



Delivering a **good life**
for every Victorian



VCOSS State
Election
Platform
2018

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#GoodLife



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The Victorian Council of Social Service is the peak body of Victoria's social and community sector.

Our 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.

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

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Introduction: Delivering a good life for every Victorian

Victoria is a strong, prosperous and vibrant community. Few, if any, of the challenges we confront are genuinely unable to be overcome. Working together, we have the expertise and affluence to deliver a good life for every Victorian.

Overcoming the state's challenges requires two key ingredients: the commitment, vision and determination of our political leaders, and the authentic involvement of the wider Victorian community.

This document presents a vision for Victoria that has the attainment of 'a good life' at its core.

VCOSS believes a good life should be central to the policy platform of every political party contesting the 2018 Victorian election.

Everyone instinctively grasps the concept of a good life. It means:

- having a safe and affordable place to call home,
- affording the basics, paying for food, energy, transport and general costs of living,
- having a great education to grow and develop our talents, leading to a job with security and a decent wage,
- prioritising health, with support to recover from illness and manage disabilities,
- living free from violence, abuse and neglect, and
- being part of a community with friends and loved ones.



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Underpinning a good life in Victoria is the need to support self-determination and a Treaty between the Victorian Government and the state's Aboriginal people. This includes mapping out a pathway to deep and meaningful reconciliation.

This document lays out clear priorities for generating and sharing prosperity with every Victorian, with clear goals and actions. It is the result of extensive consultation between VCOSS and our members, representing frontline social service organisations, charities and a range of individuals and social advocacy bodies across Victoria.

We call on all parties and candidates to adopt these priorities in the lead up to the election, and to work alongside us in delivering them.



Emma King
VCOSS Chief Executive Officer

Priorities for a good life

Goal: Everyone can find a secure, affordable and appropriate home

Forge new beginnings with 3,000 new homes each year
Over the next decade, Victoria can forge new beginnings by building 3,000 extra public and community homes each year as critical infrastructure.
[See page 12](#)

Include public and community housing in new developments
Victoria can accelerate public and community housing growth by compelling developers to include social housing among their new apartments.
[See page 12](#)

Nip homelessness in the bud
Victoria can bring together properly funded homelessness prevention services to 'wrap around' people before they become homeless.
[See page 13](#)

Set a benchmark for liveable rental homes
Victoria can set minimum health, safety and energy efficiency standards in rental homes to systematically improve the quality of rental housing.
[See page 14](#)

Goal: Every child can reach their potential

Give every child 15 hours of kindergarten each week for two years
Victoria can lead the nation in early childhood education by bringing us up to world standards of access to early learning for 3 and 4-year-olds.
[See page 32](#)

Goal: Everyone can get a secure job with a decent wage

Target more jobs to marginalised workers
Victoria can lift and broaden its targets for a more diverse workforce.
[See page 18](#)

Maintain free vocational education
Victoria can keep delivering free training in targeted qualifications for future growth industries, like community services.
[See page 19](#)

Boost community sector pay and conditions
Victoria can fund community service employers for wage and cost increases to avoid creating more insecure, low-paid jobs.
[See page 21](#)

Develop innovative approaches to grow the workforce
Victoria can respond on multiple fronts to enhance community sector career paths and provide superior services to meet the needs of a changing industry.
[See page 22](#)

Match funds to learning needs for children with disability
Victoria can give children with disability their best chance in life by matching their support funding with their actual learning needs.
[See page 33](#)

Goal: Everyone can pay for their basic needs

Regulate for fair energy prices
Victoria can adopt stronger regulations to make energy pricing more transparent, simple and comparable, and ensure fair and affordable energy to those in need.
[See page 26](#)

Help upgrade homes to slash energy use
Victoria can invest in upgrading homes to be more energy efficient, providing basic energy savings measure like insulation, hot water and heating systems.
[See page 26](#)

Become a connected community with low-cost internet plans
Victoria can become Australia's most digitally-connected state by expanding internet access to low-income households with a special low-cost basic internet plan.
[See page 29](#)

Make public school free
Victoria can deliver financial relief for parents and a truly free education for every child by investigating the real costs of school participation and topping up funds.
[See page 33](#)

Goal: Everyone is free from violence, can stay healthy and recover from adversity

Complete delivery of the Royal Commission into Family Violence recommendations
Victoria can complete the work of the Royal Commission to deliver real and lasting change for Victoria's women, children and families.
[See page 40](#)

Be a proud leader in mental health recovery
Victoria can convey a sweeping vision for recovery-based mental health, combining prevention and early intervention with psychosocial rehabilitation and support.
[See page 42](#)

Make funding transparent to keep services running during and after the NDIS rollout
Victoria can clearly break down the funding sources for 'service continuity' outside the NDIS, providing assurance people will continue to receive the help they need.
[See page 43](#)

Help kids join their friends in local sport
Victoria can help engage every child in sport by funding a transferable sport voucher for children from low-income families.
[See page 33](#)

Goal: Everyone is recognised, valued and included

Cultivate strong, Aboriginal Controlled Community Organisations
Victoria can adopt a policy of Aboriginal self-determination and build strong, sustainable ACCOs.
[See page 50](#)

Develop a gender inclusive culture
Victoria can pursue cultural and attitudinal change to perceptions of women.
[See page 51](#)

Boost advocacy and information funding
Victoria can empower people with disability by funding advocacy and information services that give them a voice and support their decision-making.
[See page 52](#)

Provide free public transport for school kids from families facing disadvantage
Victoria can support school attendance with free public transport for children of families with a health care card.
[See page 33](#)

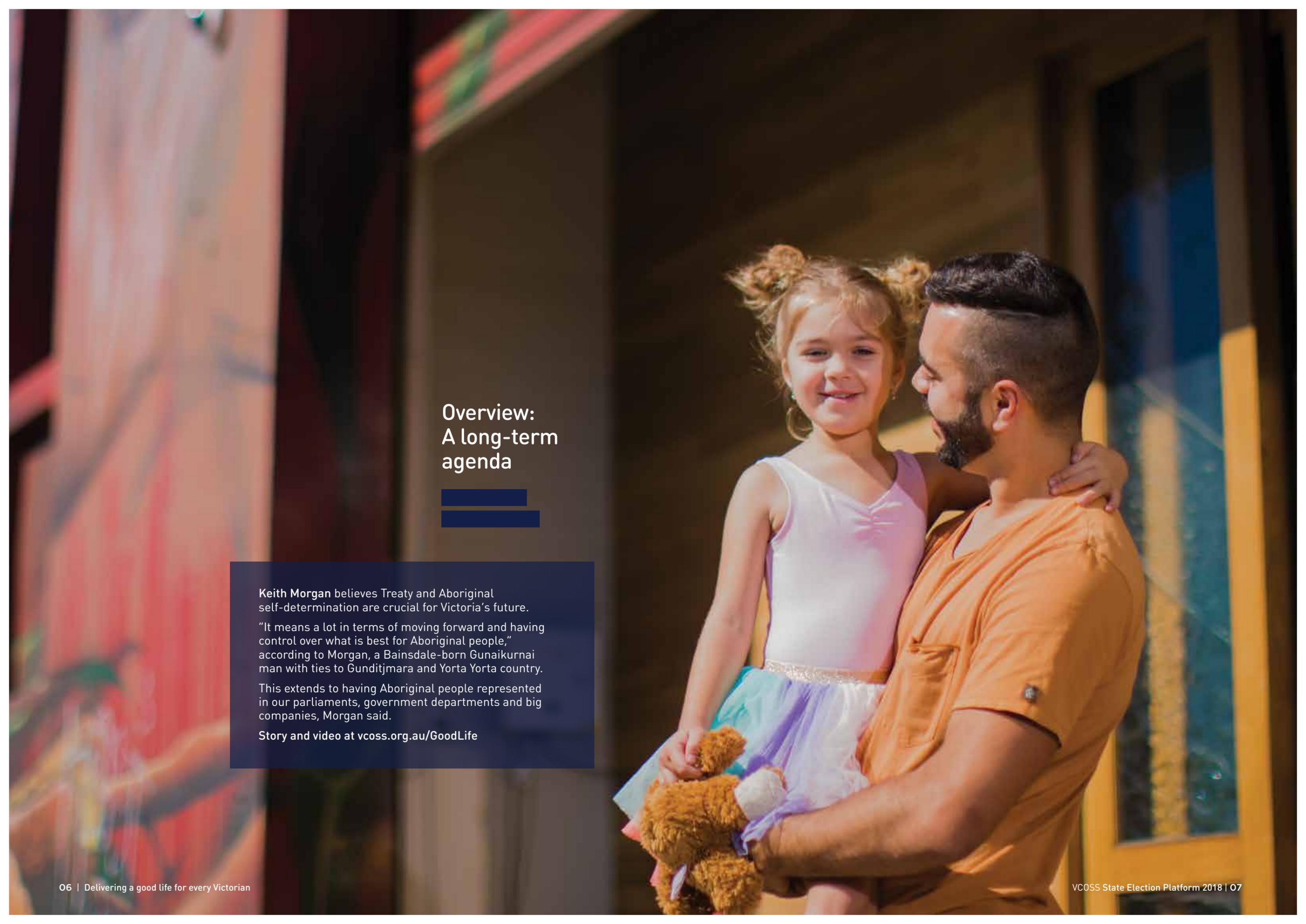
Goal: Everyone is treated fairly under the law

Unclog courts by decriminalising toll fines
Victorian can change road toll fee enforcement to a civil debt recovery system.
[See page 60](#)

Close youth prisons and invest in better diversion alternatives
Victoria can plan to progressively discontinue its youth prisons, and replace them with more effective diversion and rehabilitation interventions.
[See page 61](#)

Slash re-offending rates
Victoria can tackle repeat offending by aiming to reduce recidivism by 15%.
[See page 62](#)

Guarantee the home stretch for young care leavers
Victoria can extend support for young care-leavers until at least 21 to equip them with the skills, housing and resources to succeed in life.
[See page 36](#)



Overview: A long-term agenda

Keith Morgan believes Treaty and Aboriginal self-determination are crucial for Victoria's future.

"It means a lot in terms of moving forward and having control over what is best for Aboriginal people," according to Morgan, a Bainsdale-born Gunaikurnai man with ties to Gunditjmara and Yorta Yorta country.

This extends to having Aboriginal people represented in our parliaments, government departments and big companies, Morgan said.

Story and video at vcoss.org.au/GoodLife

Overview: A long-term agenda

For all people to lead a good life Victoria needs a long-term social policy agenda and governments that strive to be engaged and embedded in communities.

Enter a treaty with the Aboriginal community

Transforming government means confronting our shared past: to plan for the future of all Victorians we must find a pathway forward to reconciliation with Victoria's first peoples. Aboriginal Australians have long called for a Treaty, or treaties, between community and government:

"We seek constitutional reforms to empower our people and take a rightful place in our own country. When we have power over our destiny our children will flourish. They will walk in two worlds and their culture will be a gift to their country."

Aboriginal Victorians should decide the scope of a Treaty, potentially including sovereignty, rights, government relationships, service delivery and decision-making. It could also include education, Aboriginal guardianship, housing, economic empowerment and business development.

Steer social change with a social policy blueprint

Under a flagship strategy for Victorian social justice, different areas of government can develop leadership, oversight and coordination to work together in achieving social change.

Victoria needs a clear future vision setting high aspirations through targets, timeframes and accountabilities. This will bring together different plans and ensure resources are working in the right places and reaching the right people. Rather than delivering a list of isolated announcements, different agencies can work together towards the same goals, and changes can be correctly aligned – not duplicated or haphazard – and rolled out in the right sequence.

Create inclusive growth

To reduce economic inequality, Victoria can pursue inclusive growth, which ensures that the dividends of economic growth flow to those with the lowest incomes through stronger income support, more jobs and higher wages. This is fairer than the current economic growth trajectory, where most of the extra income generated by economic growth flows to people who already have high incomes and wealth.

Prevent and intervene early

The key to enhancing the lives of Victorians is to prevent health and social problems, rather than waiting for them to become entrenched and acute before acting. Across the Victorian Government, resources need to be directed 'upstream' to prevention and early intervention services, disrupting the heavy reliance on 'downstream' services that provide acute, emergency and crisis responses. In every case, prevention and early intervention is cheaper and leads to people living happier and healthier, more productive lives.

