



Building a better Victoria

Creating opportunity
and wellbeing

VCOSS
STATE BUDGET
SUBMISSION
2018-19





ABOUT VCOSS

The Victorian Council of Social Service (VCOSS) is the peak body of the social and community sector in Victoria. VCOSS members reflect the diversity of the sector and include large charities, peak organisations, small community services, advocacy groups, and individuals interested in social policy.

In addition to supporting the sector, VCOSS represents the interests of vulnerable and disadvantaged Victorians in policy debates and advocates for the development of a sustainable, fair and equitable society.

Authorised by

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VCOSS acknowledges the traditional owners of country and pays our respects to Elders past and present.

Images courtesy of North East Neighbourhood House Network: cover image (top right) and p. 26



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Foreword

Every Victorian should have the opportunity for a good life. We all want the chance to live healthy, secure and meaningful lives, with the dignity of a decent income and a place to call home.

Victoria is a generous, prosperous and beautiful place to live. But not every Victorian can gain the benefits of living here. Every day, Victorians are struggling to avoid poverty and disadvantage.

The *VCOSS State Budget Submission 2018-19* outlines a vision for a new Victoria. We provide a roadmap for the Victorian Government, with workable investments and policy solutions to grow the opportunity for every Victorian to maximise their potential.

We imagine a Victoria where everyone can live a good life, regardless of their background or individual circumstances; where there is less poverty and more opportunity, and where individual and community wellbeing is our measure of success. We also envisage a Victoria reconciled with our First Nations people, who can self-determine their futures under a lasting treaty.

To achieve this vision, we believe the Victorian Government should zero in on growing opportunities for individual and community wellbeing.

Wellbeing is both a driver and a measure of a successful society and, increasingly, is the central mission of modern government. It is the common thread between every individual facet of government.

Most importantly, the very pursuit of wellbeing can provide the foundation for a better Victoria. It gives us a new conceptual framework to measure our success, and a contemporary lens through which to view ourselves and assess policy initiatives.

In practical terms, growing opportunity for wellbeing means every Victorian must be able to live with dignity and meaning, including by getting a great education, staying healthy, living free from violence and abuse, having a roof over their head and securing a decent income.

Achieving this goal will require a genuine partnership between governments, the community sector, private industry and individual citizens.

We all have a part to play.

Only by working together will we build a better, fairer and more liveable Victoria.

Emma King
VCOSS Chief Executive Officer




KEY INITIATIVES:

12 steps for a better Victoria

1 **Develop the community services industry**

Begin allocating funding to implement the proposals developed by the 10-Year Community Services Industry Plan. See page 8.

2 **Waive fees for high-growth community services qualifications**

Waive fees for community services VET qualifications in high employment growth occupations for all Victorians facing barriers to employment or looking to retrain. See page 8.

3 **Accelerate social housing growth**

Develop a plan to deliver 30,000 new social housing properties over the next 10 years to ensure all Victorians have a safe, secure and affordable place to live. See page 16.

4 **Introduce minimum rental standards**

Define minimum health, safety and energy efficiency standards for all private rental homes, to save renters money and increase health and comfort. See page 17.

5 **Save community mental health**

Allocate additional funding to preserve community mental health rehabilitation services during and after the transition to the NDIS. See page 22.

6 **Embed Aboriginal self-determination**

Ensure Aboriginal organisations are funding adequately to ensure their communities' ongoing engagement in self-determination and treaty discussions. See page 24.

7 **Help students with disability thrive in education**

Overhaul the Program for Students with Disabilities to appropriately support all students with disability. See page 32.

8 **Replace child prisons with better alternatives**

Commit to closing Victoria's child prisons over the long-term and introducing a new system of youth justice, based on diversion, rehabilitation and intensive community support. See page 38.

9 **Increase focus on preventing family violence**

Fund evaluation and scale-up effective family prevention strategies. See page 44.

10 **Keep supporting young people after they leave state care**

Help young people leaving care develop independence by providing housing assistance and ongoing support until the age of 21. See page 52.

11 **Provide more funding for disability advocacy**

Increase disability advocacy funding to \$5.1 million annually so all Victorians with disability have a voice. See page 56.

12 **Assist Victorians struggling with housing and energy costs**

Deliver a comprehensive financial wellbeing package, with a focus on the needs of people facing debilitating housing and energy costs. See page 62.

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Invest in the jobs of the future

Our community services industry is vibrant and mature, with a proud history of supporting people facing poverty and disadvantage. It is also a major contributor to the Victorian economy, and is projected to be one of the fastest-growing jobs generators.

Community services industry growth delivers a double dividend. It creates new jobs and economic growth in its own right and, by reducing social and economic disadvantage, allows more people to participate in the social and economic life of the community. Community services is already an \$11 billion industry in Victoria, employing about 150,000 people¹.

Jobs growth is being fuelled by significant reforms and investments in family violence prevention, the National Disability Insurance Scheme (NDIS) and Victoria's Roadmap for reform: strong families, safe children package. Strong demand for community services such as aged care and child care is being driven by social and economic change.

Victoria can seize this opportunity to deliver economic benefits and create secure, well-paid jobs for the future. The Victorian Government can do this by playing a strong stewardship role in developing the community services industry to produce sustained economic growth and stable, skilled employment.





Develop the community services industry

RECOMMENDATION

Begin allocating funding to implement the proposals developed by the 10-Year Community Services Industry Plan.

To create sustainable, secure community sector jobs of the future, the Victorian Government will need to invest in industry development. Despite being one of the largest job creators in Victoria, the community services industry receives little industry development and training support compared with industries with much smaller job-creation roles, such as mining, manufacturing and agriculture.

VCOSS and the Department of Health and Human Services are currently developing a future-focused 10-Year Community Services Industry Plan to guide industry development over the coming decade.² It seeks to navigate the challenges of industry growth and change, while building professional capabilities and strong relationships between the Victorian Government and community services.

The Community Services Industry Plan will be sector-owned and led, in partnership with the Victorian Government. It will emphasise flexible, person-centred and place-based services, embedding data, evidence, outcomes and new technologies, while adopting best practice regulation and governance.

The plan will set out the industry's aspirations and develop strategies for sustainable growth and a skilled workforce. But the plan can only come to life when followed by strong investment to deliver on its promise. The Victorian Government should use this Budget to begin delivering investment to seize the community services growth opportunity.

Waive fees for high-growth community services qualifications

RECOMMENDATION

Waive fees for community services VET qualifications in high employment growth occupations for all Victorians facing barriers to employment or looking to retrain.

Given the high demand for community service workers, the relatively low pay of entry-level social sector jobs, and the potential of the sector to grow the Victorian economy, there is a strong case for waiving fees for community services training programs offered by selected high quality training providers.

Rapid expansion of the community service industry is creating strong demand for new 'job-ready' workers.

Rapid expansion of the community service industry is creating strong demand for new 'job-ready' workers. To build a quality workforce during a period of high worker demand, a structured pipeline of workers receiving high quality training in relevant qualifications is required.

Victoria needs better methods of attracting people to the industry to meet this workforce challenge. This requires improved pre-job education and training, including greater support for students to maintain their enrolment, enhanced professional development, and better on-the-job-training. Higher pay and career progression opportunities also help retain workers.

An immediate step is to make approved entry-level community services vocational education and training (VET) qualifications free for Victorians facing barriers to employment or currently looking to retrain. This fee waiver would apply irrespective of a person's existing qualifications.

Future Social Service Institute Scholarship Program

Early findings from a Future Social Service Institute (FSSI) evaluation of its scholarship program for the Certificate III in Individual Support indicate that under-represented groups, such as disengaged young people and single parents, are more likely to train for a career in social service work when fees are waived.

FSSI has been trialing a 'facilitated career structure' model, which gives prospective students facing disadvantage a scholarship for their first step into social services, and additional language, literacy and numeracy support. Once in the program, they are guaranteed a place in the RMIT

Diploma of Nursing if prerequisites of language, literacy and numeracy are met.

A concurrent hardship fund has been established to remove small but significant barriers to completion – such as enough Myki travel credit and assistance with short-term accommodation – keeping young people in the program who might otherwise drop out.

After the 'first step' is facilitated, course entrants have a high likelihood of remaining employed while they pursue further career pathways in the field, such as in nursing or allied health.

Fund community services to cover mandated wage rises

RECOMMENDATION



Adopt a community sector funding formula that accounts for changes to the national minimum wage and inflation.

Victorian community services funding is not keeping up with wage increases, creating a shortfall across the sector. The Victorian Government should adopt a funding formula that matches funding increases with minimum wage decisions and inflation, so the quality and amount of services are not eroded.

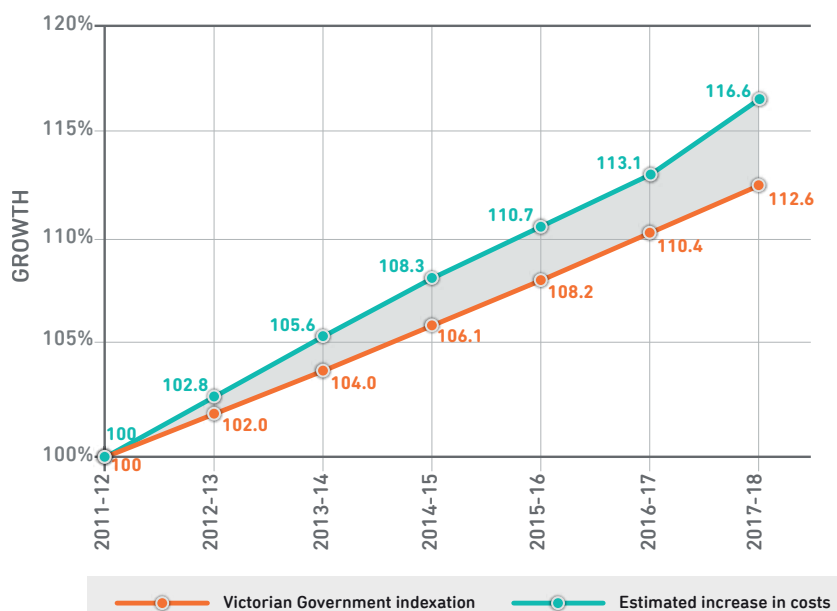
Community services employers mostly pay wages based on the Social, Community, Home Care and Disability Services Industry Award. Wages rise according to the annual minimum wage decision of the Fair Work Commission (FWC) and the Equal Remuneration Order (ERO). While the ERO wage increases have been funded by the Victorian Government, the FWC's minimum wage decisions have not. The most recent between minimum wage

decision raised wages by 3.3 per cent, but community services workers only received indexation of two per cent, as they have for the past six years.

Other wage cost increases include WorkCover premiums and the unfunded increases in the Superannuation Guarantee Levy. Non-wage operating costs, such as administration and compliance costs, have also risen, estimated to be in line with official inflation (recently between 1.1 and 3.2 per cent).

Funding for community sector organisations must be increased and applied using a flexible and responsive formula, to maintain the quality and availability of services for people experiencing disadvantage.

Community Services Funding



Build community services infrastructure in growth areas

RECOMMENDATION



Expand the Growing Suburbs Fund to build new community services facilities in areas of high population growth.

Rapid population growth on the urban fringe of Melbourne and in regional cities requires investment in facilities so community services can assist these communities. The Victorian Government can expand the Growing Suburbs Fund so construction of new facilities can better keep pace with demand.

Victoria's population is growing rapidly, and is now the fastest growing Australian state or territory. Much of this growth is focused on the edges of Melbourne and regional cities. At the same time, there are large increases in housing costs near the centres of cities, pushing low-income households towards the fringes in search of affordable housing. This is causing spikes in demand for many community services, including early childhood education, community health services, family violence services, drug and alcohol treatment, and employment services.

Many community organisations deliver services from legacy infrastructure, and are not funded to build new facilities or deliver from high-cost commercial premises. This means that community organisations cannot move to or develop new services in growth areas, leaving many communities experiencing significant distress without support.

In the 2017-18 Budget, the Victorian Government funded the Growing Suburbs Fund with \$25 million per year for two years. This is half the size of the previous \$50 million Interface Growth Fund, despite accelerating population growth. By expanding the size of the Growing Suburbs Fund, the Victorian Government can assist community service organisations to provide services where they are most needed.

Ensure community hubs have dedicated coordinators

RECOMMENDATION



Ensure dedicated coordinators are embedded in integrated education, health and family services 'community hubs'.

The Victorian Government can help integrate education, health and family services by ensuring there are dedicated coordinators to facilitate service collaboration, particularly in areas of high socioeconomic disadvantage.

Integrated community hubs commonly involve elements of co-location and virtual integration.³ For example, a hub might host several services, such as maternal and child health, early childhood education, playgroups and parenting skills programs. Services such as housing, legal, family violence and mental health services might also be offered. The model reduces stigma by allowing families to more discreetly access legal, financial and family violence services, which can sometimes cause embarrassment, and reduces the time and money it costs to attend multiple appointments.

For the benefits of integration to emerge, integrated service centres require dedicated coordinators tasked with facilitating service collaboration, community development and outreach programs targeting marginalised individuals and families.

Integrated services also provide more tailored 'wrap-around' support, aiding social engagement, individual wellbeing and community development. Particular benefits for children include greater attendance at school, better results and a stronger connection to the school community.^{4,5}

Jindi Family and Community Centre

The Jindi Centre is an integrated family and community hub in Melbourne's outer north⁶. It provides universal services including maternal and child health, playgroups and early childhood education and care, offering additional entry to specialised services and interventions, such as financial programs and family support. An interdisciplinary team connects children and families with appropriate support. The centre takes a two-generation approach, simultaneously addressing the needs of parents and children.

Early results are promising. Parents are being assisted into education, training and employment, and children are successfully transitioning from infant and toddler activities to kinder and then school. About 200 families attend playgroup activities, and about 100 local residents are participating in community-building activities in response to local priorities.

'backbone' funding for local collaborative partnerships. With dedicated funding, community organisations would be well-placed to facilitate place-based approaches. They can foster relationships between a diverse range of people, organisations, businesses and services. Such collaboration can deliver cooperatively-designed initiatives, with agreed outcomes and evaluation measures.

There are many potential models that could form the basis for local employment collaborations, with sufficient agility to allow communities to develop their own iterations based on local expertise. Businesses, governments, community organisations and educators can provide employment pathways by working directly with individuals and small groups. These partnerships could bring together the myriad of local programs that work with disadvantaged jobseekers and disengaged young people and, alongside local employers and training providers, deliver strong pathways into jobs.

Effective place-based approaches bring together community members, empowering 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 people find jobs and overcome entrenched poverty and disadvantage.

Deliver 'backbone' funding for local, community-led employment partnerships

RECOMMENDATION



Fund the 'backbone' of community partnerships that reduce disadvantage and develop employment pathways for local jobseekers.

