

# Making the justice system work

## Significant initiatives

- **Continuing early intervention and resolution legal services**

\$12.9m in 2025-26 (\$40m/3yrs) to continue critical legal services and improve access to justice for marginalised Victorians.

- **Embedded Youth Outreach Program**

\$1.9m in 2025-26 (\$3.8m/2yrs) to continue the Embedded Youth Outreach Program (EYOP) in the existing locations of Werribee and Dandenong.

- **Community safety package**

\$278.1m in 2025-26 (686.1m/2yrs) to increase corrections and youth justice custodial operation capacities to support new bail laws and community safety reforms.

- **Supporting a safe and effective youth justice system**

\$43.4m in 2025-26 (93m/4yrs) to support Youth Justice system operations, including training to custodial staff, the implementation of the Youth Justice Act 2024, custodial rehabilitation services, and programs that support diversion and early intervention, including continuation of the South Sudanese Australian Youth Justice Expert Working Group.

- **Locking in the lower cost of phone calls from prison announced earlier this year**

Part of the funding under 'Supporting a safe and effective corrections system' (\$9.8m in 2025-26; \$19.4m/2yrs) has been earmarked to reduce the cost of phone calls for people in custody.

- **Victims of Crime Financial Assistance Scheme (FAS) continued operations**

\$74.2m in 2025-26 (\$284m/4yrs) is provided for the continued operations of the FAS, which commenced in November 2024 replacing the Victims of Crime Assistance Tribunal (VoCAT). The FAS is aimed at making it easier for victims to get financial assistance and other support without having to go to court.

## What's good

- Access to justice is a cornerstone of a fair and equal society. Community legal centres are a key pillar. The Budget provides continued funding for critical legal services and early intervention services that improve access to justice for Victorians who can't afford lawyers, don't have access to legal aid and face barriers to legal help because of discrimination and stigma associated with disability, mental health, gender and sexuality, culture and language, or geographic remoteness.
- This Budget measure ('Continuing early intervention and resolution legal services') includes funding for Integrated Services and Health Justice Partnerships. These partnerships have shown that integrating legal and non-legal supports is a highly effective way to address service gaps, silos and access issues for people with multiple and complex needs.

We understand this funding specifically includes:

- Continued investment in 16 existing Community Legal Centres Integrated Service Partnerships (ISPs) and Health Justice Partnerships (HJPs).
  - Continuation of the CLC Family Violence Assistance Fund.
  - Funding for the early Resolution Service/Pre-Court Engagement model which provides more support in family violence matters at an earlier stage of court proceedings to enable earlier risk assessments, increase safety for victim-survivors and streamline court processes to better meet demand.
  - Funding community legal and Aboriginal legal services to operate at the new Wyndham Law Courts.
  - Funding for the Victorian Aboriginal Legal Service to deliver culturally-safe legal assistance to Aboriginal communities across Victoria, including regional hubs operated in Mildura, Bendigo, Morwell, Warrnambool and Melbourne's West.
- The Budget makes some important investments in evidence-based youth crime prevention initiatives. In Justice, the Embedded Youth Outreach Program provides a youth outreach response as part of a police response. [Evidence](#) shows the program provides good outcomes in assisting young people to address the root causes of offending behaviour.

Two key game changer investments include:

- Best Start, Best Life (Free Kinder, Pre-Prep, 50 government-owned Early Learning and Care Centres in childcare deserts, and Three-Year-Old Kindergarten). Children

facing educational barriers and exclusion are more likely to enter the criminal justice system. For example, in 2019, [68 per cent of children in custody were recorded as having been suspended or expelled from school](#). Providing access to high-quality, inclusive education is one of the best forms of crime prevention.

- The introduction of free public transport for children aged under 18. This initiative will play a critical role in alleviating the financial and social impacts of Victoria's hefty fare evasion fines, which have disproportionately impacted young people. It will also disrupt the 'fine to crime' pipeline.

These are the kind of smart investments VCOSS will continue to advocate for, as part of our commitment to the [Working Together Action Plan to End the Over-Representation of Certain Groups of Young People in the Justice System](#).

- This Budget locks in the lower cost of phone calls from prison. As canvassed in the [Yoorrook Justice Commission](#), the exorbitant price of phone calls from prisons has created barriers for people in prison to maintain contact with loved ones, impacting wellbeing and their right to family and culture. VCOSS welcomes the provision of this funding, as recommended by the Yoorrook Justice Commission. VCOSS also welcomes another 12 months of boost funding for the Victorian Disability Advocacy program, which includes support for Victorians with disabilities caught up in the prison system.

## What's missing

- The funding for 'community safety initiatives' represents a missed opportunity. Community safety is a key priority for VCOSS and the broader social and community sector; however, this Budget line is focused on measures that involve community surveillance, not community care. This investment would be more strategically directed to community-based youth, family, mental health, and alcohol and other drug services, and housing. These represent a more effective upstream investment in community safety.
- This Budget strengthens carceral youth justice responses that tackle youth offending from the wrong end. The [Youth Justice Act](#) principles specify 'responses to offending and alleged offending by children and young people are to emphasise prevention, diversion and minimum intervention'. But this Budget allocates \$43.4m in 2025-26 (\$93m/4yrs) to Youth Justice operations and the Government has announced it will establish 88 new prison beds in youth prisons Cherry Creek and Parkville as part of the Community Safety package. Kids in prisons will not make the community safer. These resources should be repurposed for prevention, early intervention and rehabilitation and directed to community-led initiatives, alongside investment in stronger, more inclusive universal services for 'at risk' cohorts.

- The Budget does not make sufficient investment to support the increased number of people on remand. The most recent bail reforms announced by the Victorian Government will see alarming increases in unsentenced people. To mitigate the worst impacts of tightened bail laws, there must be a corresponding uplift in access to legal assistance.
- The Budget invests in increased prison capacity (more beds), but under-invests in support services – both in-prison and in the community. In terms of in-prison supports, VCOSS will continue to advocate for increased funding for family violence counselling as well as a public health model for delivery and oversight of health services. VCOSS is also disappointed there is no direct funding allocated in the Budget to deliver an [Aboriginal-led model of care in custody](#). An Aboriginal-led model of care has been a recommendation to Government since the Royal Commission into Aboriginal Deaths in Custody and reinforced in other reports, investigations and reviews in the four decades since then.
- The Budget does not deliver the necessary investment for non-custodial supports that ensure Victorians can safely re-integrate into society post-release. Post-release supports are integral to reducing recidivism. In this Budget, part of the funding under ‘Supporting a safe and effective corrections system’ (\$9.8m in 2025-26 / \$19.4m/2yrs) continues employment hubs services at select prisons. Much more is needed. VCOSS’ pre-Budget submission called for the expansion of the Second Chance Jobs Program across all Victorian prisons. We also highlighted the need for expanded health and social supports available for people exiting prison, and the introduction of a Housing Guarantee so that nobody exits prison into homelessness.
- Victoria should not be growing prisons. It should be growing social housing. (Refer to ‘Fixing our housing system’).
- The Budget does not provide funds to create a new independent police oversight body to investigate complaints against police. The Yoorrook Justice Commission identified that First Peoples do not have confidence in Victoria’s police complaints system because it is not independent of police. We understand that the [Victorian Government is currently considering this recommendation](#). With the recent tightening of bail laws and a Budget that funds prison expansion, it is now more critical than ever to adequately resource a new independent police oversight authority, headed by a statutory officer who has not been a police officer.