

VCOSS 2023 Victorian Budget Submission





VCOSS is the peak body for Victoria's social and community sector, and the state's premier social advocacy body.

We work towards a Victoria free from poverty and disadvantage, where every person and community is supported to thrive. We work relentlessly to prioritise wellbeing and inclusive growth to create prosperity for all.

We achieve these goals through policy development, public and private advocacy, supporting and increasing the capabilities of the state's social service bodies, forging strong coalitions for change, and explaining the true causes and effects of disadvantage.

VCOSS's strength comes from its members and the people they serve. Our members include frontline service groups, peak bodies, advocacy organisations and individuals passionate about a fair, sustainable and inclusive Victoria.

We listen to members and amplify their experiences and insights. We respect the unique perspectives of people who experience poverty or inequality, and seek to strengthen and elevate their voices.



Acknowledgement of Traditional Owners.

VCOSS acknowledges the traditional owners of Country, and pays respect to Elders past and present, and to emerging leaders. Our office is located on the sovereign, unceded lands of the Wurundjeri people of the Kulin nation.

Lived experience statement

VCOSS thanks all those who shared with us their personal stories, experiences and insights. Every person is shaped by their history and environment. Many people have endured trauma or hardship. For some, this trauma and its effects continue today. By sharing your experiences and insights with VCOSS, you have enriched both our understanding of the issues and our recommendations for change. Thank you for your courage and generosity.



Introduction

In November 2022, the Victorian people voted for a continuation of the Victorian Government's change agenda.

Voters resoundingly endorsed better and cheaper early childhood education, a fair transition to renewable power, an expansion of women's health services, more affordable public transport and new measures to address the rising cost of living and bolster community wellbeing.

Attention now quickly returns to the business of governing and the delivery of the 2023 Victorian Budget.

VCROSS acknowledges the tight timelines for this budget and the need for responsible haste. This submission's scope and focus have therefore been carefully designed to be most helpful to the Government.

Recommendations fit thematically into two broad streams:

- Measures that directly assist with the smooth and timely delivery of **election promises**, and;
- Measures that align with the Government's **existing reform agenda**. (As one example, measures that support the goals or would

complement existing work being undertaken as part of Victoria's Early Intervention Investment Framework.)

In addition, we identify areas not directly related to the Government's election agenda or ongoing reform goals but requiring attention in this budget cycle. These include:

- Responding to the **2022 floods** across northern Victoria, and
- Preparing for the **2026 Commonwealth Games**.

The community sector stands ready to assist the Government to deliver progressive social policies and its broad fairness agenda, to combat poverty and disadvantage, and prepare Victoria for future challenges.

Working together, we can make Victoria a stronger, fairer and even better state.

Emma King
VCROSS CEO

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Become the wellbeing state

Embrace the wellbeing agenda

The new Federal Labor Government has made ‘measuring what matters’ and the adoption of wellbeing economic principles a key priority over its first term.

This builds on international momentum towards wellbeing economic practices in other jurisdictions, such as New Zealand, Scotland and Iceland. The ACT is also active in this space.

Wellbeing economics places local indicators of social outcomes and life satisfaction on a level pegging with traditional economic indicators, to create a new framework to design policies, target funding and measure progress.

In 2023, Victoria should formally declare its intention to become a wellbeing economy and begin delivering wellbeing budgets.

Such an approach would assist government to rise above traditional portfolio siloes. It would convey to people the Victorian Government’s deep understanding of their concerns and determination to effect change.

This change would enhance the government’s ability to design, deliver and measure the effectiveness of its broad fairness and reform agenda in housing, justice, early intervention investment and numerous other areas.

To kickstart this bold reform, the 2023 Budget should:

- **Launch a six-month consultation with communities across Victoria**, leveraging the highly-successful Listening Tour model developed by VCOSS. Building on that earlier work, which government commissioned VCOSS to undertake to inform social recovery efforts, this new consultation project would ask Victorians to consider wellbeing across economic, social, cultural and environmental domains. The discussions would have a future focus and would encourage people to consider tangible and innovative steps to achieving wellbeing. The full diversity of Victoria’s population would be represented in these consultations, including people experiencing disadvantage and First Nations people.
- **Develop a wellbeing framework based on the outcomes of the six-month community consultation on wellbeing.** This framework would explicitly outline Victoria’s wellbeing priorities and the outcomes a wellbeing economy should deliver. It would help drive a high level of collaboration across government. The framework would be refreshed at regular intervals to match changing community needs and expectations.

This reform task should be overseen by a new Minister for Wellbeing.

Value the community sector

Provide fair, evidence-based and adequate funding

The funding provided to community services organisations doesn't reflect the true cost of delivering services. Meanwhile, overall demand for social assistance and the complexity of that demand continues to increase.

Underfunded services simply cannot provide help to everybody who needs it. This leaves many organisations with limited capacity to deliver on the Victorian Government's vision for system reform.

The 2023 Budget should:

- **Increase base funding to reflect rising demand, increased case complexity and the true cost of delivering services.** The quantum of increase should be determined in partnership with sector peak bodies. It must be equitable across the sub-sectors and different government departments.
- **Index that funding properly.** In early 2022, Victoria committed to a 4.6 per cent funding boost to services funded by the Department of Families, Fairness and Housing and the Department of Health for 2022–23. This was a good start, and has enabled the continuation of critical service delivery. However, this rate of indexation is for one year only, and doesn't apply to organisations funded by other departments. Victoria needs a consistent, whole-of-government and whole-of-sector solution for the long term. VCOSS strongly advocates for a transparent formula that genuinely reflects the true impact of wages growth and other cost increases.

Provide long-term, stable contracts

A thriving community services industry is central to Victoria's long-term recovery and performance. It is an engine room for job creation, and an enabler for many of the Victorian Government's flagship reforms. But the sector's impact is constrained by short funding contracts. It is impossible to deliver long-term reform on short-term funding.

Short contracts also lead to inefficiencies, with higher contracting and recruitment costs, uneconomical use of infrastructure and limited capacity for long-term planning. Furthermore, one of the key reasons the sector struggles to attract and retain workers is because short-term government funding creates insecure jobs.

The 2023 Budget should:

- **Introduce long-term contracts for government-funded community service organisations.** By default, government funding contracts for the community sector should span seven years. This is the recommendation of the Productivity Commission. It should be an immediate priority.

Invest in data capability to model demand

Policy and systems reforms spanning aged care, disability support, family violence, mental health and early childhood education can't be delivered without a huge lift in the size and skills of the community services workforce.

The Victorian Government has made a welcome investment in a new Centre for Workforce Excellence in the Department of Families, Fairness and Housing, to help build this capability. This team has hit the ground running with the rollout of the *Social Services Jobs Guarantee*, which is matching Diploma of Community Services graduates to suitable entry-level vacancies in the sector.

In addition, the 2023 Budget could:

- **Fund an overarching community services industry workforce strategy** that enables all parts of the sector to grow and develop their workforces. This would be a whole-of-sector strategy, inclusive of volunteering.
- **Fund the development – and maintenance – of an industry-wide dataset on the community workforce**, modelled on the UK's Adult Social Care Workforce Data Set. This would support the design and implementation of the community services industry workforce strategy. It would create data systems to accurately model demand and guide workforce planning.

Recognise community sector workers as 'key workers' and provide affordable housing

Currently, many community sector workers cannot afford to live in the communities in which they work. Employers lose workers who find work closer to home, including in other industries. The lack of affordable housing has made it difficult for organisations to attract, recruit and retain staff, particularly in regional Victoria. Communities suffer.

The 2023 Budget should:

- **Reserve a proportion of government-backed affordable housing for community sector key workers.**

Provide paid student placements

Most TAFE and university qualifications relevant to the community sector require students to complete a minimum number of placement hours before they can graduate. But cost-of-living pressures are making it difficult for students to undertake these placements.

Many students already juggle study and paid work. Taking on unpaid labour means they lose valuable income from casual or part-time jobs. On top of this, students incur placement-related expenses such as travel, housing (for placements not close to home), uniforms, required equipment and childcare.

The 2023 Budget should:

- **Roll out supported student placements.** Eligible students would be assessed for need and offered financial or practical support. This support would provide payment in lieu of lost ordinary income for those who've had to reduce hours at a paid job or quit a job to undertake a placement. The program would also incorporate flexible wraparound support for those who need it – for example, access to coaching and mentoring.

Extend the Sick Pay Guarantee to more casual workers in the community sector

The pandemic has shone a light on the problems of toxic insecure work. Without access to paid sick leave or annual leave, many casual workers are choosing between going to work unwell or losing income by staying at home.

The Victorian Government has stepped up, introducing the 'Sick Pay Guarantee'. The two-year pilot covers more than 150,000 casual workers in retail, hospitality, cleaning, security, and aged and disability care.

The 2023 Budget should:

- **Expand the Sick Pay Guarantee to all community sector casuals.** The inclusion of aged and disability care workers in the sick pay pilot is welcome. However, the scheme should be extended to cover all casual workers across the community sector (for example, community mental health, community development and adult education workers). This expansion makes sense given the sector's high rate of casualisation and the proximity of workers to vulnerable people.

Increase women's leadership and economic security

The community services workforce is female-dominated, yet women are under-represented in senior leadership positions.¹ One constraint is access to part-time leadership or co-leadership roles.

The 2023 Budget should:

- **Fund VCOSS and Gender Equity Victoria to design and test a model to support the growth of part-time and co-leadership positions in the sector.** This initiative would improve the economic security of Victorian women in the sector by supporting career progression opportunities and leadership roles for women of all ages (and therefore access to greater remuneration). It would enable more women with care responsibilities to sustain employment at senior levels. By having more diverse senior leadership, the performance and impact of community sector organisations would be enhanced.

Strengthen volunteering

The volunteer workforce is pivotal to social services delivery across Victoria. Volunteering also fosters social connection – it is a key part of the solution to loneliness and isolation.

The dramatic decline in formal volunteering after COVID has reduced organisations' capacity to meet community needs.

¹ Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, 'Welfare workforce', 2018.

The new *Victorian Volunteer Strategy 2022–2027* has a key role to play in making volunteering more inclusive and accessible, creating new pathways into volunteering and helping past volunteers return.

The 2023 Budget should:

- **Fully fund and deliver actions from the *Victorian Volunteer Strategy 2022–2027*.**
- **Guarantee adequate and sustainable funding for place-based volunteering infrastructure**, including volunteering support services and resource centres that promote, resource and facilitate volunteering in local communities.

Early intervention

Strengthen Victoria's Early Intervention Investment Framework

In 2021 the Victorian Government introduced an Early Intervention Investment Framework (EIIF), with two key goals: improving outcomes for users of government services by offering assistance sooner, and reducing government expenditure by curbing demand for acute services.

The 2021 and 2022 Victorian budgets invested a combined \$828 million for 26 initiatives across a range of service delivery areas including child protection, family services, justice, homelessness and mental health.

VCOSS has long advocated to shift from crisis responses to prevention and welcomes the government's renewed strategic focus on early intervention.

Now, an opportunity exists for the Victorian Government to work with the community sector to further calibrate the EIIF so all investments genuinely improve the *likelihood* and *quality* of early intervention in a person's life.

For example, the 2022 Budget included funding for a range of programs to help people involved with the corrections system, such as family visit support and rehabilitation programs.

But by the time a person is in the corrections system, there have been many missed opportunities for early intervention. For example, stable housing, mental health counselling, treatment for drug dependence, or support for a family violence situation might have prevented them from becoming criminalised in the first place.

These are complex issues and investment decisions.

