

VCOSS 2024 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.

This work is authorised by VCOSS CEO Juanita Pope.



Acknowledgement of Traditional Owners.

VCOSS acknowledges the Traditional Owners of Country, and pays respect to Elders and ancestors. 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, or through our member organisations, you have enriched both our understanding of the issues and our recommendations for change. Thank you for your courage and generosity.

Sustainability

VCOSS is committed to reducing its impact on the environment. This report is available in PDF and accessible Word formats only. Please visit vcoss.org.au/budgetsub





Victoria can address the cost-of-living crisis and pursue long-term change.

Victoria is in the grip of a cost-of-living crisis.

People are being priced out of housing, food, energy, and health care. Debt repayments are surging. Wages are not.

Having enough money to pay for basic services and afford essential items has become the dominant concern for Victorians on low incomes.

We see evidence of this crisis in our streets. People sleeping rough, families lining up for food, and renters queueing to inspect a home they probably can't afford anyway. Many more suffer out of sight.

Unscrupulous market operators are seizing on this moment, seeking to make profits from people's pain.

The net result is more Victorians being pushed into poverty, getting sick, withdrawing from their community, and seeking government assistance to get by.

The perilous 'long tail' of the pandemic and more frequent disasters are adding fuel to this fire.

This is a significant economic and social challenge. But it's one we can meet through wise investment and courageous systemic change.

Victoria must make solving the cost-of-living crisis a top priority in the 2024–25 budget.

And the solutions must be long-term. Not just band-aids for today, but a bedrock of equity for generations to come.

This document contains more than 250 smart, targeted, and achievable recommendations to get things started.

We propose a combination of targeted assistance measures to prevent people hitting rock bottom, calculated investments to strengthen social services and promote community wellbeing and healing, and a renewed focus on prevention and early intervention across a range of social policy areas.

But it's not good enough to 'stop people falling through the cracks'. We need to plug the gaps so there's no risk of falling.

“The solutions must be long-term. Not just band-aids for today, but a bedrock of equity for generations to come.”

That’s why we also recommend broader policy changes, detailing inclusive ways Victoria can combat climate change, end violence against women, advance First Peoples’ self-determination, improve justice outcomes, support people with disability, and raise government revenue.

To achieve success, Victoria must engage effectively with lived experience through meaningful co-design processes and grow the evidence base of what works, through smart investments in innovation, research and evaluation.

The community sector plays a significant role in delivering these objectives. But social service organisations are doing it tough too, with rising workforce costs, declining volunteering and new compliance obligations making it ever more difficult to make ends meet with surging demand for services.

This document repeatedly calls for more funding – and better funding terms – for

community service organisations. Now more than ever, our sector must be properly resourced to deliver safe, reliable and effective services that support community wellbeing for all.

VCOSS, our members, and the wider community sector stand ready to play our vital part in combating the rising cost-of-living and supporting every Victorian to lead a good life.

The wellbeing of Victoria depends on it.



Juanita Pope
VCOSS CEO

Key recommendations for meaningful change

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Raising revenue fairly in tough times

Governments must raise adequate revenue to deliver social services, invest in our education, health and justice systems, and perform other core government functions.

VCOSS advocates strongly for more funding – and better funding terms – for social services. This submission makes repeated calls for increased, recurrent and new funding for a variety of programs, services and reforms.

We acknowledge this money must be raised from the community.

But *how* the Victorian Government raises money matters.

Challenging economic conditions mean governments must get creative. VCOSS supports the introduction of fair and targeted revenue measures to help fund social services.

We believe the Victorian Government should:

- **Target new taxes towards those who can pay.** The Victorian Government should not be restrained in considering new taxes, levies and other revenue mechanisms to invest in services essential for the community's wellbeing. These must be designed fairly, so the burden falls on high-income earners and people with significant assets or investments. Appropriate exemptions or discounts must be created for people on low incomes or with an inability to pay.
- **Abolish discounts for full, upfront payments of government charges.** These discounts are a hidden 'poverty tax'. They assist people with savings or cash reserves, making items comparatively more expensive for those with less disposable cash.
- **Protect concessions and take steps to maximise uptake.** Victoria's concessions scheme provides vital cost-of-living support to low-income Victorians. It makes essential services – such as housing, water, energy, health, education and transport – more affordable. (See also: 'Protect current investment in concessions' on p. 15)
- **Adopt a proportional fines system.** The standard \$288 fine for not having a valid ticket on public transport may be annoying to a high-income earner, but it will absolutely upend the household budget of somebody on a low income, forcing them to cut back on food, medicine or energy. A proportional fines system would mean lower-income Victorians pay *less*, and higher-income Victorians pay *more*, for the same offence. The underlying reasons why people receive fines also needs to be addressed. Many people can't afford a \$5 fare for public transport, so they take their chances without a ticket. Others are more likely to attract fines because of racial profiling, experiences of homelessness or other forms of discrimination. (See also: 'Making the justice system work' on p. 75)

In addition to direct revenue measures, the Victorian Government can bolster the state's budget bottom line by lobbying the Federal Government to:

- **Raise the rate of Jobseeker (and related payments)**

JobSeeker has failed to keep pace with the cost-of-living and is now so low it actually prevents people from seeking work.¹ This entrenches poverty and disadvantage, and forces many people to rely on Victorian Government supports (including concessions) and the assistance of state-run services. If JobSeeker and related payments² were raised, many Victorians would be assisted out of poverty and would not need to access state support.

- **Abolish the \$18 billion-a-year Stage Three tax cuts.**

The Stage Three tax cuts overwhelmingly benefit the top 20 per cent of income earners. This will increase inequality in our community, while simultaneously depriving the Commonwealth of the revenue it needs to properly fund projects and services affecting Victorians.

¹ ACOSS. (September 2023) *"It's not enough": why more is needed to lift people out of poverty.* acoss.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2023/09/ACOSS_COL_Report_Sep_2023_Web.pdf

² Related payments include Youth Allowance, parenting payments, Austudy, Abstudy, and Special Benefit payments.

Helping Victorians afford the basics

Formalise Victoria's commitment to ease the cost-of-living

About 13 per cent of Victorians live in poverty, with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Victorians, people of culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds, and people with a disability more likely than other Victorians to be living in poverty.³

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 issues driving the cost-of-living crisis cut across ministerial portfolios and need a whole-of-government response.

To drive change in this critical space, the 2024 Budget should:

- **Establish an independent Cost of Living Commissioner.** A Commissioner with statutory powers could make a real difference, putting a spotlight on cross-cutting issues and driving systemic reform. 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. A good model is the Commissioner for Children and Young People, which has regulatory powers to enforce a set of standards to ensure child safety and equity, has the power to initiate systemic reviews, and reports to Parliament.

Additionally, the Victorian Government, in concert with other state and territory governments, should advocate for the Commonwealth to increase the rate of income support payments, and reduce the unfair and unjust compliance burden of mutual obligations on recipients. A raise in the rate would lift many Victorians out of entrenched poverty and relieve pressure on Victoria's finances.

(See also: 'Raising revenue fairly' on p. 12)

³ Victorian Council of Social Service. (2023) *Mapping poverty in Victoria: 2023 VCOSS Insights Report*. https://vcoss.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2023/08/PovertyMaps23_VCOSS.pdf

Protect current investment in concessions

Victoria's concessions scheme provides vital cost-of-living support to low-income Victorians. It makes essential services – such as housing, water, energy, health, education and transport – more affordable.

Not every Victorian who is eligible for a concession is aware of it or accesses it. For example, on average, more than one-in-ten Victorians eligible for an energy concession are currently missing out.⁴ These access barriers need to be addressed.

(See also: 'Free Victorians from energy hardship' on p. 16)

However, the foundations of Victoria's concessions scheme are strong. Indeed, many structural elements of Victoria's concessions safety net are the envy of other states.

Amid a cost-of-living crisis, this form of financial assistance has never been more important.

It is vital that the 2024 Victorian Budget:

- **Maintains current investment in Victoria's concessions scheme, with appropriate indexation applied.**

Prevent Victorians from being ripped off by bad faith market actors

The Victorian Government has a strong and positive economic growth agenda, but there's no growth without trust in markets.

The 2024 Budget should provide resources that enable the Victorian Government to:

- **Action insights from existing government-funded consumer services, so that Victorians get the best out of markets.** Every year, the Victorian Government funds community organisations to provide legal assistance, financial counselling and related services to disadvantaged consumers (the Consumer Affairs Victoria 'Funded Services Program'). These organisations have a wealth of insights about systemic reforms that government can enact to *prevent* consumers from being ripped off by bad faith actors. They also have excellent ideas about how to effect swifter remedy for those who've already been tricked or trapped. In a cost-of-living crisis, it's more important than ever that the Victorian Government harnesses the insights of funded services and provides resources to implement their expert recommendations.
- **Increase funding to enable Consumer Affairs Victoria to take more regulatory action against bad faith actors.** Penalties for breaching the Australian Consumer Law and Fair Trading Act in

⁴ Victorian Council of Social Service. (2023) *The Missing 14%: Why so many Victorians are missing out on energy concessions*, p4. <https://vcoss.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2023/05/The-Missing-14-per-cent.pdf>.

Victoria should be paid into the existing Victorian Consumer Law Fund and be used to fund new measures that improve consumer wellbeing, consumer protection and fair trading.

- **Undertake baseline research into how Victorians currently understand and use their existing consumer rights.** This data would be used to identify and remedy gaps in community education needed to support consumer protection and help drive investment decisions (for example, funding priorities for the Victorian Consumer Law Fund).

Free Victorians from energy hardship

Household energy is an essential service. We can't live without it.

Yet many Victorians can't afford enough energy. They live with the physical and mental harms of under-consumption (shivering in their homes in winter, sweltering in summer, going to bed as soon as it's dark).⁵

The result is that Victorians can't afford their bills and 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 (realistically) never clear.

Unfortunately, the Victorian Utility Relief Grant isn't enough to support people with energy debts to get back on track, as average energy arrears are now much higher than the rate of the grant.⁶

To tackle energy hardship and build long-term equity into the energy market, the 2024 Budget should:

- **Improve access to energy concessions.** Currently, around 14 per cent of people eligible for concessions miss out because of lack of awareness, stigma, language and literacy barriers and digital exclusion. Many of these barriers could be overcome by funding an ongoing suite of community-based energy advice services (building on the Energy Assistance Program), investing in place-based "community connector" organisations that can help people to apply for concessions (like Neighbourhood Houses and Community and Information Support agencies), and exploring the feasibility of automatically applying concessions to eligible bills without the need for an application.
- **Make the Utility Relief Grant fit for purpose** by raising the maximum grant to \$1,000 on each utility type, or \$2,000 for households with a single source of energy. This would realistically cover the current average rate of arrears on electricity and gas bills.
- **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

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ The Utility Relief Grant is set at \$650 on each utility type, or \$1,300 for households with a single source of energy. The average rate of energy arrears for customers accessing tailored assistance across 2022–2023 was \$1,110 for electricity, and \$884 for gas. Essential Services Commission. (2023) *Victorian Energy Market Report: September 2023*, p28. <https://www.esc.vic.gov.au/electricity-and-gas/market-performance-and-reporting/victorian-energy-market-report>

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.

- **Introduce a default offer for gas.** This would be like the Victorian Default Offer (VDO) which currently exists for electricity. As Victoria, guided by the Gas Substitution Roadmap, transitions away from gas, renters and low-income earners risk being stuck paying rising gas prices in the short term. A gas VDO would help to regulate household energy costs while homes remain connected to the gas network.
- **Renew the \$250 Power Saving Bonus and continue and expand associated community outreach partnerships.** A further round of the Power Saving Bonus would make a real difference for Victorians in a cost-of-living crisis. Resourcing trusted local community services to raise awareness of the Power Saving Bonus and help people to submit applications would be a smart investment that maximises the public benefit of the scheme. Community outreach partners could connect people to information and support on a range of other energy market-related matters while they are helping people to access the Power Saving Bonus.
- **Use the revived State Electricity Commission to build energy equity.** The primary role of a publicly-owned entity like the SEC should be to address the market's failure to create equity for Victorians. The Victorian Government can begin this work by directing the SEC to support low-income households directly to get off gas in the home, improve energy efficiency, and take advantage of rooftop solar and batteries. Filling gaps in network infrastructure can also help to put downward pressure on bills. The SEC can play a significant role as an impact investor in innovative community-sector led energy solutions. Longer term, the Victorian Government should consider entering the electricity market with the SEC as an affordable public electricity retailer for residential customers.

Support food security

Food security is a major and growing concern for many Victorians. Currently, more than a third of Victorians are experiencing moderate or severe food insecurity, and households with children are among the hardest hit.⁷

Victorian community organisations providing food relief are experiencing unprecedented demand for their services. For example, Neighbourhood Houses have increased their provision of food relief eight-fold since 2019. However, organisations incur cost of transporting, storing and distributing donated food, or purchasing food themselves.

They require immediate support to provide nutritious and culturally appropriate food relief to a growing number of people.

⁷ Foodbank. (2022) *Foodbank Hunger Report 2022*. <https://reports.foodbank.org.au/foodbank-hunger-report-2022/>

Alongside this, a long-term strategy is needed to address systemic issues and plan for future impacts of climate change and natural disasters on food security.

The 2024 Budget should:

- **Establish a grants scheme for community organisations to offset the out-of-pocket costs they incur by providing food relief.** This could function similarly to the Community Food Relief Fund, which provided grants to Victorian community sector agencies supplying food aid during the pandemic.
- **Fund more paid food relief positions** to coordinate volunteers and support community organisations providing food relief with a range of challenges due to increased demand.
- **Develop and implement of a whole-of-government Victorian Food Security Strategy.**
- **Re-establish the Victorian Food Relief Taskforce.** This was introduced during the pandemic to advise on strategies and initiatives to strengthen Victoria's food relief system.

Support Victorians to live in cost-efficient all-electric homes.

The transition from gas-powered to all-electric homes is critically important for individual health, the environment and to generate cost-savings for families. But if managed poorly, this transition risks exacerbating disadvantage.

While the Victorian Government's ban on gas connections in new homes requiring planning permission after January 2024 is a great first step, more action is needed.

Electrification and installing rooftop solar come with significant upfront costs. Without direct financial support and legislated minimum standards, Victoria risks creating a two-tier residential sector whereby households with sufficient disposable income and control over their properties benefit from lower bills by electrifying appliances and installing rooftop solar, while lower-income households pay the increasing costs of remaining on the gas network.

This would, in effect, be a cross-subsidy from lower-income households to wealthier ones.

Electrification efforts should also coincide with a push to improve household energy efficiency. Improving energy efficiency is a cost-effective method of reducing energy bills, reducing the load on the electricity grid of widespread electrification, and further reducing greenhouse gas emissions.

This would boost benefits to the community gained through residential electrification.

The 2024 Budget should:

- **Establish a residential electrification pilot program** that examines what is required to support a whole neighbourhood to 'get off gas' and showcase the benefits. The program should involve bulk disconnection and appliance switching, ideally in low-income and culturally diverse communities. The Victorian Government should work with local governments, electricity distribution businesses, community sector organisations and community groups to establish this pilot program.

- **Abolish gas disconnection penalties and create direct subsidies, rebates and no-interest loans to enable low-income households to replace gas appliances.** It costs a lot of money to ‘get off gas’. Costs include buying new appliances, rewiring, safe disconnection from the gas network, and switching cookware to induction cooktop-appropriate pots and pans. Victorians on low incomes will need financial support to afford these changes.
- **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.
- **Support renters to switch to electric appliances** and improve household energy efficiency. The government’s updated Gas Substitution Roadmap commits to reviewing the minimum standards for rental properties, to ensure they are consistent with Victoria’s goal of all-electric homes. The Budget should ensure the necessary resources for the Regulatory Impact Statement to be progressed in 2024.
- **Review the adequacy and accessibility of the Victorian Energy Upgrades (VEU) program.** While the VEU is an important tool for improving the energy efficiency of Victorian homes and reducing emissions, it is currently a difficult market for consumers to navigate and the available savings are not enough to create affordability for low-income households. To investigate how to reinvigorate and expand the VEU, the Victorian Government should mount a strategic review of the program.
- **Re-launch the *Home Heating and Cooling Upgrades* program, without user co-payments.** Victoria’s now-discontinued *Home Heating and Cooling Upgrades* program offered rebates for low-income households to upgrade to energy-efficient heaters and air-conditioners. But the rebate didn’t cover the full cost of purchase and installation. People had to make a co-payment. This meant a cost barrier remained in the program’s design. The solution is to enhance the scheme, not abandon it.
- **Bring the community along on electrification.** Some communities have a cultural preference for gas. These communities must be engaged about the importance of moving away from gas. Victoria should work with communities to co-design electrification policies and communications campaigns. Creating advocates for electrification within communities will increase the adoption of electric appliances.

Resource 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.

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. Their services are in high and increasing demand, and increasingly middle-income earners are having to seek help.

Currently, Victoria has a financial counsellor shortage, and existing counsellors often aren't where they're needed most.

The Victorian financial counselling sector urgently needs increased funding and long-term planning to build capacity to support people at risk of financial crisis.

The 2024 Budget should:

- **Adequately fund the financial counselling sector to ensure more Victorians can access assistance.** Financial counsellors should be consulted as to where funding should be directed for the best results.
- **Establish a financial counsellor outreach scheme.** For example, as part of this approach, a financial counsellor employed by a community legal centre could regularly visit local aged care or health services.

Bolster the capacity of place-based services on the frontline

Community Information and Support Services are on the frontline of the cost-of-living crisis. There are 57 of them across Victoria, and they are often the first port of call for people needing help with personal and cost-of-living matters. They offer information, advocacy, referrals, and support services.