Poverty and disadvantage are geographically concentrated – just 11 Victorian postcodes (1.6 per cent) account for 13.7 per cent of our most disadvantaged communities.⁷

People may face multiple barriers to employment, which are often highly complex and individualised. Local knowledge and networks can identify opportunities, barriers and links not visible to more distant or 'siloed' agencies. Local leaders can marshal and align existing resources across government, business, philanthropic and non-government sectors, reducing service fragmentation. Community co-design can tailor responses to local needs and conditions.⁸

The Victorian Government can help people facing disadvantage gain meaningful employment by providing

Directly hire more people facing disadvantage

RECOMMENDATION



Set public sector employment quotas for Aboriginal Victorians and people with disability.

Unemployment is both a symptom and a driver of disadvantage. By directly hiring people from disadvantaged backgrounds, such as Aboriginal Victorians and people with disability, the Victorian Government can change the trajectory of these cohorts and reduce the entrenched disadvantage they face. There are broader groups of people experiencing disadvantage who can also be assisted by public sector employment, and this should be encouraged, but it is useful that the Victorian Public Service Commission already monitors the proportion of Aboriginal people and people with disability in public sector employment.⁹

The rate of unemployment among Aboriginal Victorians remains almost three times higher than the state unemployment rate.¹⁰ As of May 2016, about 0.9 per cent of the Victorian public sector workforce identified as

Aboriginal, slightly higher than the Victorian population of 0.7 per cent. However, these employees commonly held lower-paying positions.¹¹

VCOSS welcomes the Victorian Government's ambition to have Aboriginal people make up two per cent of the Victorian public sector workforce by 2022. However, we want to ensure actions implemented under the Aboriginal employment strategy not only increase the proportion of Aboriginal employees but support and encourage Aboriginal people into higher-level roles.

A similar approach could help create employment opportunities for people with disability. Just over half of all working age people with disability are working, compared with 83 per cent of people without a disability.¹²

The introduction of a public sector quota, proportionate to the number of people with disability in the community, backed by a robust disability employment strategy, would help address this underrepresentation.

FURTHER STRATEGIES

Targeted responses to specific workforce challenges

The Victorian community sector faces unprecedented demand for family violence services. The sector must prepare for the workforce challenges this presents. Not only will there be a need for more qualified family violence prevention and response workers, we must upskill and provide effective supervision and support to retain workers already in the system.

To respond effectively to families with complex needs, the workforce will need diverse skills, including early parenting, therapeutic care and Aboriginal cultural competence. Workers need to be comfortable using new technology as part of their everyday practice.

Trained youth workers have a place responding to the diverse needs of young people. The Victorian Government can transform the community into the future by ensuring young people have the supports they need.

To ensure that the workforce is appropriately skilled and trained, the Victorian Government needs to offer alternative education pathways for marginalised women, and education programs in rural and regional Victoria. Direct support workers and their supervisors also need to understand trauma and therapeutic approaches to working with trauma.

As well as upskilling the specialist family violence workforce, workers across the community sector need to recognise and respond to family violence. This includes services working with culturally and linguistically-diverse communities and interpreter services.

Register and accredit disability workers

People with disability have the right to be safe and receive high quality services. Introducing a robust registration and accreditation scheme can help lift service quality across the sector, improve safety for people with disability and raise the status of disability caring work to improve pay and grow the workforce.¹³

Registering disability workers and managers will provide a basic level of screening to prevent people who have committed violence, abuse or neglect from continuing to provide disability services. This level of scrutiny is particularly crucial at a time when the disability workforce is growing rapidly, combined with a large injection of government funding and a shift to a market-based approach. However, to avoid constraining choice, the scheme should enable self-managing participants to 'opt-out' of being required to engage registered and accredited workers for services not defined as 'high risk'.

Accrediting qualifications and requiring all disability support workers to hold minimum qualifications will provide assurance to people with disability, their families and carers, and employers that disability workers have the requisite competence and skills. The accreditation process provides an opportunity to review course content and delivery and to set, monitor and enforce high standards, so graduates complete courses with the skills needed to perform effectively on the job.

A staged transition must be undertaken to ensure the workforce has time to adjust to the changes. The Victorian Government has a responsibility to resource and assist the sector to successfully transition to the scheme. This includes providing free training and access to Recognition of Prior Learning for existing disability workers; ensuring the registration process is not onerous or costly for workers; and increasing wages to reflect qualifications. Ideally, registration and accreditation of workers would be expanded nationally, but in the meantime, government must ensure it is designed and implemented to work effectively with the NDIS Quality and Safeguarding Framework.

Cut red tape

Red tape has a stifling effect on the Victorian community sector. It takes time and money to comply with administrative requirements, and can restrict the ability of organisations to innovate.

One way for the Victorian Government to easily reduce the burden is by brokering a deal with the Australian Charities and Not-for-profits Commission (ACNC) to access information the ACNC already collects from registered charities. This would reduce the number of reports charities submit to different government agencies, in line with the ACNC's 'report once, use often' framework.

Another way is streamlining quality standards and auditing. Funded community service organisations must often comply with multiple overlapping standards, such as the Human Services Standards, the Child Safe Standards and the Home Care Common Standards, in addition to ACNC governance standards. The same elements are duplicated in different standards, such as governance and risk management. Relevant quality assurance agencies should work together to eliminate duplication and ease the regulatory burden on community service organisations.

The Victorian Government should also consider completely repealing the Fundraising Act 1988, which imposes unnecessary regulatory burdens on not-for-profit community organisations. Victorian community sector charities raise nearly \$1 billion per year through donations and bequests.¹⁴ The Fundraising Act 1988 (and similar legislation in other states) complicates how community sector organisations can raise money, meaning charities currently spend more than \$15 million per year on unnecessary reporting and compliance requirements nationally.¹⁵

VCOSS believes fundraising can be better regulated by other laws, including the Australian Consumer Law (a proportionate, risk-based model), which Consumer Affairs Victoria has previously used to successfully prosecute a charity for misleading conduct.

Improve tendering and contracting

Working with vulnerable people requires strong relationships developed over the long term. The recent practice of three or four-year contracts for services, or even less, combined with poor recommissioning processes, has made it difficult to develop and sustain these connections. Without guarantees of ongoing employment, staff look for new jobs six to 12 months before the end of their contract. High staff turnover threatens service user engagement; some drop out of treatment or break therapeutic relationships, which can take many years to rebuild, delaying healing.

In its Inquiry into Human Services draft report, the Productivity Commission recommended a standard contract of seven years.¹⁶ VCOSS supports this call.

The Productivity Commission's draft report also argued that government selection processes tend to focus on service delivery costs and the quality of tender applications, rather than organisations' ability to actually deliver outcomes for people. The Victorian Government should redesign selection criteria to give more weight to the ability of service providers to achieve actual results.

Short deadlines for the submission of tender documents reduce the ability of community service organisations to prepare considered responses or collaborate on joint applications. Longer submission periods would result in better-prepared tender documents and produce better services and outcomes.

- 1 Victorian Council of Social Service, *A growing industry: A snapshot of Victoria's community sector charities*, 2017.
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- 9 Victorian Public Service Commission, *The State of the Public Sector in Victoria*, 2015-16.
- 10 Australian Bureau of Statistics, *National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Social Survey*, Australia, 2014-15, cat. no. 4714.0, April 2016.
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- 12 Australian Bureau of Statistics, *Disability, Ageing and Carers, Australia: Summary of Findings, 2015*, cat. no. 4430.0, October 2016.
- 13 VCOSS, *A high quality disability workforce: VCOSS submission to registration and accreditation consultation paper*, October 2017.
- 14 Victorian Council of Social Service, *More than Charity: Victoria's community sector charities*, July 2016, p. 11.
- 15 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.
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Ensure everyone has an affordable home

Escalating house prices and rents are deeply affecting struggling Victorians. Rental stress in Victoria has jumped by 25 per cent in just two years.¹⁷ Just 5.7 per cent of private rental properties are affordable for people on income support,¹⁸ and Victoria is experiencing rising levels of homelessness, as evidenced by increasing numbers of 'rough sleepers'¹⁹ and reports of rising demand for emergency relief and crisis accommodation.

Rising housing costs are also putting pressure on household budgets, with people cutting back on essentials like food and energy, and reducing children's sport and educational opportunities.

Housing costs affect all Victorians – young and old, women and men, families and individuals – but they are most acutely felt by people with disability, carers, Aboriginal people, migrants, refugees, women and children escaping family violence, and people leaving institutions, such as out-of-home care, the justice system or health facilities.

A secure, affordable home forms the foundation of a person's life. Everything else – good health, a decent education and a steady job – is impossible without it. Providing secure, affordable housing is the Victorian Government's most effective intervention against poverty. It ensures people can build meaningful, productive lives and live with dignity.





Accelerate social housing growth

RECOMMENDATION

Develop a plan to deliver 30,000 new social housing properties over the next 10 years.

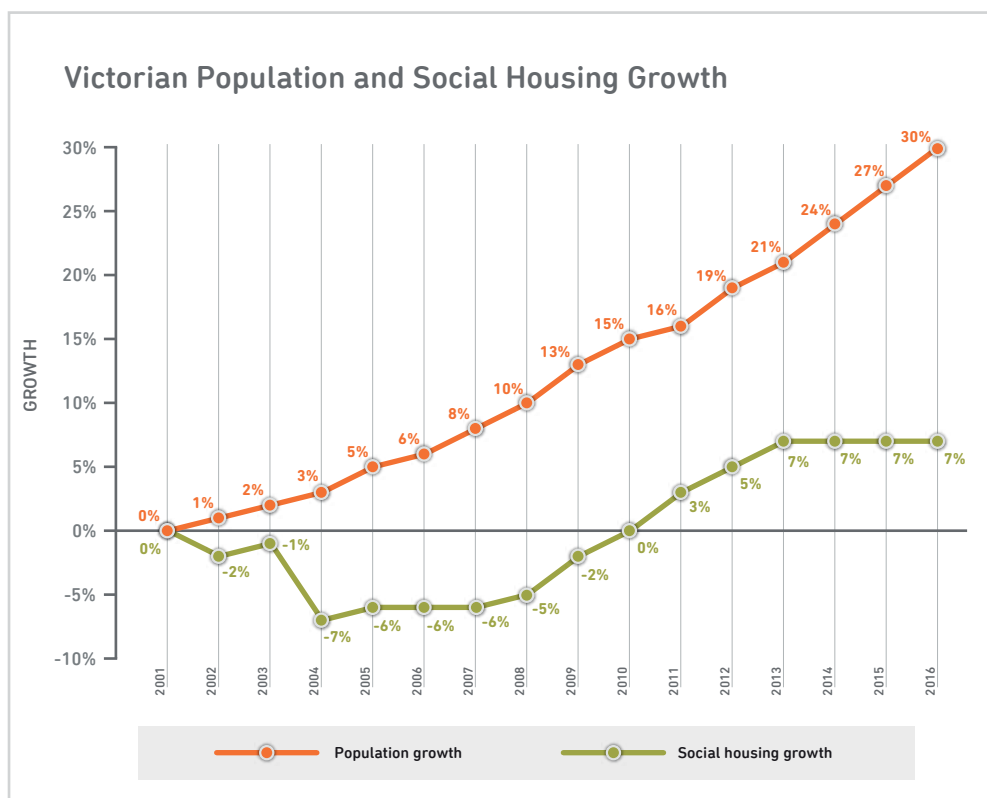
Social housing is an essential component of a well-functioning society, safeguarding people's basic right to a home. Many people cannot access the private rental market due to high costs, an inability to compete against other prospective tenants, discrimination and a lack of accessible or appropriate housing. For many Victorians, social housing is all that stands between them and homelessness.

Demand for social housing is increasing. About 30,000 additional public and community housing properties are needed by 2031 just to keep pace with population

growth.²⁰ More than 50,000 additional homes are needed for those eligible for priority access. Recognising this, Infrastructure Victoria has listed affordable housing growth among its top three priorities, with a call for 30,000 additional dwellings to be built in the coming decade.²¹

The Victorian Government has begun to respond to this challenge. The Homes for Victorians package, which is forecast to generate thousands of new homes in coming years, includes a public housing redevelopment program, funding for new social housing properties, a social housing growth fund, and the provision of loans and guarantees for community housing.

The next step is to accelerate the social housing growth trajectory. Growth has been minimal for many years, other than a short-term boost from the Australian Government's Nation Building package following the global financial crisis. VCOSS believes a higher social housing growth trajectory must be maintained continuously if Victoria's social housing system is expected to cope with future demand.



Sources: Productivity Commission (Steering Committee for the Review of Commonwealth/State Service Provision), Report on Government Services, Volume G: Housing and Homelessness Services: Attachment Tables, 2002, 2007, 2017, Australian Bureau of Statistics, Australian Demographic Statistics, Table 4. Estimated Resident Population, States and Territories, Cat No. 3101.0, Dec 2016.

Embed a 'housing first' approach to rough sleeping

RECOMMENDATION



Embed a 'housing first' approach to homelessness that prioritises permanent housing as soon as possible, to tackle rough sleeping.

Melbourne has seen a dramatic rise in rough sleeping on city streets. The City of Melbourne estimates the rough sleeping population has increased by more than 70 per cent in two years.²² However, rough sleeping is only the tip of the homelessness iceberg. VCOSS members also report rising instances of couch surfing, people sleeping in cars and living in inadequate accommodation.

This problem is exacerbated by the difficult operating environment confronting Victoria's specialist homelessness services. These organisations have insufficient resources to cope with rising demand, and their effectiveness is further reduced by government red tape and ongoing funding uncertainty. For example, homeless organisations are often funded for time-limited 'support periods' of only a few weeks. This undermines their ability to support people, such as rough sleepers, over longer periods. Organisations also have to meet arbitrary targets for the number of people they assist, encouraging them to deliver short-term responses, without the resources to assist people until they can be securely and permanently housed.

The Victorian Government is currently developing a long-term strategy to tackle rough sleeping. Central to this strategy must be the adoption of a 'housing first' model of support. 'Housing first' means providing permanent housing as a starting point rather than an end goal. This necessitates ensuring sufficient housing is available in the first instance. Multi-dimensional and flexible support services can then be 'wrapped around' a person, without coercion. A number of successful trials and pilot programs have been conducted in Melbourne using 'housing first' principles, including Journey to Social Inclusion and Melbourne Street to Home.

A permanent supportive housing model, based on 'housing first' principles, could bring together multidisciplinary teams of homelessness and health workers in a flexible, 'step-up, step-down' support approach that could vary based on an individual's needs. This could include assertive outreach and engagement that provides pathways to establishing and sustaining permanent housing, combined with assessment, care planning and integrated service provision.

Journey to Social Inclusion (J2SI)

This program takes a relationship-based approach to addressing entrenched homelessness, providing long-term support.²³ It works on the premise that if people can sustain their housing and manage their complex health issues, this provides a solid foundation to the next steps – building skills, becoming a part of the community and contributing to society.

The J2SI pilot supported 40 people over three years. A year after the program ended, 75 per cent of participants remained in stable housing and 80 per cent used health services less often.

Introduce minimum health, safety and energy efficiency rental standards

RECOMMENDATION



Amend the Residential Tenancies Act 1997 to create the power to make regulations for minimum health, safety and energy efficiency standards in rental housing.