Plan to match place-based needs with local services

Victoria has an opportunity to forecast and budget for local social and community services and infrastructure needs, as local communities grow and change differently in different places.

Already we can see moves in this direction. Victoria is getting better at future planning through Infrastructure Victoria and the School Building Authority. We can now make this 'business as usual' across government, so every local community has the mix of local services that fit with its current size and need. This includes the right suite of community services, including childcare, neighbourhood houses, community health services, mental health services, disability services, children's services and family violence services, among others.

Develop 'one place, one plan' place-based approaches

Social and community services are most potent when they work as part of broader, collaborative action in local communities. Place-based approaches facilitate government, non-government, private sector and community collaboration to tackle local issues. Local

networks can identify opportunities and linkages not visible to more distant and centralised agencies.

Fragmented, overlapping and partial place-based initiatives currently operate. This inhibits co-ordination and increases the workload on everyone involved. Instead, these initiatives should move to 'one place, one plan' place-based partnerships, with governance structures reflecting unique local community composition.

Collaborate and co-produce with the community sector

The community sector is a resource with decades of experience in delivering services to Victorians. The Victorian Government can be more effective and efficient and generate better ideas if it draws community organisations into the heart of policy-making. Co-production encourages people using services to get involved in service delivery and planning, funding decisions, evaluation and outcomes measurement.² The Victorian Government can create more successful services by encouraging and endorsing co-production for program development, community service organisations and place-based initiatives.

Co-design with service users for person-centred services

People with lived experience, including of poverty, disability, family violence or homelessness, have knowledge and insight essential for governance systems, place-based approaches, and service design and delivery.

Co-design "involves coming alongside people who experience vulnerabilities, to work with them in creating interventions, services and programs which will work in the context of their lives, and will reflect their own values and goals".³

Local co-design can use collaborative problem-solving to produce tailored service design and delivery suited to local needs.

¹ Referendum Council, *Uluru Statement from the Heart*, 2017, https://www.referendumcouncil.org.au/sites/default/files/2017-05/Uluru_Statement_From_The_Heart_0.PDF

² S Pollock, 'Shifting the power-are we ready to embrace the full potential of co-production', *VCOSS Insight edition 15* (citing Social Care Institute of Excellence, *Co-production in social care: what it is and how to do it*, SCIE Guide 51, London, 2013)

³ Victorian Council of Social Service, *Walk alongside: Co-designing social initiatives with people experiencing vulnerabilities*, VCOSS, July 2015, http://vcoss.org.au/documents/2015/08/Codesign-paper-Jul15_Final.pdf



Finding a place to call home

Goal: Everyone can find a secure, affordable and appropriate home

The best way to help someone achieve a good life is by finding them a safe place to call home. Every other life achievement is built on this bedrock. Homes are places to raise our families, express ourselves and store our memories, and stay safe, warm, clean and healthy.

Yet, for many Victorians, this basic human need is a luxury they can't afford. Nearly 25,000 Victorians are homeless on any given night.⁴ Another million live in housing stress.⁵ Rising rents and stagnant social housing growth have made the problem worse.

Creating affordable housing, ending homelessness and making renting fair gives every Victorian a better chance at a great life.

Being made redundant was the initial trigger for David Montgomery's slide into homelessness.

The former public servant spent more than nine years in rooming houses and crisis accommodation before securing a social housing property in Melbourne's outer east.

"It's fantastic, it feels like a home to me. I'm so lucky," he said.

"It's so important for a person to feel that they have security."

Story and video at vcoss.org.au/GoodLife

Finding a place to call home

Delivering affordable housing

Housing is the most important thing for Victoria to get right; the happiness of every single Victorian depends on it.

Forge new beginnings with 3,000 new homes each year

Over the next decade, Victoria can forge new beginnings by building 3,000 extra public and community homes each year. Just like roads and rail, Victoria needs to view our public and community housing as critical infrastructure. But neglect has left it to decay and become dangerously inadequate for Victorians' needs. Victoria will need 3,000 public and community homes each year just to meet the needs of people eligible for priority housing.⁶

Victoria has a chance to transform: after decades of being Australia's housing laggard we can start leading the nation by providing the capital investment and recurrent backing to create a public and community housing system to be proud of.

Include public and community housing in new developments

One of the most effective ways of accelerating public and community housing growth is by challenging the private sector to contribute to the task. Inclusionary zoning means compelling developers to include social housing among their new apartments. Victoria builds 30,000 new units every year; making just a few per cent of these units social housing would go a long way towards ensuring every Victorian has a place to call home.

Make new homes age and disability-friendly

Victorians deserve homes where they can age gracefully: homes that suit diverse community needs, including for people with disability. Our housing standards aren't up to scratch for this task.

The good news is this can be easily fixed. 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.⁷

Reform property taxes to promote housing affordability

Our antiquated system of property taxes is leading to millions of dollars being lost to our economy, and too many Victorians missing out on achieving their housing dreams. Stamp duties encourage property speculation, dampen economic activity, fall heavily on young home buyers, and discourage people moving to better homes or new jobs. They also create budget nightmares for governments, being prone to drastic drops in revenue if the property market stalls.

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 occur with appropriate concessions, exemptions and deferrals, particularly for low-income households that may be asset-rich but income-poor.

Creating a Victoria without homelessness

Victoria can be Australia's leading state in combatting homelessness. It is shocking that nearly 25,000 Victorians are homeless on any given night, including over 1,000 sleeping rough. This is a problem we know how to fix.

Nip homelessness in the bud

The first step towards ending homelessness is to prevent people becoming homeless in the first place. This means having services to help people as soon as their housing comes under threat, rather than waiting until they are living on the streets.

We can bring together and properly fund our fragmented, overstretched homelessness prevention services. These can 'wrap around' people at risk of homelessness, and include tailored assistance, legal help, and financial advice and

support. People facing eviction, foreclosure or sudden income loss can get help with legal and financial advice, while also resolving tenancy problems and being connected to intensive support services.

Combine talents and offer 'housing first'

To tackle entrenched homelessness, Victoria needs to bring together the expertise of different professionals, including homelessness workers and healthcare professionals, to immediately deliver the right package of voluntarily accepted assistance.

This entails a 'housing first' approach, meaning people are offered permanent, affordable housing as quickly as possible, combined with the multidisciplinary support to stay housed and avoid becoming homeless again.

A permanent supportive housing model can operate on 'step-up, step-down' principles, meaning housing support can be intensified when people have difficulties, and can be reduced when it becomes unnecessary. This includes assertive outreach and engagement providing a path to permanent housing, combined with assessment, care planning and integrated service provision.

Don't let people leave with nowhere to go

Victoria has a special responsibility to those in its care. People leaving hospital, prison or out-of-home care should not be pushed out into the cold with nowhere to go.

People leaving these institutions are often particularly vulnerable, and without stable, affordable housing. They have a high risk of homelessness or of returning to an institution soon after leaving.

Fixing this problem needs better planning from those institutions, and a pool of available long-term homes for people to go to.

Finding a place to call home

Making renting fair

Victoria can secure better homes for Victorians by strengthening rental laws. With more Victorians renting for longer, including more families and older people, renting is no longer just a short-term housing choice. New, stronger rental laws can provide better protections for life-long renters, allowing them to make a home, raise a family, and keep comfortable, safe and healthy.

Set a benchmark for liveable rental homes

Setting minimum health, safety and energy efficiency standards will systematically improve the quality of rental housing. This will improve the health and safety of Victorian renters, and help reduce their energy bills.

Standards can include basic features such as a working toilet and stove, locks on external doors, proper airflow, draught-proofing, ceiling insulation and efficient heating. Gradually introducing minimum rental standards over time can ease any price impacts.

Prevent people being needlessly forced to leave their rental homes

Victoria can strengthen our rental laws to prevent people being unnecessarily forced from their homes. With some people renting all their lives, they need to be able to plan for the future with certainty, settle down, and make a home for their families and pets.

Victoria should make sure eviction is only used as a last resort, when all avenues of saving someone's home have been exhausted. Law reform can give more power to tenants to defend against needless evictions, stop evictions for no reason, compel landlords to make proper repairs, and let renters make and enjoy their homes without interference.

Streamline problem-solving in rental disagreements

A Housing Ombudsman could be a more engaged, investigative and problem-solving regulator, overcoming the fear and complexity many people experience dealing with the Victorian Civil and Administrative Tribunal (VCAT).

A Housing Ombudsman can be a 'one-stop shop' for resolving housing problems. Ideally, it would receive direct government funding, be vigorously independent, report and speak publicly and have strong powers to resolve complaints. This includes the power to investigate problems, make binding orders and launch inquiries into systemic problems in housing.

⁴ Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2049.0 - Census of Population and Housing: Estimating homelessness, 2016

⁵ The Australian Bureau of Statistics estimates that 962,500 Victorians live in households paying more than 30 per cent of their income towards housing costs. See Australian Bureau of Statistics, 4130.0 - Housing Occupancy and Costs, 2015-16, Table 13.5 Household Estimates, Selected household characteristics, States and Territories, 2015-16

⁶ Community Housing Federation of Victoria, *Quantifying the shortfall of Social and Affordable Housing*, p.3, <https://chiavic.com.au/wp-content/uploads/2017/08/CHFV-Housing-Needs-Estimates.pdf>

⁷ Australian Housing and Urban Research Institute, *Dwelling, Land and Neighbourhood Use by Older Home Owners*, 2010, p.282



Getting a good job

Goal: Everyone can get a secure job with a decent wage

Getting a decent job can change someone's life. A good job with security and decent pay provides a stable income, meaningful engagement and buys people a stake in Victoria's future. By creating good jobs and giving people the skills, advice and pathways to get into them, the Victorian Government can give hope to the nearly 200,000 unemployed Victorians, and the 300,000 more who can't find enough work.⁸

But this needs to mean more than just providing any job - Victorians need *good jobs*. In Victoria today, a job no longer guarantees a decent living, with over 200,000 Victorian workers living in poverty despite being employed.⁹

The community sector will provide a growing share of the jobs of the future, especially as the NDIS, MyAgedCare and family violence response rolls out. But this means the quality of those jobs will impact heavily on Victorians' wellbeing. Community services jobs must be secure, well paid and provide decent career paths. If we create more insecure work in casualised and under-valued roles we will not fill job vacancies, and vital services will not be delivered.

Nhu Nguyen is part of the workforce of the future—though she'll probably never manage a fleet of robots.

"I help people in the community," is how the disability support coordinator and Future Social Service Institute alumna describes her job.

Nguyen is a member of one of Australia's fastest growing and most important sectors, covering social support and assistance.

"There is so much room for growth, to be innovative, to be entrepreneurs," she said.

Story and video at vcoss.org.au/GoodLife

Getting a good job

Creating jobs, skills and pathways

Victoria is the jobs engine of Australia, generating nearly 400,000 jobs over the past five years. But we need to provide better pathways for marginalised workers to be hired to reduce unemployment. Jobless numbers have barely budged, and youth unemployment is at record levels of 15 per cent.¹⁰

Target more jobs to marginalised workers

The Victorian Government is a major employer, and can lead by example by lifting and broadening its targets for embracing a more diverse workforce. This includes extending the 6 per cent disability target (12 per cent by 2025)¹¹ and the 2 per cent Aboriginal target,¹² from the relatively small and central Public Service to the entire Victorian public sector, including schools and hospitals.¹³ Victoria can also set targets for other groups, such as people from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds, and single parents.

“The Victorian community is best served by a public sector that reflects and embraces its rich diversity.”¹⁴

Work with business to promote inclusion and flexibility

The Victorian Government should encourage employers to ‘take a chance’ on hiring disadvantaged jobseekers and to offer more inclusive and diverse workplaces. Becoming best-practice employers, with inclusive attitudes and flexibility for workers, can mean tapping into a larger recruitment pool and benefitting from the many talents of diverse workers, which are too often overlooked.

Use government buying power to create jobs for marginalised workers

‘Social procurement’ uses government purchasing power to create jobs for marginalised workers. The current Social Procurement Framework can be expanded across all government purchasing, and can go beyond creating apprenticeships and traineeships to employing long-term unemployed people, people with disability and other marginalised workers.

Top up wages and provide more jobseekers support

Victoria can expand its capabilities in supporting the most disadvantaged jobseekers to get into the workforce. Victoria should build on the successes and lessons from the Jobs Victoria Employment Network and expand intensive assistance for jobseekers, including additional tools to support them into work, such as introductory wage subsidies as people develop experience in workplaces.