The EIIF approach would be strengthened not only by greater cross-departmental collaboration and stronger engagement with the community sector, but also by leveraging the expertise and wisdom of the Victorian community.

To strengthen the EIIF, the Victorian Government should establish a Community Priority Fund that:

- Identifies broad wellbeing priorities by holding regular consultations with communities across the state.
- Invests in funding bids that address those priorities.
- Gives extra weight to funding bids that have been co-designed with community services and target communities.
- Encourages cross-departmental collaboration to facilitate holistic service delivery.

VCOSS's *Voices of Victoria Listening Tour* is a consultation model that could be used to identify what matters most to people.

The top five concerns raised by Victorians who participated were access to health services, loneliness and isolation, cost of living, digital access and mental health.

The 2023 Budget should invest in a pilot round of the Community Priority Fund and fund initiatives that address these community priorities while also reducing demand on acute services. The Community Priority fund could lead to a broad suite of innovative programs.

Inclusive communities

Keep Treaty on track

Victoria is committed to providing formal recognition of the status, rights, cultures and histories of Traditional Owners and Aboriginal Victorians through a Treaty process.

The 2023 Budget must maintain the momentum, resourcing:

- **The First People's Assembly of Victoria to advance towards Treaty**, so that Victoria's Traditional Owners always have the freedom and power to make the decisions that affect Aboriginal communities, culture and Country.

Improve the wellbeing of LGBTIQ+ Victorians

During the election, the Victorian Government committed to a \$22.2 million package of measures to help LGBTIQ+ Victorians feel equal, visible, safe and celebrated. The pledge comprises direct investment in community-led organisations to celebrate and connect the LGBTIQ+ community, and a pilot program to address the needs of ageing LGBTIQ+ Victorians. It also includes funding to boost the number of community and mental health providers that are Rainbow Tick accredited, assisting mainstream services to ensure robust, LGBTIQ+ inclusive practice.

In delivering these election commitments, and when considering sector design, reform or expansion, the government must consider the unique needs and vulnerabilities of LGBTIQ+ Victorians and review whether targeted services should and/or can be offered. Furthermore, procurement and tendering processes should be reformed to build up and recognise the role and unique attributes of LGBTIQ+ community-controlled organisations when funding health, wellbeing and social services for LGBTIQ+ communities.

The 2023 Budget should deliver funding for the government's election commitments and also:

- **Provide government seed funding for an LGBTIQ+ community-controlled sector Social Delivery Fund.** This Fund would provide organisations that are initiated, governed and operated by and for LGBTIQ+ communities with access to dedicated funding to deliver programs and services that address the evolving needs of their communities.

Go further with gender responsive budgeting

Victoria's introduction of gender responsive budgeting is a game changer. The effects can be seen in women's health measures announced during the election campaign.

The 2023 Budget is an opportunity for the Victorian Government to build on this strong foundation. It should:

- **Establish an independent Gender Equality Budget Group**, modelled on the United Kingdom Women's Budget Group. The Group would comprise experts from across government, academia and the social sector, and undertake an annual gender equality needs assessment of government initiatives.

- **Establish a gender budget baseline.** This would require a detailed analysis of all existing expenditure and revenue budget initiatives. Insights would guide future spending to target inequalities.

Advance inclusion for multicultural communities

The recent election produced welcome pledges to invest in the capacity of the multicultural sector, as well as the promise of legislative reform to protect against hate speech.

These should be first-year priorities, with funding provided in the 2023 Budget.

There is an opportunity for additional complementary investment. Specifically, VCOSS advocates for the Victorian Government to:

- **Release the Statewide Anti-Racism Strategy** and provide funding to implement all actions.
- **Fund the development of a new co-designed Multicultural Strategy.** The completed Strategy would help to coordinate action across government to engage and support migrant and refugee communities. One outcome of the Multicultural Strategy would be a more responsive and equitable funding model for the multicultural sector, in place of current fragmented drip-funding.

Provide more funded support for carers

More than 700,000 Victorians take on the role of unpaid carer for a family member, friend or other person – and ABS data suggests that number is growing rapidly. These unpaid carers save the Victorian economy \$19 billion each year.² But this service comes at a great personal toll.

The Victorian Government has made a welcome commitment to develop a new Carers Strategy in 2023,³ in consultation with carers and the sector. This will guide future investment.

In the meantime, the Victorian Government can adopt interim measures to alleviate pressure on carers. The 2023 Budget should:

- **Expand and sustain funding for carers** so more than 112,000 additional Victorians can access the flexible support they need by 2026.

(Refer also to page 20 – VCOSS’s call for the government to expand mental health and wellbeing programs that support under-served groups, including carers. VCOSS supports a state-wide expansion of the *InTouch* program.)

Tackle loneliness head-on

Loneliness is linked with dying early, poor physical and mental health, and general dissatisfaction with life.⁴ Concerningly, it’s on the rise.

² Deloitte Access Economics for Carers Australia, *‘The value of informal care in 2020’*, May 2020.

³ Looking ahead to the next Carers Strategy, the most recent Carers Victoria modelling shows the need to grow the overall recurrent investment in funded carer services to \$34.5 million by 2026.

⁴ Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, *‘Social isolation and loneliness’*, September 2021.

The 2023 Budget should invest in a bold strategy to tackle loneliness, funding measures such as:

- **A public campaign to reduce stigma and promote help-seeking**, supported by a community ambassador program.
- **The development of a loneliness screening tool** that enables health and community services to identify people who may be lonely or at risk of loneliness, drawing on the expertise of Victoria's community health sector.
- **The statewide expansion of 'social prescribing'**,⁵ using evidence from trials currently underway in Gippsland, Geelong, near Benalla and in outer suburban Melbourne (started after the Mental Health Royal Commission).⁶
- **Increased opportunities for volunteering.**

Provide extra support for 'community connector' organisations

Victoria's Neighbourhood House sector has welcomed confirmation of \$19 million in additional funding over three years, as well as ongoing annual funding of \$6.6 million. More recently, the government also announced targeted grants for several Community Information and Support Services.

Like Neighbourhood Houses, Community Information and Support Services are at the heart of strong and connected communities. Right now, they are on the frontline of the cost-of-living crisis.

However, they are reliant on a depleted volunteer workforce and struggling to keep up with demand.

The 2023 Budget should build on the targeted grants announced during the election and lift capacity across the sector. Specifically, it should:

- **Fund one paid Coordinator in every Community Information and Support Service.** This would deliver 41 new positions across the state at a total annual cost of \$4.1 million.

End digital exclusion

Digital access is an essential service. Being on the wrong side of the 'digital divide' makes many everyday tasks impossible.

The 2023 Budget should deliver funding to:

- **Install free NBN across all public housing properties.**
- **Subsidise NBN services for community housing tenants** and other low-income households.
- **Give all public school students a free digital device.** Digital devices should be formally included in the 'standard curriculum', meaning schools are required to provide them for free. Additional government funding will be required so schools aren't left out-of-pocket.

⁵ Social prescribing (sometimes called community referral) is where health professionals 'prescribe' non-traditional or non-clinical treatments, like involvement with a community group or local activity that offers practical or emotional support.

⁶ Royal Commission into Victoria's Mental Health System, Recommendation 15, 2021.

- **Provide more digital literacy support.** Increased investment in Neighbourhood Houses and greater support for multicultural and multifaith communities should be complemented by ongoing investment in telephone information and referral services for groups with high rates of digital exclusion, such as older Victorians.

Increase long-term funding for Victoria's disability advocacy sector

Disability advocacy organisations help individuals with disability, families and carers to overcome barriers to accessing services, and play a vital role in identifying and reporting systemic issues. They are also a key safeguard against violence, abuse and neglect.

While the sector has welcomed bursts of 'boost funding' in recent years, this is unpredictable, and masks the core issue: base funding is too low and hasn't increased to meet the exponential growth in demand.

The 2023 Budget should:

- **Increase core funding for the disability advocacy sector** to reflect the level of demand, quantum of unmet need and complexity of cases – and lock this in via longer contracts.

Create a Supported Decision-Making Service

People with cognitive disabilities without family or friends to provide 'informal support' can be left to navigate complex systems on their own, often leaving them at the risk of being unable to express their will.

Currently, no organisation is specifically funded by the Victorian Government to provide independent decision support.

The 2023 Budget should remedy this and:

- **Fund a new Supported Decision-Making Service.** This service would provide 1:1 assistance to support decision-making capacity for individuals with cognitive disabilities. It would respond to referrals from government departments, statutory agencies and universal services (for example, courts, police, hospitals, education providers and Child Protection). It would also offer advice and training to people who give informal support.

Increase access to community transport

Community transport is critical for people who can't use public transport, but don't have alternatives.

These are hyper-local services provided by community organisations. But the community transport sector is under-funded and existing funding arrangements are complex. This has created a patchwork of services with different availability, scope, eligibility and fees.

The 2023 Budget should:

- **Boost funding to community transport providers so they can meet current demand.**
- **Fund a study of unmet need to inform future evidence-based investments that fill service gaps.** This might include new transport providers, or existing providers being funded to offer more services.

A healthy Victoria

Close the Aboriginal health gap

Aboriginal Victorians are more likely to experience ill health and to die young than the rest of the population.⁷

This is a long-tail effect of colonisation, which has created multi-generational dispossession, marginalisation and discrimination. Self-determination is key to closing this health equity gap.

The 2023 Budget should:

- **Provide Aboriginal Community Controlled Organisations (ACCOs) with adequate and secure funding** to meet rising demand for health and wellbeing services. This should be backed by the creation of a new infrastructure strategy and fund that provides a sustainable approach to building and maintaining the facilities needed by ACCOs.
- **Fund the implementation of the Victorian Aboriginal Health and Wellbeing Research Accord.** This will produce research in health and wellbeing that is meaningful to Aboriginal people and involve them as active partners.

Reinforce community health services

Over the next four years, the Victorian Government will deliver record investment in hospital infrastructure and build a workforce to match. It's vital this is coupled with strategic investment in health promotion, disease prevention, early intervention and action on the social determinants of health.

This is core business for Victoria's community health sector, along with health maintenance and continuing care services.

Community health services stand ready to ramp up this work and assist the government to 'turn off the tap' of demand for expensive hospital care.

The 2023 Budget should:

- **Increase core funding and provide longer contracts to the community health sector for 'business as usual' work**, so services can meet current demand and respond to increasingly complex community needs.
- **Provide dedicated funds for the Department of Health to work with community health on health system planning and commissioning** – including long-term strategies to boost provision of non-acute and out-of-hospital care by the community health sector.
- **Provide opportunities for the community health sector to access the government's landmark investments in health infrastructure.** Independent community health services should be eligible for the same grants and opportunities as the rest of the public health system.

⁷ Victorian Department of Health, 'Korin Korin Balit-Djak: Aboriginal health, wellbeing and safety strategic plan 2017–2027', October 2017.

Offer vulnerable people health assistance *before* they ask for it

It took a pandemic to expose the depth of extreme deprivation and social isolation in hidden pockets of our community. Victorians should not look away.

The government should apply the evidence from the short-lived but highly successful High Risk Accommodation Response (HRAR) program, which operated during the height of COVID.

Specifically, the 2023 Budget should:

- **Design and fund a state-wide assertive outreach healthcare and social assistance program.** This recurrently funded program would be targeted to people who need help, but don't seek it because of their profound social exclusion and low levels of health literacy. Local community health workers – assisted by lived experience officers – would go into caravan parks, rooming houses, Supported Residential Services and public housing to identify people who need health and social assistance; build trust with them; and proactively connect them to appropriate services.

