



Empowering all Victorians



**VCOSS state budget
submission / 2017-18**





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 has a wide range of members, including large charities, sector peak organisations, small community service groups, advocacy groups and individuals involved in social policy debate.

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

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Foreword

**Overall, Victoria is experiencing growth and prosperity.
Yet it is not reaching everyone, and inequality is growing.**

The 2017-18 Victorian State Budget is a chance to turn the tide on inequality and further prioritise and invest in solutions that empower all Victorians to connect, fulfil their potential, and share the benefits of social and economic growth.

Buffeted by global forces, our economy is making a long-term transition from manufacturing to services. Meanwhile the housing market remains hot, making it difficult for many to afford safe, secure housing. Many people face uncertain job futures, especially young people and people living in rural and regional Victoria.

At the same time, social support systems are undergoing radical change, with some being entirely rebuilt and virtually no sector left untouched. Many of these reforms have laudable goals, but a solid future cannot be built on ever-shifting sands.

However, working together with the right resources, Victorian citizens, community organisations and the government can work together to empower and support people to avoid and overcome poverty, and thrive.

This can be done through well-resourced place-based approaches delivering local solutions; connecting people, community organisations, business and government to work together on tailored, 'joined-up' responses to common goals.

It can be done by expanding social housing so more people have a safe, secure and affordable home, and by helping people reduce their essential services costs.

It can be done by providing basic services to all Victorians. Students with disability need support to access school, training and tertiary education, young people leaving out-of-home care need support to independently establish their lives, and mental health consumers need to know their community mental health support services will not disappear in the transition to the NDIS. People also need support to speak up and defend their rights, through community legal and disability advocacy services.

This State Budget Submission weaves together far-reaching investments the Victorian government can make in its 2017-18 budget, to empower all Victorians to share in the state's continuing growth and prosperity.

Emma King
VCOSS Chief Executive Officer



Ten priority investments

Empower communities to deliver local solutions with a social innovation fund

The Victorian government can empower communities by creating a social innovation fund to resource place-based approaches to delivering local solutions to poverty and disadvantage. Place-based approaches facilitate government, non-government, private sector and community collaboration, to design and deliver services that build on local strengths and tackle local issues (see page 7).

Develop a community sector workforce plan

The Victorian government can help plan for the projected rapid workforce growth, along with substantial service delivery changes, by investing in an industry plan, led by the sector, in partnership with government. This can include collecting baseline data on the skills and capabilities of the sector's existing workforce, and identifying skills gaps and employer needs. Community sector workforce growth will be a major source of new jobs in Victoria, but skill and worker shortages are likely to occur without careful planning (see page 9).

Build more social housing

The Victorian government can establish a dedicated social housing growth fund to help more people find secure, affordable and appropriate housing. Building more social housing is Victoria's most effective ammunition in the fight against poverty. The state's significant lack of affordable housing makes all other social problems worse (see page 13).

Help students with disability succeed at school

The Victorian government can empower students with additional health and development needs to succeed at school by reforming the Program for Students with Disabilities (PSD) funding model. Adopting a functional needs-based funding approach would shift the system to better respond to and maximise these students' learning and development (see page 22).

Support every child with high quality early learning

The Victorian government can give children the best start in life by extending the availability of high quality early learning services, from birth to when they start school. This includes securing funding for 15 hours per week of four-year-old kindergarten, providing universal access to at least five hours of three-year-old kindergarten, and more early learning hours and stronger participation strategies for children facing disadvantage (see page 24).

Retain community mental health rehabilitation services

The Victorian government can empower people to manage and recover from mental illness by retaining funding responsibility for community-based mental health rehabilitation services. Victoria has committed to transferring all its community-based mental health service funding over to the NDIS, making it unclear who will deliver rehabilitation services, as these are deemed outside the scope of the NDIS (see page 29).

Empower young people leaving care

The Victorian government can empower young people leaving out-of-home care by providing holistic support and care until at least age 21. Giving young people similar opportunities as their peers to successfully and gradually transition into adulthood will help them achieve better health, employment and quality of life (see page 35).

Empower people with disability through independent advocacy services

The Victorian government can empower people with disability and their carers to protect their rights and direct their lives by increasing long-term funding for independent disability advocacy services. Independent advocacy services can help people navigate the NDIS rollout, understand their rights and entitlements, prepare for NDIS planning, and access internal and external review processes. People ineligible for individual NDIS funding packages also use advocacy to access mainstream systems. Disability advocacy can help people with inclusion and human rights violations not remedied by the NDIS (see page 42).

Cut people's bills with energy efficiency

The Victorian government can help people on low incomes cut their cost of living by funding expanded home energy efficiency programs. Energy-efficient housing helps to cut people's bills and promotes good health, including by protecting people against extreme and prolonged cold and heat (see page 46).

Improve access to legal assistance

The Victorian government can empower people to resolve their legal problems by investing more in community legal centres. Equal access to justice, when everyone receives adequate legal assistance and a fair hearing, protects human rights and redresses inequality. Legal assistance targeted as early as possible to people who need it, can resolve legal issues that otherwise lead to more problems and higher costs for individuals and the justice system (see page 52).

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Build the community sector and social cohesion



Community and public services form the community's social safety net. When well-funded and staffed with talented, skilled workers, they can collaborate in service design, delivery and evaluation to help build strong, resilient communities.

Community sector organisations support people to overcome challenges and help prevent them becoming isolated, vulnerable and impoverished. They help tackle the causes of poverty and disadvantage by delivering services and policy advocacy. Victoria's community sector helps create strong, cohesive and inclusive communities, where everyone is supported to overcome barriers and fulfil their potential.

The social economy, which puts people before profits, is now a major component of our economy and society. Victoria's community sector charities form an \$11 billion industry employing more than 135,000 people. In regional centres, community sector charities are often major employers.¹

The Victorian government can support this industry through steady funding streams and sensible regulation. Community sector organisations need sustainable and appropriately indexed funding to maintain and develop their services, and to account for the full cost of service delivery, including planning, infrastructure and administrative support. They need streamlined reporting and compliance requirements.

Public funding comprises 53 per cent of community sector charity income,² meaning public funding variability is its biggest financial risk. With clear, sensible and certain funding, organisations can maintain their focus on designing and delivering effective services, rather than spending significant time managing financial uncertainty, and endlessly reapplying for funding. Short-term funding, unnecessarily complex procurement, and excessive competitive tendering weakens community organisations and inhibits collaboration.

Similarly, community organisations are only as strong as their people. The more skilled, engaged and innovative the community sector workforce is, the more effectively it can work with people. With community services growing rapidly, strategically finding and training new workers can not only help empower marginalised people, but provide new employment opportunities and economic growth for Victoria.

Budget investments

○ Empower communities to deliver local solutions with a social innovation fund

The Victorian government can empower communities by creating a social innovation fund to back place-based approaches to delivering local solutions to poverty and disadvantage. Place-based approaches facilitate government, non-government, private sector and community collaboration, to design and deliver services that build on local strengths and tackle local issues.

When resourced adequately, community organisations are well-placed to facilitate place-based approaches, without diverting resources from existing programs and services.

When resourced adequately, community organisations are well-placed to facilitate place-based approaches, without diverting resources from existing programs and services. With their local knowledge and networks, they can foster relationships between a diverse range of people, organisations, businesses and services. Such collaboration can deliver cooperatively designed initiatives, and develop agreed outcome and evaluation measures.

Strong organisations can engage in place-based approaches to develop local solutions to social problems. Effective place-based approaches bring together community members, community organisations, businesses, governments and public services to solve problems by building on local strengths.³ They empower people to develop and drive their own innovative community solutions, and integrate them successfully over the long term. They help build stronger communities that are better equipped to help families overcome entrenched poverty and disadvantage.

Community organisations have significant experience and expertise to facilitate place-based approaches. They draw on their local knowledge and networks to make them work. However, they often lack the funds and flexibility to participate effectively while still delivering existing programs and services.

1 Victorian Council of Social Service, *More than Charity: Victoria's community sector charities*, July 2016

2 Ibid. p. 11.

3 Victorian Council of Social Service, *Communities taking power: using place-based approaches to deliver local solutions to poverty and disadvantage*, October 2016.

A social innovation fund can overcome this and enable communities to drive local solutions that empower all Victorians to connect, fulfil their potential, and share the benefits of social and economic growth.

FIGURE 1: Place-based approaches for local solutions... a recipe for success

Place-based approaches can provide the best recipe for helping communities to deliver local solutions to entrenched poverty and disadvantage.

First take a few basic ingredients...

- | | |
|-------------------------------------------|----------------------------------|
| 1. A focus on place | 8. Flexible service delivery |
| 2. Support for groups facing disadvantage | 9. Capacity development |
| 3. Roles for community and service users | 10. Backbone funding and support |
| 4. Effective engagement and communication | 11. Outcomes-focused measurement |
| 5. Local decision-making | 12. Good governance |
| 6. Shared vision and a joint approach | 13. Long-term timeframes |
| 7. Innovation | |

Then get everyone to the table to mix it up using the following method...



Source: VCROSS, Communities taking power, October 2016, p. 21.

○ Develop a community sector workforce plan

The Victorian government can invest in a community sector workforce plan to facilitate rapid projected workforce growth and substantial service delivery changes.

This would help facilitate the projected rapid growth in demand for community sector workers, and substantial service delivery changes, with an industry plan led by the sector, developed in partnership with government. This can include collecting baseline data on the skills and capabilities of the sector's existing workforce, and identifying skills gaps and employer needs.

These data can track changes over time, and prioritise workforce development, attraction and retention so Victoria can lead the way in supporting the jobs of the future.

The community sector is growing rapidly, fuelled by the NDIS rollout, Family Violence Royal Commission investments, and aged care growth. Nationally, the health and social assistance industry will produce the most jobs over the next five years.⁴ The Victorian community sector already employs 135,000 workers.⁵ Community sector workforce growth will be a major source of new jobs in Victoria, but skills and worker shortages are likely to occur without careful planning.

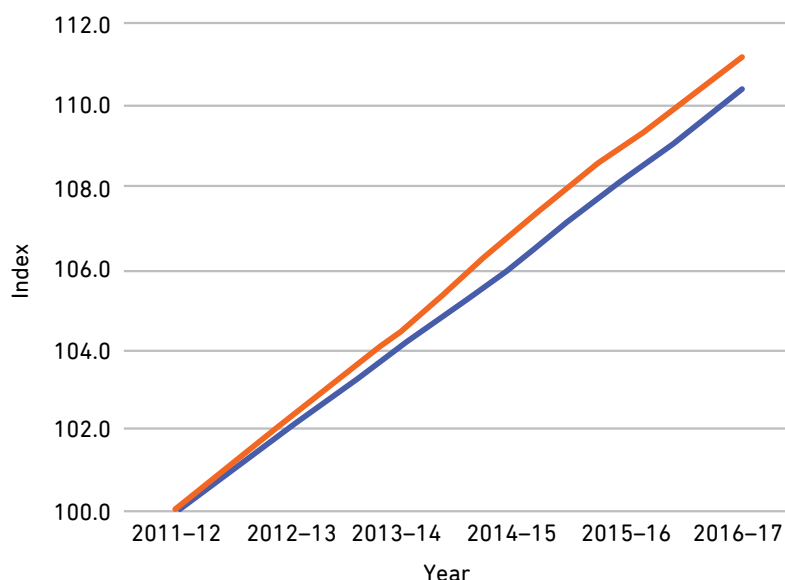
The current lack of community sector data collection and workforce planning could hamper job creation. Organisations may not be able to attract qualified, skilled staff in the locations where jobs are expanding. Whilst workforce issues are being considered as part of the Family Violence Royal Commission recommendations, a holistic industry plan for the entire social service sector is required. Other states have been working with their Councils of Social Service to develop broad industry plans covering the entire service spectrum.

A workforce plan could also help grow Aboriginal representation in Aboriginal community-controlled organisations, and in non-Aboriginal community organisations to improve the cultural fit of non-Aboriginal services for Aboriginal clients. This can include developing education and training pathways for Aboriginal people, helping organisations develop workplace policies supporting Aboriginal employees, and gathering data that tracks Aboriginal employment growth.

○ Introduce a fair indexation method

The Victorian government can annually index community sector funding using a formula that accounts for the rising real costs of service provision. This will help maintain the quality and availability of services for people experiencing disadvantage.

FIGURE 2: Differences between indexation and estimated costs



⁴ Australian Government Department of Employment, *Industry Employment Projections 2016 Report*, March 2016, p. 1.

⁵ Victorian Council of Social Service, *More than Charity*, 2016.

Government community service funding does not keep pace with rising service delivery costs. Indexation is 2 per cent per annum, while community sector minimum wage increases have been 2.4–3 per cent,⁶ on top of mandated Superannuation Guarantee Levy increases, and recent inflation rates increasing by between 1.1 and 3.2 per cent.⁷ Indexation of only 2 per cent is a real funding cut (see Figure 2).

○ Resource Aboriginal community-controlled organisations to facilitate treaty discussions

The Victorian government can support the Aboriginal community's treaty and self-determination discussions by resourcing Aboriginal community-controlled organisations (ACCOs) to participate.

Aboriginal Victorians have called on the Victorian government to resource a treaty-negotiation process. Advocates believe a treaty could help:

- recognise past wrongs and apologise for them
- recognise Aboriginal land rights and sovereignty
- recognise Aboriginal self-government within Victoria
- exchange land rights for financial and other benefits
- create a new relationship for future dialogue.⁸

VCOSS strongly supports empowered Aboriginal communities directing their own self-determination.

*"At the moment, our definition of leadership is giving Aboriginal Victorians a seat at the table. But real leadership is about making it their table too. Our effort must have heart, and it must have ears. It must be for Aboriginal people and by Aboriginal people."*⁹

– Daniel Andrews, Premier of Victoria

ACCOs hold community positions of trust, legitimacy and leadership, so they can facilitate community engagement in these conversations. However, ACCOs need dedicated funding to engage in self-determination and treaty discussions, to avoid diverting resources from frontline service delivery.

○ Strengthen 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 locations.

Neighbourhood houses help improve community health and wellbeing by enabling people of any ability, background or age to connect, learn and share in an inclusive environment. They are a cost-effective way of strengthening communities and improving people's wellbeing, reducing reliance on acute health and other interventions.

Victoria's Neighbourhood House Coordination Program funds about 370 neighbourhood houses. There are more than 30 unfunded neighbourhood houses in fast growing areas such as Carrum, Geelong West and St Andrews. The regional Neighbourhood House Networks funding formula leaves rural and remote neighbourhood house committees under-resourced to meet complex governance requirements and remain sustainable.

Every year, a neighbourhood house can:

- 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.¹⁰

FURTHER STRATEGIES

Develop an overarching social policy strategy

The Victorian government can improve the lives of people experiencing disadvantage by developing a cohesive whole-of-government social policy strategy. Victoria has many specific plans and strategies seeking to address particular barriers to successful economic and social participation. However when developed in isolation, objectives and strategies can fail to align, meaning they can contradict one another or pull in separate directions.

6 Fair Work Commission, *National Minimum Wage Orders*, 2012, 2013, 2014, 2015, and 2016.

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

8 Aboriginal Victoria, *Treaty Fact Sheet*, 2016.

9 D Andrews, Premier of Victoria, Closing the Gap event, Queens Hall, Parliament House, 18 March 2015.

10 Association of Neighbourhood Houses and Learning Centres, *Neighbourhood House Survey 2013*.

A whole-of-government social plan, and political leadership to bring all the relevant plans and strategies together, could deliver a flagship direction for Victorian social policy.

Cut red tape

The Victorian government can strengthen the community sector by cutting red tape. Victorian charities spend almost 300 hours, and more than \$23 million each year meeting government reporting obligations.¹¹ One way to quickly reduce this reporting burden is to work with the Australian Charities and Not-for-profits Commission (ACNC) to become a 'Charity Passport Partner'.¹² This would enable the ACNC to share information collected from registered charities with Victorian government agencies, reducing the number of reports charities need to submit to different government agencies, in line with the ACNC's 'report once, use often' framework.

Reduce compliance costs by simplifying fundraising

The Victorian government can significantly reduce the regulatory burden on not-for-profit community organisations by repealing the *Fundraising Act 1988*. Victorian community sector charities raise nearly \$1 billion per year through donations and bequests.¹³ The *Fundraising Act 1988* means charities spend more than \$15 million per year nationally on unnecessary reporting and compliance requirements.¹⁴ Fundraising can be regulated better by other laws, including Australian Consumer Law (a proportionate, risk-based model), which Consumer Affairs Victoria recently used to successfully prosecute a charity for misleading conduct.

Provide funding stability

The Victorian government can value long-term relationships between community organisations and people, by providing long-term funding and minimising use of competitive tendering, to enable service continuity. Working with vulnerable people requires strong relationships and these take time to build. Sudden disruptions that sever connections between organisations and the people they work with risk destroying these relationships, which can take many years to rebuild. Disrupting services carries the risk of people not engaging with new services and breaking therapeutic relationships.

Support social enterprise

The Victorian government can support community organisations to generate independent income streams through social enterprises. As well as improving organisations' financial position, this income can then be used to fund additional services for Victorians. The government is producing a social enterprise strategy that can raise the profile of social enterprises, build skills and knowledge about them in the community sector, and assist their development by purchasing goods and services from them.

Improve social cohesion

The Victorian government can strengthen social cohesion by supporting organisations working with multicultural communities to build on Victoria's open, accepting and diverse society. The government's Social Cohesion Framework has largely allocated funding to pilots and start-ups, rather than strengthening existing services. Mainstream organisations have been preferred over specialised multicultural organisations embedded in local communities.¹⁵ These organisations have developed long-term trusted relationships and networks with multicultural people and communities, best placing them to work with isolated, marginalised people.

Support migrants, refugees and asylum seekers

The Victorian government has allocated welcome resources for refugees and asylum seekers, including the recently announced refugee health package. The government can support settlement and social and economic participation of the 4000 Syrian refugees expected in Victoria by bolstering community services in settlement areas, particularly in rural and regional areas.

Trauma-informed approaches for newly arrived refugees helps prevent potential mental and physical illness, social and relational difficulties, and poor academic and employment outcomes. Child-focused wrap-around services integrated with schools, hospitals, maternal and child health and other allied health services can help children and young people integrate well. Effective services for this group can develop trust and understanding for newly arrived refugees accessing services.

11 Victorian Council of Social Service, *More than Charity: Victoria's community sector charities*, July 2016, p. 26.

12 See Australian Charities and Not-for-profits Commission, *Charity Passport*, accessed 13 September 2016.

13 Victorian Council of Social Service, *More than Charity: Victoria's community sector charities*, July 2016, p. 11.

14 Deloitte Access Economics, *Cutting Red Tape: Options to align State, Territory and Commonwealth charity regulation*, Australian Charities and Not-for-profits Commission, 2016, p. 39.