Demand has never been higher – but services are struggling to keep up. This is exacerbated by one-in-three services being staffed entirely by volunteers. Nearly every service has had volunteer shortages in the past year.

The 2024 Budget should strengthen the capacity of place-based Community Information and Support Services to respond to Victorians experiencing financial hardship by:

- **Funding one paid Coordinator in every Community Information and Support Service.** This funding (costed at \$5.7 million annually⁸) would be recurrent and provide much-needed staff scaffolding to the volunteer workforce, enabling services to expand their reach and assure quality.

Other measures outlined in this chapter would also assist the Community Information and Support sector with demand pressures – refer to the sections on financial counselling, food security, energy relief and concessions, as well as the chapters on housing and family violence prevention and response.

(See also: 'Valuing the community sector' on p. 87)

⁸ Community Information and Support Victoria. (2023) *Coordination Funding Required For Every CISVic Member Agency*. <https://cisvic.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2023/07/Coordinators-Campaign-07-07-23.pdf>

Pursuing a wellbeing agenda

Govern for the wellbeing of current and future generations

In July 2023, the Australian Treasury released the nation's first wellbeing framework, the 'Measuring What Matters' Statement. This is the first step towards embracing a wellbeing agenda federally by measuring and valuing indicators of social progress alongside traditional markers of economic success, like GDP.

Victoria is well positioned to undertake complementary work on wellbeing, with the Victorian Government's *Early Intervention Investment Framework* a key foundation stone.

Focusing on wellbeing means working to ensure all Victorians, now and in the future, have access to the support and resources they need to thrive.

It means creating sustainable, resilient, inclusive and more cohesive communities. And it requires breaking down government siloes so that complex issues are tackled by departments in a holistic way.

This cohesive way of working has never been more important, as we face systemic challenges like growing inequality, the sky-rocketing cost of living, and climate change.

To create the conditions for wellbeing and address these challenges, the 2024 Victorian Budget should:

- **Hold a broad and inclusive consultation process** to collectively define the Victoria we want to create for our children and grandchildren. Victoria could undertake a similar process to the *Wales We Want National Conversation* that led to the development of the *Well-being of Future Generations (Wales) Act 2015*. This would shape our wellbeing framework: the 'north star' to guide policy design and decision-making moving forward.
- **Establish a Commissioner for the Wellbeing of Future Generations** to oversee the implementation of the wellbeing framework, ensuring the indicators of social progress, as defined by communities through the consultation process, are integrated into budget and policy decisions across government. The Office of the Commissioner would also support and enable multi-departmental and cross-sector collaboration to progress shared wellbeing goals.
- **Strengthen democratic institutions** by funding the implementation and continual improvement of the *Victorian Public Engagement Framework 2021-25* to ensure the inclusion of under-represented communities and people experiencing disadvantage in decision-making. This should include proactive outreach by teams undertaking engagement to ensure traditionally under-represented groups (such as multicultural communities, people with disabilities, and those without internet access) have their say in decisions that impact them. A greater use of co-design in policy-making, citizen juries, participatory budgeting and other community deliberation models should also be considered. Self-determination and civic participation are foundational for individual and collective wellbeing, so public sector institutions and practices need to be inclusive, open and transparent.



Safe, secure and affordable housing
is a critical component of a good life.

Fixing our housing system

Strengthen direct government investment in social housing

Recently, the Victorian Government unveiled a broad suite of reforms designed to fix the state's housing crisis by increasing housing supply. These include measures to drive a 10 per cent increase in social housing supply across the state.

While all investments in social housing growth are welcome, with more than 100,000 Victorians currently waiting for social housing and average wait times beyond 18 months, there is an urgent need for additional bold action. Victoria should specify a target for social housing growth that reflects current and projected demand for public and community housing, and establish a long-term pipeline of funding that enables that growth.

This Budget should specifically:

- Deliver the necessary resources to develop a comprehensive plan that can coordinate the policy and investment required to **build at least 6,000 new public and community homes every year for 10 years**, with all homes fully accessible for people with disabilities, and with 10 per cent of new homes reserved for Aboriginal Victorians.
- Support the plan's implementation by providing **a sustained and predictable level of direct government investment in new public housing and grant funding to community housing organisations**.

These new investments would align with the overarching goal of the Victorian Government's Housing Statement and complement other commitments – like the \$1b Regional Housing Fund (locked-in, redirected Commonwealth Games investment) and the Commonwealth Government's Social Housing Accelerator Fund and the Housing Australia Future Fund.

Make developers do their part to create enough social housing

The Victorian Government's Housing Statement rightly notes developers have an important role to play in addressing our housing crisis. It includes welcome measures encouraging developers to make big new residential developments feature 10 per cent *affordable* housing.

However, a voluntary system does not provide certainty and questions remain about how long so-called "affordable housing" will remain truly affordable for people on low incomes, over the long term.

To provide further certainty, this Budget should:

- Establish a ***mandatory* inclusionary zoning scheme for *social*/housing**. This would be a legislated measure that requires 10 per cent of new, large-scale housing developments to be

public or community housing. The detailed design of this policy should be finalised in consultation with housing, homelessness and developer bodies.

Protect residents during public tower rebuilds

The Victorian Government has announced a major urban renewal project as part of the Housing Statement, with all of Melbourne's high-rise public housing estates to be retired and redeveloped by 2051.

Many renters have lived in these homes and communities for decades.

Renters must feel supported, empowered and respected during this renewal process, and provided as much clarity and certainty as possible. This should include a guaranteed right of return to the same site, no diminution of security of tenure, and continued tenancy management under public housing policies and procedures (including rental calculation methods).

The Victorian Government should recognise these rights, and:

- **Increase funding for advocacy and tenancy supports** for renters of public housing towers (and other social housing properties) earmarked for reconstruction, to help assure those rights.
- **Invest in additional social and community infrastructure around redevelopments**, as required, so relocated public renters are close to health services, community support agencies, parkland, playgrounds and other resources that enable wellbeing.

Fund the implementation of the Social Housing Regulation Review

Social housing protects and supports renters in a manner the private market cannot. As the sector expands and evolves, there must be a contemporary regulatory system for social housing that puts renters at the centre, ensures best practice tenancy management, encourages sustainable growth, and provides adequate industry oversight.

The government should:

- **Publish the final report of the Social Housing Regulation Review and provide funding in the 2024 Budget to implement the Review recommendations.**

Build on Victoria's best-in-class rent reforms

Victoria's renting laws are best-in-class. Other states and territories are working on changes to their own legislation to follow Victoria and move towards a fairer, safer renting market.

But these laws are being tested by the toughest conditions we've ever seen in the renting market. The Victorian Government has recognised these challenges, announcing additional measures to ease the pressures facing renters.

These responses will take time to design and deliver.

This Budget should ensure sufficient resources are available to:

- **Progress the detailed design of the new Dispute Resolution Service** promised in the Housing Statement. This design should be undertaken with input from renters themselves and community services that support them.

In the meantime, the Victorian Government should invest in complementary measures to boost renters' rights *now*. The Budget should include funding to:

- **Increase Consumer Affairs Victoria monitoring, enforcement and frontline dispute resolution capacity**, including resources to bolster the *Rent Assessment Service*, which helps people challenge unfair rent increases. (See also: 'Helping Victorians afford the basics' on p. 14)
- **Boost resources for VCAT** to provide timely dispute resolution and establish a new internal appeals mechanism that improves the consistency of decision-making.
- **Expand existing renter support services**, including the Private Rental Access Program, Tenancy Advocacy and Assistance Program, Tenancy Plus and community legal assistance.

Shift from crisis responses to preventing homelessness

The development of the National Housing and Homelessness Plan provides the opportunity to make homelessness rare, brief and non-recurring.

Concurrent action is required at the state level for the plan to be a success. The Victorian Government should increase funding for state-based homelessness programs. Specifically, the 2024 Budget should:

- **Increase capacity at Victoria's homelessness entry points**, for more workers and brokerage funds to respond to increased demand and clients with more complex needs.
- **Fund more workers to deliver assertive outreach**, including a targeted health and social assistance outreach program to provide support to people in high-risk accommodation settings (such as motels, rooming houses and group homes). This would be an evolution of the High Risk Accommodation Response and Community Connector programs successfully delivered by community health.
- **Renew funding for the current Statewide After-Hours Response Service.**
- **Expand 'Housing First' programs** to prevent homelessness from recurring, including funding additional *From Homelessness to a Home* packages and sustaining funding for the highly successful *Journey to Social Inclusion* program.

Creating choice, control and safety in housing for Victorians with disabilities

More than 18 per cent of Victorians have a disability. But this diversity isn't reflected in our housing stock.

Most homes are inadequate and unsuitable for people with a disability.

This makes group homes and Supported Residential Services a forced choice for many Victorians with disabilities, denying them autonomy and choice over their daily lives. These congregate settings are also high-risk for violence, abuse and neglect.

The Disability Royal Commission sets out options that can be progressed at a state level, in consultation with Victorians with disabilities. The *Final Report of the NDIS Review* – co-commissioned by the state, territory and Commonwealth governments– will also drive change in the way that supports for independent living are provided.

The Victorian Government can make changes *now* to ensure the regulatory and oversight framework provides strong residential rights for people with disabilities, ahead of longer-term changes to the housing landscape for people with disabilities.

In this Budget, the Victorian Government should invest in:

- **A review of Supported Residential Services**, with the aim of improving quality of service delivery and resident wellbeing.
- **Progressing legislative reform**, prioritising the changes needed now to address the worst conditions and strengthen resident rights in group homes.

End youth homelessness in Victoria

About 20 per cent of people seeking help at a homelessness service in Victoria are teenagers or young adults.⁹ Yet, Victoria doesn't have a statewide approach supporting young people experiencing homelessness. This leads to poor outcomes.

To fix this, the 2024 Victorian Budget should:

- **Fund the development of a Youth Homelessness Strategy** co-designed with young people. A dedicated strategy would recognise the unique drivers of youth homelessness. This would enable better case management, more appropriate trauma-informed care, and person-centred approaches that recognise young people's unique development stage and pathway. Crucially, it would enable better coordination between youth homelessness services and other support systems, to prevent young people from becoming homeless in the first place.
- **Allocate resources for Homes Victoria to work with the community sector to establish a new funding model for youth housing.** This new model will need to include higher subsidies for providers to enable access for young people.

⁹ Australian Institute of Health and Welfare. (2022) *Specialist Homelessness Services Annual Report 2021–22 – Fact Sheet – Victoria*, 8 December 2022.

- Create at least 5,000 social housing dwellings for young people over the next four years. (See also: 'Strengthen direct government investment in social housing' on p. 23)

This approach would reinforce Victoria's ambitious youth policy reform agenda, including *Our promise, Your future: Victoria's youth strategy 2022–2027*, Home Stretch and Roadmap for Reform: children and families.

Take the next steps to achieve the vision *Mana-na woorn-tyeen maar-takoort*

Mana-na woorn-tyeen maar-takoort (in English: "Every Aboriginal person has a home") is the first Aboriginal-led housing policy to be adopted as government policy by any jurisdiction in Australia.

This Budget should take the next steps to achieve this vision. It should:

- **Earmark 1,500 social housing properties for Aboriginal people**
- **Reserve 10 per cent of all future social housing for Aboriginal households.**
- **Continue developing the two pilot Aboriginal-specific entry points** at the Willumbong Aboriginal Corporation (St Kilda) and the Wathaurong Aboriginal Co-operative (Geelong), and expand these pilots to two additional sites at priority locations identified.¹⁰
- **Fund two Aboriginal-specific Youth Foyers** in locations based on demand and capacity. Aboriginal Community Controlled Organisations currently supporting young people should guide the design and delivery of these foyers.
- **Fund a Housing Options Program**, a partnership between Aboriginal Community Controlled Organisations and mainstream providers, where Aboriginal workers partner with providers to link people with emergency accommodation.
- **Fund a new strengths-based primary prevention and early intervention initiative** to assist Aboriginal people living in social housing to maintain their tenancy (similar to an existing scheme for private renters).
- **Fund the development and implementation of a long-term workforce strategy** for the Aboriginal community housing and homelessness sector.
- **Offer direct funding to Aboriginal Community Controlled Organisations housing agencies** to build financial, governance and partnership capabilities.
- **Establish and recurrently fund an Aboriginal system steward** to collect, analyse and report on Aboriginal housing and homelessness data.

¹⁰ Priority locations are identified in the 'Blueprint for an Aboriginal-specific homelessness system in Victoria': Aboriginal Housing Victoria Limited. (2023) *Blueprint for an Aboriginal-specific homelessness system in Victoria*. <https://vahhf.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2023/09/Blueprint.pdf>

Keeping all Victorians healthy

Tackling health inequalities

Across Victoria, there are people and places who are at greater risk of preventable health conditions because they have unequal access to material resources necessary for health.

For example, good housing, adequate income and healthy food. Other factors include the impacts of colonisation and experiences of racism, ableism, ageism, gender inequality, homophobia, transphobia and stigma.

These health inequalities have a direct impact on people's physical health and mental health and wellbeing, and they explain why chronic disease is more prevalent in low-income communities.

So while this chapter makes specific recommendations to improve our health system, the wider submission makes a series of related recommendations for how Victoria can reduce health inequality.

These include:

<i>Ensure Victorians can afford the basics and get access to early help in the current cost of living crisis, so they have the capacity to look after their health.</i>	<i>p. 14</i>
<i>Connect people to decent jobs and fair pay.</i>	<i>p. 35</i>
<i>Reduce child poverty.</i>	<i>p. 42</i>
<i>Strengthen children and young people's sense of belonging in kinder and school.</i>	<i>p. 51</i>
<i>Tackle loneliness and social isolation.</i>	<i>p. 56</i>
<i>Grow public and community housing, and improve renters' rights.</i>	<i>p. 23</i>
<i>Take fast and fair action on climate change.</i>	<i>p. 81</i>
<i>Build community resilience.</i>	<i>p. 82</i>
<i>Maintain momentum on Yoorook and Treaty, to recognise and remedy the health-damaging effects of colonisation on First Nations.</i>	<i>p. 76</i>
<i>Tackle systemic discrimination and unequal resourcing, and make Victoria more inclusive for under-served communities, including Victorians with disabilities, LGBTIQ+ people, migrants and refugees and others from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds.</i>	<i>p. 56</i>

Closing the gap on Aboriginal health

Aboriginal Victorians are more likely to experience ill health and to die young than the rest of the population. This is a long-tail effect of European colonisation, which has created multi-generational dispossession, marginalisation and discrimination. Self-determination is key to closing this health equity gap.

The 2024 Budget should:

- **Remove systemic barriers to better the health and wellbeing of Aboriginal Victorians by delivering practical actions from The Victorian Aboriginal Health and Wellbeing Partnership Agreement Action Plan 2023-2025.** VACCHO's submission to the 2024 Budget identifies 11 immediate priorities from the Action Plan. These include investment in secure data management, culturally safe service standards, funding reform, and workforce growth and development.
- **Scale the successful Culture + Kinship pilot** so that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people across the state have access to strengths-based prevention initiatives.
- **Address the infrastructure needs of Aboriginal Community Controlled Organisations (ACCOs).** The 2024 Budget should **invest in the development of a framework for a Perpetual Infrastructure Fund** that will provide enduring self-determined minor capital, maintenance, planning and management resources for ACCOs. While this framework is being developed, VCOSS supports VACCHO's call for **fast-tracked investment in this Budget for Dandenong & District Aborigines Co-Operative Ltd** to acquire land and fully develop plans for facilities to deliver holistic models of care.
- **Provide funding of \$10.5 million over three years to implement marra ngarrgoo, marra goorri: The Victorian Aboriginal Health, Medical and Wellbeing Research Accord.** This will support researchers and organisations to improve their research practices, enabling ethical and self-determined Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander research in Victoria.

Ensure access to timely, highly-quality healthcare

Being able to see a healthcare professional when you need it is crucial to preventing, treating and managing health conditions. The pandemic, global cost-of-living crisis and labour shortages have combined to increase barriers to essential care.

The 2024 Budget should continue to make investments that strengthen the state's health system.

In particular, it should:

- **Provide the state's health services with funding that reflects the true cost of delivering care.** As part of this, the Budget should deliver adequate and sustainable funding to the community health sector so services can meet demand.
- **Locate the health spend in places where government can maximise public value.** For example, the Budget should strengthen investment in prevention activity. It should also make strategic investments in the community health platform to improve access to primary healthcare and to take pressure off Victoria's hospital system, including scaling evidence-informed programs that reduce acute service demand.

- **Address thin markets.** For example, the government should continue to invest in strategies that grow healthcare workforces in under-served communities, including regional and rural Victoria and outer suburban growth corridors. This should include ensuring community health services, along with the rest of the community sector, can access affordable housing for key workers. (See also: ‘Strengthen direct government investment in social housing’ on p. 23)

Resource communities to prevent, treat and manage chronic disease

Chronic diseases – like diabetes – are the leading cause of illness, disability and death. More than one-third could be prevented by avoiding risks such as smoking, high body mass and drinking alcohol at risky levels.¹¹

Victoria’s registered independent community health services are at the forefront of innovative, place-based approaches to prevention, early intervention and care in the community. They build people’s knowledge, skills and confidence to understand their health and stay on top of their wellbeing.

One of the most promising value-for-money interventions is CP@Clinic, a regional and rural Victorian adaptation of the internationally celebrated Canadian Community Paramedic model.

CP@Clinic is a chronic disease screening, education and referral service supported by a purpose-built database and credentialled training. Paramedics offer weekly drop-in clinics in accessible locations to support people to manage their health outside of a hospital emergency department. Wider social needs are also addressed through non-clinical interventions, such as community meals, food relief and walking groups.