This would allow community health services to perform assertive outreach in places they can't currently reach with existing resources.

Deliver the promise on women's health

During the election, the Victorian Government committed to flagship investments in women's health – including new clinics at public hospitals, an expansion of sexual and reproductive health hubs, an Inquiry into Women's Pain Management, direct investment in medical research and resource support services, plus support groups and mental health programs.

As funding starts to flow in the 2023 Budget, it's vital the government continues to work with experts to guide this investment, including specialist peak bodies and the 12 women's health services that comprise the 'Women's Health Program'.

The 2022 Victorian Budget included a historic and welcome funding boost for these 12 services. However, this extra funding is for just two years.

The 2023 Budget provides an opportunity to:

- **Lock-in the 'boost' funding as the new baseline level for the Women's Health Program** – with a fair rate of indexation applied annually, to maintain the real value of this funding.
- **Provide funding to support women's health services and LGBTIQ+ health services** to strengthen collaboration and alignment.

Ramp up investment in primary prevention and health promotion

A key way to reduce the burden on the health system is to prevent ill-health before it happens.

This requires strategies that focus on the whole population as well as groups that are vulnerable to poor health because of the social factors that shape health outcomes (the 'social determinants of health').

VCOSS's State Budget Submission highlights the crucial role of Aboriginal health services, community health services, women's health services, LGBTIQ+ health services and other community-based and managed services in designing and delivering primary prevention and health promotion activities.

The 2023 Budget should:

- **Strengthen investment in primary prevention and health promotion.**

VCOSS supports the call of VicHealth, the Public Health Association Australia and others for all Australian governments to set a target that directs 5 per cent of health expenditure to health promotion and illness prevention.

Boost access to mental health care now, while progressing big structural reforms

Record investment is flowing into Victoria's mental health system to implement the recommendations of the nation-leading Mental Health Royal Commission. This will increase care and improve outcomes in the medium and long term.

However, the system is under immense pressure now.

The 2023 Budget should:

- **Elevate investment in community-managed mental health services.** VCOSS endorses Mental Health Victoria's call for funds for the development of a whole-of-government strategy for community-managed mental health. In addition, ongoing funding is needed now for the Early Intervention Psychosocial Support Response and Mental Health and Wellbeing Hubs.
- **Increase and stabilise funding to specialist organisations** that currently deliver mental health supports to highly vulnerable communities. This includes First Nations people, migrant communities, refugees and asylum seekers, people experiencing homelessness, and people experiencing eating disorders.²
- **Expand support to under-serviced cohorts**, including carers, young people, women, LGBTIQ+ communities and those living in regional and rural areas.³

All reform activity and investments should incorporate a gender lens. This is vital to mitigate the impacts of gender discrimination and gender inequity, which produce unequal access to healthcare and poor health and wellbeing outcomes. It should also be intersectional – responding to compounding experiences of discrimination.

Invest in a modern alcohol and other drug treatment system

The Mental Health Royal Commission recognised the crossover between mental health and substance use, and the need for more targeted support to help people dealing with both.

But additional investment in the AOD treatment sector is needed to address drivers of substance use beyond mental ill-health, reduce wait times for treatment, and improve health and wellbeing outcomes for all cohorts of substance users. This will also contribute to the successful implementation of the Royal Commission reforms.

The 2023 Budget should:

- **Address current demand pressures.** Funding should be continued for:
 - The *COVID Workforce Initiative* – this would enable the sector to quickly restore 100 full-time equivalent AOD treatment workers and respond to urgent training and upskilling needs.

- The 100-bed *Expansion Initiative*, which provides critical residential rehabilitation support capacity.
- The *Transformer* program, which provides support to young people in new and emerging communities, to increase access to resources, community connection and engagement with education, employment and activities.
- **Address medium-term demand pressures.** Provide funding for 250 additional full-time AOD clinicians over the next two years and at least 200 residential rehabilitation and 50 residential detox beds across regional Victoria and metropolitan Melbourne. Demand for AOD treatment services increased by 71 per cent over the course of the pandemic, exacerbating long-standing capacity issues. Right now, many people who voluntarily seek AOD treatment cannot get it. The new investment should include safe and supportive services for women, LGBTIQ+ Victorians, refugee and migrant communities and other groups who face barriers.
- **Fund the development of an industry plan** that will deliver the AOD sector with the workforce and infrastructure it needs to meet future demand.
- **Better regulate the private AOD treatment sector**, to ensure quality and consumer safety.

Provide more timely access to public dental care

About 1.5 million Victorian adults are eligible for public dental care, but very few receive any.

On average, it takes almost two years to see a dentist. The pandemic has only made wait lists worse.

The 2023 Budget should:

- **Increase the public dental treatment target.** Recent Victorian budgets have set a target of public dentists treating about 220,000 adult Victorians each year. Starting from 2023, the Budget should add a further 50,000 treatments for Victorian adults each year, over five years. This would double the number of people treated by 2027/28. This would require extra investment of \$40 million each year (\$200 million/five years). Increasing the target would mean that – for the first time – all eligible Victorian adults would have access to care at least once during this term of government. It would produce positive flow-on effects for physical and mental health and social and economic participation.
- **Build the capacity of the oral health workforce.** As part of this, the government should fund Dental Health Services Victoria to oversee a dental graduates' program in public hospitals and community health services.
- **Boost investment in public health, prevention and promotion.** At least 5 per cent of Victoria's dental health budget should be spent on oral disease prevention and promotion.

Easing the cost of living

Formalise Victoria's commitment to ease the cost of living

About 11 per cent of Victorians live in persistent poverty. Many more are on the brink, struggling with debt, rising rents, higher mortgage repayments and the ballooning costs of essentials like food, medicine, clothing and energy.

The Victorian Government made cost of living a central plank of its re-election campaign, promising cheaper public transport, an extension of the Power Saving Bonus for all Victorians, and to drive down power prices by bringing back the SEC.

VCOSS believes the positive impacts of these measures would be enhanced by a series of complementary targeted initiatives, as well as broader system reforms.

To drive change in this critical space, the 2023 Budget should:

- **Establish an independent Cost of Living Commissioner.** Recent experience with state-wide, issue-specific commissioners in Victoria has demonstrated their effectiveness as both a policy development and systems reform tool. This Commissioner would lead collaborative work addressing challenges that sit across multiple areas of government, such as concessions, food security, telecommunications affordability and accessibility, and housing. They would have a mandate to look across state services and private markets and consider national factors.

Remove barriers to clean, energy-efficient technology

Victoria's response to climate change and our transition to net zero emissions has the triple-benefit of a cleaner planet, healthier people and communities, and cost savings for households.

For example, government policies promoting the adoption of solar panels and batteries are lowering both power bills and emissions. Ensuring more motorists can access a fully electric vehicle helps the environment while also reducing car running costs.

But new technologies have expensive up-front costs. Even with positive government initiatives, the best and most effective new technologies are still out of reach for the lowest-income households.

More can be done to bridge this gap, and ensure low-income Victorians have equitable access to clean technologies.

The 2023 Budget should include:

- **Targeted investment to improve the energy efficiency of poor-quality homes.** Measures would include grants of \$5,000 – targeted to community housing providers and low-income households – to help bridge the financial gap between existing schemes (such as the Victorian Energy Upgrades program) and upgrades that save the most energy but are still too expensive for people on the lowest incomes.
- **Direct subsidies, rebates and no-interest loans** to enable low-income households to replace gas appliances with electric models, and abolition of gas disconnection penalties.

- **Introduce a Default Offer for gas**, to help regulate household costs in the short term while Victoria transitions away from gas. This would be similar to the Victorian Default Offer (VDO) which currently exists for electricity.
- **Solar panels on all houses owned by the Director of Housing**. This would save households more than \$500 a year on their energy bills.
- **Action to make all public housing properties fully electric**. This would include the installation of solar panels and batteries on all suitable properties, and working with communities to identify and implement innovative place-based solutions where installation is trickier.

While Victoria transitions to a low-carbon future we must ensure people aren't left behind.

Relaunch the Home Heating and Cooling Upgrades program

Victoria's discontinuing *Home Heating and Cooling Upgrades* program offered rebates for low-income households to upgrade to energy-efficient heaters and air-conditioners.

But the rebate offered did not cover the full cost of purchase and installation, requiring an applicant to make a co-payment. This meant a cost barrier remained in the program's design, which meant that the program didn't meet its full potential.

VCOSS strongly believes the solution is to enhance the scheme, not abandon it.

The 2023 Budget should:

- **Re-launch the *Home Heating and Cooling Upgrades* program with refinements. Under the revised program, eligible applicants would not need to provide a co-payment.**

The scheme's eligibility criteria should be amended to specifically include people impacted by the 2022 northern Victoria floods, who now need to replace or upgrade appliances and wiring due to water damage.

Boost food relief now, while developing a long-term plan

Food relief agencies are experiencing unprecedented demand, with one-in-25 Victorians – or about 180,000 people – running out of food or struggling to afford food each year.

This crisis is compounded by rising inflation and sluggish wages growth impacting household budgets, just as foreign events and natural disasters disrupt food production and supply.

Relief services are trying to provide nutritious and culturally-appropriate food to a growing number of people while struggling with dwindling donations and fewer volunteers.

The Victorian Government should:

- **Produce a whole-of-government Victorian Food Security Strategy.** This would be a long-term blueprint to create a food system that supports health, sustainability, equity and resilience for all Victorians. It would comprise a food system review (that would examine physical and economic accessibility, availability and quality of food across Victoria). It would also establish and fund ongoing data collection into food security challenges. This would take the form of a Victorian Food Stress Index collated by VCOSS.

- **Back food relief workers.** Invest in more paid food relief positions, plus provide funding to expand the volunteer workforce (with resources to recruit, train and support skilled volunteers).
- **Cut food waste.** Establish a grants scheme to help small businesses, community sector organisations and sports clubs to implement other initiatives that reduce food waste and increase quality food donations.

Help more people access the Power Saving Bonus

The Victorian Government's decision to extend the \$250 Power Saving Bonus into 2023 will give immediate relief to Victorians struggling to cover household costs and assist many to switch to a better energy deal.

But some people will need help accessing the Bonus.

To support this, the 2023 Budget should:

- **Extend Phase 2 Power Saving Bonus community outreach partnerships.**

Resourcing trusted local community services to raise awareness of the Power Saving Bonus and helping people to submit applications is a smart investment that maximises the public benefit of the scheme.

While helping people to navigate the Victorian Energy Compare website for a better deal, and access the payment, community outreach partners can connect people to information and support on a range of other energy market-related matters, including additional energy saving advice and upgrade schemes.

Free Victorians from unrealistic and entrenched power debts

Currently, Victorians can accumulate energy debts far beyond their capacity to repay.

These big debts create immense stress for individuals, damaging their mental health, and forcing them to indefinitely reduce spending in other areas of their lives to service a debt they will never clear.

For example, at the end of the COVID lockdown period, the Essential Services Commission estimates 9,000 Victorians households were in arrears and unable to pay for their ongoing electricity needs. The average debt was roughly \$2,000.

The 2023 Budget should:

- **Provide a one-off Debt Demolition payment of up to \$2,000** to help eligible low-income households clear their current accumulated utility debts.
- **Establish a 'maximum arrears' cap.** With a cap in place, power companies would be banned from generating new customer debt beyond a set point. This would save people from accruing large debts. It would also incentivise power companies to step up and provide more help to customers to access all assistance on offer – for example, raising awareness of concessions and appliance upgrade schemes.

