in this is a requirement to build back *fairer*.

Throughout 2020, COVID proved that what was previously considered 'impossible' was actually within our grasp all along. This forces us to now pose the question: what else is within our grasp?

Victoria has already invested heavily in social policy and developed new approaches to tackle the big policy challenges. To *build back fairer*, we need to continue this effort.

We need to keep developing new approaches and better policies, and increase support for the workforce that will help implement them. We also need a clear and positive framework to measure our success.

This document is the result of extensive research by VCOSS and consultation with more than 300 VCOSS members across the state.

It identifies the fresh policies and approaches that would underpin positive and lasting social change in Victoria, and the measures necessary to safeguard the advances we've already made.

We propose 53 specific measures to create a Victoria where every person and every community can live a life of genuine wellbeing.

These include:

- Delivering on the promise of the Royal Commission into Victoria's Mental Health System
- Closing the digital divide
- Funding a Youth Employment Strategy
- Protecting Victorians from the COVID 'debt trap'

Underpinning this, our communities need social service organisations that are well funded on secure terms.

Victoria has long been considered a progressive powerhouse. We have been pioneers across many social policy fronts, continuing to lead the nation in new social housing investment and inclusive school reform, just to name a few.

This is our chance to take the next great stride.

To reimagine our state's potential, and unashamedly pursue what's possible.

We might never get this opportunity again.

Let's not waste it.

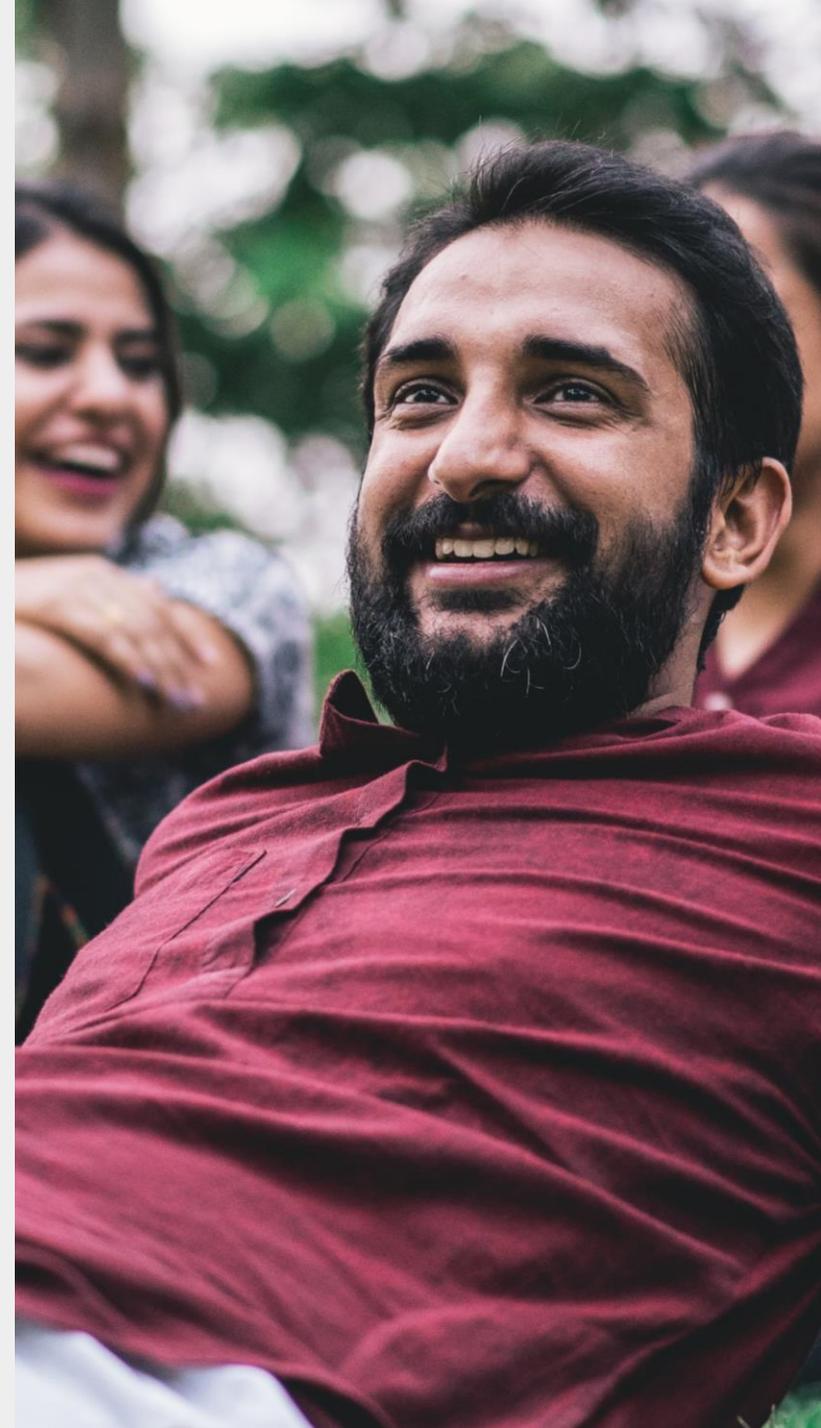


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A wellbeing state

Shift to a wellbeing economy

While economic growth will be a crucial element of Victoria's recovery, it is not enough. Victoria is more than an economy.