The Victorian Government can allow the growing number of renters to experience greater health and comfort and lower living costs by introducing minimum health, safety and energy efficiency standards for private rental housing.

More Victorians are renting their homes and for longer. Many will become life-long renters. More families and older people are renting.

Minimum standards are the only way to improve the quality of rental housing, given the different incentives and consequences landlords and tenants face. The Victorian Government can ease any potential impacts on rental prices by staging the introduction of standards over time, helping to limit costs for landlords.

Low-income earners often have no option but to rent poor-quality housing as a result of severe affordable rental shortages and shrinking social housing supply. Poor quality rental housing affects people's health and safety, including families raising children and older people living in these properties. Draughty, poorly insulated homes are a major cause of high energy bills.

Minimum health, safety and energy efficiency standards should focus on the most critical features of housing to ensure quality and 'value for money' improvements. We envisage they would target the very worst rental homes. The standards could include basic features such as a working toilet, working cooking facilities, locks on external doors, proper airflow, draught-proofing, ceiling insulation and efficient heating.

Invest in education-first youth foyers

RECOMMENDATION



Fund more education-first youth foyers in additional regions of high disadvantage.

The Victorian Government can help young people facing disadvantage complete their education and find stable housing and employment by investing in more education-first youth foyers.

The association between youth homelessness, failure to complete year 12 or equivalent and poor employment outcomes is well established. On any given night, there are about 4000 homeless young people in Victoria and more than half of 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 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 welfare dependency.

Education-first youth foyers break the cycle of homelessness by providing young people with safe, secure and affordable accommodation on a TAFE campus for two years while they study for a career. Young people live in customised, studio-style accommodation and share communal areas. There are trained staff on-site around the clock. Support services include career guidance, employment assistance, mentoring, mental and physical health support, life skills development and assistance with involvement in volunteer and community activities.²⁴

Some foyers have already been established at TAFE colleges in Southbank, Glen Waverley, Richmond, Broadmeadows and Shepparton. 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 Kangan Youth Foyer

Harriet experienced family violence and was forced to leave her home. She was offered a place at the Kangan Youth Foyer in Broadmeadows.²⁵ Through the assistance of the youth foyer, Harriet has completed an advanced diploma in justice and is now studying to become an immigration lawyer. She is volunteering with a community group addressing family violence in the local African community, and is working part-time.

The Kangan Youth Foyer opened in 2014 and houses 40 young students at risk of homelessness for up to two years while they study. The youth foyer is led by Launch Housing and the Brotherhood of St Laurence and provides 24-hour on-site staff. It also partners with other agencies to deliver a range of services to young people including education and training, employment assistance, life skills development, mental and physical health support, drug and alcohol support, mentoring and social participation.²⁶

FURTHER STRATEGIES

Expand and integrate homelessness prevention services

The only way to eliminate homelessness in the long term is to stop people becoming homeless in the first place. This means having services in place to help people as soon as their housing comes under threat, and help people leaving prisons, mental health facilities and residential care find a home.

Victorian Government programs to help people avoid homelessness are haphazard, poorly funded and often not integrated. Homelessness prevention services should 'wrap around' people at risk of homelessness, and include tailored assistance, legal services and financial support. For example, an integrated service could provide legal advice while negotiating with landlords to resolve tenancy problems (including by repairing damage or addressing rent arrears), working with people to improve living skills to curb behaviour that may lead to eviction, and providing financial strategies to tenants struggling to pay their rent.

Mandate universal housing standards

In the next 20 years, the number of Victorians aged over 65 is expected to nearly double, to more than 1.6 million. Nearly one in five Victorians has a disability. However, our homes have not been built to meet the needs of Victorians as they age and their abilities change. Very simple changes to the building code, such as requiring adequate door widths, a clear access path to the front door and a stepless shower recess, can make homes more easily adaptable to accommodate people's changing abilities. Adapting a home can be 22 times cheaper with these basic features in place.²⁷

The Victorian Government completed a Regulatory Impact Statement in 2009 recommending a Victorian-specific variation to the Building Code to incorporate these features. The Government should proceed with this change to ensure new homes are suitable for every Victorian to 'age in place' and find accessible housing.

Adopt inclusionary zoning

Victoria has more than 142,000 low-income households in rental stress,²⁸ and there are more than 40,000 applications for social housing under the Victorian Housing Register.²⁹ Victoria desperately needs new sources of social housing.

Inclusionary zoning means using the planning system to require a mandatory percentage of homes in multi-dwelling developments to be reserved for social housing. In 2016, private developers began construction of about 30,000 apartments.³⁰ If only a few per cent of these were reserved for social housing, thousands of homes could be supplied for Victoria's most vulnerable people.

The Victorian Government has committed to an inclusionary zoning trial on government land, aiming to supply about 100 social housing properties. The Victorian Parliament recently passed legislation³¹ allowing voluntary affordable housing development to be negotiated by local governments.

However, this does not mandate inclusionary zoning. The Victorian Government should move quickly to establish inclusionary zoning in Victoria's planning laws to accelerate the growth of social housing.

Replace stamp duties with a comprehensive land tax

Stamp duties on homes are among Australia's most inefficient taxes, estimated to cost the economy about 35 cents for every dollar raised.³² They are also unfair, being incurred by younger people with lower incomes when they first buy a home, and are paid more frequently by people who have to move more often. Stamp duties also encourage property speculation, as land-banking incurs no costs. They are also a volatile source of revenue, rising and falling with the property market, leading to rapid changes in Victorian Government revenue. If our overheated property market suddenly cools, there will be negative consequences for the Victorian Budget and pressure to cut essential public and community services.

To move to a fairer, more efficient and stable property tax system, the Victorian Government should, over time, replace stamp duties with a broad-based land tax. This should be accompanied by appropriate concessions, exemptions and deferrals, particularly for low-income households that may be asset-rich, but income-poor.

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Create healthy and resilient communities

Good health is essential for a good life, but it is not experienced equally across the Victorian community. Poverty, discrimination and a lack of education and employment can cause or exacerbate poor health and increase vulnerability to trauma and crises. To maximise health outcomes, Victoria needs locally accessible, integrated pathways between primary and acute care and an approach that acknowledges the social determinants of health. The healthcare system must also provide for people's cultural safety.

Disadvantaged communities experience higher rates of preventable hospitalisation and chronic disease, and lower average life expectancy. Victoria needs a system that provides equitable access to timely, affordable healthcare and tackles the causes of poor health.

Health inequity is often more pronounced in rural and regional areas. Workforce shortages and a lack of local services mean people must travel greater distances for treatment and shoulder the associated challenges of time off work, transport costs and childcare. People with disability, LGBTIQ people, people from refugee and migrant backgrounds, Aboriginal people and people leaving institutions also have poorer health outcomes than other Victorians.

The community sector plays a role in reducing the social inequity that leads to poor health, and improving resilience and wellbeing. For marginalised Victorians, community health and social services are an entry point to the health system. Community health and social services can help identify problems early, before they reach crisis point, and connect people with other sources of assistance in their community.

Properly-resourced, community-based health services can help people and communities recover from illness and crisis quicker, and stay well longer.





Save community mental health rehabilitation services

RECOMMENDATION



Allocate additional funding to preserve community mental health rehabilitation services.

VCOSS believes the Victorian Government has a responsibility to continue to fund community mental health services outside of the National Disability Insurance Scheme (NDIS). New funding must be allocated in the 2018-19 Victorian Budget to save Victoria's rehabilitation services. The Victorian community mental health sector is calling for about \$50 million each year to fund rehabilitation services.³³

In Victoria, publicly-funded community mental health services have long provided psycho-social rehabilitation and support to people with mental illness. These services help people stay healthy, commit to a job or education, care for their children and families, and fully participate in community life.

Victoria faces a looming gap in mental health rehabilitation funding. Neither the NDIS nor the Victorian Government has committed to funding these services into the future

Community-based rehabilitation forms one pillar of a balanced mental health system, alongside clinical treatment and disability support. The NDIS will soon provide disability support to people with mental illness through tailored support packages, while the Victorian Government will continue to provide clinical treatment through hospital and community teams.

However, as this changeover occurs, Victoria faces a looming gap in mental health rehabilitation funding. Neither the NDIS nor the Victorian Government has committed to funding these services into the future, as rehabilitation is outside the scope of the NDIS.

Victoria redirected all its community-based mental health services funding to the NDIS. It is the only state to have done so. In contrast, New South Wales has recently increased its investment in community-based mental health.

Funding will enable Victorian community mental health services to continue to support people living with mental illness who are ineligible or choose not to access the NDIS.

For example, the NDIS may be unsuitable for younger people without a formal mental health diagnosis or people who feel alienated by the NDIS' requirement for a 'permanent' condition. These people need continued support from community mental health services to recover from or manage their mental health conditions, and lead healthy and happy lives.

Invest in preventative health

RECOMMENDATION



Increase funding for place-based preventative health programs through existing partnership platforms.

Victoria's health system was originally designed to treat the ill and injured. In recent years, as the general population has aged and rates of chronic and 'lifestyle' diseases have increased, attention has shifted to how we keep Victorians healthy and happy.

Despite this, only about 1.34 per cent of health spending in Australia is on prevention.³⁴

The Victorian Government can improve the wellbeing and quality of life for current and future generations of Victorians by making long-term investments in preventative health.

This approach will also save money in the long term. Chronic disease contributes to nine out of 10 deaths in Australia, reduces productivity and puts a massive strain on the health system.³⁵ However, every dollar spent on healthy eating and active living returns about \$3.³⁶

Investing in preventative health will also help address health inequities, as it will benefit disadvantaged Victorians most. Preventative health investment is supported by the community; Australians identified it as a top-tier priority in a 2016 opinion poll.³⁷

The Victorian Government recognised the need to build a health system geared to prevention as much as treatment in its plan Health 2040: Advancing health, access and care. The plan commits to building healthy neighbourhoods by partnering with communities to identify and act on local health concerns and issues, and address health disparities across groups and communities.

These goals can be achieved by the Victorian Government investing in local preventative health programs.

Existing partnership platforms such as the Victorian Primary Care Partnerships and Regional Partnerships should be engaged to help design and deliver these programs, in conjunction with community health services, local governments and other service providers.

SEA Change Portland

is working towards creating a community where healthy eating and being active is easy, by reorientating existing resources to a collective, long-term, community-driven systems approach.³⁸ More than 60 Portland community members have worked together to tackle the town's high rates of obesity by undertaking more than 200 actions to strengthen healthy living. These have taken place within schools, early years services, sporting clubs, service clubs, community groups, workplaces and community events. Some examples are:

- Auditing and building accessible public water fountains.
- Adjusting sporting club canteen menus to include healthier and more affordable options, and providing healthy food at social events.
- The introduction of a health food policy at a local school, which has made changes to its canteen, held special food days and developed students' cooking skills.



Credit: Guernsey Sports

Reduce public dental waiting times

RECOMMENDATION



Increase funding to Victoria's public dental programs.

The Victorian Government can help people with oral diseases and pain by investing in public dental services. Australian Government funding cuts have extended general dental care waiting times to more than 16 months after blowing out in the past two years.³⁹

Getting the balance right between treatment and prevention may involve changing the way public dental services are funded, delivered and administered.

Poor oral health can cause pain and discomfort, impact on mental health and self-esteem and impinge on many aspects of people's lives, including eating, sleeping, working and socialising.

The majority of oral disease is preventable. But people need access to timely or preventative dental care. While people on low incomes are eligible for public dental treatment, they often don't get help until it is too late.

The Victorian Auditor General, in the 2016 report *Access to Public Dental Services in Victoria*, said we must break the cycle of poor oral health and build more preventative approaches to managing public dental health.⁴⁰ Getting the balance right between treatment and prevention may involve changing the way public dental services are funded, delivered and administered.

Extend community-based palliative care

RECOMMENDATION



Increase investment in community-based palliative care to help people in their homes.

The right to a good life extends to a good death. Most people wish to die at home, but some have no choice and live their final days in hospital.

The ongoing discussion about end-of-life choices and voluntary assisted dying in Victoria has clearly highlighted the need for high-quality palliative care. Palliative care provides emotional and practical support to people facing death, including pain management and help making decisions about their care and quality of life.

The Victorian Government can help people live and die well by supporting community palliative care services to provide '24-7' care, as well as carer support and respite as required.

Population growth, an ageing population and high rates of chronic disease mean there is growing demand for palliative care in hospitals, aged care facilities and, increasingly, community-based services delivered in people's homes.

Community palliative care providers help people in their homes, including after business hours. They support carers by providing counselling, bereavement support and respite. Yet just 40 per cent of community-based palliative care providers are able to meet current demand and only 14 per cent expect to meet anticipated demand over the next three years.⁴¹

Rural and regional Victorians, people from culturally and linguistically diverse (CALD) backgrounds, people with disability and people in residential aged care facilities have particular difficulty accessing palliative care services.⁴²

The Victorian Government can help people live and die well by supporting community palliative care services to provide '24-7' care, as well as carer support and respite as required.

Embed Aboriginal self-determination

RECOMMENDATION



Ensure community and self-determination are at the heart of the treaty process.

"Aa Aa Yuwang-ngal-in marram nganjin budambundjerring, which means in Taungurung language that Aboriginal Victorians and the Government need an agreement together that is reciprocal."

Mick Harding, Taungurung Traditional Owner and Co-Chair of the Aboriginal Treaty Working Group, Address to the Victorian Cabinet in August 2017.

Self-determination is vital to improving Aboriginal health and wellbeing. The full potential of Aboriginal people can best be realised through empowered communities making decisions about their own futures, helping determine all policy that affects them and delivering a range of programs and services.

Self-determination has been progressed through recent actions including establishing the Victorian Aboriginal Economic Board, transferring nearly 1500 public housing properties to Aboriginal Housing Victoria and empowering Aboriginal community controlled organisations (ACCOs) to take guardianship and responsibility for the care of Aboriginal children in out-of-home care.

As part of the Victorian Government's commitment to self-determination, it has commenced a treaty-making process with the Aboriginal community.

"A treaty should deliver recognition of our unique position as this country's first people, repatriation for past wrongs and injustices, improve our lives today and allow us to establish the foundations for a strong and bright future for our future generations. It will enable us to build and celebrate our cultural strength."

Jill Gallagher, Co-Chair of the Aboriginal Treaty Working Group

More than 7,500 Aboriginal Victorians have already been consulted on the pathway to treaty discussions. ACCOs need adequate funding to support their communities' ongoing engagement in self-determination and treaty discussions and to make sure the community voice is at the heart of the treaty-making process.

Invest in a resilient recovery strategy

RECOMMENDATION



Develop and fund a resilient recovery strategy promoting collaboration with community organisations.

The Victorian Government can help communities cope and adapt to change, and better recover from emergencies and disasters, by developing a resilient recovery strategy. Central to this strategy would be the role of community organisations in working collaboratively with the emergency management sector to build resilience at a local level. Investing in people-centred and place-based resilience will help strengthen communities and empower them to lead their recovery.