Grow the financial counselling sector to match need

Many Victorians are on the brink of financial distress, just one piece of bad news away from a crisis.

The proliferation of credit cards, dodgy debt management services, payday lenders and risky ‘buy now, pay later’ schemes has created a ticking time bomb for individuals, families and communities.

These financial traps drive people towards hardship, and work against the goal of the Victorian Government’s cost-of-living agenda.

Financial counsellors are a fundamental safeguard to stop people slipping into crisis. They are employed by community organisations to provide free, independent and confidential advice to people in financial distress. This might relate to housing costs, energy hardship, disaster recovery or debt.

Currently, Victoria has a financial counsellor shortage, and existing counsellors often aren’t in the right places (such as aged care, disability or mental health services).

The Victorian Government should:

- **Fund the financial counselling sector to ensure more Victorians can access assistance when they need it.**
- **Establish a financial counsellor outreach scheme.** For example, a financial counsellor employed by a community legal centre could have a schedule to visit local aged care or health services.

Thriving children and families

End childhood inequity in a generation

Victoria's flagship early childhood '*Best Start, Best Life*' initiative will boost children's participation in early learning and support women's economic participation.

However, the impact could be even greater if coupled with new targeted investments in neighbourhoods that have the highest levels of childhood disadvantage.

The 2023 Budget should:

- **Fund Victoria's Centre for Community Child Health to lead a multi-sector, multi-partner trial of 'Beyond the Silver Bullet'.**

'Beyond the Silver Bullet' would identify 10 transformational interventions and deliver them in 20 priority communities. The sites – and the 10 interventions – would be selected with government.

The interventions could include sustained nurse home visiting, playgroup participation, childcare attendance, parenting programs, access to green spaces, and financial support.

Many of these interventions already exist. The difference in this trial is that they would be combined (or 'stacked') in neighbourhoods, and every child and family in the trial would receive every intervention in the antenatal to school-entry period, to accelerate equitable outcomes.

'Beyond the Silver Bullet' can transform the lives of Victorian children and provide a global template for disrupting early childhood disadvantage.

Connect more families to early help through right@home

Early help for vulnerable families reduces hardship and improves children's long-term development.

The right@home program uses the existing Maternal and Child Health workforce to provide 25 structured home visits to vulnerable families. The visits start before a child is born and continue over the child's first two years.

The program has been shown to improve parent care and connection. It's a high-impact, evidence-informed initiative that aligns with eight recommendations from the Mental Health Royal Commission, as well as ongoing family violence reforms.

Currently, the program only operates in four areas of Victoria: Ballarat, Dandenong, Frankston and Whittlesea.

The 2023 Budget should:

- **Provide funding to scale and sustain provision of right@home across Victoria, so that it is accessible to all families who need it.** This program should be recurrently funded as 'business as usual' in Victoria. If scaled, right@home could also be the first 'layer' in the stack of 10 'Beyond the Silver Bullet' interventions.

Keep strengthening the child and family services system

Victoria's child and family services system is under immense pressure. Demand is increasing across family services, family violence, sexual assault and child protection, and the workforce is fatigued.

Service providers – dedicated to supporting vulnerable children, young people, families and carers, and their workers – are worried about funding and program sustainability.

Over the next four years, Victoria should continue to implement policies and approaches that reduce demand and help shift the system from crisis responses to early help.

The 2023 Budget should:

- **Provide adequate and secure funding to child and family service providers so they can meet demand and provide the highest levels of therapeutic care.**
- **Deliver a substantial increase in resources for the sector to provide early intervention, and family preservation and reunification.** As part of this, the Budget should ensure adequate funds for evaluation of pilot schemes, and sustain investment in promising pilot initiatives, including in the early help space.

Support self-determination in child and family services

Aboriginal people understand what is best for their families and communities.

The Victorian Government has committed to reducing the over-representation of Aboriginal children in care by 45 per cent by 2031.⁸

To support self-determination, Aboriginal Community Controlled Organisations should be empowered to work with families to ensure that all children and young people are safe, resilient and thriving.

The Victorian Government should:

- **Increase resourcing to Aboriginal Community Controlled Organisations so they have adequate funding to work proactively with Aboriginal children and their families to prevent them from becoming system-involved.**

Relieve cost-of-living pressure on our foster and kinship carers

Foster and kinship carers play an important role in creating safe environments for children and young people to learn and grow.

Carers shoulder a heavy financial burden to do this important work. While Victoria pays carers a fortnightly 'allowance' to contribute to day-to-day expenses, many foster and kinship carers experience financial hardship.⁹

⁸ Premier of Victoria The Hon Daniel Andrews, '[Strengthening Connection To Culture, Country And Family](#)', 10 September 2021.

⁹ Foster Care Association of Victoria, '[Increase the carer allowance](#)', 2018.

This cost burden is contributing to carer dissatisfaction, carer churn and a long-term decline in the overall number of carers. The loss of experienced carers creates instability for children and young people already living with significant trauma.

The 2023 Budget should:

- **Raise the Care Allowance.** This allowance should cover the true costs of providing a safe and therapeutic environment. The Victorian Government should complete a review of the current allowance (as recommended by the Australian Institute of Family Studies¹⁰) to determine an appropriate increase and implement the new payment level immediately.
- **Improve Client Expense funding** for extraordinary expenses that are not covered by the Care Allowance (for example, medication, allied health services, and extra-curricular activities). The current funding is limited and pooled. This means some children receive the supports they need, while others miss out. Action is required to ensure an adequate, guaranteed minimum amount of funding per child, and funding assessments that are timely, consistent and transparent.
- **Provide equity for kinship carers**, who currently receive less financial assistance than foster carers.

Increase community connection and support for foster and kinship carers

Being a carer is rewarding work, but the experience can be isolating.

Carers want more peer support and greater access to respite care – in particular, respite carers they can build a relationship with over time.¹¹

To retain carers and attract new ones, Victoria should address these needs urgently.

The Victorian Government should:

- **Invest in initiatives that increase community connection, emotional and practical support for foster and kinship carers.** For example, several community agencies are rolling out evidence-informed peer support programs that connect carers who live close to each other. This creates a kind of ‘extended family’ or support network. Where positive outcomes are being achieved, the Victorian Government should review these and scale up what works, so that all carers have access to peer support.

Increase support for parents and families with disability

While many Victorians may need to access sexual and reproductive health services, relationship advice, or parenting information and support, access isn’t always equitable.

Some individuals and families with disability experience barriers to getting the information or services they are seeking.

While there have been welcome investments as part of the family violence and child and family services reforms, disability advocacy organisations and self-advocacy groups advise that parents are still not receiving the full range of holistic supports they need.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Ibid.

The Victorian Government should expand access to timely, tailored, accessible and inclusive information, advice, advocacy and services.

In particular, the 2023 Budget is an opportunity to:

- **Scale up the Royal Women's Hospital's *Women with Individual Needs* program so there is statewide provision.**¹² This antenatal care clinic provides a dedicated midwife and social worker to support women who are pregnant and have a disability. The midwife provides continuity of antenatal and postnatal care, while the social worker provides information about service options, advocacy, practical assistance, emotional and social support and referral to community services.

¹² [The Royal Women's Hospital - Women with Individual Needs.](#)

Stronger early childhood education, schools and skills training

Strengthen disability inclusion in early childhood education and care services

Many young children with disabilities or developmental delays were not diagnosed or assisted during the COVID lockdowns. Children and families are now presenting to early childhood education and care services with increasingly complex needs. The proportion of children with disabilities that formally require special assistance or extra assessments has grown markedly since 2018.¹³

During the election campaign, the Victorian Government made a welcome pledge to boost the allied health workforce in regional Victoria. Having more speech pathologists, occupational therapists and disability workers in these areas will make a positive difference for children's participation in early learning.

The 2023 Budget should invest in additional, complementary measures that improve inclusion support for children across the state. It should include funding to:

- **Refine and expand access to the existing Kindergarten Inclusion Support and Preschool Field Officer programs.** Program refinements should remove the hurdle of a diagnosis requirement for children and make it easier for services to access an additional educator.
- **Map all current disability supports,** engage with the sector and families to identify access barriers and service gaps, and use these findings to guide future budget investment in inclusion support.

Help vulnerable children and families engage in kindergarten

Victoria is leading the nation with the *Best Start, Best Life* reform agenda, which includes two years of high-quality free early learning before school.

But some children and families need additional support to take up early learning and sustain engagement, including those from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds.

The Victorian Government has recently pledged \$3.7 million to establish 10 new bilingual kindergartens across the state. This election commitment builds on the strong foundations of the government's *Early Childhood Language* program. It will improve the literacy of **all** participating children – but particularly benefit children from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds, by helping to remove barriers to engagement.

There is an opportunity for the government to boost the impact of this pledge and support an even greater number of vulnerable children and families to engage in kinder.

The 2023 Budget should:

¹³ Australian Government, [2021 Australian Early Development Census National Report](#), 2022, p 72. Australian Government, '[2021 Australian Early Development Census National Report](#)', 2022, p 72.

- **Boost funding for community programs that foster links between culturally and linguistically diverse families and early learning services.** For example, the *Family Learning Support Program* model, which was first piloted during COVID lockdowns, has supported the engagement of families living in inner-city high-density public housing and warrants ongoing investment.
- **Expand the existing *Access to Early Learning* program.** This Department of Education program assists three-year-old children from families involved with Enhanced Maternal and Child Health, ChildFIRST or child protection services. Extra funding would enable state-wide reach, helping to address unmet demand.

Make public education free

Many Victorian families are struggling to afford the cost of a ‘free’ public education. So-called ‘voluntary fees’ and payments for extra-curricular activities keep adding up. For children whose families can’t pay, it’s difficult to genuinely participate in all aspects of schooling and keep up with other students.

The 2023 Budget should:

- **Formally declare digital devices, textbooks and stationary part of the standard curriculum** and allocate additional funding to schools to cover these items.
- **Fund State Schools Relief, schools and other support agencies to cover school uniform co-payments where vouchers don’t cover the full costs** (complementing State Schools Relief’s existing suite of programs).
- **Make public transport free all year for all disadvantaged children and children in crisis**, building on the existing free 30-day public transport travel pass for disadvantaged children.
- **Expand the *Get Active Kids Voucher Program*** to fund recreational activities like music, drama and visual arts, in addition to sport.
- **Launch a School Lunch Club program**, building on the successful School Breakfast Club program. This would be a carefully targeted measure and involve students in co-design.

Address learning and wellbeing needs to support student engagement

Roughly 10,000 young Victorians drop out of school each year.

Students can disengage because they’re struggling academically, have wellbeing issues or financial barriers.¹⁴ This can have lifelong consequences, increasing the risk of long-term unemployment, poor mental health and engagement with the justice system.

Two of the most effective ways schools can keep kids engaged are to address literacy and numeracy struggles early, and to respond to students’ wellbeing needs.

¹⁴ Melbourne Graduate School of Education, [*‘Those who disappear: The Australian education problem nobody wants to talk about’*](#), 2019.

That's why VCOSS has enthusiastically welcomed the Victorian Government's extension of funding for the in-school tutoring program. Small group, school-based tutoring is proven to reduce learning gaps between disadvantaged students and their peers. Looking ahead, this should become a recurrently funded program.

VCOSS also commends the government for its implementation of the recommendations from the Mental Health Royal Commission. This is driving substantial investment in student mental health and wellbeing, providing schools with the resources they need to access the right evidence-informed interventions for their students.