Real outcomes, that impact people's lives, do not always appear in a balance sheet.

By developing a set of indicators that measure social progress and community wellbeing, we can track our COVID social recovery successes *alongside* our economic recovery.

The smartest way to embed this approach would be for Victoria to become a wellbeing economy and deliver a wellbeing budget. Other jurisdictions, like Iceland, Scotland and New Zealand, can provide us with examples of successful wellbeing economies with indicator framework that focus on prioritising wellbeing of all citizens.

Deliver on the promise of the Mental Health Royal Commission

The Royal Commission into Victoria's Mental Health System final report is detailed, ambitious and significant. It's a roadmap for real, positive change. And it puts people who have lived with mental illness at the centre of service design and delivery.

Achieving the vision of the Royal Commission will require long-term effort, sustained resourcing and engagement with communities and services.

Reorienting the mental health system to care in the community will keep people out of hospital, and make sure they have a choice about the type of care they need, when they need it, where they need it. Community mental health services have a vital role to play.

To fulfill the potential of the Royal Commission the Victorian Government can adequately and sustainably fund community mental health services and build on their strengths as a pillar of the system.

Improve access to drug treatment and pharmacotherapies

COVID has driven an increase in alcohol consumption, and changed what illicit drugs people use and how they use them.

Victoria already had the second lowest ratio of residential drug rehabilitation beds in Australia. Reduced capacity due to COVID-19 has led to a huge increase in demand, but far fewer places available. Many people have been left languishing without help.

A rapid increase in the number of residential drug and alcohol treatment beds is needed to reduce bottlenecks in the system caused by COVID-related restrictions.

Lockdowns have also made it more difficult for people to get to their health clinic or pharmacy to access pharmacotherapies. Temporarily allowing takeaway doses, longer prescriptions and third-party pickups helped immensely. These improvements should be retained, and the dispensing fee for opioid replacement therapies subsidised to encourage people to stay engaged with their treatment.

Plan for Aboriginal population growth

Between 2018 and 2028, the Aboriginal population in Victoria is expected to grow by nearly half again. In areas like Ballarat, Ararat and the Surf Coast, it will be even faster.¹

Rapid growth has major implications for the capacity of Aboriginal Community Controlled Organisations (ACCOs) to respond to the needs of Aboriginal Victorians.

Victoria will not be able to achieve the outcomes and meet the targets of the refreshed Closing the Gap framework without planning for the demand created by rapid population growth.

Secure funding, which grows with the community, is needed to make sure the ACCO sector is strong and sustainable, and able to deliver holistic support to Aboriginal Victorians.

Expand green space in Victoria's urban hotspots

Walking paths, picnic spaces and local parks were a precious respite for many during Melbourne's second wave. Public green space was essential to people's wellbeing.

But Melbourne has the lowest proportion of green space of all Australian capital cities. About 135,000 Melbourne households don't have any green space within 5km of their home. Low-income households and suburbs are least likely to have access to parks and playgrounds.

The outside environment and the urban 'heat island' effect play an important part in heat vulnerability. Surface temperature in Melbourne is negatively correlated with income, meaning that households most vulnerable to heat are living in the hottest areas with less resources to cope.

Urban greening programs need to be expanded. Priority should be given to areas of Melbourne and regional Victoria with few existing green spaces. This will reduce the impact of urban heat islands in our hottest suburbs and improve air quality in pollution hot spots.



Protestors at the 2021 'Invasion Day Rally' in central Melbourne wear facemasks to stop the spread of COVID. Image: Matt Hrkac





Value the community sector

Extend community sector post-COVID support

When the pandemic hit, the community services industry moved quickly to increase services and maintain continuity of essential support.

This transition cost money.

Some organisations had to upgrade digital infrastructure to enable remote service delivery. The costs of personal protective equipment, enhanced cleaning and office reorganisations also added to the bill.

While some sector organisations were assisted to remain financially sustainable, others missed out. Small and medium-sized organisations especially are struggling to meet extra costs.

Services need extra funding to adapt to 'COVID normal' arrangements. Without this support, fewer Victorians will get the help they need, and the diversity and sustainability of vital community sector organisations will be at risk.

Partner with community service organisations in emergencies

The vital role of community organisations as partners in emergency response and recovery is made clear all too frequently; through bushfires, floods and pandemics.

Community organisations can swiftly mobilise resources and expertise, and deliver essential services. They are trusted sources of information and local knowledge. When they're involved in emergency planning and response, the outcomes are better for vulnerable communities.

But these organisations face their own challenges during emergencies; they lose workers, staff experience personal losses, business operations are disrupted and extra money must be spent on staff safety and wellbeing.