15 Ethnic Communities Council of Victoria, *Pre-Budget 2016-17 Submission to Victorian Department of Treasury and Finance*, February 2016.

The Victorian government can provide diverse support, including for employment and training, health, social cohesion, youth issues and education. Emergency relief and housing services in popular settlement areas will experience increased demand. The government can fund more child and family services, as well as family violence support services, including translators. Increased staff training in cultural awareness, sensitivity and competency can deliver more effective services.

Strengthen the Human Rights Charter

The Victorian government can promote, protect and fulfil the human rights of every Victorian by building a stronger and more enduring human rights culture. When everyone is treated respectfully, human rights are protected. Community and government support, leadership, and expanded human rights education can help develop this culture.

The Victorian government announced full or partial support for 45 of the 52 recommendations of the 2015 Independent Review of the Charter of Human Rights and Responsibilities. Progressing these recommendations helps strengthen the Charter and builds a stronger human rights culture. However, the government deferred some important decisions, including rights enforcement mechanisms and the Victorian Equal Opportunity and Human Rights Commission's jurisdiction to resolve Charter complaints.

VCOSS recommends economic, social and cultural rights, and the right to self-determination, be included in the Charter. People often find economic, social and cultural rights most meaningful, because they relate to basic necessities of life, including access to healthcare, housing, social security and adequate food.

Strengthen disaster resilience

The Victorian government can support the community sector to use close community ties, willingness, specialist skills, assets and capacity to contribute more to disaster resilience. Community organisations can help people better prepare for emergency events and respond to them afterwards. Research with community organisations shows:

- More than 70 per cent can deliver community education programs teaching people about local extreme weather risks and preparing for potential impacts
- More than 60 per cent can plan for collaborative service provision during extreme events
- More than 60 per cent can warn service users about a predicted extreme weather event
- About 40 per cent can evacuate people from high-risk areas before a predicted extreme weather event.¹⁶

¹⁶ K Mallon et al, *Adapting the Community Sector for Climate Extremes*, National Climate Change Adaptation Research Facility, Gold Coast, 2013, p. 286.



Improve housing affordability and reduce homelessness

Victoria's high housing costs limit people's opportunities more than any other factor. Skyrocketing rents and house prices mean people struggle to stay housed, or are forced to live in sub-standard homes, or live far from jobs and services. Excessive housing costs not only prevent people from finding secure shelter, but make it difficult for them to cover other basic living costs.

Skyrocketing rents and house prices mean people struggle to stay housed, or are forced to live in sub-standard homes, or live far from jobs and services.

More than 22,000 Victorians face homelessness.¹⁷ The number of people sleeping rough in Melbourne's CBD has increased 74 per cent in two years.¹⁸ There are more than 32,000 people on the public housing waiting list.¹⁹

Low-income households spend a large share of their incomes on housing. Low-income private renters on average spend 34 per cent of their income on rent. About 115,000 Victorian renters face housing stress.²⁰

Low-income mortgagees on average spend 27 per cent of their income on housing. Victorian regions with greater concentrations of low-income households have high mortgage stress rates. For example, more than 14 per cent of Melton residents experience mortgage stress.²¹

It is also of concern that the future of the National Partnership Agreement on Homelessness remains uncertain, with funding unconfirmed beyond 30 July 2017.

Budget investments

○ Build more social housing

The Victorian government can establish a dedicated social housing growth fund to help more people find secure, affordable and appropriate housing.

The government is releasing an affordable housing statement by the end of 2016. This can significantly expand social housing, and be funded in the 2017-18 State Budget.

Building more social housing is Victoria's most effective ammunition in the fight against poverty. The state's significant lack of affordable housing makes all other social problems worse. Appropriate and affordable housing gives people a solid foundation from which to turn around their lives.

Whether by helping people find a job, overcoming family violence, avoiding homelessness, engaging in education, managing chronic illness, avoiding contact with the justice system, or protecting children from harm; safe and secure housing helps people overcome challenges, and lift themselves out of poverty. Higher rates of poverty and severe financial hardship are directly linked to high housing costs.²²

Infrastructure Victoria lists affordable housing expansion in its top three priorities, finding:

*"While the cost of improving the provision of housing for vulnerable Victorians will be significant, not acting will come at even greater costs to society and the economy, which will be felt by generations to come. This is not a future we can accept."*²³

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

18 City of Melbourne, *StreetCount 2016*, Final Report, 2016, p. 7.

19 Department of Health and Human Services, *Public housing waiting and transfer list*, June 2016.

20 Australian Bureau of Statistics, *Housing Occupancy and Costs 2013-14*, Data Cube: Additional Tables – low income rental households, Cat No. 4130, 2015.

21 Community West Vic, *Victoria-first mortgage stress service announced in Melton*, Media release, 22 February 2015.

22 Bankwest Curtin Economics Centre, *Falling through the cracks: poverty and disadvantage in Australia: focus on the States*, Report Series No. 1, 2014, p. 49.

23 Infrastructure Victoria, *Victoria's Draft 30-year Infrastructure Strategy*, 2016, p. 4.

Victoria's housing affordability problem keeps getting worse. More than 22,000 people face homelessness on any night. The number of people sleeping rough in Melbourne's CBD has risen 74 per cent in two years.²⁴

Housing stress grips 115,000 Victorian rental households.²⁵ Of more than 21,000 private rental homes listed in Melbourne, Anglicare's *Rental Affordability Snapshot* found only four were affordable for Newstart or Disability Support Pension recipients.

Of more than 21,000 private rental homes listed in Melbourne, Anglicare's *Rental Affordability Snapshot* found only four were affordable for Newstart or Disability Support Pension recipients.

Victoria's public housing is increasingly dilapidated and no longer fit-for-purpose. About 10,000 public housing properties are nearing obsolescence.²⁶ More than 32,000 people are on the public housing waiting list.²⁷

More can be done, as Victoria lags behind other states. Despite investments of around \$600 million in housing and homelessness funding since the Royal Commission into Family Violence report, Victoria's social housing supply is still at crisis point. Infrastructure Victoria suggests the state needs 30,000 affordable housing dwellings.²⁸

VCOSS members report single people are the hardest group to house, with few social housing vacancies, and the private market completely unaffordable to this group. Future social housing projects can build more houses for single people.

VCOSS members report particular housing difficulties for people experiencing long-term homelessness, people with disability, older people, women and children escaping family violence, Aboriginal Victorians, refugees and asylum seekers.

A dedicated social housing growth fund can resource a social housing transformation. The fund can provide resources to:

- Refurbish, redevelop or replace dilapidated public housing stock
- Finance new social housing, directly or by leveraging finance such as housing bonds, revolving loan facilities, debt guarantees or shared equity models.

- Combine with community housing stock transfers or land grants to maximise asset growth potential.

Fair and transparent distribution of funds can give non-government organisations the chance to develop strong proposals, not only increasing dwelling numbers, but also improving affordability, amenity and access to services. Social housing can support diverse socioeconomic communities, and cater to high demand groups, such as single people facing poverty and disadvantage.

○ Invest in a chronic homelessness permanent support model

The Victorian government can reduce the number of people sleeping rough by developing a long-term support model for people experiencing chronic homelessness.

Rough sleeping is ever more visible, especially in Melbourne's CBD. Engaging people sleeping rough in intensive interdisciplinary homelessness services, and establishing them in homes, is the most effective way to reduce chronic homelessness. This requires more social housing availability. These services can work with people to overcome other barriers over the longer term, and 'step in' if their housing is at risk.

People who are homeless for a long time, or experience repeated homelessness episodes, often accumulate disadvantage over time, including worsening physical and mental health, exposure to violence, and alcohol and other drugs, and loss of living and employment skills. Overcoming these barriers takes time, resources and skills, but helps people successfully establish and maintain their housing.

Establishing interdisciplinary teams, comprising assertive outreach workers, community health nurses and psychiatric nurses, for an integrated and accessible response to people with a history of homelessness can effectively reduce the number of people sleeping rough in Victoria.

○ Sustain tenancies and prevent homelessness

The Victorian government can reduce homelessness by funding more services that prevent people becoming homeless in the first place.

²⁴ City of Melbourne, *StreetCount 2016*, Final Report, 2016, p. 7.

²⁵ Australian Bureau of Statistics, *Housing occupancy and costs 2013-14*, Data Cube: Additional Tables – low income rental households, Cat. No. 4130, 2015.

²⁶ Victorian Auditor-General's Office, *Access to Public Housing*, PP No 118, 2012, p. viii.

²⁷ Department of Health and Human Services, *Public housing waiting and transfer list*, June 2016.

²⁸ Infrastructure Victoria, *Victoria's Draft 30-year Infrastructure Strategy*, 2016, p. 95.

Supporting people when their housing is under threat is far more cost-effective than waiting for them to become homeless. Homelessness prevention helps people sustain their tenancy or transition to a new home. An integrated homelessness prevention service can help people negotiate with landlords and creditors, access brokerage to manage rental arrears or damage costs, provide case management to help people maintain their tenancy, provide legal assistance in eviction proceedings, and provide financial counselling to help people manage their budget and reduce their living costs. A good service system can help people regardless of tenure, covering social housing and private rental, and even extend to mortgage foreclosure. It can refer people to other services, including mental health services, alcohol and drug services, family support services, aged care assistance and the NDIS.

However homelessness prevention services are currently under resourced and disparate. Initiatives like the Social Housing Advocacy and Support Program, having been cut by the previous government, are restricted to working with people in the public housing system, while other services like tenancy and homelessness legal services, are only funded to focus on the legal aspects of eviction prevention, rather than provide more holistic support.

Homelessness prevention services can be funded separately from homelessness crisis services, as crisis-response services already face overwhelming demand, and cannot stretch their budget to service those already homeless, let alone those at risk of losing their housing. Homelessness prevention services have been prioritised by Infrastructure Victoria.²⁹

○ Expand social housing energy efficiency retrofits

The Victorian government can create secure, affordable and healthy social housing by expanding energy efficiency retrofits to all social housing stock. Energy efficiency retrofits are a win-win for government and low-income Victorians. Tenants can stay healthy, live in greater comfort, and pay rent more reliably without facing bill shock.

Energy efficiency retrofits are a win-win for government and low-income Victorians.

As the state's largest landlord, the Victorian government can lead on energy efficiency by improving its own housing quality and affordability. A wide-scale retrofit program can generate construction and energy efficiency jobs.

Alongside building retrofits, the Victorian government can expand solar panel installations in social housing, reducing energy bills and increasing energy security. Energy security especially helps social housing tenants, including a high proportion of older people, young children, and people with medical and other vulnerabilities relying on electricity, to stay healthy and safe.

FURTHER STRATEGIES

Develop an affordable housing strategy

The Victorian government can integrate diverse policy levers in an integrated affordable housing strategy to help people throughout Victoria afford safe and secure homes.

Unaffordable housing affects everyone. It causes rising rates of homelessness, more social housing demand, unaffordable and insecure private rentals, and high house prices that prevent people purchasing their own home.

Victoria has no integrated, effective response to unaffordable housing. Potential policy levers to improve housing affordability include homelessness services, social housing, planning, taxation, and use of public land. Despite this, housing affordability efforts have so far been siloed and limited to small-scale initiatives, often disconnected and working at cross-purposes.

The Victorian government will release an affordable housing statement by the end of 2016. VCOSS encourages the government to develop an ambitious strategy covering the full housing spectrum, including homelessness, social housing, private renting and home ownership.

Review taxation effects on housing affordability

The Victorian government can change taxation settings to reduce housing price distortions.

Options include shifting revenue from inefficient stamp duties to a broad-based land tax, which improves housing affordability while maintaining a sustainable, less variable revenue base. This provides a progressive taxation base, does not penalise people who move more frequently, removes a barrier for first-home buyers, discourages property speculation and land banking, and acts as a value-capture mechanism. Tax changes can be designed carefully, including appropriate concessions and deferred payment options, especially for people who may be asset-rich, but income-poor.

29 Infrastructure Victoria, *Victoria's Draft 30-year Infrastructure Strategy*, 2016, p. 92.

As has been seen in West Australia, state budgets can crumble rapidly if built on unsustainable revenues. The Victorian budget is especially exposed to the housing market, and could be better protected by transitioning to a less volatile base, including substituting property stamp duties with broad-based land taxes.

Develop housing strategies for diverse groups

The Victorian government can better help people secure housing by developing specific strategies for specific groups. A coalition of older people's organisations is calling for a housing strategy for older people. Other groups with specific housing needs include people with disability, Aboriginal Victorians, young people, single parents, and multicultural communities, including new migrants, refugees and asylum seekers.

While an overarching housing strategy extends somewhat to these groups, each has particular housing barriers not necessarily addressed by a generic strategy. For instance, older people may face particular problems with retirement living and rental security, people with disability may have difficulty finding accessible housing, and multicultural communities may face discrimination or difficulty around identification and demonstrating a rental history.

Introduce minimum standards for rental housing

The Victorian government can ensure secure, healthy homes by introducing minimum standards for renters. Minimum standards are beneficial and achievable, requiring investors to provide basic amenities such as heating, bathing and cooking facilities, a weatherproof structure and window coverings.

Quality housing improves housing stability by helping people stay healthy and safe, raise their children and manage energy costs. Low-income households, often forced to live in poor-quality housing, particularly benefit from minimum standards.

Landlords are financially well-placed to meet minimum standards, with 70 per cent in the top two income quintiles.³⁰ The Victorian government can ease any potential consequences for rents by staging the introduction of standards over time, and by facilitating affordable finance for low-income landlords, or those renting to low-income tenants. 'On-bill' financing is a proven way of delivering finance. Only a small percentage of rental housing is likely to need significant repairs or improvement, helping contain any affordable finance costs.

In the absence of minimum standards, the Victorian government is effectively subsidising landlords not maintaining basic housing conditions, by funding energy bill concessions, the Utility Relief Grant and the healthcare costs arising from poor-quality housing. The government will reap some offsetting savings by introducing minimum standards.

Improve security of tenure in private rental homes

The Victorian government can help people maintain stable, appropriate accommodation by strengthening security of tenure in rental laws, especially by removing no-cause evictions and allowing eviction only as a last resort.

Victorian law provides renters little security of tenure, and lags behind other countries and jurisdictions.

Victorian law provides renters little security of tenure, and lags behind other countries and jurisdictions. People can be evicted for no reason, constantly living weeks away from having to find a new home at short notice, or becoming homeless.

This precarious situation means people are reluctant to assert other rights to a decent home. Without recourse to evictions, people can be afraid to raise problems with substandard housing, broken fixed appliances, faults or maintenance requirements. This can put their health and wellbeing at risk, and increase their living costs.

By abolishing no-cause evictions, and making other tenure security improvements, the Victorian government can prevent people being evicted into homelessness, and help them live more stable, secure lives.

Mandate universal housing standards in the building code

The Victorian government can make more appropriate housing available for people with disability and older people, by mandating minimum accessibility requirements in the building code for residential housing.

People with disability and older people have different accessibility needs, which are often not provided for in standard housing design, and this can exclude them from mainstream housing.

30 R Wilkins, *The Household, Income and Labour Dynamics in Australia Survey: Selected Findings from Waves 1 to 14 – The 11th Annual Statistical Report of the HILDA Survey*, Melbourne Institute of Applied Economic and Social Research, 2016, pp. 74-75.

In 2010, the Victorian government undertook a regulatory impact statement on mandating building code accessibility standards. However, the recommended changes were not introduced. The proposed better apartment standards include some accessibility requirements, but these do not extend to detached housing.

Introduce inclusionary zoning to boost affordable housing

The Victorian government can boost the supply of social and affordable housing by changing planning laws to leverage affordable housing from residential development.

Options include inclusionary zoning, meaning multi-unit residential developments include a certain percentage of social or affordable housing. Inclusionary zoning is especially appropriate when 'up-zoning' or selling public land, as it is less likely to reduce land values.

Another option is density bonuses, where developments may be more intensive if incorporating social and affordable housing. Other planning changes can improve housing affordability, such as fast-track approvals and car-parking requirement reductions for social and affordable housing developments.



Prevent and respond to family violence

The repercussions of the Victorian Royal Commission into Family Violence are precipitating monumental shifts in prevention and responses. VCOSS applauds the Victorian government's leadership and investment, and recognises the enormity of the task, including system redesign, and the recruitment and skilling of a legion of new workers.

Family violence can be tackled with a whole-of-government and whole-of-community approach, including community sector collaboration. The Victorian Royal Commission into Family Violence is a chance to drive lasting social change, by challenging attitudes and behaviours underlying family violence, and improving responses to it.

*"The report delivered by the Royal Commission into Family Violence is a landmark moment and a turning point in addressing the scourge of family violence in Victoria." – Emma King, VCOSS CEO*³¹

The Royal Commission's report canvases sweeping changes, from primary prevention, through to universal and mainstream services responding to family violence, to better supporting specialist family violence services.

In April 2016, the Victorian government responded to the report with a two-year, \$572 million funding package as a "down-payment" to achieve systemic, transformational change. In late 2016, this funding is beginning to reach organisations serving people experiencing family violence.

The 10-year *Ending Family Violence: Victoria's Plan for Change* is also a momentous step toward achieving genuine systemic change, to one day eradicate family violence. VCOSS, through its representation on the statewide Family Violence Steering Committee and the Social Services Taskforce, aims to support the co-design process across the community, health and education sectors.

Budget investment

○ Continue resourcing the Royal Commission's recommendations

The Victorian government can continue to use this opportunity to embed lasting change by continuing to resource the implementation of the Family Violence Royal Commission.

VCOSS applauds the Victorian government's investments so far, with the 2016-17 State Budget providing the largest ever funding commitment to tackling family violence. VCOSS encourages the government to continue monitoring resource requirements to implement the changes, and making necessary adjustments to keep the reforms on track.

Family violence organisations face operational challenges, compounding their challenges in responding to growing demand, and while co-designing, delivering and evaluating new programs with government. Fierce competition for highly skilled workers and tight reform timelines put pressure on management, administrative and frontline service delivery workers. Workforce planning takes time, with the Royal Commission recommending a comprehensive 10-year workforce development strategy.³²

The first stage of implementation can address this by providing realistic timeframes, funding and expectations of demands placed on organisations and workers. Given the significant nature of the reform package being delivered, VCOSS recommends the Victorian government continue investing in reform implementation. We also propose further strategies below to realise the vision of the 10-year *Ending Family Violence: Victoria's Plan for Change*, of a future where all Victorians live free from family violence.

31 E King, Landmark family violence report a turning point in addressing the scourge of family violence, Media release, VCOSS, 30 March 2016.

32 Royal Commission into Family Violence, *Report and Recommendations; Volume VI, March 2016*, p. 200.

FURTHER STRATEGIES

Engage broader health, education and community sectors

Many families experiencing violence are first identified as needing support by general health, education or community sector services, rather than specialist family violence services. Hospital, general practice, maternal child health, early years and school workers must know how to recognise the signs of family violence and respond appropriately for safe and effective interventions.

