

Putting children at the centre: 2018 State Election



Centre for Excellence
in Child and Family Welfare Inc.

Acknowledgements

We respectfully acknowledge the traditional land of the Kulin Nation and we acknowledge the Wurundjeri people who are the traditional custodians of this land. We pay our respects to their elders past and present and recognise that their sovereignty was never ceded and the structural inequality created by colonisation continues to this day.

We appreciate and celebrate diversity in all its forms. We believe diversity of all kinds makes our teams, services and organisations stronger and more effective.



We have a responsibility
to look after
every Victorian child.

Our future depends on it.

**The voices of disadvantaged
children and young people are
all too often ignored.**

**Too many Victorian children and
families are struggling. Demand for
support services is growing at an
unprecedented rate.**

**That's why the Victorian state
government must
act early to help children in need;
support young people,
their families, and carers;
and fund what we know
will deliver better results.**

Putting children at the centre Victorian 2018 election statement

Introduction **CEO's message**

Children need to be placed at the centre of everything we do. As a community we have a duty of care to make sure our children grow up in safe, stable home environments, connected to family, community and culture, with the care and support needed to advance their health, education, wellbeing and development.

To achieve this, families need access to quality, flexible, culturally informed support when and where they need it.

To better support families, service providers need funding that is based on demand; allowing for flexibility to respond early to family and carers' needs, a portable long service scheme that allows workers to move within and across the service system, more streamlined compliance requirements that enable workers to spend more time on families, and funding that increases in line with inflation or the costs of service delivery so providers can maintain service levels.

Despite significant investment in child and family services in recent years – including LOOKOUT Education Support Centres to support children in out of home care, implementation of Targeted Care Packages, funding to support Aboriginal self-determination, and initiatives to address family violence –

there is still so much to be done to keep families together and children safe and supported.

Consistent with self-determination, Aboriginal agencies must be funded long-term to provide services for Aboriginal children and families when and as needed, early in life, early in need. The Victorian government must continue to work with traditional landowners towards Treaty.

We need to make sure families living in regional areas have the same opportunities to thrive as those in metropolitan areas. This means making sure service providers are appropriately resourced, workers are given access to flexible training options, and carers are reimbursed for travel and other expenses incurred in supporting children's emotional, intellectual, cultural, and physical growth.

Families affected by crime need targeted support to make sure that parents who have been incarcerated can take on parenting responsibilities when released, and children who are victims of crime are supported in their own right to thrive.

To help give stability to children in care we need to make sure Victoria has an integrated carer strategy that enables carers to easily access the full range of supports and services available, including stable housing, to maintain children's safety and wellbeing.

Our election statement focuses on key priorities to enable babies, children, young people and families to thrive. The whole community benefits socially and economically when government prioritises the physical and mental wellbeing of its youngest citizens, and in strengthening family connections.

Our babies, infants and children

What we know

Every child has the right to the best possible start in life.

The period from conception to the end of the child's second year has life-long consequences for health and wellbeing.¹ However, in 2016-17, 3638 babies under the age of 1 year and 9579 toddlers aged 1-4 years were receiving child protection services in Victoria. Of these, 586 and 1407 respectively were Indigenous.² Most notably, at 30 June 2017, 320 babies under the age of 1 year and 2143 toddlers aged 1-4 years were in out of home care in Victoria.³ Antenatal services and parenting supports, including access to respite care, are needed from pregnancy onwards to promote healthy brain development in children, develop secure attachments and support parents' capacity to create safe and nurturing home environments. Investing in the early years yields a greater return than investing at any other life stage.⁴

One in five children entering school has additional health and developmental needs⁵ and 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.⁶ We know that the children of incarcerated parents are also vulnerable, at risk of poor developmental and educational outcomes.⁷

Studies show that programs which combine access to quality health care, particularly during pregnancy and in the first few years of life, with parent training, can strengthen early parenting practices.⁸ Every child who is exposed to violence, abuse and neglect must be given the best specialist intensive therapeutic and case management possible to prevent long-term psychological and behavioural issues.