Before the pandemic, not all community organisations had comprehensive disaster and business continuity plans.

The Victorian Government can help prepare community organisations for the next (inevitable) disaster by funding the development and implementation of a framework to improve the sector's overall resilience and emergency preparedness.

End ‘drip funding’ to promote secure employment

Victoria’s second wave exposed the plight of insecure workers. For example, in the aged care sector, inadequate funding and a trend towards employers only offering short-term contracts meant many people were working at multiple sites, often without adequate training and equipment. This increased the risk of virus transmission.

If the Government continues to only fund community service organisations through short-term contracts and extensions, they can’t offer staff long-term, secure work. In some community service organisations, about a third of workers are on fixed, short-term contracts.²

Most community sector workers are women. Insecure work and low pay in the industry contributes to gender inequity.

Only with secure and long-term funding can the industry offer more attractive wages, better conditions, decent hours and proper training to keep people in jobs and keep the community safer. VCOSS supports the Productivity Commission recommendation to extend community service contracts to seven years.³

Provide fair indexation and growth funding

Organisations across the community services industry—such as housing and homelessness, alcohol and other drugs, family violence, mental health, family and child, and youth services—are reporting increased numbers of new and returning clients, and increased complexity of need. As face-to-face services resume, this is likely to place additional demand on community service organisations, many of whom are already at capacity or dealing with long waiting lists.

Low indexation rates over recent years and a significant widening of the scope of the Portable Long Service Leave Scheme have left organisations struggling to make ends meet.

A fair indexation formula incorporating wage rises, the superannuation guarantee and Portable Long Service Leave, and dedicated funding to meet growth in demand, are needed so organisations can keep supporting the community.

Safeguard volunteering capacity

In an ordinary year, more than two million Victorians volunteer.⁴ Volunteering increases mental and physical wellbeing, and boosts the health and resilience of the wider community. But volunteering was significantly reduced during COVID, and help will be needed to get this vital service to our communities going again.

Volunteering support services are place-based organisations that promote, resource and support volunteering, and provide the critical infrastructure required for safe, effective and sustainable volunteering. The existing volunteer support network is at risk of significant reduction in both geographic coverage and service delivery capacity.

The Victorian Government can strengthen volunteering by funding a new model of place-based volunteer support services.

Support student placements in priority areas

Demand for social assistance has never been higher. Services cannot keep up because of workforce shortages. Student placements are part of the solution. They provide students with practical on-the-job training and create a pipeline of new workers for employers.

Many community organisations want to take on students but can't because they don't have the resources for placement administration, student supervision or training. Programs such as 'Enhanced Pathways to Family Violence Work' help participating organisations to build that capability. Investment in these types of programs should be sustained.

The Victorian Government could also address unique challenges faced by small and mid-size employers by examining the feasibility of a centralised support and supervision model with VCOSS and dual sector TAFE/university partners.



Inclusive communities

Strengthen safeguards and advocacy for people with disability

Victorian disability advocacy and self-advocacy organisations work alongside people with disability to understand, protect and exercise their rights.

Disability advocacy has been consistently recognised by inquiries as an important safeguard to help prevent and report abuse, particularly for people who are afraid or unable to have their voices heard.

But despite the critical role disability advocates play, services are chronically under-funded. For example, the Victorian Disability Advocacy Program is only funded to support 2,000 clients each year. There are more than one million Victorians with a disability.

The Victorian Government should deliver certainty and stability to the disability advocacy sector, and in turn people with disability, by engaging organisations on long-term agreements and boosting core funding to increase the coverage, reach and access to disability advocacy and self-advocacy support.

Address NDIS service gaps and interface issues

Understanding, accessing and navigating the NDIS remains challenging for many Victorians with disability, especially those experiencing disadvantage and isolation.

The interface between the NDIS and other service systems—such as health, education, justice and aged care—remains unclear and confusing.

Compounding this, aids and equipment programs for people ineligible for the NDIS have long waiting lists and are under-resourced. The Victorian Government can step in to ensure all Victorians have timely and affordable access to aids and equipment, and advocate for the establishment of a comprehensive national program.

The Victorian Government's recent four-year \$208.8m investment in services that are out-of-scope for the NDIS was a welcome acknowledgement of these issues; however, further collaborative work with the Federal Government is required to clarify roles and responsibilities.

Tackle loneliness

Lockdowns and physical restrictions in 2020 exacerbated the loneliness and isolation many Victorians have long endured.

People were less able to interact with families, friends and the community. Many went several weeks without any human touch.

Three in ten respondents to a VicHealth survey reported that they had found staying connected to friends and family hard or very hard during the pandemic. Older people, younger people and people on low incomes reported finding it particularly hard to stay in touch.

The Victorian Government can help keep people connected by funding programs that tackle social isolation and provide Victorians with the resources, support and environment to reconnect with their community.

Advance the rights, safety and wellbeing of older Victorians

Pre-COVID research estimates that between 2% and 14% of older Australians are abused each year. The rate in aged care is expected to be closer to 40%, or roughly two out of every five residents.