The 2023 Budget is an opportunity for government to increase the impact of existing commitments. It should:

- **Fund the development of a tailored literacy and numeracy strategy for Grade 1 students.** It's 75 per cent cheaper to address a literacy problem during Grade 1 than in Grade 4.¹⁵
- **Fund the expansion of wellbeing teams in schools.** This extra capacity would enable schools to more easily identify students facing barriers (for example, homelessness or family violence) and assist them to get help from local specialist organisations.
- **Expand eligibility for the *Navigator* program.** This program is currently only offered to students who miss 70 per cent of classes. But by then it might be too late. The eligibility threshold should be reduced to missing 40 per cent of classes, so more kids can get help, and sooner.
- **Expand access to *Teach the Teacher*.** This student-led program supports schools to embed student voice practices. However, its reach is currently limited. The government should fund the development of a new blended-delivery model, to enable all schools in Victoria to participate.

Support school students with disability to thrive

During the election, the Victorian Government committed \$207 million to transform specialist schools. Key elements include an expansion of outside hours care to every single specialist school, scholarships to build the allied health workforce in regional areas, new onsite spaces for allied health appointments, and the introduction of NDIS Navigators into all 89 specialist schools. This will make a substantial difference in the lives of students and families at these schools.

The new commitments build on existing funding for specialist school upgrades and the broader \$1.6 billion *Disability Inclusion* reforms that are intended to make all schools inclusive for students with disabilities and offer the support students need to thrive.

This is a mammoth system transformation, which will take full effect by 2025. It will require continuing close work by the Department of Education with schools, peak bodies, advocacy groups and students to ensure the reforms achieve their promise.

In the meantime, there is a need for government to urgently respond to a cohort of students with disability who need targeted support to consistently attend school.

The Association for Children with Disability (ACD) continues to report a significant increase in the number of students who are formally or informally excluded from school, as well as increased prevalence of school refusal (also known as 'school can't'). Recent ACD data suggests a doubling of cases. Current reforms – whilst welcome – do not address the particular challenges faced by this cohort of children and young people and their families.

¹⁵ S Goldfeld, R Beatson, A Watts, P Snow, L Gold, HND Le, S Edwards, J Connell, H Stark, B Shingles, T Barnett, J Quach, P Eadie, ['Tier 2 oral language and early reading interventions for preschool to grade 2 children: a restricted systematic review'](#), Australian Journal of Learning Difficulties, Vol 27, No 1, 2022.

The 2023 Budget should:

- **Provide dedicated resources for the Department of Education to work with peak bodies, advocacy organisations, schools and lived experience representatives to identify and fund measures that address school exclusion and school refusal.**

Support disadvantaged adult learners to engage in education

Learn Local providers play an important role training adults in community settings, such as Neighbourhood Houses. This includes basic reading and writing, maths, digital literacy and employability skills. Graduates are empowered to tackle new things, such as further training, skilled volunteering and work.

These programs are highly effective, with graduates being more likely to complete a subsequent TAFE course. However, providers are struggling for funding. Many are closing their doors.

The Victorian Government should:

- **Design a more generous funding model for Learn Local providers.** This new model should cover the full cost of course development, promotion, delivery, administration and student support. Under this new model, TAFEs and Learn Locals should be encouraged to coordinate and collaborate more.

Support learners to complete VET (TAFE) qualifications

During the election, the Victorian Government announced \$8.2 million for TAFE transition officers to support students with disability. This is a welcome measure. Providing this type of 'wraparound support' sets students up for success and helps them stay the distance with their studies.

The 2023 Budget should build on this commitment and:

- **Provide funding to implement all recommendations from the Victorian Parliament's *Inquiry into access to TAFE for learners with disability*.**
- **Establish Mentor Teams at every TAFE campus to support other groups of 'at risk' or vulnerable students.** These supports would include accredited and pre-accredited language, literacy, numeracy and study skills training. The mentors would also provide 'warm' referrals to specialist supports like disability, mental health or housing services. This would help drive up TAFE completion rates amongst these cohorts of learners.
- **Establish a bursary program for students on low incomes.** While the expanded Free TAFE initiative removes significant cost barriers, students are still required to cover the cost of course materials, transport, childcare and student placements. Learners who are unable to absorb these costs are at risk of dropping out and need additional targeted financial support.

Victorians in work

Target help to people locked out of good jobs

Victoria's employment growth is strong, with the unemployment rate at 3.4 per cent.¹⁶

However, even in a tight labour market, some groups – including older women, people with disabilities, young people, carers, Aboriginal people, and people from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds – face structural barriers to employment and struggle to obtain decent secure jobs.

Dedicated policies and programs are needed to 'wrap' support around these jobseekers, so they can participate in the economy.

The Victorian Government should continue to resource Jobs Victoria to deliver this work. This should include a further four years of funding in the 2023 Budget to:

- **Provide personalised support to disadvantaged jobseekers.** This means providing advocates, mentors and career counsellors to help people identify pathways, develop pre-employment skills and apply for jobs.
- **Match jobseekers to good jobs and fair employers.** The Jobs Victoria Partners program and Online Hub should continue, with strong quality oversight to ensure people are matched to good jobs with employers that provide a fair and safe workplace, ensuring that minimum employment entitlements are met. The focus should be on achieving sustainable employment outcomes.
- **Provide targeted wage subsidies.** Reinstating the *Jobs Victoria Fund* wage subsidy program would encourage employers to create jobs for people they wouldn't normally consider employing; for example, a young person who's never been employed, a person with a disability or an older woman returning to paid work after raising children.

Continued investment in Jobs Victoria infrastructure will be vital to the success of flagship government initiatives such as the new *Social Services Jobs Guarantee*.

Deliver Victoria's first Youth Guarantee

Around 61,400 young Victorians aged between 15–24 years are not currently studying or working.¹⁷ The lingering effects of the pandemic are a factor – lockdowns disrupted traditional job pathways and increased mental health challenges. Other structural causes include lack of experience, which limits work options.

In an increasingly tight labour market that is experiencing widespread skills shortages, more needs to be done to invest in young Victorians' skills and experience so that they can access secure employment opportunities.

Modelled off the successful European Union approach, which has supported more than 24 million young people to start a job or continue learning, Victoria should:

¹⁶ABS, '[Labour force, Australia](#)', November 2022.

¹⁷ Australian Bureau of Statistics, Education and Work, Australia, '[Persons aged 15 – 24 years, Table 15: Engagement in employment and/or study, by highest educational attainment, 2022](#)', May 2022.

- **Develop and offer a Youth Guarantee.** This would ensure that all Victorians aged under 25 are offered an employment, education or training opportunity within four months of becoming unemployed or leaving formal education. This is a smart investment that can leverage existing Jobs Victoria infrastructure and expertise, Free TAFE, mental health reforms and school reforms. Employers, educators, unions and social service groups stand ready to work with the government to ensure that all young Victorians can access opportunities to train and work.

Develop local strategies to tackle unemployment and skills shortages

Geography, skills requirements, housing shortages and other factors can make filling jobs, particularly in regional areas, difficult.

Local communities are best placed to solve these challenges and support people into meaningful work. But they need government coordination and support to make a difference.

Victoria should:

- **Fund local skills and jobs taskforces.** These taskforces would be grounded in their local communities and be responsive to local needs. For example, one taskforce might focus on assisting a local industry find suitable workers (from within their community and beyond), while another might focus on helping a specific cohort of jobseeker. There are existing place-based models that could be adopted and expanded, such as Community Investment Committees.¹⁸
- **Back the Work and Learning Centres network.** Centres in central Melbourne, Ballarat, Geelong, Morwell and Shepparton help social housing tenants, people experiencing homelessness and other local jobseekers find work. The government should provide these centres with long-term funding certainty. It should also establish five additional sites in areas of need in regional Victoria.

Create more jobs for people with disabilities

People with disabilities are a key source of untapped talent. However, just 53 per cent of people with disabilities are employed, compared to about 84 per cent of people without a disability.¹⁹

Some of the barriers include employers not understanding disabilities, lack of confidence to hire a person with a disability or having low expectations of what tasks they can perform.

These barriers can and must be overcome.

The Victorian Government should invest in a package of new measures that improve hiring and job retention for people with disabilities. Specifically, the 2023 Budget should fund:

- **Online resources and training activities for employers** to build skills and knowledge and develop the confidence to recruit and retain staff with disabilities.
- **Wage subsidies to encourage employers to hire people with disabilities.**

¹⁸ Brotherhood of St Laurence, '[Community Investment Committees](#)', May 2020.

¹⁹ ABS, '[Ageing and Carers, Australia: Summary of Findings](#)', 2018.

- **One-on-one support for employers who need assistance redesigning jobs and making reasonable adjustments across their workplaces, and other capacity-building initiatives.**

It should also provide funding to:

- **Progress all public sector disability employment commitments outlined in *Inclusive Victoria: State Disability Plan 2022–2026*.** It is vital that the Victorian Public Service sets an example to other employers, demonstrating its commitment to the economic inclusion of people with disability and showcasing the benefits of accessing a diverse talent pool.

Provide a pathway into work – or back to work – for carers

Full-time carers are overwhelmingly excluded from the paid workforce.²⁰ Compared to non-carers, they're less likely to have a full-time job and more likely not to work at all. Many rely on inadequate Commonwealth support payments, but these payments are so low that people struggle to afford food and other essentials.

During the pandemic, about half of all Victorian carers either quit or reduced the hours of their paid job to accommodate their caring duties. They haven't returned to their old level of paid work.²¹ We need pathways that support carers who wish to return to paid work, and those seeking paid work for the first time.

The 2023 Budget should continue to:

- **Help carers engage in paid work.** The *Carers Employment Support Program* is a successful government program offering employment support, mentoring and vocational training to carers. It needs steady and recurrent funding to better support carers and jobs growth in Victoria over the long term.

Support the community sector as Victoria's jobs engine room

The community services industry employs more people than any other industry and is the third-largest contributor to GDP.²²

However, community service organisations are struggling to attract and retain workers. Shortages are most acute in regional areas. As a highly feminised industry,²³ the impacts of understaffing (when organisations can't fill roles) are mostly felt by women.

VCOSS welcomes the Victorian Government's investment in the *Social Services Jobs Guarantee*. This flagship initiative will support a pipeline of entry-level workers into the sector, helping to fill suitable vacancies with newly graduated Diploma of Community Services students.

In addition, the 2023 Budget is an opportunity to fix structural issues constraining jobs growth.

²⁰ D Schofield, R Shrestha, EJ Callander, J Byles and M Kimman, '[Costs of being a carer: Labour force participation and lost earnings among older working-aged Australians](#)', *Australian and New Zealand Journal of Public Health*, April 2013.

²¹ Carers Vic, '[Care for Victorians Policy Platform 2022](#)', p 7.

²² Based on Gross Value Added – Chain volume measures, Victoria (2019-2020). Source: Australian Bureau of Statistics, Australian National Accounts: State Accounts, November 2020.

²³ ABS, '[Characteristics of Employment, Australia](#)', August 2020 (Compiled using Tablebuilder).

It should provide:

- Adequate baseline funding and a fair rate of indexation that reflects the true cost of service delivery.
- Secure long-term contracts.

A healthy climate supporting resilient communities

Cut emissions rapidly and equitably

The Victorian Government committed to reducing emissions by 75–80 per cent by 2035 and moved the state's net zero target forward to 2045.

Among other benefits, this will save lives by limiting the harm of extreme weather events that are becoming more frequent and more severe every year.

But how Victoria reaches these numbers is important.

Climate mitigation should be equitable and targeted at the people who have less resources to participate in the transition to net zero.

