



*Centre for Excellence*  
in Child and Family Welfare Inc.

# State Budget Submission

**2016 – 2017**



# ABOUT THE CENTRE

## Our Vision

Children, young people & families in Victoria are safe, happy & connected, with access to support when they need it.

## Our Purpose

### Policy & Ideas

Develop, influence and advocate for public policies that advance the rights and wellbeing of children, young people and families and address the social, economic and cultural barriers to improving their lives.

### Research & Practice

Lead and share research to support innovation and evidence-based practice in child, youth and family services.

### Capacity Building

Strengthen the capacity of organisations in the child, youth and family welfare sectors to provide services that best suit the needs of vulnerable families and children.

## Our Leadership

For over 100 years we have advocated to advance the rights and wellbeing of children, young people and families experiencing economic, social and cultural disadvantage.

We strive to raise public awareness and understanding of the causal factors of disadvantage and the social action needed to support life opportunities for children, young people and their families.

We advocate for the rights of children and young people to be heard, to be safe, to access education and to remain connected to family, community and culture.

We represent over 100 community service organisations throughout Victoria working across the continuum of child and family services, from prevention and early intervention to the provision of out of home care.

Through our advocacy work, research, training and other activities we support the capacity of our member agencies to meet the needs of vulnerable children, young people and families.

# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This submission outlines the Centre's key recommendations for the 2016-2017 State Budget. Our recommended budget priorities are not an exhaustive list of all relevant issues, but rather relate to the budget period, aiming to assist the Government with the difficult decisions involved with competing priorities and limited resources.

Our recommendations are based on evidence-informed programs and services, including a number of pilot programs that have been evaluated, found to be effective and are, we believe, overdue for expansion. Our recommendations also prioritise laying the foundation for long term change and lasting impact for improving the lives of Victorian children and families.

For the Centre's comprehensive recommendations and longer term change connected to this budget paper, please refer to our [Roadmap to Reform submission](#), [submission to the Family Violence Royal Commission](#), [Beyond Good Intentions Statement](#) and [various submissions to the Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse](#).

## Overview of Recommended Budget Priorities

### 1. Ensure Children are Safe

#### 1.1 Prevent and respond to family violence

- a. Support and expand integrated services
- b. Expand men's behaviour change programs
- c. Expand in-home support services
- d. Improve accessibility of services
- e. Improve information sharing

#### 1.2 Expand and support child safe organisations

- a. Support implementation of Child Safe Standards

#### 1.3 Improve children's safety and wellbeing in out of home care

- a. Improve residential care
- b. Provide therapeutic and professionalised foster care
- c. Better support kinship care
- d. Expand targeted care packages
- e. Ensure Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children have access to culturally safe services
- f. Address the overrepresentation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children in the child welfare system

### 2. Enable Children to Thrive

#### 2.1 Improve access to education

- a. Support early learning
- b. Develop trauma-informed schools
- c. Remove financial barriers to education

## **2.2 Support young people leaving care**

- a. Support access to tertiary education for care leavers
- b. Provide young people leaving care with holistic support until at least the age of 21
- c. Provide education and housing support packages for children leaving care

## **2.3 Ensure Aboriginal children are connected to culture, family, community and Country**

- a. Provide adequate funding for new statutory obligations associated with cultural planning
- b. Support and resource Aboriginal Community Controlled Organisations (ACCOs)

# **3. Keep Families Strong**

## **3.1 Help families at the earliest opportunity**

- a. Support and expand integrated service models
- b. Improve access to universal services
- c. Help families support their children's early development
- d. Support and expand effective programs

## **3.2 Improve support to families experiencing complex issues**

- a. Support family services to meet complex needs
- b. Improve access to specialist health services
- c. Support the Perinatal Depression Initiative

# **4. Support a Strong, Sustainable Community Sector**

## **4.1 Support services to meet growing demand and complexity**

- a. Ensure funding meets growing demand on services
- b. Introduce a country and regional area loading
- c. Support workforce development for increasingly complex needs

## **4.2 Strong Aboriginal Community Controlled Organisations**

- a. Support implementation of *Beyond Good Intentions*

## CURRENT ENVIRONMENT

The landscape of child and family services has changed dramatically in recent years. Reports to Victoria's Child Protection Services doubled between 2006-7 and 2013-14.<sup>1</sup> The main drivers of this increased demand are referrals for family violence, drug and alcohol use, intellectual disability and mental health.<sup>2</sup> Fast growing communities in Melbourne's growth corridors reflect high cultural diversity and needs, with families from culturally and linguistically diverse (CALD) backgrounds and Aboriginal families facing additional barriers to accessing services. Many families struggle to provide safe and nurturing environments for their children due to socio-economic and other circumstances.

Our environment is also affected by developments in other sectors and levels of government. For example, the 10-year Mental Health Plan for Victoria and the rollout of the National Disability Insurance Scheme (NDIS) will have significant effects on child and family service organisations that work with families experiencing mental illness and disability. The vast majority of Victorian child and family services clients receive Commonwealth benefits. A series of Commonwealth Government decisions has affected, and continues to affect, families, such as the reductions in Family Tax Benefits and the loss of funding for the National Perinatal Depression Initiative.