Social isolation can drive and hide elder abuse, which is often perpetrated behind closed doors by relatives or staff in aged care facilities.

The Royal Commission into Aged Care Quality and Safety has provided a framework to build a system that is safe, respectful and valuing of older Australians.

With responsibility for some aged care facilities, and many community-based programs, the Victorian Government must play a role in implementing the Royal Commission's recommendations.

Funding is also needed for state-based elder abuse advocacy and support services, as well as an elder abuse awareness campaign, particularly in the wake of COVID and during the looming recession.

Turn carer support into action

Over 730,000 Victorians provide invaluable care and support for family members or friends.

Our carers are diverse. They span all ages, backgrounds, life stages and circumstances. While carers report many positive aspects of their role—like companionship, satisfaction and fulfilment—caring can also take a toll.

Carers faced additional and complex challenges during COVID, which impacted their caring role, their capacity to learn and work, their health and wellbeing, and their financial situation.

The *Victorian Carer Strategy 2018–22* shows how we can better recognise and support all carers.

To take the strategy from paper to practice, the Victorian Government should develop accountable annual action plans, in consultation with carers, and allocate dedicated funding for implementation.

Tackle racism

Racism is not new, but it is entrenched and persistent.

The vast majority of Aboriginal Victorians, as well as migrants and many others, say they commonly experience racism and discrimination, or are treated unfairly because of who they are or how they look.⁵

Racism has long-term health effects, both mentally and physically.

Racist abuse, harassment and vilification only increased during COVID,⁶ just as CALD Victorians were hit the hardest by the health and economic burdens of the pandemic, causing additional mental, financial and physical stress.

The Victorian Government should tackle racism and protect the wellbeing of multicultural and Aboriginal Victorians by funding a multi-year Anti-Racism Strategy.

Tailor vaccine communication to reach diverse communities

Vaccinations are an important next stage in Victoria's COVID response. Clear, targeted and accessible information about vaccine eligibility, access and prioritisation are critical to a successful roll-out.

But during the pandemic, some communities were not provided the information they needed in an accessible format. For example, official advice was not given in different languages in a timely manner.

Groups like the COVID Accessible Communications Reference Group and the CALD Taskforce helped rectify this situation, making sure information was available in a range of accessible formats, and disseminated through appropriate channels, including social and community media.

The Victorian Government can learn the communications lessons of the pandemic and make sure everyone gets the information they need about getting vaccinated, by funding communities to design tailored communication strategies and resources.

Improve access to public and community spaces

One in five Victorians live with disability, our ageing population is increasing and families with small children are excited to explore new places and experiences after the isolation of COVID.

But many public places remain fully or partly inaccessible for people with disability, older people, people with limited mobility and pram users.

Getting any action often requires formal complaints and long bureaucratic processes.

Investing in accessibility upgrades for public places is a win-win for Victorians, businesses and the building sector alike.

Infrastructure Victoria's *Draft 30-year Strategy* recommends the immediate establishment of an accessibility upgrade fund for priority public building upgrades. This investment should be complemented by grants and incentives for small businesses, such as cafes and shops, to improve access to their premises.



A safe place to call **home**

Go the distance on renters' rights

In March, the long-awaited changes to the *Residential Tenancies Act* came into effect, providing the framework for a fairer, safer renting market in Victoria.

To make these rights a reality for renters, the Victorian Government should deliver a broad and sustained communications campaign about the changes, and fund community legal and renters' rights groups to develop targeted resources and provide direct assistance to renters.

Monitoring and enforcement mechanisms will be needed to ensure compliance with the new laws and prevent tenancy disputes. The need for an independent complaints and dispute resolution body should be explored.

The Victorian Government can make sure that any disputes are resolved quickly and fairly by improving access to VCAT.

Build on the Big Housing Build

Social housing is the best way to make sure all Victorians have a safe and secure home. The historic Big Housing Build is a critical step towards ending homelessness in Victoria.

Yet even with this record investment, demand for social housing will continue to outweigh supply in Victoria.

A steady pipeline of diverse social housing stock over the next 10 years—ranging across short, medium and long-term housing, and coupled with support to sustain tenancies—will be needed to deliver enough appropriate housing for every Victorian waiting for a home.

Future budgets can also increase the supply of affordable housing by introducing mandatory inclusionary zoning.

Help people hang on to precarious tenancies

The emergency measures essential to keeping people housed during the pandemic ended in March.

With evictions and rent increases no longer banned, landlords will be free to raise rents. For many renters already struggling with rising unemployment and reduced hours, paying more rent will push them into financial stress and risk possible eviction.

The Victorian Government should maintain and expand the Private Rental Access Program, a critical part of the homelessness prevention response, and increase the Housing Establishment Fund for people needing to find a new place to live.

The Victorian Government can also help people struggling to afford rent, and those at risk of losing their homes, by providing targeted rent relief payments.