Sunraysia Community Health Service and Primary Care Connect, in collaboration with McMaster University (Canada) and La Trobe University, have adapted and implemented this model across their regions. They’ve already demonstrated improved healthcare access and social connectedness. Their aim is to reduce use of emergency healthcare in the longer term. (In Canada, the model has shown a 19 to 25 per cent reduction in emergency callouts.)

CP@Clinic aligns perfectly with the ambitions of the Victorian Government’s Early Intervention Investment Framework.

The 2024 Budget should expand Victorians’ access to Community Paramedics. It should:

- **Fund Victoria’s 11 independent registered regional and rural community health services to adopt the model.** The Alliance of Regional and Rural Community Health (ARRCH) is seeking \$23.6 million in 2024/25 (\$67.7 million over three years) to provide CP@Clinic across their communities.

¹¹ <https://www.vu.edu.au/sites/default/files/australias-health-tracker-2019-mitchell-institute.pdf>

Putting essential dental care within reach for all

Private dental care is not covered by Medicare, putting it out of reach of people experiencing poverty and disadvantage. Victoria's public dental system is meant to provide an important safety net, but improvements are needed.

While the Victorian Government has made positive investments in children's oral health through the Smile Squad initiative, adults eligible for public dental care are not faring so well. It's recommended people receive dental treatment between once every six months and two years, depending on need. Currently, funding only allows for dental visits every seven years (on average). Up to 1.5 million people are missing out on adequate care.

This puts people at increased risk of health disease, diabetes and other chronic conditions. It also constrains or prevents their social and economic participation. For example, poor oral health makes it hard to get a job.

This is out of step with best-practice early intervention and cost avoidance approaches.

The 2024 Budget should:

- **Increase investment in prevention of future oral diseases.** The Victorian Government should ensure at least five per cent of dental health expenditure flows to evidence-based disease prevention and health promotion. As a starting point, the 2024 Budget could expand access to Smiles 4 Miles, Healthy Families, Healthy Smiles and Lift the Lip – programs that have delivered good outcomes for participating children and pregnant women, but have gaps in provision. More funding should also be directed to culturally-appropriate prevention programs.
- **Build the capacity of the oral health workforce to meet current and future needs.** As part of this, the government should fund the development and implementation of a workforce strategy that addresses critical shortages in dentists, oral health therapists, dental prosthetists, dental assistants and dental technicians. This should include a focus on recruitment and retention in regional and rural Victoria.
- **Improve access to care for priority groups.** The government should establish a new funding model that assures sustainable and timely dental care for 'at risk' Victorians. Once complete, this new model should drive a five-year \$600 million strategy¹² to double the target number of disadvantaged and vulnerable Victorians completing care by 2030. Doubling the target would mean an additional 750,000 Victorians receiving essential dental care in that period and achieve avoided costs across other areas of the Budget.

¹² As advocated by the Victorian Oral Healthcare Alliance.

Invest in women's health

Victoria leads the nation with its network of coordinated women's health services.

These services play a vital role advancing women's equality, promoting sexual and reproductive health at every life stage, preventing violence against women, and promoting positive mental and physical health.

The 2022 Victorian Budget provided the first funding boost to women's health services since 1988.

This funding uplift delivered¹³ a nine-fold return on investment, with a 78 per cent increase in the number of Victorian women and children assisted resulting in 22,000 fewer women experiencing family violence and 500 fewer teen pregnancies.

This funding will expire in June 2024.

The Victorian Government should:

- **Maintain current uplift funding for Victoria's women's health services.** Continuing this investment supports the Victorian Government's objectives in *Our Equal State: Victoria's gender equality strategy*, and will reduce demand and cost pressures across the health system.
- **Provide funding to women's health services and LGBTIQ+ community-controlled organisations** to work collaboratively to identify service gaps for LGBTIQ+ women and develop new models of care.

Ensure access to alcohol and other drugs treatment

Right now, Victoria's Alcohol and Other Drugs (AOD) treatment services support more than 40,000 people per year. But patterns of consumption have changed and services don't have the resources to keep up with demand. Waitlists for support are growing and people are presenting with increasingly complex needs.

These pressures are compounded by the busy and complex reform environment, following the Royal Commissions into Family Violence and Mental Health.

In this Budget, the Victorian Government should invest to increase the capacity of the AOD sector by:

- **Funding the development of an industry plan for the AOD sector**, to guide investment in AOD sector workforce and infrastructure needed to meet future demand.
- **Providing increased loading for forensic services by 25 per cent**, to ensure the forensic system can meet demand, and to reduce pressure on community-based treatment.
- **Increasing the capacity of residential services**, including both withdrawal and rehabilitation, as well as making strong investment in youth residential detox.

¹³ Small Change, Big Impact: Women's Health Services Network Collective Impact Report.

- **Funding innovative programs that meet a place-based or cohort-specific need.** For example, the Living Free Project in Frankston and Mornington Peninsula, which supports girls and women who are at risk of entering the justice system, or who have already been in contact.
- **Ensuring under-serviced groups have access to adequate AOD services.** The Budget must fund the full-service delivery model in regional and rural Victoria and provide resources that enable women, young people, LGBTIQ+ Victorians, refugee and migrant communities and other groups to access safe and supportive services.
- **Making positive investments in harm reduction services,** including pushing ahead with a second overdose prevention centre (to be located in the Melbourne Central Business District), introducing a government-run drug checking and early warning service, and funding more access to the life-saving anti-overdose drug naloxone.

Increase LGBTIQ+ Victorians' access to essential health care

Across almost every measure of health and wellbeing, LGBTIQ+ people fare significantly worse than non-LGBTIQ+ people. This is not because of their LGBTIQ+ status, but because of stigma and discrimination that many LGBTIQ+ people encounter – including in the health system.

The VCOSS Budget submission highlights actions that the Victorian Government can take to improve the social determinants of health for LGBTIQ+ Victorians (for example, access to safe, affordable housing).

Additionally, there are a range of health system investments that the Victorian Government should make in the 2024 Budget, that will increase LGBTIQ+ Victorians' access to preventive healthcare, assessments, treatments, continuing care and emergency care across all parts of the health system.

Specifically, the Budget should:

- **Maintain strong investment in community-controlled healthcare services.** Please also refer to 'Valuing the Community Sector' on page 87.
- **Increase trans and gender diverse Victorians' access to community-based specialised care,** by:
 - **Funding outreach clinical programs.** For example, the peer-led trans and gender diverse primary health care service, Equinox, should be supported to open satellite clinics in outer urban, regional and rural health centres.
 - **Allocating resources to develop and operate online outreach services.** This will ensure more timely assistance for people who would otherwise be on a waiting list at Equinox. It will also help people who are unable to attend the service in person.
- **Continue to lift the bar for mainstream health services to confront stigma, discrimination and other unsafe and exclusionary practices and behaviours in their settings.** The Budget should build on the momentum of culture and practice change currently propelled by Rainbow Tick accreditation, so that culturally safe and inclusive ways of working are embedded and enduring in the state's health system.

Getting Victoria's mental health Consumer Leadership Agency up and running

The implementation of Victoria's Mental Health Royal Commission promises a new approach to mental health and wellbeing. One of the most significant reform pillars is the centering of lived experience expertise.

Recommendation 29 of the Royal Commission provides for an independent consumer leadership agency. This was meant to be established as part of the foundational architecture of the reimagined system. But almost two years since the Royal Commission final report, consumers are still waiting.

The 2024 Budget should:

- **Deliver funds to establish a not-for-profit, consumer-governed and driven Consumer Leadership Agency**, with operational resources to:
 - **Foster new consumer-created initiatives for healing and support** by testing new ideas and expanding effective approaches that can become part of the service mix.
 - **Nurture and connect consumer leaders who are influential in sector governance, management and development.**
 - **Uplift system capability.** The agency would be funded as a centre of excellence and support identification and implementation of evidence-informed and best practice approaches to drive systemic change.
 - **Be a sector model, or 'backbone'.** For example by providing back-of-house support for new lived experience led organisations and services to start, grow and develop lived experience work.

Backing Victorians in work

Strengthen support for gig economy workers

Many gig economy workers experience low pay, a lack of job security and limited access to paid leave entitlements.

To improve fairness and support for gig workers, the Victorian Government established the Gig Worker Support Service in early 2023. This service helps workers understand their rights, protections and entitlements under workplace and related laws, and can refer workers to community legal centres to help resolve disputes.¹⁴ It also promotes and administers Victoria's *Voluntary Fair Conduct and Accountability Standards* (the Standards).

Alongside this, the City of Melbourne recently established a Gig Workers' Hub in central Melbourne to support delivery rider and rideshare drivers to connect with other workers and access basic facilities including clean toilets, a kitchen with free food and drink, and charging points. Currently the Hub is operating four days a week (for three hours a day) until the end of 2023.¹⁵

The Victorian Government can build on these investments in the 2024 Budget by providing funding to:

- **Increase the reach and impact of the Gig Workers' Hub by:**
 - Partnering with the City of Melbourne to extend the Gig Workers' Hub in 2025 and increase its opening hours to seven days.
 - Supporting the Gig Worker Support Service to operate a drop-in centre at the Gig Workers' Hub to better support workers to understand their workplace rights, protections and entitlements, including access to the Sick Pay Guarantee.¹⁶
 - Providing another two years of funding to funded community legal centres to continue to accept referrals from the Gig Workers' Hub for legal advice and support, and to work jointly with the City of Melbourne to operate outreach at the Hub.
 - Using the lessons from the Gig Workers' Hub to develop approaches to assist and support gig workers more broadly.
- **Strengthen the impact of Victoria's nation-leading Voluntary Fair Conduct and Accountability Standards by:**
 - Introducing the strongest possible legislative enforcement model that it can – to assure compliance with Victoria's Standards, which are already in place – whilst advocating for the Commonwealth to legislate strong Minimum Employment Standards for gig workers.

¹⁴ Victorian Government, Gig Worker Support Service. <https://www.vic.gov.au/gig-worker-support-service>

¹⁵ City of Melbourne, Gig Workers' Hub. <https://participate.melbourne.vic.gov.au/emerging-tech-testbed/micro-labs/gig-workers-hub>

¹⁶ Service Victoria, Sick Pay Guarantee. <https://www.service.vic.gov.au/services/sick-pay-guarantee>

- Ensuring that the Gig Worker Support Service is adequately funded to run a public awareness campaign around the Standards, and can work more closely with worker platforms to promote adoption of the Standards.
- Maintaining investment in research and data collection and analysis on the effectiveness of the Standards in improving the pay and working conditions of gig economy workers in Victoria.

Assist young people to get a foothold in the labour market

COVID lockdowns disrupted traditional job pathways and increased mental health challenges. Many young Victorians disengaged from school or dropped out entirely.

These impacts continue to be felt today.

Almost 61,400 young Victorians aged between 15–24 years are not studying or working.¹⁷ Victoria’s youth unemployment rate remains high at 10.1 per cent – more than double the state’s unemployment rate of 3.9 per cent.¹⁸

Victoria’s Youth Strategy 2022–2027 identified that education, training and employment “are the keys to building independence and financial stability”¹⁹ but notes that:

“Entering the workforce is highly competitive and young people are finding it hard to compete with others who have more experience. They are calling for support to enter the workforce.”²⁰

The Victorian Government should support young people in the 2024 Budget by:

- **Reducing financial barriers to commencement and completion of vocational education and training and higher education by:**
 - Maintaining Free TAFE
 - Investing in more scholarships for young people
 - Increasing financial support for students undertaking placements. (See also: ‘Support high quality student placements in the community sector’ on p. 89)
- **Funding flexible tailored supports to TAFE learners who have risk factors for disengagement/non-completion, such as homelessness.**
- **Continuing to fund measures that maintain uptake and boost completion rates of apprenticeships and traineeships.** Investment decisions should be guided by expert advice

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’, November 2022.

¹⁸ Australian Bureau of Statistics. Labour Force, Australia, November 2023. <https://www.abs.gov.au/statistics/labour/employment-and-unemployment/labour-force-australia/latest-release>

¹⁹ Victorian Government. (2022) *Our promise, your future: Victoria’s youth strategy 2022–2027*.

<https://content.vic.gov.au/sites/default/files/2022-08/Our-promise-Your-future-Victoria%27s-youth-strategy-2022-2027.pdf>

²⁰ Ibid.

and recommendations from members of the Victorian Government's Apprenticeships Taskforce.

- **Funding the community sector to deliver employment supports committed to in *Victoria's Youth Strategy 2022–2027*.** This government strategy identified a suite of targeted supports that are needed to help young Victorians build work readiness and find a job.²¹ They are supports that young Victorians cannot access from Commonwealth programs or services.
- **Supporting the creation of more entry-level positions by:**
 - Acting as a model employer and increasing entry-level job opportunities in state government,²² especially in regional areas, as outlined in *Victoria's Youth Strategy 2022–2027*.
 - Establishing a new, targeted round of the Jobs Victoria Fund. This would provide time-limited wage subsidies of up to \$20,000 per position to encourage employers in priority industries to create secure, entry-level positions for young people experiencing disadvantage.

Help create more jobs for Victorians with disabilities

Many people with disability experience barriers to obtaining and retaining employment.

The reasons are varied – they range from discrimination and stigma through to lack of employer awareness or confidence. Whatever the reason, this systemic exclusion from the labour market is causing great harm. It's one of the key drivers of poverty and mental ill-health for Victorians with a disability. It's also a huge economic cost to the state – lifting the participation rate of people with disabilities would lift GSP.

These barriers can and must be overcome.

The Victorian Government should invest in a package of measures that improve hiring and job retention for people with disabilities. Specifically, the 2024 Budget should:

- **Strengthen the Victorian Government's disability employment procurement policies, as per recommendation 7.23 of the Disability Royal Commission.**
- **Fund the development of online resources and training activities for employers** to build skills and knowledge and develop the confidence to recruit and retain staff with disabilities.
- **Reinvest in wage subsidies to encourage employers to hire people with disabilities** and consider how these subsidies can best promote long-term employment and retention.

²¹ Victoria's youth strategy 2022–2027 priority 3.5 is: Expand targeted job support to young people through Jobs Victoria Services. Provide personal assistance to build work readiness and get jobs through: • Jobs Victoria Services • access to career counselling • work opportunities via traineeships and wage subsidies through the Jobs Victoria Fund.

²² Victoria's youth strategy 2022–2027 priority 3.12 is: Expand job opportunities for young people across the Victorian Public Sector. This includes paid short-term roles that build skills and experience.

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

Fill gaps in mentoring for the state's most disadvantaged jobseekers

Victoria's employment growth remains strong, with the unemployment rate at 3.9 per cent.²³

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

Previously, these jobseekers were able to access best-in-class employment supports from the Victorian Government, through Jobs Victoria. This changed in the 2023 Budget, with the cessation of the Advocate and Career Counsellor programs and the significant scaling down of the Mentor program.

While VCOSS understands the policy context for the Victorian Government's 2023 budget decisions, we note that equivalent Commonwealth supports have not kicked in. Reforms to Workforce Australia and the Local Jobs Program are still underway and many Victorians who are eager to work *right now* are unable to get the support they need – particularly individual mentoring.

The 2024 Budget should provide time-limited scaffolding. It should:

- **Immediately expand access to mentors for disadvantaged jobseekers statewide**, not just long-term unemployed people in the five sites funded in the 2023 Budget (Hume, Brimbank, Dandenong, Shepparton and Latrobe). The community sector stands ready to support the Victorian Government to quickly design a fit-for-purpose time-limited scheme, while advocating for these supports to be embedded in the new Commonwealth model.
- **Reinstate the successful Community Employment Connectors program**, which provided culturally responsive and individualised support to help disadvantaged jobseekers navigate and connect with employment and training services.
- **Back in a demonstration project for the delivery of the Jobs Victoria program with the Commonwealth Government**, as recommended by the recent House of Representatives Select Committee on Workforce Australia.²⁴ Victoria should urge the Federal Government to accept this recommendation and strike a bilateral agreement.

²³ Australian Bureau of Statistics. Labour Force, Australia, November 2023. <https://www.abs.gov.au/statistics/labour/employment-and-unemployment/labour-force-australia/latest-release>

²⁴ Parliament of Australia Select Committee on Workforce Australia Employment Services. (2023) *Rebuilding Employment Services: Final report on Workforce Australia Employment Services*. https://www.aph.gov.au/Parliamentary_Business/Committees/House/Workforce_Australia_Employment_Services/WorkforceAustralia/Report



More than 60,000 young Victorians aged
15–24 years are not studying or working.

Ensure a strong and sustainable adult community and further education sector

Pre-accredited training supports learners with diverse needs and those who have experienced barriers to education to access high-quality training that can set them up for success in study, work and life.

However, pre-accredited training is in decline, with the number of Learn Local providers reducing from 363 in 2006 to 274 in 2021.²⁵

As a result, learners and communities are losing access to quality education and training. It is also disproportionately affecting rural providers, with 40 per cent of Neighbourhood House Learn Locals planning to reduce their delivery.²⁶

To support a strong and sustainable pre-accredited training system, the Victorian Government's 2024 Budget should:

- **Introduce a new, sustainable funding model for Learn Local providers**, as proposed by the peak body for Adult and Community Education and supported by the sector. This new model should cover the full cost of course development, promotion, delivery, administration and student support.
- **Increase the Student Contact Hour funding rate from \$9.10 to \$9.83** to recover the erosion in funding over years due to wage and CPI increases. Regional and other existing loadings should continue.
- **Apply annual indexation to Adult Community and Further Education (ACFE) Board funding**, using the recently agreed indexation formula between community sector organisations and the Victorian Government.