The 2023 Budget should:

- **Advance the rental minimum standards** for ceiling insulation, draught proofing and hot water systems that were announced in 2020.
- **Expand the *Healthy Homes* program** across the state to upgrade the energy efficiency of all low-income homes.
- **Roll out the *Social Housing Energy Efficiency Program*** to all social housing properties.
- **Install solar panels and/or batteries in all public housing and provide support for solar gardens for renters.**

Help public housing residents keep cool

During the election campaign, the Victorian Government made a welcome pledge to install air-conditioning in the state's 42 high-rise public housing towers.

This investment will improve the lives of current and future tenants, many on low or fixed incomes. But the full benefits will only be realised if tenants can comfortably afford to use these new appliances.

Broader changes are also necessary to ensure **all** public housing tenants are kept safe from the heat.

The 2023 Budget should:

- **Begin rolling out the air-conditioning now.** The first of these promised units should be installed this year.
- **Connect everybody to solar.** Solar panels should be installed on all suitable public housing properties. Where this is not possible, tenants must be supported to access solar gardens or other communal sources of cheap, green power.

- **Install power batteries in every public housing property** to absorb energy from solar sources or the network grid when it's at its cheapest.
- **Fund an education campaign** to show residents how to most effectively use their air conditioner (such as optimal temperature ranges and time periods), batteries and related products.
- **Introduce a Summer Cooling Concession.** This 17.5 per cent energy bill discount would apply to all people in public and community housing, and any other Victorian with a specific medical need. It would replace the existing and more narrowly focussed Medical Cooling Concession.

Build Victoria's climate resilience

The Victorian Government's seven Adaptation Action Plans (AAPs) and six Regional Adaptation Strategies (RASs) plot a meaningful pathway to a state that is resilient to the growing impacts of climate change.

But there needs to be ongoing funding behind these plans and strategies to deliver the most benefit.

The community sector provides a clear case study. Sector organisations feel impacts of climate change firsthand, with extreme weather events harming staff and disrupting vital services.

The 2023 Budget should:

- **Allocate ongoing funding to all of Victoria's climate adaptation plans and strategies.**
- **Establish a specific Community Sector Climate Adaptation Fund** (as part of the Health and Human Services AAP) to support initiatives such as hands-on training and scenario planning.

Develop cool spaces that act as heat refuges

People who don't have air-conditioning or who live in shoddy housing rely on cool community spaces like shops and libraries to keep safe in summer.

Yet these facilities might be difficult to get to by public transport or have limited opening hours. Some employ security patrols that discourage people from staying for extended periods.

The 2023 Budget should:

- **Formalise a network of heat refuges** so everybody has a safe and reliable place to shelter from the heat. This includes advertising, extended opening hours, affordable transport options, and funding for community service organisations to provide tailored assistance.

Ensure Victoria's flood recovery leaves no one behind

The Victorian Government's \$351 million investment to support regional Victorian communities to recover from the recent floods will make a material difference to communities that are coming to grips with this devastating disaster.

Investment must go beyond the initial flood response to an inclusive recovery as we learn from this experience to better prepare for future disasters.

Victoria will continue to experience emergencies and natural disasters with increasing frequency and severity. We know that people who are already experiencing disadvantage are hit first and worst by extreme weather events, and need the most help to recover. Others will be pushed into poverty and may experience homelessness for the first time in their lives, and their health and wellbeing will suffer. Practical steps must be taken now to embed inclusive practices to responding to disasters like the recent floods, and building community resilience at a state-wide and local level.

Strengthen spontaneous volunteering

'Spontaneous volunteers' deliver essential support during and after crises. However, harnessing this human capital requires extensive planning and co-ordination to ensure the safety and support of volunteers, the public they seek to assist, and the emergency management workforce.²⁴

While the State Emergency Management Plan makes clear the roles and responsibilities of recovery lead agencies and recovery support agencies, the 2022 floods have highlighted the need to match this with resources to manage spontaneous volunteering.

The 2023 Budget should:

- **Fund the development and implementation of a well-resourced and coordinated spontaneous volunteering strategy, responses, and best practice models.** This will strengthen community-led volunteer responses in times of social crises.

Prevent floods and other emergencies from creating a long-term homelessness crisis

Thousands of homes around Victoria have been affected by the floods. Many Victorians have been made homeless as their homes are deemed uninhabitable.

²⁴ https://www.volunteeringvictoria.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2022/12/VV_Budget-2023-2024-Submission_FINAL-1.pdf

The Victorian Government acted quickly to make relief available to Victorians to meet their immediate crisis housing needs, as well as re-establishment assistance for homeowners. However, many Victorians continue to reside in housing that is not suitable beyond the immediate crisis period and their medium- and long-term housing prospects are unclear.

Victoria is already experiencing a housing crisis, with a lack of crisis, transitional and long-term social and private rental housing available to meet demand. This has only worsened as Victorians displaced by floods add to the pressure on this system.

The 2023 Budget should:

- **Invest in a suite of measures to support people currently displaced or experiencing homelessness as a consequence of floods, including:**
 - Working with investment property owners to make more houses available for private, affordable long-term rental, including mechanisms to tighten the regulation of residential holiday accommodation such as Airbnb, and establish a formula for fair rent increases.
 - Using vacant land for modular housing, so that people can remain connected to community while awaiting long-term housing options.
- **Prioritise social housing as high-value public infrastructure that should be fast-tracked in recovery.**
- **Undertake a housing needs analysis that investigates:**
 - Ongoing housing support needs for medium- and long-term recovery – for example, targeted supports such as financial and legal assistance.
 - Strategies and investment required to ensure rapid replacement of housing stock.
 - The housing design features required to assure safety and resilience in the face of future emergencies and natural disasters.
 - The changes to planning policy, housing standards, insurance and other measures that will be required to minimise impacts of future disasters/emergencies.²⁵

Support community sector organisation capacity

The community sector plays a vital role in helping Victorian communities prepare for, respond to and recover from disasters.

Throughout the 2022 Victorian floods, community organisations have met additional demand for essential services, mobilised resources and expertise, and ensured people most at-risk were safe.

The Victorian Government can help community organisations to recover from the 2022 floods and prepare for future ones by:

- **Establishing a Flexible Contingency Fund that supports community sector organisations to rapidly respond to emergencies.**

²⁵ Refer to Infrastructure Victoria, Victoria's Infrastructure Strategy 2021-2051, Recommendation 19 – Build back better after emergencies, p72.

Mitigate mental health impacts

The Mental Health Royal Commission highlighted the need to prioritise mental health during and after natural disasters, and recommended that Australian, state and territory governments refine arrangements to support localised planning and the delivery of appropriate mental health services following a natural disaster.

In the aftermath of disasters like the recent floods, people may experience a range of physical, psychological, emotional or behavioural reactions that, while perfectly natural, can significantly impact their ability to cope with the situation.²⁶

As part of the initial flood response, the Victorian Government moved quickly to boost funding to existing mental health hubs and announced an additional welcome package of mental health support for flood-affected communities.

However, many Victorians, having already experienced prolonged distress resulting from COVID-19 and other disasters, now face the cumulative impact of years of stress.

As the government progresses Royal Commission implementation, VCOSS supports Mental Health Victoria's calls for the 2023 Budget to:

- **Make targeted investments in building resilient communities through Disaster Response and Relief** – such as a grassroots community building and men's mental health and suicide prevention initiative in 10 disaster-impacted regional Victorian municipalities, and rural and regional youth mental health education and suicide prevention.²⁷

It's vital that government supports community-grown, place-based solutions for rural and regional communities.

Boost responses to family violence

Research shows that family violence incidents soar in the months and years following natural disasters. While natural disasters on their own do not cause family violence, incidents are often driven by the effects of disasters, including displacement and homelessness, unemployment, increased alcohol and drug use, trauma, grief and loss.²⁸

The 2023 Budget should invest in:

- **Boosting specialist family violence service capacity for case management in flood-affected areas, as well as their capacity to be disaster prepared.**

²⁶ Australian Red Cross, *'The hidden impact of disasters'*, Humanitarian Issue 27, Melbourne, 2015.

²⁷ See recommendation 20 of Mental Health Victoria's 2023 State Budget Submission for detail - https://www.mhvic.org.au/images/MHV-003-Budget_RGB_v2.pdf

²⁸ J Boddy and C Harris, *Domestic violence soars after natural disasters. Preventing it needs to be part of the emergency response*, The Conversation, 27 January 2021.

Support multicultural communities before, during and after disasters and emergencies

Migrant and refugee communities are often at greater risk of harm during emergencies such as the recent floods.

Early and culturally-appropriate engagement with diverse communities is key to building the resilience of people who might have never experienced Victorian weather extremes.

Emergency preparedness programs should be co-designed with CALD community leaders so activities are effective, trusted and fit-for-purpose.

The 2023 Budget should:

- **Provide sustainable funding to multicultural community organisations before disasters strike, rather than one-off funding in response to crises.**

Help children and young people take climate action

Climate change is shaping the lives of young Victorians and driving their anxiety in an increasingly uncertain world.

The floods will be one of countless extreme weather events that will punctuate their lives.

At best these disasters will invoke panic as distressing images pop up on the news, or at worst hit close to home and harm their friends and loved ones.

But there's hope.

As adults, these young people will navigate the public policy challenges of climate change and be the generation who solves this wicked crisis.

And so we need a comprehensive approach that supports children and young people on this journey.

The 2023 Budget should:

- **Fund the development of a Climate Resilience Framework for Children and Young People that assists children and young people to navigate eco-anxiety and take action.**

The Framework would catalyse all parts of government to engage with children and young people about climate change and provide funding to projects that build their understanding and empower them to lead in their local communities.

Importantly, this initiative would ensure that young people's voices are heard, while helping train the climate leaders of tomorrow.

A safe place to call home

Take steps now to establish a long-term pipeline of new social housing

The current four-year *Big Housing Build* is a record investment in building new community housing and upgrading existing public housing. More than 1,700 new social housing homes have been completed, with another 7,381 on the way.²⁹

This nation-leading program is changing people's lives.

However, more than 100,000 Victorians are on the waitlist for housing.³⁰ Even those in most need for a home are waiting about 12 months.³¹ Victoria needs 60,000 new social housing properties over the next 10 years.

To fund this construction requirement, the 2023 Budget should:

- **Introduce a mechanism for big developer contributions.** This secure revenue stream would help create a pipeline of new community and public housing beyond 2024, and enable a focus on groups who have historically been locked out or under-served, such as young people.³² The new mechanism would need to be developed with the development industry and other stakeholders, including the community sector. Legislating the mechanism would provide certainty to all parties.

Put Housing First

'Housing First' is a best-practice model of homelessness support.

Victoria has several large programs operating on Housing First principles. *Homelessness to a Home* and *Homes for Families* support almost 2,000 people with long-term housing and wraparound support.

However, funding for these programs will lapse at the end of this financial year. There is a risk some people who have just begun recovering from long-term challenges could return to homelessness. Without careful planning, these circumstances will be worst for those living in regional cities that will host the Commonwealth Games (see page 55 – *Use the Commonwealth Games to develop Victoria's regions fairly*).

The 2023 Budget should:

- **Extend funding for current Housing First-like initiatives** including *Homelessness to a Home* and *Homes for Families*.
- **Fund a comprehensive model of Housing First in the specialist homelessness system**, alongside the current Housing First-like programs. This 'high fidelity' model should be co-designed with the sector, facilitate access for under-served groups (such as young people and people with disability) and cover more areas of regional and rural Victoria. The investment should reflect the true costs of delivering this

²⁹ Homes Victoria, "[What's happening in my area?](#)", August 2022.