A number of reports and inquiries have identified the resource constraints on the child and family services sector and adverse impact on the quality of services provided. External service systems that help prevent children entering the care system—including family violence services, mental health, alcohol and drug treatment services and affordable housing and homelessness supports—are also experiencing significant demand pressures. All of these changes have affected the capacity of organisations to respond early and effectively to vulnerable families.<sup>3</sup>

In response to these changes the Victorian Government has embarked on a series of initiatives and policy solutions. The Government made a significant investment in child and family services in the State Budget 2015-16. It has since expanded the Child FIRST and family services system, implemented Targeted Care Packages, introduced changes to Permanent Care legislation to improve stability for children in care, and initiated a new Foster Care Recruitment and Retention strategy.

It has also introduced a number of education initiatives that focus on children and young people who are disengaged, or at risk of disengagement, from education—such as the proposed Lookout Education Support Centres, which will support and advocate for children in out of home care. A key challenge for the Government will be to make sure these strategies work together to improve the effectiveness and efficiency of the social welfare system in Victoria.

In particular, the Roadmap for Reform provides the opportunity for a more strategic and integrated approach to managing the demand for child and family services across the state. The Centre's Roadmap [submission](#) outlines a strategic vision for the sector that builds on its robust foundation. Our budget submission focuses on key priorities that keep children safe, enables them to thrive, strengthens families and supports the community sector.

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<sup>1</sup> Victorian Auditor General's Office, May 2015, Early intervention services for children.

<sup>2</sup> Senate Community Affairs References Committee, 2015, Out of Home Care.

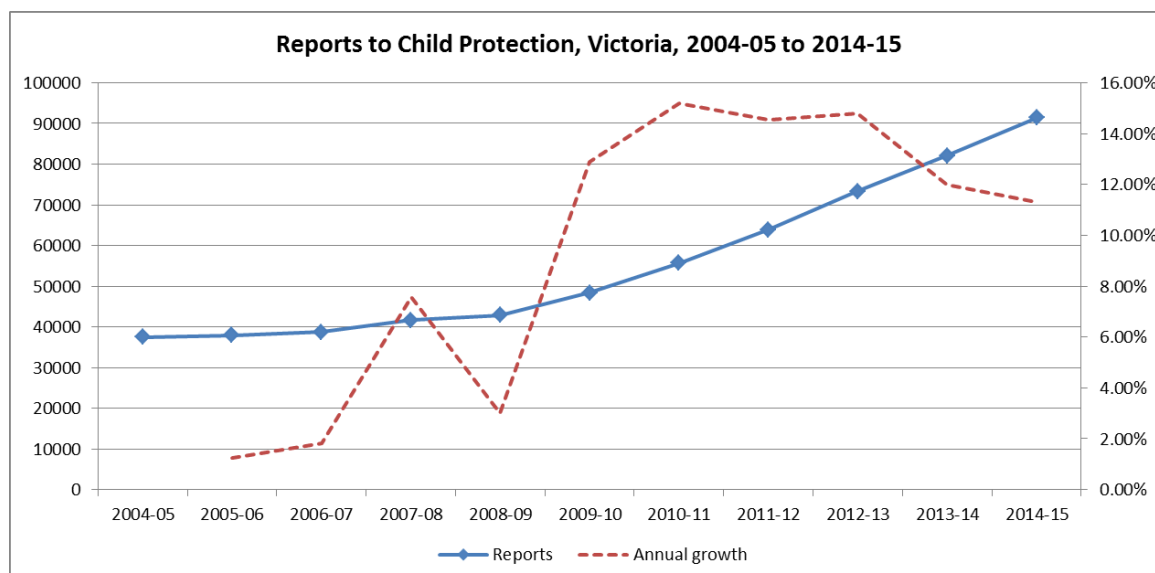
<sup>3</sup> op. cit, p. 21.

# 1. ENSURE CHILDREN ARE SAFE

A number of recent reports, such as the Commission for Children and Young People's '*...as a good parent would...*' report, have highlighted our inability to keep children safe. The Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse and the Royal Commission into Family Violence have also documented systemic failings in the capacity and ability of our community to keep children safe.

The most recent Victorian 2014-15 child protection data<sup>4</sup> shows evidence of serious, ongoing demand pressures compared with 2013-14 in all child and family services leading indicators:

- Reports to child protection up by 11 per cent
- Child Protection investigations up by 18 per cent
- Child Protection substantiations up by 19 per cent
- Unallocated child protection cases up from 12.8 per cent to 16.9 per cent
- Substantiated quality of care cases up by 66 per cent, from 64 in 2013-14 to 106 in 2014-15.<sup>5</sup>



These growing demand pressures in child protection flowed through to increased demand for family services and out of home care. While services received some increases in annual funding during this period, these fell well short of demand. Running services on an unfunded basis is not financially sustainable in the medium to long term and places children at risk.

To ensure children in Victoria are safe, the following issues should be prioritised:

- Prevent and respond to family violence
- Expand and support child safe organisations
- Improve children's safety and well-being in out of home care

<sup>4</sup> Department of Human Services, Victorian Department of Health and Human Services 2015 Annual Report.