Supercharge regional economic development strategies

Victoria can create and boost local collaborative economic development alliances to harness the talents and assets in communities, generating a viable commercial base and ensuring that people working and living locally reap the benefits. The first priority is areas of high unemployment or those affected by a changing employment landscape. These powerhouse alliances can link local training with local jobs, encourage ‘buy local’ campaigns and pinpoint the best infrastructure investments.

Invest in dedicated, skilled and experienced school careers advisors

It’s a challenge to decide on a career path and choose the right option to pursue it, especially for young people who don’t have good personal connections or who face others’ low expectations about their future.

Victoria can help young people make informed choices by funding dedicated full-time school careers advisors, rather than part-time afterthought roles.¹⁵ With dedicated jobs, careers advisors can provide high quality, contemporary guidance tailored to students’ strengths and interests, and realistic information about training requirements and job prospects. They can open students’ minds to new possibilities, provide real-world opportunities, build strong relationships and referral pathways with employers as well as other education providers and community organisations, and attend relevant professional development.

Maintain free vocational education

Victoria can overcome the biggest barrier to people getting the skills needed for our future workforce by keeping free training in targeted vocational qualifications, like community services. Cost is the biggest barrier for many students, especially those living in poverty. Waiving fees means more people can undertake courses and gain the skills for future success.

Provide intensive training support for disadvantaged learners

Victoria can engage the most disadvantaged in acquiring skills by funding extra assistance to stay in vocational education courses. For the most disadvantaged learners, it can be a struggle to stay connected and engaged in training. Having extra funding set aside to help overcome life’s difficulties – including daily costs like transport, short-term accommodation or mental health support – can keep people learning and on a pathway to success.

Foster innovative ways of engaging young people in higher learning

Victoria can better support young people once they leave school by investing in novel and alternative pathways to jobs and vocational education for early school-leavers and at-risk young people. For example, Local Learning and Employment Networks can help develop innovative models to re-engage young people and provide pathways into the higher education system.

Safeguard excellence in vocational education

To maximise students’ job prospects, Victoria should have an accessible, high quality VET system, which particularly meets the needs of students from disadvantaged backgrounds. There is still widespread distrust of accredited qualifications, especially from some for-profit private training providers. Both Victorian and Commonwealth governments should keep strengthening quality control and audits so students can trust they are learning the right skills for successful careers.

Make wage theft a crime

Wage theft is widespread, with one in five young workers found to receive base pay rates less than the minimum wage and less than half of young workers receiving penalty rates.¹⁶ Underpayment of wages is endemic across the retail, hospitality and fast food sectors and enforcement activities undertaken by the Fair Work Ombudsman are ineffective.¹⁷

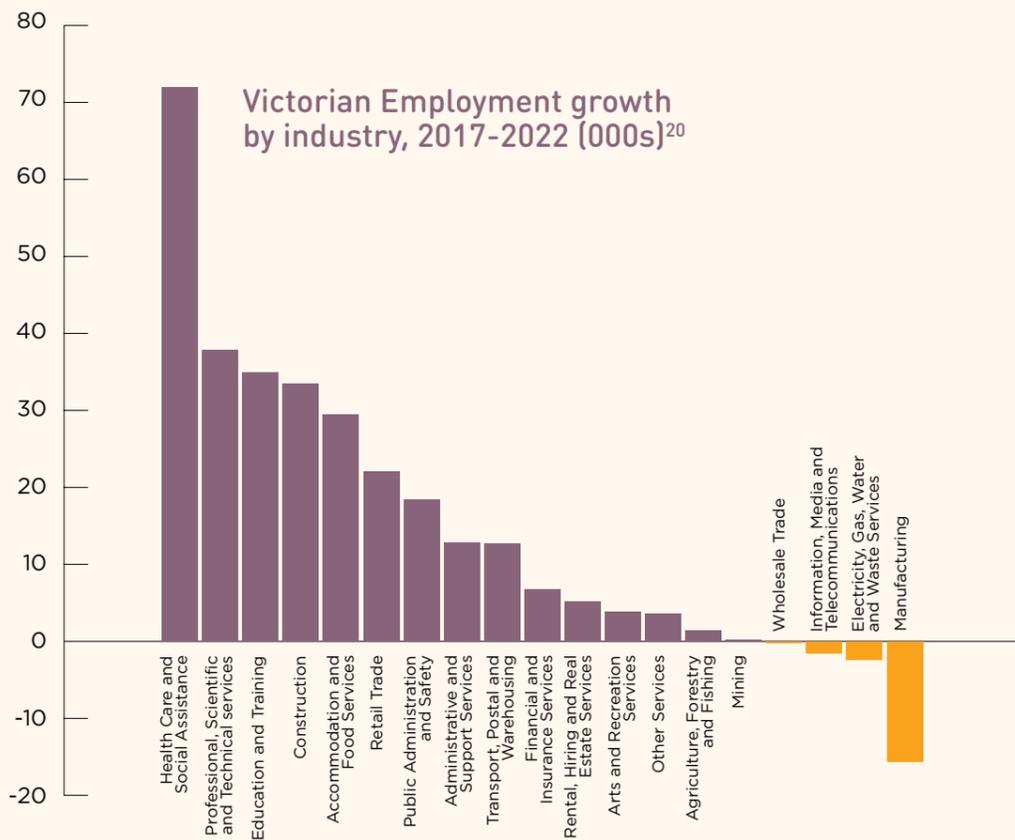
The *Crimes Act 1958* (Vic) should be amended to insert a new offence of ‘wage theft’ to deter and punish employers for engaging in the deliberate and dishonest underpayment of wages.¹⁸

Getting a good job

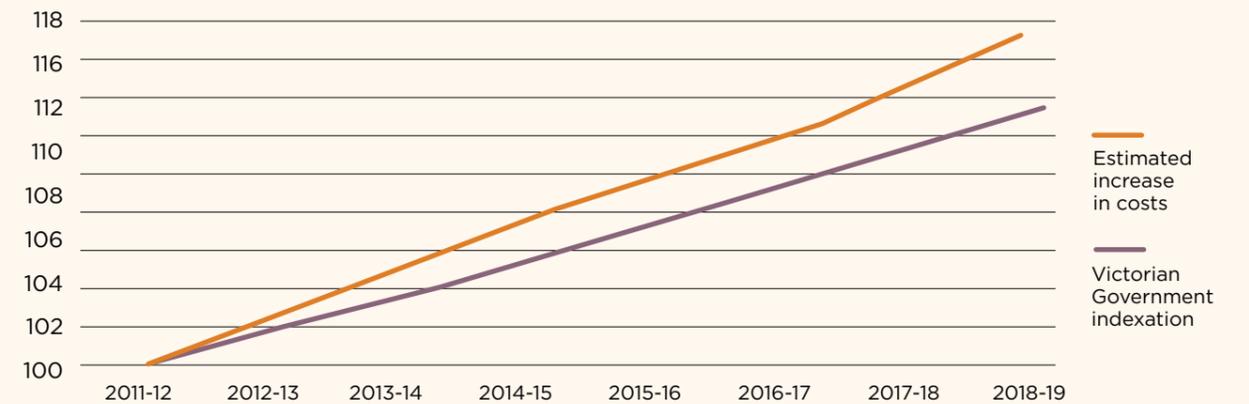
Securing the community sector growth dividend

The community services and health industry is creating the jobs of the future right now, nearly double the rate of any other industry. In five years, it will employ nearly half a million workers.¹⁹

We want to be an industry of choice for job seekers and provide rewarding career opportunities, secure employment, and good pay and conditions.



Victorian Government indexation versus estimated cost increases



Boost community sector pay and conditions

Community services industry growth can only provide secure futures for Victorian workers if these new jobs offer decent pay and conditions. Victoria needs to fund community service employers to keep pace with wage and cost increases, and to avoid creating more insecure and low-paid jobs.

To achieve fair wages and conditions, community service organisations need a properly costed pricing and indexation framework that maintains fair funding levels. The industry is being squeezed by baseline funding increases of only 2 per cent each year, threatening job security and wage levels.

Grow community sector skills in the regions

Victoria especially needs to construct a pipeline of qualified, professional community service workers in our regions, where skill shortages are most acute. These shortages are compromising regional service quality and stymieing jobs growth. Investing in local, community-led approaches can be effective to secure regional jobs and ensure our regions get equivalent services.

Build a Victorian social development bank

Victoria can promote faster community services jobs growth by establishing a Victorian Social Development Bank. Access to capital is a major barrier to growth in the community sector and for social enterprise start-ups. It is difficult to get long-term loans from commercial banks.

Providing a government-owned 'bank' can help provide low-cost capital to the sector, support social enterprise start-ups and allow more innovative use of capital to lower service delivery costs.

For example, community organisations could save rental costs by investing in premises or investing in IT platforms to reduce transaction costs. This model also replenishes its funding, as capital is recycled when it is paid back through loan repayments.



Getting a good job

Promote fulfilling, exciting community sector careers

Promoting community careers will help to secure a growing workforce. While community services industry jobs are rapidly growing, they are often not known about or discussed in the community, and not considered by school leavers or jobseekers. This means many people who would love the chance to move into caring, compassionate work in a growing industry miss out.

Develop innovative approaches to grow the workforce

While community sector workers are committed and skilled employees, the industry is changing, with new roles and expectations around person-centred services and co-design. Victoria can respond on multiple fronts to enhance career paths and provide superior services: supported traineeships, supported student placements, upskilling existing workers with extra training and professional development, and greater partnerships between community employers and training providers.

Design contemporary qualifications for first-rate graduates

Victoria should lead the country in advocating for world-class community service qualifications that prepare graduates for the compelling and diverse career options ahead of them. The current qualifications framework is not fit-for-purpose in an increasingly person-centred and complex social care future. Refreshed qualifications with modern competencies can better prepare graduates for their future employment demands.

Build the Aboriginal community sector workforce through coordinated planning

Self-determination is the overarching guiding principle for Aboriginal affairs in Victoria. Achieving this in the community services industry will require a strong and sustainable Aboriginal workforce, and Aboriginal leadership in governance and management. Victoria can help build the Aboriginal community services workforce by working with the Aboriginal community-controlled sector and the mainstream community sector to undertake coordinated planning and develop a sector-wide Aboriginal workforce strategy.

Secure solid data to guide workforce planning

Victoria can only plan for the future of community services job growth if it has a strong grasp of the data. But quality data is hard to find. Victoria is approaching a critical deadline to collect strong workforce data to synchronise with the coming jobs surge. By developing a meticulous workforce data compilation program, tracking change over time and in different industry segments, we can maximise the dividend from workforce growth.

⁸ Australian Bureau of Statistics, *Labour Force, Australia*, Mar 2018, <http://www.abs.gov.au/AUSSTATS/abs@.nsf/DetailsPage/6202.0Mar%202018?OpenDocument>

⁹ Victorian Council of Social Service and the National Centre for Social and Economic Modelling, *Victorian Poverty Data Report*, forthcoming

¹⁰ Australian Bureau of Statistics, 6202.0 - Labour Force, Australia, January 2018, <http://www.abs.gov.au/AUSSTATS/abs@.nsf/DetailsPage/6202.0Jan%202018?OpenDocument>

¹¹ Victorian Government, *Every opportunity: Victorian economic participation plan for people with disability 2018-2020*, Action 10, p.16

¹² Around 1 per cent of the Victorian public service identify as Aboriginal: source Victorian Public Service Commission (2018), *The state of the public sector in Victoria 2016-2017*, p.36, <https://vpsc.vic.gov.au>

¹³ The Victorian Public Service makes up less than 17 per cent of the broader public sector workforce, which includes schools, hospitals and TAFEs.

¹⁴ Victorian Public Service Commission, <https://vpsc.vic.gov.au/aboriginal-employment/>

¹⁵ Career Industry Council of Australia, *Lack of funding deprives young Australians of necessary career support*, 25 March 2015

¹⁶ Young Workers Centre, *Young Workers Snapshot: The Great Wage Rip-Off*, May 2017, p.7-8 and p.11-12

¹⁷ Young Workers Centre Briefing, *Criminalising Wage Theft*, p.8-9

¹⁸ *Ibid*, p.12-13



Mark Brewer knows about managing a tight budget. "Life in general is so dear today because of the prices of housing, bills, food," the father of two said. "I'm always looking for bargains."