What we need government to do

- ◆ Expand programs such as Cradle to Kinder, Aboriginal Cradle to Kinder, Healthy Mothers, Healthy Babies, and Enhanced Maternal Child Health Nurse service to make sure all babies, infants and children have access to intensive therapeutic support early in life.
- ◆ Fund Aboriginal agencies to develop and deliver holistic and evidence-informed early years services accessible to every Aboriginal child in the state.
- ◆ Fund early parenting centres to provide early help for families needing intensive support and respite to be able to care for their children.
- ◆ Boost outreach perinatal support services to new and expectant parents who may be dealing with or at risk of perinatal depression.
- ◆ Train teachers in trauma-informed approaches to better support children experiencing vulnerability during the earliest years of school.
- ◆ Funding for rapid response to children's needs is set at levels to meet demand and is held by agencies.

Our young people

What we know

The most vulnerable young people in Victoria are those leaving care and those in – or at risk of entering – the youth justice system. These are not necessarily separate cohorts given that a high proportion of young people in the justice system have histories of trauma, neglect, child protection and out of home care involvement.⁹

Young people who leave out of home care experience poorer outcomes than the broader population.¹⁰ They are overrepresented in the young homeless population, suggesting that many young people in out of home care transition into homelessness.¹¹ Few go on to university.¹²

Extending care supports beyond 18 years has a positive impact on young people's lives.¹³ This has the potential to address intergenerational disadvantage, reducing the likelihood of poor outcomes for the next generation, and reducing the need for crisis intervention.¹⁴

A 2015 DHHS survey of 167 males and nine females detained on sentence and remand in Victoria found that 63 per cent were victims of abuse, trauma or neglect, 62 per cent had previously been suspended or expelled from school, 30 per cent presented with mental health issues, and 66 per cent had a history of both alcohol and drug misuse.¹⁵ There was also a high proportion of young people with developmental difficulties or disability.

We know that education can turn people's lives around. Recently the Department of Education provided 12 months' funding for the successful *Raising Expectations* program, which focuses on building the educational expectations of children in care and of the carers and professionals who support them. Such opportunities need to be extended to all care leavers who want to pursue further or higher education.

What we need government to do

- ◆ Extend the leaving care age to 21 years to make sure all young people in care have the necessary supports to succeed in adulthood.
- ◆ Make sure every young person in a residential care setting has access to therapeutic programs catering for their specific needs.
- ◆ Increase funding for programs and outreach services specifically targeting young people showing early signs of school refusal.
- ◆ Provide all care leavers with the option to pursue university by funding *Raising Expectations* long term.
- ◆ Invest in trialling evidence-based programs that have been shown to divert young people from entering or remaining in youth justice, including culturally appropriate programs for Aboriginal young people.
- ◆ Provide a more structured approach to support young people leaving care with safe and stable housing, including access to the private rental market.

"I believe that we need further support for young people who are either in the care system or have spent time in it to access further education and secure employment."

Brittany
Youth advisor

Our children and families with disability

What we know

36,265 Victorians aged 19 and under had a profound or severe disability in 2016.²³ Aboriginal children under 14 are more than twice as likely to have a disability as their non-Aboriginal peers.²⁴ Children with a physical or intellectual disability are more likely than other children to come into contact with the child protection system.²⁵ Children with disability are disproportionately placed in residential care compared with foster and kinship care.²⁶

We know that families and children with disability enter out of home care either through relinquishment or removal by child protection authorities due to the incidence or risk of neglect or abuse.²⁷ Once in care, children with a disability experience much greater placement instability than their peers without a disability,²⁸ with a higher number of placements and reduced likelihood of being reunited with a parent.²⁹

For CALD families there are additional challenges associated with caring for a child with disability or for a parent with disability supporting a family, including different understandings of disability that can affect engagement with services, language barriers, lack of knowledge about the services available, and difficulty accessing or navigating the NDIS system.³⁰ Aboriginal families with disability face additional challenges associated with intergenerational trauma.

While the Victorian government has introduced initiatives to better support children and young people with disability,

typical education experiences remain exclusionary.³¹ Key barriers include negative societal attitudes, lack of resources and information, and accessibility.³²

What government needs to do

- ◆ Expand the services and supports available to provide counselling where a child is identified with a disability, interpreter services for CALD families, resources to support family preservation or, where a child has been removed, to maintain attachment and foster bonding for reunification.
- ◆ Support and strengthen the disability service capacity of Aboriginal Community Controlled Organisations to better support Aboriginal children and families with disability.
- ◆ Provide more flexible and increased funding for in-home support options to assist parents and carers to care for a child with disability, including funding for after hours and weekend support programs, and respite and emergency care for children.
- ◆ Enhance current access to legal and advocacy avenues for parents with a disability where there is involvement with child protection or family court proceedings.
- ◆ Build the capability of teachers to implement inclusive and strengths-based approaches to enable children with disability to remain connected to learning.