Stressors like poverty, unemployment or chronic diseases can weaken communities and affect their ability to manage change. Natural disasters and other crises and emergencies can uproot communities, separate families and destroy homes, livelihoods and threaten lives. Genuine recovery may take many years as people rebuild and find new directions and patterns of normality.

The lifetime social cost of the 2009 Black Saturday bushfires is estimated at \$2.5 billion,⁴³ which includes the cost of mental health issues, risky or high risk alcohol consumption, chronic disease and non-communicable diseases, and family violence. The Victorian Government can mitigate these sorts of costs through investment to strengthen communities and individuals before disasters or emergencies occur.

The five-year Beyond Bushfires study⁴⁴ of the impacts of Black Saturday and related bushfires found that involvement in local community groups and organisations was associated with more positive health and wellbeing.

If a community functions well, has strong social connections and plentiful resources, it will be better able to withstand the challenges imposed by a crisis or emergency. Conversely, people and communities with pre-existing vulnerabilities, or who are disadvantaged, will be hit hardest by the immediate, medium and long-term effects of disasters.

Members of resilient communities are better able to manage traumatic life events; for example, family breakdown, mental illness or alcohol and other drug misuse. Members of resilient communities are also better equipped to manage broader events like social unrest or economic downturn.

Building individual and community resilience has been the core focus of the community sector for decades. By leveraging the resources, knowledge and skills of community organisations, a resilient recovery strategy can significantly enhance Victorian communities' resilience before stress or disasters strike.

Strengthen Neighbourhood Houses

RECOMMENDATIONS



Immediately fund the 30 under-resourced Neighbourhood Houses in Victoria's growth corridors and other areas.

Increase support for country Neighbourhood House Networks to better support rural and regional Neighbourhood Houses and advocate on regional issues.

Neighbourhood Houses help Victorians make friends, get involved in their community and become economically engaged. They create inclusive and welcoming environments where people of any ability, background or age can connect, learn and share.

They are also a cost-effective way of combatting loneliness and social isolation, improving a person's wellbeing and reducing their reliance on acute health and other government services.

The Victorian Government can help people facing disadvantage engage and connect with their communities by increasing funding for Neighbourhood Houses, especially in growth corridors.

The Victorian Government's Neighbourhood House Coordination Program presently funds about 375 Neighbourhood Houses across Victoria. This leaves more than 30 – in areas such as Carrum, Geelong West and Wyndham – without any funding.

Regional Neighbourhood House Networks provide management and governance support to Neighbourhood Houses and advocate on behalf of Neighbourhood Houses and communities to local councils and the Victorian Government.

The way funding is calculated and awarded to Neighbourhood House Networks does not recognise the additional costs of networking in rural and regional Victoria. The current formula disadvantages rural and remote areas, leaving them under-resourced to help local Neighbourhood Houses respond to the needs of a dispersed community, meet complex governance requirements and remain sustainable.

More funding will allow these networks to better support individual Neighbourhood Houses, facilitate regional consultation and advocate on regional issues.



Victoria's Neighbourhood Houses

Each week in Victoria:

- 190,000 Victorians use a Neighbourhood House
- 6,700 Victorians volunteer at a Neighbourhood House
- Neighbourhood House facilities are used for approximately 56 hours of community activities (roughly eight hours per day, every day of the week).

FURTHER STRATEGIES

Make community health facilities safe and fit-for-purpose

The Victorian Government can help community health services protect their workers from physical violence and aggression by investing in workplace redesign and infrastructure.

The Government has already acknowledged the risk of violence against mainstream health workers, providing funding to help prevent violence against hospital staff and first responders. With more than 90 per cent of health workers in Victoria having been victims of violence or aggression in the workplace, community health workers also need support.⁴⁵

Building design is an effective way to help protect community health workers. Many community health and Aboriginal Community Controlled Health Services buildings and facilities are ageing, too small, unsafe or not fit-for-purpose, partly due to limited capital investment in recent years.

Help alcohol and other drug treatment services respond to increasing demand

The Victorian Government has committed to rolling out a real-time prescription monitoring system to help identify people who misuse prescription drugs. This system is expected to commence in 2018 and the alcohol and other drug sector will need capacity to accept additional referrals to treatment, including pharmacotherapy. If there is no additional capacity, there is a risk of further harm to people the new system identifies, who could transition to other harmful, possibly illicit substances.

Despite recent welcome investment in alcohol and drug treatment services, long waiting lists for residential rehabilitation services remain. Funding additional rehabilitation places would help meet demand.

Continue to support the Sexual and Reproductive Health Strategy

Early in 2017 the Victorian Government released the first-ever Victorian Sexual and Reproductive Health Strategy. This document provided an overarching plan for improving Victorians' sexual and reproductive health and reducing barriers to accessing affordable healthcare, contraception and termination services across the state.

However, while the \$6.6m funding that accompanied the strategy was welcome, several important gaps remain. In particular, additional funding is required to establish a new pregnancy support phone hotline, to ensure all Victorian women and families can receive informed pregnancy advice when they need it.

Keep people safe through robust emergency planning

The Victorian Government can improve the safety of vulnerable people in emergencies by ensuring there is adequate emergency services planning and clear lines of responsibility for their care or evacuation during an emergency event.

The 2009 Bushfire Royal Commission found 44 per cent of Victorians who died as a result of the fire were more vulnerable to bushfire because of age, ill health or a combination of both. Following the Royal Commission, all service providers funded by the Victorian Department of Health and Human Services are required to plan for and respond to a diverse range of emergencies affecting people. This includes events caused by weather or natural emergencies, human health, animal health, failure of infrastructure and security emergencies.

With the transition to individualised funding models, including both the NDIS and My Aged Care, it is unclear who will have responsibility for emergency planning. NDIS providers report they have not been provided with templates or documents prompting thought about emergency planning or preparedness for people.

Review the adequacy of the Medical Cooling Concession

VCOSS's 2017 Power Struggles report highlighted the interconnection between health and energy consumption. Nearly all interviewed households either had health issues that increased their use of heating and/or cooling, or would have benefited from using more heating or cooling.

Several people had health issues that caused heat intolerance and created a need for home cooling, but they were ineligible for the Medical Cooling Concession. In other cases, poor health contributed to people being home and sedentary through the day (for example, recovery from surgery, injury or depression), which increased their use of heating or cooling, or increased demand from lighting and other appliances.

The Victorian Government should examine whether the Medical Cooling Concession is too narrowly targeted.

VCOSS believes the concession could be expanded to include general medical need for increased cooling or heating, regardless of whether thermoregulation is required (this is the current criterion for concession access). People who are coping with illness or recovering from surgery over a long period would then be eligible for this concession.

Alongside this, the Victorian Government could examine whether concession eligibility should be needs-based, rather than providing a list of eligible conditions, which could make the concession clearer and easier to access.

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Deliver everyone a great education

Education is a pathway out of disadvantage, giving people the tools and confidence to pursue opportunities and reach their full potential.

Education is important at every stage of life.

Receiving high-quality early childhood education sets young children on a positive trajectory, providing them with the cognitive and social skills to learn, develop and engage with their peers.

Later, completing their school education leads to better job prospects, and therefore better health, improved wellbeing and enhanced community and social engagement.

Vocational education and training provides people with the skills they need to gain meaningful work, or to retrain or upskill to maintain employment.

However, the benefits of education are not experienced equally across Victoria.

Children and young people from socioeconomically-disadvantaged backgrounds are less likely to attend early learning programs and, if they do, will go for fewer hours. They have lower school attendance rates and are more likely to discontinue their studies,⁴⁶ placing them at greater risk of financial hardship, physical and mental health problems, drug and alcohol misuse, homelessness and a life involving crime.⁴⁷ About 10,000 young people drop out of school each year.⁴⁸

Every Victorian should receive a great education.





Fund two years of early learning for every child

RECOMMENDATIONS



Fund and deliver 15 hours of early learning for all three and four-year-olds.

Develop a further package of initiatives to ensure more children experiencing disadvantage can access early learning services.

Every child deserves a solid start to life, putting them on a positive trajectory and helping them become happy, healthy and inquisitive. Children's brains undergo rapid development in the first five years of their life, building the foundation for later learning.⁴⁹

The Victorian Government can give all children the best start in life by providing 15 hours of early learning for all three and four-year-olds.

High quality early learning is a smart investment, providing both short and long-term benefits. For example, children with two years of early learning have better language skills and early number concepts when starting school, as well as greater independence, concentration and peer sociability.⁵⁰ At age 16, they do better in English and maths, and achieve higher overall exam scores.⁵¹ After high school, they are also more likely to pursue tertiary education.⁵²

While all Victorian children benefit, children from families experiencing disadvantage enjoy the greatest advances.⁵³ High costs mean these children are less likely to receive early learning. They also face structural barriers, such as inconvenient operating hours and locations, a lack of public and private transport, complex paperwork, low levels of cultural competence and lack of trust in service providers.

To address these structural problems, the Victorian Government can deliver a reform package so more children from families facing disadvantage participate. This can include pre-purchasing more early learning places for children from disadvantaged backgrounds, enhancing services to be welcoming and inclusive, educating families about the benefits of early learning, and having a 'key worker' to build relationships and better support families. It can also include improving services' cultural competency in line with the Murrung Aboriginal Education Plan 2016-26.⁵⁴

A growing number of countries already provide universal early childhood education. New Zealand fully funds 20 hours per week for three and four-year-olds and the United Kingdom provides 15 hours per week.^{55, 56} The

United Kingdom also extends this to two-year-olds facing disadvantage, including those from families on low incomes, asylum seekers, children in out-of-home care and children with disability and special education needs.⁵⁷

The Victorian Government's recent investments in early learning is a great start, particularly \$55.3 million for school-readiness. Working with the community sector to design and deliver the next stages of early childhood reform will make this funding achieve the best results. This will help the Government meet the Education State goal of ensuring every child can access and benefit from early childhood services and reducing disadvantage so all children reach school ready to learn.

Koorie Kids Shine at Kindergarten

The Koorie Kids Shine at Kindergarten campaign raises awareness of the value of early childhood education and access to 15 hours of free three- and four-year-old kindergarten per week for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children.

Enrolment spots are also secured for Koorie children through the Victorian Government's pre-purchased places program.

Since 2014, the participation rates of Koorie children in four-year-old kindergarten have risen from 79.6 per cent to 90.5 per cent and in three-year-old kindergarten from 37.1 per cent to 48.8 per cent.⁵⁸

Help young people re-engage in education

RECOMMENDATION

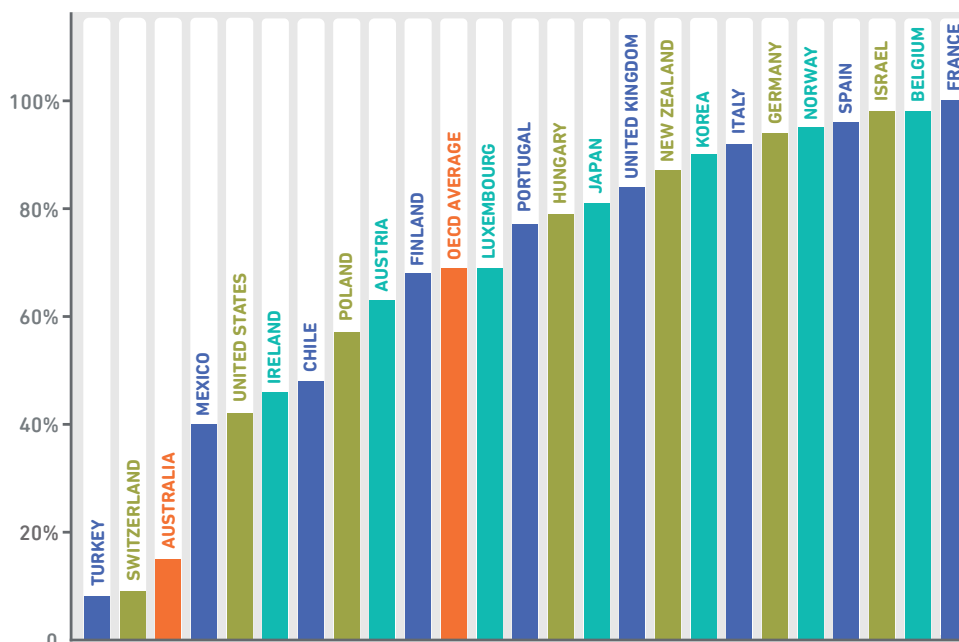


Expand the Navigator program state-wide, incorporating the lessons from pilot site evaluations.

Keeping young people engaged and happy at school should be a key goal for the Victorian Government. Young people at risk of disengaging must be embraced by the system, not pushed further away.

To achieve this, the Victorian Government should expand the Navigator program state-wide. It should increase its capacity so every young person at risk of leaving, or who has become disengaged, is helped to re-engage. The Navigator program can accompany a suite of complementary measures.

Three Year Olds Enrolled in Education (2014)⁵⁹



The Navigator program is being trialled in eight Department of Education and Training (DET) regions. It provides case management to young people aged 12 to 17 who have disengaged from school or are at risk.

Navigator assists young people who face multiple, complex barriers and require flexible, intensive and tailored support. Navigator's success has resulted in long waiting lists where the program is available. Children and young people in the remaining nine regions have no access at all. While the 2017-18 Victorian Budget provided more Navigator funding, VCOSS members say this will not meet demand.

It is crucial the Navigator program has the capacity to undertake proactive outreach to identify young people who have disengaged from education, and provide intensive, flexible support. Eligibility should be broad and flexible so the program does not arbitrarily exclude young people who would benefit. The Navigator pilot program evaluation can be used to guide a state-wide expansion.

It is important to recognise that other early intervention programs exist in Victoria, such as the Reconnect: Engagement and Learning Support Program and School Focused Youth Service. However, access to some programs are inconsistent and VCOSS members report a lack of coordination between different programs and services in some areas.

The Victorian Government should facilitate greater coordination and referrals between schools, education and training providers and various programs, to ensure children and young people receive timely support and do not fall through the cracks.

Navigator success

Eli* was referred to the Navigator program after patchy school attendance for two years. Eli was struggling with depression and social isolation and felt extremely anxious about returning to school.

Navigator assisted his family and school to communicate and develop a re-engagement plan. Over three school terms, Eli progressively moved from part-time attendance in the school staffroom with some home tutoring to full-time classroom attendance. He received assistance for his anxiety from a local mental health service, with support from his family, school and Navigator program staff.

Eli now has an 80 per cent attendance rate and was recently graded as 'at standard' for eight of his nine subjects in year nine.

*name changed to protect identity

Help students with disability thrive in education

RECOMMENDATION



Overhaul the Program for Students with Disabilities to appropriately support all students with disability by making it a functional and educational needs-based assessment and funding model.

The Victorian Government provides targeted funding for about 24,000 Victorian students with disability through the Program for Students with Disabilities (PSD).⁶⁰ This means many of the estimated 84,000 students with disability are missing out on support for school success. The Victorian Government can help these children achieve by reforming the PSD funding model and ensuring schools take evidence-based approaches.