Brewer lives in public housing, and says he often makes heartbreaking decisions about what he can afford and what's unattainable.

"If we all addressed the problem together we'd have an answer, yeah?"

Story and video at vcoss.org.au/GoodLife

Affording the basics

Goal: Everyone can pay for their basic needs

People can only live a good life if they are free from constant worry about the cost of living. In a prosperous state with great leadership, everyone should be able to afford life's essentials.

Affording the basics means families can pay their energy bills, and not worry about having their power cut off. It means being able to juggle living costs – including food, rent, water and education costs – knowing that there is help to avoid or manage a financial crisis.

An affordable cost of living means people can pay their travel costs, including for work, learning, connecting and receiving care and support. It means being able to participate in learning and sharing online, with affordable access to technology and the internet.

Affording the basics

Cutting power bills

A good life means being able to heat and cool your home, and having energy for cooking and washing. In 10 years, electricity prices have risen 52 per cent faster than inflation.²¹ More Victorians are experiencing the shock of receiving an energy bill they can't pay. Increasing energy costs have been driving financial problems for many families, and leading to more Victorians having their power cut off.

Regulate for fair energy prices

Victoria can adopt stronger regulation to control energy prices. Better regulation can help achieve fairer, lower pricing by making energy prices transparent, simple and comparable; making energy contracts fair; and ensuring people experiencing disadvantage can get a fair, low-cost offer. More transparency and better protections can prevent people from being gouged.²²

Boost enforcement of energy rules

Victoria can ensure energy companies are following the rules to protect customers who are having trouble paying energy bills, or stop them from being disconnected. Stronger enforcement can be achieved by funding community organisations to inform people about the new payment difficulty framework, and resourcing the regulator properly.

Commit to clean energy

Victoria needs a solid, sensible plan to gradually remove carbon-intensive energy generators over time and replace them with clean, affordable alternatives. This will also help lower energy prices. Recent price increases are mainly caused by runaway electricity generation charges, resulting from fluctuating energy supply.²³ But new, renewable energy investment won't occur without a clear, enduring commitment to a stable investment environment.

Help upgrade homes to slash energy use

Victoria can invest in upgrading homes to be more energy efficient and slash energy costs.²⁴ For Victorians on low incomes in poor-quality public or private rental homes, paying for improvements is an uphill battle. The provision of basic energy saving measures like insulation, affordable hot water and heating systems and window coverings is needed. Using a mix of finance, and bolstered by minimum rental standards and modification rights, we can tackle this fundamental cause of unaffordable energy supply with new home energy-efficiency measures.

Defend the value of bill-shock relief

Victoria provides families with a payment if they struggle with energy costs, recently increased to \$650.²⁵ This protection can be defended from eroding in value by properly indexing it to reflect changing energy costs.

Break the barriers to asylum seeker energy concessions

Energy and water can be made more affordable for asylum seekers by extending energy and water concessions to them, consistent with public transport concessions, and TAFE and health access. Bewilderingly, this most impoverished and marginalised group is currently excluded. Most asylum seekers become Victorian residents, and depriving them of concessions compromises their future contribution to Victoria.

Managing money

Living in poverty or facing financial crisis is not a pathway to a good life. A thoughtful and considered collaboration to respond to financial distress can help Victorians avoid financial pitfalls, without having to make desperate trade-offs between bills and food, or resorting to predatory loans.²⁶ With costs outpacing incomes,²⁷ and household debt at historic highs,²⁸ it is an opportune time to invest in Victorians' financial capabilities, supporting them to be great financial managers.

Plan for action on financial inclusion

Victoria can mobilise its resources to build a simple, decently funded and thorough system to respond to financial stress and hardship. The first step is to develop a Victorian Financial Inclusion Action Plan to guide investment and provide a collaboration platform for community, government and business.

Help people deal with financial emergencies

Victoria can join the majority of Australian states and territories in directly funding financial crisis assistance services to help people pay for food, clothing and essentials, and help establish financial stability. These 'emergency relief' services build on their immediate assistance by supporting people to develop longer-term financial independence.²⁹

Help Victorians be money-wise

Financial counsellors help people better deal with housing stress, energy hardship, debt problems, the financial effects of poor health or job loss, and help prevent financial stress snowballing into much larger and costlier problems.³⁰

Victoria can strengthen its financial counselling network to save more people from mortgage default, bankruptcy or long-term hardship. It is estimated another 90 financial counsellors are needed to fully support Victoria's financially distressed families.³¹

Displace predatory lenders

No Interest Loan Schemes (NILS) allow people to afford essentials, by financing household appliances, education and medical expenses at an affordable rate, and diverting people away from predatory lenders like payday lenders and pawnbrokers. Delivering more sites like Morwell's recently opened 'Good Money' store will mean more Victorians can benefit.

Ensure people are properly insured

Ensuring that Victorians have adequate home and contents insurance protects them against financial disaster in a crisis. Community organisations can be supported to partner with insurers to develop better products, and can use financial literacy channels to raise awareness of the value of insurance.

Affording the basics

Getting around

Transport is freedom. For a good life, people need to be able to reach the places where they work, learn, get healthcare and community services, connect with family and friends, and participate in community life. To maximise people's mobility, Victoria needs great public transport at affordable prices, and for those with greater needs there can be a well-resourced mobility program providing individualised transport.

Boost rural and regional transport options

Boosting public transport is one of the most important investments that can be made in regional Victoria, where people travel further and at greater expense. In many parts of regional Victoria the population is ageing, and public transport is a lifeline that allows people to shop, attend appointments and connect with the community. For young people it also increases the prospects of getting a job, getting a qualification, and being able to access health and community services.

Beef up buses in the outer suburbs

Victoria can reach more people with its public transport network by boosting the bus system, especially in Melbourne's outer suburbs where trains and trams don't reach the communities that often experience the most disadvantage. Victoria needs to restructure its bus network³² to run more frequent and direct services, concentrating on places disconnected from the rail network.

Unscramble public transport fares and concessions

Victoria can devise a simple, easily understood public transport fare structure, with affordable concessions for low-income earners. This can overcome the cumbersome concessions structure we've inherited, which involves 17 types of concessions and six types of free travel passes. An innovative overhaul can create simple, fair and proportionate fares to meet the needs of people on low incomes, those with disability and older people.

Revamp public transport to work for everybody

Victoria can have a 21st-century public transport system. We can revamp our public transport network to truly work for all Victorians, including older people and those with disability. We need a strong and enduring pipeline of public transport upgrade investments, repairing our legacy infrastructure to meet modern access standards, aiming to be fully accessible by 2022.³³

Broaden transport subsidies

Victoria can make sure that everyone, regardless of their ability, can get where they need to be affordably by expanding its transport subsidy program to more transport options. Currently, the mobility program is restricted to taxis, and can't be used for cheaper options like Uber or community transport.

Slash costs by championing community transport

Victoria can catch up with and surpass other states by investing in the fully-fledged development of a community transport industry. In other states, community transport moves tens of thousands of people each week, and is cheaper than other transport services. Victoria can eliminate the barriers to community transport growth and deliver affordable, quality transport for people with mobility difficulties.

Going digital

Digital access is a prerequisite for 21st-century living. Today's world is digital, with everything from getting a job to finding a home, managing money, doing your homework or looking for help performed online.

In the new era of personalised services, choice and control is increasingly digital, with internet portals for your bank account, tax, Centrelink, NDIS, MyAgedCare or MySchool.

Digital participation improves school performance and educational outcomes, employment opportunities, and social inclusion.³⁴

Expand public access Wi-Fi and internet

Victoria can reach more people who depend on free internet access by expanding VicFreeWiFi to more locations, especially in Melbourne's outer suburbs, and more regional cities and rural towns. People on low incomes are more likely not to have internet plans, or to use occasional pre-paid services but rely largely on free Wi-Fi or community access for connection.

Coverage beyond the centres of Melbourne, Ballarat and Bendigo could provide digital access for people who really need it, like age and disability pensioners, and young people from low-income families who would benefit from online access for schoolwork and connecting to their peers. This could be supplemented by more community access centres, expanding from local library models into community facilities like neighbourhood houses and community centres.

Become a connected community with low-cost internet plans

Victoria can become Australia's most digitally-connected state by expanding internet access to the remaining low-income households who can't afford it. Victoria can design a specialised low-cost basic internet plan, and connect disadvantaged families and individuals with a concessional discount. This would help overcome Victoria's large 'capital-country' digital gap, and reach the significant number of people who are currently excluded.³⁵

Deliver the skills for digital inclusion

Victoria can invest in digital literacy services to further bridge the digital divide. Digital inclusion is more than devices and connectivity: it requires digital literacy skills. People on low incomes and people with disability are likely to be less digitally literate.³⁶ Investing in community delivered digital literacy programs helps include these people in the online

²¹ Australian Competition and Consumer Commission, *Retail Electricity Pricing Inquiry: Preliminary Report*, 22 September 2017, p.42

²² Australian Competition and Consumer Commission, *Retail Electricity Pricing Inquiry: Preliminary Report*, 22 September 2017; *Independent Review of the Electricity & Gas Retail Markets in Victoria*, August 2017

²³ Australian Competition and Consumer Commission, *Retail Electricity Pricing Inquiry: Preliminary Report*, 22 September 2017, 84-85; Australian Energy Regulator, 'AER electricity wholesale performance monitoring: Hazelwood advice', March 2018

²⁴ Sustainability Victoria, *Victorian Households Energy Report*, May 2014

²⁵ Premier of Victoria, *Helping Victorians bust their energy bills*, media release, 22 April 2018

²⁶ Victorian Council of Social Service, *Power Struggles: Everyday Battles to Stay Connected*, 2017

²⁷ Centre for Social Impact, *Why is financial stress on the rise?*, September 2017; Australian Competition and Consumer Commission, *Retail Electricity Pricing Inquiry: Preliminary Report*, 22 September 2017, p.13

²⁸ Reserve Bank of Australia, *The Australian Economy and Financial Markets*, March 2018

²⁹ N Brackertz, *Time, Trust, Respect: Case Management in Emergency Relief—The Doorways Model*, Salvation Army, 2014

³⁰ N Brackertz, *I Wish I'd Known Sooner! The Impact of Financial Counselling on Debt Resolution and Personal Wellbeing*, Salvation Army, 2012

³¹ In Victoria, the Financial and Consumer Rights Council estimates there are approximately 160 FTE financial counsellors (of which approximately 110 FTE positions are funded by State Government). With 500,000 financially distressed Victorian households, the current ratio is less than one third of the modest 1:1,000 Financial Counselling Australia target, with one financial counsellor to every 3,125 financially distressed households: see *Financial Counselling Australia, Pre-budget submission to the Federal Government (2018-19 Budget)*, December 2017.

³² Infrastructure Victoria, *Victoria's 30-year Infrastructure Strategy*, p.125

³³ 31 December 2022 is the target date for all buses to be accessible under the *Disability Standards for Accessible Public Transport 2002*, and all train and tram infrastructure under the *Disability (Access to Premises) Standards 2010*.

³⁴ Salvation Army, *The Hard Road: National Economic & Social Impact Survey 2017*, p.54

³⁵ J Thomas, J Barraket, C Wilson, S Ewing, T MacDonald, J Tucker and E Rennie, *Measuring Australia's Digital Divide: The Australian Digital Inclusion Index 2017*, p.27-29

³⁶ J Thomas, J Barraket, C Wilson, S Ewing, T MacDonald, M Mundell and J Tucker, *Measuring Australia's Digital Divide: The Australian Digital Inclusion Index 2016*

Giving children a great start

Goal: Every child can reach their potential

To lead a good life, children need a great education, to stay safe and have the support of a loving family. Children's growth, development and achievements are highly contingent on their home and learning environments, where they spend most of their time.

Across every life stage, education plays a vital role in providing the skills and confidence people need to reach their full potential. Whether developing basic literacy and numeracy, or specialist skills and knowledge, education provides the foundation for people to learn, think, understand, create meaning and dream. In a prosperous state such as Victoria, children's potential shouldn't be limited by their backgrounds. And yet, children from low socio-economic backgrounds aren't achieving as well as their peers.³⁷

One in eight people experience abuse as a child.³⁸ We need strong protections to keep children safe, and support their recovery from trauma. But we must aspire to more than simply protecting children from harm: we need to build a culture that supports caring, nurturing parents, and gives them the tools to help their children flourish.