Make the historic shift to 'Housing First' permanent

Housing First approaches—which provide housing, assertive outreach and ongoing flexible support—are a proven solution for people who have experienced chronic homelessness, including rough sleepers.

Homelessness to a Home is an example of a Housing First program. It was established in 2020 to find a permanent home for 1,700 Victorians in emergency hotel accommodation.

The Victorian Government should give more people experiencing chronic homelessness the best chance at maintaining stable housing, by expanding the *Homelessness to a Home* program and incorporating Housing First models across the service system.

Improve support for young people who are homeless

Currently, young people at risk of or experiencing homelessness in Victoria have limited options for support.

The service system is designed primarily for adults. It's not equipped to respond to the unique needs of young people, or to provide them with the right support to access and maintain stable housing themselves.

The Victorian Government should design a new system of support for young people, in partnership with young people.

This new youth homelessness support system would focus on helping young people to develop the skills and independence to maintain housing. Young people know best what type of housing works for them, and where it needs to be.

A comprehensive strategy would also include subsidised private rental, refuge options, transitional accommodation, and supported housing models like Youth Foyers.

Provide a fair land tax system

Stamp duty is a regressive tax that encourages property speculation, dampens economic activity and discourages people from moving to better homes or new jobs.

With the pandemic and economic circumstances already creating uncertainty in the property market, the time is right for a shift to an annual land tax.

NSW last year announced it will follow the lead of the ACT and commence consultation on a new model that phases in land tax.

The Victorian Government should consider switching to a broad-based land tax, with appropriate concessions and deferrals, to provide a more stable, efficient and fair system.

Make houses more energy efficient

Energy efficient homes are better at staying cool in summer and warm in winter, while keeping energy bills down. But installing new appliances or insulation can be expensive, and there's often little incentive for landlords to do so, leaving tenants in poor quality housing with sky-high bills.

Programs like Energy Savvy Upgrades can be expanded. Local councils should also be funded to provide no-interest loans through Environmental Upgrade Finance.

The new rental minimum standards for insulation and hot water systems (to be introduced in 2022) should be immediately followed by a cooling standard to encourage landlords to access subsidies for efficient reverse-cycle air conditioners.

An energy efficiency disclosure scheme for the sale or rental of homes would empower renters and purchasers, and encourage property owners to make upgrades.



Affordable living

Reform the energy concessions system

High energy bills cause many low-income households significant stress, and force people to forgo other necessities like healthy food and medical care.

Energy concessions help households make ends meet. But there are significant gaps in the concessions system.

For example, some international students and asylum seekers miss out on discount concessions, potentially leading to greater financial hardship and even disconnection. Newly unemployed people or those working reduced hours due to COVID may not even know they are eligible for support.

The Victorian Government can help make sure low-income households are not paying too much by closing gaps and reforming eligibility of the concessions system.

The Thwaites review of the energy retail market calls for an extensive review of the energy support scheme for people with concessions cards. This should happen immediately.

Provide free public transport for kids who need it

The expense of transport is a hidden cost of education that can become a major barrier to school attendance for families experiencing disadvantage.

No child should have their education compromised because they can't afford to get to school.

The Victorian Government can remove this cost barrier by giving a free public transport pass to every school-aged child whose parent or guardian is a concession card holder, and all others in established need.

The WEstjustice Travel Assistance pilot program found that providing free transport for young people who needed it most increased school attendance and punctuality and decreased stress.⁷



Close the digital divide

Being on the wrong side of the digital divide makes it harder to apply for jobs, access services, stay connected with family and friends and, increasingly, work or study.

Students need access to a computer or device with an affordable internet connection to get the most out of school.

Access to the internet is just as much an essential service as electricity or water. But consumers don't have the same protections against being disconnected and retailers aren't required to provide the same support to people struggling to pay their bill.

The Victorian Government can make sure everyone can get and stay connected by providing low-income households with subsidised or free data and devices and improving consumers protections. Organisations can be funded to provide training and support in digital literacy.

Install solar panels on public housing properties

More than half a million Victorian homes now have rooftop solar. That means one in five households are saving money on power bills by producing their own energy and selling what they're not using.⁸

But public housing residents are missing out, despite living in poor quality dwellings that cost a fortune to keep cool in summer and warm in winter.

They are denied access to Victoria's landmark *Solar for Rentals* program. This program should be expanded to include public housing tenants.

Installing solar panels on public housing will make tenants healthier, save them over \$700 a year and ensure they are not locked out of the renewables boom.



Provide food and financial relief in a crisis

Victorians accessed emergency relief at unprecedented rates following the 2019-20 bushfires and during the COVID pandemic.

Demand hasn't yet eased, with organisations bracing themselves for a flood of further requests for help when federal supports are withdrawn in March.

But the emergency relief sector is poorly funded and understood. Investment in coordination, data collection and demand modelling would help make sure Victorians can access help in a crisis.