Many families experiencing violence are first identified as needing support by general health, education or community sector services, rather than specialist family violence services.

More than one in five women experiencing family violence will make their first disclosure to a health professional.³³ Schools and health service staff responses vary, often based on their individual knowledge, experience and skills. While some organisations develop relationships with local specialist family violence services and have strong training programs, policies and referral pathways in place, many do not.

The Victorian government can support the education, health and broader community sector in implementing the Royal Commission's recommendations by investing in training, workforce and resource development to build appropriate family violence response capacities and facilitate partnerships with family violence services.

Resource support and safety hubs to be responsive

The Victorian government can help provide people experiencing family violence with timely, holistic and integrated support, by appropriately resourcing support and safety hubs to hire adequate numbers of skilled and specialist workers.

The government's 2016 funding package includes \$5 million to design 17 new support and safety hubs. These will provide people experiencing family violence with clear and accessible entry points to find help, and link with other services.

Support and safety hubs need to be adequately resourced. Entry and referral systems require resources to meet demand and prioritise the needs of people in crisis, and to provide enough early intervention services.

Support and safety hubs will be most effective when able to respond appropriately to diverse groups, including Aboriginal people, people with disability, people from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds and older people. If specialist staff are employed to work with diverse and high-risk groups, they can also develop the skills of other safety hub team members and partner agencies. Clear linkages and referral pathways between the hubs and the health, education and community sectors will support seamless system navigation.

Provide people with longer term support

The Victorian government can help people recover from family violence trauma, through support that continues long after a crisis. Often services are only funded to help women and children during an initial crisis period.

In the months and years after escaping family violence, families can face problems with housing, finances, or parenting. Family violence agencies report women often feel they have no choice but to return to violent perpetrators, or risk homelessness. Some women remain in contact with violent perpetrators after separation due to parenting commitments or court orders, putting them at risk of continuing trauma. They need better access to long-term counselling, financial and other practical support.

Without long-term support, people risk post-traumatic stress disorder. Women may feel longer-term effects many months or years afterwards. Family violence is linked to people experiencing longer term problem substance use, anxiety and chronic health conditions.³⁴

Recognise and address Aboriginal families' intergenerational needs

Aboriginal communities experience trauma stemming from colonisation, discrimination, and policies such as children's forced removal, with devastating consequences.

Intergenerational trauma can be embedded in a community's collective and cultural memory. It contributes to high family violence rates in Aboriginal communities, as well as high poverty rates and other disadvantage.³⁵

33 J Spangaro and A Zwi, *After the questions; Impact of routine screening for domestic violence in NSW health services*, The University of New South Wales, 2010, p. 22.

34 Domestic Violence Prevention Council, *What are the impacts?*, Information sheet, accessed November 2016.

35 Commissioner for Children and Young People, *Always was, always will be Koori Children: Systemic inquiry into services provided to Aboriginal children and young people in out-of-home care in Victoria*, 2016, p. 47.

"88 per cent of Aboriginal children in out-of-home care have experienced family violence."³⁶

Strategies to prevent Aboriginal family violence must be developed and delivered by Aboriginal people if they are to be successful.

The Victorian government can reduce high Aboriginal family violence rates by strengthening Aboriginal community-controlled organisations, including with more sustainable and long-term funding, and by not putting Aboriginal organisations in funding competition with larger non-Aboriginal organisations. The government can amplify the voices of Aboriginal people in the process, especially those of women and children.

Advance gender equality

The Victorian government can reduce gender inequality through the release and implementation of the Gender Equality Strategy.

Women are adversely affected by gender inequality throughout their lives. It affects women's educational and training pathways, employment opportunities, work-life balance, positions of formal leadership, health and safety, economic security and social inclusion. These interrelated factors combine to place women at greater risk of poverty, disadvantage and social exclusion.

Communities with greater gender equality have higher rates of wellbeing and lower rates of depression among both men and women.

Advancing gender equality benefits not only women but men, children and society more generally. Communities with greater gender equality have higher rates of wellbeing and lower rates of depression among both men and women.³⁷ Communities valuing women's participation and representation have fewer economic, social and political differences between men and women, and significantly lower family violence levels.

VCOSS outlined priority areas for action in its submission to the Gender Equality Strategy consultation, including addressing inequality in education, employment and leadership, financial security, safety, housing and health.³⁸

Prevent elder abuse

The Victorian government can help older people at risk of physical, emotional or financial abuse and mistreatment by strengthening community understanding of elder abuse and improving system responses.

Between two and six per cent of people aged 60 or over experience elder abuse.³⁹

Ageism and negative attitudes to ageing drive elder abuse. Building public awareness of elder abuse, its relationship to other forms of family violence, and tackling underlying ageist attitudes, help keep older people safe.

Financial abuse is the most common form of elder abuse. Older people can be encouraged to plan and take control of their finances to minimise the risk of financial abuse. Accessible resources and well-informed, experienced professionals, including financial counsellors, can help older people plan appropriately.

"Older women over the age of 80 are most at risk of financial abuse. The older person's own children are most likely to be perpetrators."⁴⁰

Some health and community sector workers may not identify elder abuse, or be unsure of the appropriate response. This is compounded when older people rely on the perpetrator's care, or do not want help. Providing people working with older people with professional development helps them recognise elder abuse, respond to it and make appropriate referrals.

36 Ibid.

37 Science Nordic, *Gender equality gives men better lives*, Norway, 2015.

38 Victorian Council of Social Service, *Advancing Gender Equality; submission to the Victorian Gender Equality Strategy Consultation Paper*, March 2016.

39 National Ageing Research Institute in partnership with Seniors Rights Victoria, *Profile of elder abuse in Victoria: Analysis of data about people seeking help from Seniors Rights Victoria – Summary Report*, June 2015, p. 5.

40 State Trustees Victoria, *Financial elder abuse research*, accessed October 2016.



Give everyone access
to education



All Victorian children and young people have the right to a quality education.

Education is a strong foundation for children's learning and development, their future employment and life opportunities. It is an empowering path from poverty and disadvantage.

However, too many children and young people miss out on full access to a quality education due to disadvantage. They face participation barriers to early years services and school, and sometimes leave education altogether.

Too many children and young people miss out on full access to a quality education due to disadvantage.

Developmental gaps between children from socioeconomically advantaged and disadvantaged backgrounds often emerge in early childhood and widen over time.⁴¹ By the first year of school, children from the most disadvantaged areas are twice as likely to be developmentally vulnerable as those from the most advantaged areas.⁴² Without effective intervention, these gaps can place children on a poor trajectory during schooling.⁴³

About 10,000 Victorian students disengage from school each year.⁴⁴ Early school leavers are at greater risk of financial hardship, physical and mental health problems, drug and alcohol misuse, homelessness, and justice system involvement.⁴⁵ Students from disadvantaged backgrounds are overrepresented among early school leavers.⁴⁶

The government can build on past budget investments to create a fully inclusive and accessible universal education system empowering every child and young person.

This requires services to embrace diversity and be respectful, tolerant, culturally safe and inclusive of all children and young people, including children with disability, same sex attracted, intersex and gender diverse young people, children experiencing poverty, children in out-of-home care, Aboriginal children and children from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds. Early childhood education and care services, schools, training providers, health and community services, and families, can work together to maximise every child and young person's learning, development and wellbeing, and give them a positive start in life.

Budget investments

○ Help students with disability succeed at school

The Victorian government can empower students with additional health and development needs to succeed at school by reforming the Program for Students with Disabilities (PSD) funding model.⁴⁷

Children and young people with disability have the right to a quality, inclusive education that maximises their academic and social development.⁴⁸ But they are hampered by funding limitations, lack of specialist support, inadequately trained teachers, and discriminatory attitudes.⁴⁹ Students with disability are less likely to complete Year 12,⁵⁰ and those from families facing disadvantage are even less likely to achieve in education than their peers.⁵¹ Providing effective early support through the PSD can improve their educational and life trajectories.

41 T Moore, *Understanding the nature and significance of early childhood: New evidence and its implications*, Presentation at Centre for Community Child Health seminar Investing in Early Childhood—the future of early childhood education and care in Australia, Centre for Community Child Health, The Royal Children's Hospital, Melbourne, 2014, p. 11.

42 Department of Education and Training, *Australian Early Development Census National Report 2015*, Canberra, 2016, p. 31.

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

44 S Bracks, *Greater Returns on Investment in Education: Government Schools Funding Review*, Victorian Government, December 2015, p. 52.

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

46 Ibid, p. 9.

47 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 require health and related services of a type or level beyond that required by children generally.

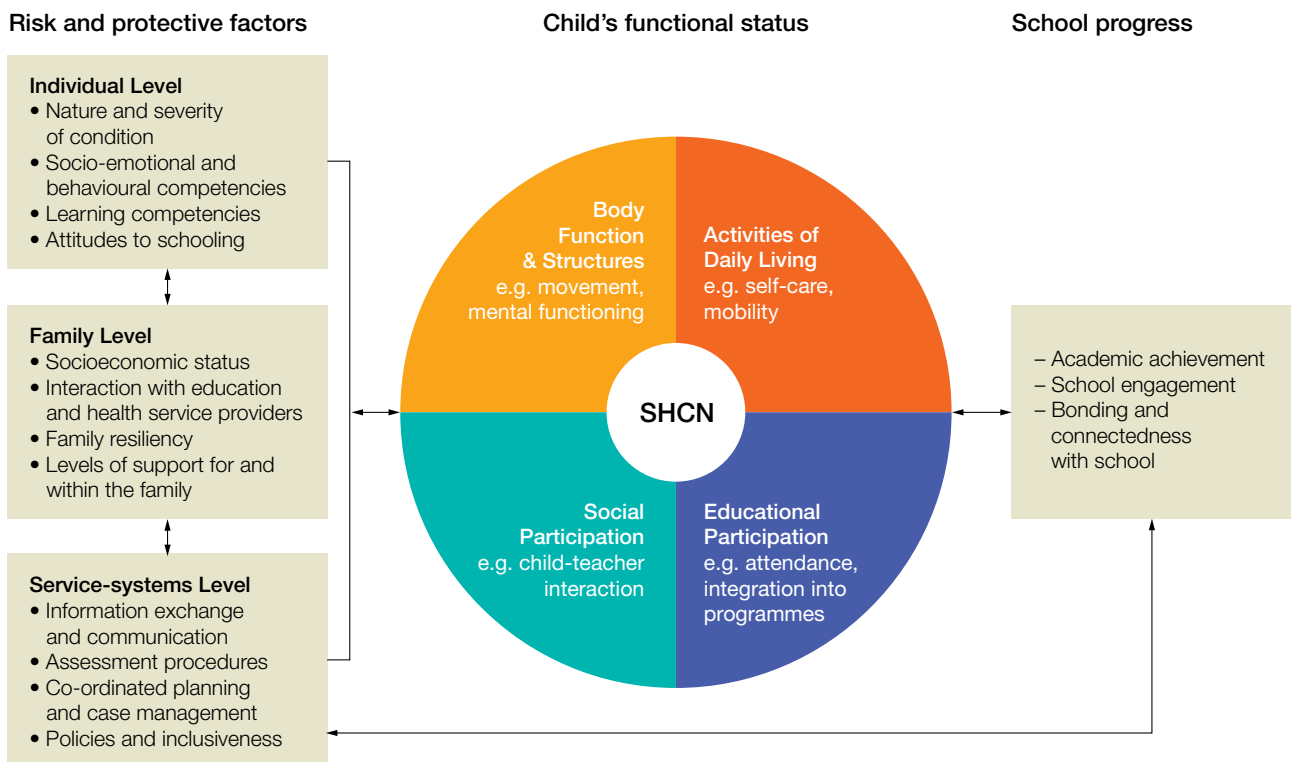
48 United Nations, *Convention on the Rights of Persons with a Disability*, Article 24, 2006.

49 Victorian Equal Opportunity and Human Rights Commission, *Held Back: The experiences of students with disabilities in Victorian schools*, Carlton, 2012, p. 10.

50 D Gonski, K Boston, K Greiner, C Lawrence, B Scales and P Tannock, *Review of funding for schooling: Final report*, Canberra, December 2011.

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

FIGURE 3: Conceptual model of the relationship between special healthcare needs and children's school progress



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

PSD funding supports about 4 per cent of Victorian students.⁵² However, about 7 per cent of Australian children aged up to 14 face disability,⁵³ and about 20 per cent have additional health and development needs that require extra support if they are to fulfil their educational potential.⁵⁴ This leaves a significant gap.

PSD funding eligibility is based on rigid diagnostic categories, excluding many students and putting families in the situation of having to 'paint the worst case scenario' of their children's future to obtain funding. It also causes funding uncertainty for families and schools.

Adopting a functional needs-based funding approach would shift the system to better respond to and maximise these students' learning and development.

Both the Victorian Government Schools Funding Review⁵⁵ and the Review of the PSD⁵⁶ recommended redesigning the PSD on a strengths-based functional needs approach. However, these recommendations remain 'under consideration'.

Reforming the PSD funding model as recommended by these reviews will deliver a more inclusive education system, optimising the educational, social and wellbeing outcomes for every child and young person with disability or additional health and development needs.

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

53 Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, *A picture of Australia's children 2012*, 2012, p. 26.

54 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.

55 S Bracks, *Greater Returns on Investment in Education: Government Schools Funding Review*, Department of Education and Training, December 2015, p. 22.

56 Department of Education and Training, *The Education State: Review of the Program for Students with Disabilities*, April 2016, p. 28.

○ Support every child with high quality early learning

The Victorian government can give children the best start in life by extending the availability of high quality early learning services, from birth to when they start school.

Families facing disadvantage cannot afford to enrol their children in high quality early childhood education and care (ECEC). The Victorian government can help by securing funding for 15 hours per week of four-year-old kindergarten, providing universal access to at least five hours of three-year-old kindergarten, and more early learning hours and stronger participation strategies for children facing disadvantage.

Investing in high quality universal early education, with extra support for children facing disadvantage, gives every child a strong learning foundation, improves their life chances and helps break the poverty cycle

Children benefit from high quality early learning, particularly those facing disadvantage.⁵⁷ One or more years of kindergarten participation produces higher development, learning, cognitive and social-emotional outcomes.⁵⁸ It can counter the effects of disadvantage and supports children's success at school. Children enrolled in a high-quality early learning program perform better academically in grade 3,⁵⁹ and achieve higher results at age 15 on the OECD Program for International Student Assessment.⁶⁰

Investing in high quality universal early education, with extra support for children facing disadvantage, gives every child a strong learning foundation, improves their life chances, and helps break the poverty cycle. It delivers clear economic value. If every child experiencing disadvantage participated in ECEC services, the

Australian economy would benefit by \$13.3 billion dollars by 2050.⁶¹

The length of time children spend in quality early learning environments also matters. Children who spend more time in kindergarten have better cognitive development, independence, concentration and sociability, and achieve better final school results.⁶² The effects are magnified for children who spend two years in a quality early learning program.⁶³

Commonwealth and state governments have only secured funding for 15 hours of four-year-old kindergarten until 2017.⁶⁴ The Victorian government can work with the Commonwealth government to secure ongoing funding, providing certainty for families and improving children's chance for school success. Extending four-year-old kindergarten access for children facing disadvantage to three days per week can improve their learning and development.

Most European countries provide every child with at least two years of free, publicly funded early education, and New Zealand funds 20 early childhood education hours for every three- and four-year-old child. The United Kingdom provides three- and four-year-old children with 15 free ECEC hours each week, extended to vulnerable two-year-olds, including those from families on low incomes, asylum seekers, children in out-of-home care and children with disability and special education needs.

The Victorian government can improve children's learning and development by funding at least five hours of universal three-year-old kindergarten, and funding 15 hours of three-year-old kindergarten programs for every child facing disadvantage. The government can consider extending access to 15 hours of early learning for two-year-old-children facing disadvantage.

Children from families facing disadvantage are most likely to miss ECEC opportunities, including those from low socioeconomic backgrounds, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities, and non-English speaking

57 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.

58 C Gong, J McNamara and R Cassells, *AMP.NATSEM Income and Wealth Report: Issue 28 – Little Australians: Differences in early childhood development*, Sydney, AMP.NATSEM, April 2011, p. 10.

59 D Warren and J P Haiken-DeNew, *Early Bird Catches the Worm: The Causal Impact of Pre-School Participation and Teacher Qualifications on Year 3 National Naplan Cognitive Tests*, Melbourne Institute Working Paper No. 34/13, October 2013.

60 Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD), *Education at a Glance 2016: OECD Indicators*, OECD publishing, Paris, 2016.

61 PricewaterhouseCoopers (PwC), *Putting a value on early childhood education and care in Australia*, PwC, 2014, p. 4.

62 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 and 65.

63 S Fox and M Geddes, *Preschool – Two years are better than one: Developing a preschool program for Australian 2 year olds – Evidence, policy and implementation*, Mitchell Institute Policy Paper No. 03/2016, Mitchell Institute, Melbourne, 2016.

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

backgrounds.⁶⁵ In particular, many eligible children do not receive Early Start Kindergarten,⁶⁶ which provides 15 free or low-cost hours of three-year-old kindergarten for Aboriginal children and those known to child protection.

The Victorian government can develop an early learning participation strategy for children facing disadvantage, particularly those eligible for Early Start Kindergarten. This can include:

- helping organisations offer welcoming and culturally safe services for families and promoting meaningful inclusion of children with disability
- proactively reaching out to families, such as by employing dedicated family support workers and transporting children to and from services
- pre-purchasing places
- providing integrated child and family services.

○ Provide children and families with integrated services

The Victorian government can improve children and young peoples learning, development and wellbeing, particularly for those facing disadvantage, by investing in integrated service models.

Integrated models go beyond co-locating services: they coordinate a holistic service delivery approach.

Integrated services, such as child and family centres, and schools as community hubs, provide welcoming and safe places for family-centred engagement. They usually combine universal education and health services such as school, kindergarten, playgroup and Maternal and Child Health Services, with other specialised community and health services.

Integrated models go beyond co-locating services: they coordinate a holistic service delivery approach. This supports children, young people and families facing multiple and complex needs that a single organisation is unable to meet.⁶⁷ Funded coordinators can facilitate service collaboration and engage in community development and outreach work.

Integrated services promote early intervention by linking children and their families with targeted services when problems first arise. They deliver positive educational and wellbeing outcomes, including better attendance, educational attainment, wellbeing, social development and behaviours, more engaged learning, and greater family engagement in school.⁶⁸

○ Help families facing disadvantage meet education costs

School costs can prevent children and young people facing disadvantage from participating fully in education. Families face rising education costs,⁶⁹ including for digital devices, school uniforms, clothing and equipment, textbooks, elective subjects, sports activities, camps and excursions. There are also indirect costs, such as travelling to and from school, and requiring internet access for homework.