Sunshine College Year 12 student **Angelique Corke-Cox** has a vision for schooling in Victoria.

"An ideal school would be inclusive. Everything is accessible. And also just making sure that every student has what they need to succeed."

Corke-Cox, who sits on the VicSRC Student Executive, is also passionate about student voices.

"If they say something it's not just said for no reason, it's said to make an impact."

Story and video at vcoss.org.au/GoodLife



Giving children a great start

Starting learning early

To have a good life, every child needs a great start. Participating in high quality early childhood education lays strong foundations for children's social and emotional development and improves life-long learning outcomes.

Give every child 15 hours of kinder each week for two years

Children's brains are growing most actively in the first five years of life,⁴⁰ providing us a small window of opportunity for immense gains from a small investment. Every dollar invested returns between \$2.50 and \$17.⁴¹ Children who get this opportunity do better at school⁴² and throughout adolescence,⁴³ with the biggest boost for children facing disadvantage.⁴⁴ Victoria can lead the nation in early childhood education by bringing us up to world standards, up with the 20 hours for two years in New Zealand⁴⁵ and the 15 hours for two years in the United Kingdom.⁴⁶

Build more integrated child and family centres in growth areas

Victoria can plan and invest in a pipeline of early learning centres, expanding existing facilities and building new ones. Victoria's growth areas are experiencing a baby boom, with 90 babies born each week in Wyndham, and 70 born in Whittlesea.⁴⁷ Early learning funds need to be matched with integrated child and family centres on the ground where children live.

With a secure funding stream, which could be enabled by expanding the Children's Facilities Capital Program, we can meet demand in high growth areas and support co-location of early years facilities with schools. These need to be flexible and available to provide wrap-around services.

Prioritise playgroups

The Victorian Government can foster children's early development by expanding supported playgroups and providing enough community playgroups for all children to participate. Playgroups range from parent-led community groups to professionally-led supported playgroups for families experiencing disadvantage, to more intensive ones, such as for families of children with autism.⁴⁸

They foster children's learning, social and communication skills, and better prepare them for kindergarten and school.⁴⁹ With more playgroups, children who would otherwise miss out will be better prepared when starting school.⁵⁰

Designing inclusive, engaging and affordable schools

Great schools with outstanding teachers are inclusive and engaging places to learn. Meeting children's individual needs equips them with the tools to shape their futures.

Inclusive schools embrace diversity and make every student and family feel welcome, make sure no one misses out because of costs, provide every child with the chance to learn and grow, and foster social and emotional health and wellbeing, as well as educational achievement.

Match funds to learning needs for children with disability

Victoria can give children with disability their best chance in life by matching their support funding with their actual learning needs. Around one in 25 Victorian students get extra help to learn at school under the Program for Students with Disability (PSD).⁵¹ However, nearly one in six still need additional funding support.⁵²

Children with disability from families facing disadvantage face 'double jeopardy'.⁵³ A comprehensive review of the PSD recommended a new approach. The way forward is assessing children's strengths, their functional learning needs, and broader factors, including family background⁵⁴ - instead of solely focusing on their medical diagnoses. This tiered model provides base funding for all schools, a teaching and learning load to help schools support students needing extra help, and targeted funding to students with high needs.⁵⁵ This is a fairer, clearer and widely supported funding model.⁵⁶ Victoria should adopt it without delay.

Make public school free

Victoria can deliver financial relief for parents and a truly free education for every child by investigating the real costs of school participation and topping up school funding to cover them. This can unburden parents who might be struggling to pay the rent and bills from school expectations to pay extra for their children to learn, meaning their kids won't miss out on fully joining in all school activities.

On average, in government schools, parents are paying \$3,489 each year for a child in primary school, and \$5,170 for high school.⁵⁷ Families are paying extra for digital devices, internet access, uniforms, textbooks, camps, excursions and elective subjects. The Camps, Sports and Excursions Fund and State Schools' Relief programs help out, but aren't able to reach everyone or cover everything.

Help kids join their friends in local sport

Victoria can help engage every child in sport by funding a transferable sports voucher for children in low-income families to join in. Too many Victorian children miss out on the social, health and emotional benefits of sport because their families can't afford the costs.

Provide free public transport for school kids from families facing disadvantage

Victoria can support the attendance of children and young people at school and reduce the cost of living for low-income families by providing school-aged children with a free public transport pass if their parent or guardian has a health care card. This targeted measure supports children's learning, and ensures young people are not excluded from after-school or social activities with their peers by the cost of transport. It would also reduce the numbers of young people caught in the fines system,⁵⁸ keeping them out of the youth justice system.



Giving children a great start

Keep all children and young people connected to school

Victoria can invest in a suite of transformations and initiatives to engage students in learning and keep them connected to education. Keeping students engaged helps them complete their education, with benefits for their future employment, income, health, community participation and life satisfaction.⁵⁹

Victoria can keep and build upon its suite of evidence-informed programs shown to improve student retention, including LOOKOUT Education Support Centres, Springboard, Navigator, Reconnect, School Focused Youth Services and Educational Justice Initiative. Having flexible learning alternatives to mainstream school that can tailor education and wrap-around support also helps.

Transform schools to be welcoming, safe and inclusive

Victorian schools can focus on creating welcoming and inclusive environments, supporting each student's individual learning to boost completion rates and student wellbeing. Schools should build staff knowledge and skills in trauma, disability and mental health to help prevent and manage concerning behaviour, including trauma-informed practice, and deliver positive behaviour models.

Programs like Safe Schools help foster supportive school environments for everyone including LGBTI students, tackle bullying and harassment, and prevent suicide and self-harm. Similarly, the Respectful Relationships program promotes positive, respectful relationships. More qualified youth, health and wellbeing workers including youth workers, Koorie Engagement Support Officers, and specialist allied health supports can help build student resilience, health and wellbeing.

Ensure there is no equity gap in education

Victoria can keep and expand extra equity funding, allowing schools to give extra help to students facing disadvantage. The extra funding works,⁶⁰ and lets schools tailor interventions to support disadvantaged students' participation and learning; for example, by employing extra literacy and numeracy teachers or introducing new student learning support programs.

Support students in the 'middle years'

Victoria can develop a Middle Years Transition Framework and deliver age-specific prevention and early intervention services to support students in year five to year eight stay engaged, connected to education, and transition from primary to secondary school. These 'middle years' are a period where children face significant social, behavioural and developmental challenges, and need a different approach from older children to address their needs.

Keep children safe and stimulated after school

Victoria can adopt a Before and After School Care Fund to help deliver up to 45,000 extra out-of-school hours care (OSHC) places, keeping children safe and stimulated if their parents have to work or study before and after school or during school holidays. The fund, modelled on its NSW equivalent, can help Victorian schools, councils and service providers with grants to upgrade OSHC spaces and equipment, or with project management to bring new programs online.

Nurturing strong, resilient children and families

Enriching and strengthening families and relationships has far-reaching benefits, including better health and education for children. Victoria can foster children's healthy development and prevent or minimise the likelihood of abuse and neglect by investing in intensive prevention and early intervention support services that strengthen vulnerable families, helping them provide optimal environments for their children. This helps ensure children have cognitive stimulation in the home, secure caregiver-child attachments and high quality early learning services.

Support parents to nurture strong, resilient kids

Victoria can help ensure children grow up in safe, nurturing homes by guaranteeing family access to universal prevention and early intervention support services. If we provide a universal service, any parent can get help to improve their parenting skills, without the stigma of having their child classified as being at risk by child protection services.

Victoria can guarantee parents have access to a selection of specialised support, counselling and advice services that help foster stronger parent-child relationships, and ensure more families receive sustained, engaging home visits. These help improve outcomes for children and their families by building parents' capacity to provide safe, responsive care that meets their children's needs. This would give parents access when they need it, rather than waiting until problems have escalated to crisis point and involving child protection services. This approach can build on the knowledge and expertise in Child FIRST, Integrated Family Systems, Early Parenting Centres and maternal and child health nurses.

Currently, intensive support services have to prioritise high needs families due to escalating demand.

Support new and expecting mothers' mental health

The Victorian Government should expand the availability and resourcing of mental health support programs to meet the needs of expecting and new mothers, and their babies.

More than one in ten women experience depression during pregnancy, and one in seven women in the year following birth.⁶¹ To better help and support mothers and their babies, an expansion is required in the availability and resourcing of perinatal mental health support programs.

Investing in the prevention, detection, treatment and management of mental health issues in the perinatal period will better support new mothers and their babies.

Giving children a great start

Keeping vulnerable children safe and supported

Victoria can better protect the over 8,000 children in out-of-home care⁶² by ensuring they are placed in well-supported kinship and foster families, or high-quality residential services, to improve their recovery from trauma, their educational attendance and engagement, and social and emotional wellbeing.

Keep Aboriginal children in the care of their communities

Victoria should continue to transfer guardianship of Aboriginal children in out-of-home care to Aboriginal Community Controlled Organisations to support children's connection to culture and community. Given Aboriginal children are 12.9 times more likely to be in out-of-home care than other children,⁶³ we must ensure their cultural connection and care is self-determined by Aboriginal communities. Better outcomes for Aboriginal children can also be delivered by targeted services supporting children to safely return to their community's care.

Raise allowances and support for foster and kinship carers

Victoria can increase foster and kinship carer payments by at least \$88 per week to ease financial pressures on carers, and provide access to professional skills to meet children's needs.

If children must enter care, they should be placed whenever possible with an appropriate kinship or foster family. But there is a shortage of families, in part due to the lack of financial and professional support for them.

Kinship and foster care is not only better for children's wellbeing, it is far more cost-effective, with a placement costing around \$15,000 per year, compared with \$280,000 for residential care.⁶⁴ In particular, the disparity between kinship and foster carers demands attention, with over 95 per cent of kinship carers receiving the lowest payment level.⁶⁵ This can also assist the aims of Victoria's Targeted Care Packages, which provide holistic help for children to transfer from residential care into other arrangements and promote better personal, social and economic outcomes.⁶⁶

Provide world-class care that allows children to heal

The Victorian Government can ensure all children and young people in out-of-home care have high quality, therapeutic placements. Therapeutic care recognises the trauma children have experienced, and uses professionally supported, skilled staff to help children manage their behaviour and successfully transition from care to independent living.

Guarantee the home stretch for young care-leavers

Extending the support available to young care-leavers until they are 21 will better equip them with the skills and educational opportunities they need to succeed in life. Most young people continue to get support from family long after turning 18, and care-leavers need the same. Both the Tasmanian and South Australian governments have recently committed to extending this support. Guaranteeing support after age 18 helps young care-leavers achieve better life experiences, including secure housing, engagement in education and work, staying healthy and avoiding the youth justice system.

