



A State of Wellbeing

Victorian
Budget
Submission
2020–21



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

VCOSS members reflect the diversity of the sector and include large charities, peak organisations, small community services, advocacy groups and individuals interested in social policy.

In addition to supporting the sector, VCOSS represents the interests of Victorians experiencing poverty and disadvantage, and advocates for the development of a sustainable, fair and equitable society.

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VCOSS acknowledges the traditional owners of country and pays respect to past, present and emerging Elders. This document was prepared on the lands of the Kulin Nation.





- 2 Introduction
- 3 Priority recommendations
- 4 Equitable and inclusive communities
- 14 Secure and safe homes
- 21 A safe and just Victoria
- 29 Affordable living
- 38 Victorians in work
- 45 A strong community services industry
- 51 Stronger early childhood education and schools
- 57 Thriving children and families, free from violence
- 62 Healthy Victorians

Making Victoria a state of wellbeing

Economic prosperity alone is no longer a good measure of community wellbeing, if it ever was. Victoria needs a new way to conceptualise, pursue and measure progress.

We need to proudly and loudly articulate our overarching social goals, and match these bold aspirations with concrete targets, timeframes and accountabilities.

This will be achieved by Victoria becoming a *wellbeing economy*.

Making this leap would require traditional budget processes and the machinery of government itself to evolve to put pursuit of wellbeing at the centre of all decisions.

Adopting this wellbeing lens would create a framework for departments and ministers to make funding bids for programs that achieve this greater goal. It would allow the government to group together otherwise disparate programs and initiatives.

Most importantly, becoming a *wellbeing economy* would provide the framework for Victoria to measure the success of policies, and make changes where necessary.

Growing Victorians' sense of wellbeing will take time. But with the right policies in place to ensure every Victorian gets a great education, has a safe place to call home, works a rewarding job, can afford the basics and has the necessary support to stay healthy, change is possible.

This document makes the case for a shift to a wellbeing economy, and lists dozens of positive policies that would help Victorians live a better life.

Internationally, there is growing focus on how to improve community wellbeing through the sustainable growth and distribution of financial, social, human, and environmental capital.

Victoria is perfectly placed to lead this conversation here in Australia.



A handwritten signature in blue ink, which appears to read 'Emma King'.

Emma King VCROSS CEO

Priority recommendations

Shift to a modern wellbeing budget

This would deliver a bold and overarching framework to direct investments into key areas of government reform, including housing, early childhood, justice and family violence.

PAGE 4

Urgently boost funding to frontline mental health

Mental health services can't wait until after the Royal Commission for funding relief. An immediate boost is needed to keep services running properly and supporting Victorians in need over the coming year.

PAGE 64

Stop stealth funding cuts to community organisations

Not indexing funding for community organisations means support is shrinking in real terms. We must fix this decline, so vulnerable Victorians don't miss out on the care they need.

PAGE 45

End the damaging funding 'drip-feed' to service providers

Multi-year funding deals for social service organisations will provide financial certainty, allowing them to deliver better support to more people over the long term.

PAGE 46

Progress self-determination for Aboriginal Victorians

Ensure Treaty and moves towards self-determination are led by Aboriginal people, and take the remaining practical steps that are necessary to support these reforms.

PAGE 7

Launch a public and community housing construction blitz

Build 6,000 new public and community housing properties each year, on a rolling basis, so every Victorian has a place to live and raise their family.

PAGE 14

Make homes safe and liveable for low-income Victorians

This involves mandating and enforcing meaningful energy efficiency standards for rental properties and investing more money into energy-related home upgrades.

PAGE 31

Close service gaps for people with disability

Buck passing between the NDIS and other systems must stop. We need to improve how disability services connect and collaborate with health, education, justice, housing and out-of-home care.

PAGE 7

Continue the pivot to crime prevention

Build on recent advances to shift Victoria's justice approach towards crime prevention. This would involve identifying and funding new opportunities for offender diversion and restorative justice projects.

PAGE 21

Make public education genuinely affordable

Victorians' first-hand experience of sending their kids to a government school is that a public education isn't truly free. Make it so. Fund schools to the proper limit so all hidden costs can be abolished.

PAGE 52

If a young person is in state care, look after them until they're 21

Keeping Victorians in state care for three more years, until their 21st birthday, will make them more likely to lead a safe, happy, healthy and fulfilling life.

PAGE 59

Support communities to confront climate change

Community organisations are on the frontline of climate change, helping communities adapt, prepare and weather the storm. Give them the tools and support they need to do the job properly.

PAGE 47

Equitable and inclusive communities

Victorians are very diverse, in cultural background, age, gender, sexuality and physical and cognitive ability. This diversity should be recognised and celebrated.

All Victorians, no matter who they are, are entitled to a safe, dignified and fulfilling life. However, many in our community—including people with disability, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Victorians, carers, older Victorians and LGBTIQ people—are subject to discrimination and accessibility challenges that lead to poorer wellbeing, making it harder to live a good life.

Removing the barriers that prevent people fully participating in society, and adopting an approach that makes inclusion and wellbeing everybody's business, will benefit all Victorians.

The Victorian Government can do more to strengthen the voices of diverse Victorians, and consider how every policy decision and budget allocation will make Victoria more equitable and inclusive.

Shift to a wellbeing budget

Declare a 'wellbeing economy', and begin planning for our first Wellbeing Budget.

Prosperous societies have more than good balance sheets; they have vibrant and liveable communities, they champion dignity and fairness, and they have healthy and happy citizens.

Fostering community wellbeing is a core responsibility for all governments, from the basic needs for food, housing and safety to civic engagement and participation in democracy.

Countries like New Zealand, Scotland and Iceland are rising to this challenge by becoming *wellbeing economies*. Under this model, all branches of government are responsible for improving community wellbeing through budget priorities, policy-making and reporting.

This year New Zealand delivered its first Wellbeing Budget, requiring all new spending to advance one of five wellbeing priorities, including improving mental health, reducing child poverty and combatting Indigenous disadvantage. Ministers must demonstrate the wellbeing impacts of budget proposals, and explain any trade-offs between environmental, social, human and financial capital.

By adopting a Wellbeing Budget, Victoria would continue to lead the nation in social policy.

We would have a bold and overarching framework to direct investments in housing, early childhood, justice and family violence, underpinning key areas of ongoing government reform.

To help guide this decision-making and monitor progress, comprehensive data collection and analysis would also be necessary.



**Equitable
and inclusive
communities**

Ivy

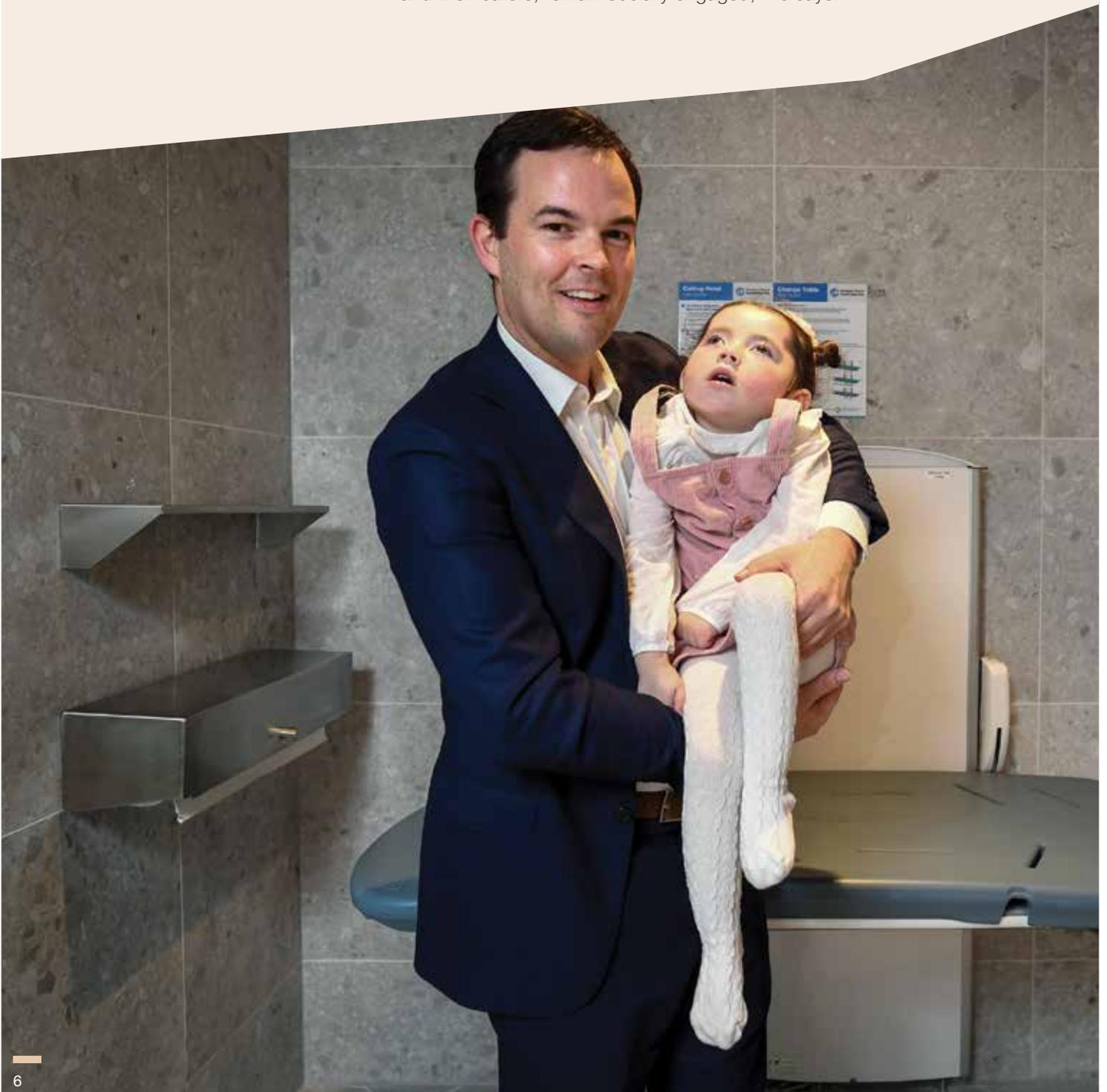
Four-year-old Ivy Atwell has a rare, life-limiting genetic condition and is profoundly disabled. With no voluntary movement, Ivy has outgrown baby change tables and now needs a fully accessible bathroom.

Programs like Changing Places, which upgrade bathroom infrastructure in public spaces, have proven to be a game changer.

“Changing Places help keep our family connected with the community through the confidence of knowing Ivy can go to the bathroom with dignity,” according to her dad, Glen.

“Every person should be able to travel around their community safely and with ease.”

“Changing Places are no longer seen as an ‘optional extra’ but necessary facilities to ensure people with severe disabilities, and their carers, remain socially engaged,” he says.



Progress self-determination for Aboriginal Victorians

Ensure Treaty and self-determination are led by Aboriginal people.

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people have the longest surviving continuous culture in the world, and possess a proud and rich history and identity.

VCOSS believes the best outcomes for Aboriginal people will come when policies and programs are shaped and led by the expertise of Aboriginal communities.

By championing Aboriginal *ways of knowing, being and doing*, Victoria can support Aboriginal people to overcome the health and wellbeing inequities that have been created by dispossession, marginalisation and discrimination, and compounded by the top-down policy approaches of the past.

Self-determination is essential. Closing the gap will require a shift in power and control away from government and mainstream organisations towards community-owned solutions.

The Victorian Government's commitment to Treaty is significant and historic. But Aboriginal people have been let down by governments too many times to count. The Treaty-making process must deeply respect the cultures, traditions and structures of Aboriginal communities.

No wrong doors for Victorians with a disability

Agree with the Commonwealth on 'provider of last resort' arrangements.

Build interface capacity between state-based systems and the NDIS.

The transition from the old state-based system of disability support to the National Disability Insurance Scheme (NDIS) is almost complete. VCOSS continues to support this landmark social policy reform, which reorients disability support from an 'old welfare' model of rationed support to a rights-based social insurance scheme.

However, the scheme is yet to deliver on its full promise, and as service and funding gaps continue to emerge or grow, people with disability experiencing disadvantage and isolation are almost always the first to fall through the cracks.

The complexity, scale and pace of the NDIS has disrupted how disability services connect and collaborate with mainstream services, in particular, state-based systems such as health, education, justice, housing, child protection and out-of-home care.

In theory, the interface between NDIS and mainstream service systems is supported by Coalition of Australian Governments (COAG) principles, bilateral agreements and state-based practice guidelines. However, on the ground, the lack of clarity, coordination and services, and the increase of plain and simple buck passing, means people with the most complex needs are being caught short.

For example, there are many Victorians who are eligible for the NDIS, or are likely to be eligible, who are marooned in hospitals,

prisons, or aged care facilities due to NDIS planning or decision-making issues or a lack of appropriate services. As of July 2019, 80 Victorian patients with disability were stuck in hospital for more than three months after they were ready for discharge because of NDIS-related or service delays. Unclear processes and planning can also contribute to delays to discharge or release from prison. Women and children with disability may also be unable to escape family violence without access to specialised, accessible crisis supports.

In addition, the 'provider of last resort' function traditionally undertaken by the Victorian Government has become disputed and unclear. Without appropriate and responsive crisis and provider of last resort arrangements, vulnerable Victorians will be unable to access timely support and may be forced to stay in inappropriate or unsafe settings.

During this time of significant system disruption, service gaps have also emerged for Victorians with disability who are not eligible for individual NDIS funding and rely on 'universal' government systems, such as health, to meet their needs.

We recognise recent investments towards an NDIS Transition Support Package for community mental health services for people with psychosocial disability, and acknowledge the Victorian Government as a strong advocate at COAG through the Disability Reform Council. However, more work is required to build interface capability and capacity across and within state-based, state-funded systems and with the NDIS.

