

# A State of Wellbeing



## VCOSS 2020 Victorian Budget Submission Update

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A fair plan for Victoria's  
post-pandemic recovery



# Prioritising wellbeing in a pandemic world

Victoria's economic environment, social landscape and political climate bears little resemblance to anything that was predicted just months ago. COVID changed everything.

The state budget itself was moved, in recognition of these unique and changing circumstances, and the difficulty in forecasting how things will look when some sense of normality returns.

The VCOSS 2020 Victorian Budget Submission '**A State of Wellbeing**' was written *before* the world changed.

Many of the issues, challenges and solutions contained in that submission remain unresolved, but new challenges have since emerged, demand for community sector assistance has soared and the operating environment is now wildly different.

This paper serves as a companion document to that original submission, building on its themes and proposals by putting them in the contemporary context, and identifying the most pressing actions we can take to support Victorians in the wake of COVID.

Creating new jobs, looking after mental health and making sure people have safe and secure homes has never been more important. A strong community sector is a vital safety net for Victorians struggling in the wake of the pandemic.

Last year we highlighted wellbeing as a guiding principle to create a fairer and stronger Victoria, with the related concepts of wellbeing *budgeting* and a wellbeing *economy* as central to this mission. As we now look towards a post-pandemic recovery, wellbeing is more critical than ever.

This submission calls for community and individual wellbeing to be central to our COVID recovery, in recognition that social and economic outcomes are inextricably linked.

*This submission calls for community and individual wellbeing to be central to our COVID recovery, alongside the more classic goals of economic recovery.*

More broadly, wellbeing should be instilled as the core concept that shapes the future of Victorian policy-making and budgets, as we emerge and rebuild from the looming pandemic recession.

In the short term, a key component of this will be the establishment of a Social Recovery Taskforce (p. 3) to shape and inform Victoria's immediate and medium-term recovery.

In the longer term, we need a strengthened community services industry, with secure funding and a pipeline of skilled workers to meet the needs of a forever changed Victorian community.

We need the 2020 Victorian Budget to truly focus on the wellbeing of all Victorians and Victorian communities.



A handwritten signature in black ink, which appears to be 'Emma King'.

EMMA KING  
VCOSS CEO

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.

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.

Authorised by VCOSS CEO Emma King.

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## Deliver a **wellbeing budget**

Our recovery from COVID-19 must be about more than getting spending down and GDP up. It must be about tangible outcomes for people. Real outcomes, which impact people's lives, do not always appear in a balance sheet.

Victoria needs a new way to conceptualise, pursue and measure progress.

The smartest way to embed this approach would be for Victoria to become a wellbeing economy and deliver a wellbeing budget. 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.

A wellbeing budgeting approach would allow us to draw a line under the pandemic and set ambitious goals for our recovery.

## Launch a **Social Recovery Taskforce**

Building back a stronger Victoria, post-COVID, will require more than just economic growth. We must focus on tangible outcomes for people, and strengthening of the safety net for people who are unable to immediately 'bounce-back'.

We need to identify ambitious and bold recovery goals, and economic opportunities that will have ongoing social benefits, and be inclusive of people from all backgrounds, genders and abilities.

A Social Recovery Taskforce, comprised of government, non-government and business members, can provide leadership and direction to these discussions, set goals and targets, and coordinate actions by all partners to address the social impacts of COVID-19 through and beyond the recovery phase.

## Deliver a 'reopening package' to **keep community service organisations sustainable**

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

But there have been substantial costs incurred as a result. Some organisations have quickly invested in digital infrastructure so they could shift to remote service delivery.

The costs of personal protective equipment and enhanced cleaning are quickly adding up.

Services need additional capacity to help them adapt to the new COVID-normal, and comply with public health directives. Without this support, fewer Victorians will get the help they need.





## Provide **fair indexation and growth funding** to meet demand

Organisations across the community services industry, such as housing and homelessness, alcohol and other drugs, family violence, mental health, family and child, and youth services are reporting increased numbers of new and returning clients, and increased complexity of need.

As restrictions lift and face-to-face services resume, this is likely to place additional demand on community service organisations, many of whom are already at capacity or have long waiting lists.

Low indexation rates in recent years, short-term funding extensions and a significant widening of the scope of the portable long service leave scheme have left organisations struggling to make ends meet.