An inability to access or afford healthy food is one of the biggest drivers of demand for emergency relief. COVID led to a doubling in emergency food requests.⁹

Victoria also needs a statewide *Food Relief Framework* that provides a sustainable model for addressing food insecurity and delivering food relief across Victoria. It should include plans to help people access nutritious food, build food literacy and find ways out of food insecurity.

Protect Victorians from the COVID debt trap

The financial impacts of the pandemic continue to hit low-income Victorians. More households are accessing bill payment assistance, seeking early access to their super, and relying on credit or buy-now-pay-later schemes.¹⁰

With supports like the rent moratorium and JobSeeker COVID supplement winding down, we anticipate an increase in predatory lending practices by unscrupulous payday lenders, pawn brokers and consumer lease providers.

Financial counsellors are part of the answer. They can provide expert support and advocacy, and help people resolve debt issues and avoid predatory providers. But Victoria currently doesn't have enough financial counsellors, which means people in need are missing out.

The Victorian Government can protect people from COVID-related debt by cracking down on predatory debt management firms, and providing adequate and secure funding for financial counselling programs.



Victorians in work

Develop a Youth Employment Strategy

During the COVID pandemic, many young people lost work in hard-hit industries like hospitality and retail. Youth unemployment remains stubbornly high in Victoria, at 14.8% compared to 13.9% nationally.¹¹

Victoria desperately needs a youth employment strategy that helps support young people into secure work.

Designed in partnership with young people, this strategy should focus on increasing participation in education, training and employment, with a view to keeping young people in good jobs.

It should consider initiatives such as supporting more apprenticeships and cadetships for young people in state and local governments, and providing wage subsidies in booming industries such as healthcare and social services.

Better support disadvantaged jobseekers into good jobs

Placing disadvantaged jobseekers into sustainable employment benefits individuals, their families and society. It allows people to live in greater comfort, look after their health and eat better. It also means more people paying tax, generating extra revenue for other public services.

But many disadvantaged jobseekers face complex barriers to finding a job and staying employed. The Victorian Parliament's *Inquiry into Sustainable Employment for Disadvantaged Jobseekers* made 70 recommendations to better support jobseekers to obtain employment.¹²

The Victorian Government should urgently implement these recommendations, specifically as they relate to:

- better funding place-based employment programs focused on disadvantaged jobseekers
- enhancing the capacity of organisations to host placements for students undertaking 'free TAFE'
- entering into five-year funding agreements with not-for-profit organisations to enable them to provide intensive wraparound employment services to disadvantaged jobseekers.





Fair and equal justice

Above: Photo from a Jesuit Community College studio program where marginalised young people can create art and music.

Keep children safely away from the justice system

Children who become involved with the criminal justice system are extremely vulnerable and have usually already experienced trauma, abuse and neglect. A punitive response to offending behaviour effectively punishes children for having a rough start in life. It often leads to a lifetime of criminality, disadvantage and exclusion.

The Victorian Government can steer children around the quicksand of the criminal justice system by raising the age of criminal responsibility to 14 years and investing in prevention, early intervention and therapeutic and restorative justice.

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children make up about 60% of children in youth jails, despite being only about 5% of the population.¹³ Aboriginal communities and organisations need sustained investment to strengthen young people's connection to family, community and culture, and develop the tailored interventions and supports necessary to reduce offending.

Prevent crime through health and place-based responses

The smartest way to prevent crime is to build resilient communities.

The Victorian Government can do this by adopting a justice reinvestment framework. This would mean equitable funding for place-based, community-led and scalable programs that tackle disadvantage. It would also involve supporting communities to address the health, social and legal problems that cause people to offend.

The decriminalisation of public drunkenness is a welcome reform to keep people safe and prevent dangerous and discriminatory responses.

The health-based response that replaces it must be place-based and culturally safe. It must also be accompanied by investment in the alcohol and drug treatment system, community health services and ACCHOs.

Cut prison numbers

COVID shone a spotlight on the vulnerability of people stuck in Victoria's prison system.

Poor physical health, trauma and high rates of disability and substance abuse among inmates made them particularly vulnerable to the worst effects of the virus.

Grueling lockdowns and restrictions on movement within prisons as authorities tried to control the spread of COVID didn't help.

The Victorian Government should reduce the numbers of people in prison over the long term, by reforming bail law and increasing the use of police diversion and non-custodial options in sentencing.

Prisons shouldn't have revolving doors. The Victorian Government can also prevent recidivism by setting a target to reduce reoffending by 15%, and better resourcing the community services needed to support it.

Make fines fair

COVID restrictions meant more disadvantaged and low-income Victorians being issued new fines or struggling to pay existing fines.

Despite police discretion, many people were fined for not understanding COVID rules or making accidental breaches. Even some children were issued with \$1,600 fines they couldn't pay. Language barriers, fear and confusion meant many didn't contest the fines they received.

The Victorian Government should ensure people are not pushed into financial distress by retaining the flexible fines payment arrangements introduced during the pandemic, and withdrawing all COVID-related fines issued to anybody aged under 18.