³⁷S Lamb, J Jackson, A Walstab and S Huo, *Educational opportunity in Australia 2015: Who succeeds and who misses out*, Centre for International Research on Education Systems, for the Mitchell Institute, Melbourne: Mitchell Institute. <http://www.mitchellinstitute.org.au/fact-sheets/socio-economic-disadvantage-and-educational-opportunity-persistently-linked/>

³⁸Australian Bureau of Statistics, *Personal Safety Survey 2016*, Cat No. 4906.0, November 2017

³⁹S Pascoe AM and D Brennan, *Lifting our Game: Report of the Review to Achieve Educational Excellence in Australian Schools through Early Childhood Interventions, 2017*, https://www.education.act.gov.au/__data/assets/pdf_file/0004/1159357/Lifting-Our-Game-Final-Report.pdf

⁴⁰Australian Government, *Your child and neuroscience*, 2017, <https://www.learningpotential.gov.au/your-child-and-neuroscience-2>

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⁴²OECD Indicators, *Education at a Glance 2017*, https://www.keepeek.com/Digital-Asset-Management/oced/education/education-at-a-glance-2017_eag-2017-en#page263

⁴³S Pascoe AM and D Brennan, *Lifting our Game: Report of the Review to Achieve Educational Excellence in Australian Schools through Early Childhood Interventions, 2017*, https://www.education.act.gov.au/__data/assets/pdf_file/0004/1159357/Lifting-Our-Game-Final-Report.pdf

⁴⁴S Fox and M Geddes, *Preschool - Two Years are Better Than One Developing a universal preschool program for Australian 3 year olds - evidence, policy and implementation*, Mitchell Report No. 03/2016, <http://www.mitchellinstitute.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2016/10/Two-Years-are-Better-than-One.pdf>

⁴⁵New Zealand Government, *For Parents - 20 Hours ECE*, <https://parents.education.govt.nz/early-learning/early-childhood-education/20-hours-ece-2/>

⁴⁶United Kingdom, *Help paying for childcare - 15 and 30 hours free childcare for 3 and 4-year-olds*, <https://www.gov.uk/help-with-childcare-costs/free-childcare-and-education-for-2-to-4-year-olds>

⁴⁷Australian Bureau of Statistics, *Births, Australia*, 2016

⁴⁸Playgroup Victoria, <https://www.playgroup.org.au/Training1/PlayConnect2.aspx>

⁴⁹K Hancock, D Lawrence, F Mitrou, D Zarb, D Berthelsen, J Nicholson and S Zubrick, *The association between playgroup participation, learning competence and social-emotional wellbeing for children aged four-five years in Australia*, *Australasian Journal of Early Childhood*, Vol. 37, No. 2, 2012

⁵⁰T Gregory, Y Harman-Smith, A Sincovich, A Wilson and S Brinkman, *It takes a village to raise a child: The influence and impact of playgroups across Australia*, Telethon Kids Institute, South Australia, 2016

⁵¹Victorian Government, *Review of the Program for Students with Disabilities*, April 2016, <http://www.education.vic.gov.au/Documents/about/department/PSD-Review-Report.pdf>, p.61

⁵²*Ibid*, p.11

⁵³Victorian Council of Social Service, *Review of the Program for Students with Disabilities: VCOSS Submission*, p.5

⁵⁴Risk and protective factors occur at the individual, family and service-systems level. For example, at an individual level - nature and severity of condition; socio-emotional and behavioural competencies; learning competencies and attitudes to schooling. M O'Connor, S Howell-Meurs, A Kvalsvig and S Goldfeld, *Understanding the impact of special health care needs on early school functioning, a conceptual model*, *Child: Care, Health and Development*, May 2014

⁵⁵Victorian Government, *Review of the Program for Students with Disabilities*, April 2016, <http://www.education.vic.gov.au/Documents/about/department/PSD-Review-Report.pdf>, p.125

⁵⁶Victorian Government Department of Education and Training, *Greater returns on investment in education: Government schools funding review*, Final Report, December 2015, p. 22; Parliament of Victoria, Family and Community Development Committee, *Inquiry into services for people with Autism Spectrum Disorder Final Report*, June 2017, p.158; Victorian Government Department of Education and Training, *The Education State: Review of the Program for Students with Disabilities*, April 2016, p.28

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Staying safe, healthy and resilient

Goal: Everyone is free from violence, can stay healthy and recover from adversity

Being safe, healthy and resilient gives people their best chance to live good lives. This means being free from violence, avoiding sickness or injury if possible and recovering quickly if not, and being able to bounce back from uncertainty, surprise, change and emergencies.

Victoria can complete its world-leading reforms in family violence prevention, and keep delivering the Royal Commission's recommendations to deliver real and lasting change for Victoria's women, children and families.

Victoria can create an easy-to-access, low-cost health system, focusing on preventive and primary health care and dismantling barriers to health care. We can improve people's health literacy, and build new health services in regional communities to fight unequal health outcomes.

And Victoria can work in partnership with communities, government, agencies and business to build resilience so people can survive, adapt and thrive in the face of everyday challenges and emerging global risks.

Güler Altunbas endured physical, sexual, emotional and financial abuse across multiple decades.

"And I still suffer from it today as Post Traumatic Stress Disorder and all the flashbacks," she said.

Connecting with services, leaving abusive relationships and rediscovering art has helped Altunbas rebalance her life in safety.

She says people "need to listen with their hearts and their ears" to achieve lasting change.

"Let's all work together and not have another person die again."

Story and video at vcoss.org.au/GoodLife



Staying safe, healthy and resilient

Freeing Victorians from family violence

Victoria is leading the world in its response to family violence, with unprecedented funding, law reform, service design and cultural change. The Royal Commission into Family Violence has provided a blueprint for preventing and responding to family violence in Victoria.

No one can live a good life in fear. Being hurt by an intimate partner causes deep trauma and anguish, and ending the relationship can be dangerous.

Each week in Australia a woman is murdered by her partner, and one in every four women has experienced violence from an intimate partner.⁶⁷ Children and young people are also victim survivors of family violence and their experience of family violence can have life-long impacts.

Complete delivery of the Royal Commission into Family Violence recommendations

VCOSS calls on all parties to commit to complete the work of the Royal Commission, to keep delivering its recommendations over the next term of government, securing real and lasting change for Victoria's women, children and families.

At the core of the Commission's recommendations is a call for a long-term, bipartisan approach to family violence, with all parts of government working together and involving the entire community.

Victoria can now take the next step in preventing family violence by increasing primary prevention action and research. This will provide new knowledge, and help to deliver community-wide cultural change by tackling the attitudes and behaviours that allow violence to occur.

Current reforms need to be backed in to be durable, including the Support and Safety Hubs and the Refuge Redevelopment Program. With secure long-term funding rather than short-term contracts, organisations will be better able to deliver change, develop community trust and build a skilled, professional workforce.

Change needs to go beyond the specialist family violence response system. It will mean building enduring partnerships between universal and specialist services, so general workers like doctors, teachers and early childhood professionals can identify and respond to violence disclosures, and direct people to available specialist support. Overcoming current funding shortfalls allows all services to achieve this holistic model.

Holding perpetrators to account helps reduce family violence. Programs to change men's behaviour have long waiting lists, especially for men in rural areas, and we need more programs targeted for men from Aboriginal or culturally diverse backgrounds. Other perpetrator supports, like alternative housing, also help protect families.

Promoting healthy living and preventing disease

Good health is vital to everyone's ability to live a good life. Providing people with equitable, affordable and timely access to health care reduces health inequities, prevents sickness and disease, and allows for early interventions so people's health doesn't deteriorate.

Build a strong community health platform to prevent disease

Victoria can invest in a sturdy primary and community health platform as the gateway to the healthcare system. Strong primary and community health services contribute to better health and reduce costs, especially when collaborating through partnership platforms, like the Primary Care Partnerships and Healthy Together Victoria networks.

Victoria can take a better, cheaper approach that focuses on health outcomes, prevents chronic disease or intervenes early, and ultimately produces healthier Victorians. Chronic disease causes 9 out of 10 Australian deaths.⁶⁸ Investing

in preventive health works. For example, every \$1 invested in food and nutrition education has a \$10 return in reduced healthcare costs.⁶⁹ Victoria can be a part of lifting Australia to international standards of preventive health spending, raising the country from our 1.5 per cent to the 7 per cent spent in New Zealand, or nearly 6 per cent in Canada.⁷⁰

Boost community health as regional health hubs

Victoria can become a national leader in rural and regional health by investing in community health centres to be the backbone of health care, combatting the regional health inequality produced by fewer private services. Our community health services face headwinds from new market-based models of pricing and care, but investment can strengthen them to provide a backbone in many places to ensure equal access for marginalised and isolated communities, especially in regional Victoria.

Give every Victorian a healthy smile

Victoria can expand its public dental scheme so Victorians on low incomes can have healthy smiles. More funding can cut waiting lists and help people get dental care earlier. Good dental treatment can prevent severe pain, lost sleep and difficulty eating; it can help people get back to work and school, and improve their self-esteem. Expanding public dental services will mean people can get timely help, slashing the current, agonising 19-month wait for public treatment.

Help Victorians learn about their health

Victoria can invest in health literacy so people can make informed choices about their health and care. Only 41 per cent of Australians are considered to have adequate or better health literacy.⁷¹ Better health literacy makes it easier to find and understand health information, and to find the right services. To improve health literacy we can encourage meaningful conversations between people and healthcare professionals, and foster person-centred models of care. Health care communication should be conveyed in plain English, and steer away from jargon.

Staying safe, healthy and resilient

Caring for Victorians' mental health

Mental illness affects about one in five Victorians each year.⁷² Good mental health improves people's quality of life and participation in work; it helps them manage daily life and preserve strong personal and family relationships. Victoria should build a mental health system that promotes good mental health, intervenes early when people are at risk of mental illness, and provides necessary treatment and support.

Be a proud leader in mental health recovery

Victoria can convey a sweeping vision for recovery-based mental health, blending prevention and early intervention with clinical assistance, rehabilitation and support services.

Until recently, Victoria was a national leader in creating an accessible, recovery-based community mental health system. Community mental health services provide psychosocial rehabilitation and support. This goes beyond clinical counselling, actively helping people to stay well and solve daily living problems, so they can work, study and care for their children and families and be engaged in community life.

But NDIS funding arrangements have put this leadership at risk, threatening people's stability and quality of life. Victoria should save and grow its psychosocial rehabilitation services, especially for people outside the NDIS,⁷³ and avoid placing expensive and unnecessary pressure on acute psychiatric wards and clinical services.

Intervene early with youth mental health services

Victoria can invest in evidence-based and tailored mental health therapies for young people, providing help at the time mental illness often first occurs. This will buttress the rising numbers of our young people experiencing mental health difficulties, especially our young women.⁷⁴

Currently the youth mental health system is fragmented and difficult for young people to navigate. Victoria can design a youth mental health system that is welcoming and easy to find. The right prevention, early intervention and support can improve young people's mental health, allowing them to achieve academically, find work, avoid problematic drug and alcohol use and cultivate strong social skills.

Prevent suicide with place-based action

Suicide is currently the number one cause of death for Australians aged between 15 and 44,⁷⁵ with a devastating impact on family, friends, colleagues and communities. Victoria should halve the number of suicides by 2025. We must be particularly focused on reducing high rates of suicide in regional Victoria and among Aboriginal people. Victoria has started rolling out place-based, tailored prevention programs to 12 communities. These can be extended over longer periods and to more communities across Victoria.

Keeping effective services running through NDIS and aged care reforms

It is an exciting time in Australia for social care reform. The NDIS and MyAgedCare reforms promise choice and control for many people with disability and older Victorians, providing them with individually tailored services to meet their support needs.

Victoria has a key role as a system steward to prevent people falling through the cracks and to ensure support and service continuity for those who are ineligible for individual support packages.

Make funding transparent to keep services running during and after the NDIS rollout

Through the NDIS reform process, governments have given welcome commitments to 'service continuity' for people with disability, committing to keep essential supports for their daily living and participation in community life. The NDIS is experiencing some difficulties in its introduction and in the

transition from older funding models. It requires fine-tuning to achieve consistent and correct eligibility requirements and seamless access, and to reach marginalised communities and co-ordinate complex support.

For fair treatment, Victoria must maintain a complete services system for people ineligible for an NDIS package. With many existing programs being 'rolled into' the NDIS, Victoria can clearly delineate the funding sources available for 'service continuity' outside the NDIS, providing relief and confidence for people by assuring them they will continue to receive the help they need. Funding certainty is particularly recommended for mental health consumers, people aged 65 or over, and carers.

Pinpoint and publish any holes left by the NDIS

Victoria can share its knowledge of any services at risk through NDIS transition with the Victorian people, demonstrating trustworthiness and transparency. We understand Victoria is closely monitoring and mapping the service system through the transition; publishing this information will help inspire community confidence, in line with Productivity Commission recommendations.⁷⁶

This will also garner attention and help problem-solving for affected communities, including by identifying the appropriate level of government to provide resources.

Boost mainstream services so they work for people with disability

Victoria can increase funding, upskill health professionals and pursue service integration in the mainstream services system to work better with people with disability and their carers, especially those ineligible for the NDIS. With the right support, people can enjoy good physical and mental health, saving resources by keeping pressure off services such as the acute healthcare, welfare and justice systems. Sufficient support for people with disability reduces reliance on family and carers. All levels of government share responsibility for an effective mainstream service system, which adequately supports people with disability and their carers, especially those ineligible for the NDIS.

Staying safe, healthy and resilient

Recognising and supporting carers

With the right support, caring roles can be fulfilling and meaningful. Carers provide significant and valuable support, worth \$60 billion nationally, to their loved ones who need help with daily life.⁷⁷ When properly supported, Victoria's 770,000 voluntary carers⁷⁸ can avoid unnecessary stress, achieve financial security, join the workforce, stay physically and mentally healthy, access good caring information and stay socially connected. Extra support is especially vital for socially or geographically isolated carers.