A fair indexation formula incorporating wage rises, the superannuation guarantee and portable long service leave is needed, as is dedicated funding to meet growth in demand and make sure organisations can meet community need.

## Create a pipeline of **new workers to the community sector**

Pre-pandemic, the health and social assistance industry (which includes the community services sector) was projected to be the fastest-growing industry in the state. Workforce shortages have been magnified during the pandemic.

Community service organisations have not had access to the back-up workforce they need to cover workers who are sick or unavailable, let alone access to the surge workforce they need to expand existing services or design new ones in response to emerging demand.

There is opportunity to simultaneously support more Victorians into meaningful jobs with genuine career pathways, and address the growing demand for community sector workers.

For example, the Victorian Government's job creation program, Working for Victoria, provides an opportunity to address supply, by promoting community services careers to workers displaced from other industries and providing an employment 'taster' of between six and 12 months. So far, the program has created 1,100 funded positions across 59 community services organisations.

An expanded job-creation program could provide more funded positions across different roles and skill levels.

## Support **student placements**

Every year, thousands of students are attracted to community services qualifications, but are deterred from pursuing their career pathway because of difficulties obtaining student placement hours.

The pandemic has made it even harder to find student placements.

We need to create capacity in community service organisations to take on increased student placement numbers and enhance the level of workplace support so that students stay in the sector beyond their placement.

A centralised support and supervision model for student placements would be a game-changer for small to medium-sized community services organisations, particularly in regional Victoria.

## Develop a Food Relief Framework to **address food insecurity**

Demand for food relief has increased dramatically during the pandemic. Pre-COVID about one-in-eight Victorians worried about running out of money to buy food.

Since the pandemic, people who have never previously needed food relief have been turning to services for help. In April, 25 per cent of requests for food relief were by newly vulnerable Victorians who were recently unemployed.

However, there is no state-level planning or coordination of emergency relief to map and plan for this demand. Logistic and data-sharing challenges are hampering the ability of the sector to meet community need.

A Food Relief Framework, backed by the newly announced Food Relief Taskforce, will help make sure nobody goes without food.

## Reduce financial stress through **temporary bill relief**

Low-income households entered the pandemic with wafer-thin financial buffers.

For many Victorians, spending more time at home means a significant increase in energy usage and bills, especially as the current lockdown coincides with winter.

The Victorian Government can help people in financial hardship by providing additional, flexible bill relief and financial counselling capacity.

This could include a one-off cash boost to low-income households (as done in South Australia), a broad-based credit on electricity bills, or short-term increases in energy concessions and the Utility Relief Grant Scheme payment.



## Launch a **COVID-19 mental health promotion campaign**

The protracted nature of the COVID-19 pandemic will take its toll on Victoria's collective mental health. Community organisations are already reporting that more people are seeking help to manage mental distress because of the health crisis, the lockdown and financial distress.

Modelled on the successful *All Right?* wellbeing campaign that was launched after the Canterbury earthquakes in New Zealand, a statewide mental health promotion campaign would help build community resilience, contribute to compliance, normalise conversations about mental health and promote wellbeing.



New Zealand's *All Right?* post-disaster mental health campaign.

## Close the **digital divide**

Access to the internet is not a luxury; it's the difference between getting a job or living in poverty. Affordable technology and devices unlock access to work, education, social support and essential services.

Right now the digital divide is being felt more strongly than ever. Anyone on the wrong side of it is unable to access resources that have moved online, or keep in touch with family and friends. This includes more than 300,000 Victorian households with no internet access at all.

Now is the time to close the digital divide; to make sure everyone has access to the devices, affordable or free public Wi-Fi, and training they need to access online services and supports.

In particular, the shift to remote and flexible learning has highlighted how vital access to a device, the internet and adequate digital literacy is for students to fully engage and participate in education. All school-aged students who can't access or afford a device and the internet should be provided these essential learning tools.

## Launch a big **social housing building program**

The pandemic has exposed Victorians' vulnerability to homelessness and the critical role of housing in the social safety net.

The Victorian Government should build 6,000 new public and community housing homes every year for 10 years to keep pace with community demand and need.

Recovering from the social and economic effects of the pandemic presents a once-in-a-generation opportunity to invest in public and community housing to provide homes for Victorians, as well as put thousands of Victorians to work and stimulate the economy.

## Support communities and organisations to take the lead

Local communities know themselves best. They can deliver information effectively, respond quickly to emerging needs, and know who is most at-risk.