If families cannot afford these, their children risk missing opportunities and being socially excluded. While the Camps, Sports and Excursions Fund responds positively to the Education Maintenance Allowance loss, VCOSS members advise it does not cover all rising school costs being borne by families. The Victorian government can provide more resources so children and young people do not miss out. The Department of Education and Training can also regularly monitor the new Parent Payment Policy to ensure schools understand and comply.

○ Help young people reengage in education

The Victorian government can help more young people reengage in education by funding a statewide, targeted, intensive, case-managed support service for young people disengaging early, or who are at risk of disengaging from school. The Navigator pilot program currently operates in only eight of the 17 Department of Education and Training areas, leaving many young people without specialised support. The program is only funded for two years.

Program expansion can be informed by a comprehensive evaluation of the Navigator pilot program, alongside evaluations of other programs, including the new Lookout Education Centres and reshaped School Focused Youth

65 J Baxter and K Hand, *Access to early childhood education in Australia, Research Report No. 24*, Australian Institute of Family Studies, April 2013.

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

67 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.

68 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, July 2012, p. 10.

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

Services. Evaluation can find gaps and identify the most effective practices. Long-term effort and adequate resources can deliver a suite of effective support. Funding uncertainty and frequent program changes undermine efforts to build effective relationships between schools, families, community sector organisations, other education providers and the local community. The disengaged student register could promptly identify students needing more support.

○ Provide inclusive support for children with disability and developmental delays and their families

The Victorian government can help universal early years services to identify, respond to and support children with disability and developmental delays by investing in professional development, including for maternal and child health, and early childhood education and care services.

Demand for programs such as the Strengthening Parent Support Program has grown substantially, but funding has not risen in more than a decade.

This includes providing relevant undergraduate and postgraduate course content, continuing professional development and mentoring, widespread use of evidence-based approaches, and supporting referral pathways into early childhood intervention services.

Increasing funding to expand Kindergarten Inclusion Support (KIS) packages and the Preschool Field Officer (PSFO) programs helps more children with disability access and participate in kindergarten programs.⁷⁰

The Victorian government can build families' knowledge and skills about their child's disability or developmental delay by expanding family support programs. These programs help families to self-advocate, share strategies, inform, train and connect them to other services, and provide engagement opportunities with families in similar situations. Demand for programs such as the Strengthening Parent Support Program has grown substantially, but funding has not risen in more than a

decade.⁷¹ The NDIS rollout is likely to increase demand. Family support programs help families access and understand the NDIS, particularly in rural areas with fewer locally-based services.

The Victorian government can help families support their children to successfully transition from secondary school to further education and employment, by developing tailored resources and a trial transition program.⁷² The government resources children with disability for other transitions, but not for the transition after secondary school, which causes family anxiety and can limit life possibilities for young people with disability.

FURTHER STRATEGIES

Empower students facing disadvantage with equity-based funding

The Victorian government can help break the link between students facing disadvantage and poor educational achievement by maintaining a needs-based school funding model, including substantial equity funds targeted at the most disadvantaged students and schools.

Children's school success should not be determined by their parents' wealth. Equity funds allow schools to provide extra assistance to students. The Victorian government can strongly advocate for the Commonwealth government to meet its Gonski Agreement funding share to 2020.

The Victorian government can make schools more accountable for their use of equity funds to ensure it supports the learning, development and wellbeing of students facing disadvantage.⁷³

Keep children in the middle years engaged in school

The Victorian government can help children in the middle years stay engaged in school by investing in age-appropriate services and programs, and developing a comprehensive framework so children transition smoothly from primary to secondary school.

Children in the middle years, between Grade 5 and Year 8, are entering adolescence and undergoing significant physical, socioemotional and developmental

70 Early Childhood Intervention Australia (Victorian Chapter), 2016-17 State Budget Submission: Making Victorian the Education State and NDIS Ready, 2016.

71 Association for Children with Disability, Victorian Budget Submission 2016-2017, p. 7.

72 Ibid.

73 Victorian Council of Social Service, Schools Funding Review: VCOSS Submission, July 2015.

change.⁷⁴ Children can experience difficulties transitioning from primary to secondary school, with many experiencing educational achievement falls and school disengagement afterwards, particularly those facing disadvantage.⁷⁵ About a quarter of children in middle years do not meet educational milestones.⁷⁶ If ignored, the effects can accumulate, leading to poor educational attainment and possible disengagement from school.

The Victorian government has no comprehensive, consistent strategy for successful transitions to secondary school⁷⁷ and few policies and services targeted to children during the middle years.⁷⁸ Middle years children are presenting at youth services at increasingly younger ages, often with complex problems.⁷⁹

The Victorian government can fund organisations to assist middle years children, in a similar model to the Empower Youth Grants,⁸⁰ helping plug the support gap. This can identify and respond to children showing signs of early disengagement.

Help keep young people in school with quality flexible learning options

The Victorian government can help more young people remain at school by funding high quality flexible learning options across Victoria, in schools, or community settings well connected to schools.

Flexible learning options can help students with complex needs requiring more intensive assistance. They are most effective if they offer meaningful qualifications, provide wraparound services, are based on best-practice evidence, and adopt a quality standards framework, such as the Framework of Quality Flexible Learning Programs.⁸¹

Government investment can increase the coverage of high quality flexible learning programs across the state, particularly in rural Victoria. Modifying the Student Resource Package portability rules so equity funding follows students moving to alternative settings can provide a funding source, as recommended by the Bracks Review.⁸²

Support the learning and wellbeing of children who have experienced trauma

The Victorian government can improve the learning and wellbeing of children and young people who have experienced trauma by supporting schools to provide schoolwide trauma-informed practice. Trauma exposure in childhood is relatively widespread⁸³ and every class in every school can benefit from having staff skilled in understanding and assisting students who have experienced trauma. In particular this helps children in out-of-home care, those who have been exposed to family violence, refugees and asylum seekers.

Every class in every school can benefit from having staff skilled in understanding and assisting students who have experienced trauma. In particular this helps children in out-of-home care, those who have been exposed to family violence, refugees and asylum seekers.

Trauma can affect children's cognitive, emotional and social competencies, affecting their ability to learn and function effectively at school, and placing them at greater risk of poor educational achievement and disengagement from school.⁸⁴ Effective training helps teachers understand the effects of trauma on children's development and behaviour, and ways to help them in the classroom.⁸⁵

This can be supported by building schools' ability to better understand and nurture students' holistic development, including their mental health and wellbeing, and providing schools with greater numbers of qualified wellbeing staff.

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

75 Victorian Auditor-General's Office, *Education Transitions*, Op. Cit.

76 S Lamb, J Jackson, A Walstab and S Huo, *Educational opportunity in Australia 2015: Who succeeds and who misses out*, October 2015.

77 Victorian Auditor-General's Office, *Education Transitions*, Op. Cit.

78 M McGuire, *One Foot in Each World: Challenges and Opportunities for Children and Young People in the Middle Years*, Good Shepherd Australia New Zealand, April 2016.

79 Ibid.

80 See Youth Central, *Empower Youth*, accessed November 2016.

81 K te Riele, *Putting the jigsaw together: Flexible Learning programs in Australia: Final Report*, The Victoria Institute, 2014.

82 S Bracks, *Greater Returns on Investment in Education: Government Schools Funding Review*, Victorian Government, December 2015, p. 231.

83 M Tobin, *Childhood trauma: Developmental pathways and implications for the classroom*, Australian Council for Educational Research, 2016.

84 Ibid.

85 Ibid.

BERRY STREET EDUCATION MODEL ⁸⁶

The Berry Street Education Model equips schools with knowledge and skills to promote positive cognitive and behavioural change, particularly for students who have experienced trauma or chronic stress.

The model applies a therapeutic, strengths-based approach to teacher practice and classroom management. It integrates clinical, educational and welfare approaches, drawing on Berry Street's approaches to trauma-informed learning and neuroscience.

The model started in 2014 as a pilot with two state schools and has since been rolled out to 40 schools across Victoria and interstate. A pilot evaluation⁸⁷ found the model had positive impacts on student engagement, wellbeing, behaviour and academic achievement. The model works best when a whole-of-school approach is taken, so it is consistently applied across the school and incorporated into every classroom routine.⁸⁸ Ideally, every staff member is trained, including teachers, leadership and administrative staff.

Plan for early childhood service growth and integration

The Victorian government can plan for growth in early childhood services, by considering infrastructure requirements, particularly in growth corridors and rural areas, and training of sufficient qualified early years workers.

Services accessibility can be improved by working to converge long-daycare and kindergarten models. Families are confused by the myriad of options, such as sessional kindergarten, long-daycare and integrated session kindergarten, and different funding streams hinder families' efforts to navigate services.

86 Berry Street Childhood Institute, Berry Street Education Model, accessed May 2016.

87 H Stokes and M Turnbull, *Evaluation of the Berry Street Education Model: trauma informed positive education enacted in mainstream schools*, University of Melbourne Graduate School of Education, Youth Research Centre, Melbourne, 2016.

88 Ibid.



Improve health and wellbeing

Good health underpins everyone's ability to live a good life, free of the distress and discomfort of disease and the costs of treating illness. Good health means people can make the most of their lives – maximising their capabilities to work, learn, play, socialise, volunteer and care for loved ones. A healthier community is not only more productive, but is happier, more cohesive and offers people a better quality of life.

Promoting good health for everyone, regardless of their social or economic situation, means utilising the social determinants of health approach. This focuses on creating living and working conditions conducive to good health, and supporting people with poor health and chronic disease. Reducing health system barriers that lead to poor health, and providing equitable access to income, education, employment and secure housing, helps build healthier communities.

Structural barriers prevent equal access to health services and can cause or compound health inequities.

Structural barriers prevent equal access to health services and can cause or compound health inequities. Barriers include fees and healthcare costs, low health literacy, poor access to health information, and lack of timely and quality services, especially in rural and regional areas.

The Victorian health system faces other challenges and changes. These include the rollout of the NDIS and the transfer of home and community care services to the federal 'My Aged Care' system. The Commonwealth government is also rearranging health service procurement by creating Primary Health Networks (PHNs).

There are also changing demographics and growing demand for services. For example, rapid population growth in outer metropolitan corridors puts pressure on Melbourne health services. Rural and regional health services face workforce and sustainability challenges. The Victorian government can strategically respond to the community's health needs, prioritising prevention and early intervention, and making sure all Victorians have equitable access to timely and affordable healthcare.

Budget investments

○ Retain community mental health rehabilitation services

The Victorian government can empower people to manage and recover from mental illness by retaining funding responsibility for community-based mental health rehabilitation services.

Victoria's community-based mental health sector has long provided treatment, support and rehabilitation services for people with serious mental illness, to help them manage their illness and build life skills.

However with the move to the NDIS, Victoria has transferred all its community-based mental health services funding over to the NDIS. Victoria is the only state to do this. This means it is unclear who will provide people with mental health rehabilitation services, as rehabilitation is deemed outside the scope of the NDIS.

State-funded clinical mental health services will continue to provide treatment services outside the NDIS. However they are not well-placed to provide rehabilitation services, because they are subject to legal frameworks for involuntary treatment. Community-based mental health services are best-placed to deliver rehabilitation services, because they respond to people coming to them voluntarily for these services.

It is unclear who will provide people with mental health rehabilitation services, as rehabilitation is deemed outside the scope of the NDIS.

Victoria's community-based mental health services need to be funded independently of the NDIS, alongside clinical and acute mental health treatment services. The community-based mental health sector estimates \$80-\$100 million is needed to maintain the existing system.

Many people living with mental illness will also be ineligible for the NDIS altogether. People with mental illness

must be classed as having a 'permanent' psychosocial disability to be eligible for an NDIS package. Requiring people to identify as having a 'permanent' disability or condition contradicts recovery models of mental illness rehabilitation. It creates stigma, distress and a sense of hopelessness, and presents a barrier for younger people without a diagnosis, and for all people with moderate mental health needs, who are likely to recover if given appropriate support.⁸⁹ GPs and psychiatrists also face difficulty giving people permanent diagnoses due to the episodic nature of mental illness.

Community health centres and Aboriginal community-controlled health organisations (ACCHOs) are the health system gateway for many people experiencing poverty and disadvantage

The government has given assurances that people ineligible for the NDIS will receive assistance, but there is little detail or funding linked to this assurance.

"Twenty per cent of existing community managed mental health system clients... are clearly ineligible for the NDIS and NDIS status remains unclear to the agencies for another 11 per cent of consumers".⁹⁰

○ Provide capital investment in community health and Aboriginal community-controlled health services

The Victorian government can help people maintain good health and strengthen their access to local community health services, by investing in infrastructure and facilities.

Community health centres and Aboriginal community-controlled health organisations (ACCHOs) are the health system gateway for many people experiencing poverty and disadvantage. They help people manage chronic conditions and stay healthy in the community, and are more cost-effective than acute care. The community's demand for services is growing. For example, the Victorian Aboriginal population increased 41 per cent between 2006 and 2011,⁹¹ putting pressure on ACCHOs. A study in 2012 indicated (ACCHO) infrastructure needs of around \$120m.⁹²

Many community health and Aboriginal community-controlled health services' facilities are ageing, too small, or not fit-for-purpose. ACCHOs and community health services report being unable to start new programs or provide extra services to meet demand due to inadequate facilities. Recent investment in community health infrastructure has been erratic, with a sharp decline since 2010.⁹³

○ Invest in preventative health programs

The Victorian government can prevent unnecessary hospitalisations and illness by investing in prevention and health promotion. Chronic diseases are significant contributors to illness, disability and premature death, causing nine out of 10 Australian deaths.⁹⁴ Disadvantaged communities face higher risks of poor health and chronic disease, including people living on low incomes and in rural and remote areas.

The World Health Organisation estimates at least 80 per cent of all heart disease, stroke and diabetes is preventable, as are 40 per cent of all cancers.⁹⁵ The Commonwealth government's 2014 termination of the National Partnership Agreement on Preventive Health has led to fewer Victorian preventative health programs operating. The community health sector reports Victorian government health promotion and prevention funding has not grown in recent years.

○ Invest in more alcohol and drug rehabilitation services

The Victorian government can help more people overcome problem drug and alcohol use and reduce drug-related harm by making it easier for people in growth corridors and rural and regional Victoria to receive alcohol and drug treatment.

Alcohol and drug treatment helps people regain control of their lives and reengage with work, education, family and community. It can reduce hospital costs, drug-related harm, violence and welfare costs.

89 VICSERV, *Learn and Build in Barwon*, June 2015, p. 15.

90 Ibid, p. 11.

91 Australian Bureau of Statistics, *Estimates of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Australians*, June 2006 and June 2011.

92 VACCHO and Aboriginal Housing Victoria, *Submission to All things considered; Exploring options for Victoria's 30 year Infrastructure Strategy*, 2016.

93 Victorian Healthcare Association, *Futureproofing Victoria's health system*, 2016, p. 37.

94 Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, *Australia's Health 2014*, 2014, p. 94.

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

Alcohol and drug rehabilitation services in Victoria cannot meet demand and have long waiting lists. Alcohol and drug services report particularly high demand in regional Victoria, and in Melbourne's growth corridors.

In last year's state budget the government funded a new residential rehabilitation facility in the Grampians region. While this welcome funding helps meet demand in western Victoria, extra beds and facilities are still needed elsewhere.

○ Offer more needle and syringe programs

The Victorian government can reduce the spread of blood-borne viruses among injecting drug users by expanding access to needle and syringe programs.

International evidence shows needle and syringe programs do not encourage drug use or increase numbers of discarded syringes in public places.

Needle and syringe programs provide clean injecting equipment, education and information about health, wellbeing and drug-related harm, and are often injecting drug users' first contact point with the health system. They prevent the spread of diseases, including HIV and hepatitis C.

"Between 2000 and 2009 it is estimated that 96,667 hepatitis C and 32,050 HIV infections were averted through the provision of sterile injecting equipment."⁹⁶

International evidence shows needle and syringe programs do not encourage drug use or increase numbers of discarded syringes in public places.⁹⁷

Equitable local access to needle and syringe programs means operating outside business hours. The Victorian government can build on its recent Ice Action Plan investment in 20 needle and syringe program sites, by funding out-of-hours services and installing dispensing machines to all needle and syringe program sites in Victoria, including in rural and regional Victoria.

○ Resource the Aboriginal Health, Wellbeing and Safety Strategic Plan

The Victorian government can support healthy, culturally strong and resilient Aboriginal communities by adequately resourcing the Aboriginal Health, Wellbeing and Safety Strategic Plan and building on the successes of past plans.

VCOSS welcomed the introduction of the Victorian government's Koolin Balit Aboriginal Health Strategy 2012-22, and the development of statewide and regional action plans, governance structures, an evaluation strategy and workforce development plan.⁹⁸ The momentum, successes and investment so far achieved by Koolin Balit and the Human Services Framework can be carried into developing the new Aboriginal strategic plan.

The previous state government invested \$61.7 million over four years to 2017 for Koolin Balit. Extra resources can support the new plan's expanded scope, including housing, disability and family violence.

○ Invest in public dental health services

The Victorian government can help people access dental care earlier and prevent problems worsening by expanding the public dental scheme. Poor dental health causes pain, discomfort, embarrassment and difficulty participating in work and social activities. Many people cannot afford dental care, with out-of-pocket costs accounting for 60 per cent of Australian dental care spending.⁹⁹

The public dental system is under-resourced. Average general dental care waiting times have grown from less than 12 months in the June quarter of 2015 to more than 15 months a year later.¹⁰⁰

The Commonwealth government proposed closing the Child Dental Benefits Scheme (CDBS) and reducing spending on dental health in its 2016-17 budget. Under the CDBS, eligible children are offered private or public dental services including general check-ups, x-rays, fillings, cleaning and other preventative services. There is no waiting list for this scheme. Community health services warn the proposed replacement scheme risks moving children back onto the general waiting list, further increasing waiting times.

96 Department of Health, Australian Government, *Needle and Syringe Program*, accessed September 2016.

97 Ibid.

98 Victorian Council of Social Service, *Aboriginal Health and Wellbeing Plan Submission*, 2016.

99 Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, *Oral health and dental care in Australia, Key facts and figures 2015*, 2015, p. vii.

100 Department of Health and Human Services, *Average time to treatment for general dental care – Quarterly data, 1 April 2015 – 30 June 2016*.

FURTHER STRATEGIES

Develop a sexual and reproductive health strategy

The Victorian government can promote good health by developing a comprehensive, statewide sexual and reproductive health strategy.

Good sexual and reproductive health supports people's enjoyment of social relationships and their general physical and mental wellbeing. It is more than the absence of disease or dysfunction, and includes positive and respectful approaches to sexuality, the ability to have a responsible, safe and satisfying sex life, the capability to reproduce and the freedom to decide if, when and how to do so.

Victoria does not have a statewide sexual and reproductive health strategy or overarching evidence-based framework for research, policy and program development and delivery. In the absence of this, responses to sexual and reproductive health risk being siloed or primarily focused on treating disease and behaviour change.¹⁰¹

Progress reforms to the alcohol and drug funding model and central intake service

The Victorian government can help people with drug and alcohol problems by progressing the recommendations of the recent review of the alcohol and other drug (AOD) treatment system.