<sup>5</sup> op. cit. p. 59.

## 1.1 Prevent and respond to family violence

Both the National Framework for Protecting Australia's Children 2009-2020 and the National Plan to Reduce Violence against Women and their Children 2010-2022 recognise family and domestic violence as a major contributor to child abuse and neglect.

Family violence is the leading contributor to death, injury and disability in Victorian women aged 15 to 44 years.<sup>6</sup> While women are predominantly the victims of family and domestic violence, many of these women have children who are witnesses to or direct victims of family and domestic violence.<sup>7</sup>

Our members cite family and domestic violence as the highest risk factor for the children and families they work with, often in combination with mental illness and substance abuse. Family and domestic violence is a factor in 53 per cent of substantiated abuse and neglect cases and 97 per cent of cases involving Aboriginal children in out of home care, highlighting the need for targeted, culturally sensitive, specialist interventions and support services.

Better understanding and awareness of family violence has led to increased reports to Victoria Police, with a growth of more than 70 per cent between 2010 and 2014.<sup>8</sup> Increased reports from Victoria Police to child protection relate to changes in Police Standing Orders regarding the presence of children in family violence incidents.

Early assistance and holistic family support is vital for parents exhibiting risk factors. In-home support at the earliest possible stage is also critical for families experiencing violence who require parenting assistance and offender behavioural change support.

Family services require additional resources to respond to and address the diverse needs of families and children experiencing family and domestic violence, including responding to physical and mental injury, housing, employment and legal issues.

The last decade has provided examples of services co-locating to provide a more coordinated, multi-disciplinary response to vulnerable families, including those affected by family violence. A notable innovation in the last decade was the introduction of Multi-Disciplinary Centres for victims of sexual assault, which can often occur in a family violence context.

### Recommended budget priorities

#### a. Support and expand integrated services

- Provide funding and implement the co-location of family violence practitioners from family violence services with Child FIRST and Integrated Family Services.

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<sup>6</sup> Victorian Government. State Budget Paper No. 3: 2015-16 Service Delivery. Department of Treasury and Finance: Melbourne.

<sup>7</sup> National Children's Commissioner (2015) Children's Right Report 2015. Australian Human Rights Commission: Sydney (p100).

<sup>8</sup> Victorian Government. State Budget Paper No. 3: 2015-16 Service Delivery. Department of Treasury and Finance: Melbourne.

This builds on the positive evaluation of the co-located, community-based child protection practitioner in Child FIRST and would enhance the capacity and quality of service responses to families affected by family violence.

- Invest in a community of practice to clarify the role of family services and the best models of practice for families experiencing family violence.
- Expand the role of Multi-Disciplinary Centres to include joint initial responses to the most serious, high-risk family violence matters, with social welfare practitioners involved in the planning of the initial response and accompanying Victoria Police on the initial call out response.

#### **b. Expand men's behaviour change programs**

- Invest in effective men's behaviour change programs and services providing support for families affected by child-parent violence and ensure ongoing evaluation and monitoring of these programs.

#### **c. Expand in-home support services**

- Expand in-home support services designed to reduce the incidence and harmful effects of family violence. Research<sup>9</sup> has shown that in-home services may operate as a powerful protective factor in preventing child fatalities.

Centre members have identified early detection of stress factors and appropriate referrals, exposing the 'veil of secrecy' and support to victims as just some of the positive impacts of in-home services in keeping children safe and preventing fatalities.

#### **d. Improve accessibility of services**

- New investment in support services should address the needs of Aboriginal and CALD families, including increasing the service capacity of Aboriginal Community Controlled Organisations and specialist services for CALD families experiencing family violence.

#### **e. Improve information sharing**

- Introduce new or amend existing legislation, consistent with privacy principles, to improve information sharing between services and professionals working with family violence victims and perpetrators for the purpose of providing better responses.

For further and longer term priorities, please refer to the Centre's [submission](#) to the Royal Commission into Family Violence.

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<sup>9</sup> Florida Department of Children and Families Executive Digest, *Child Fatality Trend Analysis: 1 January 2007 – 30 June 2013*, accessed at: <https://s3.amazonaws.com/s3.documentcloud.org/documents/1390965/child-fatality-trend-analysis-florida-department.pdf>



## 1.2 Expand and support child safe organisations

The 2013 Family and Community Development Inquiry into the Handling of Child Abuse by Religious and Other Non-Government Organisations highlighted the devastating effects of criminal child abuse on the lives of children. The harm done was intensified by the fact that it was the very institutions entrusted with safeguarding the wellbeing of these children that had betrayed this trust.

The Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse and Royal Commission into Family Violence have further highlighted the extreme vulnerability of children being raised in unsafe institutional and family environments. Children have the right to be nurtured physically and mentally, be healthy, achieve positive educational outcomes, develop a strong sense of identity and be connected to their culture and community. Abuse undermines and can destroy the conditions in which children learn, grow and thrive.

Victoria's recently released Child Safe Standards are a positive step towards keeping children safe. It is pleasing to see specific mention of safeguarding the needs of Aboriginal children, children from CALD backgrounds and children with a disability. However, organisations that care for children will need ongoing access to appropriate resources and information if they are to establish and maintain child-safe environments. While the Government has supported in principle all the Committee's recommendations in its *Betrayal of Trust* report, not all have been implemented.