A refreshed National Disability Strategy, underpinned by the State Disability Plan, is desperately needed to ensure there is no wrong door for any Victorian with disability seeking the supports they need to live an 'ordinary life'.

Equitable and inclusive communities

Provide adequate funding for disability advocacy

Free disability advocacy organisations from the rollercoaster ride of short-term funding.

Boost core funding to help disability advocacy organisations meet demand.

Disability advocates promote, protect and defend the human rights of people with disability. Disability advocacy is an important safeguard to help prevent, report and respond to abuse.¹

But the most important funding sources for this critical sector—boosted core funding and short-term grants provided through the Victorian Disability Advocacy Futures Plan² and related Commonwealth funding—both run out in June 2020.

Advocacy organisations can't do their job properly while paralysed by short-term funding cycles and preparing for the next funding cliff.

The current funding uncertainty has coincided with an increase in demand and in complexity of cases, as a result of the NDIS and other changes to disability services.³ Regional and rural disability advocacy services are particularly affected.

The advocacy sector requires increased investment to respond to demand pressures associated with both the NDIS and its mainstream interfaces.

Recurrent, expanded advocacy funding would help organisations plan for the future and reach more Victorians with disability, including those in marginalised communities and those who have previously missed out on advocacy. With every \$1 invested in disability advocacy proven to save taxpayers \$3.50,⁴ it also makes compelling economic sense.

End stigma and discrimination against LGBTIQ Victorians

Increase focus on LGBTIQ inclusion.

Provide ongoing funding to LGBTIQ programs.

Victoria has a proud track record celebrating, supporting and empowering LGBTIQ people, including support for Safe Schools,⁵ the creation of a high-level LGBTIQ Taskforce,⁶ establishing a Victorian Pride Centre and allowing trans and gender diverse people to easily affirm their sex on their birth certificate.⁷

Despite this, LGBTIQ people are still more likely to experience mental ill-health, engage in self-harm, and consider and attempt suicide.⁸

The Victorian Government can further boost the health and social outcomes of LGBTIQ people by adopting an increased focus on inclusion and recognition.⁹ Such an approach would include making public spaces more inclusive,¹⁰ considering intersectionality in all government services and providing secure and ongoing funding to LGBTIQ programs so they can continue to deliver essential services.¹¹

Strengthen gender equity

Immediately increase funding to the women's health and gender equity sector.

Tie future funding to population growth.

Gender discrimination and inequality is a serious challenge facing Victoria. Women earn roughly 15 per cent less than their male colleagues and retire with barely half as much in superannuation, and they are over-represented in part-time, insecure and low-paid jobs. Damaging gender stereotypes also persist in the media and the community, warping notions of how women should look and act.¹²

Gender equality benefits everyone: it makes people safer by preventing violence against women and girls, encourages economic growth by engaging more people in the workforce, and promotes dignity, respect and fairness.

The Victorian Government has recognised this and is pursuing gender equity through *Safe and Strong: A Victorian Gender Equality Strategy*.

But at the same time, women's health and gender equity services have experienced a funding cut in real terms since 2011.¹³ This is compromising their capacity to deliver programs related to gender equity, sexual and reproductive health, and the prevention of violence against women.

Ensuring funding growth can keep pace with population would help the Government achieve its vision of a gender equitable state.

Tackle loneliness among Victorians

Develop and resource a strategy to reduce loneliness among at-risk Victorians.

Loneliness might not sound like a serious threat, but research has shown that social isolation and loneliness impede people's physical and mental health, and can actually pose a bigger risk to people's wellbeing than smoking or air pollution.¹⁴

Loneliness is unique to each individual. It can be triggered by a life event like moving house or losing a partner. Or it can be a life-long experience, extending into people's senior years. Because of this diversity there is no 'one-size-fits-all' program that can combat loneliness.

VicHealth found one in eight people aged 16–25 reported a very high intensity of loneliness.¹⁵ Similarly, WA research shows seven per cent of seniors report severe loneliness, with higher levels reported by single people, those living alone, and people with poor health.¹⁶

The most effective way to relieve loneliness is to help people feel connected to a community. Communities don't need to be united by geography—they might be online (for example, for LGBTIQ young people), or united by shared interests or hobbies.

Men's Sheds are a well-known community initiative that tackles loneliness, focusing on men who are no longer in paid employment, whether because of retirement, redundancy, health issues or other reasons. Men's Sheds participants build and repair things for the community, but the benefit for participants is coming together to build relationships and find meaningful purpose.

Neighbourhood Houses are another initiative helping people engage and connect with communities. They enable people of all abilities, backgrounds and ages to connect, learn and share in an inclusive environment. This is a cost-effective way of combatting loneliness and social isolation, improving people's wellbeing and reducing their reliance on acute health services.

Deliver local, place-based solutions

Establish a social innovation fund to support place-based solutions.

Provide communities with 'backbone funding' to manage and deliver initiatives.

Poverty and disadvantage are concentrated geographically. This means that Victorians living in some areas are much more likely than others to get trapped in cycles of entrenched and intergenerational poverty.¹⁷

Complex issues like entrenched disadvantage need solutions that empower communities. Effective place-based approaches bring together community members, empowering local people to develop and drive their own innovative solutions over the long term. They help build stronger communities that are equipped to help people get jobs and overcome disadvantage.

Communities have their own unique profiles, strengths and weaknesses. What works in one place will not necessarily work in others. To be successful, place-based responses need to build on existing collaborations and community resources, and be flexible and adaptable enough to suit local circumstances.

Governments can support place-based responses to building community wellbeing by providing local communities with 'backbone funding' for management, coordination and governance and to develop and deliver initiatives.

Give people with disability dignity

Build more public changing facilities.

Every person should be able to access a public bathroom that is accessible and fit for purpose. However, there are only 36 assisted change facilities for adults with a disability in Victoria, despite recent government investments in this space. More 'Changing Places' facilities need to be built.

Fully accessible and inclusive universal design practices should also be embedded in the development of all new public spaces, to provide greater inclusion and ensure all Victorians can access our public spaces with dignity and ease.

Equitable and inclusive communities

Further strategies



Support people with lived experience and peak bodies to engage in reform processes.

People with lived experience—including of poverty, disability, family violence or homelessness—have insights essential for successful system design and service delivery. Similarly, organisations that are governed by people with relevant lived experience—like LGBTIQ groups, disability organisations and consumer-led services—help ensure policy reform and service design are genuinely suited to people’s needs.

Large reform processes, including Royal Commissions, must value the input of people with lived experience to inform them (including by paying for their time). Peak and representative bodies need additional resources to increase their capacity to participate in policy reform.

Launch a campaign to improve community attitudes towards people with disability.

Community attitudes are a critical factor in disability inclusion. Negative attitudes can lead to significant barriers in a range of areas including health, education and employment.¹⁸

A national community attitudes survey supported by the Victorian Government was undertaken in 2018,¹⁹ looking at attitudes that impact the social and economic participation of people with disability. Collecting this data was a positive first step towards the development of more inclusive attitudes. The Victorian Government can now invest in targeted work to promote inclusion, such as campaigns to raise community awareness and counteract negative stereotypes.

Build a more inclusive community services workforce.

People need health and community services to work in a responsive, safe and flexible manner. A workforce that is representative of the community it serves (e.g., in terms of culture, disability, language and sexual orientation) will be better equipped to understand and respond to people’s needs.

Workforce diversity is crucial to ensuring that services are provided in the most appropriate and safe way. The Government can provide community service organisations with affordable and

accessible cross-cultural and trauma-focussed training. It can also improve access to services by providing information about them in a range of languages, and providing access to interpreters and translators, including Auslan.

Adopt a gender lens in budget and policy-making.

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

Adopting such a gender lens would allow the Government to be more attuned to how policies and programs affect women, and therefore to reduce gender inequality, combat harmful gender stereotypes and empower women.

This could be accompanied by the production of an annual Victorian Gender Equity Report, which would track the impact of Victoria’s gender equity and violence prevention investments over time.



Combat elder abuse.

Research shows that about one in six older people experience abuse.²⁰ Victoria needs a whole-of-government strategy to respond to this scourge and improve older people's wellbeing and inclusion in the community.

This strategy could include ongoing support for local elder abuse prevention networks, funding training so frontline staff can detect and respond to abuse, and investing in specialist services. It would need to be designed in a genuine partnership with older people and their advocacy organisations, and recognise both the damaging impact of ageism and the importance of intersectionality.^{21,22}

Provide Aboriginal young people with mentoring opportunities.

Aboriginal children and young people are best supported by culturally appropriate services built on Aboriginal definitions of identity and wellbeing. Mentoring programs can provide this kind of support, as well as opportunities to build role models, strengthen cultural health and connect people together.

For example, the Marram Nganyin program supports the development of Aboriginal youth mentoring across Victoria. However, the program received just one year funding in the 2019–20 budget. Further support is required so programs like Marram Nganyin can help more Aboriginal children and young people to reach their potential.

Implement the Victorian carer strategy.

One in eight Victorians is an unpaid family or friend carer.²³ Carers report many positive aspects of their role, like companionship, satisfaction and fulfilment; but it can also take a toll. Carers are at risk of poor mental health, and of financial drains that can make it a struggle to make ends meet.²⁴

In July 2018, the Victorian Government launched Victoria's first whole-of-government strategy in this space, the Carer Strategy 2018–22. The Strategy sets out ways to recognise and support carers, to improve their health, wellbeing and ability to participate in school or work.

Ongoing commitment is needed to monitor the implementation of the Strategy, set clear timelines, and engage carers themselves in decision-making.

Equitable and inclusive communities

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All Victorians, no matter who they are, are entitled to a safe, dignified and fulfilling life. The Victorian Government can do more to strengthen the voices of diverse Victorians, and consider how every policy decision and budget allocation will make Victoria more equitable and inclusive.



Secure and safe homes

Having a safe place to call home is the foundation of wellbeing. A secure and safe home is more than shelter; it's a place to stay warm, clean, healthy and well. It's the enabler of a good life for people in all walks of life.

But for many Victorians, this basic human right is out of reach. Nearly 25,000 Victorians are homeless on any given night. And rising rents, an unaffordable property market and a vast housing waiting list are pushing more people to the brink of homelessness.

Building more houses, integrating health and social services with housing, preventing evictions and making renting fair will underpin all other progress towards providing a good life for all Victorians.

Launch a sustained public and community housing construction blitz

Build 6,000 new public and community housing properties each year.

In 2019, the Victorian Government followed through with a commitment to address the state's chronic shortage of public and community housing by building 1,000 new properties over four years.

But more than 82,000 Victorians remain on the wait list for public and community housing,²⁵ and this figure is tipped to hit 100,000 by mid-2020. Public and community housing currently makes up just 3.2 per cent of all housing in Victoria, well below the national average of 4.5 per cent.²⁶

Without enough public and community housing, Victorians who need it might be struggling to maintain private rental accommodation, paying more rent than they can afford, going without essentials for daily life, or languishing on the edge of homelessness.

That's why Victoria needs a sustained public and community housing blitz to meet the demands of our growing population and provide quality, affordable homes for all.

At least 6,000 new public and community houses should be built each year for the next 10 years. We need this much to keep pace with population growth, to house Victorians on the wait list and those living in extreme housing stress.²⁷

Three hundred of these new homes should be for Aboriginal Victorians, who are experiencing the fastest growth of homelessness in the nation.²⁸ Roughly 10 per cent of homelessness services are Aboriginal services, despite Aboriginal people making up only 0.8 per cent of the Victorian population.²⁹

The new housing should be well located, and the construction mix should address the current mismatch in supply and demand. For example, both women needing a one-bedroom home and larger families needing multiple bedrooms are currently missing out because these kinds of homes aren't available.

This entrenched problem needs a sustained solution. Acting now will prevent worsening the housing crisis currently facing the Victorian community and the Victorian Government.



**Secure and
safe homes**

Vanessa

Vanessa Robinson's young sons were killed in 2010 when a faulty gas heater began leaking poisonous gas into the family's rented Mooroopna home.

Ms Robinson—who now runs the Chase and Tyler Foundation in her sons' honour—says all rental homes must be safe and liveable.

She says new regulations currently being finalised that will require rental properties to meet a minimum safety standard must be clear and tough.

“We want to make sure that when we go home to our families and to our loved ones, that nothing terrible is going to happen.”

“Renting out your property is essentially a business. And in business we have basic OH&S that we have to adhere to. Why is it not like that in a rental property?”



Tackle homelessness by stopping unnecessary evictions

Increase eligibility for services designed to keep people in their homes.

The best way to prevent more Victorians from becoming homeless is to support people to keep the housing they already have.

Victoria doesn't have many private rental properties that are available and affordable for people on fixed or low incomes. People are therefore forced to make tough decisions to secure a property and pay the rent.

Budgets are stretched to breaking point, leaving very little wiggle room if something goes wrong. At times, these tenants need a bit of help to stay in their homes, or face the prospect of homelessness.

The Victorian Government can support people as soon as they are at risk, by investing more in homelessness prevention services. This might mean legal assistance to fight an eviction notice or assist with negotiating a rental payment plan, financial support to manage rent in arrears, or drug, alcohol or mental health assistance at a service close to home.

Numerous services already exist, like Tenancy Plus and the Tenant Assistance and Advocacy Program. But access to them depends on what kind of housing you are in, where that housing is, whether you can get to a service and how risky your situation is.

Once people are homeless it is much more difficult for them to get the support they need. Victoria must modernise the state's fragmented housing system so it can help people *before* they're at the pointy end of the homelessness crisis.

Join the dots between housing and mental health

Integrate housing and mental health support services.

Create a safety net between prison release and mental health treatment, and homelessness.

More than a quarter of the adults and young people who use Victoria's homelessness services are also living with a mental health issue.²⁶ The two problems are inexorably linked.

The Royal Commission into Victoria's Mental Health System has been described as a once-in-a-generation opportunity for improvement. But the Royal Commission will be unable to deliver on this promise unless Victoria's critical shortage of housing is addressed.