The Victorian Equal Opportunity and Human Rights Commission (VEOHRC) recently identified “significant unmet need for support services in schools”, including occupational and speech therapists and integration aides. It reported some schools were continuing to actively exclude students with disability.⁶¹ For example, some students were only allowed to attend school when a funded integration aide was available, or were placed on part-time attendance schedules following behavioural problems resulting from their disability being mismanaged.⁶²

The current PSD model takes a deficit-based approach, focusing too much on a student’s disability diagnosis and not enough on what that student could achieve if properly supported. This approach also fails to recognise that students facing disadvantage require greater support.

Although Victorian Government and parliamentary reviews have recommended updating the PSD funding formula, including the Victorian Government Schools Funding Review, the Inquiry into Services for People with Autism Spectrum Disorder, and the Victorian Government’s own review of the PSD,^{63, 64, 65} the Victorian Government says that updating the funding model is still ‘under consideration’.

The PSD funding formula must be updated and based on a functional and educational needs-based model.

Students with disability can only maximise their academic and social development when schools teach based on evidence and adopt behavioural supports that actually work. VCOSS holds serious concerns about schools

restraining and secluding children. While policy material and best practice resources are provided, they are inconsistently used or enforced by the Department of Education and Training.

VCOSS supports calls by VEOHRC in *Held back*: the experiences of students with disabilities in Victorian schools for independent oversight and strict enforcement of reporting requirements, adherence to new policy material by educators and new laws to ban the use of restraints and seclusion.⁶⁶

Remove school cost barriers

RECOMMENDATIONS



Identify the costs of providing free instruction at different year levels and adjust school funding accordingly.

Educate schools and ensure compliance with the new Parent Payment Policy.

Victoria’s laws require the standard education curriculum to be provided free to all students but, in reality, families are spending increasing amounts on their children’s education. This includes spending on digital devices, home internet packages, textbooks, stationery, school uniforms, sports days, elective subjects, camps and excursions. The out-of-pocket annual cost to send a child to a state school in Melbourne is up to \$3,409 (primary schools) and \$5,297 (secondary schools).⁶⁷

While some support exists for families experiencing disadvantage, including the Camps, Sports and Excursions Fund and State Schools’ Relief, this does not meet costs for many.

Community sector organisations report being overwhelmed with requests for assistance to meet educational costs, particularly at the start of the school year. Where families cannot afford costs, children and young people risk being excluded from the standard school curriculum and educational enrichment options.

The Victorian Government can stop children missing out on learning by properly funding schools to provide the standard curriculum. The costs of providing instruction at each year level can be calculated and schools funded accordingly, to ensure access to free state education for all Victorian children. The Auditor-General found DET does not understand the actual costs of providing free instruction⁶⁸ and, so far, corresponding funding adjustments have not occurred.⁶⁹

Unsupported in School

Fifteen per cent of Victorian students have a disability and need targeted support. But only four per cent receive it.



Source: Victorian Government, Department of Education and Training, The Education State: Review of the Program for Students with Disabilities, April 2016.

Victorian state schools are responsible for developing their own parent payment policies based on Victorian Government guidelines. Policies have been applied inconsistently, and DET has responded with an improved Parent Payment Policy in 2017. However, the Auditor-General found schools still do not understand or comply with the new rules, and there is limited monitoring and oversight.⁷⁰

The Victorian Government can educate schools to ensure compliance with the new policy so the costs of education are not a barrier to school engagement.

FURTHER STRATEGIES

Provide targeted support for 'middle years' school students

Developing comprehensive 'middle years' transition plans and investing in tailored prevention and intervention services for children at risk of disengaging would help keep them engaged at school.

There are clear support structures for children in primary school and teenagers preparing to leave the education system, but no such policies and services aimed at children in the 'middle years', from grade five to year eight. This is a time when children experience significant physical, socio-emotional and developmental change and may first experience challenges such as the onset of mental health issues.^{71, 72}

Children in the middle years are increasingly seeking support at youth services, often with complex problems.⁷³ Signs of school disengagement can also emerge in the first few years of primary school.⁷⁴ Without the appropriate

support, children from disadvantaged backgrounds are at increased risk of becoming disengaged from school and having lower educational outcomes.⁷⁵

Invest in flexible learning options

Flexible learning options deliver more tailored education and 'wrap-around' support in alternative settings to mainstream schools. They also assist young people with complex needs who require more intensive assistance to remain engaged.

The Victorian Government can help students stay connected to education by ensuring high-quality flexible learning options are available equitably across Victoria. VCOSS members report many students don't have access to flexible learning options, particularly in rural Victoria.⁷⁶ DET does not systematically track availability across the state.⁷⁷

Flexible learning options need enough funding to ensure the delivery of high-quality programs. They should be integrated or connected with mainstream schools to provide genuine alternatives for young people, not used to remove 'difficult' students from the classroom. Investment in expanding flexible learning options should be based on evidence and best practice principles.⁷⁸

Maintain needs-based equity funding

The Victorian Government can improve the educational outcomes of school students facing disadvantage by maintaining the existing level of needs-based equity funding in schools.

Equity funding means schools can provide additional assistance to students facing disadvantage and counteract concentrated disadvantage.

Equity funding also allows schools to develop innovative methods to help students do well, such as new literacy and numeracy interventions.⁷⁹ Robust monitoring and accountability can ensure equity funds are spent effectively to benefit students facing disadvantage.

Stop rushed and unreasonable school expulsions

Hundreds of children are formally expelled from Victorian Government schools each year, some as young as five or six years old.⁸⁰ Most expulsions do not comply with Victorian Government regulations, including the lack of a plan for the student to find a new school.

Many more children are expelled informally – encouraged or forced to leave a school without a formal expulsion process – despite informal expulsions being prohibited by DET.⁸¹

Too often, students who display challenging or unproductive behaviours at school are viewed as a ‘problem’,⁸² without considering the complex issues involved, such as children experiencing trauma or family conflict.⁸³ Children with a disability or mental health condition, those in state care, and Aboriginal children are overrepresented.⁸⁴ In its Investigation into Victorian government school expulsions, the Victorian Ombudsman found many recorded expulsions could be prevented “had the school been willing – or better supported – to deal with the behaviour”.⁸⁵

The Victorian Government can help prevent early school leaving by delivering its commitment to implement the Ombudsman’s recommendations.

Assist students who have experienced trauma

The Victorian Government can improve outcomes for children who have experienced trauma by ensuring all teachers and school administrators receive comprehensive trauma training. Schools should also be required to deliver evidence-informed, positive behaviour models.

Trauma makes it harder for children to pay attention in school and can lead to learning disabilities, an inability to regulate emotions and other behavioural problems.^{86, 87} Providing teachers and other staff with a better understanding of trauma and its symptoms and how to provide a therapeutic environment will enable schools to better support children’s learning, development and wellbeing in the classroom, and better respond to behavioural challenges. This will particularly benefit children in out-of-home care, those who have experienced family violence, and refugees and asylum seekers.

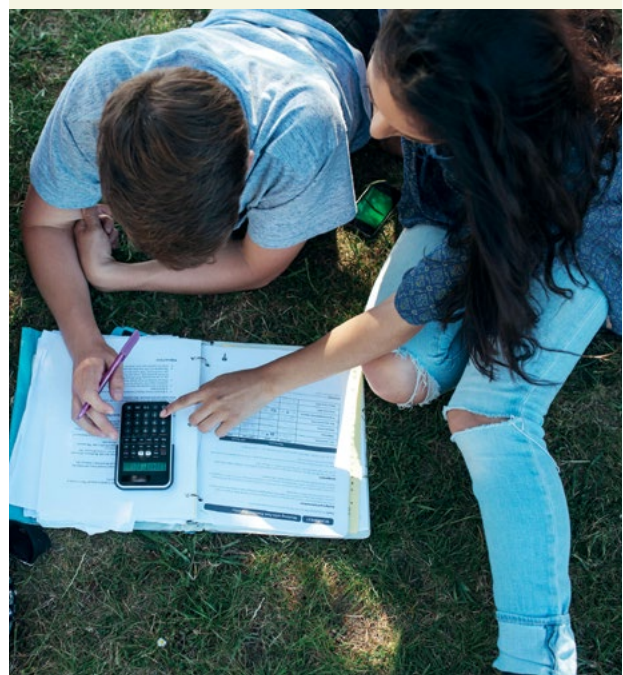
Students who have experienced trauma would benefit from access to qualified wellbeing staff. Schools also need to build skills and understanding to promote students’ mental health and wellbeing. For example, VCOSS members report benefits of models such as the School-wide Positive Behaviour Support Framework, an evidence-based framework that creates a positive school culture and helps schools better respond to challenging student behaviour.^A

Berry Street Education Model

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.⁸⁹

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 evaluation⁹⁰ 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 routine⁹¹. Ideally, every staff member is trained, including teachers, leadership and administrative staff.



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Keep Victorians safe with a more effective justice system

Victoria needs to be smart on crime and tough on its causes. This means adopting a justice reinvestment approach that combats the disadvantage pushing some people towards crime, new policies to stop people—especially young people—being entrenched in our prison system, and an increased focus on diversion, support and rehabilitation.

The best way to keep Victorians safe is to stop crimes before they occur by addressing the underlying factors that drive offending and ensuring people don't become trapped in a cycle of disadvantage and criminal activity.

Victorians expect a great deal from our justice system. We want it to guarantee community safety but also ensure all people are treated fairly, proportionately and compassionately before the law.

VCOSS believes the justice system is most effective when these elements are well-balanced. By adopting policies that appear to be 'tough on crime', the Victorian Government risks embracing policies that undermine rehabilitation and actually make Victorians less safe.




**Victoria
jails kids
in cells
this small.**

#RaiseTheAge

Replace child prisons with better alternatives

RECOMMENDATIONS



Commit to closing Victoria's child prisons over the long term.

Introduce a new system of youth justice, based on diversion, rehabilitation and intensive community support.

Overwhelmingly, young people in the justice system have experienced significant disadvantage. They are the children we, as a society, have either failed or forgotten.

Most come from a life of poverty, and many have spent time in the child protection system, have endured trauma and neglect, experienced mental illness or faced drug and alcohol problems. Aboriginal children and those with intellectual disabilities in particular are dramatically over-represented in child prisons.

The Victorian Government should develop a long-term plan to shut down child prisons, and build a truly effective, modern and therapeutic youth justice system based on community interventions and rehabilitation

VCOSS is concerned that in response to high profile problems at the Malmsbury and Parkville Youth Justice Facilities, the Victorian Government is adopting policies that don't enhance community safety, but work against rehabilitation for young people.

Plans to build an expansive youth prison in Melbourne's west, send children to adult courts and sentence them to longer jail terms are recent examples of policies that evidence shows us will not work. Far from deterring children from committing crime, such measures will actually cause more trauma and place them at risk of becoming chronic, long-term offenders.

The Victorian Government should develop a long-term plan to shut down child prisons, and build a truly effective, modern and therapeutic youth justice system based on community interventions and rehabilitation,⁹² including more diversion, police cautioning and intensive support programs.

As Victoria's Sentencing Advisory Council states:

"The best way to protect the community is to invest in measures that prevent or interrupt the criminal pathways of children who would otherwise go on to commit a disproportionately high volume of youth crime."

"Measures such as enhanced early intervention and resources to rehabilitate young offenders are the best way to steer at-risk children away from a life of crime and protect the community in the long term."

"The best way to protect the community is to invest in measures that prevent or interrupt the criminal pathways of children who would otherwise go on to commit a disproportionately high volume of youth crime." ⁹³

Inaction is not an option. The 2017 Armytage-Ogloff review described the current youth justice system as "in crisis", lacking purpose, focus and coordination. It said there was too much focus on detention and urged a significant structural and cultural overhaul.⁹⁴

VCOSS agrees with this analysis and supports the review's recommendations for upskilling the workforce, preserving the dual track system separating youth justice from the adult justice system, expanding diversion and community-based interventions, and developing a new Youth Justice Strategic Plan.

Missouri closes child prisons

The US state of Missouri provides a model for change. From the early 1980s, Missouri began closing down child prisons and replacing them with small, home-like facilities based in local communities and with a strong focus on education.⁹⁵

In Missouri, about 30 per cent of young people reoffend within three years. The rate in Australia is more than 75 per cent.

Better support people leaving prison

RECOMMENDATION



Increase funding for transition support in prisons, from early in a person's sentence to well after they return to the community.

Most prisoners will eventually be released back into the community. Successful reintegration and rehabilitation is crucial to keep the community safe, prevent the person from reoffending and ensure they can live a peaceful and productive life.

The Victorian Government can help people released from prison transition smoothly back to the community by investing in extended supports that begin when they are still incarcerated.

The more support a person has, the better their chances of staying out of prison.⁹⁶ Ideally community and health services would start working with prisoners long before they leave. They can provide stability and build strong, trusting relationships that act as a protective factor against reoffending.

Special attention must be paid to Aboriginal women, who are the fastest growing group in Victorian prisons. Most of these women have histories of family violence, abuse and intergenerational trauma.⁹⁷ They require additional assistance to maintain a connection to country, culture and family while in prison, to help with their wellbeing, mental health and eventual reintegration.

With only limited official transitional support available in Victoria, most people have to arrange their own housing, treatment and support when they leave. This is far from ideal. A third of people leaving prison expect to be homeless or in emergency accommodation.⁹⁸ This approach does not support effective rehabilitation for Victorians leaving custody or promote community safety.

Comprehensive support is already offered in other jurisdictions. The ACT Government supports people for 12 months after they leave prison, including helping them find a place to live, access mental health counselling and undergo alcohol and drug treatment, if required.

The program has reduced recidivism, with participants reporting increased self-esteem, improved confidence, a greater quality of life and an enhanced ability to achieve goals.⁹⁹



Trevor's story

Trevor is 48 years old, Aboriginal, and was a client of the ACT Extended Throughcare Program for seven months. He has been in and out of custody for most of his adult life.¹⁰⁰

The program provided Trevor with accommodation and material items such as furniture, clothes and transport, as well as practical support such as driving lessons, help finding a job, counselling, Aboriginal cultural support and legal assistance.

The key to Trevor's support was the speed with which it was instituted, especially the housing, which he was able to move into three weeks after being released. This rapid stability provided the platform for Trevor and his family to focus on other areas that in turn further increased their stability, such as seeking employment, settling his daughter into school and building his relationship with her, as well as forming positive social connections.

Trevor was adamant that for the program to be successful, ex-offenders had to be prepared to make changes and help themselves. He said it had taken him a long time to "wake up", and that this may not have occurred without the help of the program. He commented on the fact that the program staff established trust with him early in the process by following through on what they said.

Trevor's wife said the support had helped the whole family: "He was so institutionalised and this is the first time ever that I've had any support with Trevor when he's got out. He usually lasts about three months."

Support more health justice partnerships

RECOMMENDATION



Fund community legal centres and health services to develop 'health justice partnerships'.

Health justice partnerships put community lawyers where people are already accessing support, like community health services, hospitals or family violence services. People experiencing legal problems are already more likely to confide in a GP or social worker than a lawyer.