For example, the low incidence of COVID-19 cases in the Victorian Aboriginal community is a direct result of Aboriginal-led community action, swiftly put in place by Aboriginal community-controlled organisations (ACCOs) and leaders to suppress the virus in their local communities.

ACCOs outreached to check in on Elders, disseminated up-to-date and culturally appropriate information about staying healthy and adhering to restrictions, provided care packages, food and in-home COVID testing.

Similarly, during the Flemington and North Melbourne public housing estate “hard lockdowns” it was local organisations and ethnic community groups who stepped up to provide culturally appropriate food, deliver packages, identify individual needs (like medication and dietary needs) and translate resources and information in to the languages of the people who lived there.

By valuing, engaging and funding local groups and organisations to lead responses in their own communities, government can keep at-risk people safer and better informed.

## Create targeted employment strategies that address rising unemployment for women and young people

Women and young people are being hit hardest by growing unemployment. They make up the majority of employees in industries most impacted by COVID-19 lockdowns, like hospitality and retail.

The Victorian Government can prioritise creation of meaningful jobs for women and young people, including in the health and social services industries.

Applying a gender lens to all recovery investment will make sure women are not left out of an economic recovery built on stimulus in construction and other male-dominated industries.

Increased casualisation of the workforce and disappearing entry-level jobs already made it hard for young people to break into the job market.

Targeted employment support, and expansion of employment-based training, can help people attain qualifications and stay in work. Workplace protections can also be strengthened to ensure workers in precarious employment and the ‘gig economy’ are treated fairly.

## Upgrade the energy efficiency of Victoria’s homes

Victorians are spending more time at home than ever before to comply with health advice, but are faced with spiraling energy bills to keep their homes warm.

The energy efficiency of public housing, rental properties and homes owned by low-income families should be upgraded so every Victorian can live in a thermally safe home.

Helping low-income families replace outdated appliances with energy-efficient ones would reduce their energy bills while stimulating jobs in retail, manufacturing and logistics.



## Tackle loneliness by funding programs that help keep people connected

Loneliness and social isolation cause emotional distress and impact people's wellbeing.

While social distancing is an important measure to reduce transmission of the virus, people are feeling increasingly disconnected from family, friends and social networks.

But communities and organisations have already identified many innovative ways to build social connection, including moving activities online, establishing phone trees and developing buddy programs.

It is likely that restrictions will continue for some time, especially among people vulnerable to COVID-19, like older people.

Organisations can do more to tackle loneliness, if they can access flexible, innovative program funding.

## Close access gaps for students with disability

COVID-19 has widened the gaps in access, inclusion and educational attainment between students with disabilities and their peers.

There is a need for investment in specific disability-adjusted catch-up support, as well as access to new or improved personalised modifications or adjustments.

Remote and flexible learning has increased the need for all recommendations from the Program for Students with Disability Review to be fast-tracked, including a new funding and support model, inclusion measures, behaviour support and strengthened staff capacity.

The mental health needs of students with disabilities are often overlooked or not understood.

Specific investments in mental health and wellbeing will be required, which address the particular impacts that remote and flexible learning has had on the engagement of students with disabilities, including their connection with peers.

## Extend COVID measures that support people with disability

Even as COVID restrictions ease, many people with disability will remain isolated (especially those who are immune compromised).

As Victoria opens back up, access and inclusion measures that have been introduced during lockdowns should be continued for a further 12 months.

In particular, the COVID 'Call to Test' service should be preserved for people who are unable to drive or leave their house for COVID testing. The Rapid Response Program should continue, to prevent and respond to COVID outbreaks in specialist disability settings, supported residential services and group homes.

The temporary increase of the Multi Purpose Taxi Program subsidy should continue, as should access to telehealth, to enable people with disability to continue to safely access essential services.

The expanded DHHS Intensive Support Team should remain in place to assist Victorians with disability to access or navigate the NDIS during a period that will continue to be uniquely challenging for our state. The Home and Community Care Program for younger Victorians who are ineligible for the NDIS should also be extended.

Finally, the outreach capacity of disability advocacy organisations should be bolstered, with grants made available for a full 12 months of activity. Current funding is due to expire in March 2021.





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Various posters from New Zealand's multilingual All Right? mental health and wellbeing campaign, launched after the 2010 Canterbury earthquake.



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