³⁰ Homes Victoria, [Victorian Housing Register](#), June 2022.

³¹ Department of Treasury and Finance, *Victorian Budget 2022/23, Budget Paper 3 – Service Delivery*, May 2022, p 216.

³² Refer also to our Budget ask for a new Youth Homelessness Strategy. As part of this, VCOSS is calling for 5000 social housing properties for young people over the next four years.

specialised model, provide access to suitable housing stock, and include funding for workforce training.

Stay the course on fairer renting

Long-awaited changes to Victoria's renting laws (the *Residential Tenancies Act 1997*) were introduced in March 2021. Many renters now have more protections around rent increases and evictions, and new rights to make minor modifications to their home. There are also higher standards for amenity, thermal comfort and energy efficiency.

While some of the changes deal with rent and financial hardship, they were designed pre-pandemic. They are now being tested by unforeseen circumstances – a perfect storm of low vacancy rates and skyrocketing rents, set against a global cost-of-living crisis.

Renters are skipping meals, medicine and heating to pay the rent.

To support the realisation of the government's bold rental fairness agenda, the 2023 Budget should:

- **Boost funding for services to intervene early to help renters use their new rights** to resolve issues like unreasonable rent increases and evictions. This should include tenancy specific supports, such as community legal centres, and tenancy advocacy services (*Tenancy Advocacy and Assistance Program* and *Tenancy Plus*) as well as homelessness, family violence, financial counselling and community information and support services.
- **Make dispute resolution accessible and timely for renters**, by increasing the capacity of VCAT and developing a new, independent dispute resolution service.
- **Invest in establishing and implementing a formula for fair rent increases.**
- **Quarantine funding to coordinate the Fairer, Safer Housing Reforms to the *Residential Tenancies Act 1997* with other intersecting reforms across government**, such as the *Social Housing Regulation Review*, the *Rooming House Minimum Standards Review*, the *Rooming House Lived Experience Project* and the *Disability Act Review*. Each of these reviews has identified the need for more targeted supports for renters living in non-mainstream rental accommodation.

Develop a Youth Homelessness Strategy

One-in-five people seeking assistance for homelessness are either teenagers or young people in their early 20s.

The causes of homelessness for young people tend to be age-specific. These include leaving state care, family breakdown, family violence, mental ill-health, and challenges arising from exploring gender or sexual identity.

The 2023 Budget should:

- **Fund the development of a Youth Homelessness Strategy, co-designed with young people.** This strategy would enable the service system to provide supports best suited to young people (for example, intensive case management, youth-specific trauma-informed care and person-centred approaches that recognise the person's unique development stage and pathway). The strategy would also encourage better coordination between youth homelessness services and other support systems and ensure the best possible outcomes for young people.

- **Bolster homelessness support at risky transition points in a young person's life.** These transition points include starting a new school, leaving education, or exiting a state system such as youth detention or out-of-home care.
- **Provide services with greater access to housing stock to end young people's homelessness.** This should include:
 - Removing barriers to accessing social housing (for example, by adjusting the social housing rent model, in consultation with the community housing sector, and reserving spots for young people in new developments).
 - Expanding medium-term supported housing models (on top of the welcome *Big Housing Build*/Mental Health Royal Commission commitments).
 - Supporting the development of other new youth-specific housing models.
- **Deliver 5,000 new social housing properties for young people over four years.**

Keep moving towards Victoria's bold Aboriginal housing vision

The scale and significance of Victoria's Aboriginal Housing and Homelessness Framework, *Mana-na woorn-tyeen maar-takoort*, cannot be overstated. Launched in 2020, the framework – developed by the Aboriginal community – details the necessary steps for every Aboriginal person to have a home.

A 2021 report card confirms there have been early steps to achieve this vision. These include the establishment of a new partnership between the Victorian Government and Aboriginal leaders, a series of funded 'first-year actions' and a mechanism to track future progress.

But high levels of homelessness and housing distress among Aboriginal communities remain and will only be solved by a sustained commitment and investment.

The 2023 Budget can help the Victorian Government to stay the course on the effort, partnership and investment established in the first years of the Victorian Aboriginal Housing and Homelessness Framework by investing to:

- **Continue to reserve 10 per cent of new social housing stock for Aboriginal people.**
- **Maintain tailored support for Aboriginal people experiencing homelessness**, including by embracing Housing First models.
- **Enhance safeguards protecting Aboriginal people from eviction**, by guaranteeing long-term funding for the *More Than a Landlord* program and expanding the *Aboriginal Private Rental Program*.
- **Tailor rent-to-buy and shared equity schemes for Aboriginal people**, to give Aboriginal Victorians a secure pathway to home ownership.

A Victoria free from violence

Achieve the vision of the Royal Commission into Family Violence

Ending family violence is complex.

While Victoria is halfway through a decade-long transformation of the family violence system, with 204 recommendations of the Royal Commission implemented, change takes time.

Rising levels of demand and complex support needs are placing increased pressure on stretched specialist and generalist support services.

The 2023 Budget should deliver the funding needed to keep advancing the vision of the Royal Commission into Family Violence. This should include resources that:

- **Make rolling action plans fully inclusive.** Each plan should include strategies to address unique barriers to seeking or receiving help for victim survivors who are Aboriginal, LGBTIQ+, culturally and linguistically diverse, young or have a disability.
- **Act on Implementation Monitor advice.** Take action to resolve implementation challenges identified by the Family Violence Reform Implementation Monitor reports.

Ensure victim survivors can access support

As community awareness of the impact of family violence increases, demand for specialist and generalist services has skyrocketed.

In order to deliver safe, effective and high-quality supports for victim survivors, increased investment in services is desperately needed.

The Victorian Government should use the 2023 Budget to provide a sustainable footing for the specialist family violence sector. This should include:

- **An uplift in ongoing base funding for all specialist family violence services.** This is needed to help meet current and projected demand for case management and recovery support.
- **An end to drip funding.** Longer-term funding contracts will give specialist family violence services the financial certainty to offer secure employment contracts.
- **Increased funding for back-of-house operations,** including infrastructure and administration.
- **Improved access to specialist family violence support for under-represented groups.** This should include funding for new models of support for young people and extra funding to enable the *Disability Family Violence Practice Leader* initiative to expand state-wide.
- **Secure ongoing funding for cohort-specific services** that deliver family violence case management services to marginalised communities who have traditionally not been able to access family violence support. For example, multicultural organisations should be resourced to provide culturally-appropriate responses to family violence for migrant and refugee women.

Support victim survivors to remain safe at home

Family violence is the leading cause of homelessness for women and children in Victoria.

Victim survivors should feel safe at home. It's the perpetrators of violence who should leave.

Flexible financial support, access to legal assistance and safer housing options are needed to better support victim survivors.

To support this shift, the 2023 Budget should:

- **Improve access to legal assistance** by:
 - Increasing funding for community legal centres so they can meet demand from victim survivors needing legal advice and representation.
 - Providing additional funding to legal services to support the seven new Specialist Family Violence Courts. The government should also fund family violence training for lawyers and court staff across the entire Specialist Family Violence Court network.
 - Investing in evidence-informed programs that support perpetrators to change their abusive and violent behaviour, and ensure these programs have enough places to meet demand and the volume of court referrals.
 - Better using police to hold perpetrators to account and support victim survivors. Police officers should proactively manage breaches to intervention orders and stay in contact with victim survivors.
- **Provide safer housing options** by:
 - Ensuring victim survivors who rent in the private market can benefit from new protections introduced by the Fairer Safer Housing reforms. Government should continue to resource workers in both the specialist family violence sector and the tenancy legal sector to develop their capability to support victim survivors to realise their new rights.
 - Continuing to invest in flexible support packages that victim survivors can use to purchase safety and security responses such as property modifications and technology. This will enable victim survivors to remain safely in or return safely to their homes.
 - Building more social housing. For some victim survivors, social housing is the only housing option to prevent homelessness. Policymakers should also consider suitable housing options for perpetrators, so more victim survivors can stay at home.

Provide more places of refuge for those who need it

Victoria has invested heavily in family violence refuges over the past five years.

Despite this investment, demand continues to rise, and specialist services are being forced to accommodate people leaving family violence in unsafe and unsuitable motels.

The 2023 Budget should:

- **Boost crisis refuge capacity.** Victoria's refuge system can currently accommodate about 160 people and their children each night. This is not sufficient to meet demand, with 100 victim survivors placed in motels every night instead of refuge accommodation. Refuge capacity should be increased to accommodate at least 320 families. These facilities should also be accessible for people with disability.
- **Provide more standalone properties for refuge providers** so they have flexible options to safely house victim survivors who have multiple and complex needs that aren't well met in a typical refuge environment.

Drive community responses that prevent family violence

Ending family violence requires a coordinated approach across society to change the behaviours and norms that excuse, justify or even promote violence.

But funding for primary prevention activities is often short-term, with programs funded for only one or two years. This makes it difficult to attract and retain skilled practitioners and drive real cultural change.

To eliminate violence against women, gender diverse Victorians and children, the 2023 Budget should:

- **Increase the spend on primary prevention.** To determine exactly what's needed, government investment decisions should be guided by the independent statutory authority Respect Victoria and other subject matter experts. This should be supported by community insights and lived experience perspectives.
- **Invest in more monitoring and evaluation of what works in primary prevention** to build the evidence base and drive future investments.
- **Build the prevention workforce.** This includes addressing the shortage of qualified and accredited trainers to meet the demand for training and capability building.
- **Deliver funding certainty.** Ensure that all prevention activities are backed by long-term funding contracts.

Strengthen sexual violence prevention and responses

A greater understanding of what constitutes sexual assault, driven by better education and more media exposure, has increased demand for sexual assault services. In Victoria, more than 17,000 'therapeutic sexual assault services' are now delivered each year.³³

But help isn't always readily available. In some areas, victims wait up to six months to access critical support.³⁴ Sexual assault services have welcomed top-up funding in recent years to help manage demand. But the sector needs predictable and sustainable funding to do its job properly.

The 2023 Budget should:

- **Provide increased, reliable and ongoing funding** to better equip the specialist sexual assault sector to lead efforts to prevent and respond to sexual violence.

³³ Data supplied to VCOSS by Sexual Assault Services Victoria.

³⁴ Ibid.

Improve access to justice for sexual assault survivors

Despite much progress, many Victorians who've experienced sexual violence still don't report this crime to police. Fewer still proceed to court. And those who do go to court may not get the outcomes they need. Many find the process retraumatising.

The Victorian Law Reform Commission (VLRC) has provided a roadmap for effective change in the state's justice system. Its 2021 report, *Improving the Response of the Justice System to Sexual Offences*, tabled in the Victorian Parliament, makes 91 recommendations.³⁵

There has been good progress implementing some of these, but progress on the full package has stalled.

The 2023 Budget should:

- **Provide funding to implement the remaining VLRC recommendations** in partnership with the sexual assault and harmful sexual behaviours sector.
- **Support system transformation by fully funding actions in Victoria's whole-of-government *Sexual Violence Strategy*.**

Stop elder abuse

All Victorians should enjoy a life of dignity and safety as they age.

But sadly, this is not always the case, with up to 14 per cent of older people experiencing physical, psychological, financial, emotional and sexual abuse or neglect.³⁶

Seniors Rights Victoria is the only integrated legal and advocacy service specialising in elder abuse that covers the whole state. But it's struggling for adequate funding to meet demand.