### Recommended budget priorities

#### a. Support implementation of Child Safe Standards

- Resource a comprehensive, ongoing Child Safe Standards training and resources package for the sector to support organisational compliance with the Standards.
- Resource the ongoing and full implementation of the *Betrayal of Trust* report recommendations.

## 1.3 Improve children's safety and wellbeing in out of home care

At 30 June 2014 there were 7,710 children and young people in out of home care in Victoria.<sup>10</sup> Of these, 1,308 were identified as Indigenous. While the number of children in residential care in Victoria has remained relatively steady at around 500 a year, the number of children in foster and kinship care has increased. There has been a 61 per cent growth in the real rate of Victorian children placed in out of home care over a ten year period between 2004-05 and 2013-14.

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<sup>10</sup> AIHW, 2015, Child Protection Australia 2013-14. Child Welfare Series no 61. Cat. No CWS 52. Canberra: AIWS.

Residential care has been the subject of several reviews. The most recent by the Commissioner for Children and Young People highlights the failure of institutions to maintain residential environments where children can be safe and thrive.<sup>11</sup> The Department of Health and Human Services (DHHS) has signalled its intention to reduce the number of residential care homes over time. It has begun this process with the introduction of Targeted Care Packages (TCPs), which offer more flexible, individualised approaches to care. As residential care declines, there will need to be a range of alternative innovative, flexible and high quality care options for children who require a safe home. However, there will always be a small number of children for whom high quality therapeutic-based residential care is the best option.

Foster care as a primary care option is vital for children who cannot live with their own families. Victoria needs sufficient numbers of appropriately skilled and well supported foster carers to meet the diverse needs of children and young people in care. However, Victoria's stream of foster carers is declining. While there has been a recent increase in the General Carer Allowance for all carers, without appropriate financial reimbursement to cover the costs of raising children with complex needs, foster carers will continue to be out of pocket.

Therapeutic Foster Care (TFC) has proved to be effective in caring for children who cannot live with their families. An evaluation of The Circle Program showed that TFC *can prevent [children] from becoming entrenched in the care system and experiencing developmental harm, and can also achieve excellent results where children and young people in OoHC experience complex and entrenched difficulties.*<sup>12</sup> The evaluation also showed how TFC increases the stability of placements through appropriate support for and training of carers, which improves carer retention.

A similar approach should be introduced for kinship carers, who need to be provided with opportunities for training and support, including access to high quality respite care. Kinship carers, a number of whom are grandparents on pensions, currently receive less support than foster carers even though the children in their care may have similarly complex needs to those in foster care.

Cultural connection is important for the safety and wellbeing of all children. The right to cultural connection while a child is in out of home care is enshrined in Article 20 of the Convention of the Rights of the Child (United Nations, 1989). Across Australia Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children are over-represented in child protection and out of home care. In Victoria, Aboriginal children are 16 times more likely than non-Aboriginal children to be placed in out of home care, which often means losing their connection to culture.<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> Commissioner for Children and Young People, 2015, '...As a good parent would...'

<sup>12</sup> Frederico, M., Long M., McNamara, P., McPherson, L., Rose, R., and Gilbert, K. (2012 ) The Circle Program: an Evaluation of a therapeutic approach to Foster Care.

Centre for Excellence in Child and Family Welfare, Melbourne, Australia

<sup>13</sup> Ibid.

*Koorie Kids: Growing Strong in their Culture*<sup>14</sup> called for a comprehensive plan and approach to address the over-representation of Aboriginal children in out of home care:

*Underpinning the plan must be a serious and sustainable focus on tackling the underlying causes of the growth of Aboriginal children in care. Aboriginal children in Victoria represent a small population of just under 16,000 children. Most are already known to service providers. But the first significant service intervention these children and families experience, too often, may be admission to out of home care. This just does not make sense. So much more could be done to reduce the growth of Aboriginal children in out of home care if there were wider availability of well-designed and evidence informed prevention and early intervention services.*

The Centre acknowledges the forthcoming review of prevention and reunification services for Aboriginal children. Findings from the review and the recently completed Taskforce 1000 work should inform future reform priorities.

## **Recommended budget priorities**

### **a. Improve residential care**

- Consult closely with the sector to manage in a structured way any reduction in the number of residential care units, including:
  - identifying priority client cohorts for attention (for example, children under 12 years, separated siblings);
  - identifying the rationale, quantum, location and timeline for the decommissioning of residential care homes in each Division;
  - clarifying the role of contingency units.
- Continuing to review and refine Targeted Care Packages to incentivise residential care providers to establish alternative high quality placements based on the specific needs of the child.
- Establish a transitional fund to enable:
  - Homes to be transitioned in a planned and orderly fashion so that children can either 'age out' of the placement naturally or have sufficient time for an alternative suitable placement to be made
  - Residential care staff retraining and relocation
  - A proportion of the savings made through closures to be reinvested in the remaining residential care homes to enable the best quality care for these children
  - Secure recurrent funding to upgrade RP2 placement targets to the RP3 level and complete the upgrading of all remaining residential care targets to the RP3 level.