When a lawyer is part of the healthcare team, healthcare professionals are better equipped to spot a legal problem and have confidence there is someone nearby who can help resolve it. Because legal problems can affect health, patients also receive better, more holistic healthcare. Working together, legal and healthcare professionals can better identify and respond to the legal and social issues that make it hard to be healthy – and stop existing problems from reaching crisis point.

For example, health justice partnerships can:

- work with landlords to make housing repairs that improve health, such as treating mould or adding handrails
- help people with accumulated fines or debt – money problems can cause anxiety or prevent people buying prescriptions or making co-payments
- advise on legal needs that can emerge with illness, such as wills, powers of attorney and accessing superannuation.

Victorians facing marginalisation or disadvantage experience legal problems at higher rates than the general community.¹⁰¹ Groups particularly affected include people with disability, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, people experiencing homelessness and single parents. For these groups, it is often harder to seek help, and is difficult for the mainstream legal system to proactively find and assist them. This can mean a simple legal issue quickly spirals out of control.

The Victorian Government can help people with legal issues identify and solve their problems quickly by funding the development and delivery of health justice partnerships.

Jana's story

Jana's abusive partner made her stay in the family home unless she was attending medical appointments.

Her doctor was able to learn of Jana's abuse during a consultation and introduce her to the medical centre's in-house lawyer and family violence advocate, who were able to advise Jana about her options.

The doctor also provided Jana with a medical certificate to show her partner she had been at a medical appointment.¹⁰²

FURTHER STRATEGIES

Expand problem-solving courts

The Victorian Government can help people address their offending and drug and alcohol issues by expanding problem-solving courts, including the Victorian Drug Court and the Family Drug Treatment Court. Problem-solving courts are designed to tackle specific behaviours, where traditional justice system approaches have not worked. They usually focus more on treatment and rehabilitation than punishment.

The Victorian Drug Court provides a comprehensive, collaborative approach to drug dependence and related crime. The two-year recidivism rate for the Drug Court is 34 per cent lower than the mainstream justice system.¹⁰³ The Family Drug Treatment Court works with parents whose drug addiction has played a significant part in their child protection involvement, to give them the best chance of rehabilitation and family reunification.

Victorians would benefit from both courts being expanded across the entire state.

Introduce recidivism reduction targets

Victoria's recidivism rate is high, with 43 per cent of people returning to prison within two years.¹⁰⁴ The Victorian Government should consider setting itself a target to reduce reoffending by 15 per cent.

Several jurisdictions have had success in reducing reoffending rates by introducing targets. For example, since introducing reoffending reduction targets in 2011, New Zealand has achieved a four per cent reduction in the reoffending rate, to 29 per cent.¹⁰⁵

Setting a target helps maintain momentum and encourages a collaborative cross-government approach.

Expand the Fast Track Youth Remand Court

The Victorian Government can help young people get the right support and reduce pressure on the youth detention system by expanding the Fast Track Youth Remand Court across the state. About half of the young people in youth detention facilities across Victoria have not been sentenced for a crime. Young people on remand can't access the range of support services, education and rehabilitative programs available to sentenced young people.

In 2017 the Children's Court of Victoria established a new Fast Track Remand Court in Melbourne to deal with children's criminal charges in a timelier way. Pressure on the system could be further relieved by establishing similar courts at other Children's Court locations.

Stop the criminal prosecution of young children

Victorian law currently allows children as young as 10 to be charged with crimes, but at this age a child cannot fully understand the severity of their actions and lacks total control of their behaviour.¹⁰⁶

Young children accused of crimes at this age are also generally experiencing some type of trauma or disadvantage. Involvement in the criminal justice system at a young age risks causing more harm, including encouraging children to become chronic, long-term offenders.¹⁰⁷

The United Nations advises that age 10 is far too young for children to be held criminally culpable.¹⁰⁸ The Victorian Government can help change the path of at-risk children by raising the age of criminal responsibility to 14. By maintaining the age of criminal responsibility at 10, Victoria is out of step with international best practice and human rights standards.

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Protect Victorians against family violence

Family violence violates intimate, trusting relationships, can cause death and inflict long-lasting harm on people and families. More than 160,000 people are estimated to experience family violence in Victoria, costing the community more than \$5 billion.¹⁰⁹

Victoria has provided genuine leadership to protect women and children from violence. In the past two budgets, the Victorian Government's bold aspirations have been matched with substantial funding.

The 2018-19 Budget provides an opportunity to fine-tune this work and extend whole-of-government coordination to create sustained change, with a greater emphasis on violence prevention and helping women and children rebuild their lives. Perpetrator accountability remains a key plank of the Victorian Government's commitment to reduce violence against women. But services for some people are still lacking.

VCOSS looks forward to working with the Victorian Government to ensure the new Support and Safety Hubs are well-designed, adequately funded and working in partnership with local community sector organisations. However, in bringing together the family violence and child protection systems through the Support and Safety Hubs, the Victorian Government should not lose focus on the family safety outcomes it is trying to achieve.

The Victorian Government's steadfast commitment to eradicate family violence is a testament to its determination to tackle this issue. A change of this scale requires a whole-of-government, bipartisan commitment to working collaboratively to deliver long-term results.



Help women and children recover from violence over the long term

RECOMMENDATION



Fund support teams to provide tailored, flexible support to violence survivors over the long term.

Family violence causes cumulative and long-term effects. Violence can tear families apart, force people to move home, affect employment, disrupt children's education and fracture friendship groups.¹¹⁰ Ongoing support for survivors is crucial.

Children and young people who experience family violence are more likely to develop health, development and social problems. They are also more likely to be victims of violence again later in life, or commit violence themselves.¹¹¹

The Royal Commission found that to recover and thrive in the aftermath of family violence, women and children need "housing, financial security, education and employment [and] the ability to regain their health and sense of wellbeing".¹¹²

This can be achieved with interdisciplinary long-term recovery teams: housing workers, financial counsellors, health services, trauma-informed therapists, and parenting support workers to help rebuild mother-child bonds. Children also need help to re-engage with education, and women need links to training and employment.¹¹³

To complement the response system, survivors of family violence also need dedicated planning and funding for family violence recovery.

Increase focus on preventing violence

RECOMMENDATION



Fund evaluation and scale-up effective prevention strategies.

Currently just 2.6 per cent of family violence spending in Victoria goes towards prevention, a reduction from four per cent in 2014-15. This downward trend is despite the release of a new prevention framework and \$12m provided over four years for a dedicated prevention agency.

Prevention projects are commonly funded by grants for small, local initiatives. This means programs often develop in isolation, without a unifying purpose, and promising projects are hard to evaluate or scale-up.

Experts warn this approach does not engage the broader community, dampening prevention effectiveness.¹¹⁴

Ramping up prevention work can engage the whole community and reinforce the message that violence in any form is unacceptable. This includes working hard to include people whose experiences have traditionally been silenced or ignored, such as Aboriginal women and children, women with disabilities, older women and women and children from CALD backgrounds.

Sustained prevention investment addressing structural inequality will save millions in the long term, across justice, health, corrections and social services. Evaluation of prevention activities must be longitudinal. While the results of this investment may not be evident for many years, it will produce happier, healthier, safer families, with women and children living free from violence and abuse.

Victoria should allocate more family violence funding to prevention measures, and make a deeper commitment to prevention work to ensure project sustainability over the long term.

Essential elements of a violence prevention framework

- Establishing shared understanding of violence against women, its drivers and reinforcing factors
- Techniques and strategies for ensuring reach across different communities
- A holistic approach to integrated gender equity and non-violence promotion
- Stakeholder roles and responsibilities
- Stages of action and expected short, medium and long-term signposts of success.¹¹⁵



Change men's behaviour

RECOMMENDATION



Fund behaviour change approaches that suit men from diverse cultural backgrounds and of different ages, including adolescents and young men.

Changing men's attitudes to women and violence and promoting perpetrator accountability is a key plank of the Victorian Government's family violence reforms. This is particularly important for men who have already been violent.

The Royal Commission and VCOSS members have raised concerns that current men's behaviour change programs adopt a 'one size fits all' approach. The Royal Commission reported:

"While there may be common risk factors for family violence, perpetrators are not a homogenous group. Rather, they reflect the diversity of our community. This includes perpetrators who are older, who are Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander, perpetrators from culturally and linguistically diverse communities, those from regional, rural or remote communities, and those who have disabilities..."

"The Commission was told that behaviour change programs and other perpetrator interventions must address the needs of these diverse groups and be developed in consultation with them."¹¹⁶

Behaviour change programs must be tailored to specific population groups—including adolescents and men from cultural and linguistically diverse communities—with a particular focus on cultural nuances and sensitivities. Although positive initiatives are underway (for example, the Dardi Munwurro Strong Spirit Residential Men's Behavioural Change Program) new initiatives are in Melbourne, with none in rural and regional Victoria.

The demand for men's behaviour change programs continues to grow but there are not enough diverse programs or workers trained to do this work. More training places are required to meet the diverse needs of perpetrators, and keep women and children safe.

Help victims of family violence access courts and tribunals

RECOMMENDATIONS



Fund safe waiting facilities and remote witness facilities in all courts.

Expand access to the Victims of Crime Assistance Scheme to include victims of family violence and sexual assault.

Many Victorian courts have undergone or are currently undergoing upgrades. To ensure vulnerable women and children have equitable, safe access to courts, these upgrades should include expansion of remote witness facilities and safe waiting spaces.

The Victorian Law Reform Commission is also reviewing the Victims of Crime Assistance Tribunal and the Victims of Crime Assistance Scheme. The scheme provides financial assistance for medical, counselling and other expenses incurred by victims of crime. It can also be a powerful acknowledgement of the loss and harm experienced.

The review should ensure that victims of family violence are able to access the scheme, including by updating the definition of 'act of violence' to include different types of family violence, broadening the scheme's understanding of family, and making sure all victims are treated equally, regardless of their past behaviour.

Combat elder abuse

RECOMMENDATIONS



Develop a Victorian integrated elder abuse strategy.

Elder abuse includes any action that harms or distresses an older person, carried out by someone they know, including physical violence, psychological or emotional abuse, financial abuse, sexual abuse, and neglect.¹¹⁷ Elder abuse may be committed by paid workers or by family members or friends. Women, people with significant disability, poor physical health, mental health conditions, cognitive impairment, people who are socially isolated and people from low socioeconomic backgrounds are more at risk of experiencing elder abuse.¹¹⁸

Elder abuse is the least recognised form of family violence and is based in ageism, influenced by society's attitudes towards older people, and their marginalisation in the community.¹¹⁹

A whole-of-government approach is required to tackle elder abuse, with integrated planning and policy development between Australian and state and territory governments. Action that acknowledges ageism as the root cause of elder abuse is required from the Victorian Government, including:

- providing training to frontline staff who work with older people (such as police, healthcare professionals and financial service workers) to detect and respond to elder abuse
- investment in specialist services with expertise in elder abuse (such as Seniors Rights Victoria) to provide advice to other service providers and help meet service demand
- creating a registry for enduring powers of attorney.¹²⁰

An elder abuse strategy must promote the dignity, agency and autonomy of older people and improve the system's response to elder abuse.

FURTHER STRATEGIES

Provide funding certainty to agencies to continue family violence response

Agencies providing family violence responses to women and children are facing funding uncertainty as family violence packages announced in the 2016-17 Budget are due to expire soon.

In 2016 a number of services received welcome funds to provide financial counselling, flexible support packages, therapeutic interventions and specialist supports for Aboriginal women and women from CALD backgrounds. Agencies that have been doing this work need certainty for the future. The time is right to review evaluations and scale-up effective interventions.

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Strong and resilient children and families

Families and relationships come in many forms. They are central to everyone's life, providing support, comfort and enjoyment. Enriching and strengthening families and relationships will have broad and positive social impacts, including better health and educational outcomes for children.

But some families and parents can be affected by mental illness, alcohol and other drug misuse, family violence and gambling. Sometimes it's hard for families to get the help they need to overcome these problems. Access can be blocked by cultural factors, distance and siloed service delivery.

Children and families in difficulty need support earlier. Providing advice and help for all families can prevent problems escalating and support the creation of happy and healthy home environments where fathers, mothers and children thrive.

Keeping children safe within their families should be the goal of early intervention. When the community needs to step in, support and stability must be key elements of the out-of-home care response.



Help new parents create positive, nurturing homes

RECOMMENDATIONS



Broaden access to parenting support programs to include all families experiencing vulnerability, not just those who have previously interacted with child protection.

Employ more perinatal and parenting support workers.

We need a stronger focus on the first 1000 days of a child's life, when a child's brain has the most capacity for learning, and foundations for positive growth and development are laid. In infancy, social and developmental experiences become embedded, and have lifelong impacts.¹²¹ By the time a child gets to school, their brain is more than 90 per cent developed.¹²²

The influence of environment in the first 1000 days is profound. This makes the first 1000 days the best time to teach parents the skills they need to put children on the right track for life.

When family life is violent or chaotic, or when parents have addiction issues or mental illness, children can be at risk of developmental difficulties. The influence of environment in the first 1000 days is profound.¹²³

The human brain develops sequentially. Like placing building blocks from bottom to top in sequence, the first blocks set the foundation for those placed on top. If a baby or toddler experiences hardship, the foundation blocks don't form properly. When brain development is disrupted in this way, it is hard for children to learn and have positive relationships in the future.¹²⁴

This makes the first 1000 days the best time to teach parents the skills they need to put children on the right track for life.¹²⁵

Sometimes families find help too late, when child protection has become involved and there is a risk of removal. Greater and earlier access to parenting help for all parents can reduce this problem. Sadly, often only families at risk of child removal can get intensive parenting help.

We need:

- investment in perinatal services, especially perinatal mental health services, to meet the needs of expectant and new mothers and their babies
- investment in parenting support programs provided by Early Parenting Centres, including those that support new fathers.

PlaySteps: "Kids don't come with a manual"

"We were finding it hard to capture and hold our son's attention. Jonah would buzz about the place, never sitting still for long. Parenting books gave different advice and didn't work for us. We felt lost, that we'd failed as parents. The QEC PlaySteps program was our lifeline. It showed us how to enjoy playtime and use it to teach our children. Before then we'd never known playtime could have a purpose and could change behaviour.

"Our children are happy because they want to play with us and know we enjoy doing it. Dad normally misses, but when he comes home, the kids say 'let's play!' With support, we're relaxed and we know we can have fun with our kids. There are ways of coping and we don't have to be perfect parents – whatever that means. We got to test different approaches until we found what worked for us.

"We found praising our children for what they do makes a difference. They're listening to us more and are confident to try new things. You don't need a Nintendo to play. It's our imagination that gives us the enjoyment—even a cardboard box makes a great toy."

Case study adapted from QEC Stories

A better deal for kinship and foster carers

RECOMMENDATIONS



Increase foster and kinship carer payments to \$88 per week.

Streamline and align payments with children's needs.

Improve training for carers who look after children with challenging behaviour.

When a child is unable to stay safely at home, statutory child protection services may become involved.¹²⁶ Children who have experienced trauma need safety, stability and a sense of security. The out-of-home care system cannot always provide this.¹²⁷

A stable placement is key for good outcomes for children and young people in out-of-home care.¹²⁸ The key to placement stability is kinship and foster carers who feel supported, and are properly remunerated and resourced. The Carer Allowance is insufficient and carers often cover the shortfall between the real costs of caring for children and the confusing array of DHHS reimbursements.