In 2015 the Victorian government commissioned an independent review of the new alcohol and drug treatment arrangements, arising from the 2014 recommissioning process. The review found some elements of the recommissioned AOD system present barriers to people accessing the system, including catchment-based intake and assessment.¹⁰²

The review recommended assessment be devolved to treatment services, and a comprehensive review be undertaken of the drug treatment funding model. At the time of writing, the Victorian government has released an exposure draft of proposed new alcohol and other drug program guidelines.

Help marginalised groups access mental health support and alcohol and drug treatment

The Victorian government can reduce health inequities by making it easier for people to access mental health support and alcohol and drug treatment, especially people experiencing homelessness, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and other marginalised groups. Services with established relationships with these groups are well placed to provide 'soft entry points' to the system.

Community mental health AOD service reforms have made it more difficult for people experiencing homelessness to enter the system, as they are less likely to access the new formal central intake assessment system. For example, one survey reported services had difficulty engaging Aboriginal, culturally diverse and LGBTI people because of system inflexibility, cultural inappropriateness and 'reduced front doors'.¹⁰³

Data from the Barwon NDIS trial site shows people in unstable housing are overrepresented among people with mental illness found to be ineligible for the NDIS.¹⁰⁴ The NDIS structure makes it more difficult for organisations to reach out to help marginalised groups.

Develop the peer workforce and peer education models

Peer education involves knowledge sharing between people of similar age, background or experience. The peer workforce employs people with lived experience, for example as mental health consumers or carers, or as injecting drug users.

Peers can be a trusted and credible source of information, and can be more approachable than traditional health services, making people feel their experiences are valued and understood. This can reduce social isolation, combat stigma and improve service access. Peer education can change attitudes and behaviours, and help link people with health and other support services.

More can be done to support the growth of innovative peer education models, and some programs are under threat. For example, the Commonwealth government recently defunded YEAH, an organisation delivering youth-led sexual health education to young people.

101 Women's Health Association of Victoria, *Proposal for Victorian Sexual and Reproductive Health Strategy*, 2013.

102 Aspex Consulting, *Independent review of new arrangements for the delivery of mental health community support and alcohol and drug treatment services; Final Report*, September 2015.

103 Victorian Alcohol and Drug Association, *Challenges and opportunities: Key findings from VAADA's Alcohol and other drug sector recommissioning survey*, August 2015.

104 VICSERV, *Learn and Build in Barwon: The impact of the NDIS scheme on the provision of mental health services in the Barwon launch site*, June 2015, p. 6.

Improve access to health services for rural and regional Victorians

The Victorian government can reduce health inequities experienced by people living in rural and regional areas by reducing barriers to accessing healthcare.

Victorians living in rural and regional areas experience higher rates of socioeconomic disadvantage and have poorer overall health status than other Victorians, including lower life expectancy and cancer survival rates.

One way of improving health outcomes for rural and regional Victorians is by ensuring they can reliably access health services when they need them. Many people have to travel to regional centres or metropolitan areas to see specialists or get the care they need.

An NCOSS study of access to community transport for people with chronic illness¹⁰⁵ found that 77 per cent of respondents in dialysis units, and 81 per cent of respondents in cancer centres reported that their patients experienced some level of difficulty accessing transport to and from treatment. The greatest burden of unmet non-emergency transport needs was borne by older people, people on low incomes, people living in rural and regional areas, people with a disability, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and people from culturally diverse backgrounds.

Transport barriers continue to adversely affect people's timely access to services. People in rural and regional Victoria are highly dependent on cars for their travel. With fewer public or alternative transport options, most people feel their only option is to drive a car. More accessible, affordable and coordinated public transport would help reduce health inequities among rural and regional Victorians. Alternative forms of transport, including community transport and health transport services can also be further explored.

Emerging technologies may provide opportunities for improving regional Victorians' access to health services and greater opportunities for person-centred care. It is not, however, a replacement for other, face-to-face forms of service delivery. The digital divide means some people have more limited access and technology-related skills than others.

¹⁰⁵ NCOSS and Community Transport Organisation, *Staying Alive: Transport to treatment for people living with a chronic disease*, 2015.



Help children, families and young people thrive



The early years of life are a critical period for children's healthy development. They shape the way people learn, develop and form relationships.¹⁰⁶ Children's early positive and negative experiences have long-lasting effects.¹⁰⁷ Exposure to risk can compromise children's early development, while positive early experiences help build resilience and a positive trajectory. Positive experiences include secure caregiver-child attachments, stimulating home learning environments, access to health and community services, and attendance at high quality early learning services.¹⁰⁸

Investing in prevention and intensive early intervention can improve children and young people's health and wellbeing, particularly those facing disadvantage, and help reduce the prevalence of abuse and neglect.

Investing in prevention and intensive early intervention can improve children and young people's health and wellbeing.

The Victorian government can invest more in support for children from conception to two years of age, providing strong foundations for their future health and wellbeing. Effective prevention and early intervention produces better outcomes for children than interventions later in life, and are more cost-effective.¹⁰⁹

An inclusive universal health, education and care system, strongly linked with secondary and tertiary services, can effectively reach Victorian families, and provide targeted, additional support to those experiencing disadvantage. Empowering local communities to solve complex issues, including socioeconomic disadvantage, can improve children and families' wellbeing, and reduce abuse and neglect risks.

The Victorian government can provide supportive, stable out-of-home care environments for children and young people unable to live with their families, and give them the same opportunities as their peers to engage in education and employment, and lead successful lives.

Budget investments

○ Empower young people leaving care

The Victorian government can empower young people leaving out-of-home care by providing holistic support and care until at least age 21. Giving young people similar opportunities as their peers to successfully and gradually transition into adulthood helps them achieve better health, employment and quality of life.

VCOSS, along with many other organisations, are part of the Home Stretch campaign,¹¹⁰ calling on the Victorian government to extend the leaving care age from 18 to 21.

This would allow young people to remain in home-based care or supported accommodation if they wish, and include the option of extending this to age 25 if necessary. The government can provide reimbursements to carers, or case management to the young person, along with resources to access education or employment.

Young people across the community increasingly live with their families well into their 20s while studying or saving a home deposit.¹¹¹ Many receive emotional and financial support after leaving home.

Yet when turning 18, young people in out-of-home care must leave their care providers and homes, and become entirely independent. Many do not have a formal leaving-care plan,¹¹² and post-care services are not coordinated, flexible or consistently available to them.

106 T Moore, *Understanding the nature and significance of early childhood: New evidence and its implications*, Presentation at Centre for Community Child Health seminar Investing in Early Childhood—the future of early childhood education and care in Australia, Centre for Community Child Health, The Royal Children's Hospital, Melbourne, 2014.

107 M McDonald, T Moore and R Robinson, *Policy Brief No. 26: The future of early childhood education and care services in Australia*, Murdoch Children's Research Institute, Centre for Community Child Health, 2014.

108 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, 2015.

109 Ibid.

110 The Home Stretch, website, accessed 31 October 2016.

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

112 P Mendes, G Johnson and B Moslehuddin, 'Effectively preparing young people to transition from out-of-home care: An examination of three recent Australian studies', *Family Matters*, No. 89, Australian Institute of Family Studies, 2011.

Young care leavers have often previously experienced abuse and neglect, multiple care placements and may have limited social networks,¹¹³ which can leave them ill-equipped to cope with an abrupt transition to adulthood. They can face difficulties finding affordable and secure housing, enrolling in further education, getting a job, and gaining life skills.

Young care leavers have often previously experienced abuse and neglect, multiple care placements and may have limited social networks, which can leave them ill-equipped to cope with an abrupt transition to adulthood.

Young care leavers are at greater risk of experiencing housing instability or homelessness, unemployment and low incomes, poorer educational achievement, justice system involvement, poor physical and mental health, substance abuse, social isolation, and early pregnancy and parenthood.^{114, 115}

They need a holistic support program, including stable living arrangements to build life skills, manage their health and pursue further education, training or employment.

Several international jurisdictions extend care for young people after 18, including the United Kingdom and California.^{116, 117} They help people pursue education, training, employment and stable housing.¹¹⁸ Every dollar spent extending support for young care leavers is estimated to return \$1.84.¹¹⁹

○ Help families care for their children with intensive early years support

The government can support children's healthy early development and strengthen families' ability to care for their children by increasing investment in intensive early intervention and prevention programs, from birth to the early years of life.

Children up to the age of four are at greatest risk of being placed on child protection orders.¹²⁰ Early parenting services help families facing disadvantage build their skills, develop nurturing environments, form strong caregiver-child attachments and connect to community support. They reduce parents' stress, anxiety and depression levels, and the likelihood of child abuse and child-behavioural problems.¹²¹

Services cannot keep up with growing demand for intensive early parenting services and prevention programs, particularly for families of children with complex needs who are at risk of entering, or are already involved with the child protection system. There are few services in growth corridors, such as Wyndham, where 76 new babies are born every week.¹²²

Funding to expand early parenting services, integrated with early parenting services in child and family hubs and other community and health services, helps families find support before problems escalate. Evidence-based prevention programs build parents' skills and challenge parental gender norms, while specialist centres and intensive services such as residential and day-stay programs wrap support around families, helping them negotiate complex challenges. The Victorian government can expand investment in the full continuum of support services.

Culturally responsive services, developed with and for local Aboriginal communities, improve Aboriginal child and family outcomes and prevent children entering child protection. Partnership models between Aboriginal community-controlled organisations and early parenting experts help build local knowledge and skills to create resilient families and communities. Examples of these models include the Bumps to Babes and Beyond program in Mildura. The Victorian government can increase investment in these types of partnership models.

113 P Mendes, P Snow and S Baidawi, *Young people transitioning from out-of-home care in Victoria: Strengthening support services for dual clients of Child Protection and Youth Justice*, Monash University, Melbourne, September 2012.

114 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.

115 P Mendes, G Johnson and B Moslehuddin, Op Cit.

116 Deloitte Access Economics, *Raising our children: guiding young Victorians in care into adulthood*, Anglicare Victoria, April 2016.

117 Scottish Government, *Staying Put Scotland: Providing care leavers with connectedness and belonging*, Edinburgh, October 2013.

118 Deloitte Access Economics, *Raising our children: guiding young Victorians in care into adulthood*, Anglicare Victoria, April 2016.

119 Ibid.

120 Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, *Child protection Australia 2014-15, Child welfare series no. 63. Cat. No. CWS 57*, Canberra, 2016, p. 39.

121 Queen Elizabeth Centre and Mallee District Aboriginal Services, *Bumps to Babes and Beyond Evaluation*, 2014, p. 16.

122 Australian Bureau of Statistics, *Regional Statistics by LGA 2010-2014, Annual, Wyndham (C)*, 2016.

○ Promote early development for children experiencing disadvantage with playgroups

The Victorian government can foster children's early development by expanding supported playgroups and increasing community playgroup participation. Playgroups help children learn and develop in their first few years of life, prior to formal early childhood education. They can improve children's learning and social skills, and better prepare them for kindergarten and school.¹²³

Children not attending playgroups are more likely to be developmentally vulnerable at school entry.¹²⁴ Supported playgroups strengthen parent-child relationships, build parents' skills and confidence, expand their social networks and connect them to health and community services.

Playgroups exist on a continuum, from parent-led community playgroups, to professionally-led supported playgroups supporting families experiencing disadvantage, to more intensive supported playgroups for families experiencing significant vulnerability, such as those at risk of entering the child protection system.¹²⁵

Community playgroups are an effective way to reach many families otherwise without support. The Victorian government can work in partnership with Playgroup Victoria so community playgroups are available to more families. The government can expand the Great Start funding model to mentor and resource new playgroups, and better integrate them with other early years services.

Supported playgroups are only delivered in 34 of Victoria's 79 local government areas. Expanding supported playgroups across Victoria would help more families facing complex challenges. Intensive supported playgroups include a family support worker and an early childhood worker. The Victorian government can fund intensive supported playgrounds to support children's development and strengthen the wellbeing of families with complex needs.¹²⁶

○ Empower Aboriginal communities to care for Aboriginal children and families

The Victorian government can improve Aboriginal children and families' health and wellbeing and reduce the number of children entering out-of-home care by resourcing Aboriginal community-controlled organisations (ACCOs) to deliver prevention, early intervention and out-of-home care services. The government can work with ACCOs to progress the Commission for Children and Young People's 2016 Aboriginal children in out-of-home care inquiry recommendations.¹²⁷

ACCOs are best placed to deliver services to their communities, but can only do so with resources to expand their work and sustainably grow their workforce.

Aboriginal families are significantly over-represented in the child protection system, with Aboriginal children 12 times more likely to be in out-of-home care.¹²⁸ While recent investments to improve outcomes for Aboriginal children and families are welcome, more can be done to better support families and prevent children entering the child protection system, and to nurture Aboriginal children's identity and culture.

ACCOs are best placed to deliver services to their communities, but can only do so with resources to expand their work and sustainably grow their workforce. The Victorian government can develop a workforce plan, including funding for Aboriginal workers to undertake formal qualifications, and support for organisations to recruit Aboriginal workers and provide on-the-job training. ACCOs can help redesign the child protection system, including through the Roadmap for Reform process. A non-competitive funding environment for Aboriginal services allows more flexible funding models and stronger partnerships between agencies delivering family-centered wrap-around services.

123 K Hancock, D Lawrence, F Mitrou, D Zarb, D Berthelsen, J Nicholson and 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*, Vol. 37, No. 2, 2012.

124 T Gregory, Y Harman-Smith, A Sincovich, A Wilson and S Brinkman, *It takes a village to raise a child: The influence and impact of playgroups across Australia*, Telethon Kids Institute, South Australia, 2016.

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

126 Playgroup Victoria Inc., *Policy Brief 5: Playgroups and child protection*, Playgroup Victoria Inc., 2014.

127 Commissioner for Children and Young People, *Always was, always will be Koori Children: Systemic inquiry into services provided to Aboriginal children and young people in out-of-home care in Victoria*, 2016.

128 Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, *Child Protection Australia 2014–15*, *Child Welfare Series No. 63*, 2016, p. 44.

The Victorian government can maintain targeted care funding packages to prevent Aboriginal children and young people entering, or help them transition out of, residential care. Assisting ACCOs to deliver these packages, and supporting growth in the number of Aboriginal kinship and foster carers can improve the wellbeing of Aboriginal children in out-of-home care.

The Victorian government can fund meaningful Aboriginal cultural plans to help children retain cultural connections. Community organisations advise that promised funding is not enough. Plans need increased brokerage funding for content delivery, such as cultural activities and return-to-Country visits.

The Victorian government can continue to support Aboriginal children in out-of-home care to transition to the care and case management of ACCOs. This includes transferring guardianship of Aboriginal children from the Department of Health and Human Services to ACCOs by working towards the full implementation of section 18 of the Children, Youth and Families Act 2005.

○ Help foster and kinship carers to create supportive home environments

The Victorian government can better support carers so more children and young people in out-of-home care live in stable and supportive home-based placements. This includes increasing foster and kinship allowances and providing carers with comprehensive training, development and therapeutic support. This would help address the crisis being caused by the rapidly growing number of children coming under care and protection orders,¹²⁹ combined with a growing shortage and reduction in the number of foster carers.¹³⁰

Foster carer allowances do not meet the real costs of caring for children and young people, falling short by about \$4,000 a year.¹³¹ Up to 60 per cent of potential foster carers are deterred by financial costs.¹³² Half of kinship carers report financial stress.¹³³ The foster care

system has five care allowance levels, based on the department's assessment of each child.¹³⁴ However, kinship carers are automatically assigned to the lowest care allowance level, regardless of their circumstances or the complexities faced by children in their care.

Foster carer allowances do not meet the real costs of caring for children and young people, falling short by about \$4,000 a year.

Children and young people entering the out-of-home care system have increasingly complex needs.¹³⁵ Foster and kinship carer training does not sufficiently equip carers with the skills to support children, particularly for traumatised children. The recently announced foster and kinship carer training strategy¹³⁶ improves targeted and comprehensive training, development and therapeutic support.

○ Help children and families access timely interventions

The Victorian government can help families access timely, effective early intervention services, and reduce the number of children entering the child protection system by increasing funding to meet child and family services demand.

There has been significant growth in both the number of referrals and the complexity of cases received by Child and Family Information, Referral and Support Teams (Child FIRST) and Integrated Family Support Services (IFS).¹³⁷ The number of child protection reports has doubled in the last seven years,¹³⁸ and is expected to keep rising due to population growth, and greater community awareness and reporting.

Early intervention services help divert children and families from protective care, but funding has not kept pace with the growth in demand. Services are forced to concentrate on assisting children, young people and families in crisis, reducing early intervention provision.¹³⁹

129 Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, *Child protection Australia 2014-15*, *Child welfare series no. 63. Cat. No. CWS 57*, Canberra, 2016, p. 63.

130 In 2014-15, 620 Victorian households exited foster care and only 392 households commenced care.

131 Foster Care Association of Victoria, *Claims for Improvement Manifesto: July 2016 Victorian foster care*, 2016.

132 Berry Street and Foster Care Association of Victoria, *Save Foster Care*, accessed September 2016.

133 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.

134 Department of Health and Human Services, *Care allowances and other financial support for carers*, June 2016.

135 ACIL Allen Consulting, *Professional Foster Care: Barriers, opportunities and options*, Melbourne, 2013.

136 Victorian Government, *Media release: Boosting Support for Victorian Carers*, 9 September 2016.

137 Victorian Auditor-General's Office, *Early Intervention Services for Vulnerable Children and Families*, May 2015, p. x.

138 Ibid, p. 1.

139 Ibid, p. vii.

More funding would allow services to meet increasing demand and intervene early. It can be accompanied by providing families better access to specialist services including alcohol and other drug, mental health and housing services, so they can get help before problems escalate and require the involvement of child protection services.

FURTHER STRATEGIES

Help prevent young women from experiencing forced marriage

The Victorian government can better support young women at risk of, or who have experienced, forced marriage. This can include increasing forced marriage identification, and funding targeted prevention and intervention services for these girls and women. Forced marriage is against the law in Australia. While its prevalence in Victoria is unknown, emerging evidence suggests a significant and diverse range of Australian women and girls are at risk.¹⁴⁰

Forced marriage puts girls and women at risk of violence, mental health issues, economic abuse, social isolation, and compromises their engagement in education or work.¹⁴¹ It needs a holistic response including case management, accommodation, peer support, education, legal, health and family violence services, similar to the Safe House model in NSW for women who have experienced trafficking and slavery.¹⁴² Outreach and prevention services help young women obtain help before a forced marriage occurs. General services are not suitable for the specialist and individual needs of this group.

¹⁴⁰ M McGuire, *The Right to Refuse: Examining Forced Marriage in Australia*, Good Shepherd Youth & Family Service, Domestic Violence Victoria and Good Shepherd Australia New Zealand, Melbourne, 2014.