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<sup>14</sup> *Koorie Kids: Growing Strong in their Culture, Five Year Plan For Aboriginal Children In Out Of Home Care*, A joint submission from Victorian Aboriginal Community Controlled Organisations and Community Service Organisations, October 2013.

## **b. Provide therapeutic and professionalised foster care**

- Continue to increase the financial support provided to foster and kinship carers. At a minimum, there should be subsequent increases of \$20 per week, plus CPI, for the **next two/three years**. This would bring Victoria in line with in other states, including NSW and Qld.

There should also be an immediate review of the adequacy of the allowance relative to cost of living and real costs for carers.

- Expand Therapeutic Foster Care, ensuring there are diverse therapeutic options for all children and young people entering care.
- Professionalise foster care, whereby foster carers are provided with the training, skills and practical support required to look after the children in their care.
- Provide ongoing funding and support for the Foster Care Attraction and Recruitment Campaign and the Foster Care Retention Projects to ensure this best practice work continues to build a strong foundation for foster care in Victoria.

## **c. Better support kinship care**

- Provide resources for training, practical support and respite opportunities to support kinship carers.
- Continue to increase the financial support provided to kinship carers (outlined above).
- Progressively expand the sector's role in the provision of kinship care with the long term goal of transferring to community services organisations responsibility for all children placed in kinship care.

## **d. Expand Targeted Care Packages**

- Continue to invest in and expand the provision of Targeted Care Packages.
- Evaluate the effectiveness of Targeted Care Packages to inform subsequent refinements and sustainable funding options.

## **e. Ensure Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children have access to culturally safe services**

- Monitor agency compliance with the Aboriginal Placement Principle and address non-compliance promptly.
- Implement *Beyond Good Intentions* to create a fair, just and restorative child welfare system for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children by transferring new and existing funding to Aboriginal Community Controlled Organisations.

**f. Address the overrepresentation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children in the child welfare system**

- Fully implement the [\*Koori Kids: Growing Strong in their Culture\*](#) recommendations.
- Commit to the development of well designed, evidence-informed and early intervention services for Aboriginal children and families.

## 2. ENABLE CHILDREN TO THRIVE

The Centre believes the following priorities are vital for children to thrive:

- Improve access to education
- Support young people leaving care
- Ensure Aboriginal children are connected to culture, family, community and Country

'The Education State' consultation paper released in late 2015 by the Victorian Government highlights the importance of keeping young people engaged in education. Individuals benefit intellectually, economically and socially from the skills and knowledge gained at school and in further education. The broader community benefits from having skilled and productive citizens. Studies consistently show the importance of regular attendance and engagement in schooling in providing a foundation for lifelong learning.

There are 7, 710 children and young people in out of home care in Victoria, generally as a result of abuse or neglect. The trauma and disruption to their lives can significantly affect their capacity to learn or meet the same developmental milestones as their peers. The proposed Navigator Pilot to re-engage disengaged children and the Lookout Education Support Centres to advocate for and support children and young people in out of home care are welcome initiatives to improve school attendance, engagement and achievement for children and young people.

The right of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children to access support through local Aboriginal services must be actively promoted. Strengthening Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children's cultural identity is always in their best interests. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Organisations are the legitimate agencies to respond to needs within their communities and must be actively supported, resourced and respected.

### 2.1 Improve access to education

Research shows how kindergarten programs can help children with their language, development and self-confidence. It also shows that children from financially disadvantaged families, Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander families, families with children who have a disability, and CALD families are less likely to attend an early childhood education or care service before starting school.<sup>15</sup> Developing a strategy for engaging with families—particularly those who are socially isolated—is critical if kindergarten attendance rates for vulnerable cohorts are to improve.

There are many situations that can create trauma for children—such as physical, psychological or sexual abuse, violence in the home or broader community, living with family members who have mental illness or substance abuse issues, having a parent who is incarcerated, being bullied, and witnessing or experiencing the impact of natural disasters. Such trauma can affect brain development, capacity to learn, social interaction with others and contribute to school refusal and disengagement from school. However, not all teachers have been trained to understand and work effectively with children and

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<sup>15</sup> K. Rosier & M. McDonald, November 2011, *Promoting positive education and care transitions for children*, Australian Institute of Family Studies.

young people whose lives have been affected by trauma. Schools would benefit from evidence-based training to support these vulnerable children.

The Education Maintenance Allowance (EMA) was intended to support families on low incomes with the costs of education. The Victorian Government's termination of the EMA has affected around 200,000 children. For families already struggling to pay for their children's education, removal of the EMA adds an additional and unnecessary barrier to their children's full participation in the academic and extra-curricular life of the school.

## **Recommended budget priorities**

### **a. Support early learning**

- Develop a strategy to support attendance at 3 year and 4 year old kinder for vulnerable children to provide a strong foundation in literacy, numeracy and social skills before starting formal schooling.

### **b. Develop trauma-informed schools**

- Provide funding to train teachers in trauma-informed approaches to enable more effective support for vulnerable children.

### **c. Remove financial barriers to education**

- Provide a replacement for the Education Maintenance Allowance component paid directly to Victoria's most vulnerable families regardless of location to ensure their children can continue to attend and participate fully in school.