Formulate a complete carer strategy

Delivering a funded, whole-of-government carer strategy can recognise carers' rights, and address carers' unique and specific needs. This can include a clear vision and targets for all carers, and reflect the breadth of care experiences, including caring for older people, for people with mental illness and people with disability. It can incorporate the unique needs of younger and older carers, and assemble and co-ordinate diverse social and community support systems, including in employment, health, education and financial support.

Coach carers to find the right services

With information and guidance, carers can receive the suite of services they are entitled to. At this time of significant change to services, a state-wide carer strategy can include funded assistance to carers to identify themselves as 'carers', navigate service systems, and access up-to-date information and support. Integrated and comprehensive carer information and assistance can overcome barriers to social and economic participation, providing carers with the same opportunities as other members of the community.

Preserve and expand respite care and peer support

Carer-specific support, particularly respite care, is vulnerable in the NDIS transition.⁷⁹ VCOSS members report reductions in the availability of respite care during the NDIS rollout, and have noticed funding withdrawals for carer support groups. The re-design of the Australian Government's Integrated Carer Support Service has also introduced uncertainty. Peer support allows carers to find emotional and mental support for their roles, which can help preserve resilience and wellbeing at times of difficulty.⁸⁰

A robust and dynamic approach to supporting carers should include sufficient respite care and peer support facilitation. This will pay dividends both in better and more meaningful lives for carers, and in sustaining the care of their loved ones.

Reducing the harm from alcohol and drugs

Drug and alcohol use can result in significant harm to individuals and communities, including poor physical and mental health, unemployment, poverty, family breakdown, violence and road trauma. Reducing harm from alcohol and drug use should be the guiding principle for drug policy.

Combat a culture of alcohol overuse

Victoria can reduce harm and promote health by increasing funding for health promotion organisations and the broader community to challenge our culture of alcohol misuse. Alcohol consumption is deeply embedded in cultural practices, which encourage and even expect people to drink alcohol regularly. Victoria can lead the way in changing cultural expectations about alcohol consumption, creating a safer and healthier society.

Treat drugs as a health problem

For Victorians to lead happy, healthy lives, the best way to approach drug and alcohol problems is to treat them as health issues. This results in better health and wellbeing for drug users compared to law and order approaches. A health approach also reduces risky behaviour and the spread of blood-borne viruses, lowers crime, and encourages people to seek treatment.⁸¹

Taking a health approach frees up police, court and prison systems for more serious crimes. A law enforcement approach is expensive, consuming about two-thirds of drug spending, compared with 9 per cent for prevention, 21 per cent for drug treatment, and 2 per cent to harm reduction.⁸²

A health approach prioritises diverting people into treatment or education. Countries like Portugal that have embraced a health approach have fewer drug deaths than Australia, and significant community benefits overall.⁸³

Expand drug and alcohol treatment services

Taking a health approach means Victoria can invest in more treatment services to cut drug and alcohol use, improve health, reduce crime, produce better mental health outcomes and increase community participation.⁸⁴ For every \$1 invested in alcohol or drug treatment, society gains \$7.⁸⁵

A strong, sustainable alcohol and drug treatment sector can build on recent rehabilitation bed increases across the state so people receive treatment when they need it. This will help slash wait times, which are currently up to six months, and reduce the reliance on expensive and unregulated private facilities. A strongly funded sector can also extend step-down support to help people leaving hospital.

More drug treatment services will also ensure the success of Victoria's new real-time prescription monitoring system, SafeScript. This guards against misuse of pharmaceutical medicines and tackles problems with prescribing. For SafeScript to succeed, we need enough services to manage the additional flow of drug treatment referrals.

Staying safe, healthy and resilient

Promoting resilient communities

Resilient communities have strong social connections and resources and are able to cope with change, stress and disruption. Resilient people and communities are able to withstand everyday challenges, chronic stressors such as climate change, and shocks like emergencies and disasters.

Invest in local resilience-building through community organisations

Community organisations connect people. They know the risks that people are most vulnerable to and possess unique skills for working with diverse groups. They serve people most in need of support, focusing on prevention, early intervention, crisis support and community-building activities. By strengthening people's capacities for resourcefulness, they help families and communities become stronger and better able to cope with adversity.

Local resilience-building programs deliver a range of projects under national and state funding grants to help strengthen communities and build their resilience. However, while pilot programs deliver great results, their impacts are short lived. Enduring collective impact efforts between community members, community organisations, business and government agencies can build community resilience over the longer term and build collective knowledge.

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Embracing diversity and inclusion

Goal: Everyone is recognised, valued and included

People can only lead a good life if they are respected for who they are, and everyone gets the same chance to achieve. Victoria is blessed with incredible diversity: proud First Australians, people from cultures around the world, strong and talented women and men, people of diverse age, abilities, and gender and sexual identities. Our challenge is to harness all their talents and energies to realise a fair future together.

To do this, we must remove the roadblocks that prevent people from getting a fair go. We need to confront the attitudes and biases, conscious or unconscious, preventing us seeing people's true value. We need to address the wrongs of the past, and achieve reconciliation for the future. By giving every Victorian a fair chance, including treating them equally, we can overcome disparities and allow everyone to achieve a good life.

Olivia McMahon has Kleefstra Syndrome, a rare genetic condition that produces moderate physical and intellectual disabilities.

Her dad Tim says there were "a lot of tears and hugs" when doctors finally provided a diagnosis for Olivia, after more than two years of uncertainty.

He hopes other families navigating genetic conditions find networks of support and receive the right help to care for, protect and empower their children.

"It's imperative people with disabilities and their families get the support they need," he said.

Story and video at vcoss.org.au/GoodLife

Embracing diversity and inclusion

Embedding Aboriginal self-determination

VCOSS recognises that the lands of Victoria were never ceded by its First People, which remains unfinished business. VCOSS supports a Treaty between the Victorian Government and the Aboriginal nations of Victoria, and to map out a pathway to self-determination and reconciliation.

Cultivate strong, Aboriginal Controlled Community Organisations

The best way to redress centuries of marginalisation is a policy of Aboriginal self-determination and strong, sustainable Aboriginal community controlled organisations (ACCOs). Self-determination is an 'ongoing process of choice' through which Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities can meet their social, cultural and economic needs, recognised by Australia as a human right.⁸⁶

Strong, independent ACCOs are the foundation infrastructure upon which self-determination can be built. ACCOs deliver culturally appropriate services, designed and trusted by Aboriginal people.

Through well-resourced organisations, the diversity of Aboriginal voices can be amplified. ACCOs provide tools for change and control of resources through which Aboriginal communities can overcome the manifold disadvantages they face,⁸⁷ to take their rightful, proud place as the original custodians of the lands and waters of Victoria.

Enter a Treaty with the Aboriginal community

See page 8

Build the Aboriginal community sector workforce through coordinated planning

See page 23

Keep Aboriginal children in the care of their communities

See page 36

Pursuing gender and sexual equality

Gender and sexuality are deeply personal components of identity, and part of the richness of human diversity. Societies with greater gender equality tend to have less crime and violence, stronger economies, better business performance, and be more cohesive and connected.⁸⁸

Develop a gender inclusive culture

Victoria can pursue cultural, structural and attitudinal change around perceptions of women. This means investing in programs and interventions that erode gender stereotypes and develop public consciousness of the equal capabilities and value of women and men.

By encouraging women's participation in all levels of government, and supporting business and the community to dismantle barriers to equality, we can facilitate equal representation and life achievement, and change perceptions of women's capabilities and leadership potential.

Use a gender lens in policy-making, budgeting and auditing

By adopting a gender lens in budgeting and policy-making we can help overcome the inequalities experienced by women, including greater risk of poverty,⁸⁹ 15.3 per cent lower wages, and superannuation balances nearly half the size⁹⁰ of men's.

Victoria can build on the commencement of a Gender Equality Budget Statement by more widely adopting gender impact analysis, gender budgeting⁹¹ and gender auditing. These are tools to make better decisions to reduce gender inequality and support women's participation. They help design organisational systems, policies, plans, services and communication to erase discriminatory effects, eliminate unequal access, or combat harmful gender stereotypes.

Teach respect in relationships

Victoria can help shape positive attitudes and behaviours toward gender roles, encouraging equal relationships and reducing gender-based violence. Victoria can maintain and expand the Respectful Relationships education program, which engages schools in addressing gender inequality, gender stereotypes, and attitudes that foster violence.⁹²

Respect and support lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and intersex people

Victoria can help LGBTI Victorians live happy, healthy, fulfilling lives by removing residual legal discrimination and improving support for the LGBTI community. This can help overcome their higher risk of abuse, violence, discrimination and exclusion, which results in increased incidence of depression and anxiety, substance abuse, self-harming and suicidal thoughts.⁹³ Victoria can remove remaining employment discrimination allowed by the Equal Opportunity Act 2010, and create safe, open, non-judgemental services, including in the areas of health, family violence and aged care. Key interventions can include specialist training and resources, inclusive policies and practices, and specific service interventions.

Embracing diversity and inclusion

Empowering people with disability

The more than one million Victorians with disability⁹⁴ have the same right to a good life as everybody else. This includes being able to exercise their human rights, make choices, and understand and execute their responsibilities.

Boost Victorian disability advocacy and information funding

Victoria can match Australian Government funding for disability advocacy,⁹⁵ providing at least \$5.1 million for advocacy recurrently, and making sure information services for people with disability are not lost in the NDIS transition. Disability advocacy helps empower people with disability, as well as their families and carers, to defend their human and legal rights, communicate and meet their needs,⁹⁶ and safeguard against abuse.⁹⁷ These services are especially valuable during and beyond the NDIS transition.

Strengthen Victoria's safeguards for people with disability

Victoria can guarantee and strengthen safeguards to protect people with disability against violence and abuse through the NDIS roll-out and beyond. The NDIS Quality and Safeguarding Framework will only apply to NDIS providers and participants,⁹⁸ leaving a major gap in coverage for individuals accessing services outside of the

NDIS. The majority of people with disability will be ineligible for individual NDIS packages and even those who qualify for NDIS supports will continue to access mainstream services, such as education and health. Victoria must provide strong safeguards for people at risk of violence, abuse and neglect across all settings.

Select people with disability as decision-makers

Victoria can include more people with disability in government decision-making structures and processes, ensuring their voices are heard in decisions about their lives. People with disability have valuable insight from lived experience that can make government policies, programs and practices inclusive and accessible.

Standardise disability statistics

Victoria can better understand and improve its effectiveness at reaching people with disability by improving their recognition when collecting administrative data. Collecting better data provides a picture of service use and uptake by people with disability, allowing better identification and removal of barriers and gaps in access. Data collection should be made consistent with national and international standards, such as by adopting a standardised disability data flag.⁹⁹

Make government information accessible

Improving communication accessibility will ensure all Victorians can get the information they need. This can include better access to interpreting in Auslan or community languages, improving website compatibility with screen readers, and providing government information in plain or Easy English. These changes would improve accessibility for people with disability as well as the broader community, including people for whom English is not their first language, those with varied levels of literacy, and children and young people.

Planning an age-friendly Victoria

Age should not compromise someone's ability to live a good life. As our population continues to age, we need to ensure the supports and services are in place to allow older Victorians to continue to lead happy, healthy and fulfilling lives of their choosing. Older Victorians are active participants in our families, communities and economy, including by working and volunteering, and as unpaid carers, looking after spouses, older parents, children and grandchildren.¹⁰⁰

Unveil a long-range blueprint for older Victorians

Victoria has an opportunity to develop an extensive agenda to strengthen Victorians' quality of life and the state's economic performance as our population ages. Victoria's seniors have diverse needs, with some at greater risk of social exclusion or disadvantage, including people on low incomes, people with disabilities, older women, those living with dementia or chronic health conditions and people living in rural areas.¹⁰¹

The blueprint should incorporate the dimensions and diversity of older people's lives, including areas such as employment, healthy ageing and participation, strengthening culture, supporting diversity and addressing vulnerability, carer recognition and support, access to services and housing, and preventing and responding to elder abuse.¹⁰²

Combat elder abuse

Victoria can strengthen its action on preventing and responding to elder abuse with a cross-sectoral Victorian strategy as well as working with the Australian Government on a national response.¹⁰³ This can help protect older Australians, of whom up to 1 in 17 experience elder abuse,¹⁰⁴ the most overlooked form of family violence. 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.¹⁰⁵ It is rooted in ageism, which is influenced by society's attitudes towards older people, and their marginalisation in the community.¹⁰⁶

Victoria can respond with comprehensive strategies to detect and respond to elder abuse, such as training for frontline staff across government services and investment in specialist services. Prevention can also be a strong focus, based on understanding ageism and community attitudes as key causes.