¹⁴¹ Ibid.

¹⁴² The Salvation Army, *Trafficking and Slavery Safe House*, accessed September 2016.



Develop skills and grow employment

Work is central to many people's lives, and enhances Victoria's society and economy. It provides people with an income and contributes to their sense of identity and wellbeing. It fosters social cohesion, helping people meet, learn from and collaborate with others from different backgrounds, offering alternative perspectives.

Many people are not securely employed and face multiple and complex barriers to work. They are more likely to face unemployment, underemployment, long-term unemployment and workforce exclusion. These can devastate people's lives, and undermine communities, leading to 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 rose from 4.8 per cent in May 2011 to 6.8 per cent in August 2014.¹⁴³ It has since declined to 5.7 per cent at August 2016,¹⁴⁴ but can go lower. Young people in Victoria still experience significantly higher unemployment rates, with the unemployment rate for 15–24 year olds at 13 per cent.¹⁴⁵

Budget investments

○ Develop a workforce participation plan

The Victorian government can help create meaningful employment opportunities, particularly for people facing disadvantage, by developing and funding a Workforce Participation Plan.¹⁴⁶

With just one job available for every four people looking for work in Victoria,¹⁴⁷ a high proportion of 15–29-year-olds not in any employment, education or training,¹⁴⁸ and

a stubbornly high long-term unemployment level,¹⁴⁹ more local job opportunities are needed to support people to find and keep work. While unemployment has fallen in Victoria over the past 18 months,¹⁵⁰ more can be done to reduce the multiple and complex barriers to employment facing many young people, people with disability, long-term unemployed people (including older long-term unemployed people), Aboriginal people and single parents. The VCOSS 2014 *Tackling Unemployment* paper outlines four interrelated strategies for overcoming these barriers so more people can get back to work:

- Build people's skills and capabilities
- Create the jobs people need, where they need them
- Develop inclusive and flexible workplaces
- Improve labour mobility and availability.¹⁵¹

○ Expand Local Learning and Employment Networks

The Victorian government can keep young people in education and training and reduce youth unemployment by investing more in Local Learning and Employment Networks (LLENs) to develop local solutions. With high youth unemployment, LLENs play an important role in helping young people develop skills and find work.

Every year LLENs facilitate more than 850 local partnerships between schools, training organisations, employers and community agencies. Between 2011 and 2014, they helped about 250,000 young people.¹⁵² LLENs link schools with other education providers, health and community services, industry, local government and state government. They empower communities to design and deliver 'joined-up' local solutions responding to community needs and local service gaps.

¹⁴³ Australian Bureau of Statistics, *Labour Force Status*, 6202.0, August 2016.

¹⁴⁴ Ibid.

¹⁴⁵ Ibid.

¹⁴⁶ Victorian Council of Social Service, *Tackling Unemployment*, 2014.

¹⁴⁷ Australian Bureau of Statistics, *Job Vacancies Australia*, 6354.0, May 2016 and Australian Bureau of Statistics, *Labour Force Australia*, 6202.0, May 2016.

¹⁴⁸ Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, *Investing in Youth: Australia, Investing in Youth*, OECD Publishing, Paris, 2016, p. 46.

¹⁴⁹ Australian Bureau of Statistics, *Labour Force Australia: Detailed - electronic delivery*, 6291.0.55.001, August 2016.

¹⁵⁰ Ibid.

¹⁵¹ Victorian Council of Social Service, *Tackling Unemployment*, October 2014.

¹⁵² LLEN Network, *Funding cuts hit youth hard*, 2014.

LLENs can lift school reengagement rates and tackle youth unemployment by building partnerships between the education, community and employment sectors. Returning LLENs funding levels to 2014 levels of \$48 million (indexed), over four years, would help expand this network.

○ Invest in new Education First Youth Foyers

The Victorian government can help young people facing disadvantage complete their education and find stable and secure housing and employment by investing in more Education First Youth Foyers.

The government has established Education First Youth Foyers, co-located with TAFE Colleges at Southbank, Glen Waverley, Richmond, Broadmeadows and Shepparton. These foyers are providing improved education, employment and housing outcomes for young people who are experiencing homelessness. A five-year evaluation will be completed by 2019, but they are already showing substantial improvements for young people in rates of education completion, exits to stable and secure housing, and employment.

The association between people's failure to complete Year 12 or equivalent and poor employment and housing outcomes is well established. On any given night there are around 4000 young people homeless across Victoria and more than half these are disengaged from education and employment. The number of years people spend in school is a significant predictor of future employment and earnings. Young people with low educational attainment are more likely to be unemployed, less likely to be in full-time work and are more likely to experience lower wages.

Young people who leave school before Year 12 face many potential hardships. Early school leavers, particularly those without post-school qualifications, are at greater risk of low income, unemployment and dependency on government welfare. Education First Youth Foyers can help address these issues.

FURTHER STRATEGIES

Introduce a public sector employment target

The Victorian government can lead by example and create jobs for people facing disadvantage by setting public sector employment targets for groups who are

underrepresented in the workforce or experiencing high rates of unemployment.

Only 54 per cent of people with disability participate in the Victorian labour force, compared with 82 per cent of people without disability.¹⁵³ Negative employer attitudes remain the biggest barrier to employment.¹⁵⁴ The Victorian State Disability Plan 2017–2020 can help address this by including a public sector employment target.

One in five Aboriginal people are unemployed in Australia.¹⁵⁵ While the public sector has had some success in employing Aboriginal people, more can be done.

At June 2015, Aboriginal employees comprised about 1 per cent of the Victorian public sector workforce,¹⁵⁶ and 0.7 per cent of the Victorian population.¹⁵⁷ However, the Aboriginal public sector workforce has a lower median salary than the whole public sector workforce and Aboriginal employees have shorter lengths of service. The forthcoming Victorian Public Sector Commission's Aboriginal Employment Strategy could help address this.

Support young people with complex needs to enter the workforce

The Victorian government can help young people with multiple and complex needs enter the workforce by funding services targeted to them. Many young people face multiple and complex barriers to employment, such as limited education and training, poor literacy, poor physical or mental health, inadequate or no housing, parenthood, and a lack of living skills. Wraparound services provide affordable housing, education or training, employment support, living skills training, health services and connections to community. These assist young people with complex needs build a positive future.

Expand social procurement to create jobs

The Victorian government can create targeted employment opportunities by setting up purchasing arrangements that help businesses, community organisations and social enterprises to employ Victorians facing barriers.

Social procurement uses the government's purchasing power to generate positive social outcomes while efficiently purchasing goods, services and infrastructure. They can help create apprenticeships and traineeships for unemployed young people, support social enterprise, and reach targets for Aboriginal and disability employment.

¹⁵³ Australian Bureau of Statistics, *Disability and Labour Force Participation*, 4433.0.55.006, 2012.

¹⁵⁴ National People with Disabilities and Carer Council, *Shut Out: The experience of people with disabilities and their families in Australia*, Australian Government, May 2012.

¹⁵⁵ Australian Bureau of Statistics, *National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Social Survey 2014-15*, 4714.0, 2016.

¹⁵⁶ Victorian Public Service Commission, *The state of the public service in Victoria 2014-2015*, p. 14.

¹⁵⁷ Australian Bureau of Statistics, *Census of Population and Housing 2011*.



Empower people with disability, older people and carers

People with disability have the right to participate fully and equally in the community, but are often excluded by systemic disadvantage. This disadvantage is not created by their impairments, but by the physical and social environment around them. Barriers can pervade all aspects of people's lives, including access to health and disability services, education, employment, the built environment, housing, transport, information and community participation.¹⁵⁸ As many as 45 per cent of people with disability live in or near poverty.¹⁵⁹

Barriers can pervade all aspects of people's lives, including access to health and disability services, education, employment, the built environment, housing, transport, information and community participation.

The NDIS represents profound change, empowering people to exercise choice and self-determination. The NDIS must be accessible to every eligible person, adequately cover the state, and be accompanied by access to independent advocacy.

The NDIS does not tackle every barrier faced by people with disability. The Victorian government can work with people to shift community attitudes and remove the social, physical and legal hurdles preventing people with disability having the same opportunities as everyone else.

Carers provide invaluable support to people with disability and older people. This support is often provided at the expense of the carers' own health and wellbeing, and compromises their ability to participate in education, work or community activities.¹⁶⁰ The government can improve carers' lives, and help them continue caring, by maintaining their access to carer-specific support services, and adequately recognising their contribution.

Older people face higher risks of poverty compared with other age groups, with 14.8 per cent of people over the age of 65 living below the poverty line.¹⁶¹ With an ageing population and aged care reforms, Victoria faces challenges in maintaining older people's standard of living and adequately supporting them in retirement. This includes maintaining access to affordable and secure housing, high quality healthcare and aged care, transport and community services.

Budget investments

Empower people with disability through independent advocacy services

The Victorian government can empower people with disability and their carers to protect their rights and control their lives by increasing independent disability advocacy services. While the recent investments in disability advocacy funding following the Victorian parliamentary inquiry into abuse and neglect is welcome, one-off funding needs to be backed up by a long-term financial commitment.

Strong, independent advocacy helps people with disability, and their families and carers, to exercise their human rights, be involved in decisions, and meet their needs. It promotes wider awareness of disability rights and safeguards against abuse and neglect. It supports people's rights to access services, the built environment, public transport, housing, education, employment, justice, legal services, and information and communication systems.

Disability advocacy includes self-advocacy, individual advocacy, family advocacy, citizen advocacy, systemic advocacy, legal advocacy, group advocacy and carer advocacy. These all complement one another, have different purposes and are suitable in different circumstances.

158 National People with Disabilities and Carer Council, *Shut Out: The experience of people with disabilities and their carers in Australia*, 2009, Australian Government, p. 3.

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

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

161 Australian Council of Social Service, *Poverty in Australia 2014*, 2014, p. 18.

But there are not enough disability advocacy services. The Victorian government funds only one out of every 600 Victorians with disability to visit an advocate each year.¹⁶² Disability advocacy funding is not matched with any meaningful demand measure, and demand will likely rise during the NDIS rollout. The Victorian Ombudsman's 2015 report into abuse in disability services confirmed advocacy remains underfunded and underutilised. It recommended increasing funding and conducting a comprehensive needs assessment.¹⁶³

Independent advocacy can help people navigate the NDIS rollout, understand their rights and entitlements, assist in preparing for NDIS planning, and help access internal and external review processes. VCOS members report people using disability advocacy services during the NDIS planning process are more likely to have their needs met.

Carers may face disadvantage, social isolation and discrimination if their caring is unsupported or unrecognised.

People ineligible for individual NDIS funding packages use advocacy to access mainstream systems. Disability advocacy also helps people with inclusion and human rights violations not remedied by the NDIS.

Carers may face disadvantage, social isolation and discrimination if their caring is unsupported or unrecognised. Independent advocacy helps carers navigate complex systems, and address the cumulative disadvantage they face.¹⁶⁴ Advocacy helps carers secure the Carer Payment or Carer Allowance, respite and health services, employment, education and secure housing.

Through investing in advocacy, the Victorian government can support the needs of groups with specific diagnoses, such as people with an acquired brain injury, intellectual disability, autism or complex communication difficulties. It can recognise different advocacy needs of specific population groups, including women, children and young people, Aboriginal people and people from culturally and linguistically diverse communities. Specialist advocacy services can be 'expert advisors', and share their knowledge of inclusive practice with other services.

Investment can expand disability advocacy coverage in rural and remote areas, and reach out to underserved people and communities.

○ Ensure people with disability receive continued support

The Victorian government can provide service continuity for people with disability by ensuring they continue to receive the same or better service quality during and after the NDIS transition.

Of the 1.1 million Victorians with disability,¹⁶⁵ only about 105,000 are eligible for the NDIS.¹⁶⁶ VCOS members fear many people with disability will 'fall through the cracks' in the transition to the NDIS. They are particularly concerned for people with mental health conditions, people aged over 65, and people with disability who are ineligible for the NDIS.

The Victorian government can help maintain health and disability service delivery for people ineligible for the NDIS. It can act as a systems steward to better coordinate health and disability services.

The market-driven nature of the NDIS can leave gaps in service delivery, particularly in rural and regional areas. VCOS members advise some rural areas are already underserved, and shifting from the block funding model may make this worse.

Members advise the NDIS is not consistently being delivered as intended in rollout areas. Some families are being rushed to develop their child's care plans, to meet NDIS participant intake targets. This can lead to children, young people or adults with disability missing out on support they are entitled to. The Victorian government can work with the Commonwealth government to ensure people with disability receive high quality services and full service coverage in Victoria, particularly in rural areas.

The NDIS shifts state and Commonwealth responsibilities, creating uncertainty about the continuity of Information Linkages and Capacity Building (ILC) type services and highly specialised programs supporting people with disability and mental illness, such as RuralAccess, MetroAccess and Deafaccess services, the 'Slow to Recover' program, and the 'Disability and Family Violence Crisis Response Initiative'. Effective Victorian-based initiatives should be retained.

162 Victoria funds 1700 people for individual advocacy (Victorian Government, *Victorian Budget 16-17, Budget Paper No. 3: Service Delivery*, p. 258) of the 1.1 million people with disability in Victoria.

163 Victorian Ombudsman, *Reporting and investigation of allegations of abuse in the disability sector: Phase 1 - the effectiveness of statutory oversight*, June 2015.

164 Carers Victoria, *Discussion paper on Individual Advocacy and Caring Families*, October 2011, p. 9.

165 Australian Bureau of Statistics, 'Disability, Ageing and Carers, Australia: Victoria 2012' Ageing and Carers, Australia: Summary of Findings, 2012, Cat. No. 4430.0, ABS, 2013.

166 Council of Australian Governments, *Schedule A: Bilateral Agreement between the Commonwealth and Victoria for the transition to an NDIS*, 2015, p. 4.

○ Improve public transport accessibility

The Victorian government can help more people reach employment, education, and health and community services by investing in applying universal design to public transport. This supports people with disability, older people, parents travelling with young children, and people with shopping trolleys and luggage.

Victoria suffers a significant legacy of inaccessible public transport infrastructure and vehicles due to underinvestment over many decades. Progress on achieving milestones under the Disability Standards for Accessible Public Transport has stalled, with the state's public transport system unlikely to achieve 90 per cent compliance by the legally required date of 31 December 2017. Our public transport system is not adapting to our changing population, with more older people requiring public transport options as they age, and more people with disability likely to require greater transport options once their basic needs are met by the NDIS.

Victoria suffers a significant legacy of inaccessible public transport infrastructure and vehicles due to underinvestment over many decades.

Universal design principles should be built into public transport procurement. Disability advocates report consultation on design of infrastructure and vehicles is being undertaken after procurement has already been decided. This often 'locks in' inaccessible features and limits the ability to make changes or develop 'work-arounds' for inaccessible designs.

VCOSS members also report increasing congestion on public transport is compromising people's ability to use it, especially older people and those with mobility impairments.

○ Invest in community transport

The Victorian government can improve transport for people with mobility difficulties by expanding community transport services. This supports a range of people, including those with disability and older Victorians.

Community transport is the 'missing link' in Victoria's transport system. It can be more cost-effective than taxis, ride-sourcing or local bus travel, especially in rural and regional Victoria. Because it is delivered by mission-driven, not-for-profit organisations, it can be more sensitive to customers' diverse needs.

Victoria lags behind other states and territories in developing community transport services. Community transport in NSW and Queensland, for example, delivers millions of customer journeys and even manages local public transport bus contracts. With changes to Home and Community Care services and the introduction of the NDIS, Victoria's community transport is under threat, potentially resulting in people being forced to use high-cost, poor quality alternatives, or have no transport options at all.

FURTHER STRATEGIES

Make the NDIS accessible to all eligible people

The Victorian government can help all eligible people access the NDIS by ensuring information and services are welcoming, culturally safe, gender responsive and engaging for underserved or hard to reach communities. This will help engage people with disability from Aboriginal communities, CALD communities, those in rural areas and those experiencing disadvantage such as homelessness.

Strategies include undertaking outreach activities to engage isolated people or communities, and supporting people on low incomes to obtain relevant disability assessments required for NDIS applications. Increasing the number of Aboriginal and CALD employees in disability services, building the cultural competency of all staff, and adopting inclusive practices improves services' cultural safety. NDIS information can be made more accessible to fully include everyone with disability. Online communication does not reach everyone, particularly those most marginalised. The Victorian government can also work with the Commonwealth and other states to change NDIS eligibility so asylum seekers can access it.

Empower children with disability and developmental delay through high quality early childhood intervention

The Victorian government can empower children with disability or developmental delay to optimise their learning, development and wellbeing by investing in high quality early childhood intervention (ECI) services. The NDIA has endorsed the National Guidelines for Best Practice in Early Childhood Intervention,¹⁶⁷ but funding can help the entire early childhood intervention sector translate and embed these principles.

Developing resources and tools can help maintain high quality, consistent services for children and families. For example, provider self-assessment tools and factsheets can help inform families when selecting providers, and training professionals can improve their practice delivery. This can be supported by developing formalised, accredited ECI training for all ECI professionals.

167 Early Childhood Intervention Australia, *National Guidelines: Best Practice in Early Childhood Intervention*, 2016.

The government can assist families and children receiving ECI services to make a smooth transition to the NDIS through continued support for the Victorian ECI sector to prepare for the changes. NDIS readiness funding¹⁶⁸ is only available to June 2017, but the sector requires continued support during the NDIS rollout period, to be ready to operate.

Support carers' health and wellbeing

The Victorian government can support carers' health and wellbeing and help them continue caring by providing carer-specific service continuity and developing a whole-of-government, statewide carer strategy.

Informal carers make an enormous social contribution across Australia, caring for an estimated 1.9 billion hours each year. This care is valued at \$60.3 billion,¹⁶⁹ and allows many people to remain living in their own homes and communities. Yet people often care at the expense of their own health and wellbeing, compromising their participation in education, work and community activities.¹⁷⁰

Too often, carers have limited awareness of available services, experience difficulty navigating service systems, are not identified as carers, and do not receive referrals to services that would assist them.¹⁷¹ Carers have higher rates of disability or long-term health conditions than others,¹⁷² but are often not identified as people needing disability or health support.

To support carers' wellbeing and allow them to keep caring, the Victorian government can provide carer-specific support, regardless of the age or diagnosis of the person they care for. This includes maintaining funding for the Victorian Support for Carers Program during and after the transition to the NDIS, and the Commonwealth Home Support Program.¹⁷³

The upcoming statewide Carers Statement will consider how to best support people's unique and specific needs as carers. To be most effective, the carer strategy will need to be appropriately resourced, co-designed with carers, and have a clear vision and targets, including progress towards a whole-of-government carer strategy. It can align with other relevant strategies including Victoria's Mental Health Plan and State Disability Plan.¹⁷⁴

The statement should reflect the breadth of carers' experiences, including young carers and those caring for people with mental illness.