## **2.2 Support young people leaving care**

About 806 young people aged between 15 and 17 left state care in Victoria in 2013-14. Young people in care are forced to leave at 18 years of age. This is in contrast to the general Australian population aged 18-24, over half of whom still live at home.

Very few care leavers complete high school and only around one per cent go on to further education. For care leavers to be able to continue with education, maintain good health, stay safe, obtain stable and affordable housing and improve employment opportunities they need additional resources and support. Removal of such support comes at a critical transition point in their lives—often when care leavers are trying to manage the final years of schooling, find new housing, cope with the loss of care team support, and learn to manage independent living.

As well as compounding existing disadvantages for these young adults, issues associated with poor care and leaving care experiences result in significant costs to the community over the course of their lives. In 2006, Morgan Disney and associates estimated this cost as \$40,000 per person per year until they turn 60.

The young adult stage of development is critical in determining how well young people do in life. Effective support through the transition from care to independent living will

result in improved quality of life and substantial savings to the state in justice, healthcare, welfare and housing costs. It would also represent a strategic investment in the well-being of the entire Victorian community.

End of care planning decisions should be based on individual needs, rather than age or legal status.

## Recommended budget priorities

### a. Support access to tertiary education for care leavers

- Provide funding for tertiary scholarships for children leaving care to provide a new pathway to tertiary education.

### b. Provide young people leaving care with holistic support until at least the age of 21

- Develop evidence-informed pilot programs for 18 year olds in home based care, such as those trialled in the UK 'Staying Put' program<sup>16</sup>, to provide gradual transition that effectively plans and supports for independence.

This should include enabling young people to move into independence at their own pace, supported to make the transition in a more gradual way, as well as providing stability and support necessary for young people to engage in education, training and employment.

### c. Provide education and housing support packages for children leaving care

- For young people in or leaving care, provide full fee relief for post compulsory education and appropriately tailored support and housing packages, to the age of 25.

## 2.3 Ensure Aboriginal children are connected to culture, family, community and Country

The recent legislative change that extends the requirement for a cultural plan to all Aboriginal children in out of home care is a positive move. Ensuring Aboriginal children are in culturally safe living arrangements are in their best interest. It is therefore vital that services are adequately funded to meet the new cultural planning statutory obligations. The amount of funding required has been clearly identified in the Price Waterhouse Cooper work on cultural planning.

Aboriginal Community Controlled Organisation (ACCOs) have unique organisational strengths and capabilities that have enabled them to effectively provide services for their communities over many decades. ACCOs need greater day-to-day control over child

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<sup>16</sup> Emily Munro, Clare Lushey, National Care Advisory Service, Debi Maskell-Graham and Harriet Ward, *Evaluation of the Staying Put 18 Plus Family Placement Programme: Final Report*, Centre for Child and Family Research, Loughborough University, 2011.



welfare programs and services, as well as increased and expanded support to deliver these services to ensure better outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children.

## **Recommended budget priorities**

### **a. Provide adequate funding for new statutory obligations associated with cultural planning**

- Fully fund services to meet their new cultural planning obligations to ensure these are realised.

### **b. Support and resource Aboriginal Community Controlled Organisations**

- Adequately resource ACCOs to ensure Aboriginal children can stay connected to their culture, family and community and recognise ACCOs are the legitimate agencies to identify and respond to needs within their communities.
- Fully implement s 18 of the *Children, Youth and Families Act 2005* to enable the transfer of custody and guardianship responsibilities from the Secretary of the Department of Human Services to Aboriginal Community Controlled Organisations.

## **3. KEEP FAMILIES STRONG**

Helping families stay strong needs to be at the centre of Victoria's approach to supporting vulnerable children and this can best be achieved through a combination of measures that build family resilience and keep children safe:

- Help families at the earliest opportunity
- Improve support to families experiencing complex issues

All children have the right to an education, to healthcare, to grow up in an environment that promotes their physical, mental, spiritual, moral and social development. Universal services seek to meet these needs for the community; however universal availability does not mean universal accessibility.

Getting help to families earlier requires capable, skilled and well integrated services. Integrated Family Services and Child FIRST face continued growth in demand coupled with growing complexity in the highly vulnerable children and families with whom they work.

In its first year in office the Andrews Labor Government has made a promising start with a package of initiatives in the 2015 State Budget aimed at supporting families earlier and addressing unsustainable demand pressures on family services, child protection and out of home care. It has also committed to a comprehensive program of reform through the *Roadmap to Reform: Strong Families Safe Children*. With reports to child protection increasing by 20 per cent in the first four months of the 2015-16 financial year, and

double-digit growth in each of the preceding five years, it is vital that Government continues to invest in services that can keep families strong.

### **3.1 Help families at the earliest opportunity**

Victoria has an excellent suite of early childhood services. Low rates of infant mortality and teenage pregnancy, and high rates of preschool participation illustrate the positive outcomes that flow from investment in prevention and early childhood services. It is vital that these critical services continue to be funded to meet expected population growth.

While these are highly valued services with high levels of participation, some vulnerable children and families do not currently access these services.