²⁵ Neighbourhood Houses Victoria and ACEVic, Proposed quality-based funding model to sustain Learn Local provision, Prepared by Neighbourhood Houses Victoria (NHVic) and Adult and Community Education Victoria (ACEVic) on behalf of the Victorian Learn Local sector. <https://www.nhvic.org.au/advocacy-for-learn-local-funding>

²⁶ Data supplied by Neighbourhood Houses Victoria.

Maximise investment in Free TAFE

Since 2019, the Victorian Government's Free TAFE initiative has invested almost \$340 million to help reduce barriers to training for more than 137,000 students.²⁷

Building on this landmark investment, government changes to eligibility criteria this year have enabled students that already hold a VET qualification or a university degree to access Free TAFE and permitted students to complete more than one Free TAFE course within the same occupational pathway. These are nation-leading reforms and have been widely lauded.

However, while the expanded Free TAFE initiative removes significant cost barriers, students are still required to cover the cost of course materials, transport, childcare and unpaid student placements. This is likely to be a factor (though not the only factor) in low course completion rates, which were sitting at 44.7 per cent in 2020.²⁸

To optimise Free TAFE, the 2024 Budget should invest in TAFE providers to:

- **Better support students** to understand the course requirements, career prospects, the costs associated with studying and the number of hours required to undertake unpaid student placements (if relevant) prior to enrolment. Front ending this support and investment will ensure students enrol in the right course and improve completion rates.
- **Deliver student support services to meet increased demand** and ensure students can access the support they need to continue with and complete their studies.
- **Establish or increase scholarships to better support students struggling financially to complete their qualifications.**
- **Develop feeder courses into accredited TAFE courses** in partnership with Learn Local venues, where the distance to a TAFE campus is a barrier to participation. This will help ensure more regional Victorians are able to access accredited TAFE training, including Free TAFE.
- **Ensure ongoing implementation of the Victorian Parliament's Inquiry into access to TAFE for learners with disability**, with associated funding.

²⁷ Premier of Victoria, 'Free TAFE Building Better Careers', Media release, 6 June 2023. <https://www.premier.vic.gov.au/free-tafe-building-better-careers>

²⁸ Most recent data available. Supplied by the National Centre for Vocational Education Research.

Supporting children and families to thrive

Front-load support for children and families early in life

The first 1,000 days of a child's life (from conception to age two) and subsequent 1,000 days (up to age five) is a critical time developmentally. When early life experiences are positive and enriching, children are more likely to do well at school and lead healthy, happy and fulfilling lives.

Victoria's \$14 billion investment in the ambitious '*Best Start, Best life*' reform package is enriching children's learning over the next decade by boosting participation in three-year-old kinder and Pre-Prep.

However, the impact could be even greater if coupled with new targeted early investments in Victorian neighbourhoods that have the highest levels of child poverty and disadvantage.

The 2023 Budget should:

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

Building on the evidence of what works to improve children's outcomes, '*Beyond the Silver Bullet*' would identify 10 transformational interventions, selected in partnership with government, and deliver them in 20 priority communities.

The trial would focus on existing interventions, such as sustained nurse home visiting, parenting programs, playgroup participation and childcare attendance, as well as access to green spaces and financial supports.

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

Connect more families to early help through sustained nurse home visiting

Supporting families early in a child's life reduces stress and hardship, improves parent care and connection, and promotes a child's healthy long-term development.

The sustained nurse home-visiting program right@home is a high-impact, evidence-driven initiative that uses the existing Maternal and Child Health workforce to provide 25 structured home visits to families facing adversity. The visits start before a child is born and continue over the child's first two years.

Right@home has so far been implemented in four Victorian locations: Ballarat, Dandenong, Frankston and Whittlesea.

The 2024 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.

Right@home aligns with Victoria’s family violence and mental health reforms, providing an important opportunity for prevention and early intervention. It is well placed to support children’s learning and social development in the first 2,000 days of life.

Connect community nurses with financial counsellors to help prevent childhood poverty

Children growing up in households experiencing financial hardship face poorer health, wellbeing and education outcomes that extend into adulthood.

A pilot initiative – ‘Healthier Wealthier Families’ – could help shift the dial, by creating a systematic referral pathway between two free community-based services: maternal and child health and financial counselling. As part of this approach, maternal and child health nurses would have tools to identify families experiencing financial hardship, who could benefit from early referral to existing free, independent financial wellbeing services – before they reach financial crisis.

Healthier Wealthier Families has already been tested for feasibility and acceptability in five sites across metropolitan and regional Victoria and New South Wales.

The 2024 Budget should take the next step and:

- **Fund the statewide roll out of the Healthier Wealthier Families initiative.**
To achieve optimal impact, this investment in Healthier Wealthier Families would need to be complemented by stronger investment in the financial counselling sector, to ensure it has the capacity to respond to new referrals.

(See also: ‘Resource the financial counselling sector to match need’ on p. 19)

Keep strengthening the child and family services system

Victoria's child and family services system continues to come under significant and sustained pressure. Year in, year out, demand is increasing across family services, family violence, sexual assault and child protection. The workforce is fatigued.

Service providers – committed to supporting Victoria's most at-risk children, young people, families and carers, and their workers – are working in an increasingly challenging environment. They are faced with a more complex regulatory environment, as well as rising costs and workforce shortages. Many are worried about their funding and program sustainability, and their capacity to meet the community's needs.

To ensure that Victoria's children and their families are kept safe and well, Victoria must continue to implement policies and take steps to reduce the demands on the child and family services system, shifting from crisis responses to prevention and early intervention.

Building on positive investments in recent budgets, the 2024 Budget should continue to:

- **Ensure adequate and secure funding to child and family service providers** so they can meet demand and provide high quality care.
- **Ensure the sector has the resources it needs to provide early intervention, and family preservation and reunification**, including adequate funds for evaluation.

(See also: 'Valuing the Community Sector' on p. 87)

Support Aboriginal self-determination in child and family services

First Peoples and Aboriginal Community Controlled Organisations (ACCOs) have long drawn attention to unjust laws and practices that drive Aboriginal children and young people into the child protection system at a higher rate than non-Aboriginal kids. Victoria's Yoorrook Justice Commission is helping to create the conditions for change, through a formal truth-telling process that is intended to hold those in power to account for the separation of children from kin, Country and culture.

The Victorian Government has already made a commitment to reducing the overrepresentation of Aboriginal children in care by 45 per cent by 2031.²⁹

To achieve this important target, the Government made a landmark commitment of \$20.9 million in the 2023–24 Budget (\$140 million over four years) to support self-determined approaches to address the overrepresentation of First Nations families in the child protection system.

²⁹ Premier of Victoria, 'Strengthening Connection To Culture, Country And Family', Media release, 10 September 2021.
<https://www.premier.vic.gov.au/strengthening-connection-culture-country-and-family>

The Victorian Government should build on this landmark investment by providing resources that:

- **Ensure First Nations children and young people in out-of-home care have access to disability assessments.**
- **Enable the Aboriginal Community Controlled sector to work with the Department of Treasury and Finance to reform the overarching funding model for ACCOs.** While the sector is receiving substantial funding right now to deliver programs and services for Aboriginal children and families involved with Child Protection, Budget development and commissioning processes do not put Aboriginal decision-making in Aboriginal hands. Reform is needed to ensure these critical processes align with the Government's commitment to self-determination.
- **Support implementation of new recommendations from the Yoorrook Justice Commission on child protection matters.**
- **Assure a whole-of-government commitment to Close the Gap across the four priority reform areas.**

Relieve cost-of-living pressures on foster and kinship carers

Foster and kinship carers play a vital role in creating safe, enriching and therapeutic environments for children and young people. Carers carry a heavy financial burden to do this important work. And while Victoria provides carers a fortnightly allowance to contribute to the costs of caring for children and young people, Victoria's base rate is the lowest in the country.³ In addition, Victorian carers must wait until a child is eight before they are eligible for an age-related incremental increase to the base rate.⁴

Many Victorian foster and kinship carers experience financial hardship,⁵ and this is contributing to carer dissatisfaction, carer churn and a significant long-term decline in the overall number of foster carers. The loss of experienced carers leads to instability for children and young people already living with significant trauma. It also leads to increased use of contingency care (e.g. hotel rooms with workers) and residential care, as options for placing children in home-based care decline.

While the Victorian Government acknowledged growing cost-of-living pressures for carers in the 2023 Budget with a \$650 one-off payment to all carers with a placement, this is not enough.

The 2024 Budget should:

- **Raise the Care Allowance to cover the true costs of providing a safe and therapeutic environment.** The Victorian Government should review the current allowance to determine an appropriate payment structure that aligns with key child life stages and immediately increase payment levels to cover day-to-day costs of care.
- **Index the Care Allowance to maintain its real value:** the Victorian Care Allowance has only been indexed by two per cent annually when inflation was 3.8 per cent in 2020/21, 6.1 per cent in 2021/22 and 6.0 per cent in 2022/23.⁶
- **Assess and apply equity** in the rates and levels of care allowance provided for children and young people in care based on their needs, not placement type. The level of care allowance funding should reflect the needs and complexity of providing care to the child, regardless of orders, i.e. across Kinship, Foster and Permanent Care.

Improve service delivery and support for foster and kinship carers

Victoria has one of the worst foster carer retention rates in Australia. Australian Institute of Health and Welfare data shows that Victoria is losing volunteer foster carers at nearly twice the rate it is recruiting them.³⁰ Measures to improve carer experience are needed to improve carer retention and ensure stability, safety and wellbeing for children and young people.

While improvements to the Care Allowance are crucial, these need to be accompanied by other practical supports.

The 2024 Budget should:

- **Strengthen investment in the DFFH Care Support Help Desk**, which supports carers by obtaining vital documentation at the time of placement establishment, such as Medicare numbers, birth certificates and vaccination certificates. The Support Desk funding should be extended so staff can also offer assistance for issues such as passport applications, NDIS applications and transition to permanent care. Funding should be made recurrent.
- **Fund a review of existing peer support initiatives and use this evidence to scale up successful programs**, to ensure all carers have access to respite and peer support as they need it.

Increase maternity support to mothers with disabilities

When women with disabilities are well supported throughout their pregnancies and in the early days of parenthood, they are more likely to have healthy babies and have the best possible mental and physical health outcomes. Supported mothers and families are also more likely to feel confident with their ability to parent and to live independently.³¹

Victorian women with intellectual and physical disabilities and their families do not have equal access to specialist perinatal care, information, and the full range of holistic supports they need across the state. Currently, Australia's only specialist program for pregnant women with disabilities, the *Women with Individual Needs (WIN)* program delivered by the Royal Women's Hospital, is only available to women who live within 40km of Parkville.

This puts mothers with disabilities and their children – particularly those living in rural and regional Victoria – at risk of poor physical and mental health outcomes. It also increases the likelihood that they will become involved with the child protection system.

The Victorian Government should expand access to the WIN program to women with disabilities who live outside metropolitan Melbourne, to provide timely, tailored, and accessible and inclusive information, advice, advocacy, and perinatal services. This will prevent harm to Victorian women,

³⁰ Australian Institute of Health and Welfare. Child protection Australia 2021–22. Table 7.2: <https://www.aihw.gov.au/reports/child-protection/child-protection-australia-2021-22/data>

³¹ Royal Women's Hospital Women with Individual Needs Clinic. (2022) *Disability and maternity care: Submission to Disability Royal Commission*. <https://disability.royalcommission.gov.au/publications/sub99905062-women-individual-needs-clinic>

babies and their families, in line with the Victorian Government's commitment to investment in early intervention.

The 2024 Budget should:

- **Scale up the Royal Women's Hospital's *Women with Individual Needs* (WIN)³² program** so that there is state-wide provision of specialist perinatal care for women with disabilities.

Increase support to families raising children with disabilities

When families raising children with disability get the right level of support early, they thrive. But if support isn't available when families need it most, the risk of poor health and education outcomes is higher, and there is a greater risk that the family will become involved with the child protection system.

The Victorian Government funds two initiatives that help families access much needed support for their children, and help families remain together: Family Services Specialist Disability Practitioners and the Children with Complex Disability Support Needs program.

Together, these programs support around 1,075 families (including 2,150 children) to navigate complex service systems, access the NDIS, and promote sustainability of care that prevents families from breaking down.³³

Despite the critical role these programs play, they face ongoing funding uncertainty.

The 2024 Budget should:

- **Permanently fund the Family Services Specialist Disability Practitioners and the Children with Complex Disability Support Needs programs** so families raising children with disabilities can access strengths-based supports they need.

Fund the continued roll out of Infant, Child and Family Mental Health and Wellbeing Hubs

Child and family hubs provide a 'one stop shop' for families to access health, education, and social services in one place, as well as opportunities to work with families, to build parental capacity and create social connections.

³² The Royal Women's Hospital Victoria Australia. Women with Individual Needs. <https://www.thewomens.org.au/health-professionals/maternity/women-with-individual-needs>

³³ Association for Children with Disability. (2023) 2024 Victorian State Budget Submission, pg 3. https://www.acd.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2023/11/ACD-submission-2024_Victorian_State_Budget_061123.pdf

Emerging evidence associates these hubs with improved school readiness, increased parental confidence, improved health and academic outcomes for children, increased identification of developmental vulnerability and increased service access for all families.³⁴

Victoria currently has three Infant, Child and Family Area Mental Health and Wellbeing (ICFAMHW) Hubs operating across Southern Melbourne, Brimbank-Melton, and Loddon areas. These three hubs were funded in response to the Royal Commission into Victoria's Mental Health System.

The 2024 Budget should:

- **Expand access to children and families by funding the roll out of more Infant, Child and Family Mental Health and Wellbeing Hubs** across Victoria.
- **Ensure that new and existing hubs are adequately funded** to include community-based paediatricians and multi-disciplinary teams.

Continue to invest in young people in rural and regional Victoria

Young people living in rural and regional Victoria face barriers to the services and supports they need to thrive. These barriers are often intersecting – spanning education, transport, employment, housing, health and social assistance – and impact their opportunities for social and economic participation and their wellbeing.

Young people in rural and regional Victoria are also more likely to live in communities that are being hardest hit by climate change. In the past four years alone, regional and rural communities have been hit with rolling disasters including drought, fires, a pandemic and floods, as well as a cost-of-living and housing affordability crisis.

To ensure that young people in rural and regional Victoria can face what's in front of them, the 2024 Budget should provide multi-year funding to proven place-based initiatives. It should:

- **Continue the provision of the Regional Presence Project in Warrnambool, Swan Hill, Morwell and Ballarat.** This project, delivered by the Youth Affairs Council of Victoria and the Centre for Multicultural Youth, provides high-value place-based support to young people and builds resilience through youth-led social and recreational activities, in-school student support group sessions and sector capacity building.
- **Enable support to be expanded to young people in the under-resourced regions of north-east and south-east Victoria.**

³⁴ National Child and Family Hubs Network. (2023) *Child and family hubs: an important 'front door' for equitable support for families across Australia*. https://apo.org.au/sites/default/files/resource-files/2023-02/apo-nid321543_0.pdf

Bolster support for migrant and refugee children, young people and their families accessing community services

Having access to high quality, skilled interpreters in health, community services and education settings is essential to ensure that migrant and refugee children, young people and their families can communicate effectively, build relationships and access the information, care and support they need.

When it comes to working with migrant and refugee children, young people and their families, VCOSS member organisations report that there is an urgent need across health, family violence, community services and the education system to increase access to interpreters who are skilled in working with children and young people – particularly children and young people who have experienced complex trauma.

The need for interpreters is particularly acute in areas with large migrant populations, including Shepparton, Bendigo and Mildura.

The 2024 Budget should:

- **Invest in training, resources, support and supervision for interpreters working with children and young people from migrant and refugee backgrounds** to ensure interpreter services are safe, and trauma informed.
- **Fund training for all community sector workers**, so they know how and when to access interpreting services and can offer culturally safe support for clients.
- **Increase base funding for interpreter services so there are enough workers to meet demand.**

Please also refer to ‘Making the justice system work’ for recommendations related to children caught up in the quicksand of Victoria’s justice system.

This chapter includes a specific call (page 78) for DFFH to be the designated lead agency for the coordination of support to children affected by parental incarceration, as recommended by the *Victorian Parliamentary Inquiry into Children Affected by Parental Incarceration*.



Better schools and early childhood education

Strengthen disability inclusion in early childhood education and care services

Many young children with disabilities or developmental delays in Victoria are missing out on opportunities for early diagnosis and treatment because there are lengthy wait times of 12–18 months to see paediatricians and allied health professionals in the public system.³⁵ This longstanding issue was made worse by the pandemic. There is a large backlog of children and families waiting for diagnosis and support.

Children and families are now presenting to early childhood education and care services with increasingly complex needs. The proportion of children with disabilities who formally require special assistance or extra assessments has grown markedly since 2018.³⁶

According to the Association for Children with Disabilities, children and their families are being turned away from services, having their access restricted or facing difficulties obtaining reasonable adjustments. Families regularly report children being actively discouraged from attending because services can't access funded supports, or applying is too hard, or because they are waiting for a diagnosis.³

The Victorian Government allocated \$18.1 million over four years in the 2023 Budget to modernise and tailor support for young children with disabilities to access kinder. It also committed to expanding the Preschool Field Officer program and boosting the allied health workforce in regional Victoria, to improve access to support and increase children's participation in early learning.

The 2024 Budget should invest in additional, complementary measures to guarantee and improve inclusion support for children across the state.

This should include funding to:

- **Refine and expand access to the existing Kindergarten Inclusion Support.** Program refinements should remove the hurdle of a diagnosis requirement for children and make it easier for services to access an additional educator.
- **Set aside funds as part of the *Best Start, Best Life* initiative to ensure that services aren't disincentivised from enrolling children with disabilities** if they can't do the full 30 hours of kinder. It is essential that the Best Start, Best Life reforms centre inclusion.