A home is the foundation for a healthy life, including mental wellbeing. It plays a key role across the continuum of mental illness prevention, early intervention, response and recovery.

Victoria should scale-up models that integrate housing and responsive mental healthcare and support, across both the private rental market and public and community housing. These models should reflect best practice operation and embrace 'housing first', step up/step down and multidisciplinary service-based approaches.

To break the cycle of homelessness and mental illness, more also needs to be done to secure housing for people leaving mental health inpatient facilities and prisons—including child prisons—so they don't exit into homelessness.

These investments will ensure the Royal Commission can deliver on its promise of better mental health outcomes for Victorians.

Deliver strong rental law changes to protect tenants' rights

Keep working with the community sector on the fine detail of rental reform.

Launch a communications campaign explaining the new laws, specifically to CALD, elderly and other vulnerable communities.

The Victorian Government has made historic changes to rental laws. They come at a time when the unaffordable housing market means more people, including families and older people, are renting, and renting for longer.

In broad terms, the changes abolish unfair 'no specified reason' evictions, make it easier for people to make minor modifications or have pets, and put a cap on rent increases.

But the detailed work to give force to the new laws, and ensure they deliver real changes for Victorian tenants, is ongoing.

The regulations need to explicitly define the types of modifications allowed, the information that must be disclosed to tenants and the evidence required for legal eviction. To exercise their new rights, tenants must also be well educated about the changes.

The Victorian Government has already been working closely with the community sector to draft the required regulations. When the regulations are finalised, there must be a well-designed communication campaign about people's rights under the new laws, that targets information at diverse and vulnerable communities, including people with disability and older people.

Secure and safe homes

Further strategies

Mandate inclusionary zoning.

The Victorian Government can accelerate the increase of public and community housing by encouraging the private sector to play its part. ‘Inclusionary zoning’ requires developers to include public and community housing among new apartments.

Victoria builds about 30,000 new apartments every year. Making sure a percentage of these are public housing would provide many more Victorians with a home, and help shorten public housing waiting lists.

Make public housing energy efficient and healthy.

Many vulnerable Victorians live in poorly insulated public housing properties, with inefficient appliances and limited ability to stay warm or cool in winter or summer. To provide the energy efficient public housing that Victorians need, existing programs that upgrade the energy efficiency of public housing can be expanded, including the Energy Smart Public Housing Project.

Champion accessible housing standards.

Our housing standards are not suitable for many people with disability, older people and other diverse community needs. Only five per cent of Australian homes are fully accessible. Simple changes to the building code, such as requiring adequate door widths and step-less shower recesses, would make homes more liveable for people with different needs. The Victorian Government can help provide accessible homes by supporting the incorporation of accessibility standards in the National Construction Code.

Invest in emergency housing options.

More public and community housing is the key to addressing homelessness, but until the shortfall is plugged, more emergency and crisis accommodation is needed. Family violence services report they are increasingly being forced to accommodate vulnerable women and children escaping family violence in motels. Other people are turned away from emergency housing providers, or accommodated in rooming houses or other unsuitable options.

People who do find emergency housing are staying longer than anticipated, because there are no longer-term options available. The Victorian Government can help those in crisis by funding more flexible emergency accommodation.

Switch to a broad-based land tax.

Stamp duties encourage property speculation, dampen economic activity, fall heavily on young buyers and discourage people moving to better homes or new jobs. They also leave the Victorian Treasury hostage to the volatile housing market. We can develop a more stable, efficient and fair system by progressively replacing stamp duties with a broad-based land tax. This should occur with appropriate concessions, exemptions and deferrals.

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Simple changes to the building code, such as requiring adequate door widths and step-less shower recesses, would make homes more liveable for people with different needs.





A safe and just Victoria

A just legal system treats everyone fairly, and upholds basic human rights. It is time to reorient our justice system away from costly punitive approaches and towards prevention of crime and early resolution of legal problems.

Victoria's prison population keeps growing—it increased seven per cent in 2018 alone. The cost to the budget now exceeds \$1 billion,³¹ but all this money spent locking people up doesn't reduce crime or make communities safer. We need to change our response to legal need and offending behaviour. We need evidence-based, targeted local solutions that work.

For many people, encountering the criminal justice system does not deter them from further crime.

Instead, contact with the system causes harm and consequences disproportionate to the nature of the offence, entrenching criminality and leading to a vicious cycle that benefits no one.

By focusing on strong local communities, early resolution of problems and supporting the health and wellbeing of people returning from prison, the Government can help make Victoria safer and fairer for everyone.

Pivot to crime prevention

Reorient the focus of justice policy towards crime prevention.

Identify opportunities for diversion and restorative justice.

Preventing crimes before they occur benefits everyone. It keeps the community safer, avoids costly prison sentences and reduces the negative on-going effects of imprisonment on people's health and wellbeing.

People who commit crimes are more likely to live in poverty, be unemployed and have experienced trauma, neglect and victimisation. Addressing crime means working with high-risk communities to identify local, place-based solutions to the economic and social factors that drive people to offend.

The Victorian Government recently launched a Crime Prevention Taskforce and there is bipartisan support for including rehabilitation in the purposes of the Corrections Act.³² These first green shoots of reform provide an opportunity for a fresh approach to law and order that prioritises preventing crime.

We can do more to divert people from entering the justice system in the first place, through investing in community-based drug and alcohol, mental health, housing and education support programs. Crime prevention programs that target children and young people experiencing problems at school and at home, or who have used alcohol or drugs, can set them on a different path, away from the justice system.³³

We can also do more to address and repair the damage done when crimes are committed. Restorative justice recognises that when a

crime has been committed there's usually harm caused to people, relationships and community. Restorative justice focuses on repairing this harm.

It brings together the offender and the victims to acknowledge the harm, consider how best to repair it, and prevent similar harm in the future. This process is often transformative, creating fundamental changes for individuals, relationships and communities. More than 80 per cent of young people who participated in a Jesuit Social Services restorative justice programs in Melbourne had not reoffended two years later, compared to 57 per cent of the comparison group.³⁴

The Victorian Government has the opportunity to reframe our criminal justice system, towards evidence-based programs that work to prevent crime, tackle its causes, address harm and build connections to family, community and culture.

A safe and just Victoria

Keep kids at a safe distance from the criminal justice system

Raise the age of criminal responsibility to 14 years.

Expand programs designed to divert young people away from the criminal justice system.

Close child prisons over the long term.

Sending children to prison should only be an option of absolute last resort.

When young people get sent to prison, the root cause is commonly a major problem in their own life: trauma, abuse, illness, or trouble at home or school.³⁵ Being too quick

to imprison young people can entrench offending behaviour for life. Instead of funneling children into a punitive system, the Victorian Government should support children to thrive in the community.

Children under 14 should be in school, not prison. Yet in Victoria, children as young as 10 can be charged with crimes and sentenced to jail time. This is despite all the evidence that children aren't just mini adults. Developmentally, children are very different to adults. They do not reflect on their actions or understand long-term consequences in the same way.

The Sentencing Advisory Council estimates that if children are arrested before they are 14, they are three times more likely to continue to become involved in crime throughout their life.³⁶ By raising the age of criminal responsibility to 14 years old, and introducing more age-appropriate interventions for those young children who do offend, the Victorian Government can build stronger and safer communities.

The money allocated to a new child prison in Melbourne's west would be better spent on intensive, therapeutic community interventions. However, recent decisions to scale-down the new Cherry Creek detention facility and retain Parkville Youth Justice Centre for young women and the youngest boys is a step in the right direction.

The Government could keep the community safer by funding and expanding innovative programs that divert young people away from the prison system, from their first interaction with police through to ongoing support.

Diversion programs give young people the support they need to grow out of offending and turn their lives around. They give first-time or low-level offenders the chance to avoid a criminal conviction through activities that help them to understand the reasons they offend and encourage them to take a different path.



The Government could keep the community safer by funding and expanding innovative programs that divert young people away from the prison system, from their first interaction with police through to ongoing support.

Provide legal assistance early so problems don't escalate

Boost funding to community legal centres, and provide dependable funding for 'community-justice partnerships', so all Victorians can benefit from free, timely and accessible legal assistance.

The Victorian Government can stop people's legal issues escalating to full-blown crises by ensuring all Victorians can access free community legal assistance when they need it.

For example, if a person is facing eviction and possible homelessness, a lawyer could help them strike a new payment plan or fight an unjust eviction. Or a community lawyer could help a person facing financial stress to reduce outstanding toll fines or wipe an unfair payday loan debt.

Victoria's community legal services work primarily with people experiencing complex forms of disadvantage. Youthlaw reports that 80 per cent of the young people they help have a mental illness. Similarly, 84 per cent of the women accessing the Women's Homelessness Prevention Program have a mental illness.³⁷

So-called 'tough on crime' policies have increased demand for legal assistance, especially among groups subject to racial profiling and inequitable justice outcomes, like Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities and people of colour. Some legal centres have been forced to ration services and apply strict eligibility criteria. The Victorian Government can help people resolve their legal problems quickly, and prevent them escalating, by providing community legal centres with more funding to meet demand.

Community-justice partnerships also play a critical role, providing integrated community, health and legal support. There are opportunities to expand community-justice partnerships, including with youth services, homelessness and family violence services. However, many successful community-justice partnerships receive only seed funding or one-year contracts, making it difficult to recruit and retain quality staff, and plan for the future.

A safe and just Victoria

Stop releasing people from prison into homelessness

Make well-funded, long-term transition support available to all people leaving prison.

Allowing a person to leave prison without a place to live sets them up for failure. They are more likely to fall straight into poverty, drift into homelessness, use drugs and commit crimes.³⁸ Under this scenario people are unlikely to be able to engage with education and employment, quickly leading into a vicious cycle.

The problem arises because existing discharge planning is inadequate, and transition support programs are over-subscribed and provide assistance for only a few months.

Long-term transition support programs—which begin engaging with people inside prison and continue after they’re released—would improve people’s quality of life and prevent reoffending.

Almost all Victorian prison inmates will eventually return to the community. About one-third of people in prison have a sentence of less than two years. The Victorian Government could cut recidivism and make the community safer by guaranteeing no person will be released from prison into homelessness.

Change the way we approach fines and infringements

Make toll companies chase their own debts in the civil system.

Retain the Magistrates Court Special Circumstances List.

Expand the Work and Development Permit Scheme.

Fines and infringements are disproportionately issued to people experiencing mental illness, homelessness and family violence, and are felt most acutely by people on low incomes. They push people into a cycle of debt and criminal enforcement, and condemn whole families to a life of poverty.

Pursuing toll fees in criminal courts turns a private debt into a crime, and transfers money owed to private operators into a debt to the Victorian Government, inflated many times over by ‘additional fees’. Despite welcome action by some toll operators to introduce hardship policies, there are still too many debt cases clogging up the courts. The Victorian Government should immediately shift toll fee enforcement to the civil system.

Infringement matters that still proceed to the Magistrates Court and involve people experiencing mental illness, homelessness, family violence or addiction should continue to be dealt with by the Special Circumstances List.

The Special Circumstances List allows for cases to be heard in a therapeutic setting, by a Magistrate with understanding of the complexities of people’s lives.

For people with significant fine debt, the Work and Development Permit Scheme helps them pay off fines by participating in work, training, medical treatment or counselling. But there are more people who need the scheme than organisations who can deliver it. The Victorian Government can help more Victorians reduce their debts by better promoting the scheme and encouraging more community and medical services to become sponsors.



Atrium Program

Atrium is a partnership between several Victorian community service organisations. Based at the Melbourne Magistrates Court, it works alongside the Court Integrated Support Program to provide wrap-around housing and support options to people who are homeless and on remand but seeking bail. It is designed to provide safe and supported accommodation, break the cycle of criminal justice and homelessness and lay the foundations for fulfilling and independent living.

Reduce barriers to bail

Reform bail laws to make sure people are not being remanded due to homelessness.

Increase bail accommodation and support options.

Victoria's prison population is growing at an unprecedented rate. A key driver of this is more people in prison who are denied bail and remanded in custody.³⁹ In 2019, more than a third of people in prison were on remand, and had not been sentenced for an offence.⁴⁰ This problem is gendered: almost half of the women in Victoria's prisons are there on remand.

This reform was meant to prevent a small number of offenders from committing more crimes while on bail. But now remand is being used as a crime prevention measure.

Strict reforms to bail laws have led to some people being imprisoned simply because they don't have a secure home. For most offences, there is now a presumption against bail.

Restricting bail doesn't reduce reoffending or protect the community. When a person offends and is remanded in custody, they do not have access to rehabilitation programs and supports, and they are separated from their natural supports in the community.

Instead of locking vulnerable people up, the Victorian Government can properly resource bail programs. More bail accommodation will keep people who have not been sentenced, and who are not a risk to the community, out of prison and with their children and families.



More bail accommodation will keep people who have not been sentenced, and are not a risk to the community, out of prison and with their children and families.

**A safe and
just Victoria**

Further strategies

Improve treatment options for people in prison.

Sixty per cent of people who enter prison in Victoria report being diagnosed with a pre-existing mental health disorder.⁴¹ Prison sentences can be an opportunity to help people address their mental health and alcohol and drug problems, and participate in training and education that will help keep them out of prison in future.

Establish a spent convictions scheme.

The Victorian Government can end discrimination against people whose records of old, minor convictions are stopping them finding a job or a house or getting insurance.

Victoria is the only state in Australia without a spent conviction scheme. The Legislative Assembly Legal and Social Issues Committee has recommended a “controlled disclosure of criminal record information framework” be developed as “a matter of urgency.”⁴²

Strengthen the Charter of Human Rights.

Victoria’s Charter of Human Rights does not formally protect economic and social rights— including the rights to health, housing or education— or the right to Aboriginal self-determination. The Charter also has no avenue for people to take direct legal action when their rights are breached. The Victorian Government can strengthen the Charter to provide people with a direct right of action and protect more of the rights that impact on the lives of vulnerable Victorians.