In 2020, the *Fines Review Advisory Board* recommended ways to make Victoria's fines system fairer. The Victorian Government should commit resources to these recommendations, including improvements to the special circumstances test, establishing a concessional penalty rate, and expanding the *Work and Development Permits Scheme*.

Fund community legal centres properly

Community lawyers have been central during the COVID pandemic response, supporting Victorians with housing, employment, banking and consumer issues.

They also helped keep some women and children safe from violence—a role they performed long before COVID.

Many of these issues, coupled with ongoing financial hardship, will linger throughout the COVID recovery, and beyond. In short, demand for free legal assistance is likely to remain high.

The Victorian Government should provide secure, long-term funding for the legal assistance sector, including community legal and Aboriginal legal services.

Integrated legal services—where people can access legal services from health and social agencies they are already visiting—should become a permanent feature of this system. This will mean the interconnected social, health and legal challenges many Victorians face can be dealt with holistically.

Keep improvements to court processes and access

The way Victorians access court was fundamentally transformed because of COVID restrictions.

Temporary measures like pre-court engagement, online hearings and remote appearances improved access for many. Victims of trauma avoided the distress of attending court, and country residents saved significant time and money by not being required to travel great distances.

A detailed analysis should be undertaken to determine which measures increased court accessibility the most, and those measures should be retained.

The Victorian Government should also invest in more specialist and problem-solving courts. Where traditional approaches fail, problem-solving courts tackle *behaviours* causing offending. And they work. Drug Court recidivism rates are down 34%.¹⁴

But access to specialist and problem-solving courts is patchy. For example, despite having one of the highest rates of family violence in Melbourne, there isn't a Family Violence Court in or near Broadmeadows.



Stronger early childhood education and schools

Support high quality early learning for all children

Victoria is leading the way in making early childhood education accessible to all children before they start school.

A centrepiece of this strategy is the rollout of three-year-old kindergarten. This large and complex reform must be built on a sustainable service system. To attract and retain the skilled and qualified staff required, pay and conditions need improvement.

The Victorian Government can provide further confidence to the sector by confirming funding for the newly-negotiated enterprise agreement to 2024.

A sustainable service system is also one that includes not-for-profit providers. But many are struggling with the long-tail impacts of COVID-19, on top of the costs of reform implementation. The Victorian Government can work with sector peaks to develop a long-term vision and plan for a robust not-for-profit early learning sector.

More wraparound support for school-aged students

The pandemic is taking its toll on Victoria's children and young people.

Mental health has taken a hit. Many students fell behind as a result of remote and disrupted learning. These children need additional 'wraparound' support at school.

The Victorian Government can build on the success of the tutor program in helping kids catch up, by investing in mental health and wellbeing initiatives including a statewide rollout of the *Mental Health Practitioners in Primary Schools* program.

Students would also benefit from better access to lawyers based in schools, youth workers and mental health peer support training.



Fully fund public schools so families aren't out-of-pocket

Each year thousands of Victorian families struggle with the cost of sending their kids to the local public school. They're forced to ask community organisations for help to afford the basics, like uniforms and digital devices.

This is not how the system is supposed to work.

Alarming, the number of families seeking assistance is rising, indicating more children at risk of not fully participating in school life. This increases disengagement and bullying, and decreases learning and wellbeing outcomes.

The Victorian Government can make sure no student misses out on a high-quality education by rewriting the Student Resource Package funding formula, so education funding is increased to a level at which every school can fully cover the costs of the standard curriculum.

Speed up the roll-out of the Disability Inclusion Package

Every student with disability should get access to the right support at the right time.

The Victorian Government's Disability Inclusion Package will see a significant and welcome shift in how students with a disability access support in school. It will also create a more inclusive school culture, through leadership and workforce capability training.

But the roll-out will take five years.

Every month that a child with a disability is denied the right support to engage in high-quality education will make their life harder after school.

The Victorian Government should fast track the roll-out of the Disability Inclusion Package to ensure no student with disability misses out.

Better support vulnerable learners at TAFE

The Victorian Government's *Free TAFE* initiative is helping many low-income and disadvantaged jobseekers embark on study and change careers. But many drop out before they gain a qualification.¹⁷

For disadvantaged students or those with caring responsibilities, it can be even more difficult to finish their studies.

To assist learners who are struggling to finish their course, the Victorian Government should provide bursaries and scholarships that cover the costs of peripheral expenses, like textbooks, childcare, transport and digital devices.

TAFEs should also be funded to deliver more support in the form of dedicated mentoring, pathways support, literacy and numeracy support, assessment adjustments, counselling, and employer partnership development to facilitate workplace training.



Women and children thriving, free from violence

Boost spending on family violence prevention

Adequate and recurrent funding for the prevention of family violence is key to stopping violence before it starts. Primary prevention is aimed at the whole community, and includes programs and campaigns that raise public awareness of the issues and support the delivery of education programs in schools and workplaces.

Respect Victoria has identified that currently only 3% of the family violence budget is spent on *primary* prevention.