³⁵ Hiscock, H., Danchin, M. H., Efron, D., Gulenc, A., Hearps, S., Freed, G. L., Perera, P., Wake, M. (2017). 'Trends in paediatric practice in Australia: 2008 and 2013 national audits from the Australian Paediatric Research Network'. *J Paediatr Child Health*, 53(1), 55-61.

³⁶ Australian Government. (2022) *2021 Australian Early Development Census National Report*, p 72.
<https://www.aedc.gov.au/resources/detail/2021-aedc-national-report>

- **Invest in specialist disability support training initiatives for early childhood education and care workers** to ensure children accessing the Kindergarten Inclusion Support program have access to suitably trained educators who are equipped to support families with multiple and complex needs. Workers should also be paid for time ‘off the floor’ to prepare, reflect and embed learnings for inclusive practice.

Make public school education free

There are growing numbers of Victorian families struggling to afford the cost of a ‘free’ public education. Cost-of-living increases mean many Victorian families must choose between the things children and their families need to participate at school (such as internet access and digital devices) and other necessities like groceries.³⁷

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 to keep up with other students.

The 2024 Budget should:

- **Formally declare digital devices, textbooks and stationary part of the standard curriculum** and allocate additional funding to schools to cover these items.
- **Launch a School Lunch Club program**, building on the successful School Breakfast Club program.
- **Make public transport free all year for all children and young people from low-income households and those in crisis**, building on the existing free 30-day public transport travel pass.
- **Allocate more funding to 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).

Support school students with disability to thrive

In the 2023 Budget, the Victorian Government invested \$235 million to transform specialist schools through investments in the allied health workforce, the provision of therapy pools, extra-curricular activities, outside school hours care and more.

Those initiatives came on the back of funding for specialist school upgrades and a broader \$1.6 billion *Disability Inclusion* package intended to make all schools fully inclusive.

³⁷ QUT Digital Media Research Centre. (2023) *The low-income families digital divide: Digital inclusion is everybody’s business – Key findings from the ARC Linkage Project Advancing digital inclusion in low-income Australian families*. <https://apo.org.au/sites/default/files/resource-files/2023-11/apo-nid324660.pdf>

Since then, the Disability Royal Commission has concluded, along with the Independent Review of the National Disability Insurance Scheme. The final reports of both inquiries will necessitate further reform and investment in Victoria's education system to deliver safety, inclusion, equity and excellence for students with a disability.

The 2024 Budget should:

- **Set aside funds in anticipation of implementing a suite of reforms** from the recommendations of the Royal Commission and the Independent NDIS Review.
- **Develop and implement accountability frameworks and mechanisms to ensure students with disabilities can attend their school of choice.**
- **Invest in training for all school leaders and classroom teachers** so they're aware of, and meeting, the requirements to provide reasonable adjustments to students with disabilities, and to support differentiated teaching and behaviour support.
- **Invest in data systems and research** to better understand the needs, experiences, and education outcomes of Deaf and hard of hearing students.

Invest in dedicated, holistic responses for children and young people at risk of disengaging

School attendance in Victoria has been in steady decline in recent years.³⁸ This has been exacerbated by the pandemic, which resulted in more children and young people experiencing severe distress and a reluctance to attend school, and complete disengagement for some students.

The decline in attendance and increase in school refusal, which is occurring among younger and younger students, has been attributed to a range of factors such as anxiety and mental health, not feeling included at school and negative student transition experiences.³⁹

Furthermore, some children and young children face barriers to attending because of a change in family circumstance. For example, those who are living in temporary crisis accommodation because of family violence and homelessness.

Urgent action is needed to restore participation and engagement, and prevent more children and young people from disconnecting.

³⁸ Australian Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting Authority. (2022) Student attendance. <https://www.acara.edu.au/reporting/national-report-on-schooling-in-australia/student-attendance>

³⁹ Victorian Government. (2023) as cited by Parliament of Australia Senate inquiry into School Refusal in Australia: Parliament of Australia. (2023) *The national trend of school refusal and related matters*. https://www.aph.gov.au/Parliamentary_Business/Committees/Senate/Education_and_Employment/SchoolRefusal/Report

The 2024 Budget should respond to the immediate challenge by:

- **Ensuring existing re-engagement programs (such as Navigator) have the capacity to support a return to education** for the increased number of students who are disengaging and fully detached.
- **Providing access to online learning, specialist tutoring programs and similar initiatives** to help children and young people stay connected and engaged in learning when they can't be at school. For example, victim survivors of family violence who are living in temporary crisis accommodation.
- **Maintaining investment in initiatives that are helping mainstream schools to be more inclusive.** For example, school mental health promotion activities that tackle bullying, disability inclusion measures, and Respectful Relationships Education.
(See also: 'Drive community responses that prevent family violence on p. 67)
- **Filling gaps in the current suite of supports**, including additional funding for evidence-informed interventions that have emerged since the pandemic to tackle school refusal. This work should be undertaken collaboratively with community organisations that have expert knowledge of at-risk cohorts and what works – including (but not limited to) disability advocacy organisations.
- **Giving kids a second chance at education.** The Victorian Government should invest in measures that support access to high-quality alternate education settings for learners who identify that they can't or don't want to attend a mainstream school.

Increase access to student mental health support in schools

Schools are an ideal platform for promoting children and young people's mental health. Yet, without resourcing and dedicated training and support, it can be challenging for teachers to navigate increasing mental health issues in the classroom.

The Victorian Government has made landmark investments in student mental health. Direct support is provided in schools through the *Mental Health Practitioners in Secondary and Specialist Schools* and *Mental Health in Primary Schools (MHiPS)* initiatives. Schools can also access evidence-informed supports from Victoria's *Schools Mental Health Menu*.

The 2024 Budget can build on these excellent foundations by providing funds to:

- **Trial the delivery of multi-disciplinary student mental health teams in primary schools.** This trial would respond to a gap in the current suite of supports. It would bring together community-based paediatric mental health support, allied health, education specialists and teachers to provide *integrated* support that addresses a student's mental health and learning needs. Ten sites would be selected. The trial would assess models of care and evaluate outcomes, to inform future investment decisions.

Support students with the transition from school to work

The transition from school to work is a period of enormous change. For some students, it's a challenging time.

For more than 22 years, Victoria's statewide network of 31 Local Learning and Employment Networks (LLENs) have supported young Victorians to establish great post-school pathways.

They broker, build and maintain place-based partnerships involving schools, employers, industry bodies, government agencies and the broader community. LLENs also deliver place-based initiatives that connect young people to opportunities, such as work placements and training. They have a strong focus on addressing disadvantage and supporting young people at risk of falling through the cracks.

The 2024 Budget should ensure LLENs can continue to deliver their high-value work by:

- **Providing LLENs with adequate funding and multi-year contracts.**

(See also: 'Ensure a strong and sustainable adult community and further education sector' on p. 40)

Inclusive communities

Maintain momentum on Truth and Treaty

VCOSS campaigned for a First Nations Voice to Federal Parliament, as an act of allyship with Aboriginal Victorians and Aboriginal Community Controlled Organisations. The rejection of the referendum at the ballot box has been painful for many First Nations peoples and their supporters.

In the wake of this result, Victoria must respond to continued calls from First Nations peoples for action to Close the Gap and meaningful outcomes for communities on self-determination and justice.

And now more than ever, it's critical that Victoria continues to advance its own historic process for truth-telling, voice and Treaty. Other states are looking to Victoria for how to lead the way.

VCOSS congratulates the Victorian Government for establishing a Treaty Authority to oversee upcoming negotiations between the First Peoples' Assembly of Victoria and the government.

The 2024 Budget should back this in, and:

- **Ensure the Treaty Authority has the necessary resources** to advance self-determination, empowerment and systemic change.
- **Continue to make strong complementary investment in the truth telling work of the Yoorrook Justice Commission through to June 2025**, when it is due to conclude its historic inquiry.

Build social inclusion to confront loneliness

Loneliness is at epidemic proportions with almost one in three Victorians experiencing it throughout their lifetime. Victorians of all ages and backgrounds are struggling with loneliness and social isolation. It's affecting people's health and wellbeing, and their ability to engage in education, work and civil society.

The community sector plays a pivotal role in fostering social connection, which prevents loneliness and social isolation. People that are socially connected are more resilient to challenges like climate-related disasters and emergencies.

Social isolation is when a person is distant, remote or physically separated from other people.

Loneliness is feeling sad, empty or distressed because of the absence of meaningful social relationships.

The levers to combat social isolation and loneliness fall across different government departments and sometimes fall *between* the cracks of ministerial portfolio responsibilities. Victoria needs a dedicated Minister to champion social inclusion and be accountable for addressing loneliness and social isolation.

The 2024 Budget should:

- **Establish a Minister for Social Inclusion and fund an expert advisory panel.** The expert advisory panel should include people with lived experience of social exclusion and isolation. It would provide advice to government on a range of priority areas set by the Minister for Social Inclusion, including how services can better meet the needs of people facing barriers to inclusion.
- **Fund research and data collection about the extent and prevalence of loneliness and social isolation.** Victorian-based evidence is needed for a better understanding of risk factors, effective interventions, and intersections with other social barriers.
- **Fund a public awareness campaign to reduce the stigma of loneliness and social isolation.** This should be co-designed with community members including young people, CALD communities and older Victorians, noting that co-design processes can also reduce individuals' experience of loneliness.
- **Accelerate the rollout of Social Inclusion Action Groups** (recommended by Victoria's landmark Mental Health Royal Commission) across all local government areas. Currently, investment is limited to Frankston, Benalla, Mansfield, Wangaratta and Latrobe.
- **Invest in mapping social infrastructure.** Access to social infrastructure such as education, healthcare, and social services provides social capital support for the whole community and can be a protective factor against isolation and loneliness.
- **Continue to invest in social prescribing,** including research into the implications of social prescribing for cohorts such as people with a disability (noting the Local Connections social prescribing trials currently underway in Victoria are specifically targeted at supporting mental health and wellbeing).

(See also: 'Bolster volunteering' on p. 90)

Get started on Disability Royal Commission and NDIS reform

Disability reform must be a major priority in the 2024 Victorian Budget.

The final report of the Disability Royal Commission identified systemic discrimination and a litany of human rights abuses in all states and territories, including Victoria. A multitude of laws, policies and systems – and public institutions – have failed people with disabilities. These failures have enabled violence, abuse, neglect and exploitation to flourish.

Victoria must also grapple with the findings and recommendations of the NDIS Review. This review has turned a spotlight on universal services (such as education and health) and specialist disability services. It found many people with disabilities are failing to have their needs met across these

systems. Children, young people and adults are locked out of social, economic, cultural and recreational opportunities because of unequal access to essential services and supports.

Achieving the vision of both the Royal Commission and Independent NDIS Review will require long-term effort, sustained resourcing and deep engagement with communities and services.

The work must start now.

The 2024 Budget must provide resources that enable Victorians with a disability to be at the centre of reform priority setting and implementation. Specifically, it should:

- **Fund leadership programs so that more people with disabilities can confidently engage with government on reform.** These programs should be co-designed with, and targeted to, under-represented voices. For example, people with intellectual disabilities, First Nations communities and women.
- **Improve funding for self-advocacy groups and peer support networks.** These groups provide a platform for people with disabilities to forge relationships, learn skills and develop confidence to self-advocate. Groups have struggled to keep operating since the introduction of the NDIS. The sector requires increased funding – and needs it to be ongoing – so self-advocates can have a voice in Royal Commission and NDIS reform.

The Disability Royal Commission and NDIS Review also have implications for services the Victorian Government regulates, purchases, funds and delivers. Additional funding is needed to ensure the Victorian public sector has the capacity to engage with systemic reviews, develop a reform blueprint and implement it. As a starting point, the 2024 Budget should include funding to:

- **Establish a State Taskforce to mirror the Commonwealth Disability Royal Commission Taskforce.** This would coordinate action across government. It would have representation from people with disability to help drive the state's approach.
- **Set-up Victorian Public Service infrastructure to implement the NDIS Review.** The form, function and level of funding would be informed by the reform blueprint agreed by National Cabinet.
- **Increase the capacity of the Office of Disability to provide specialist advice and strategic support across the Victorian Public Service.** This would complement the lived experience expertise of Victorians with disability.

In addition, the 2024 Victorian Budget should:

- **Ensure representative peak bodies and government-funded services are resourced to play their part in these reforms.** This includes increased and sustainable funding for the Victorian Disability Advocacy Program, in line with Royal Commission and NDIS Review recommendations.

Increase long-term funding for disability advocacy

Disability advocates make Victoria more inclusive, healthier, resilient and safe for people with disabilities. This has been affirmed in the final reports of the Disability Royal Commission and the NDIS Review.

Both landmark inquiries have highlighted the important role of the Commonwealth and state and territory programs – of which the Victorian Disability Advocacy Program (VDAP) is an exemplar.

VDAP-funded agencies work alongside people with disability, families, and carers to understand, protect and exercise their rights. They also play a vital role in identifying and reporting systemic issues and act as a key safeguard against violence, abuse, and neglect.

Recent budgets have provided VDAP agencies with bursts of ‘boost funding’. While this extra funding has been welcomed, it’s unpredictable and not a sustainable solution. Base funding remains too low – it hasn’t increased to meet the high demand for advocacy or the complexity of cases. Short-term contracts also make it hard to retain experienced advocates.

This is a handbrake on the sector’s productivity and effectiveness.

Both the Disability Royal Commission and NDIS Review recommend improvements to government funding for disability advocacy. The Royal Commission specified funding reform should be enacted no later than 2026 and that, where this has not occurred, the Victorian Government must guarantee ‘boost funding’ in the interim.

The 2024 budget must deliver funding reform now. It should:

- **Increase core funding for the disability advocacy sector** to reflect the level of demand, quantum of unmet need, complexity of cases, and the true cost of service delivery. This investment should comprise:
 - **Increased funding for agencies currently funded under VDAP.**
 - **New funding to address strategic gaps in sector capacity.** For example, the NDIS Review has identified the need to establish specialist disability advocacy for First Nations people with disability and LGBTIQ+SB people.⁴⁰ Additionally, there’s a need for VDAP funding to be expanded to disability rights legal services.
 - **Greater funding for VDAP organisations to undertake systemic advocacy work.**
 - **New funding for continuous improvement.** For example, funding to VDAP organisations to invest in upgraded IT systems to strengthen cybersecurity.
- **Deliver certainty and stability to the advocacy sector and, in turn, people with disability by providing organisations with multi-year contracts.** VCOSS advocates for seven-year default

⁴⁰ LGBTIQ+SB is an acronym that includes lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, intersex, and queer, in addition to sisters and brothers.

contract terms in line with the advice of the Production Commission in its review of human services.

(See also: ‘Valuing the community sector’ on p. 87)

Create a supported decision-making service

People with cognitive disabilities who don’t have family or friends to provide ‘informal support’ can be left to navigate complex systems on their own. This puts them at risk of not being able to express their will. Effective, independent decision support is crucial for people with cognitive disabilities and it should be a given – especially when interacting with mainstream services.

One of the reasons people fall through the cracks is that no organisation is specifically funded by the Victorian Government to provide independent decision support.

The 2024 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, advocates or those who work alongside participants with complex decision support needs.

End digital exclusion

Digital access is an essential service.

As goods and services – including many government services – are increasingly provided online, being on the wrong side of the ‘digital divide’ makes many everyday tasks impossible.

Systems must change to better support broad community access to digital services.

To support this, the 2024 Budget should:

- **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.
- **Provide more digital literacy training and support.** The best support is provided by local organisations who know their communities best, including the needs of older people, people with cognitive disabilities, and culturally and linguistically diverse people who are at risk of digital exclusion.

(See also: ‘Make public school education free’ on p. 52)

Increase access to community transport

Community transport is a localised and important part of the service eco-system provided by community organisations who support the most vulnerable members of our community to access health, social and community care and remain living independently at home.

It is a critical support for people who can't use public transport and for whom alternative transport options are limited or unable to meet their needs.

The community transport sector is witnessing growing demand for services from people with disabilities, older Victorians, school students, and people living on the fringes of the metro area with limited access to public transport. These people rely on community transport for local trips.

Despite this growing need, the community transport sector is underfunded, and existing funding arrangements are complex, with providers often relying on diverse revenue streams to remain viable. This has created a patchwork of services with different availability, scope, eligibility, and fees.

The 2024 Budget should:

- **Boost funding to community transport providers so they can meet current demand.**

(See also: 'Fix, expand and green the bus network' on p. 83)

Deliver on the Transport Accessibility Strategy

Right now, most of our transport system remains inaccessible to many Victorians, including people with disabilities and older Victorians with mobility challenges.

Current progress on accessible transport is slow. Many rural and regional areas still have limited public transport and even less accessible transport. Melbourne also continues to fail to meet its accessibility targets, the new Tram Plan indicating that only just over 25 per cent of all tram stops are accessible.²

The Victorian Government is expected to release a Transport Accessibility Strategy in early 2024.

This strategy will provide a framework for prioritising upgrades, and will work towards compliance with the Commonwealth Disability Standards for Accessible Public Transport (DSAPT).

While this strategy will be welcome, putting the strategy into action will require considerable investment by the Victorian Government. Especially if we want to achieve improved transport experiences for everyone, in line with universal accessibility goals, in a timely manner.

The 2024 Budget should:

- **Establish a dedicated, long-term fund to advance the Transport Accessibility Strategy** and allow for the planning and prioritising of transport infrastructure upgrades to maximise access for all Victorians.

Drive equity and inclusion for multicultural communities

Victoria is becoming increasingly culturally and linguistically diverse. The service system, policies and funding need to match the state's diversity, and support equal *access* and *outcomes* for all Victorians.