Expand Victoria’s drug courts.

The Victorian Drug Court and the Family Drug Treatment Court reduce reoffending and promote family reunification.⁴³ The Victorian Government can help keep people out of prison by expanding the Drug Court model across the state, including to rural and regional areas.

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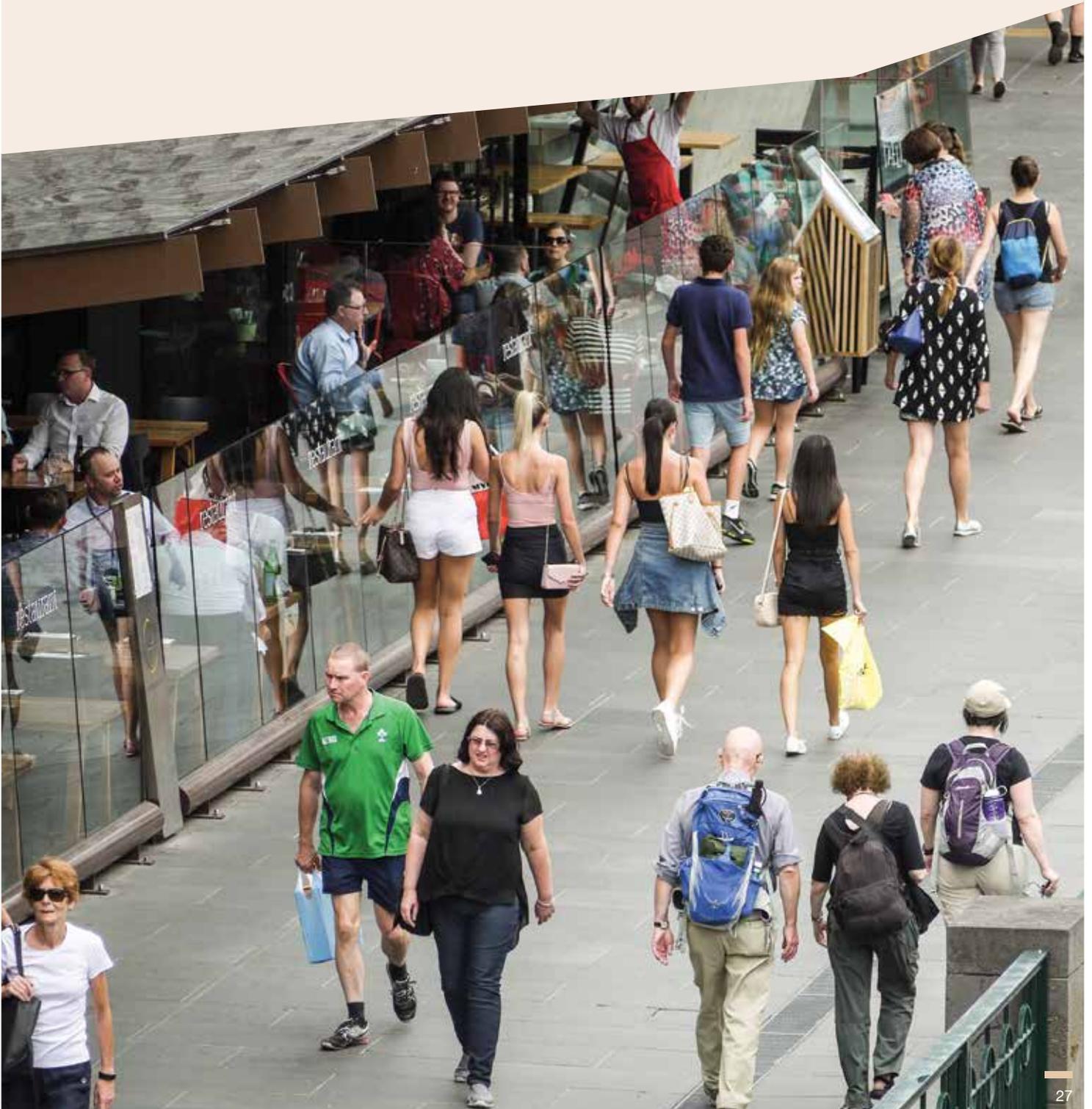
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The Victorian Government can strengthen the Charter of Human Rights to provide people with a direct right of action and protect more of the rights that impact on the lives of vulnerable Victorians.





Affordable living

Victorians living on low incomes face growing housing, energy and school costs.

With wafer-thin financial buffers and little capacity to cope with unplanned expenses, even small unexpected costs like a school excursion can tip the balance from managing to not managing. Many every-day costs are higher for low-income households,

who cannot afford to buy in bulk or purchase monthly or annual travel passes.⁴⁴

Being unable to afford the basics puts people's health and wellbeing at risk. Turning off the heating to save on electricity bills can make people sick or exacerbate existing conditions. Avoiding visiting the doctor or filling a prescription because out-of-pocket costs are too high can lead to worsening illness, and eventually health crisis.

The Victorian Government is helping ease costs of living by reforming the energy market to make it cheaper and easier to get a good deal. But more can be done to invest in energy efficiency for low-income households and provide financial counselling and emergency relief to people when they find themselves struggling to stay afloat.

Help low-income Victorians access clean and affordable energy

Reduce the cap to target solar subsidies to Victorians in need.

Deliver targeted engagement to low-income households to encourage take-up of Solar for Renters.

Access to affordable energy is non-negotiable if people are to lead a healthy and comfortable life. Ensuring this power is also generated cleanly and sustainably is critical as Victoria deals with climate change.

But despite the runaway popularity of rooftop solar, fuelled by government subsidies, rooftop solar remains out of reach for roughly 30 per cent of Australians. This includes people who rent or are on low incomes.⁴⁵

People without the money to pay for rooftop solar upfront are at risk of being locked out of the clean energy future, and instead trapped on an increasingly expensive energy grid. With 7.3 per cent of Victorian households (180,000 households) persistently struggling to pay their energy bills,⁴⁶ we could see big benefits on bills from supporting more people to shift to rooftop solar.

A portion of Solar Homes subsidies should be allocated to low-income households and those experiencing energy hardship. This can be achieved through reducing the household income cap for eligibility so that the subsidies reach the people most in need. It also means targeting low-income households to engage in the Solar Homes program and be part of the clean energy transition.

Affordable living

Help people with health conditions heat and cool their homes affordably

Introduce an ‘Energy for Health’ concession.

A wide range of health conditions can increase a person’s energy consumption and drive up their power bills.

For example, daily charging of an electric scooter increases power use, a person with respiratory illness might need to keep their house warmer than usual, and people recovering from illness or injury, or who live with chronic illness or disability, might also spend a lot of time at home and therefore consume more energy on a daily basis.

But Victoria’s existing Medical Cooling Concession is narrowly defined, and only available to people who have a medical condition that stops them maintaining their body temperature.

The Victorian Government can help people with a health condition or disability afford their energy bills by introducing a broader ‘Energy for Health’ concession.

This more generous concession would apply to people with conditions that:

1. are exacerbated by temperature changes
2. affect body temperature maintenance
3. create intensive washing, cleaning or personal care needs
4. require charging or using communication, medical and mobile devices
5. require lengthy periods of time at home.

Ursula’s story

Ursula experienced a series of financial shocks after becoming a single parent—higher interest rates, reductions in child support, lack of stable employment for a sole parent with a frequently unwell child—leaving her with significant debt.

Because of permanent heart damage, Ursula is cold-intolerant and needs to use electric heating regularly. A recent neck injury compromised her capacity to work and complete her studies, and involved high out-of-pocket medical costs.

Ursula required full-time care from a family member. Energy use was higher during this period.

“I was home. I couldn’t do anything. I was on the couch, so the heater was on a lot. I don’t watch TV very much but people that took care of me would watch it. My son and I have been home on weekend when we’re not normally... he has a TV and iPad, so he runs them a lot since I’ve been sick, he’s bored.”

When people ask Ursula how she managed, she says, “you just go without sometimes.”

An ‘Energy for Health’ concession would help people like Ursula manage during periods of injury or illness, and stay warm and healthy.⁴⁷



Deliver Healthy Homes for low-income Victorians

Mandate meaningful energy efficiency standards for rental properties.

Expand home-energy efficiency schemes for home upgrades.

Poorly insulated homes filled with power-hungry major appliances are driving up people's electricity bills. Damp, cold homes or excessively hot homes are also causing illness and stress, especially for older people and young children.⁴⁸

In extreme cases, an unhealthy home can kill you. In mid-2019 an Alfred Hospital study revealed a high number of Victorians were becoming hypothermic in their own homes.⁴⁹ Some of these people died. More than half of those who were taken to hospital with hypothermia lived alone with few social supports. Almost three-quarters were on the pension.

With so few homes affordable for low income earners,⁵⁰ many people have little choice but to accept poor quality housing.

The Victorian Government can help improve the lives of renters by mandating meaningful energy efficiency standards for rental properties. A staggering 36 per cent of Victorian renters struggle to keep their homes cool in summer or warm in winter—well above the national average of 28 per cent.⁵¹

Setting standards initially at a low and achievable level, communicating obligations effectively while giving landlords plenty of notice and access to affordable finance will ensure tenants are protected and landlords can comfortably absorb any costs.

In addition, the Victorian Government can help low-income households be more energy efficient and slash bills by investing in home energy-efficiency measures and subsidies for upgrades.

Existing schemes like the Energy Savvy Upgrades program for home owners can be extended to allow people to fund insulation, heating, cooling, window coverings or draught sealing. Targeting subsidies at people on low incomes and/or with a health condition will mean healthy homes for the Victorians who need it most.

Affordable living



Most people who seek emergency relief need support to pay their electricity bill, buy food, clothe their kids, make a mortgage repayment or pay the rent. Organisations are also seeing a spike in requests for help with education costs, like uniforms, books and excursions.



Strengthen local transport options for country communities

Increase funding to community transport and the Flexible Local Transport Solutions program.

Poor access to public transport makes it harder for people to get where they need to go—to school, work or doctors appointments, or to connect with friends and family.

People living in rural and regional communities feel this most acutely. They typically travel longer distances and have fewer transport options. Rural and regional communities also have higher rates of poverty and more older people, who are often most reliant on public transport.

Infrequent public transport with sparse coverage can contribute to higher rates of unemployment and poorer health outcomes.⁵²

But a comprehensive community transport system, responsive to local needs, can help people get where they need to be. This means providing transport for people who cannot afford to travel to or around regional centres, and funding organisations to provide outreach or permanent transport services in areas with entrenched transport disadvantage.

The existing Flexible Local Transport Solutions program, which funds small-scale initiatives to improve transport options across regional Victoria, is a good model.

Victoria should expand its investment in this program to make it easier for all Victorians to move around their local communities and get where they need to go.

Provide relief to people in financial crisis

Join other jurisdictions in formally funding emergency relief organisations.

Stagnant wages, growing under-employment, rising household costs and the hideously low rate of Newstart are driving people into financial crisis.

Emergency relief organisations play a critical role in preventing these people from spiralling into homelessness or other dire situations.

Most people who seek emergency relief need support to pay their electricity bill, buy food, clothe their kids, make a mortgage repayment or pay the rent. Organisations are also seeing a spike in requests for help with education costs, like uniforms, books and excursions.

Emergency relief organisations are often the first point of contact for people with complex needs, referring people to more intensive support such as financial counselling, mental health services or alcohol and other drugs support.

But emergency relief providers need some help themselves.

Victoria is one of the few states and territories that doesn't fund emergency relief organisations, and philanthropic donations are drying up in Victoria.

The Victorian Government can help people facing financial crisis by investing in flexible emergency relief funding to meet growing demand.

A helping hand

Of all people seeking emergency relief support:



63 per cent

COULD NOT AFFORD MONEY FOR THEIR CHILDREN TO PARTICIPATE IN SCHOOL ACTIVITIES



55 per cent

COULD NOT AFFORD UP-TO-DATE SCHOOL BOOKS AND CLOTHES FOR THEIR CHILDREN



61 per cent

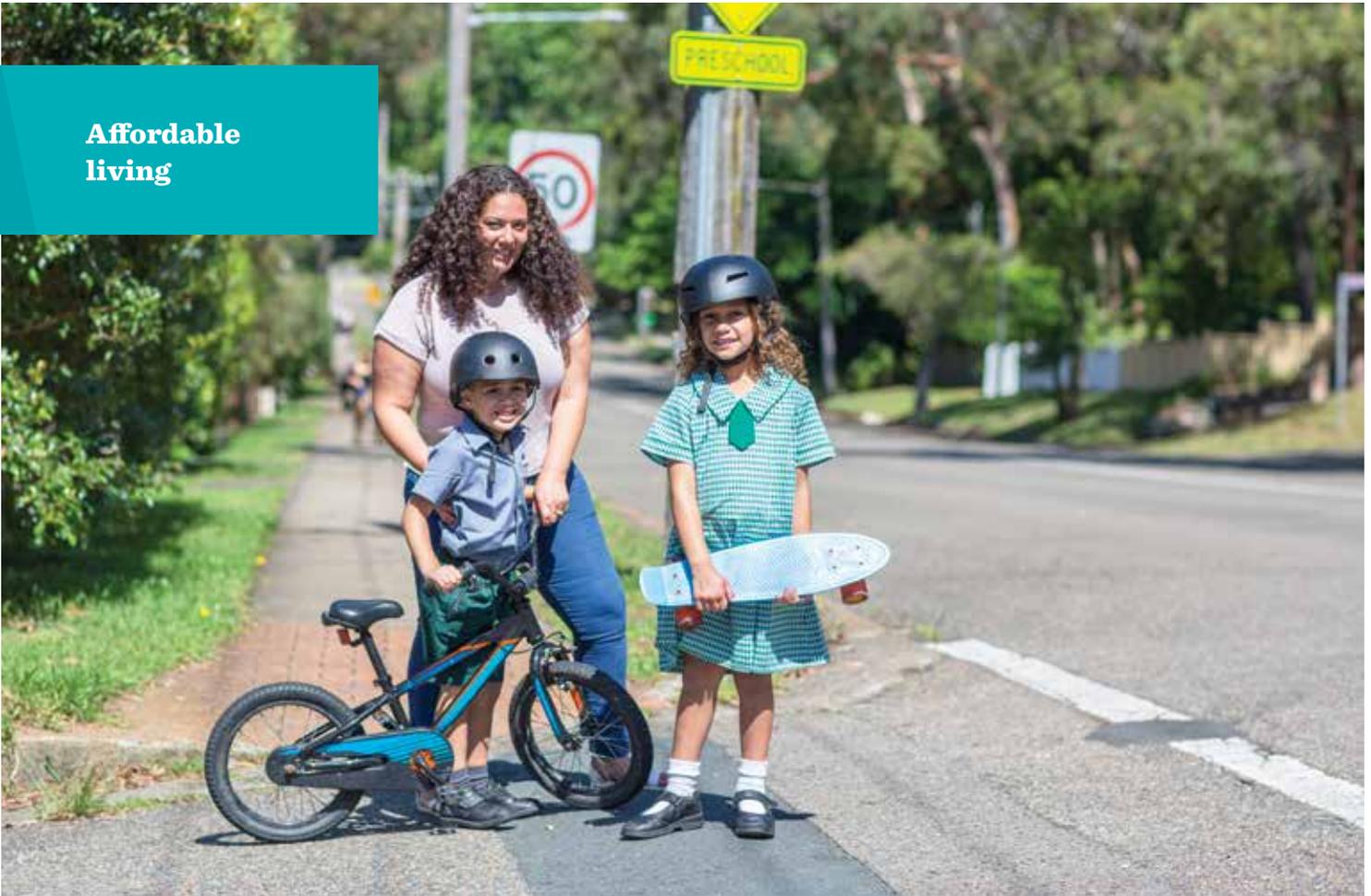
COULD NOT AFFORD A COMPUTER, LAPTOP OR TABLET



48 per cent

COULD NOT AFFORD AN INTERNET CONNECTION AT HOME⁵³

Affordable living



Free public transport for kids who need it most

Provide free public transport to every school-aged child whose family has a healthcare card.

Families with school-aged children continue to face increasing costs to send their kids to the local school, with research suggesting that families are paying up to \$3,489 per year.⁵⁴

The WEStJustice School Myki Pilot Project found that, for kids facing disadvantage, the cost of getting to and from school can become a major barrier to attendance.

Kids who can't afford to get to school either do not attend school or can accrue public transport fines. It compromises their learning, engagement, mental health and connection to education.⁵⁵

If we are to give every child the best opportunity to reach their potential, access to and participation in education is critical. Strong attachment to education promotes good mental health in young people, supporting their emotional and social skills development and promoting a sense of belonging to their school community.⁵⁶ This can help to reduce the 10,000 Victorian students that drop out of education and training each year.

Providing a free public transport pass to every school-aged child whose parent or guardian has a health care card would save families between \$307 and \$594 per year. It would reduce the cost of living for low-income families and support the attendance of children and young people at school.

More financial counsellors in places of need

Fund 20 new financial counsellors in areas of high demand.

Support programs that place financial counsellors in existing specialist support services.

Make the Diploma of Financial Counselling a 'Free TAFE' course.

Financial wellbeing is one of the fundamentals in life, like stable housing and good health. But stagnant wages, low and inaccessible income support, a growing reliance on credit and predatory practices from some companies mean Victorians are facing more financial risk and hardship. This in turn can have a severe negative impact on people's physical and mental health and wellbeing.

Financial counsellors provide expert support and advocacy and help people improve their financial situation. But a shortage of

financial counsellors means many Victorians experiencing hardship cannot access this support.

Integrated care models incorporating financial counselling, such as those explored in Financial and Consumer Rights Council's Dignity and Debt project, are highly effective at addressing the complex needs of people in financial difficulty.⁵⁷ But these models rely on the role of financial counselling being understood more broadly in the social services sector, and incorporated into a broader range of service, support and care models.

While the future of federal funding is unclear, the Victorian Government can step in now to reduce wait times for financial counselling and ensure people can get holistic support. This means funding at least 20 new financial counsellors in 2020/21 in the areas most in need. It also means boosting the sector in the longer term, by adding the Diploma of Financial Counselling to the free TAFE course list, and funding integrated service models and new pathways for financial counsellors in other services.

Get kids involved in sports and recreation

Introduce a sport and recreation subsidy scheme.

Students shouldn't miss out on the benefits of sports and recreational activities because their families can't afford to pay.

Children who come from low-income families, live in a remote or regional area, or have a parent who speaks a language other than English at home are less likely to participate in organised physical activities outside school.⁵⁹ Extracurricular activities are an important part of supporting students to feel socially included, build resilience and develop latent talent. These programs also get kids active while increasing social and developmental skills.⁶⁰

The Victorian Government can make sure disadvantaged kids don't miss out on activities like sport, drama, art and music by subsidising their participation.

Victoria is the only Australian state without a subsidy scheme to help families experiencing disadvantage pay for sports and recreational activities outside school.

In NSW, over half the eligible children in the state registered for more than 671,000 vouchers in the first year.⁶¹ The scheme has been particularly popular with children from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds, students with disability, Aboriginal children, and those living in regional and remote communities.⁶²

Mortgage Wellbeing Service

The Mortgage Wellbeing Service is an integrated social, legal and health wellbeing program that provides financial counselling, social work and legal assistance to people experiencing mortgage stress. Assistance incorporates:

- financial counselling information and support, including communication with lenders and ombudsman services
- social work information, casework and referrals where appropriate
- legal information, advice and casework including negotiation with lenders, ombudsman services and regulators, and representation at court where appropriate.

Over 90 per cent of clients who utilise the service report having more control over their finances and choice to stay in their homes.⁵⁸

Affordable living

Further strategies

Ensure the energy fairness reforms are backed by a strong regulator.

The Victorian Government is making it easier to get a good deal on energy, with the new Victorian Default Offer on electricity prices already saving an estimated 130,000 households \$310 to \$450 per year.⁶³ Additional reforms in the works—such as clearer marketing, fairer contracts and ensuring people on concession cards get the best deal—need to be backed by an Essential Services Commission which is funded and empowered to monitor energy retailers and make sure they stick to the rules.

Reduce digital exclusion.

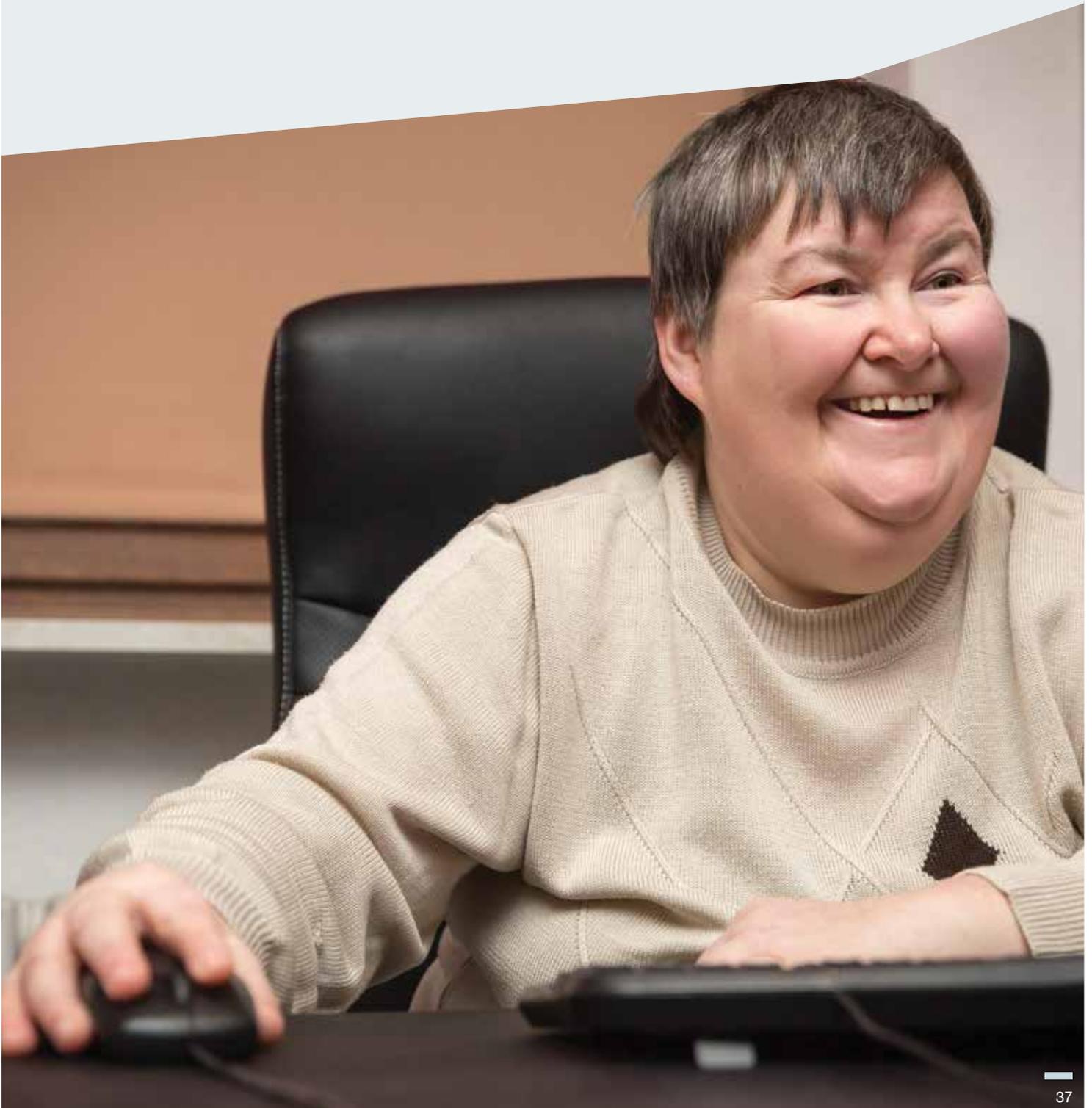
Despite the ongoing rollout of the NBN, the digital divide remains deep. The number of people who don't use the internet has remained constant over the last decade. Unsurprisingly, people on lower incomes and older people are substantially less likely than other Victorians to have internet access at home.⁶⁴

Improving digital inclusion helps people connect to healthcare and services, manage money, get a job, and access information, entertainment and online communities. The Victorian Government can help close the digital divide by expanding public access Wi-Fi and connecting low-income households through low-cost plans and access to affordable devices.

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Improving digital inclusion helps people connect to healthcare and services, manage money, get a job, and access information, entertainment and online communities.



Victorians in work

Being able to get a good job with decent pay and conditions provides people with stable income and meaningful engagement.

Victoria is the jobs engine room of Australia, creating hundreds of thousands of jobs in recent years. The community sector is one of the biggest drivers of this jobs growth.

But unemployment numbers remain stubbornly stagnant, and youth unemployment is at a record high. We need to provide better support to disadvantaged learners and job-seekers, creating pathways and placements with trusted employers and growing industries.

Embrace and promote community services as the real ‘engine room’ of the Victorian economy

Recognise community services as a ‘priority industry’.

Launch an awareness and recruitment campaign.

Develop a regional workforce strategy.

Community services is Victoria’s fastest-growing industry. Over the next five years, the health and social assistance industry—in which community services are embedded—will add about 70,000 new jobs to the Victorian economy.⁶⁵

Exponential employment growth is expected to continue with the full rollout of the NDIS, the increasing needs of an ageing and growing population, and the Government’s ongoing responses to Royal Commissions into family violence, mental health, aged care and disability.

The Victorian Government can support and facilitate the industry’s growth by recognising it as a ‘priority industry’ and launching a public awareness campaign about the career opportunities that exist. Targeted promotion could occur in schools, VET providers and universities to increase workforce supply, including in regional areas.

As workforce shortages are particularly acute in regional and rural areas, the Victorian Government should develop and enact a specific regional workforce strategy for the community services industry.



Reaching school students

The Careers in Community Services and Health Program, run by the Geelong Region Local Learning and Employment Networks, raises awareness of the community services and health industry among school-aged young people. It aims to get more young people in the Geelong region interested in working in community services and health, including those who may experience social or educational exclusion. The program promotes pathways into further education, training or employment in the industry through VET in Schools or School-based Traineeships.

Victorians in work

Remove barriers to skills development

Scale up investment in initiatives that assist employers to increase student placements.

Provide tailored support to vocational education students at risk of disengagement.

Maintain 'Free TAFE'.

Subsidise the hidden costs of 'Free TAFE' for students doing it tough.

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.

For the community services industry, Free TAFE is a welcome strategy to help grow the workforce and deliver on the promise of NDIS reform, family violence reform, aged care reform and mental health reform.

Free TAFE is helping low-income and disadvantaged job-seekers attain qualifications and change careers.

But disadvantaged students find it more difficult than others to finish their studies, with many dropping out before they gain a qualification.⁶⁶ The costs of textbooks, childcare, transport, and digital devices can all make it more difficult for these students.

The Victorian Government can help struggling learners by providing bursaries and scholarships to cover hidden costs.

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

Fund proven measures to combat youth homelessness and unemployment

Build more Youth Foyers to facilitate education and employment pathways for young people.

Too many young Victorians are facing unemployment and homelessness.

Youth Foyers provide integrated learning and housing support for young people without a home or teetering on the edge of homelessness. They are a proven way to help a young person gain a qualification, find a job and shift into more secure housing.

Young people who complete these programs are more likely to continue with education,⁶⁷ be more confident about their future and be more employable.

Victoria is currently experiencing high rates of youth homelessness and youth unemployment. The State Government can provide funding to create additional youth foyers, as part of a multi-faceted strategy to creating pathways to sustainable employment for disadvantaged jobseekers.