Revisiting the co-location of early childhood services with Child FIRST/Integrated Family Services, particularly in vulnerable communities, should be a priority. In 2010, the Early Childhood Development (ECD) pilot project commenced and was designed to improve the participation of vulnerable children in Early Childhood Services (ECS). The pilot was subject to an independent evaluation,<sup>17</sup> which found significant improvements in access to early childhood services for families involved with Child FIRST/Integrated Family Services.

Given their work with vulnerable families in the antenatal and post-natal stages, family services are well equipped to work more closely with Maternal and Child Health (MCH) nurses to deliver MCH services to vulnerable families. Greater collaboration between MCH nurses and ECEC staff would encourage continued engagement between vulnerable families and children and MCH programs, in an environment where they feel safe, comfortable and included.<sup>18</sup>

Parenting Services work in partnership with parents to identify infant health, development and parenting needs to build parenting competence, and to promote secure attachment between the parent and child. There is strong evidence that these interventions improve parent wellbeing, child behaviour and the care of vulnerable children.<sup>19</sup> Early Parenting Centres, such as Tweddle, O'Connell and Queen Elizabeth Centre, deliver targeted programs for vulnerable families in the very early years, but are struggling to meet demand. Investment in these centres and in other early intervention services is fundamental if children are to grow up in safe, stable and nurturing environments.

The Centre recommends that stronger ties are built between the Early Parenting Centres and Child FIRST/Integrated Family Services focusing on the need for additional residential and out-reach parenting services in regional locations, the merits of establishing specialist Aboriginal services, the provision of a CALD supplement in

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<sup>17</sup> RMIT, *Early Childhood Development Pilot Project Evaluation Final Report*, December 2011.

<sup>18</sup> An example of such an approach is the City of Port Philip's pilot program where the later MCH Key Ages and Stages Checks are conducted through 3 and 4 year old kindergartens. The program has demonstrated positive results, showing improved attendance among families at the Key Ages and Stages checks.

<sup>19</sup> See, for example, the highly positive findings described in the evaluation of the Mildura based Bumps to Babes and Beyond project: *Evaluation of the Bumps to Babes and Beyond Program, A Partnership Between The Queen Elizabeth Centre and Mallee District Aboriginal Services*, December 2014.

recognition of the heightened needs of this client group and future workforce requirements and development.

## **Recommended budget priorities**

### **a. Support and expand integrated service models**

- Continue to invest in Child FIRST/Integrated Family Services to effectively address growing demand on services and support families earlier.

### **b. Improve access to universal services**

- Ensure universal services are properly funded to meet population growth and increased demand.
- Trial opportunities to strengthen service integration through co-locating universal services and Child FIRST and Integrated Family Services.
- Invest in supported playgroups across Victoria to increase opportunities for vulnerable children to play and become linked to universal services.

### **c. Help families support their children's early development**

- Support greater collaboration between Maternal Child Health (MCH) and Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) workers.
- Invest in evidence-based approaches to support more collaborative working between MCH and ECEC staff to ensure continued engagement between vulnerable families and children and MCH programs.
- Release the results of the Cradle to Kinder Evaluation to the sector (due for release in January 2016) and incorporate the findings into the C2K program.

### **d. Support and expand effective programs**

- Extend access to Stronger Families across Victoria, beginning with four additional sites in 2016–2017. An independent evaluation of Stronger Families has been completed, which included a cost benefit analysis of the program.<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>20</sup> It is calculated that for every additional dollar invested in the program, additional savings of \$1.23 were realised within child protection and out of home care. Children whose families took part were less likely to be in care when they finished the program and were more likely to have been unified with their families. Similarly, they were less likely to be the subject of a subsequent re-substantiation and more likely to remain with their families, State Government of Victoria, Department of Human Services, *Stronger Families and Aboriginal Stronger Families*, KPMG *Evaluation-Final Report*, February 2014.

- Review evaluations of current programs, such as *Bumps to Babes and Beyond*, and provide resources to expand these effective programs.

### **3.2 Improve support to families experiencing complex issues**

It is important that parents with a mental illness or disability have the tools and supports to create an enriching, safe environment for their children. Family services perform an important function supporting families and children with physical or mental illness at all stages of the health continuum—early in life, early in illness, early in episode—across early intervention and complex care contexts.

Many of our member organisations have expressed concern at federal funding cuts to the National Perinatal Depression Initiative and expect this will have devastating effects on families requiring intensive support in the early stages of parenting. This represents an investment opportunity for the State Government to show its commitment to strengthening families and supporting mothers through an effective early intervention.

A common impediment for vulnerable children, young people and families experiencing mental health issues or substance abuse is the inability to access timely mental health services and the related issue of inadequate relapse planning to provide ready access to acute services at times of crisis.

A particularly vulnerable cohort that falls prey to lack of access to mental health resources are children and young people in out of home care. These children are at higher risk of poor mental health due to the traumatising experiences they have had with their birth parents and/or during their time in care. The incidence of poor mental health among children in the Minister's care was four times the Australian national average for children and young people.<sup>21</sup> Our members have raised concerns regarding timely mental health interventions and support for these children and young people.