Many services and multicultural organisations received a boost in funding at the height of the pandemic and in response to other disasters, such as the October 2022 floods. This helped the sector address pressing challenges, establish networks and communication channels and build capacity. Much of this funding, however, has not been sustained.

The short-term nature of funding makes it challenging for organisations to retain staff, secure long-term legacies and evaluate programs to learn what works.

Racism and discrimination are significant drivers of inequity for multicultural communities. These issues remain ever-present in Victoria.

The 2024 Budget should:

- **Release the Statewide Anti-Racism Strategy and provide funding to implement all actions.**
- **Develop a new co-designed Multicultural Strategy** to ensure coordinated action across government to engage and support migrant and refugee communities in all corners of the state. The strategy should also include a sustainable, equitable and long-term funding model for the multicultural sector, as well as consistent and robust approach to data collection.
- **Build capacity of frontline staff service providers to engage with multicultural clients and strengthen language services.** This should include cultural safety, promoting and enabling the use of professional interpreting services, as well as expanding the pool of qualified translators and interpreters to meet demand.
- **Fund bi-cultural worker positions across key services including community health, employment, financial counselling, family violence, housing and homelessness and youth.** This should be accompanied by a framework which sets out good practice for employment conditions, standards, and workforce development.

Improve the wellbeing of LGBTIQ+ Victorians

In recent budgets, the Victorian Government has invested in policy measures and programs that help LGBTIQ+ Victorians feel equal, visible, safe and celebrated.

Most recently, the 2023 Budget funded community-led organisations to celebrate and connect the LGBTIQ+ community, established a pilot program to address the needs of ageing LGBTIQ+ Victorians, and expanded the Rainbow Tick program by supporting more community and mental health providers to become accredited.

In the 2024 Budget, the Victorian Government should build from strength and:

- **Invest more in the LGBTIQ+ community-controlled sector.** The Budget should 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. Fund guidelines should take care to ensure equity of opportunity for small and mid-size organisations.
- **Provide funding certainty for this work.** Currently, much of the work with LGBTIQ+ communities is underpinned by short-term contracts. This is not sustainable and is a major impediment to growing a skilled and experienced workforce. The budget needs to lock-in longer-term funding to advance LGBTIQ+ equality.
- **Establish co-designed outcomes measures, to assess and assure impact and support continuous improvement.** This is important for all funded initiatives, but particularly where equality funding is being directed to mainstream organisations. It is vital that funded organisations' approaches reflect best-practice LGBTIQ+ inclusive ways of working. For example, accessible referral pathways and services in the alcohol and other drug (AOD) sector, mental health sector, and other essential service systems.

(See also: 'Valuing the community sector' on p. 87)

Tackle the exploitation and exclusion of migrant workers

There are more than 300,000 workers on temporary visas in Victoria.⁴¹ Exploitation of migrant workers is widespread, with research showing that recent migrants are 40 per cent more likely to be under-paid.⁴²

Those on low-incomes and seasonal workers face additional challenges including ineligibility for supports, uncertainty over rights and entitlements, inadequate housing and workplace hazards.

Many temporary visa-holders do not have access to Medicare and rely on private health insurance. Barriers such as the complexity and limitations of insurance schemes, lack of providers in regional areas, and fear of authorities mean that people delay or avoid seeking essential healthcare.

This can result in serious long-term health impacts and even deaths.

⁴¹ Australian Bureau of Statistics. Temporary Visa Holders, 2021. There are 429,000 temporary residents in Victoria, of whom an estimated 73% are in the labour force (either employed or unemployed, based on the national average rates).

<https://www.abs.gov.au/statistics/people/people-and-communities/temporary-visa-holders-australia/latest-release>

⁴² Grattan Institute. (2023) *Short-changed: How to stop the exploitation of migrant workers in Australia*. <https://grattan.edu.au/report/short-changed-how-to-stop-the-exploitation-of-migrant-workers-in-australia/>

The 2024 Budget should:

- **Fund outreach to migrant workers to promote access to healthcare**, working with communities to understand their rights and overcome barriers to access.
- **Establish a fee waiver program for emergency room visits, hospital admissions and ambulances for people on low incomes** who do not have access to Medicare and who cannot afford to pay.
- **Fund partnerships between community legal centres, the Migrant Workers Centre and multicultural and ethno-specific organisations to undertake legal outreach, education and assistance programs.**
- **Strengthen reporting and whistleblower protections for exploitative employers**, including pathways for reporting abuse and proactive engagement with regional and rural communities through funding for on-the-ground resources.

(See also: 'Strengthen support for gig economy workers' on p. 35)

Preventing unpaid carer burnout

More than 700,000 Victorians are unpaid carers to a family member or friend with a disability or health condition, or who is frail.

The 2022 National Carer Survey found carers experience high levels of financial stress, lower wellbeing and poorer health outcomes.⁴³ The challenges are particularly acute for those who have primary responsibility for unpaid care – most of whom are women. Currently, only 59 per cent of primary carers have a paid job.

Greater investment is needed in initiatives that help reduce carers' stress, prevent burnout and ensure caring relationships are sustainable. Increased access to high-quality respite care and supports will aid carer health and wellbeing, enable them to sustain their social connections, and help them access new job opportunities and/or increase their paid hours of work. This will produce long-term cost savings to government.

The Victorian Government should:

- **Develop and pilot 'Care for You'**, an early intervention program that equips carers with practical skills and knowledge to ensure they don't reach breaking point.
- **Expand access to carer respite** to allow carers a much-needed break from the everyday demands of their role.

⁴³ Carers NSW. (2022) *2022 National Carer Survey*. https://www.carersnsw.org.au/uploads/main/Files/3.Resources/Policy-Research/Carer-Survey/About_the_2022_National_Carer_Survey.pdf

Strengthen gender responsive budgeting practices

Victoria is leading the nation with its embrace of gender responsive budgeting.

It is promoting better decision-making around policy and program design and is helping ensure that government expenditure is more transparent and accountable.

The Victorian Government can build on this strong foundation in the 2024 Budget by:

- Accelerating the introduction of legislation to **enshrine gender responsive budgeting in law**, as recommended by the Inquiry into Gender Responsive Budgeting.
- **Rolling out further training on gender impact assessments and gender responsive budgeting** across the Victorian Public Service to build staff knowledge and skills.
- **Establishing an independent Gender Equality Budget Group** modelled on the United Kingdom Women's Budget Group. Comprising gender economic experts from civil society and the academic sector, this group would work with the Gender Responsive Budgeting unit in the Department of Treasury and Finance to better embed gender responsive budgeting practices and undertake an annual gender equality needs assessment of government initiatives.

Creating a Victoria free from violence

Stay the course on family violence reform

Victoria has led the nation with its work to transform the family violence system. It held a landmark Royal Commission and has since invested \$3.9 billion and implemented all 227 of the Commission's recommendations.

But we know change takes time.

To truly achieve the vision of ending family violence in a generation, Victoria must continue to make strong investments across the continuum of family violence reform. This includes prevention, early intervention, response, recovery and healing.

The 2024 Budget can build on Victoria's leading reform agenda by:

- **Investing in additional measures that ensure Orange Door services are fully accessible, culturally safe and culturally responsive** to victim survivors who are Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander, LGBTIQ+, culturally and linguistically diverse, young or have a disability.
- **Providing continued funding to support Tier 2 and 3 prescribed agencies to align to the Family Violence Multi-Agency Risk Assessment and Management (MARAM) framework.** Ongoing investment, to support a rolling cycle of training, is needed to fully embed this capability across workforces.
- **Continuing to build the evidence base for early intervention and recovery services by:**
 - Ensuring Family Safety Victoria has the necessary resources to progress shared Commonwealth/state commitments set out in the *National Plan to End Violence Against Women and Children First Action Plan 2023-27 Activities Addendum*. For example, the Budget should deliver funding to improve data collection that enables Victoria to identify effective early intervention strategies and develop more robust measurement of victim survivors' health and wellbeing during their recovery and healing.
 - Ensuring funded services are resourced to undertake reflective practice, service quality improvements, innovation and evaluation as part of their contracts.
 - Delivering the Family Violence Research Agenda and Research Program 2021-2024 and funding a third phase of research through the Family Violence Research Grants program.

Ensure victim survivors can access support when and where they need it

Despite increased investment in Victoria's family violence system, specialist family violence services are continuing to experience high levels of demand and increased client complexity.

This is contributing to high levels of staff turnover and burnout in the specialist family violence sector and limits the sector's ability to provide safe and effective support.

The 2024 Budget should provide ongoing and sustainable funding for the generalist and specialist family violence support services sector.

This should include:

- **Making all short-term funding for specialist family violence services recurrent**, so that services have a stable platform from which they can respond to demand. Providing the sector with funding certainty will improve staff attraction and retention, and enable the sector to provide more secure employment contracts in line with the new Fair Jobs Code.
- **Increased funding for back-of-house operations**, including infrastructure and administration, particularly targeting resources to smaller specialist family violence services.
- **Secure ongoing funding for cohort-specific services that deliver family violence case management services to specific communities**. For example, migrant and refugee women are less likely to access support for family violence through the Orange Door. Better resourcing of multicultural organisations will help ensure that migrant and refugee women can access culturally appropriate intake, assessment, case management and support.
- **Increased funding to specialist family violence services to provide supports that enable the long-term recovery, health and wellbeing of victim survivors**, with a focus on establishing financial security as part of their recovery.

Drive community responses that prevent family violence

Investing in the primary prevention of family violence has never been more urgent, with at least 53 Australian women killed by family violence this year.⁴⁴

The latest data on community attitudes towards gender inequality shows that, while Australians' attitudinal rejection of gender inequality continues to improve, a sizeable minority of people;

"Condone certain attitudes that undermine women's leadership, reinforce rigid gender roles in specific areas, limit women's personal autonomy, normalise sexism and deny that gender inequality is a problem".⁴⁵

⁴⁴ Correct at the time of writing. Destroy the Joint. 'Counting Dead Women Australia'. <https://www.facebook.com/p/Counting-Dead-Women-Australia-100063733051461/>

⁴⁵ ANROWS. (2021) *Attitudes matter: The 2021 National Community Attitudes towards Violence against Women Survey (NCAS)*. <https://irp.cdn-website.com/f0688f0c/files/uploaded/NCAS%202021%20Findings%20for%20Australia-b1cd01fd.pdf>

Ending family violence involves changing these kinds of attitudes, as well as transforming systems that enable or perpetuate abuse. A coordinated and longitudinal approach across society is needed, with Victorian Government funding that targets actions across all settings where people live, work, learn and play.

Currently, short-term and precarious funding for primary prevention activities is undermining this work. Services struggle to attract and retain skilled practitioners and drive real cultural and behavioural change.

The 2024 Budget should:

- **Increase the total spend on primary prevention activities** in line with advice from Respect Victoria and other prevention-focused organisations. This funding should be provided through contracts of five years, or longer. It should be targeted towards programs that are:
 - grounded in good practice,
 - have a strong evidence base, and/or
 - in the early stages of contributing to significant long-term social change.
- **Provide targeted funding to help organisations respond to backlash and resistance to primary prevention initiatives.**
- **Commit to long-term funding for comprehensive evaluation of core prevention programs**, to ensure accountability and enable iterative improvements.
- **Provide ongoing funding to grow the prevention workforce** and enable the implementation of priorities as outlined in the *10-Year Family Violence Industry Plan and Rolling Action Plans*. This investment should include support for:
 - More rigorous data collection, to enable the prevention workforce to better understand gaps, opportunities, and key issues.
 - The design and delivery of evidence-informed leadership and professional development programs for the prevention workforce.
- **Invest in strengthening governance mechanisms for the primary prevention sector** to improve overall coordination and delivery of work at a state level, and contribute to stronger state-wide advocacy at a national level.

Provide more places of refuge to people who need it

Victoria has invested heavily in family violence refuges in recent years. This investment has been largely focused on modernising existing refuges to make them all “core and cluster” models – as recommended by the Family Violence Royal Commission – with some additional funding for new refuges.⁴⁶

⁴⁶ Premier of Victoria, ‘More Safe Spaces For People Experiencing Family Violence’, Media release, 2 June 2022. <https://www.premier.vic.gov.au/more-safe-spaces-people-experiencing-family-violence>

Despite this investment, demand continues to rise. Currently, the refuge system can accommodate about 170 households. This means about 100 people escaping family violence are forced to stay in unsafe and unsuitable motels every night.

The 2024 Budget should:

- **Boost refuge capacity, to accommodate at least 340 households each night.** All new facilities should be safe and suitable for people with disability, unaccompanied young people, LGBTIQ+ people, migrants and refugees, and culturally safe and appropriate for First Nations people.
- **Provide refuge providers with access to more standalone properties** so they have flexible options to safely house victim survivors who have multiple and complex needs that aren't well met in a traditional refuge environment.
- **Provide operational funding to specialist refuge services for wrap-around supports.** This investment would complement the Federal Government's *Safe Places Emergency Accommodation Program*. The funding would support around-the-clock therapeutic care and enable services to partner with other organisations that provide legal, financial, immigration, housing, employment, mental health, alcohol and other drugs, therapeutic, child and educational support.

Improve outcomes for people impacted by sexual violence and harm

Each year, the specialist sexual assault sector supports 17,000 victim survivors of sexual violence and young people exhibiting harmful sexual behaviours.

However, services are struggling as more victim survivors of both historic and ongoing sexual violence come forward.

While the sector has welcomed top-up funding in recent years, funding cliffs are looming and services face the prospect of turning away victim survivors when short-term funding lapses.

The 2024 Budget should:

- **Maintain all existing 'boost' funding to sexual assault service providers,** to enable services to meet current and projected demand.
- **Resource the development of a new long-term funding model** that increases the sector's capacity to meet demand and respond to sexual violence and provides a stable platform to support and grow the specialist workforce.

Deliver the necessary funding to progress law reform for victim survivors

Victim survivors who choose to engage with the justice system often find this experience confronting and disempowering. It can compound trauma and delay recovery.

In 2021, the Victorian Law Reform Commission (VLRC) identified ways to improve justice system responses to sexual offences,⁴⁷ but progress has stalled.

The 2024 Budget should:

- **Deliver a fully funded and comprehensive 10-year strategy to prevent and address sexual violence and harm.**⁴⁸ This should cover all forms of sexual violence and harm, including child sexual abuse, child sexual exploitation, sexual harassment, image-based sexual abuse, and children and young people exhibiting harmful sexual behaviours.
- **Improve justice experiences, options and outcomes for victim survivors** of sexual violence and harm. This is best done by implementing the recommendations of the VLRC.
- **Fund specialist sector organisations to educate police, lawyers, judges and magistrates, mediators and dispute resolution practitioners about sexual violence.**

Resource a Safe at Home response trial

Too often, women who are being subjected to violence in the home face an awful choice: to flee and become homeless, or to stay and live with their perpetrator.

‘Safe at home’ describes an approach where victim-survivors and their children are supported to stay in the home, while the perpetrator faces the consequences of their actions.

This approach is a priority under the Victorian Government’s Ending Family Violence: Ten Year Plan and the National Plan to End Violence Against Women and their Children.

Victoria has already made progress. For example, personal safety initiatives and flexible support packages have been funded. The *Residential Tenancies Act* has been strengthened so it is easier to amend leases and deal with debt and damage.

But these responses are not offered as an integrated suite of measures and access to a ‘Safe at Home’ response is limited.

⁴⁷ Victorian Law Reform Commission. (2021) Improving the Response of the Justice System to Sexual Offences. <https://www.lawreform.vic.gov.au/project/improving-the-response-of-the-justice-system-to-sexual-offences/>

⁴⁸ Premier of Victoria, ‘Stronger Laws For Victim-Survivors Of Sexual Violence’, Media release, 12 November 2021. <https://www.premier.vic.gov.au/stronger-laws-victim-survivors-sexual-violence>

In this Budget, the Victorian Government should:

- **Invest in a ‘Safe at Home’ response trial, led by McAuley Women’s Services and Meli in Geelong.** This trial will:
 - Establish a core team that provides a rapid response within 48 hours of referral. The core team would include specialist workers providing supports to develop a plan, keep perpetrators in view, and help victim-survivors navigate service systems and access the right support.
 - Support intersecting specialist services to embed ‘Safe at Home’ responses. This would include financial counsellors, community lawyers, case managers and child protection workers.
 - Improve the way police and corrections staff work with the community sector to keep the person using violence in view.
 - Establish brokerage funds which can be used for initial safety and long-term recovery for up to two years.
 - Create a steering group and a lived experience reference group to monitor trial effectiveness, share learnings and make recommendations for how the ‘Safe at home’ approach can be offered to all Victorians who need it.

Strengthen perpetrator accountability

Ending gender-based violence requires an unrelenting focus on the perpetrators of that violence. Overwhelmingly, this is men.⁴⁹

To change the behaviours of men who perpetrate violence (and men who fail to speak out against sexism and violence) we need sustained investments and tailored interventions.⁵⁰

Currently, the specialist men’s family violence sector is straining to meet demand. It is struggling to attract and retain workers, particularly in country areas.

To address this, the 2024 Budget should:

- **Invest in evidence-informed practice and programs that support perpetrators** to change their abusive and violent behaviour. This investment must be adequate to ensure programs have enough places to meet demand, including from court referrals.
- **Direct funding to improve the evidence base** underpinning perpetrator accountability programs. This would take the form of data collection, research, evaluation and translation of evidence into action.

⁴⁹ Australian Government. (2023) National Plan to End Violence against Women and Children. https://www.dss.gov.au/sites/default/files/documents/10_2023/first-action-plan-accessible-pdf-1110.pdf

⁵⁰ Ibid.

- **Grow and develop the perpetrator intervention workforce** by providing funding that allows time for supervision and access to high-quality training and professional development. This access will support increased specialisation in client assessment and case management.
- **Invest in suitable housing options for perpetrators**, so more victim survivors can stay at home.