Foyers are proven to work

In Australia, there are 15 foyer or foyer-like services. In Victoria, the most recent iteration of the model are Education First youth foyers.

This model, run by the Brotherhood of St Laurence and Launch Housing with funding from the Victorian Government, operates at three sites in Victoria.

Education First youth foyers prioritise education through their partnership with and location on sites of tertiary education institutions, the co-delivered Certificate I in Developing Independence, and the reciprocal 'Deal' agreement between participants and staff, in which young people agree to participate in education and five other Education First youth foyer service 'offers': employment, housing and living skills, health and wellbeing, social connections and civic participation. In return, foyer staff agree to provide participants with accommodation, opportunities and inclusion in a learning community for up to two years.

A recently-published longitudinal study into Education First youth foyers found participants made strong gains in education qualifications and continued participation in education and training after exit.⁶⁸ They had improved confidence in career management capability and transferable employability skills.⁶⁹



Help disadvantaged job-seekers into work

Continue funding for Jobs Victoria Employment Network.

The Jobs Victoria Employment Network (JVEN) has helped more than 9,700 highly disadvantaged job-seekers into work, by providing holistic, non-punitive, ‘positive help’.

Jobs Victoria supports are tailored and scaled to people’s needs and interests, and aligned with industries where workers are needed. Experts help prepare job-seekers for work, by helping them set career and training goals, updating resumes, conducting mock interviews and facilitating work experience.

It helps groups who are not well serviced by the Commonwealth system, including refugees, older people, long-term unemployed people, people with disability, public housing tenants and Aboriginal Victorians.

The Victorian Government can help more disadvantaged job-seekers into work by providing Jobs Victoria with long-term funding and building in more flexibility to encourage programs to adapt and tailor to community need.

Anab’s journey to employment

Anab came to Australia seven years ago from Somalia. She arrived with no English and prioritised enrolling in English classes. Whilst studying, Anab had a series of short-term warehousing jobs. Before enrolling in the #WorkNOW program, she had been out of work for 18 months.

As a result of enrolling in the #WorkNOW program, Anab secured a one day a week job as a dry cleaner at an aged care service, whilst studying a Certificate III in Childcare. Anab really values the support that she gets from her consultant. “If I have a problem at work I know she will help me,” says Anab. “She calls me to see how I’m going.” Without the support of the program, Anab doesn’t think she would have a job.

The JVEN #WorkNOW program is delivered by Wingate Avenue Community Centre in partnership with Kensington Neighbourhood House and the Maribyrnong & Moonee Valley LLEN.

Victorians in work

Further strategies

Abolish the ‘two-course rule’ for VET studies.

Victoria currently prohibits people from starting two government-funded vocational educational courses in a calendar year, or two courses of a similar level at any point in their lifetime.

This ‘two-course rule’ makes it harder for people to retrain for new industries, including the booming community services industry, and for Victoria to address skill shortages in a changing job landscape. It particularly stymies high-needs learners in selecting their best training option.

Abolishing the two-course rule would aid skills development and retraining, especially for disadvantaged learners.

Support social procurement.

The Victorian Government can use its buying power to create jobs for disadvantaged workers. The current Social Procurement Framework is a great start, and can be expanded to encourage employment of long-term unemployed people, people with disability, carers and single parents, and other disadvantaged workers, and to support smaller social enterprises.

Support local communities to develop place-based solutions to unemployment.

With the right support, local communities can develop and drive their own innovative community solutions to poverty and disadvantage, including unemployment.

There are many things the Victorian Government can do to help develop place-based approaches across the state, including funding approaches through a social innovation fund, supporting local initiatives with social procurement and workforce training, and sharing data.

This includes targeted strategies and associated investment in locations where jobs are scarce (for example, areas directly impacted by industry restructures).

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67 M Coddou, J Borlagdan and S Mallett, *Starting a future that means something to you: outcomes from a longitudinal study of Education First Youth Foyers*, Brotherhood of St Laurence and Launch Housing, 2019.

68 Coddou, *Ibid*, p 6

69 Coddou, *Ibid*, p 6



The Victorian Government can help more disadvantaged job-seekers into work by providing Jobs Victoria with long-term funding and building in more flexibility to encourage programs to adapt and tailor to community need.





A strong community services industry

Comprised of thousands of organisations spread across the state, the community services industry is diverse, resilient and adaptable.

It is also one of the biggest and fastest-growing employers and workforces in the state. Many more workers will be needed in coming years to meet the demands of an ageing population.

The community services industry is vital to enabling and delivering many of the Victorian Government's landmark social policy reforms.

But community service organisations' capacity to undertake this work, their sustainability and ability to recruit skilled workers are threatened by short-term funding contracts and the shrinking real value of funding. Getting underlying conditions right can make all the difference in allowing community services organisations to get on with the job.

Stop the stealth funding cuts to community service organisations

[Peg community service funding to inflation and minimum wage decisions.](#)

Government funding of community service organisations has slipped behind the true cost of supporting people. Many organisations now lack adequate funding to sustainably deliver services and plan for the future.

Underfunding community services is short-sighted; it doesn't save money in the long run. Only financially healthy organisations can attract high quality staff, develop new programs, build strong partnerships and deliver critical services to the community.

When funding doesn't meet the costs of service delivery, workers are denied pay rises or, worse, laid off. Organisations can't compete with for-profit organisations for highly skilled staff, and this impacts the delivery of services.

Government funding for social service organisations has stayed at two per cent per annum over the past six years. Yet, Fair Work Australia recently raised the minimum wage by three per cent, and other costs including administrative and governance expenses continue to rise.

A fair indexation formula incorporating wage rises, the superannuation guarantee, portable long service leave and the different costs of delivering services in rural and remote areas is desperately needed to guarantee community service organisations are sustainable and effective into the future.

A strong community services industry

End the damaging funding ‘drip-feed’

Extend funding contracts to seven years.

Managing short-term funding allocations, time-limited project grants and last-minute funding extensions is one of the biggest challenges facing the community services sector.

The increasingly fragmented, bitsy and unpredictable nature of funding decisions over recent years is limiting the ability of community service organisations to deliver quality services and retain skilled staff.

Funding bodies use a standard service agreement lasting four years, supplemented by many short-term contracts. These short-term arrangements often roll over repeatedly. This increases uncertainty for community service organisations and their staff, who must constantly reapply for funding, diverting time and energy from the work of delivering services. It also means employees operate on short-term contracts, leading to high staff turnover and disrupting relationships with service users.

No organisation can operate to its full potential with a series of funding cliffs always looming on the horizon.

The Productivity Commission recommends community service contracts be extended to seven years. The Victorian Government should adopt this as the new standard for community sector funding.

Strengthen Aboriginal community organisations to play a larger role in service delivery

Assist with the development of a Victorian Aboriginal Compact.

Increase funding to Aboriginal Community Controlled Organisations.

Aboriginal services—commonly known as ACCOs—are owned, controlled and embedded in their communities. They understand Aboriginal concepts of wellbeing and cultural safety.

The ACCO sector and the broader community services industry have committed to developing a Compact, articulating a shared vision for Aboriginal self-determination, and the role mainstream organisations must play. (This was a priority action in the 10-year Community Services Industry Plan Rolling Implementation Plan 2019–20.)

The Compact could include planning for the transition of more oversight, governance and service delivery to ACCOs.

Extra funding will be needed to address this imbalance, allowing ACCOs to build the capacity to accept new work and partner meaningfully with mainstream organisations. For example, it is estimated that about 3,000 Aboriginal people in Victoria are in need of community mental health support services. ACCOs are unable to meet this demand and as a result Aboriginal people have no choice but to access mainstream services.⁷⁰

Deliver the Community Services Industry Plan

Continue funding initiatives in the Community Services Rolling Implementation Plan.

Victoria’s community services industry is experiencing dramatic change.

A growing workforce, skills shortages and the impact of major policy reforms (stemming from the implementation of the NDIS and Royal Commissions into Family Violence and Mental Health) present numerous challenges.

The 10-year Community Services Industry Plan, and the subsequent Rolling Implementation Plan, were jointly developed by the Victorian Government and the community sector, setting a roadmap to address these challenges.

Many of the actions listed in this Plan have no funding attached. Extra resourcing is necessary to ensure the Plan can be delivered in full.



Develop a coordinated minimum data set for the community services industry

Set minimum data collection requirements for community organisations.

Fund IT upgrades and training so organisations can meet the new requirements.

Meeting the growing demand for community services requires a highly skilled workforce that reflects the diversity and experiences of the community it supports. Creating this workforce requires careful planning about the kinds of skills and workers needed.

But right now, we don't know enough about the community services workforce—the people it's comprised of, their skills and qualifications, their experiences

in the sector, and why and when they leave. The community services industry lacks a coordinated approach to workforce data collection.

Existing data collection is piecemeal and inconsistent. It doesn't capture everyone, and can't track workers who move between organisations and across different sub-sectors. This hampers organisational and industry planning.

A more comprehensive approach is needed. We need long-term and consistent data across the entire community services industry. The data can be used to track change over time, qualifications and skills gaps, demographic characteristics and for workforce planning and development in local communities. The Victorian Government can improve workforce planning by following the UK's lead⁷¹ and establishing minimum data collection requirements for the community services industry.



The community services industry lacks a coordinated approach to workforce data collection.

Back community organisations in the face of climate change

Commit resources to develop a community services framework for emergencies and climate change.

The community services industry is bracing itself for the full ravages of climate change.

A 2019 VCOSS analysis revealed more than 43 per cent of organisations were affected by extreme weather or a disaster in the past 12 months.⁷²

However, just over 10 per cent have developed a climate change risk assessment or plan.⁷³

The Victorian Government is already required to engage with the health and human services sector in climate change adaptation and building disaster resilience.⁷⁴ The Government has also committed to developing the ability of community service organisations to prepare for, respond to and recover from emergencies (for themselves and the people they serve).⁷⁵

To turn these commitments into meaningful action, the Government must develop a community services framework for emergencies and climate change that will build the resilience of community organisations, their clients and their communities.

A strong community services industry

Further strategies

Provide volunteers and volunteering support organisations with professional development.

Every day, people across our society tirelessly contribute their time and skills to support their fellow Victorians. Volunteers deliver services to vulnerable Victorians, help communities recover from emergencies, engage people in sporting and community life, and govern community service organisations. But volunteering is not free. It requires recruitment, screening, risk management, supervision, training and compliance with government obligations. The enormous contributions volunteers make benefit the community in many ways, but they require funding and resources.

The Victorian Government can help support volunteers and the volunteering sector by providing professional development in volunteer management and establishing a resource platform for volunteering support organisations.

Build community service capacity to support workplace placements.

Cash-strapped and understaffed community service organisations are struggling to accommodate increased demand for student placements as a result of Free TAFE, particularly in regional areas. This is not due to lack of industry support for Free TAFE. Rather, it's an issue of sector capacity.

In the healthcare system, the benefits of clinical placements have long been recognised, and an agreed funding model has been developed to help clinical services, educational providers and students meet the costs.

The Victorian Government can further encourage placements by providing the community services industry with funding to support them, extending and scaling-up industry projects like the Enhanced Pathways to Family Violence Work project, and investing in the development of tools, orientation guidelines and staff development.

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- 71 Skills for Care, *Adult social care workforce data*, <https://www.skillsforcare.org.uk/adult-social-care-workforce-data/adult-social-care-workforce-data.aspx>, accessed 28 October 2019
- 72 VCOSS, *Resilience of community sector organisations*, 2019 (Survey not yet released)
- 73 VCOSS, *ibid*
- 74 *Climate Change Act 2017* (Vic)
- 75 The Department of Health and Human Services Victoria, VCOSS, *10 year community services industry plan*, 2018



The community services industry is vital to enabling and delivering many of the Victorian Government's landmark social policy reforms. Getting underlying conditions right can make all the difference in allowing community services organisations to get on with the job.





Stronger early childhood education and schools

High quality education beginning from the early years can lift people out of disadvantage, enabling children and young people to succeed.

Every Victorian child should have the opportunity of a good education, regardless of their families' personal or financial circumstances.

Education is one of the best frameworks for a good life and should be funded accordingly, so no Victorian child misses out.

Support the successful rollout of three-year-old kinder

Build the workforce and infrastructure critical to three-year-old kinder.

Encourage enrollment of kids from disadvantaged communities.

The Victorian Government is leading the nation with a commitment to universal three-year-old preschool. Now the Government needs to invest in the workforce, providers and facilities to successfully deliver this significant program.

6,000 new early childhood teachers and educators will be needed to support the roll-out of three-year-old kinder.⁷⁶

In addition, preschools are yet to receive extra funding to adjust to a suite of regulatory changes introduced over the past decade—including positive developments like lower child-to-teacher ratios.

Two-thirds of community kindergartens say they will need a funding boost to continue providing standard services over the next two years.⁷⁷

Increasing the base funding for services to keep up with growing costs is vital so providers can stay afloat and continue to invest in critical staff training and development.

To ensure three-year-old kinder delivers benefit where it is needed most, parents from vulnerable and disadvantaged communities must be informed about the rollout and their children supported to attend.

Stronger early childhood education and schools

Make public education genuinely affordable for everybody

Fully fund public schools to cover the costs of the standard curriculum.

Fund emergency relief services to meet demand for assistance with school costs.

Victorian schools are not currently funded to deliver free, high quality education to all students. Instead, families are required to make significant contributions through fees, hidden co-payments or compulsory fundraising.

The out-of-pocket cost for a child attending state primary school in Melbourne in 2019 is \$3,841, including \$328 for uniforms and \$825 for devices. For a child attending secondary school, the out-of-pocket cost is \$5,368.⁷⁸

When families can't afford these costs, children often end up excluded from school activities and curriculum, putting them at risk of disengagement, bullying and poor learning outcomes. Extracurricular activities bolster school attendance, increase student engagement and improve academic outcomes—but these activities are often the first costs that have to be abandoned when families are struggling.