Past primary prevention initiatives, such as anti-smoking road safety and 'sun smart' campaigns, have taught us that about 9.5% to 12% of spending must be on prevention for the campaign to be successful.¹⁸

Victoria should boost spending on family violence prevention to at least 10% and ensure primary prevention activities and programs are funded for at least two to three years. This would help embed these activities in communities and address workforce challenges.

Increase investment in specialist family violence services

Victoria's commitment to addressing family violence has seen an increase in victim survivors seeking assistance from family violence specialists.

The family violence sector has experienced high demand, with COVID and the bushfire crisis stretching resources even further, as more victim survivors experience and disclose violence and seek help.

Specialist family violence services need more funding so they can cover higher operational costs, retain experienced workers from other sectors and pay workers at a classification/level commensurate with their qualifications, knowledge and skills.

Keep Aboriginal children with community

Despite Victoria's commitment to self-determination and the transfer of all Aboriginal children in the child protection system to Aboriginal case management by the end of 2021, Aboriginal children continue to be separated from their families at an alarming rate.

For Aboriginal children, being separated from family can mean the loss of their cultural connection and identity.

The rate of Aboriginal over-representation in the out-of-home care system in Victoria is second only to Western Australia, and rising. Without rapid action, Victoria will be unable to reverse this trend and meet refreshed Closing the Gap targets (to reduce the number of Aboriginal children in out-of-home care by 45% by 2031).

We need an ambitious plan focused on strengthening culturally-based models of early intervention and family support. The transfer of children to Aboriginal case management must continue and be accompanied by investment in ACCOs, and changes in policy, practice and governance.

Strengthen women's health services

COVID has had a disproportionate impact on women's mental and physical health, as well as sexual and reproductive health.¹⁹

As Victoria recovers from the pandemic, greater investment in women's health services will be needed to ensure that women can access the tailored, gendered health information they need to effectively navigate Victoria's health system.

Despite experiencing increased demand due to COVID—and in recent years due to the Victorian Government's greater focus on gender equity and family violence—women's health services have not experienced a real increase in core funding since 1988.²⁰

The Government should increase funding to women's health services to enable them to continue to deliver vital programs and services addressing family violence and health promotion.

Funding should be tied to population growth to ensure that Victoria is a leader in gender equity.

Better fund the support and retention of carers

Foster care and kinship care creates a safe environment for those at risk. But carers face a heavy financial and administrative burden and their numbers have been in long-term decline. The loss of experienced carers is costly and creates instability for children and young people already carrying significant trauma.

While the Victorian Government provided welcome payments and telephone support for foster carers impacted by the pandemic, and has invested in a broad-based foster carer recruitment campaign, more ongoing support is needed.

For example, the 2019 *Strong carers, stronger children* strategy lacks funding and an implementation plan.

Funding available to foster cares should be increased to cover basic costs and provide a safe and therapeutic environment, and administrative requirements should be streamlined. The Budget is also an opportunity to provide equity for kinship carers, who currently receive less financial assistance than foster carers.

Continue reorienting child and family services to early intervention

In Victoria, the number of children in out-of-home care has been growing unsustainably at an average of 10% each year. The old way of doing things—concentrating on the crisis end of the system—has not served children and families well. We must reorient to early intervention.

Under the Roadmap for Reform, the Victorian Government has invested in family preservation and restoration programs and provided new funding to meet COVID-related demand.

The 2021 Budget is an opportunity to continue this transformation by scaling up investment in early intervention and maximising the impact of ChildFIRST, the entry point to the family services system.

Child and family information, referral and support teams promote the safety, stability and development of vulnerable children, young people and their families. With additional targeted investment in evidence-informed models, we can increase family capability and independence.

Introduce gender responsive budgeting

The Victorian Government can help overcome the inequalities experienced by women by further embracing gender impact assessments, gender budgeting and gender auditing.

Adopting this ‘gender lens’ would allow the Victorian Government to be more attuned to how policies and programs affect women. This knowledge will empower the Government to better design policies so they reduce gender inequality, combat harmful gender stereotypes and support women.

The Victorian Parliament’s ongoing *Inquiry into Gender Responsive Budgeting* will help identify best practices to ensure that Victoria becomes a leader in gender-informed resource allocation.

Recognise young people not registered at birth

It’s hard to think of a document more important than a birth certificate. Used to authenticate a person’s identity, access to this document is a human right.

But the Foster Care Association of Victoria estimates around 5% of young people in state care were never formally registered with Births, Deaths and Marriages.

Without a birth certificate, many of the opportunities we take for granted may be out of reach. For example, some children in the foster care system can’t be enrolled in early childhood education because they don’t have a birth certificate. Adolescents can be prevented from applying for a Tax File Number and getting a part-time job, or from obtaining their driver’s license.

This can mean additional pressure and stress for carers; for example, a carer who can’t get a child into childcare may not be able to work.

The Victorian Government can address this human rights issue by amending the *Births, Deaths and Marriages Act* and the *Children, Youth and Families Act*.

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