(See also: 'Resource the Safe at Home response trial' on p. 70 and 'Fixing our housing system' on p. 23)

Better support for children and young people experiencing family violence

Growing up exposed to family violence has a devastating impact on children and young people's mental health and wellbeing. Many are pushed into homelessness or the justice system. Early school leaving is common.

That's because our systems aren't set up to recognise children and young people as victim survivors in their own right. This creates significant gaps in services and supports for young people who experience family violence, either in the home or from an intimate partner.⁵¹

The 2024 Budget should:

- **Invest in youth-specific family violence case management responses across the homelessness services system (including access points and youth refuge)** to better support unaccompanied 15- to 21-year-olds who are victim survivors of family violence, who cannot be supported within the specialist family violence or child and family services system.
- **Expand access to therapeutic responses for children and young people that are age appropriate and culturally appropriate** by:
 - increasing the investment in existing evidence-informed programs; and
 - underwriting the community sector's development of new or innovative models of support that can address unmet needs.

⁵¹ Melbourne City Mission. (2021) *Amplify Research Report: Turning up the Volume on Young People and Family Violence*.
https://www.mcm.org.au/-/media/mcm/content-repository-files/amplify_turning-up-the-volume-on-young-people-and-family-violence.pdf

Stop elder abuse

All Victorians have the right to dignity and respect as they age. But this is not always the case. About 160,000 older Victorians are abused or neglected each year.⁵² Only one-in-three seek help.⁵³

The *Elder Abuse Helpline*, run by Senior Rights Victoria (SRV), received a record 5,082 calls for help in 2022–23, a 50 per cent increase on the previous year. In recognition of this, the 2023 Victorian Budget increased funding to SRV.

But this boost has proved insufficient to meet the increasing demand, resulting in people seeking help being denied assistance.

To fix this, the Victorian Government should:

- **Increase recurrent funding to SRV** so the *Elder Abuse Helpline* can answer more calls, enabling affected individuals to access both legal and non-legal support.
- **Fund the statewide coordination of Elder Abuse Prevention Networks.** Victoria has 10 elder abuse networks that collaborate at a community level and focus on the prevention of elder abuse. The networks' collective impact would be enhanced by greater coordination, knowledge sharing and impact evaluation. Funding is required to support this overarching function.
- **Renew and expand the Integrated Services Fund for community legal centres and Aboriginal legal services** to facilitate provision of a range of complementary legal and non-legal community-based supports to vulnerable clients. The program should incorporate initiatives targeting responses to elder abuse as well as family violence.

⁵² Australian Institute of Family Studies. (2021). *National Elder Abuse Prevalence Study: Final Report*. <https://aifs.gov.au/research/research-reports/national-elder-abuse-prevalence-study-final-report>

14.8% of older Australians have experienced elder abuse, which translates to an estimated 160,000 older Victorians, based on the latest ABS 2022 population estimates according to which Victoria has 1,072,814 people 65 and over.

⁵³ Ibid.



Making the justice system work

Maintain investment in integrated legal services

People do not experience legal issues in a vacuum. In Victoria, we've seen positive outcomes from trial initiatives that enable people to access legal help alongside health and social services.

Independent evaluation of these 'integrated legal service pilots' and place-based programs shows they are enabling person-centred support and driving evidence-informed practice. Over time, if the Victorian Government stays the course on this approach, integrated legal services can deliver significant social and economic value to the state – stopping the cycle of repeated presentations to community services for crisis support, preventing re-offending and improving health and financial outcomes for people relieved of legal problems.

The 2024 Budget should provide continued government investment in the Integrated Services Fund, with sufficient resources in the Fund to:

- **Nurture and extend proven (and promising) partnerships and programs for which there is ongoing need.** For example, Senior Rights Victoria, which supports older people experiencing or at risk of elder abuse with information, advice, legal casework and non-legal support.
- **Grow integrated legal services by investing in the design, delivery and evaluation of new innovative models of assistance.** The Victorian Government should increase the value of the Integrated Services Fund so that community legal centres and other parts of the community sector – for example, community mental health providers and consumer groups – can scope new high-impact solutions.

Ensure family violence victim survivors can access legal help

Legal help is a critical part of keeping victim survivors safe and reducing the ongoing risk of family violence. More than half of all users of community legal services in 2022 were victim survivors of family violence.

Lawyers help victim survivors access intervention orders, resolve parenting disputes, resolve debt issues, access migration assistance, and remove perpetrators from tenancy agreements or negotiate mortgage payment pauses so that victim survivors can stay at home and prevent homelessness.

This Budget should provide funding to:

- **Expand the legal services pilot in the Frankston Orange Door to all Victorian Orange Doors**, to ensure victim survivors can access legal services as part of a holistic response to family violence.
- **Increase funding available for legal services to support the seven newly-established Specialist Family Violence Courts**, building on investment in the 2023 Victorian Budget.

- **Deliver family violence training for lawyers and court staff across the entire Specialist Family Violence Court network.** This should include training that builds skills to meet people's multiple, intersecting needs – for example, disability awareness and cultural safety.

Lay the foundations for major child protection and justice reforms set out in Yoorrook for Justice

The Yoorrook Justice Commission's *Report into Victoria's Child Protection and Criminal Justice Systems* has shone a light on systemic injustice, racism, discriminatory laws and policy failures that have harmed, and continue to harm, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people.

In particular, the Commission heard evidence of children being put on a path from child protection to the justice system.

This must end.

In this budget, the Victorian Government should **invest in priority initiatives recommended by the Yoorrook Justice Commission**, including:

- **Strengthening human rights and Aboriginal cultural rights capability, competence and support in all statutory services workforces**, including all persons working in child protection, police, youth justice, corrections and forensic mental health.
- **Increased funding for Aboriginal Community Controlled Organisations** empowered to work proactively with Aboriginal children and their families to prevent them from becoming system-involved.

To make the most of these investments, the Victorian Government should also:

- **Raise the minimum age of criminal responsibility to 14 years** without exception.
- **Create a new independent police oversight body** to investigate complaints against police.

End the overrepresentation of particular groups of children and young people

Victoria's overall youth incarceration rate is falling, but certain young people still come into contact with the justice system at disproportionately high rates.

They are overrepresented in police contacts and youth detention, and they are under-served by government and community services.

Victoria's criminal justice system, and the systems that operate alongside it, are not working for these young people. The Victorian Government should enact systemic reform to resolve this.

In the 2024 Budget, the Victorian Government should:

- **Adopt and fund the implementation of *Working Together: An Action Plan to End Overrepresentation of Particular Groups of Young People in the Criminal Legal System*.**⁵⁴
‘Working Together’ is a comprehensive evidence-informed framework to guide the systemic reform Victoria needs. It has been developed by Smart Justice for Young People, a coalition of more than 50 organisations with deep expertise on these matters. The framework is ready-made to set, coordinate and drive investment in actions across government, statutory agencies and government-funded organisations aimed at addressing the criminalising processes and systemic overrepresentation across the justice system, policing, and supports for housing and material needs, health, education, and family wellbeing.
- **Invest in priority initiatives to strengthen the child and family services system** so that young people can get the support they need in their communities, including:
 - Providing adequate and secure funding to providers so they can meet demand and provide the highest levels of therapeutic, cultural and gender-identity informed care.
 - Delivering a substantial increase in resources for the sector to provide early intervention, and family preservation and reunification.
 - Strengthening investment, testing and evaluation of programs (such as Putting Families First) to develop a whole of family model of care to support children, young people and their families when they need it, breaking the cycle of disadvantage and helping to prevent children and young people from entering and re-entering the criminal justice system.

This approach would complement foundational reform occurring as part of raising the age of criminal responsibility and developing an alternative services model in response to young people’s offending.

Reduce the harms of justice involvement on children and families

Too many women are locked up in Victorian jails – the root causes of their offending driven by their exposure to violence, abuse, neglect, poverty and disadvantage. A significant proportion are mothers, including Aboriginal mothers whose criminalisation and incarceration is perpetuating intergenerational trauma that is a legacy of colonisation.

The Final Report of the 2021 *Parliamentary Inquiry into Children Affected by Parental Incarceration* provides the pathway towards reducing the harmful impacts of parental incarceration on children and families.⁵⁵

In this budget, the Victorian Government can ensure that harm to children is reduced by preventing women from being imprisoned in the first place. Specifically, it should deliver:

- **Increased funding for the primary prevention of gender-based violence.**

⁵⁴ Smart Justice for Young People. (2023) *Working Together: An Action Plan to End Overrepresentation of Particular Groups of Young People in the Criminal Legal System*. https://westjustice.org.au/cms_uploads/docs/workingtogether_v32.pdf

⁵⁵ Parliament of Victoria. (2022) *Inquiry into children affected by parental incarceration*. <https://new.parliament.vic.gov.au/get-involved/inquiries/inquiry-into-children-with-imprisoned-parents/reports/>

- 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.

(See also: 'Drive community responses that prevent family violence on p. 67)

Maintaining family connection is critical to wellbeing for both the justice-involved parent and children affected, and is a strong protective factor against recidivism. To this end, the Victorian Government should also allocate funding in the 2024 Budget to:

- **Reinstate the Pip Wisdom Community Corrections Grants.** These grants have previously funded effective, family-focused programs that ensure families remain connected when a family member is justice-involved. The scheme should continue.
- **Make phone calls from prison free.**
- **Reinstate the Family Links program across all Victorian Magistrates' Courts venues.** This program has provided case work support to families. Evaluations found it 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.

The Victorian Government should also:

- **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) as recommended by the Parliamentary Inquiry. This agency should report to the Minister for Children.
- **Fund a new data collection and monitoring system focused on children of incarcerated parents.** Police, court officers and corrections staff should be required to inquire about parenting status of offenders and use information to ensure support is offered to affected children, families and carers.

These initiatives should be complemented by providing 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.

(See also: 'Valuing the community sector' on p. 87)

Improve responses to Victorians with disabilities who come into contact with police, courts and corrections

People with disabilities are overrepresented in the criminal justice system.

The *Disability Royal Commission* and the Independent Review of the NDIS lay the pathway for the reform that's needed to prevent criminalisation and ensure people with disability can live a life of wellbeing.

However, implementation will take time. In the meantime, there is some low-hanging fruit that the Victorian Government can address to provide the foundations for the bigger, more complex systemic reforms.

In this Budget, the Victorian Government should fund:

- **The development of a comprehensive disability screening tool for all stages of criminal procedure (policing, courts and corrections).** This screening tool would be used to screen all people entering custody (on remand or sentenced) for physical, cognitive and intellectual disability, to inform support needs and service delivery in custody and returning to community.
- **Disability-specific training and ongoing professional development for all staff working in justice settings** to better identify and provide supports to people with disabilities. This training should be delivered by an external, community-based specialist disability organisation.
- **The development of a data collection strategy**, broken down by disability type, to apply to all people who encounter any stage of criminal justice system procedure (including police, courts and prison). Data should be used to inform both Department of Justice and Community Safety and other relevant state agencies, and the NDIS.
- **Increased funding for specialised legal help for people with disabilities.**

Break the link between disadvantage and corrections

Poverty, disadvantage, criminal offending and incarceration are interrelated. Currently, Victorians leaving prison are punished well beyond their sentence, with many experiencing homelessness, drug-related harms and unemployment. These are key drivers of reoffending.

Victorian can undertake reforms that reduce offending and reoffending, by investing 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 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 co-designing and investing in initiatives that intervene *even earlier* in a person's life, to address the issues that underlie offending
- Recognising the right to equivalent standard of healthcare in the legislative framework and **investing in a public health model for delivery and oversight of health services in custody**, as recommended by the *Cultural Review of the Adult Custodial Corrections System*. These new arrangements should resource supports to meet specific needs, including Aboriginal community controlled healthcare, care that is gender-responsive and trauma-informed, and specialist supports for disability, aged care, mental health and AOD needs.
- **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 the introduction of a Housing Guarantee so that nobody exits prison into homelessness, and funding the expansion of the *Second Chance Jobs Program* across all Victorian prisons.

(See also: 'Strengthen Victoria's Early Intervention Investment Framework' on p. 92)

Acting quickly and fairly on climate

Reduce emissions fast and fairly

Victoria has legislated some of the strongest emissions reduction targets in the world. But the funding to achieve these targets has been drying up.

The last Victorian Budget reduced spending on climate change by 43 per cent. Climate mitigation needs to ramp up if Victoria is going to reduce emissions by 75–80 per cent by 2035.

Our spending must match our ambition.

Solar is an important part of emissions reduction, but it must be paired with structural changes to homes and buildings to protect vulnerable Victorians from the impacts of climate change.

Climate action should focus on people who have the least resources to decarbonise.

The 2024 Budget should:

- **Progress and invest in minimum energy efficiency standards for rental properties.** Some of Victoria's most unhealthy homes are rentals. Requiring minimum levels of energy efficiency will ensure occupants are protected from unhealthy temperatures while reducing the climate impact of these homes.
- **Expand the successful Victorian Healthy Homes program.** This randomised trial managed by Sustainability Victoria upgraded insulation and appliances in more than 100 Victorian homes. These upgrades made the homes warmer in winter and reduced energy use. There were significant financial savings for people with health conditions.⁵⁶ Similar upgrades should be offered to all low-income Victorians and those with chronic health conditions.

(See also: 'Helping Victorians afford the basics' on p. 14, and 'Fixing our housing system' on p. 23)

Adapt Victoria to climate change

Climate change is affecting Victorians right now. Our state needs to catch up to adapt, and not just respond to disasters after the fact.

The Victorian Government took an important first step by developing seven Adaptation Action Plans (AAPs), including the Health and Human Services AAP, and six Regional Adaptation Strategies.

However, plans alone are not enough: funding is urgently needed to fully implement them.

⁵⁶ Sustainability Victoria. (2022) *Victorian healthy homes program – research findings*, p.5.
<https://assets.sustainability.vic.gov.au/susvic/Report-Energy-Victorian-Healthy-Homes-program-research.pdf>

The 2024 Budget should:

- **Fund the implementation of Victoria’s adaptation action plans and strategies.** Implementation of the plans will drastically reduce the physical, mental and emotional impacts of climate change on vulnerable Victorians. This is because communities will be prepared in advance to deal with climate impacts like bushfire and floods, rather than coping with them after the fact.
- **Provide funding to develop and implement a multifaceted plan for helping people stay safe during heatwaves.** Heatwaves are deadly and getting worse, and they particularly harm people experiencing disadvantage. Heatwaves disrupt community sector service delivery and have an adverse impact on workers and clients. The plan would upgrade community sector facilities to stay cool and function during a heatwave. The plan would help to make public facilities and schools heat smart by installing air-conditioning, upgrading building energy efficiency, providing shade and replacing hot playground and outdoor surfaces.

Help the community sector respond to climate change

Climate change is increasing the demand for the community sector’s services while reducing the capacity of organisations to meet it.

That’s because climate change is harming community members and forcing them to rely on social services, while disrupting the organisations and staff members needed to deliver those services.

The community sector is stretched at the best of times. Its capacity to plan how it will support vulnerable Victorians in the face of climate change is limited.

Similarly, the sector’s capacity to take action to reduce its contribution to climate change is constrained.

The 2024 Budget should:

- **Establish a Community Sector Climate Fund to support the sector in responding to climate change.** This fund should include resources for organisations to reduce emissions *and* adapt to climate change. Past programs – including the Community Climate Change Adaptation grants program and the Community Climate Change and Energy Action program – supported the sector with these goals. The fund could be established to cover both climate mitigation and adaptation. A grant program could provide non-competitive funding, long application windows, and reduced financial co-contribution requirements to enable a wide range of organisations to benefit.

Improve access to green space

Some of Victoria's least green suburbs are found in the areas of the state with the lowest socio-economic advantage, particularly in greater Melbourne.

All Victorians deserve access to green space, not just those with the money to live in established suburbs. Green space has been proven to improve health and wellbeing, which is particularly important for people experiencing hardship.

Access to nature and green space was frequently identified as important for leading a good life, by participants in VCOSS' *Voices of Victoria Listening Tour*.

The 2024 Budget should:

- **Increase green space and tree cover in areas of Victoria with a greater proportion of residents experiencing disadvantage**, including Melbourne's west and the Latrobe Valley. Improving green space in these areas would contribute towards Victoria's emissions reduction commitments by sequestering carbon. It would also improve local air quality, resilience during heatwaves, and residents' health and wellbeing.

Fix, expand and green the bus network

Investing in Melbourne's bus network will help alleviate road traffic, facilitate better access to public transport and reduce emissions.

Infrastructure Victoria's recent report '*Fast, frequent and fair: how buses can better connect Melbourne*' comprehensively details the deficiencies of Victoria's bus network and provides a blueprint for improvement.⁵⁷

Investing in more frequent buses can help Victorians travel more reliably and affordably.

The 2024 Budget should:

- **Invest in expanding Melbourne's bus network** to quickly improve public transportation access and affordability, and reduce road congestion. Expansion should particularly focus on areas with few other public transportation options, including new developments in Melbourne's fringes. New bus networks should be all-electric, and take advantage of renewable energy, for zero-emissions transport.
- **Invest in expanded bus networks in rural and regional Victoria** to enable quick and affordable travel. In country areas, many Victorians must rely on expensive taxis to get around in the absence of owning a car or accessing reliable public transport.