The Victorian Government can prevent children being excluded from a full and effective school experience, by fully funding schools to deliver the standard curriculum. Victoria currently spends less per student in government school than any other state in Australia.⁷⁹

The Victorian Government has recently announced four years funding for the Camps, Sport and Excursions Fund, and State Schools Relief to provide school uniforms, shoes and glasses. Because when parents can't afford out-of-pocket costs, community service organisations help them out. But emergency relief services are being overwhelmed by requests for assistance with school costs, especially at the start of the school year. State Schools Relief received more than 56,000 applications for assistance in 2018.



Help students stay engaged in school

Significantly boost funding to programs that tackle school disengagement.

Relax the eligibility for these programs so students can get support earlier.

Students who disengage from school are more likely to face mental health challenges, experience long-term unemployment and come in contact with the police.⁸⁰

It follows that supporting students to stay engaged or re-engage in school is one of the best tools we have to help young people reach their potential and to combat poverty and disadvantage in our community.

Fawzia's story

I'm a single mum with two kids. I came to Australia from Somalia. I was on Newstart for a time, but now have a part-time job. Even with my job, I need help to cover school costs. Our local high school wanted to charge me \$1,300 for camps, excursions and some other items. I couldn't afford it. My local relief agency could only offer me \$475 to put towards it.

Based on the real experiences of a woman who sought help from a CISVic member organisation in Hampton East. Names have been changed.



Exclusion and abuse continues

In 2019, Children and Young People with Disability Australia surveyed more than 500 young people with disability, their families and caregivers.⁸⁵ Results showed students with disability are routinely excluded in their education, with many being segregated from 'mainstream' schools and classrooms, not attending school full-time, refused enrollment and excluded from school activities. Suspensions and expulsions are familiar practices.

While the majority of students receive some specific support at school because of their disability or learning difference, there are many families who are out-of-pocket for supports and equipment to enable the student to participate in education.

Students with disability experience unacceptably high levels of abuse and violence at school, including bullying and restrictive practices such as restraint, seclusion or both.

The sooner struggling students receive comprehensive and tailored support, including to address issues they might be having at home or elsewhere, the greater the chance of turning things around. Peer support groups for young people and their parents, tailored tutoring, and outreach programs can be the difference between a young person staying in school or dropping out.

Currently, these programs are oversubscribed, particular in country areas, and hard to access. For example, the Navigator program only supports young people aged between 12 and 17 who are missing more than 70 per cent of their classes. Eligibility criteria should be loosened to include children as young as 10 who have missed more than 50 per cent of their classes. This would help children who struggle with the transition from primary to secondary school and put in place supports at an earlier stage of disengagement.

Support the learning needs of children with disability

Roll out a new Program for Students with Disabilities (PSD) funding model, based on experiences of 100 trial sites.

Eliminate seclusion and restraint in Victorian schools.

All students with disabilities should be afforded the same opportunities as other young people to access a high-quality and enriching education.

The Program for Students with Disabilities (PSD) currently supports roughly four per cent of the student population, but about 15 per cent of Victorian government school students are estimated to have disabilities and require reasonable adjustments for their learning.⁸¹

The Victorian Government has begun the process to modernise and improve the PSD, reviewing the program in 2016 and piloting a new functional needs assessment in more than 100 schools in 2018.⁸²

Victoria must maintain the momentum of this critical reform by urgently developing a new PSD funding model, based on the findings and recommendations from the 100 trial sites, and rolling it out to every school.

Students with disability continue to report experiencing seclusion and restraint in Victorian schools. In 2017, 22 per cent of students with disability in Victoria reported experiencing restraint in the last 12 months and 27 per cent reported experiencing seclusion.⁸³ Seclusion and restraint can cause significant harm and trauma, and should be eliminated, except as an absolute last resort.

VCOSS supports the Victorian Equal Opportunity and Human Rights Commission's call for the creation and enforcement of new laws formally banning restraints and seclusion in schools, paired with independent oversight and strict enforcement of reporting requirements.⁸⁴

Stronger early childhood education and schools

Further strategies

Recast schools as ‘community hubs’.

Schools are already places where community members come together and engage with each other. Victoria can capitalise on this and reduce barriers to accessing services by investing in schools as ‘community hubs’.

Partnering with community organisations and local government to deliver services on school sites can help schools more holistically engage with children and their families. Schools as community hubs can provide easier service pathways and physical access, a non-stigmatising environment, and extra support for vulnerable families.

Making schools into community hubs helps promote a sense of belonging, greater connections with families, increased safety and stronger relationships with staff. Community hubs need to build on existing community networks (formal and informal), infrastructure and partnership platforms. They must reflect the different needs, priorities and supports of different communities.

Recognise playgroup as a vital component of early childhood learning and care.

Engaging in unstructured play enables young children to develop social, emotional and physical skills. Playgroups provide a fun learning environment for babies and young children, foster attachment with caregivers, build parenting skills, reduce social isolation and provide peer support, connection and a sense of place for parents and caregivers.⁸⁷

Playgroups are an important part of the early childhood continuum of care, particularly in their connections with maternal and child health services, and the formal education system. Attending a playgroup can halve the chance of a child being developmentally vulnerable by the time they start school.⁸⁸

Children from disadvantaged families benefit most from attending a playgroup, but are the least likely to access the service.

Supported playgroups offer an important alternative for these families when parent-led community playgroups struggle to successfully engage or include them, or fail to meet their needs.

The Victorian Government can support children’s development by recognising the importance of playgroups as a vital component of early learning.

Continue supporting flexible learning options.

Flexible learning options keep students engaged at school, boost wellbeing and provide invaluable support for children with multiple or complex barriers to education.

The Victorian Government can support more young people to achieve their potential by making a long-term commitment to fund flexible learning options. To be successful, this must occur in both mainstream schools and community-based settings.

Doveton does it better

Doveton College is a place-based initiative that addresses structural causes of disadvantage and has a single entry point into early learning, school, adult learning and community spaces.

The school has a diverse and often vulnerable student population with more than 50 nationalities and languages spoken within the school. There are also a significant number of students who have experienced trauma and require wrap-around supports such as formal mental health plans.

Doveton College provides a wide range of wrap-around educational and allied health supports including maternal and child health services, play groups, medical and allied health services, engagement programs for children and adults, and adult learning opportunities... Our Place provides participants with a whole of family learning focus.

Doveton College has seen improvements in the social connectedness of communities, improvement in children and family’s health and wellbeing, as well as children and family engagement in learning, social opportunities and skills and employment.⁸⁶

Reform careers education.

Young people need high quality and contemporary careers advice to help them understand their options when they leave school. This is particularly important for young people growing up in families and communities where there is intergenerational unemployment.

Equipping career counsellors with the latest information about training pathways and opportunities, including those in the community services sector, would support students in understanding the broad range of options available to them.

The Victorian Government can provide students with better career advice by investing in dedicated careers counsellors and actively disseminating relevant resources and information.

Fund four-year-old kinder.

Federal funding for four-year-old kinder is due to run out at the end of 2020.⁸⁹

The Victorian Government must continue to champion the benefits of preschool and work with the Commonwealth to find a long-term funding solution, whether through a new National Partnership Agreement or increased state funding. Funding certainty would give parents, children, educators and the sector confidence in the future of early childhood education.

Make sure schools comply with the Parent Payment Policy.

Victoria's Parent Payment Policy is meant to clarify what expenses state schools can pass on to families. The costs of instruction in the standard curriculum must be provided free.

However, not all schools are complying with the policy.⁹⁰

Community service organisations report that families continue to be confused about school costs, and schools continue to provide unclear or inaccurate information. Some schools don't have financial hardship policies, or are forcing families to purchase specific devices, textbooks and branded uniforms.

The Government can help state schools to better understand and apply the Parent Payment Policy, monitor schools' implementation, and provide minimum standard financial hardship policies.

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Thriving children and families, free from violence

Victoria's Royal Commission into Family Violence recognised that women and children deserve dignity, safety and respect, and demonstrated a community-wide commitment to stamping out family violence.

But with 12 Victorian women already killed by family violence this year, we still have a long way to go.⁹¹

Ongoing implementation of all the Royal Commission's recommendations must be a priority, along with a renewed focus on addressing the underlying conditions for men's behaviour.

For children, exposure to violence and neglect can have long-lasting impacts. People experiencing violence need support early. Keeping children safe with their families should be the goal of early intervention. And when out-of-home care does need to be part of the response, support and stability must be prioritised, and continue well after children turn 18.

Support the long-term recovery of women and children victim survivors

Provide long-term funding for family violence services.

Victoria has led the world with its Royal Commission into Family Violence. But the key to successfully sustaining the reforms will be investment in long-term solutions.

Funding for entrenched, long-term problems such as family violence will be most effective if it is sustained and linked to long-term objectives.

Victoria's commitment to addressing family violence has seen an increase in victim survivors seeking assistance from family violence specialists. The family violence sector has experienced high demand, as more and more victim survivors disclose violence and seek help.

But the impact of family-violence related trauma can last for many years. The high demand for crisis response has forced organisations to prioritise crisis responses over equally important long-term recovery and support.

VCOSS members are experts in supporting victim survivors in their long-term recovery from family violence. They can support victim survivors to maintain stable housing, overcome financial hardship and address physical and mental wellbeing.⁹²

But this work needs dedicated and sustained funding. Current funding models prioritise immediate crisis responses and short-term support periods.

Thriving children and families, free from violence

Fund fosters and kinship carers fairly

Increase the basic carer allowance for foster and kinship carers.

Provide every family with placement support funding.

The number of children in out-of-home care in Victoria has nearly doubled over the last five years, placing huge demand on the state’s foster carers. Foster and kinship carers provide temporary care to children and young people unable to live with their birth parents. They help provide a safe and secure environment, keep sibling groups together and encourage children to maintain their personal and cultural identity.

Brenda’s foster care funding fight

My partner and I have a high needs child who requires extensive educational and health support. I work part time in order to support the placement which includes frequent attendance at school as well as regular paediatric, occupational therapy, speech therapy and counselling appointments. Many children in care will typically need at least one or a combination of all these services so my example is not unique.

Level one care allowance in Victoria is one of the lowest in Australia and does not cover day-to-day living costs. And at present I am paying for some of the support services such as occupational therapy and speech therapy out of my own pocket with no guarantee of reimbursement. I have applied for funding for these services in the past but have not been successful.⁹³

About one-third of foster carers are experiencing financial hardship. The foster carer allowance falls short of covering the true costs of providing foster care by about \$70 per week. The Victorian government can help foster carers cover basic costs and provide a safe and therapeutic environment for children by increasing the level one and two basic carer allowance, and making sure every family gets at least \$2,000 per annum for placement support and access to support services.

Kinship care, where children are cared for by a family member or friend, is the fastest growing form of out-of-home care in the state. For Aboriginal children, kinship care means the child can maintain vital connection to culture and community. Kinship carers continue to receive less support than foster carers, despite the high levels of complexity and vulnerability experienced by many children in kinship care.





Provide every young person leaving care with extended support

Extend Home Stretch to every young person leaving care.

Young people leaving care need more support than average teenagers, not less. More gradual transition from care will help improve outcomes for young care leavers.

Many young people forced to leave the care system on or before 18 years risk becoming homeless, involved with the criminal justice system or unemployed within the first 12 months.⁹⁴

Most 18-year-olds would struggle to fend for themselves without family support, in today's world of casual and insecure work, and high rental costs. And yet we ask this of young people struggling to overcome histories of abuse, trauma and insecurity.

An overwhelmed system also means too many young people are leaving care without a transition plan, or with one that is only focussed on the urgent priorities like food and housing, instead of more holistic life planning.⁹⁵

The recent investment in Home Stretch has given many young people the opportunity to remain in care until the age of 21. But it only reaches 10 per cent of the young people leaving care each year. It shouldn't be a lottery whether a young person gets the help they need. It should be an entitlement.

The Victorian Government can help hundreds more young people every year, by extending Home Stretch to every young person leaving out-of-home care. Extending the support available to all young care leavers will help ensure they have the skills and educational opportunities to succeed in life and break the cycle of disadvantage.



An overwhelmed system also means too many young people are leaving care without a transition plan, or with one that is only focussed on the urgent priorities like food and housing, instead of more holistic life planning.

Keep children safe with their families

Fund comprehensive support services to support family preservation and reunification.

Children should be cared for by their families, wherever it is safe and possible. Temporary placements and uncertainty about the future can be detrimental to children's wellbeing, as can disconnection from family and their community.

The child protection system should support families to remain together and help parents build their capacity to provide a safe, secure and caring environment for children. Family therapy and family group conferencing are early intervention options that could prevent children needing to be removed from their parents.

The reasons children enter care are often complex. They can include family violence, mental illness, poverty, insecure housing, and parental drug use.

Comprehensive support services tailored to the needs of families may be the most effective at producing long-term reunification outcomes. Services and support are required well after children are reunited with their families.

The Victorian Government can help keep children safe with their families by increasing investment in dedicated family preservation, therapy and reunification services.

Thriving children and families, free from violence

Further strategies

Increase investment in primary prevention of family violence.

Adequate and recurrent funding for the prevention of family violence is key to stopping violence before it starts. Many Australians continue to think that women exaggerate the problem of male violence.⁹⁶ But the 2019 death toll paints a different picture. As of mid-September 2019, 39 women have been killed across the country.⁹⁷

Primary prevention is aimed at the whole community, and includes public awareness raising, education programs in schools and workplace programs.⁹⁸ The Victorian community would benefit from sustained investment in primary prevention initiatives, including those that seek to change social attitudes and reduce gender inequality.⁹⁹

Provide support for parents with disability to care for their children.

Parents with disabilities require the same universal supports as other parents—including stable housing, adequate income, and a social support network—and may also need specialised supports.¹⁰⁰ However, parents with disabilities face significant discrimination about their parenting capacity,

including stigma and negative attitudes^{101,102} which can affect the support they receive. Standard parenting programs are rarely inclusive and providers often lack the experience or resources to adapt their programs.