Kinship care preserves family, reduces separation trauma, and helps children maintain a sense of belonging and being loved, security, stability and cultural identity.¹²⁹ Currently, however, kinship carers cannot access many of the supports provided to foster carers, despite their role being virtually identical.

Eighty-five per cent of foster carers need support in managing challenging behaviours and 80 per cent have specifically requested information on trauma-informed therapeutic approaches to caring.¹³⁰ To provide the best possible support to Victoria's most vulnerable children and enhance their opportunities for a positive future, their carers need to be better supported, receive training and be better compensated for the work they do.

Carer perspectives: additional costs

Adelaide is a foster mum to two children, both at the local state primary school. Adelaide wants their lives to be just like their school mates, so she provides the correct school uniform and often replaces lost items, pays and does administration for excursions and camps, and enrolls them in music and sports programs. She helps their social development by encouraging attendance at friends' birthday parties, making sure they take a gift. She also celebrates the children's birthdays with a party each year with their classmates.

As with all children who come into care, they have experienced some degree of trauma and also have additional therapeutic needs which Adelaide fits into her schedule, pays for and provides transport to. To try to make their lives as 'normal' as possible, Adelaide estimates she pays an extra \$1,500 per child each year, beyond the help she gets from DHHS.

Case study provided by Foster Carers Association Victoria.



Keep supporting young people after they leave state care

RECOMMENDATION



Help young people leaving care develop independence by providing housing assistance and ongoing support after age 18.

In modern families, it is rare for young people to leave home at age 18 and become fully independent immediately. Between ages 20 and 34, a quarter of young adults still live at home¹³¹ and a third returned home after a period away.¹³²

It is unfair to expect some of our most vulnerable young people to achieve independence earlier and faster than their peers. In contrast to most other young people, the Victorian Government stops supporting those leaving care when they are forced to leave home at age 18.

This is a time when young adults develop reasoning, impulse control, understand compliance with social conventions and develop the ability to establish intimacy in personal relationships.¹³³ During this stage, most young adults have the support of family and community.

But young people who have been in out-of-home care are often unprepared; they aren't developmentally ready, they lack independent life skills, and they don't have family or social supports to turn to if things go wrong.¹³⁴ They are disadvantaged through the experience of forced independence as well as the experience of trauma and abuse that led them into state care in the first place.¹³⁵

The leaving care experience for many young people results in homelessness or housing instability, higher rates of mental illness, unemployment or underemployment, substance abuse, contact with the justice system, early parenthood and low educational attainment.

Young people who have 'timed out' of out-of-home care need:

- safe and secure accommodation, including the option to stay in out-of-home care
- trauma-informed counselling
- opportunities to stay engaged with education and training
- help finding work
- guidance to build independent living skills.

Extending the care-leaving age to 21 would return \$1.84 for each \$1 spent.¹³⁶

Young people's views on leaving care

"Money would be a big concern. I have tried really hard to get a part-time job but I haven't been successful as of yet." (Female, 16 years)

"Just feel kind of scared, because it's a first time and it's another step for me moving into the real world." (Male, 17 years)

"[I'm worried about] being on my own and being able to financially support myself. Don't want to go downhill in school." (Female, 17 years).

Case studies from the Australian Institute of Family Studies¹³⁷

Keep Aboriginal children safe in their family and community

RECOMMENDATIONS



Increase funding for Aboriginal Community Controlled Organisations (ACCOs) to undertake guardianship for Aboriginal children and provide cultural activities for children and young people in care, including Return to Country programs.

Fund programs that help Aboriginal children and families connect; for example, the Family Finding program.

In Victoria, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children are removed from their families at an alarming rate. Aboriginal child removal undermines self-determination and perpetuates disadvantage in the Aboriginal community. Nearly 10 per cent of Aboriginal children are in out-of-home care, compared with less than one per cent of non-Aboriginal children.¹³⁸ The drivers behind this trend are many, and not helped by a child protection system that prioritises child removal over family strengthening.¹³⁹

Aboriginal children in out-of-home care struggle to stay connected with their culture. According to Taskforce 1000, less than 60 per cent of children whose cases were managed in the community sector had contact with their Aboriginal extended family members and less than 50 per cent had contact with their parents' Aboriginal community.

In many cases, DHHS failed to identify that a child and their family were Aboriginal. To build connection to culture, promote self-determination and get better outcomes for Aboriginal children, the Victorian Government must help them connect with their communities through programs like Family Finding and Return to Country.

Keeping Aboriginal children safe

The Commission for Children and Young People said the best ways to prevent Aboriginal children entering care and to improve outcomes for Aboriginal children are:

- keeping Aboriginal children safe within their family
- implementing supports that address family violence and intergenerational trauma
- giving Aboriginal children in out-of-home care meaningful access to their culture
- building cultural competence within organisations caring for Aboriginal children
- improving child protection responses to Aboriginal children and families
- ensuring Aboriginal carers are supported and properly remunerated.¹⁴⁰



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Deliver for people with disability, older people and carers

All Victorians are entitled to a safe, dignified and enjoyable life. When a person can engage in the world around them, maintain friendships and participate in activities, they are happier and healthier. This delivers both social and economic benefits. A person free of structural barriers is also more able to get a job or engage in study, and is more productive.

However, this is not the case for many people with disability and older Victorians. Inadequate infrastructure, poorly-designed services, inaccessible information and negative community attitudes can make life harder for people with disability and older people. They are also subject to violence and exploitation at higher levels than the general population.

Carers provide essential support to many groups in our community, including people with disability, older people and those with chronic health conditions. Care responsibilities can make life hard for carers too. Carers provide an average of 13 hours of unpaid care each week¹⁴¹, and many carers work countless more hours.

This workload limits a carer's ability to get a job, play sport, catch up with friends or engage in the community more broadly.

More must be done to ensure people with disability, older people and their carers can live a good life.

Major reforms in both disability and aged care services have dramatically changed how services are accessed and delivered. The NDIS promises to deliver much better outcomes for people with disability, but the shift to individualised funding models has created challenges for some people in getting the services they need.

The Victorian Government has a responsibility to ensure reforms deliver high quality, accessible services for all eligible Victorians. The NDIS must be designed and resourced to support people with complex needs and people facing disadvantage. Robust quality assurance mechanisms must also be implemented to prevent violence, abuse and neglect for all people accessing disability and mainstream services.



Increase advocacy support for Victorians with disability

RECOMMENDATION



Increase Victorian disability advocacy funding to \$5.1 million annually.

The Victorian Government should match per capita Australian Government disability advocacy funding by increasing the Victorian Disability Advocacy Program funding to \$5.1 million annually, as recommended by the Productivity Commission.¹⁴²

Many Victorians with disability don't have a voice, or struggle to be heard. In the worst cases, this leads to serial neglect or outright abuse. Independent disability advocates directly act for people with disability, protecting their human rights and seeking redress for rights violations. Disability advocacy also cost effective, saving government \$3.50 for every dollar invested.¹⁴³

Both the Victorian Ombudsman's report into abuse in the disability sector and the Victorian Parliamentary Inquiry Into Abuse In Disability Services identified disability advocacy as a core protection against abuse and neglect of people with disability, but found it was underfunded.^{144, 145}

The Victorian Disability Advocacy Program provides individual advocacy support to about 1,700 new people every year.¹⁴⁶ However, there are more than one million people with disability in Victoria.¹⁴⁷ Demand has already begun to increase as a result of the NDIS. The Productivity Commission recommends state and territory governments provide per capita matched funding for the National Disability Advocacy Program, finding that advocates help participants navigate NDIS processes and disability services. They also help them exercise choice and control.¹⁴⁸

Disability advocacy is particularly important for people who are marginalised or have complex needs, such as people with intellectual disability, those with limited or no speech, and people with no family or informal support network.

Securing eligibility for the NDIS

Dale* lives near the border of the NDIS trial site in Victoria. Dale was attending rehabilitation in the trial site and told that he was NDIS-eligible. His social worker, therapist, relatives and the Department of Health and Human Services (DHHS) checked this with the NDIA which confirmed he met the criteria. An NDIS application was completed by therapists while in rehabilitation, and Dale was sent home due to NDIS support being imminent. Months later, Dale was informed he was not within the region and was declined NDIS entry until 2018. The NDIA had repeatedly given incorrect information about Dale's eligibility, resulting in an incorrect application.

Dale approached a disability advocate for assistance, who submitted an application to the NDIA for a review. The advocate explained the disadvantage caused by the incorrect information given and asked that the NDIA take him on under the NDIS despite being outside the region.

The advocate also provided ongoing follow-up due to slow responses, and provided extra information to the manager in charge of the complaint. The NDIA took responsibility for providing incorrect information, and accepted Dale as an NDIS participant.¹⁴⁹

* name has been changed to protect the individual's privacy

Acknowledge and address Aemerging gaps in disability services

RECOMMENDATIONS

Undertake and publish rigorous mapping to identify gaps in disability service delivery during the rollout of the NDIS.

Provide detail about funding sources for service continuity.

The Victorian Government has promised “continuity of care” for people with disabilities and their carers during the transition to the NDIS. However, VCOSS members report that disability service gaps are emerging. Lack of certainty around funding is creating distress and for organisations and individuals.

Serious concerns have been expressed about services for:

- mental health consumers with moderate or severe conditions who will not meet the eligibility criteria for the NDIS
- people with disability who do not meet the eligibility criteria for the NDIS
- people aged 65 and over, or Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people aged 50 and over, who will only be eligible to receive support through the aged care system.

There is also funding uncertainty for emergency and planned respite for carers, and other carer-specific supports, capacity-building supports and information and referral services, such as RuralAccess, MetroAccess and deafaccess services, and the Autism Advisor service under the Helping Children with Autism package.

VCOSS understands the Victorian Government is closely monitoring the emergence of service gaps on an ongoing basis during the transition to the NDIS. However, this information must be made publicly available to provide greater transparency.

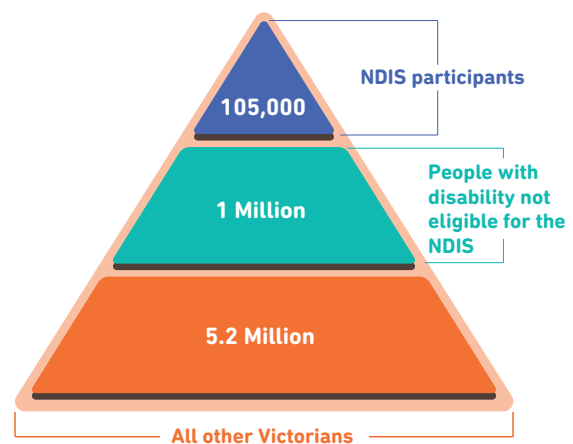
The Victorian Government must also commit to funding any service gaps identified through the mapping process. This might be direct funding or funding in partnership with the NDIS or the Australian Government, depending on the service identified as at-risk.

Local Disability Access programs

MetroAccess, RuralAccess and deafaccess workers make local communities more inclusive for people with disability. They facilitate integrated local planning across the community to improve infrastructure and the accessibility of mainstream services including education and training, transport, health, housing, sport, arts and recreation. They also provide support and help identify gaps and solutions to issues experienced by people with disability.

MetroAccess, RuralAccess and deafaccess workers operate in the majority of local government areas and help embed disability access and inclusion into council planning and projects. These programs are well-regarded by the disability sector and have been instrumental in piloting new initiatives such as ‘Changing Places’ and driving systemic change.

NDIS Support in Victoria



SOURCE: VCOSS ANALYSIS USING ABS DATA

Source: ABS, Disability, Ageing and Carers, Australia: Victoria, 2015, 44300DO002_2015, Table 22.3, Persons with disability aged five years and over, living in households, disability status, by use of public transport – 2015, proportion of persons.

Improve mobility options

RECOMMENDATIONS



Fund more accessibility upgrades of legacy public transport infrastructure.

Expand the scope of the Multi-Purpose Taxi Program to include ride-sharing and community transport.

To expand the transport options for people with disability and older people, the Victorian Government should upgrade legacy infrastructure to meet accessibility standards, and expand the Multi-Purpose Taxi Program to include ride-sharing and community transport alternatives.

Trams, trains and buses in Victoria remain inaccessible to many people with disability, in both metropolitan Melbourne and country areas. Issues relate to both physical inaccessibility and a lack of accessible information, such as captioning of public announcements.

Community transport in Victoria is also dramatically underfunded. Service operators receive money from both the state and federal governments, depending on who they transport. But these funding allocations have never been enough to meet demand, leaving many people with disability and older Victorians stranded and isolated in their homes, forced to use expensive alternatives or rely on the goodwill of family and friends.

A long history of insufficient upgrades to the public transport system means the Victorian Government will not achieve the required 90 per cent compliance with the Disability Standards for Accessible Public Transport 2002 by December 2017. While new transport infrastructure

and vehicles are supposed to meet these standards, there is a backlog of inaccessible legacy infrastructure. The Victorian Government should embark on large-scale 'legacy upgrades' to modernise ageing infrastructure to contemporary accessibility standards.

The Multi-Purpose Taxi Program (MPTP) makes point-to-point transport more affordable for eligible people, however, it is currently restricted to taxis. At the same time, the Victorian Government is proposing to deregulate taxi fares, potentially increasing the costs to users. The MPTP should be expanded to include ride-sharing services and community transport to give people greater choice and flexibility to travel independently, and reduce their transport costs.

Fund a whole-of-government carer strategy

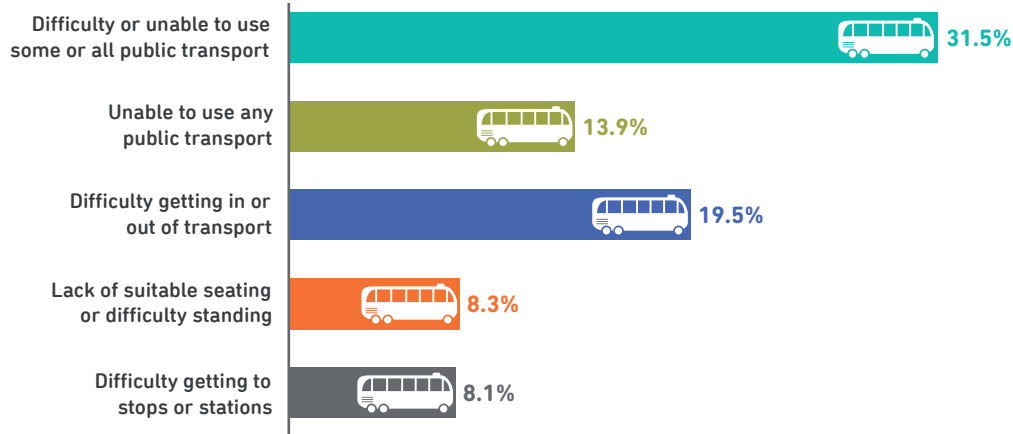
RECOMMENDATIONS



Fund and implement a state-wide, whole-of-government carer strategy.