⁵⁷ Infrastructure Victoria. (2023) *Fast, frequent and fair: how buses can better connect Melbourne*. <https://www.infrastructurevictoria.com.au/project/fast-frequent-and-fair-how-buses-can-better-connect-melbourne/>

- **Increase bus frequency to boost usage.** Many people are unable to get around because buses are often delayed and unreliable. Increasing the frequency of bus services could reduce delays and wait times, and improve the confidence of potential riders, leading to increased ridership numbers.
- **Reduce public transport fares to enable more affordable access to riders.** At \$5 per fare, public transport remains too expensive an option for many Victorians. Reducing fares across the public transportation system would help improve rider numbers and could improve available revenue to re-invest in the public transportation system.

Extend flood recovery services

The community sector is playing a vital role in helping Victorians recover from the 2022 floods. Organisations have been providing recovery services such as intake, case management, emergency accommodation, legal assistance, financial counselling, family violence support, mental health counselling, and more.

It will take impacted Victorians years to fully recover from the disaster. Yet funding for recovery services is ending between now and the end of June 2024.

The Victorian Government should:

- **Extend the 2022 flood recovery services for at least another 24 months.**

Providing certainty to these services will help flood-affected Victorians navigate their difficult recovery journeys.

Establish an ongoing disaster resilience workforce

Many people living in country Victoria have experienced multiple disasters since 2019, and this trend is set to continue with the impact of climate change. Communities are yet to rebuild their lives and recover from the long-term impacts of trauma and devastation from one disaster, only to find their lives turned upside down again as they face the next.

Despite the number of disasters that occur, the recovery response starts from scratch every time. This is inefficient and compounds stress and trauma.

The Victorian Government should recalibrate the reactive nature of emergency funding and:

- **Invest in an ongoing and integrated disaster resilience workforce in the community sector.** As part of this, funding should be directed to registered independent regional and rural community health services to deliver the Community Recovery and Resilience model, which includes the internationally-recognised Disaster Recovery Star, a tool developed by Gippsland Lakes Complete Health to support and measure recovery after a disaster.

Investment in this permanent trauma-informed workforce across regional and rural Victoria would strengthen community resilience and preparedness between disasters, and address the compounding trauma that accumulates with each event. It would deliver much-needed place-based case management services to impacted individuals, resilience building training and support to communities, disaster readiness activities, and trauma-informed practice training for organisations and businesses that engage with disaster-impacted individuals and families.

Boost the capacity of multicultural organisations to build disaster resilience

Multicultural community organisations have worked tirelessly to keep people safe during recent disasters. This includes translating emergency communications, providing material aid, and advocating to local services about cultural needs.

But this work is often unfunded and contributes to the burnout of multicultural volunteers and leaders who are relied upon in an emergency.

The 2024 Budget should provide:

- **Ongoing funding to key multicultural community organisations** to help people from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds to prepare for emergencies and recover after a disaster strikes.
- **Investment into co-design projects** so multicultural organisations can address unique local needs, disseminate emergency information in-language, and connect CALD communities and emergency services.

Expand Victoria's fleet of modular homes

Extreme weather events destroy homes and can displace people for years.

Victoria depends on caravans and motel rooms to house disaster-affected people due to the limited availability of rental properties, but they are often inappropriate for extended periods of time.

Eighty-two high-quality modular homes were purchased after the 2019–20 bushfires.

In the 2024 Budget, the Victorian Government should:

- **Expand the modular home fleet for immediate deployment after disasters.**

The homes should be provided to displaced people affordably under a framework that specifies their use in emergency situations and guarantees support for residents to secure long-term housing.

This would be strengthened by advocacy from the Victorian Government for national reforms to home and contents insurance, including timely assessments and rebuilding works.

Strengthen spontaneous volunteering

Victoria prides itself on communities putting their hands up to help others in times of need.

This rush of support happens after every disaster, but could be better utilised for community recovery if it was properly resourced and coordinated.

Instead, many community service organisations affected by disasters are quickly overwhelmed by offers of help from people who are well-meaning but might not be trained or best-placed to assist.

The Victorian Government should address this issue by:

- Funding the development and implementation of **an ongoing strategy to coordinate spontaneous volunteers for disaster recovery.**

(See also: 'Bolster volunteering' on p. 90)

Valuing the community sector

Ensure community sector funding reflects the full cost of delivering services

VCOSS applauds the Victorian Government's commitment to supporting the community sector with an increased rate of indexation for the 2023–24 year and an agreed funding indexation formula for future years that takes account of CPI and the obligations imposed by the Fair Work Commission.

Beyond this welcome indexation certainty, community organisations are facing a range of other increased costs. These include legal obligations to their workers, including portable long service leave and increased superannuation contributions, as well as footing the bill for higher WorkCover premiums. New regulatory reforms and compliance obligations are adding to the sector's costs.

With the new Social Services Regulations and Community Services Sector Fair Jobs Code (Jobs Code) coming into effect in the 2024–25 year, organisations need support. To ensure compliance, organisations need to audit their current practices, review and update policies and procedures, train staff and may need to upgrade ICT systems and infrastructure. The costs of getting up to speed with the requirements of new regulations, a new Jobs Code and a new service agreement are not separately funded but are a direct consequence of organisations receiving Victorian Government funding to deliver social services.

To ensure services can continue to operate with maximum effectiveness, the 2024 Budget should:

- **Boost *base* funding to the community sector to meet the true cost of delivering services.** The Government should work with peak bodies to ensure an equitable and sustainable approach to funding of workforce-related costs including increases to the superannuation guarantee, WorkCover premiums and the cost of portable long service leave.
- **Provide specific funding to support service providers with compliance costs arising from the new Social Services Regulations and Jobs Code.** Government assistance should include – but not be limited to – funding that covers the costs of training and updates to systems, processes and policies that are required to comply with social service registration and service standards requirements.
- **Allocate sufficient 'establishment phase' resources to the new independent Social Services Regulator** to enable it to properly support the sector to enter the new regulatory scheme over the first two years, including through ongoing sector consultations, and development of sub-sector specific educational resources and guidance.

Provide multi-year funding

Community services are part of the social and economic fabric of Victoria. They support community and individual wellbeing. A strong sector is essential for our state to thrive.

Yet, community service organisations are still often funded through short-term contracts. Those funded on four-year service agreements don't have any certainty of recurrent funding beyond the agreement term and are subject to contractual terms that allow departments to cease or terminate funding in situations that are not the fault of the service provider.

Short-term contracts are a barrier to attracting and retaining skilled workers. Short-term contracts also limit scope for long-term planning and relationship building with service users, and inhibit innovation.

Secure, long-term funding would increase capacity to design and deliver effective services and build workforce capacity. The Productivity Commission has previously recommended increasing default contract terms for community services to seven years.⁵⁸

The 2024 Budget should:

- **Increase default contract terms to seven years** for government-funded community service organisations.

Recognise community sector workers as key workers

Currently, many community sector workers cannot afford to live in the communities in which they work. For example, aged care and childcare workers spend on average 70 per cent of their income on rent in Melbourne. Employers lose workers who find work closer to home, including in other industries.

These workers are not easily replaced. The industry has long struggled to attract, recruit and retain staff because of systemic challenges outside its direct control, such as insecure and short-term funding, inadequate indexation, and pay inequity. Workforce shortages are acute, and the challenge is growing.

Recognising these challenges, the Victorian Government established the \$150m Regional Worker Accommodation Fund to provide new housing options for regional communities where key workers are struggling.

Commercial industries are well placed to leverage this fund. However, not-for-profit organisations cannot afford the required co-contributions to take full advantage of the scheme.

⁵⁸ Productivity Commission. (2017) *Introducing Competition and Informed User Choice into Human Services: Reforms to Human Services*, p.245. <https://www.pc.gov.au/inquiries/completed/human-services/reforms/report/human-services-reforms.pdf>

In this Budget, the Victorian Government should:

- **Establish a dedicated affordable housing program for community sector workers.** This program would provide a higher subsidy and more support.

Support high quality student placements and address student poverty

Across education, health and human services, the provision of high-quality student placements is crucial to industry development. The Victorian Government has made game-changer investments in education, early childhood, health and mental health. As a priority industry – central to the state’s economic growth and at the heart of the Government’s flagship social reforms – it’s crucial that comparable investment is made in the community sector’s capacity to provide high-quality placements.

Practical student placements are a mandatory component of accredited social work and community services qualifications. They help students build workplace skills, connect theoretical knowledge to real-life problems, and transition to employment.

They are critical to workforce growth and development.

But students are battling with surging cost-of-living pressures too. Many students undertaking social work and community services qualifications are juggling study with casual or part-time work. When they complete an unpaid placement in community services, they lose valuable income. On top of this, they are left out-of-pocket for compliance checks (e.g. NDIS Worker Screening Checks and police checks), transport (petrol, public transport and/or use of their own car), accommodation (if they must relocate), work clothing, childcare and other placement-related costs.

This compounds financial stress and impacts students’ mental and physical wellbeing. In turn, this has a direct bearing on course completion rates.

Unless we better support students undertaking placements in the community services sector, Victoria will continue to lose prospective workers before they graduate, and won’t be able to meet the high demand for social services in the community.

An additional challenge is the *supply* of high-quality placements. From a sector standpoint, community organisations don’t have sufficient resources to support the coordination of student placements and liaise with educational institutions. Existing workforce shortages and high workloads reduce the capacity of organisations to host high-quality placements.

These challenges can and must be addressed.

The 2024 Budget should:

- **Reduce student poverty by increasing cost-of-living support for students undertaking unpaid placements in the community sector.** The Victorian Government should work with the Commonwealth to introduce paid student placements in the community sector. While this work is underway, the Victorian Government should support current students to complete

placements and graduate by putting more money into its existing Inclusion Scholarships program.⁵⁹ This will deliver more scholarships to social work students undertaking placements who need this assistance. Victoria should also expand the scheme to include key TAFE qualifications such as the Diploma of Community Services.

- **Better support community sector organisations to deliver high-quality student placements.**
The Budget should deliver resources that address long standing inequities in the funding architecture for student placements in the community services sector. It should provide:
 - Dedicated funding to community sector organisations to host and supply high quality placements and additional resourcing to support placement coordination and liaison with educational institutions;
 - Increased support to upskill supervisors and provide time release to support quality supervision;
 - Resources to establish a new *Community Services Student Placement Grant* program to help organisations to invest in infrastructure for hosting student placements (for example, Wi-Fi access, information technology support, computers and desk space).
 - Strategic investment in community sector peak bodies to support placement capacity across all parts of the sector. The quantum of funding and type of activity should be informed by sector expertise (including sector insights gathered through VCOSS' Quality Student Placements Project).
- **Make NDIS Worker Screening checks free for students, and quicker to obtain.**
- **Continue funding the *TAFE Support Practical Placement Officers* program**, which has enabled TAFEs to address barriers to the completion of placements through the employment of Practical Placement Officers. This program helps TAFEs build strong relationships with community sector organisations and enables Placement Officers to visit organisations and work with students to identify suitable matching to organisations.

Bolster volunteering

Volunteers not only represent an essential component of the social service workforce, but the *act* of volunteering gives people agency and purpose, and contributes to connected and resilient communities. It also helps people develop skills and confidence that can help them into paid employment.

The pandemic devastated Victoria's already dwindling volunteer participation rates. Subsequent funding for organisations that rely on volunteers was not sufficient to rebuild and maintain a strong volunteering sector. The dramatic decline in formal volunteering has reduced frontline services' capacity to meet community needs.

⁵⁹ Department of Families, Fairness and Housing. Inclusion scholarships for social work placements. <https://www.dffh.vic.gov.au/inclusion-scholarships-social-work-placements>

Comprehensive investment is required to implement all actions from the government's *Victorian Volunteer Strategy 2022–2027*. A stand-alone strategy focused on spontaneous volunteering is also needed to coordinate the urgent volunteering roles and the influx of people wanting to help in the context of disaster recovery.

The 2024 Budget should:

- **Allocate funding to fully implement actions in the *Victorian Volunteer Strategy 2022–2027*.**
- **Increase funding for place-based Volunteer Support Services** to promote volunteering in their communities and help organisations recruit, retain and manage volunteers. The ambition of the Victorian Volunteer Strategy cannot be realised without stronger investment in this vital volunteering infrastructure.
- **Fund the development and implementation of a Spontaneous Volunteering Strategy** so Victoria is better prepared to harness a predicted sharp influx of volunteers when natural disasters and emergency events occur.

(See also: 'Establish an ongoing disaster resilience workforce' on p. 84)

Strengthen Victoria's Early Intervention Investment Framework

Since 2021, Victoria has invested more than \$1.5 billion in prevention and early intervention initiatives through the state's Early Intervention Investment Framework (EIIF). VCOSS welcomes these investments and initiatives.

Early intervention initiatives support people earlier, reduce acute service usage and improve outcomes. They tackle complex policy issues such as homelessness, chronic health conditions, family violence and incarceration.

To solve complex social problems such as these, the Government needs to draw on the collective wisdom of community sector organisations, people with lived experience and practitioners.

The 2024 Budget should allocate funds to:

- **Build sector awareness and pathways to engage with the EIIF.** Sector organisations may have great early intervention ideas, but lack the access to government decision-makers to progress them as EIIF proposals. The EIIF could be strengthened by better promotion of opportunities to sector organisations and genuine pathways for organisations to participate in the development of proposals.
- **Expand and further develop the Early Intervention Empowerment fund.** VCOSS welcomes the establishment of the fund that seeks to address barriers faced by the social service sector relating to data and evaluation capability. The fund should be expanded to also support organisations to codify and refine practice, and further develop interventions.
- **Fund the co-design of innovative early responses to multi-dimensional issues.** Developing effective initiatives starts with having a shared understanding of the social problem that needs to be addressed, then collaboratively designing the solution. Co-designed proposals would involve people with lived experience of the issue, sector experts, practitioners, and relevant state, local and federal government stakeholders.
- **Invest in robust evaluations** to measure the full social and economic value of all interventions, understand what works and scale good practice.

Increase women's leadership in the community services sector

The community services workforce is female dominated, yet women are under-represented in senior positions.⁶⁰ One constraint is the lack of part-time leadership or co-leadership roles.

This form of shared leadership is little understood, and community sector employers don't have the resources to build organisational or individual capacity. Few models of good practice exist in the sector.

Addressing this challenge would increase organisational productivity.⁶¹ More broadly, individual and organisational performance improves, job satisfaction increases and absenteeism drops when workers are given access to more flexible work arrangements.⁶²

The 2024 Budget should:

- **Fund VCOSS and Gender Equity Victoria to design and test a model of co-leadership and part-time work.** This initiative would get more women and gender diverse people into leadership roles. The result would be improved economic security and better career progression – and therefore access to better pay and more super. It would enable more women with caring responsibilities to keep working at a senior level. By having more diverse senior leadership, the performance and impact of community sector organisations would be enhanced.

⁶⁰ ACOSS, YMCA, Women on Boards. (2012) *Reflecting gender diversity*.

https://www.acoss.org.au/images/uploads/NFP_Boards_and_Gender_Diversity_2012_final.pdf

⁶¹ Australian Government, Workplace Gender Equality Agency. (2020) *Women in leadership positions improve business outcomes: BCEC WGEA Gender Equity Insights 2020*. <https://www.wgea.gov.au/newsroom/women-in-leadership-positions-improve-business-outcomes>

⁶² Australian Government, Workplace Gender Equality Agency. (2019) *Building a Workplace flexibility strategy*. https://www.wgea.gov.au/sites/default/files/documents/Building_a_flex_strategy_0.pdf

Support cybersecurity preparedness

Community services organisations hold extensive personal information belonging to millions of Victorians. The sector has a clear understanding of its legal obligations regarding data collection, storage and usage.

However, cyber-attacks are on the rise. The Australian Cyber Security Center reported an attack every seven minutes in Australia in 2021–22. Community sector organisations must be supported to meet this threat.

The *Infoxchange 2023 Digital Technology in the Not-for-Profit Sector Report* highlights the importance of investing in cyber security infrastructure as well as regular cyber security training so staff keep up with the ever-evolving nature of threats.

Alongside this, additional investment is needed to build the capacity of social service organisations (including Aboriginal Community Controlled Organisations, or ACCOs) to invest in information and knowledge management systems, to improve their ability to effectively monitor and evaluate outcomes and better meet funding requirements. For ACCOs, this is a vital component of Aboriginal data sovereignty and self-determination.

The 2024 Budget should include:

- **Ameliorate immediate risks by providing targeted grants to community service organisations to review cyber security preparedness, data capturing and analysis.** A grants scheme will allow organisations to properly identify the investments required to boost data security and protection, share information across programs and services, better plan for demand and invest in the growth of the workforce.
- **Provide ongoing assurance of robust information and knowledge management and cybersecurity measures in government-funded human services** by funding the community sector at a level that reflects the true cost of service delivery.

Invest in data capability

More than 210,000 additional workers are needed to meet demand in Australia's care and support workforce over the next 17 years.⁶³

But without a detailed and industry-wide data set on the community services sector, it's difficult for organisations and the Victorian Government to adequately plan for this workforce growth. This lack of data also impedes the sector's ability to deliver on the Victorian Government's ambitious policy agenda across mental health, disability, housing and family violence.

The UK Department of Health and Social Care has funded a community service organisation to develop an Adult Social Care Workforce Data Set. Each year, a report is produced detailing the latest data and workforce trends including training and qualifications, recruitment and retention, workforce demographics and pay. This data helps authorities plan, fund and monitor the sector.

The 2024 Budget should:

- **Fund the development and maintenance of an industry-wide dataset on the community services sector workforce** to model demand and guide workforce planning. By enabling detailed data capture and analysis on workforce skills, qualifications and training needs, this system would complement existing data sets such as the ACNC data set – which focuses on charity finances – to provide a holistic understanding of the strengths, risks and future needs of the sector. The dataset should be shared with the community sector to support data-driven sector workforce planning and collaborative practices among service providers, as well as government.

⁶³ Full time equivalent. Source: National Skills Commission (now called Jobs and Skills Australia).

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