Prevent violence, abuse and neglect of people with disability

VCOSS has welcomed the Victorian government's announcement of a 'zero tolerance approach' to abuse of people with a disability, in response to the recommendations from the Victorian Parliamentary Inquiry into Abuse in Disability Services and the Victorian Ombudsman's Investigation into Disability Abuse Reporting. Like every Victorian, people with disability have the right to be free from all forms of violence, abuse and neglect. Cases are significantly under-reported due to people's fears of making complaints, and poor processes.¹⁷⁵

Systemic change is required in disability services, and VCOSS looks forward to working with its member organisations and the government on making the announced measures a reality.

Including independent financial safeguards in the NDIS Quality and Safeguards Framework and strengthened independent advocacy will also help prevent people with disability from experiencing financial abuse.

Develop an older Victorians strategy

The Victorian government can support a productive and connected ageing community by developing an integrated whole-of-government strategy for older Victorians, building on the 'Ageing is everyone's business' work by the Commissioner for Senior Victorians.

Victoria has no overarching strategy to meet the changing demands of an ageing population. With the proportion of the population over 65 expanding rapidly, the Victorian government can bring together different portfolios to accommodate an ageing society and enable people to lead happy, productive and dignified lives as they age.

168 Victorian Government, NDIS, accessed November 2016.

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

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

171 Victorian Auditor-General's Office, *Carer Support Programs*, Victoria, 2012.

172 Australian Bureau of Statistics, 'carers- characteristics', *Disability, Ageing and Carers, Australia: Summary of Findings, 2012*, Cat. No. 4430.0.

173 Carers Victoria, *Take Action for Victorian Carers: Pre-Budget Submission 2016-2017*, Carers Victoria, 2016.

174 Ibid.

175 Victorian Ombudsman, *Reporting and investigation of allegations of abuse in the disability sector: Phase 2 – incident reporting*, December 2015.



Cut the cost of living

Many Victorians relying on income support and low wages cannot meet basic living expenses.

Many private renters on income support spend a high proportion of their income on rent, and are forced to cut back their food and health spending. Many income support recipients struggle to pay utility bills and under-use utilities as a way of coping. For example, many age pensioners cannot afford a phone or an internet connection.¹⁷⁶

For people in the paid workforce, the underemployment rate is at record levels of 8.6 per cent. This is partly related to the increasing shift towards part-time employment.¹⁷⁷ One third of Australians living in poverty have a job.¹⁷⁸ Underemployed households are increasingly seeking the help of community organisations to buy food, pay utility bills, cover children's education costs, and negotiate mortgage and credit card debt.¹⁷⁹

Steep rises in the cost of basic goods and services in the last 10 years have affected all low-income Victorians.

Steep rises in the cost of basic goods and services in the last 10 years have affected all low-income Victorians. While inflation rose 27.9 per cent from 2005 to 2015, this overall figure masks more dramatic price rises for utilities (89 per cent), health services (76 per cent), education (66 per cent) and urban transport fares (40 per cent). Goods and services prices depressing inflation were largely

discretionary, often imported items (such as audio-visual equipment), with little bearing on low-income households' ability to afford food, energy and other essentials.¹⁸⁰

The Victorian government can take a multi-pronged approach to easing cost of living pressures for people on low incomes, by reducing their biggest household expenses, including energy (through energy efficient housing), education, credit costs, transport and housing.

Budget investments

○ Cut people's bills with energy efficiency

The Victorian government can help people on low incomes cut their cost of living by funding expanded home energy efficiency programs.

People on low incomes face a 'triple whammy'. They are more likely to live in poor quality, energy-inefficient homes, have little ability to pay rising energy costs,¹⁸¹ and to have health problems exacerbated by poor housing, such as respiratory illness.¹⁸²

People renting are more likely to live in homes with low energy efficiency. Half of Victoria's rental homes are effectively uninsulated,¹⁸³ particularly affecting the state's 276,000 low-income private rental households.¹⁸⁴ Social housing tenants are also likely to live in old, energy-inefficient homes.¹⁸⁵

176 W Smith and D Hetherington, *The adequacy of the age pension in Australia: An assessment of pensioner living standards*, *Per Capita*, September 2016, pp. 18-28.

177 Australian Bureau of Statistics, *Labour force, Australia*, August 2016, Cat. No. 6202.0.

178 Australian Council of Social Service, *Poverty in Australia 2014*, 2014, p. 32.

179 J Hancock and S Oakley, *The rising cost of under-employment: Building a policy and program response to improving social inclusion and community for under-employed households*, 10 November 2014.

180 South Australian Council of Social Service, *Cost of living update No. 25: December Quarter 2015*, February 2016, pp. 3-4.

181 Between 2011 and 2015, Victorian electricity bills increased by approximately 64%, and gas bills increased by approximately 40%: See Australian Energy Regulator, *State of the Energy Market 2015*, *Australian Competition and Consumer Commission*, 2015, p. 19.

182 E Baker, L H Lester, R Bentley and A Beer, 'Poor housing quality: Prevalence and health effects', *Journal of Prevention & Intervention in the Community*, Vol. 44:4, 2016, p. 229.

183 Department of Sustainability and Environment, *Housing condition/environmental performance of rental properties in Victoria*, July 2009.

184 Australian Bureau of Statistics, *Housing occupancy and costs 2013-14: Additional tables – low income rental households*, Cat. No. 4130.0.

185 Just over 40% of Victoria's public housing stock is more than 30 years old, and 14% of housing stock is now close to obsolescence: See Victorian Auditor-General's Office, *Access to public housing*, March 2012, pp. ix, 5.

With poor-quality housing and unsustainable energy price rises, many low-income households cannot afford their energy bills. Electricity disconnection rates are almost double their 2010-11 rate, and Victoria's disconnection rate is the highest in Australia.¹⁸⁶ Unaffordable energy bills are a leading cause of financial hardship.¹⁸⁷

Energy-efficient housing helps to cut people's bills and promotes good health, including by protecting against cold and heat.¹⁸⁸

With poor-quality housing and unsustainable energy price rises, many low-income households cannot afford their energy bills. Electricity disconnection rates are almost double their 2010-11 rate, and Victoria's disconnection rate is the highest in Australia.

The Victorian government can expand successful programs to improve low-income households' energy efficiency, such as the home retrofit and advice programs delivered by the Brotherhood of St Laurence, Kildonan UnitingCare, the Yarra Energy Foundation, and the South East Councils Climate Change Alliance.

Low-income households can also use No Interest Loan Schemes (NILS) and affordable appliance schemes to purchase energy efficient appliances, heating and hot water systems. With more funding, NILS can reach more people, including private and social housing tenants. Subsidies can also help low-income households enjoy the benefits of energy efficiency.¹⁸⁹

SOUTH EAST COUNCILS CLIMATE CHANGE ALLIANCE DELIVERS WARMTH AND SAVINGS

Low-income households in Melbourne's south-east have enjoyed energy savings under a successful retrofit and behaviour change program. Each retrofit cost \$2,885 and achieved averages of 10-11 per cent cuts in total energy use, 13-18 per cent less gas use and similarly cheaper bills, 22 per cent cheaper lighting costs, and a 1.6 degree increase in winter living room temperatures. Householders were very satisfied with the program.¹⁹⁰

The government can connect trusted service providers to people needing better energy efficiency. Many people fall through the cracks because support is not locally available,¹⁹¹ and because of reluctance on the part of some energy retailers to assist hardship customers to improve their energy efficiency.¹⁹²

Energy-efficient housing also helps mitigate climate change effects by reducing the use of non-renewable energy sources, and allows households to better cope with increasing cold and heat extremes. Without government support, most low-income households cannot adequately protect themselves against climate change.

186 Essential Services Commission, *Energy retailers comparative performance report: Customer Service, 2014-15*, Essential Services Commission, May 2016, pp. 41-42.

187 Kildonan UnitingCare, *CareRing report: Supporting vulnerable customers together, 1 January—31 December 2015*, 2016; Financial and Consumer Rights Council, *Rank the energy retailer: Victorian financial counsellors rank the financial hardship policies and practices of energy retailers*, August 2016, p. 16.

188 E Baker, L H Lester, R Bentley and A Beer, 'Poor housing quality: Prevalence and health effects', *Journal of Prevention & Intervention in the Community*, Vol. 44:4, 2016, pp. 220-221.

189 For example, see the Home Energy Efficiency Upgrade Program conducted by the Brotherhood of St Laurence, which used a combination of subsidies and affordable loans.

190 South East Councils Climate Change Alliance, *Energy Saver Study – Low income energy saver direct care and motivators project – Final Report – Executive Summary*, 2 May 2016.

191 Financial and Consumer Rights Council, *Rank the energy retailer: Victorian financial counsellors rank the financial hardship policies and practices of energy retailers*, August 2016, p. 18; consultation with VCOSS members.

192 Energy and Water Ombudsman Victoria, *A closer look at affordability: An Ombudsman's perspective on energy and water hardship in Victoria*, March 2015, pp. 18-19; Financial and Consumer Rights Council, *Rank the energy retailer: Victorian financial counsellors rank the financial hardship policies and practices of energy retailers*, August 2016, pp. 17-18; Essential Services Commission, *Supporting customers, avoiding labels: Energy hardship inquiry final report*, February 2016, pp. 25-27.

HOME RETROFITS IMPROVE ENERGY EFFICIENCY WITHOUT MAJOR COSTS

Improving thermal efficiency with low-cost window coverings and draught-seals can significantly reduce energy bills. Low-income households are more likely to own old and inefficient refrigerators, and cheap but inefficient heaters. Installing energy-efficient appliances is one of the best ways to reduce electricity bills, even more so than building improvements.¹⁹³

○ Help Victorians in financial crisis by developing an emergency relief fund

Emergency relief is a safety net for people living on low incomes or experiencing a temporary financial crisis. As well as relieving financial stress, emergency relief is a referral pathway to housing, health and financial counselling services.

As well as relieving financial stress, emergency relief is a referral pathway to housing, health and financial counselling services.

Emergency relief agencies are facing increasing demand for their services. Income support remains inadequate for basic living expenses, Victoria has a rising homelessness rate, and the number of refugees living in Victoria will increase over coming years. The Victorian government can help meet this demand through dedicated funding for emergency relief services. Victoria is one of the few states and territories not directly funding emergency relief. Funds can be allocated through a state-based emergency relief program.

○ Prevent energy disconnections and hardship by increasing and indexing the Utility Relief Grant cap

The Victorian government can reduce energy hardship by increasing the Utility Relief Grant (URG) cap. The URG has been capped at \$500 since 2010. While designed to help people at risk of disconnection, the \$500 cap now only covers less than half the average \$1074 debt faced by hardship customers on payment plans.¹⁹⁴ The URG would be more effective in its aim if increased to be commensurate with two typical quarterly gas, electricity or water bills.

The URG cap should be indexed against energy and water prices. There has not been an increase in the cap over the past six years despite electricity prices increasing by more than 64 per cent over the same period.¹⁹⁵

○ Help asylum seekers access water and energy affordably

Victoria is home to more than 10,000 asylum seekers living in the community on bridging visas. This group faces extreme financial hardship and relies on the support of community organisations to survive, however they must pay full price for energy and water, being ineligible for concessions. Affording this is beyond the ability of people with restricted work rights, who receive little or no income assistance.¹⁹⁶

The Victorian government can reduce living costs for asylum seekers and their children by extending the 17.5 per cent energy and water concessions to asylum seekers living in the community. This is consistent with the concessions available to asylum seekers for public transport use, and the extension of health and TAFE services to asylum seekers.

○ Increase people's access to No Interest Loan Schemes (NILS)

Low-income earners have less ability to deal with unexpected or 'big ticket' household expenses. NILS loans are a lifeline in these circumstances, financing basic household appliances, education and medical expenses. NILS loans divert people away from predatory credit providers and goods rental services, with 42 per cent of NILS users either stopping or reducing their use of such credit sources after receiving a NILS loan.¹⁹⁷

193 Sustainability Victoria, *Energy Efficiency upgrade potential of existing Victorian Houses*, December 2015.

194 Essential Services Commission, *Supporting customers, avoiding labels: Energy Hardship Inquiry Final Report*, February 2016, p. 16.

195 Australian Energy Regulator, *State of the Energy Market 2015*, Australian Competition and Consumer Commission, 2015, p. 19.

196 Jesuit Social Services, *The living conditions of people seeking asylum in Australia*, Jesuit Social Services, December 2015, pp. 2-4.

197 Centre for Social Impact/Good Shepherd Microfinance, *Life changing loans at no interest: An outcomes evaluation of Good Shepherd Microfinance's No Interest Loan Schemes (NILS)*, March 2014, p. 8.

NILS loans save people money, increase their financial independence and standard of living, reduce stress levels and anxiety, and improve their confidence, self-esteem, physical health, personal relationships and community participation. They can also be used by parents to buy technology devices to help their children's education. For every dollar invested in a NILS loan, \$1.59 worth of social and economic value is created. The financial capacity of many NILS customers also improves, with almost half following a budget, paying bills on time, saving money, maintaining emergency savings funds and comparison-shopping more often.¹⁹⁸

The typical NILS customer is a woman living below the poverty line, reliant on government income support. More customers rent social housing than private housing.¹⁹⁹ VCOSS understands there is sufficient capital available to expand the reach of NILS, but the scheme is constrained by a lack of operational funding. More Victorian government funding would allow NILS to support more people.

○ Increase people's access to financial counselling

Over the past five years there has been a significant increase in the number of people seeking financial counselling in Victoria. However, there has been no corresponding real funding increase to these services.

Melbourne's western suburbs, and the Colac, Bass Coast and Horsham districts are particularly neglected.

Financial counselling reduces people's debt and helps them manage it, prevents legal action (which relieves pressure on the community legal sector), increases housing security, and improves people's health by reducing stress and anxiety.²⁰⁰ Community-based financial counselling diverts vulnerable people away from predatory credit providers.

The Victorian government can help people navigate their way out of financial stress by increasing funding for financial counsellors. VCOSS understands Melbourne's western suburbs, and the Colac, Bass Coast and

Horsham districts are particularly neglected. Some funding can be directly targeted at financial counselling for people in energy hardship, which comprises more than 40 per cent of most financial counsellors' workload.²⁰¹ Other priority areas are financial counselling for older Victorians, and early intervention programs reducing mortgage stress rates.

The Victorian government can tackle the impact of predatory debt relief services, which often worsen people's financial situations, by funding public education campaigns about the availability of free, community-based financial counselling, or by funding financial counsellors to advertise their services.

○ Help people facing disadvantage afford public transport

Affordable public transport allows people to attend job interviews, health appointments, look for housing, and access work, education, community services and support networks. The Victorian government can support people facing disadvantage by reviewing fares and concessions, aiming for public transport costs to be proportionate and fair for people living on low incomes. Compared with the general population, people on low incomes tend to be more reliant on public transport, and have to travel further from their homes to access workplaces and services.²⁰²

Extending the Access Travel Pass to a broader group of people would improve public transport affordability. At present, the pass is only available to people unable to use Myki readers due to a permanent physical disability, cognitive condition or mental illness. The pass could be extended to people with a mental or intellectual disability more generally, to children from low-income families using public transport to attend school,²⁰³ and to homeless people. This would allow some of Victoria's most disadvantaged people to access public transport, avoid distressing interactions with public transport inspectors, and avoid becoming embroiled in the over-burdened infringements system.

198 Centre for Social Impact/Good Shepherd Microfinance, *Life changing loans at no interest: An outcomes evaluation of Good Shepherd Microfinance's No Interest Loan Schemes (NILS)*, March 2014, pp. 8-9.

199 Ibid.

200 N Brackertz, *I wish I'd known sooner! The impact of financial counselling on debt resolution and personal wellbeing*, The Salvation Army Australia, 2012; Kildonan UnitingCare, *CareRing report: Supporting vulnerable customers together, 1 January—31 December 2015, 2016*.

201 Financial and Consumer Rights Council, *Rank the energy retailer: Victorian financial counsellors rank the financial hardship policies and practices of energy retailers*, August 2016, p. 16.

202 Infringements Working Group, *On track to fairer fares and fines: Public transport position paper*, p. 6.

203 Westjustice, *Fare go: Myki, Transport poverty and access to education in Melbourne's west*, March 2016.

○ Help children facing disadvantage benefit from physical activity

Many children and young people from low-income families are missing out on the benefits of physical activity for health, educational development, and social integration and cohesion, because sport and recreation are too costly for their families. There is a strong correlation between sport participation and family income.²⁰⁴

Many children and young people from low-income families are missing out on the benefits of physical activity

The Victorian government can help disadvantaged children benefit from physical activity by introducing concessions for sport and recreation fees, uniforms and equipment for children and young people from low-income families.

FURTHER STRATEGIES

Develop an energy education strategy

Low-income and vulnerable customers want to make informed choices about energy retailers and energy use, but often do not know where to look for information. Education around energy terminology, consumption, discounts and concessions, and the price comparison website can be beneficial.²⁰⁵ The Victorian government can develop a comprehensive energy education strategy, including long-term funding for community energy education programs, and information about the Energy Compare website.

Bridge the digital divide

Access to digital devices and online technology increasingly underpins social and economic participation, whether this involves accessing government services, consumer information, financial services, health services, information about children's progress at school, or emergency management advice. Staying connected with community and service networks improves people's wellbeing and social cohesion. Low-income households, older people and people with disability have relatively low digital inclusion rates, meaning they find it more difficult to access and afford digital services than other groups.²⁰⁶

The Victorian government can bridge the digital divide by investigating ways of improving digital inclusion for low-income Victorians, including funding community-scale internet access, expanding internet access for social housing tenants (building on the success of projects like the Wired Community@Collingwood project), and examining whether concessions can be made available for internet services and digital devices.

Minimise gambling harm

Victoria has about 30,000 poker machines, often concentrated in communities facing disadvantage.²⁰⁷ The Victorian government can examine options to reduce the prevalence of poker machines, especially in communities facing disadvantage, and introduce extra measures to reduce the harms associated with them.

204 VicHealth, *Participation in physical activity: A determinant of mental and physical health—research summary*, October 2010.

205 Australian Energy Market Commission, *2016 Retail competition review – final report*, 30 June 2016, pp. 46-47, 52-53.

206 J Thomas, J Barraket, S Ewing, T MacDonald, M Mundell and J Tucker, *Measuring Australia's digital divide: The Australian digital inclusion index 2016*, Swinburne University of Technology, 2016.

207 C Livingstone, C Kipsaina and A Rintoul, *Assessment of poker machine expenditure and community benefits claims in selected Commonwealth Electoral Divisions*, UnitingCare Australia, April 2012.



Build a fairer justice system

The Victorian justice system can do more to help people experiencing poverty and disadvantage. It can do more to divert people from the justice system and resolve problems before they escalate. An equitable justice system, when timely and affordable legal assistance is available to all, can help every Victorian resolve their legal problems and prevent them worsening.