Our families

What we know

Ten per cent of Victorian families generate 40 per cent of the state's child protection reports.¹⁶

These families need welfare and justice services to help build their self-management skills. They also need access to respite and emergency care to keep their family together and keep children safe. We know that disadvantage is a key driver of children being removed from families.¹⁷

Social isolation, poor education, homelessness, unemployment and intergenerational trauma increase the likelihood of children being involved in child protection.¹⁸

In 2016, over 9,500 Victorians counted as homeless were under 25 and over 10,000 were women. We know that homelessness can contribute to developmental delays and mental health problems in children, disrupted education, and adversely affect parent-child relations.¹⁹

Access to mental health and alcohol and other drug services could potentially keep families together.²⁰ Flexible and creative funding models would enable 'wraparound' and more integrated supports for families with complex needs.

For children who have been removed from their families, reunification is more likely to occur when the parent's capacity has increased and there has been regular contact throughout the child's removal.²¹

In Victoria, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander young people are 15 times more likely to be taken away from their families than non-Aboriginal children. They are then 16 times more likely to become engaged in the justice system.

Continued investment in place-based and culturally safe program delivery by Aboriginal Community Controlled Organisations is crucial to improving the lives of Aboriginal children in Victoria. We must continue to work towards a Victoria where Aboriginal children grow up safe and connected to culture, kin and country.

Carers must be supported to provide the best possible environment for children to thrive.

We know that despite increased short-term funding to family services, service providers are overwhelmed – having to focus on high-risk, families with complex needs that require intensive and sustained service delivery – which in turn affects their capacity to provide early help to prevent families from entering tertiary systems.²²

Investing in programs to grow and strengthen families, and providing adequate respite care, would reduce the rates of children being removed for short periods into care.

“I want all kids to be supported to stay connected to community, culture and country.”

Sharney
Youth advisor

What government needs to do

- ◆ Reinstatement of funding for respite and emergency care options to provide temporary and emergency care for children whose families are experiencing vulnerability.
- ◆ Provide targeted and specialist support for families to reduce the waitlists that exist in Victoria.
- ◆ Develop a core capabilities framework and training program for practitioners to understand how to work with children in family violence situations, provide cultural safety and awareness, implement trauma-informed practice, and manage vicarious trauma.
- ◆ Provide timely access to accommodation, linked to family services, to provide family safety and stability, and maintain children's wellbeing and development.
- ◆ Enhance service delivery in regional and rural areas, including better transport and training opportunities for regional family service workers, greater investment in regional community health centres.
- ◆ Government must fund Aboriginal agencies to develop and deliver holistic and evidence-informed services accessible to every Aboriginal family in the state, including support for an ACCO Industry Plan.
- ◆ Make it as easy as possible for carers to access resources and support that will enable the children in their care to have the same access to education, health, cultural and recreational opportunities as their peers who have not been placed in care.
- ◆ Raise carer reimbursement rates to ensure they meet the national average and are indexed



Dylan



Lawrence



Sharney



Brittany



Aedan

In 2018 the Centre is working with a group of young people with lived experience of the out-of-home care system.

The Centre's young leaders hold a common goal: to advocate for change so that young people who experience disadvantage are afforded practical, emotional and financial support so that they have the chance to thrive.

We would like to thank Dylan, Lawrence, Sharney, Brittany and Aedan for their leadership and contribution to our shared advocacy and campaigns.

Our Call Notes:

This image shows a single sheet of white paper with horizontal ruling lines. The lines are evenly spaced and run across the width of the page. There are no margins, text, or other markings on the paper.

We acknowledge the support of fellow peak bodies:

Kinship Carers Victoria

Grandparents Victoria

Permanent Care and Adoptive Families

Foster Care Association of Victoria



fcav
foster care
association
of victoria

**Permanent
Care and
Adoptive
Families**



grandparents
V I C T O R I A



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About the Centre

For over 100 years, the Centre has advanced the rights and wellbeing of children, young people and families in Victoria.

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 150 community service organisations, students and individuals throughout Victoria working across the continuum of child and family services, from prevention and early intervention to the provision of out-of-home care. Our members are at the forefront of supporting children, young people and families.

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