To fix this, Victoria should:

- **Boost core funding for Seniors Rights Victoria** so it can:
 - Broaden the reach of elder abuse prevention programs.
 - Answer more calls to the Elder Abuse Helpline. This free assistance service recorded a 60 per cent increase in demand from 2014 to 2019.
 - Ensure the ongoing availability of specialist workers who are best placed to respond to cases of elder abuse in the community.
 - Strengthen Seniors Rights Victoria's monitoring and evaluation work to enable them to track the scope and impact of services delivered.

³⁵ Victorian Law Reform Commission, *'Improving the Response of the Justice System to Sexual Offences'*, April 2022.

³⁶ [Better Health Channel – Elder Abuse](#).

Fair and equal justice

Transform the criminal justice system

The time is right for broad and transformational reform of Victoria's criminal justice system.

Ballooning incarceration rates and the stubborn presence of recidivism confirm the justice approaches of the past don't work.

VCOSS proposes specific measures to make the system fairer and more effective, at both reducing crime and keeping the community safe.

But the justice system doesn't exist in a vacuum. Justice reform can't either.

Justice-specific policy measures must be undertaken in concert with changes to numerous other areas of government service delivery, including housing, education, healthcare and more. We must break the poverty-to-prison pipeline.

This chapter should be read in conjunction with the other recommendations across this submission.

Steer people away from the criminal justice system

Poverty, disadvantage, criminal offending and incarceration are interrelated. If all Victorians could access appropriate health and social support early and close to home, it would mean fewer people offending and being sent to prison.

The Victorian Government can undertake reforms that reduce offending and make incarceration a genuine last resort.

The 2023 Budget should:

- **Invest in early interventions that divert people away from criminalising behaviours.** Often, by the time a person is involved with the justice system, there have been a number of missed opportunities for intervention that would have prevented them from becoming criminalised. For example, access to stable housing, treating mental health or drug issues, or providing support for a family violence situation. The Victorian Government's Early Intervention Investment Framework (EIIF) has funded some initiatives in the justice and corrections portfolios, aimed at rehabilitation and recovery for people involved with the justice system. This approach could be strengthened by designing and investing in initiatives that intervene **even earlier** in a person's life, to address the issues that underlie offending.
- **Prevent women from becoming criminalised in the first place through:**
 - Increased funding for the primary prevention of gender-based violence.
 - Increased funding for long-term recovery supports for victim survivors of family violence and sexual violence.

- Increased funding for gender-responsive AOD treatment and harm-reduction services.
- **Stop funnelling people with disabilities into prison by:**
 - Conducting a trial screening program that would assess all people entering the justice system for physical, cognitive and intellectual disability, to inform provision of any necessary adjustments and/or supports. This would incorporate boosted funding for justice agencies (police, courts and corrections) to incorporate decision support for people with cognitive disabilities.
 - Increasing long-term funding for disability advocacy services who provide critical support and independent assistance to people with disabilities involved with the justice system.
 - Establishing a mandatory training program for all staff working in police, courts and corrections to identify and provide appropriate support to people with disabilities. This training should incorporate people with lived experience in the design.
- **Stop prosecuting and jailing children younger than 14.** This will be achieved by raising the age of criminal responsibility. A paired investment in therapeutic programs that meet the needs of children will be required.

Make sure people can quickly access legal help

Targeted legal help, delivered at the right time and the earliest possible opportunity, is a smart investment. But many people can't get legal help when they need it.

Community legal centres lacked the resources to meet demand before the pandemic. This pressure has only continued to grow. Demand is surging at the same time as courts experience significant backlogs in hearing matters.

Early legal help is critical to preventing issues from escalating. It is also a key enabler for many of the government's service system reforms. For example, two key reforms arising from the Royal Commission into Family Violence – the Specialist Family Violence Courts and the Orange Door network – rely on the delivery of integrated legal services for success.

In this Budget, the Victorian Government should:

- **Invest in integrated legal assistance** including:
 - Making legal help accessible via the family violence support system – for example, embedding legal services in the Orange Door network (building on the legal services pilot in the Frankston Orange Door).
 - Providing additional funding to legal services to support the seven new Specialist Family Violence Courts.
 - Embedding community legal assistance in the roll-out of the new Local Adult and Older Adult Mental Health and Wellbeing Services.
- **Expand on what works by continuing funding for specific programs** such as the *Early Resolution Service/Pre-Court engagement* (assisting parties to family violence matters prior to their court hearing) and the *CLC Family Violence and Assistance Fund* (providing for a duty lawyer at court and other family violence/youth settings).

- **Guarantee the sustainability of the community legal sector** by:
 - Providing ongoing funding to support data collection, monitoring and evaluation.
 - **Ensuring adequate indexation of funding for community legal services**, including equivalency with other community services (funded by DFFH). Please refer to the chapter '*Value the community sector*' on page 8.

End the cycle of prison and disadvantage

Prison too often serves as a conveyor belt to poverty, hardship and further offending.

When a person is released from jail, supporting their wellbeing is in everybody's interest.

This will only be achieved if we properly support and build the skills of people while incarcerated, and then offer them the necessary supports during and after their release.

To this end, the 2023 Budget should:

- **Expand health and social services provided to people in prison**, including education, training, family connection, financial counselling, drug treatment and reintegration supports.
- **Implement the Optional Protocol to the Convention against Torture (OPCAT)**. This is an international human rights agreement to help prevent torture or ill treatment of detained people. Unlike other similar treaties that deal with rights violations after the fact, the OPCAT is focused on prevention. Implementation should occur in consultation with the community, particularly Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples and community-controlled services.
- **Expand health and social supports available for people exiting prison**. This should include guaranteeing housing so that nobody exits prison into homelessness and funding the expansion of the *Second Chance Jobs Program* across additional sites.

Support the children of incarcerated Victorians

Sending a parent to jail also punishes their children and families.

The effects include long-term trauma and shame, and were detailed by the Victorian Parliament's 2022 *Inquiry into children affected by parental incarceration*.

A first step to reducing harm is limiting incarceration. The government should reform laws and end policing practices that criminalise poverty, disadvantage, ill-health and trauma. This will result in fewer parents funnelled into prison. The money saved should be diverted to community initiatives that further prevent criminal offending.

But more must also be done for the children of people already stuck in the quicksand of the prison system.

The government should accept all recommendations set out in the Parliamentary Committee's *Inquiry Report into children affected by parental incarceration*, and fully fund these measures in future budgets.

As a first step ahead of this critical reform, the 2023 Budget should:

- **Designate and resource a lead agency to provide effective leadership and coordination of support services for children affected by parental incarceration.** This should be the Department of Families, Fairness and Housing (DFFH).
- **Fund a new data collection and monitoring system.** Police, court officers and corrections staff should be required to inquire about parenting status and use information to ensure support is offered to affected children, families and carers.
- **Provide existing community services with appropriate funding to support children, families and carers.** This should enable services to provide assistance such as direct financial support for immediate material needs, through to healthcare, trauma-informed individual therapy, family counselling and youth mentoring.
- **Reinstate the *Family Links* program across all Victorian Magistrates' Courts venues.** This program provides case work support to families. Evaluations found benefits include reduced risk to children, increased self-reliance from improved knowledge of the criminal justice system, successfully provided referrals and links to specialist community support services, and reduced risk of financial and housing trauma.
- **Fund more research.** Victoria should commission research into the best long-term interventions for affected children. This evidence should be used to develop new programs that support family connection and child wellbeing for families with a close relative serving time.

Use the Commonwealth Games to develop Victoria's regions fairly

Leave a golden housing legacy

Hosting the Commonwealth Games isn't just about sport, it's about building our state.

We know the Games will be enjoyed by many. But we need to plan together now to maximise the social and economic benefits for all Victorians and anticipate and prevent potential unintended consequences.

Given that big sporting events can drive up rents, make housing less affordable and exacerbate homelessness, housing must be front of mind for the Victorian Government.

This Budget can lay the foundations to ensure the 2026 Commonwealth Games leave a positive housing legacy that benefits the whole state by committing to:

- **Convert at least 30 per cent of the athletes' accommodation into permanent, high quality social housing immediately after the Games, ensuring a proportion for First Nations Victorians.**
- **Reserve a proportion of the promised 'affordable housing' stock for key workers employed by local community services,** so organisations can attract and retain the staff needed to deliver essential community support.
- **Fund 500 new social housing properties across the four host sites,** to be used as crisis/transitional housing during the Games before being converted into permanent social housing stock.
- **Establish a new protocol for police and local law enforcement** that enacts fair and respectful responses to visible homelessness in the host cities.
- **Protect regional renters by investing in tenancy advocacy and legal assistance in host cities, including targeted support for First Nations renters.** The 2023 Budget can also quarantine funds to develop a new model for rent increases and the use of investment properties for temporary accommodation. These investments will directly benefit local communities, and have a positive statewide impact.
- **Prevent an increase in rough sleeping in host city locations** by investing in new Housing First initiatives, as well as locking in funding for *Homelessness to a Home* and *Homes for Families* beyond the current end date. The 396 households currently supported by Housing First programs in the host cities will be placed at risk of returning to homelessness if funding lapses.

Create pathways for disadvantaged jobseekers

The Victorian Government is already planning to leverage the Commonwealth Games to create thousands of jobs. To make the most of planned investment, government should work with the community sector and host city locals to ensure that the Games leave a legacy that aligns with community aspirations and needs.

The 2023 Budget can commit to:

- **Establish a strategy to improve employment outcomes for people who are unemployed or underemployed through best practice social procurement.** This should focus on priority groups who experience systemic barriers to employment (for example, young people, the long-term unemployed, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, people with a disability, older people), with targets for employment created in procurement and in contracts with suppliers.
- **Develop a Volunteer Accreditation Program to recognise and accredit the skills of those participating in the Games (modelled off Birmingham 2022 Games) and promote volunteering for developing skills and experience.**
- **Sustain funding to continue implementation of the GROW program in all current regions, which includes the Games host cities.** GROW works with local businesses, employment providers, training and community support organisations to create supported pathways to secure, inclusive employment and more local jobs for people and communities with barriers to employment. Now is the time to lock in a long-term funding commitment to this vital place-based employment infrastructure.

Start a public transport accessibility upgrade blitz

The Victorian Government made an election commitment to improve regional public transport, including building another 23 VLocity trains to replace older trains and adding almost 200 weekend services on regional lines around the state. This will have significant benefits for regional Victorians, as well as domestic and international visitors when the Games begin.

The benefits of Victoria's public transport improvements must extend to Victorians with disability.

The planned investment in regional public transport improvements can be leveraged to contribute towards the public transport network becoming fully accessible and compliant with legislated requirements.

An accessible public transport infrastructure blitz can begin in the Commonwealth Games host sites.

The 2023 Budget should:

- **Establish a fund to advance public transport accessibility upgrades ahead of the Games.**

Commit to a carbon neutral Commonwealth Games

During the election campaign, the Victorian Government committed to an emissions reduction target of 75–80 per cent by 2035 and accelerated the state's path to net zero.

The Commonwealth Games should be carbon neutral with minimal reliance on offsets to contribute to Victoria's climate change mitigation efforts, rather than undermining it. This will produce an environmental legacy for communities beyond the Games.

The 2023 Budget should make provision for:

- **Free zero-emission transport for spectators, athletes and staff.**
- **The creation of shaded cycling paths between venues and regional hubs to encourage active transport.**
- **Installation of solar panels and batteries in all new Commonwealth Games housing.**
- **Planting of mature trees across Victoria** with a focus on towns and suburbs with high heat vulnerability, if offsets are required.



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