Our members working in family services have also expressed concern at the need to work beyond their remit of hours to support families, and their struggle to service the needs of all the families who seek their help. Family services are well placed to respond to the diverse needs of parents and children experiencing mental health issues and substance abuse; however they require additional support and resources to do their job effectively and meet demand. Greater specialisation in mental health and substance abuse within family services is critical to make sure organisations can address the complexity of experiences within struggling families.

## **Recommended budget priorities**

### **a. Support family services to meet complex needs**

- Ensure mental health and drug and alcohol training is provided to all staff in child and family services to improve understanding of the complex and often interrelated nature of mental health and drug and alcohol issues.

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<sup>21</sup> Milburn, N., Lynch, M. & Jackson, J., 2008. Early identification of mental health needs of children in care: a therapeutic assessment programme for statutory clients of child protection. *Clinical Child Psychology and Psychiatry*, 13(1), pp. 31-47.

**b. Improve access to specialist health services**

- Provide resources for greater specialisation in mental health and substance abuse within family services to provide accessible specialist treatment for parents and children experiencing mental health problems and substance abuse.

**c. Support the Perinatal Depression Initiative**

- Provide funding for the Perinatal Depression Initiative to continue across Victoria and continue to lobbying the Federal Government to reinstate funding of the initiative.

## 4. SUPPORT A STRONG, SUSTAINABLE COMMUNITY SECTOR

A strong and sustainable community sector is vital to keep vulnerable children in Victoria safe and well. All services face significant demand pressures and clear evidence of growing client complexity.

As stated in the Centre's Roadmap submission:

*Procurement methodologies are important tools that **may** (or may not) drive improved performance and outcomes. However, they remain in their infancy in child and family services with no solid evaluation evidence yet available of their impact, nationally or internationally.*

*The bigger question, identified by both the Victorian Ombudsman and the Victorian Auditor-General in four recent highly critical reports – is the debilitating effect of unfunded demand growth on service delivery and the over-riding, central importance of Government providing a sustainable, ongoing funding base for services working with highly vulnerable Victorian children and their families.<sup>22</sup>*

Changes in Commonwealth benefit settings are creating new groups of highly vulnerable families. Planned reductions in Family Tax Benefits are likely to tip a growing number of families into poverty, placing further demands on community services organisations.

The Victorian Auditor-General Early Intervention Services for Vulnerable Children and Families report observed that:

*The current funding structure does not reflect the growth in the number and complexity of cases or the impact this has had on service providers' capacity to meet the needs of vulnerable families.<sup>23</sup>*

The 2015 State Budget included a welcome demand growth component for child protection, out of home care and family services and the Centre urges Government to maintain this approach.

Many services continue to report challenges in delivering services in rural Victoria. In some parts of the State a home visit to a vulnerable family may involve a 3-4 hour round trip yet current funding arrangements make no allowance for such additional overheads in delivering services.

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<sup>22</sup> Roadmap to Reform: Strong Families Safe Children, A submission from The Centre for Excellence in Child and Family Welfare, November 2015.

<sup>23</sup> Victorian Auditor General's Office, 2104, Early Intervention Services for Vulnerable Families, p.x.

## 4.1 Support services to meet growing demand and complexity

Even the best designed services can be derailed or overwhelmed by unanticipated or unmanaged demand pressures. It is therefore vital to address how demand will be forecast and managed into the future. The Centre considers that the key to effective demand management in child and family services is a comprehensive suite of well designed, targeted and integrated prevention and early intervention services, some of which are outlined throughout this paper.

### Recommended budget priorities

#### a. Ensure funding meets growing demand on services

- Provide adequate funding to support increased demand for services and population growth to ensure accessible, high quality services for vulnerable children and families.

#### b. Introduce a country and regional area loading

- Introduce a funding loading for rural services to meet the needs of families in these areas and ensure accessible, quality services.

#### c. Support workforce development for increasingly complex needs

- Expand investment in workforce training and development across the child and family welfare sector to ensure the increasingly complex needs of vulnerable children and families can be effectively addressed.

## 4.2 Strong Aboriginal Community Controlled Organisations (ACCOs)

For over a decade Victorian Government policy has provided in-principle support for the development of Aboriginal community based and controlled services and programs in child and family welfare. However, a significant majority of services to vulnerable Aboriginal children and families is still being delivered by non-Aboriginal community services organisations.

The Centre is a co-signatory to [Beyond Good Intentions](#) and calls on Government to:

*Establish a process and mechanism to be led by ACCOs that enables the planned transfer of resources, services, programs and authority pertaining to service provision for Aboriginal and Torres Straits Islander families and children from CSOs and government to be managed independently or through agreed service partnerships.<sup>24</sup>*

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<sup>24</sup> Centre for Excellence in Child and Family Welfare, Beyond Good Intentions, 2015.

## Recommended budget priorities

### a. Support implementation of *Beyond Good Intentions*

- Implement [\*Beyond Good Intentions\*](#) to create a fair, just and restorative child welfare system for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children by transferring new and existing funding to Aboriginal Community Controlled Organisations.

This includes actively pursuing opportunities to ensure a fair proportion of all new funding in the community sector is prioritised for delivery by ACCOs.