Embracing diversity and inclusion

Celebrating and supporting cultural diversity

Everyone should be able to pursue a good life in Victoria, no matter where they were born or who their parents are.

Nurture inclusive and specialist cultural support

Victoria can build on actions to support people from culturally diverse backgrounds or who are new to Victoria. For instance, expanding the range of education and employment services, language and translation services, the Victorian African Communities Action Plan, support for young people, and festivals and events.

In our regions, a more diverse community is clamouring for culturally appropriate settlement and health services, and community engagement for people and families.

Gender equality and rights education in both pre-arrival and settlement phases can support women and girls in reaching their full potential, along with culturally sensitive information to prevent domestic and family violence in culturally diverse communities, particularly in regional Victoria.

Specialist financial counsellors can provide culturally responsive training in household budgeting to avoid financial hardship. Similarly, culturally competent and bilingual drug and alcohol prevention and treatment services can improve access for marginalised communities.

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Treating people fairly

Goal: Everyone is treated fairly under the law

For Victorians to have a good life, their government must uphold their basic human rights. They need to feel protected, knowing they will receive fair and equal treatment by the police and courts. They need to trust their justice system will deal with the causes of criminal behaviour, and will ensure people don't reoffend on leaving prison.

But fragile human rights protections and inadequate access to legal help mean some people don't get treated fairly. Many Victorians face hardships like poverty, discrimination, family breakdown and homelessness, which have potential legal dimensions. Fast and responsive legal help can prevent problems escalating into crisis.

Punitive criminal justice approaches will not deliver a safe community and reduced crime. Victoria needs to adopt evidence-based approaches to addressing legal need and offending behaviour.

By focusing on strong local communities, early resolution of legal problems and supporting community members returning from prison, the government can make Victoria safer.

As a senior lawyer at WEstjustice, **Shorna Moore** works on the frontline of the provision of free legal assistance and education in Melbourne's west.

"Community lawyers go beyond simply providing legal advice," Moore said.

"We believe in a fair society where the law and its processes do not discriminate against vulnerable people."

She said a lack of adequate funding, and the uncertainty and resources expended to maintain funding, represent major challenges for community legal centres.

Story and video at vcoss.org.au/GoodLife

Treating people fairly

Instilling human rights

Human rights set a minimum standard for treating people fairly. They are the most basic benchmark for respecting people in a civilised and humane society. People facing disadvantage are most at risk of having their human rights violated. They can be evicted from their homes, denied basic health care when sick, or prevented from catching public transport to buy food, medicine or other necessities.

Include more human rights in the Charter

Victoria can strengthen human rights protections by including economic, social and cultural rights in the Human Rights Charter, like the rights to health care, housing, social security and adequate food. The Charter should also include an explicit right to Aboriginal self-determination. These rights often mean most to vulnerable people, because they protect access to the basic necessities of a good life. The Charter of Rights and Responsibilities Act 2006 is helping many Victorians, especially those most vulnerable,¹⁰⁷ by driving improvements in services and making governments more accountable when writing policies and laws.

Allow action on human rights abuses

Victoria can include a direct right of action¹⁰⁸ in the Human Rights Charter, creating strong protections for Victorians by encouraging services to take rights into account when making decisions, preventing human rights violations. This will also combat perceptions the Charter is a 'toothless tiger', as people cannot currently take a human rights complaint alone to court.

Educate Victorians on human rights

Human rights can only be protected if everyone understands and respects them. Importantly, the Charter intends to foster cultural change across government and the community. The most recent Charter review recommended building a more enduring Victorian human rights culture, by strengthening the Charter's operation and building community awareness. However, little progress on its recommendations has been made.

Since the Charter was enacted, momentum and awareness has reduced. Community workers need to understand the meaning and importance of human rights to do their jobs properly. Victorians should know their rights and be able to have them enforced. Funding a community-wide education program can help achieve these goals.

Strengthen police accountability

Over-policing and misuse of police power also contribute to poor justice outcomes for Victorians. Police who abuse the trust of Victorians and undermine the integrity of the justice system must be held accountable. Existing accountability mechanisms fail to change systemic behaviour or build community confidence in police. The Victorian Government should implement a system of independent investigation of police misconduct.

Ensuring people can get legal help

When people encounter problems in their lives, they often confront a complicated and bewildering legal system. Fixing legal problems quickly can stop them spiralling out of control. Early, professional legal help can prevent someone losing their home, being violently attacked, or losing their job.

Bolster community legal services

Victoria can invest in expanded free legal assistance to guide people through problems and ensure they get a fair hearing. Affordable, timely legal help might save a home from foreclosure, get a rental home repaired, protect a woman from a violent partner, or stop discrimination or bullying at work.

Every year in Australia an estimated 500,000 people go without the legal help they need.¹⁰⁹ Private lawyers can be expensive and intimidating. Victoria's community legal centres, Aboriginal legal services and legal aid try to fill the gap, but cannot meet demand.

Community legal centres nationwide turned away 169,000 people in 2015-16, a third of whom had no suitable alternative.¹¹⁰ The small amounts of extra funds granted recently have been for short-term projects, and can't sustain centres to meet demand in the future.

Victoria Legal Aid also has funding shortfalls and struggles to cater for everyone who needs their help. Legal aid, increasingly, is severely restricted, and goes mainly to people facing prison on criminal charges.

...restrictions on legal aid are now so severe that in many jurisdictions a substantial proportion of those living below the Henderson poverty line ... will not satisfy the means test for legal aid eligibility.¹¹¹

Support the development and growth of health-justice partnerships

Health-justice partnerships put lawyers where people are already seeking help, such as local health or family violence services. Working together, legal and health professionals can identify and help with legal problems before they reach crisis point. Victoria has been leading the country in setting up health-justice partnerships. However, many are operating on short-term grants and may have to close once funding expires.

Treating people fairly

Making fines fair

The Victorian Government commonly uses fines to manage minor offences. In 2015-2016, three million fines were issued, raising about \$700 million.¹¹² But paying fines is harder on a low income.¹¹³ Unpaid fines can snowball, pushing people into a cycle of debt, poverty and criminal penalties.

Unclog courts by decriminalising toll fines

Unpaid road tolls are the largest source of fines,¹¹⁴ and the volume of toll fines is severely clogging courts. In part, this is because people can rapidly accrue fines: each unpaid toll can add up to \$342 of debt. A driver can amass thousands of dollars of debt in a week.

Unpaid tolls should be a debt recovery issue between toll road companies and motorists. The Victorian Government should not be the debt collector for private companies, using measures that include threatening people with jail. Toll fee enforcement should be moved to a civil debt recovery system.

Make fines fairer by matching to income levels

A fine for forgetting to pay the train fare is more than \$200, which is about 80 per cent of a single person's weekly Newstart Allowance. Paying fines can mean not paying rent, school costs or energy bills or buying food. One fairer option would be introducing lower fines for concession card holders, reflecting their lower incomes. The concession penalty can be set at 50 per cent, in line with other concession rates.¹¹⁵ Additional enforcement fees could also be waived for concession card holders, to prevent infringement debt escalating quickly and give people a realistic chance of paying debts.

Keep rolling out options for people to work off debts

The Work and Development Permit Scheme allows eligible people to work off outstanding fines and debt by participating in volunteer work or agreed programs and treatment. A foundation group of community organisations has been participating in the scheme since mid-2017. The scheme should be expanded to provide an equal chance for rural and regional Victorians to participate, and clarify eligibility and access.

Diverting young people from the justice system

Victoria's justice system can act as a safety net and give young people a chance to turn their lives around. When young people get caught in the justice system, it is usually because of major problems in their lives – at home, at school, or with disabilities or health problems. Being too quick to imprison them can simply entrench reoffending behaviour upon release.

Close youth prisons and invest in better diversion alternatives

The smart way to reduce youth crime is to work with young people, starting before they offend in the first place. First contact with the police or courts is a chance to divert young people into support and activity programs and devise successful future pathways. Communities are safer, and young people can avoid the potentially life-long stigma of a criminal record.

Once in the justice system, intensive training, therapy and rehabilitation for young people in detention and after release can prevent future criminal behaviour.¹¹⁶

Victoria can do more to reach and engage a small number of young people committing repeated and serious offences. More intensive and tailored interventions are needed to steer these young people onto a better trajectory. The best way to protect the community is to invest in measures that prevent or interrupt the criminal pathways of these children, who might otherwise go on to commit a disproportionate amount of youth crime.

Keep the adult and youth justice systems separate

Keeping young people out of adult prisons dramatically reduces the risk of further crimes. Victoria's 'dual-track' system keeps young offenders up to age 21 separate from adults. These separate systems have been essential in keeping crime rates low, by recognising young people's developmental stages, vulnerability and potential for rehabilitation. By reinstating the strong separation between the two systems, we can protect Victorians from greater risks of crime in the future.

Raise the age of criminal responsibility to 14

Children under 14 belong in school, not prison. At this age, children cannot fully understand the implications of their actions, and they lack total control over their behaviour.¹¹⁷ By imprisoning them, we risk causing more harm, including encouraging them to become chronic, long-term offenders.¹¹⁸ Children under the age of 14 should be supported through age-appropriate interventions, not imprisonment.

Treating people fairly

Building a corrections system that successfully rehabilitates people

The best way to keep Victorians safe and free to live good lives is by preventing crime from occurring. Taking a justice reinvestment approach focuses on investing in the communities prisoners come from, working with them on local, place-based solutions to the economic and social risk factors behind offending. Most of our prisoners have histories of trauma, abuse and poverty, with most not finishing high school, and many having mental health conditions or acquired brain injuries.¹¹⁹

Victorians expect their government to take sensible, cost-effective, evidence-based approaches to justice that will protect them from harm. Simply sending more people to prison for longer does little to reduce crime levels or reoffending, and is extraordinarily expensive. We now spend more than \$1 billion every year on prisons,¹²⁰ which could be better spent preventing crime.

Slash re-offending rates

Victoria can tackle repeat offending by introducing a target to reduce recidivism by at least 15 per cent over 10 years. Nearly half of Victoria's prisoners will return within two years. Other jurisdictions have introduced recidivism reduction targets to drive change. South Australia has committed to a 10 per cent reduction in reoffending target by 2020.¹²¹

Help people leaving prison find homes and vocations

Effective transition support is one way to help people leaving prison and prevent reoffending. Too many people move straight from prison into homelessness, putting them at greater risk of reoffending, or of harm or even death. More support improves their chance to stay safe and out of prison.¹²² Existing transition programs are over-stretched and target only those at highest risk, or only give help for a month or two. A revamped service can link with people while still in prison, and continue to support them for at least 12 months afterwards. This occurs in the ACT, and has successfully reduced recidivism there.¹²³

Expand problem-solving courts across the state

Victoria can expand the Victorian Drug Court to Geelong, Sunshine and Gippsland,¹²⁴ to keep people out of prison through treatment and rehabilitation. The Victorian Drug Court approach achieves a recidivism rate 34 per cent lower than mainstream courts.¹²⁵ Similarly, offenders appearing before the Neighbourhood Justice Centre (NJC) are less likely to reoffend, and complete community orders more often than people in other courts,¹²⁶ cutting Yarra area crime rates by 12 per cent in two years.

Reduce the number of women and Aboriginal people in prison

Victoria can also take targeted strategies to address the growing number of incarcerated women¹²⁷ and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, whose offences are often associated with poverty.¹²⁸ Most women in prison are mothers or primary carers of children. By locking them up for

non-violent crimes, we are often sentencing their children as well: to the dislocation of moving homes and schools, the trauma of the child protection system and the risk of generational disadvantage that comes from having an incarcerated parent.¹²⁹ Particular strategies can be targeted to Aboriginal women's over-representation: in Victoria they are 17 times more likely to be imprisoned than non-Aboriginal women.¹³⁰

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