The Victorian Government can improve the health and wellbeing of carers by funding and implementing a state-wide, whole-of-government carer strategy. There are more than 773,400 unpaid Victorian carers, about one-quarter of whom are primary carers.¹⁵⁰ These carers provide essential support to the people they care for, reducing their own social and economic participation.¹⁵¹ Caring also affects their mental and physical wellbeing.¹⁵²

Victorians with Disability on Public Transport



SOURCE: ABS

Too often, carers miss out on accessing services they are eligible for due to limited awareness of them, difficulty navigating the service systems, and lack of carer identification and referral.¹⁵³ There are also emerging gaps in carer-specific supports, particularly respite, both inside and outside the NDIS.¹⁵⁴ For example, about half of primary mental health carers reported unmet support needs, such as access to respite, counselling and adequate financial support.¹⁵⁵

A funded, whole-of-government carer strategy, which recognises carers' rights as citizens, can help address the unique and specific needs of people in care relationships across employment, health and education. The strategy can include a clear vision and targets for all carers, and reflect the breadth of care experiences, including people caring for older people, people with mental illness and people with disability. It must also address the unique needs of young carers.

An integrated, state-wide strategy can assist carers to navigate service systems and overcome barriers to social and economic participation, providing carers with the same opportunities as other members of the community.

FURTHER STRATEGIES

Help older Victorians lead dignified lives

The Victorian Government can support older Victorians to lead safe, happy, productive and dignified lives by developing an integrated, whole-of-government strategy for older Victorians and implementing state-based recommendations from the elder abuse inquiry.

Victoria has no overarching strategy to meet the changing demands of an ageing population. A strategy could help bring together different portfolios to respond and address the needs of older Victorians. These include maintaining access to affordable and secure housing, providing high quality healthcare and aged care, transport and community services, and driving cultural change to help combat ageism.

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Cut the cost of living

Rising living costs are pushing Victorians on low incomes to the edge. General inflation rates of around two per cent mask more dramatic price rises for essentials like utilities.¹⁵⁶ Incomes are not keeping up with the cost of basic items needed for survival, like housing and electricity.

For people reliant on the Newstart Allowance, payments fall short of a healthy living income by \$96 a week for a single person, \$58 a week for a couple with one child, and \$126 a week for a couple with two children.¹⁵⁷

For people in paid work, wages are essentially stagnant, growing at a record low rate of 1.9 per cent per annum.¹⁵⁸ Having a job does not necessarily bring financial security. One third of Australians living in poverty are reliant on wages as their main source of income.¹⁵⁹

Faced with severe income constraints and rising living costs, people are making trade-offs between food and bill payments, going without heating or cooling and relying on charity assistance, credit cards and high-interest fringe loans.

"The things that you have to go without in order to meet those bills... what other people would take for granted, we would consider luxuries."

'Nola', interviewed for VCOS's Power Struggles report ¹⁶⁰





Fund a comprehensive financial wellbeing package

RECOMMENDATION



Assist Victorians struggling with housing and energy costs with a comprehensive new financial wellbeing package.

The Victorian Government can help families meet their essential needs, and prevent financial problems escalating, by funding a comprehensive financial wellbeing package, with a focus on the needs of people facing debilitating housing and energy costs. The package can include:

- development of a Victorian Financial Inclusion Action Plan
- investment in emergency relief, financial counselling and No Interest Loan Schemes.

A Victorian Government Financial Inclusion Action Plan would guide investment in financial wellbeing services, bring together government, the private sector and the community sector to identify existing financial resilience initiatives, identify financial inclusion gaps, and coordinate action. Specific investments could be made in emergency relief and financial counselling services to bring about financial wellbeing.

Emergency relief services help people in financial crisis by providing food, clothing, rent and bill payment assistance, and building financial stability. More people are seeking emergency relief for housing, energy and family violence crises.¹⁶¹ People in financial crisis prioritise housing and utility payments, then seek help with food, medical costs and other essentials to survive. These pressures have only worsened in recent years.¹⁶²

The Victorian Government can help meet emergency relief demand by directly investing in these services. Currently, the Australian Government, local government, philanthropic organisations and community members (through donations and unpaid voluntary work) all contribute to emergency relief services. Victoria remains one of the few states and territories not directly funding emergency relief, even though our housing and energy costs are among the highest in Australia.

Financial counselling services are also under significant pressure. Funding has not increased despite demand growth. Energy costs are partly driving demand – energy-related work takes up 40 per cent or more of most financial counsellors' caseloads.¹⁶³ While funding for family violence-related financial counselling is welcome, other areas of need are under-funded.

More financial counselling funding would enable people to better deal with job loss, poor health, mortgage and rental stress, and debt problems. It would also allow the creation of tailored services for particular at-risk groups, like older people vulnerable to financial abuse. Investment in this area pays off, allowing further development of successful programs that prevent financial stress snowballing into much larger, costlier problems.

Ambers story

Amber is a single mother with two young children. Since leaving a physically, emotionally and financially violent relationship, she and her children had lived in transitional housing for two years.

Amber needed financial support when she left the relationship. Her ex-partner had been very controlling of finances, and had left Amber with significant debt. She had rented a microwave and television, paying \$60 a week for 12 months – three times the amount they were worth. She had also accessed fringe loans and food vouchers in the past.

To address these issues, Amber's case worker put her in touch with a financial counsellor who helped Amber get all of her finances together to pay off the debt.

Amber took out a zero interest loan to pay for driving lessons and her license. She had received a second-hand car from a family member. Prior to taking out the loan, Amber had been taking public transport with her two young children, and needed to catch taxis to get her groceries home twice a week. This was exhausting and expensive.

While Amber is still waiting for a permanent home and still feels financial pressure, particularly around Christmas and birthdays, she is now aware of the supports available to her.¹⁶⁴

No Interest Loan Scheme (NILS) loans can be a lifeline, financing essential household appliances, education and medical expenses, and diverting people away from predatory credit providers and goods rental services. NILS loans can be provided alongside or independent of financial counselling.

The Victorian Government could ensure more people benefit from NILS loans by building on 2017-18 investments like the Morwell 'Good Money' store, operated by Good Shepherd Microfinance. For every dollar invested in a NILS loan, \$1.59 worth of social and economic value is created. NILS loans save people money, increase their financial independence and standard of living, reduce stress levels and anxiety, and improve confidence and self-esteem.¹⁶⁵

Increase crisis payments for people in energy hardship

RECOMMENDATION



Help people deal with energy hardship by increasing the Utility Relief Grant and making it easier to access.

Victorians are facing an energy costs crisis. Electricity prices more than doubled between 2006 and 2016, far in excess of general inflation.¹⁶⁶ Wholesale cost spikes will push prices higher over the coming year.¹⁶⁷ Bill payment difficulties will worsen.

Victoria's Utility Relief Grant (URG) – a payment for those in temporary financial crisis – can help people through 'bill-shock' if increased to reflect current energy costs. The current URG cap is too low, limited to six months' of usage, up to a maximum of \$500. This cap has been in place since at least 2010, despite recent price surges.

Average electricity costs are now approximately \$750 for six months,¹⁶⁸ significantly above the current \$500 cap. Low-income, high-consumption households will face higher costs, including families with children, and people who live in draughty, poorly insulated rental housing. Reflecting energy cost increases, just over 40 per cent of people in energy retailers' hardship programs have debts over \$1000 when they enter those programs.¹⁶⁹

The URG would be more effective if increased to \$750.

VCOSS also supports the proposed review of URG administration. The current process is cumbersome and difficult. People must request an application form from their energy or water retailer, and then submit it to the

Department of Health and Human Services (DHHS) for assessment. The application process can be made easier by allowing energy and water retailers to send applications directly to DHHS on behalf of customers.

Crisis payments help people stay connected to power

Some people interviewed for VCOSS's Power Struggles report had stayed connected to energy by using the Utility Relief Grant. 'Beth' was able to access the grant while sole parenting and is now very focused on paying her bills on time, to take advantage of discounts. 'Ursula' also benefited from the grant and has managed to avoid disconnection despite financial struggles.

Other people's experiences showed the URG's inadequacies.

'Odette', a sole parent caring for five young children and living in public housing, saw her electricity bill double to about \$600 per quarter after the housing office installed an air conditioner for Odette's medical needs. The URG covered only part of the bill, leaving Odette financially vulnerable. 'Rachel' was unable to pay her gas bill despite accessing the URG, and has now permanently disconnected from gas to manage costs.

Invest in energy efficiency upgrades for low-income earners

RECOMMENDATION



Launch a large-scale energy efficiency upgrade program for low-income earners.

The Victorian Government can cut the cost of living for many Victorians by embarking on an energy efficiency upgrade program across social and private rental housing.

An energy efficiency program could include a mix of government-funded upgrades, subsidised upgrades and No Interest Loan Scheme financing. It would build on welcome initiatives for low-income households under Victoria's Home Energy Assist program, and the Latrobe Valley Home Energy Upgrade program.

With half of energy bills spent on heating, cooling and hot water, energy efficiency upgrades strike at the heart

of high power costs.¹⁷⁰ Measures like insulation, draught-sealing, efficient lighting and affordable hot water and heating systems can significantly bring down bills. Energy efficient households cost about 40 per cent less to run.¹⁷¹ Even relatively minor improvements can achieve valuable savings.

People living in private rental housing have a growing need for affordable energy. Renting is no longer a transitory state for many people, as social housing supply contracts and the affordability of owner-occupied housing worsens. The needs of tenants are changing. Families with young children – and often high, non-discretionary energy needs – now comprise a large proportion of long-term private renters. More older people are living in rental housing as they age, requiring affordable energy supply to meet health and wellbeing needs.¹⁷²

In the social housing sector, energy efficiency retrofits create a win-win for the Victorian Government and tenants alike, allowing people to stay healthy, live in greater comfort, pay their rent and avoid 'bill-shock'.

In conjunction with improved modification rights allowing people to make minor, non-structural modifications without landlord consent, an energy efficiency program has the power to overcome financial and tenure barriers to cheaper energy bills.

In the social housing sector, energy efficiency retrofits create a win-win for the Victorian Government and tenants alike, allowing people to stay healthy, live in greater comfort, pay their rent and avoid 'bill-shock'.

Local government 'Energy Saver' program delivers warmth and savings

More than 300 low-income households in Melbourne's south-east enjoyed energy savings under a successful retrofit and behaviour change program conducted by the South East Councils Climate Change Alliance. Each retrofit cost \$2885 and achieved 10 per cent cuts in total energy use, 13-18 per cent cheaper gas bills, 22 per cent cheaper lighting costs, and a 1.6 degree increase in winter living room temperatures. People were very satisfied with the program.¹⁷³

Introduce a Victorian Energy Broker

RECOMMENDATION



Introduce an independent Victorian Energy Broker.

The Victorian Government can help people reduce their energy costs by introducing a Victorian Energy Broker.

Many Victorians are paying more than they need to for energy. In turn, Victorian Government energy concession costs are higher than they should be.¹⁷⁴ The Independent Review of Energy Retail Markets found households were paying, on average, about 21 per cent more per year for electricity than the cheapest offer available in the market.¹⁷⁵ A household with average energy needs could save hundreds of dollars a year if they switched from the worst to best market offer.

Low-income households cannot afford to be overpaying. In the face of high energy costs and stagnant incomes, people are making trade-offs – going without food and avoiding children's education costs to stay connected. Some people turn off heating and cooling, even if this affects their health.¹⁷⁶

Although better deals are out there, many Victorians find it difficult to engage with the energy market and find a more affordable deal. Energy offers are not easily comparable, even if using the Victorian Government's 'Energy Compare' website. Hundreds of offers are available but few people have the time or skills to make sense of them. Low income and vulnerable households face additional hurdles such as a lack of internet access, communication barriers, and acute financial and personal stresses that make searching for a better energy deal a low priority.

VCOSS welcomes the Victorian Government's pilot of a brokerage service for CALD and hardship customers, funded in the 2017-18 Budget, and the Independent Review Panel's recommendation for a not-for-profit brokerage service for concession card holders. However, a Victorian Energy Broker – for all customers – would have benefits that a specialist brokerage service does not.

In tandem with changes to energy marketing and contracting practices, an independent energy broker would see Victoria lead the nation in retail energy market reforms.

Help asylum seekers access energy and water affordably

RECOMMENDATION



Make energy and water concessions available to asylum seekers living in the community in Victoria.

Victoria is home to a small but significant group of asylum seekers living in the community on bridging visas. This group faces extreme financial hardship and relies on community organisation support to survive. But they are ineligible for concessions so pay full price for energy and water. According to one emergency relief provider serving Melbourne's outer northern suburbs, "limited eligibility for a range of services and the cost of daily living expenses on minimal or no income has edged many asylum seekers into serious financial hardship".¹⁷⁷

The Victorian Government can reduce living costs for asylum seekers and their children by giving them energy and water concessions. This would not only help an extremely vulnerable group of people, but help relieve pressure on community services that face growing demand for assistance.

Energy and water concessions are one of the missing links for asylum seekers in extreme financial hardship. This assistance would be consistent with the concessions available to asylum seekers for public transport use, and the extension of health and TAFE services to asylum seekers.

FURTHER STRATEGIES

Develop a digital inclusion strategy

Access to digital services such as internet and mobile phones is essential. Without affordable digital services it is increasingly difficult to participate in social and economic life, whether this involves accessing public and community services, consumer information, financial services, health services, information about children's progress at school, or emergency management advice.

The most recent data shows the digital divide is widening between low-income and more affluent households, as is the divide between older and young people, and people in rural and urban areas in Victoria.¹⁷⁸

The Victorian Government can develop a strategy to overcome the digital divide, which could include funding community-scale internet access, expanding internet access for social housing tenants, and examining whether concessions should be available for internet services and digital devices for people in need.

Help people participate in economic and community life by reviewing public transport fares and concessions

Victorian public transport fares should be clear and affordable for low-income earners, enabling people to access work, education, community services and support networks.

The current fares system is complex and confusing, involving 17 types of concessions and six types of free travel passes. The system requires a complete overhaul to create simple, fair and proportionate fares that meet the needs of people on low incomes, and people with unique transportation needs, such as people with disability and older people.

Encourage people's financial resilience through improved access to general insurance


People living on low incomes struggle to find and afford insurance products that meet their needs. They are least able to afford the protection and security provided by insurance, and have the least resources to dedicate to recovery or replacement after a loss.


The lack of adequate insurance leaves vulnerable Victorians at risk of losing key assets they are not able to replace. This is particularly concerning given that risks such as natural disasters, unemployment, the death of a breadwinner, permanent disability, business failure and theft are the main events that can tip people into poverty.¹⁷⁹


However, people living on low incomes are aware of the benefit of insurance and the need to protect assets. They need higher insurance cover than they can currently afford. The Victorian Government can help to improve the financial resilience of people living on low incomes by funding community organisations to partner with the insurance industry to provide more affordable and accessible insurance products, and by funding financial literacy services to raise awareness of the benefits of insurance products.

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