By establishing an evidence-based parenting support program for parents with disabilities, the Victorian Government can provide important supports where and when they are needed, and empower parents and families.

Continue supporting the transfer of Aboriginal children in out-of-home care to ACCOs.

Every Aboriginal child in out-of-home care, where possible, should be able to maintain safe and strong connections with their family and community. Aboriginal children are vastly overrepresented in the child protection system, with 22 per cent of Victorian Aboriginal children living in out-of-home care.¹⁰³

The Victorian Government has committed to the transfer of all Aboriginal children in out-of-home care to Aboriginal organisations by 2021. This transfer needs to be accompanied by appropriate resources to ensure ACCOs can support Aboriginal children through the integration of Aboriginal cultural and healing practices and trauma-informed care.

Ensure every child and family, especially vulnerable families, can access universal parenting support.

The first five years of a child's life are critical to brain development and learning, and have a long-term effect on wellbeing.¹⁰⁴ Evidence also suggests secure parent-child attachments, access to tangible parent support and parental coping skills are protective factors for children's development.¹⁰⁵

The maternal children health service (MCH) is a universal, primary care service for all children and their families, supporting children's healthy development.¹⁰⁶ It provides an important pathway to early identification and referral to more targeted services. However, many vulnerable families start to disengage from MCH after the first home visit.¹⁰⁷

Increasing MCH nurses' ability to make home visits to vulnerable families, as in the right@home sustained home visiting program, could help vulnerable families reap the benefits of MCH services. right@home has been shown to improve parenting and the home learning environment for families experience disadvantage, compared with existing services.

Expand parenting and intensive support programs for families and new parents.

The State Government can support children's healthy development by ensuring early years' policies and programs target the crucial period during the first 1,000 days, from the antenatal period until children are two years of age. Experiences during this period build the foundations and competencies needed in later life.¹⁰⁸ Secure caregiver-child attachments are critical to young children's social, emotional and cognitive development.¹⁰⁹

Early parenting services, like Cradle to Kinder and Healthy Mothers, Healthy Babies can help families facing disadvantage to build their parenting skills, develop nurturing environments, form strong caregiver-child attachments and connect them with additional community supports. They have been shown to decrease parent stress, anxiety and depression, and reduce the risk of child abuse or behavioural problems.¹¹⁰

Fund perpetrator intervention programs.

The onus of changing violent behaviour is on perpetrators of violence. Perpetrator accountability featured strongly in the report of the Victorian Royal Commission into Family Violence.

Additional capacity is needed for a broad suite of perpetrator interventions and case management programs that hold men accountable for violence against women and children. In particular, programs that target Aboriginal communities, CALD communities and LGBTIQ communities need more resources. Emerging evidence about how to engage perpetrators, over the long term, should be embedded in program design.¹¹¹

Provide an ongoing crisis response for people with disability experiencing family violence.

The Victorian Government's Disability Family Violence Crisis Response Initiative provides short-term brokerage to adults and children with disabilities who are experiencing family violence. The initiative has had a positive impact in the lives of many people with disabilities, with a DHHS commissioned pilot evaluation finding it to be 'overwhelmingly positive.'

However, the initiative is currently only funded for 12 months, with uncertainty about what will happen afterwards. The NDIA has been clear that crisis supports are not in its remit, and other support for victim survivors provided by the Victorian Government may not adequately cover women's disability support needs. Ongoing funding for this initiative is urgently required to ensure women with disabilities receive the essential supports they need to re-locate or to stay safe in their homes and communities.

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Healthy Victorians

Good health is essential for a good life, but people in our community don't get equal access to the benefits of health.

People experiencing disadvantage have higher rates of preventable hospitalisation and chronic disease, and lower average life expectancy. Victoria needs a system that provides equitable access to timely, affordable healthcare and that tackles the *causes* of poor health.

Health inequity is often more pronounced in rural and regional areas. Workforce shortages and a lack of local services mean people must travel greater distances for treatment, shouldering the associated challenges of time off work, transport costs and childcare.

People with disability, LGBTIQ people, people from refugee and migrant backgrounds, Aboriginal people and those leaving institutions also have poorer health outcomes than other Victorians.

Victoria needs a change in its approach to health, to focus less on hospitals and acute care, and more on creating positive living and working conditions for good health, prioritising prevention and early intervention.

Support place-based preventative health initiatives

Boost public health spending beyond two per cent of the total health budget.

Invest in place-based preventative health programs to tackle risk factors for poor health.

Victoria has a growing health divide, which means a person's income, education, ethnicity or location can literally make them sick.

Wealthier postcodes are typically healthier postcodes.¹¹² For example, chronic diseases such as diabetes and heart disease are more common in poorer areas and regional areas.¹¹³

Public health, which includes preventative health and programs focused on wellbeing, accounts for just two per cent of the state's total health expenditure. The majority of health spending is on public hospitals.

But the answer to low physical activity, poor nutrition, smoking and a swathe of related chronic conditions—like obesity, cardiovascular disease or type 2 diabetes—doesn't reside in expensive hospital responses.

By embracing an increased focus on public health in communities, the Victorian Government can keep people healthy and happy in the first place.

Public health programs work best when they are place-based and tailored to local community need. Place-based approaches recognise that the places where people live and work play an important role in shaping their health and wellbeing. Local context is critical.

Leveraging local networks and investment, through platforms like the Primary Care Partnerships (PCPs) and Healthy Together Victoria networks, will help improve community outcomes.



Build it and they will exercise

Parks encourage people to be physically active, but are less common in poorer suburbs. Brimbank Park, an existing park in Keilor East, was upgraded to include a maze, a nature play area, climbing equipment, swings for children with physical disabilities and a range of tactile paths to explore.

Following the upgrade, visitors to the park increased seven-fold.¹¹⁴

When compared to a nearby 'control park', researchers discovered Brimbank Park had more than double the amount of people engaging in vigorous physical activity.

Healthy Victorians

Immediately increase funding to frontline mental health services

Invest in mental health services, in accordance with the recommendations of the interim report of the Royal Commission into Victoria's Mental Health System.

The Royal Commission into Victoria's Mental Health System is a once-in-a-generation opportunity to reform a system in crisis.

Ambitious, long-term planning is needed, along with sustained, large-scale investment in clinical and community-managed services to enable the system to meet demand. Psychosocial rehabilitation and support must be recognised as a vital component of the mental health system, alongside clinical care and disability support. Evidence-based promotion and prevention initiatives could stop people becoming unwell.

But right now, while we wait for the blueprint for change from the Royal Commission, the mental health system is failing Victorians.

Emergency department presentations are increasing, and the proportion of people getting help is decreasing. Victoria's investment in mental health has dropped to the lowest per capita in the country.¹¹⁵

The interim report of the Royal Commission can guide Government funding to where it is needed most. For example, frontline services need more capacity—to stop people being turned away without help, returned to the community without step-down support or reliant on unpaid carers pushed to their own limits.

Slash public dental wait times

Boost funding for emergency and ongoing dental care.

Invest more into evidence-based community dental health programs.

On average, a Victorian adult must wait 18 months to receive public dental care. Some people are waiting as long as 35 months.¹¹⁶

The Victorian Government recently recognised the importance of dental health for school-age children and is rolling out the Smile Squad dental van program. But the staged rollout means it will be several years before most children can access it.

The Victorian Government can reduce wait times for people of all ages by investing more into emergency and ongoing dental care, and providing more funding for community dental health services.



Prevention, early intervention and improved access to dental services are crucial to improving oral health. More funding could be put into existing oral health prevention and intervention programs, like *Healthy Families*, *Healthy Smiles*, which helps mothers and young kids in childcare, kindergartens and maternal and childhood service settings.

There are compelling reasons to boost the oral health of mothers and small children in particular. Pregnant women are at increased risk of gum disease, and there is an association between poor oral health in mothers and tooth decay in their children.¹¹⁷ More than half of Victorian children aged three to five have signs of tooth decay, and dental admissions are the third highest cause of preventable hospitalisation in children under five years.¹¹⁸



Grow community health to match community need

Implement the recommendations of the Community Health Taskforce.

‘Right care, right place, right time’ is a key principle of the health system. Community health services act on this principle, providing quality care in the community to disadvantaged and vulnerable Victorians, and offering a path away from expensive and intimidating acute care. They intervene early to keep people healthy and provide wrap-around support to people with multiple and complex needs.

Community health services “focus on people who experience poor service availability, cost barriers, stigma and discrimination and complexity of need”.¹¹⁹

Yet they receive less than one per cent of Victoria’s total health expenditure.¹²⁰

In 2018, the Victorian Auditor-General’s Office (VAGO) found that the extent of demand for community health services across Victoria is unknown. Funding and distribution models are based on historical data rather than current population demographics, limiting the ability of community health services to deliver timely and appropriate care to people with the greatest need.¹²¹

Community health services report that they refrain from promoting their services because they have no capacity to help more people.

With secure long-term contracts that account for growth, flexible funding models and much-needed building and equipment upgrades, community health services can meet community need.

The Victorian Government’s Community Health Taskforce has made a series of recommendations in response to the findings of the VAGO report. The Government can help people get the right care at the right time by implementing these recommendations.

Healthy Victorians

Tackle the health impacts of climate change

Develop a health and human services climate adaptation plan to support health and community organisations.

Support the health sector to take up renewable energy and make energy efficiency improvements.

Global warming is expected to bring increased temperatures, extreme weather events and worse air quality.¹²² This puts the health and wellbeing of many Victorians at risk and requires Victoria's health system, including community health services, to respond to an unprecedented need for services.

Some people, such as older people and people with existing health conditions, are much more vulnerable to the impacts of climate change.¹²³

Extreme weather and disasters have already had a significant impact on Victorians. The heatwaves in Victoria around Black Saturday in 2009 are estimated to have killed 374 people and had a significant toll on people's wellbeing.¹²⁴ The trauma and upheaval of Black Saturday saw increases in mental health issues, risky alcohol consumption, chronic and non-communicable diseases, family violence and environmental damage. These impacts cost approximately \$3.9 billion, far exceeding the direct financial damage of \$3.1 billion.¹²⁵ Community organisations see these impacts and support people through them.

Government support for health and community services is critical to build climate resilience into the health system, including in community health.

Victoria needs a health and human services climate change adaptation action plan, based on best-practice models.¹²⁶

The health sector also makes up seven per cent of Australia's carbon footprint, and Australia's healthcare emissions are the second-highest per capita in the world.¹²⁷ The sector needs to reduce its contribution to climate change. It needs to be supported by Government to improve the energy efficiency of its premises and services and switch to renewable energy.



Government support for health and community services is critical to build climate resilience into the health system, including in community health.

Further strategies

Continue to fund the Primary Care Partnership platform.

Primary Care Partnerships (PCPs) build effective partnerships with a range of local health and community services, local governments and local communities to improve health and wellbeing, especially for people experiencing vulnerability. They drive quality improvement and best practice across the system, by bringing local people together to solve local problems, sharing data, and facilitating integrated planning.

In the last three years, Primary Care Partnerships have delivered almost 300 health prevention and promotion initiatives and coordinated around 120 prevention networks across the State.¹²⁸

But PCPs have no guaranteed funding from 2020. The Victorian Government can foster collaboration across the health and community services industries by continuing to support the PCP platform.

Continue to deliver sexual and reproductive health initiatives.

In June 2020, funding is ending for Victoria's landmark 2017 Women's Sexual and Reproductive Health Plan. Much has been achieved in the past three years, including the establishment of eight sexual and reproductive health hubs.

It is now time for the Victorian Government to develop a new plan and allocate funding for delivery.

In the short term, the Government could boost funding for sexual and reproductive hubs, invest in an integrated sexual and reproductive

health service system, and work to address the significant barriers people with disability experience in accessing sexual and reproductive health services.

Expand the peer workforce.

The peer workforce employs people who have lived experience in the area in which they are working; for example, as mental health consumers or carers, or as injecting drug users.

Peers can be a trusted and credible source of information; often more approachable than traditional health services, they make people feel like their experiences are valued and understood. Peer support has been shown to decrease hospital admissions.¹²⁹

People seeking assistance for mental health challenges describe peer workers as being more empathetic and respectful, and giving them hope for recovery. And peer workers themselves report greater levels of self-esteem, confidence and resilience stemming from their work.

The Government can improve health outcomes for Victorians by investing in the development of the peer workforce, supporting the work of the Consumer Workforce Development Group,¹³⁰ and ensuring people with lived experience are involved at all levels of the health and community system, including governance, research, planning, policy-making, service delivery and evaluation.

Treat drug use as a health problem.

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.¹³¹

The Parliamentary Inquiry into drug law reform recommended the offences of personal use and possession for all illicit substances be regarded as a health rather than criminal issue.¹³² Drug trafficking offences would still be illegal.

A health approach prioritises diverting people into treatment or education. Countries like Portugal that have embraced a health approach have noted a significant reduction in drug-related harms such as overdose deaths, HIV infections and injecting drug use.¹³³

Invest in drug treatment and pain management.

State-wide implementation of Victoria's real-time prescription monitoring system, SafeScript, commenced in 2019. SafeScript guards against misuse of pharmaceutical medicines and tackles problematic prescribing.

For SafeScript to succeed, the alcohol and other drug treatment sector will need capacity to accept additional referrals. If there is no additional capacity, there is a risk of further harm to people the new system identifies, who could transition to other harmful, possibly illicit substances.

Many people identified by the SafeScript system will have spiralled into addiction after being prescribed medication to assist with chronic pain. But alternative pain management options are limited. Wait times to see a publicly-funded pain management specialist can run to years. The Victorian Government can help people struggling with addiction by funding public pain management clinics and services.

Healthy Victorians

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Victoria needs a change in its approach to health, to focus less on hospitals and acute care, and more on creating positive living and working conditions for good health, prioritising prevention and early intervention.



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