Most people in prison have previously experienced several forms of disadvantage, including homelessness, abuse, drug and alcohol use, mental illness and unemployment.

Too often, people facing disadvantage end up in prison, instead of getting help at the right time. Victoria can do more to keep people out of prison and resolve the underlying issues leading to offending. Preventing people offending helps make the community safer and more secure for everyone.

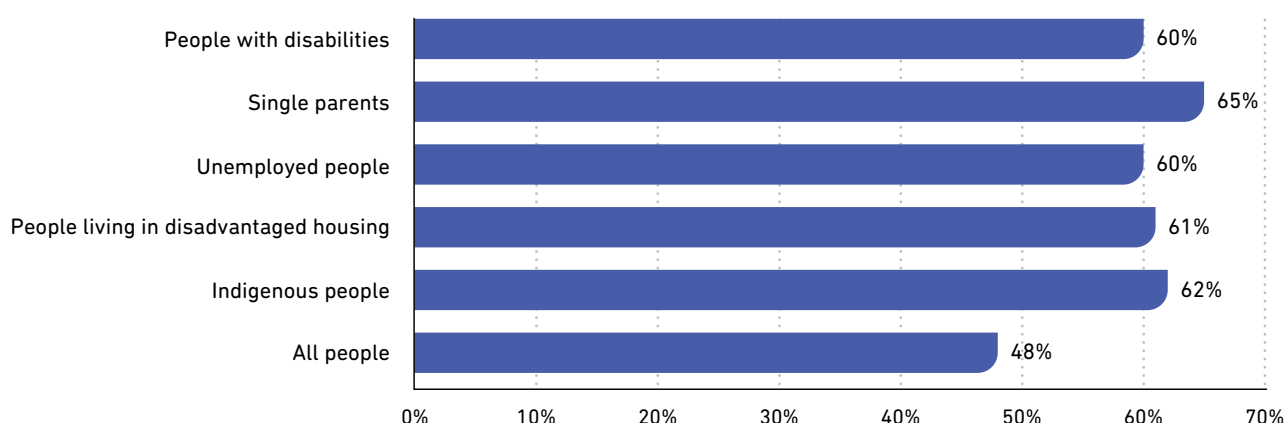
Most people in prison have previously experienced several forms of disadvantage, including homelessness, abuse, drug and alcohol use, mental illness and unemployment.

"Few women in custody are serious violent offenders, most have caring responsibilities, many are the victims of violent relationships and offend under the influence of drugs or to support drug use."²⁰⁸

Of those who serve time in prison, too many return repeatedly. Prisons can be a place to help offenders rehabilitate and transition effectively, with appropriate programs aimed at targeting the disadvantage that in the majority of cases, underlies offending. Prison is the most expensive response we have to criminal behaviour.²⁰⁹ Alternatives to prison, such as diversion, cautioning and intensive community support programs can be more effective and less expensive than prison.

Victoria's prisons now cost more than \$1 billion per year, but increasing prison expenditure has not reduced crime rates or improved community safety.

FIGURE 4: Prevalence of legal problems, Victoria



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

²⁰⁸ Victorian Ombudsman, *Investigation into the Rehabilitation and Reintegration of Prisoners in Victoria*, September 2015, p. 2.

²⁰⁹ Ibid.

Budget investments

○ Improve access to legal assistance

The Victorian government can empower people to resolve their legal problems by investing more in community legal centres (CLCs).

Equal access to justice, when everyone receives adequate legal assistance and a fair hearing, protects human rights and reduces inequality. Legal assistance targeted as early as possible to people who need it, can resolve legal issues that otherwise lead to more problems and higher costs.

People facing disadvantage have a higher prevalence of legal needs. They experience legal problems more often, and may face multiple problems at the same time. They often cannot afford legal representation. People with disability, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, people experiencing homelessness and single parents experience legal problems at higher rates than the general community.²¹⁰

More than 80 per cent of people helped by CLCs earn less than \$26,000 each year.

Addressing legal problems early can prevent them escalating into serious issues such as people losing homes through loan foreclosure, can prompt landlords to make reasonably required repairs, can protect women from violent partners, and challenge workplace bullying or discrimination.

However, a 'justice gap' is growing, between people able to recognise their legal rights and afford legal representation, and those who cannot. Too many Victorians forego their rights because they cannot access affordable, timely, appropriate legal assistance.

CLCs help people facing disadvantage or poverty, but who may not qualify for legal aid, mainly with civil and family law issues, including family violence. More than 80 per cent of people helped by CLCs earn less than \$26,000 each year.²¹¹

Victoria has a strong CLC network providing location-specific generalist and specialist assistance. CLCs use on-the-ground experience to identify emerging issues and trends, and develop new ways of tackling disadvantage and unmet need. Twenty CLCs have duty lawyers for family violence intervention orders in 29 Magistrates' Courts. They mainly assist victims to secure protection.

CLCs foster legal and non-legal service integration, such as the Eastern Community Legal Centre's Family Violence Integration Project. Some work with health or maternal child health services to provide early, more effective support for women and children.

However, the legal assistance sector is under-funded and CLCs cannot meet the growing demand for their services. This is despite welcome Victorian government investment in the CLC Assistance Fund and family violence duty lawyer services. CLCs face a 26 per cent federal funding cut over the next three years.

A National Association of Community Legal Centres survey found 33,616 people were turned away from Australia's 74 CLCs in 2012-13.²¹²

The recent Access to Justice Review²¹³ recommended increasing state legal assistance funding, prioritising duty lawyer services, family violence legal services, Aboriginal legal services, and integrated service provision partnerships.

The Productivity Commission recommends closing "the most pressing gaps" with a national \$200 million injection for civil legal assistance services.²¹⁴ It finds the Commonwealth can contribute 60 per cent, with the rest coming from state and territory governments.

Victoria receives about 23 per cent of national legal aid and community legal centre funding,²¹⁵ so meeting the Productivity Commission's recommendation just for this "most pressing gap" would require the Victorian government to contribute an extra \$18 million each year.

○ Provide 'throughcare' to people in prison

The Victorian government can help people avoid returning to prison by helping them find appropriate housing, healthcare and employment on leaving.

210 C Coumarelos et al. *Legal Australia Wide Survey; legal need in Australia*, Law and Justice Foundation of NSW, 2012, p. xxiii.

211 Community Law Australia, *Unaffordable and out of reach; the problem of access to the Australian legal system*, 2012.

212 National Association of Community Legal Centres, *Memorandum to the Productivity Commission: Access to justice arrangements inquiry*, December 2013.

213 Department of Justice and Regulation, *Access to Justice Review: Summary report*, September 2016, p. 38.

214 Productivity Commission, *Access to Justice Arrangements, Inquiry Report Overview*, 2014, p. 741.

215 The Allen Consulting Group, *Review of the National Partnership Agreement on Legal Assistance Services, Working paper two: Evaluation of legal assistance services*, p. xiv and p. 22.

Unstable or inappropriate housing dramatically heightens the risk of people returning to prison soon after release. Less than two per cent of prisoners have access to designated transitional housing for the first year after release. Alcohol and drug treatment, mental health services and employment support help people transition safely and effectively back into the community.

Community support services can also start working with people well before they leave prison. In-prison support can transition into community support, providing stability for people leaving prison.

While the ReConnect program already supports outreach to serious offenders and people with high transitional needs, only a small number of people leaving prison can access this program.

○ Fund a Koori youth cautioning program

The Victorian government can divert young Aboriginal people from crime by funding a Koori youth cautioning project.

Aboriginal young people are about 11 times more likely to be under youth justice supervision than non-Aboriginal young people.²¹⁶ Cautioning can be used by police for less serious offending. It lowers the likelihood of repeat offending, especially when it involves referring young people to appropriate diversionary programs.²¹⁷

Cautioning can be used by police for less serious offending. It lowers the likelihood of repeat offending.

A Koori cautioning pilot commenced in Morwell and Mildura in 2007. It worked to increase police cautioning rates for Aboriginal young people, and decrease future police contact rates using diversion strategies. The Victorian Aboriginal Legal Service followed up Aboriginal young people coming into police contact, to help divert them from the criminal justice system and link them with appropriate support.

The pilot concluded in 2008, resulting in a 45 per cent increase in cautioning in Mildura and a 32 per cent increase in Morwell.²¹⁸ Despite being a key initiative in the Aboriginal Justice Agreement Phase 3, the program has not secured ongoing funding or been expanded to other regions.

○ Provide women leaving prison with transitional beds

The Victorian government can help women leaving prison reintegrate into the community by providing them with transitional beds.

The Judy Lazarus Transition Centre provides beds for 25 minimum security male prisoners nearing prison release or parole eligibility. It helps these men reintegrate into the community with intensive case management, focusing on support for employment, accommodation, life skills and family relationships.²¹⁹ It reduces people's likelihood of returning to prison and increases their likelihood of finding work.²²⁰

"The recidivism rate for people who have spent time in the Judy Lazarus Centre is about 10 per cent, compared to the overall rate of 44 per cent."²²¹

No similar facility is available for women leaving prison. Access to a transition centre would help women prepare for release, prevent reoffending and reduce homelessness and unemployment rates after release.

○ Fund organisations to help people with outstanding fines and debt

The Victorian government can help people with outstanding fines and debt by adequately funding community organisations to establish the Work and Development Permit program.

The Work and Development Permit program is being developed by the Victorian Department of Justice and Regulation. It allows people facing disadvantage to discharge outstanding fines and debt by volunteer work, or agreed programs, training and treatments. A similar scheme in NSW has been found to reduce reoffending, costs to government and feelings of stress and hopelessness among participants.²²²

216 Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, *Victoria; youth justice supervision in 2014-15*, 2016.

217 Jesuit Social Services, *Thinking Outside; Alternatives to remand for children*, 2013.

218 Victorian Aboriginal Legal Service, *Practical Recommendations for Diversion*, March 2016.

219 Victorian Ombudsman, *Investigation into the Rehabilitation and Reintegration of Prisoners in Victoria*, September 2015, p. 126.

220 M and P Henderson and Associates, *Evaluation of the Judy Lazarus Transition Centre; Final Report*, 2009, p. 4.

221 Victorian Ombudsman, *Investigation into the Rehabilitation and Reintegration of Prisoners in Victoria*, September 2015, p. 127.

222 NSW Law Reform Commission, *Penalty Notices Report 132*, 2012, p. 9.

The scheme involves community organisations acting as sponsors, helping to determine people's eligibility, working with them to plan appropriate activities, and monitoring participation. However, VCOSS understands the Victorian plan does not include funding for community organisations to participate.

In NSW, Legal Aid NSW and the Aboriginal Legal Service NSW/ACT were funded to:

- Produce information and education materials for potential participants and organisational sponsors
- Advise people with fines and debt, and assist them to apply for the scheme
- Promote the scheme and assist community organisations to register as sponsors.

The scheme will likely be more successful in Victoria if community organisations are provided funding to participate.

○ Expand the Drug Court and other problem-solving courts

The Victorian government can target the reasons people offend by expanding problem-solving courts. Problem-solving courts, or specialty courts, are designed to tackle specific problem behaviours, where traditional criminal justice responses have not worked. While models differ, problem-solving courts are often less adversarial and focus more on treatment and rehabilitation than punishment.

In Victoria, problem-solving courts include the Drug Court of Victoria, the Family Drug Treatment Court, Koori Courts and the Neighbourhood Justice Centre.

For example, the Drug Court in Dandenong sentences offenders with drug dependencies who have committed an offence under the influence of alcohol and drugs, or to support their addiction. It provides a collaborative, multi-departmental response to drug dependence and related crime. An evaluation of the Drug Court program found participants experience greater wellbeing and community connection, improving their chances of staying off drugs and alcohol, and substantially reducing their risk of reoffending.²²³

*"The reoffending rate for [Drug Court] participants was 31 per cent lower within the first 12 months and 34 per cent within the first 24 months, than for the control group."*²²⁴

Most problem-solving courts in Victoria do not cover the whole state. The community can benefit from wider coverage and increased access to these court models.

VCOSS welcomes the recent expansion of the Drug Court to Melbourne, but Victorians living outside the Dandenong and Melbourne Magistrates' Court catchments will still not have access to it.

Neighbourhood Justice Centre

The Neighbourhood Justice Centre (NJC) was established in 2007 and operates in the City of Yarra. It provides innovative ways of dealing with crime and other forms of social disorder, disadvantage and conflict in the local area.

The NJC works to create a more integrated, responsive and accessible justice system by engaging with the local community and addressing the underlying causes of offending.

Evaluation showed NJC offenders are less likely to reoffend than people appearing before other courts, have higher completion rates of community-based orders and unpaid community work, and greater confidence in the justice system.²²⁵ The crime rate in the Yarra area dropped 12 per cent in the two years after the NJC commenced operation, making the whole community safer.

FURTHER STRATEGIES

Develop a justice reinvestment crime prevention strategy

The Victorian government can address the underlying reasons people commit crime by adopting a justice reinvestment strategy. Justice reinvestment empowers communities experiencing disadvantage to find local solutions to the economic and social risk factors behind offending.

Most of Victoria's prisoners have experienced significant disadvantage, including poverty, homelessness, intergenerational trauma and long-term unemployment. They are more likely to have an acquired brain injury,

223 KPMG, *Evaluation of the Drug Court of Victoria; Final Report, prepared for the Magistrates' Court of Victoria*, December 2014, p. 4.

224 Ibid.

225 Department of Justice, *Evaluating the Neighbourhood Justice Centre in Yarra*, 2010.

cognitive disability or serious mental illness. They are more likely to come from communities experiencing entrenched disadvantage. Half of all Victorian prisoners come from 6 per cent of Victorian postcodes.²²⁶

"63 per cent of male prisoners and 45 per cent of female prisoners were unemployed at the time they entered prison."²²⁷

"Six per cent of male and 14 per cent of female prisoners finished high school."²²⁸

A whole-of-government justice reinvestment crime prevention strategy can bring together work to reduce crimes involving family violence, as well as child protection, diversion programs and community engagement.

Addressing these disadvantages can prevent crime and reduce recidivism. Adopting a justice reinvestment approach can reduce offending rates, reduce spending on prisons and keep communities safer.

A whole-of-government justice reinvestment crime prevention strategy can bring together work to reduce crimes involving family violence, as well as child protection, diversion programs and community engagement.

Raise the age of criminal responsibility from 10 to 12 years

The Victorian government can prioritise supporting children's development by developing age-appropriate justice system responses to child offenders, and raising the minimum age a child can be charged with a criminal offence to 12 years.

Neurologically, children under the age of 12 are yet to sufficiently develop the social, emotional and intellectual maturity necessary for criminal responsibility. Child offenders under 12 are likely to have experienced entrenched disadvantage, abuse and neglect, which links to their offending behaviour. Involvement in the criminal justice system at a young age can lead to further harm and repeated criminal behaviour, and can be a missed opportunity to intervene to address the underlying reasons for the child's offending.²²⁹

Raising the minimum age of criminal responsibility to 12 years would bring Victoria into line with United Nations (UN) recommendations. The UN advocates for an absolute minimum of 12 years and supports a higher age of 14 or 16 as being a more suitable response.

Legislate to enshrine diversion for young people

The Victorian government can help steer young people away from the justice system by guaranteeing the youth diversion program long-term, and enshrining this in legislation. Youth diversion programs help young people address the underlying causes of their offending, by tackling issues including substance use, mental ill-health, educational disengagement and training.²³⁰

VCOSS welcomes the state government's \$6.7 million investment in expanding the youth diversion pilot program statewide. The pilot program, operating in seven Victorian courts, has received consistently positive feedback from Victoria Legal Aid, police prosecutors and the broader court network, with 94 per cent of participants successfully completing the program. Early findings indicate many positive effects for young people, including improved engagement in education, improved mental health, and better employment prospects.²³¹

However, Victoria remains the only state without a legislated court-based youth diversion scheme. Legislating the scheme would provide greater certainty for the program.

Introduce recidivism reduction targets

The Victorian government can help prevent people reoffending and returning to prison by setting a target of reducing the reoffending rate by 15 per cent. Reducing high reoffending rates requires improved rehabilitation programs for people in prison, and improved reintegration support for people leaving prison.

Victoria's recidivism rate is high, and is increasing. 2014-15 figures showed 44 per cent of people released from prison returned within two years, up from 34 per cent five years earlier.

Committing to a target to reduce reoffending provides transparency and accountability, encourages a collaborative approach across government and helps maintain the momentum for change. Other jurisdictions have been successful in reducing reoffending after

226 Catholic Social Services and Jesuit Social Services, *Dropping off the Edge* 2015, 2015.

227 Victorian Ombudsman, *Reintegration and Rehabilitation of prisoners*, 2015, p. 32.

228 Ibid, p. 150.

229 Jesuit Social Services, *Too much too young: Raise the age of criminal responsibility to 12*, October 2015.

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

231 Jesuit Social Services, *To address youth offending, we must look to the evidence of what works*, 25 July 2016.

introducing recidivism targets. For example, New Zealand is on track to meet its public target of reducing reoffending by 25 per cent by 2017, achieving an 11 per cent reduction between 2010 and 2014.

Progress the Access to Justice Review

The Victorian government can help people resolve legal problems and close the justice gap by making it easier for people to get legal assistance.

In particular, VCOSS welcomes the Access to Justice Review's recommendations to close the funding shortfall for legal assistance services and to expand collaborative partnerships between legal and community sector organisations. Health-justice partnerships are an example of this kind of integrated approach to service delivery, seeking to jointly tackle both legal and health and wellbeing issues.

Community sector submissions to the review highlighted the large numbers of people unable to access legal assistance services, and the need for targeted services for priority populations, including Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, rural and regional Victorians and people with disability.

Provide alternative avenues for resolving disputes and complaints

The Victorian government can help people resolve disputes and complaints and protect their rights by expanding ombudsmen and alternative dispute resolution schemes. Industry ombudsmen, and other external dispute resolution processes, resolve people's complaints with low-cost, informal pathways.²³²

These schemes can be expanded to industries with limited access to dispute resolution, such as Vocational Education and Training, taxis and retirement housing. In its submission to the Review of the Residential Tenancies Act 1997, VCOSS recommended the introduction of a Housing Ombudsman to mediate disputes between tenants and landlords.²³³

The Victorian complaints landscape is complex and confusing. Many people are not aware of ombudsmen and dispute resolution schemes, and how to access them.

*"Less than 40 per cent of people surveyed said they would bring a complaint to the Ombudsman."*²³⁴

The government can assist with investment to provide resources that help people understand the operation of these schemes, and pathways for accessing them, at the times they are most likely to experience problems.

²³² Productivity Commission, *Access to Justice Arrangements Overview Report*, September 2014, p. 11.

²³³ Victorian Council of Social Service, *Regulation of property conditions in the rental market; Submission to the issues paper for the Residential Tenancies Act 1997 review*, 2016.

²³⁴ Victorian Ombudsman, *Annual Report 2014-15*, p. 21.



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