

Centre for Excellence in Child and Family Welfare
Victorian 2019 State Budget Priorities



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For over 100 years, the Centre has advocated 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. The Centre is the peak body for organisations working in child and family services in Victoria. We represent over 100 organisations across the continuum of child and family services, from early intervention to out-of-home care.

These *Victorian 2019 State Budget Priorities* build on the Centre's advocacy work following on from *Putting children at the centre – Victorian 2018 election statement*. Looking ahead in 2019, the Centre will be commissioning a comprehensive platform for re-imagining child and family services in Victoria.

Overview

The Centre acknowledges the significant reform agenda of the Andrews Government to improve the wellbeing and safety of children, young people and families in Victoria.

We welcome the investment in preventing and responding to family violence, the strong commitment to Aboriginal self-determination, establishing the Royal Commission into Victoria's Mental Health System, and extending supports for young people in care up to the age of 21. The Centre proudly joined with the Aboriginal community and government to sign the *Wungurilwil Gapgapduir: Aboriginal Children and Families Agreement* aiming to reduce the number of Aboriginal children in out-of-home care by building their connection to culture, country and community.

And we welcome the commitment to developing a child and family services learning system so that children, young people and families have access to services backed by the best available research and practitioner expertise. This includes investing in the Outcomes, Practice and Evidence Network (OPEN) to help build sector knowledge of effective practice.

The government must not risk losing this momentum. A number of promising initiatives face an uncertain funding future.

The demand for child and family services from community organisations is unprecedented. The child and family service sector needs **\$200 million funding per year in integrated family services** and **\$5000 per year per carer** to respond.

Demand-driven and needs-based funding will enable and facilitate responsive and adaptable child-centred services; with seamless pathways between programs so that families can receive help based on their needs, for as long as they need. Government has not yet funded implementation of the *Child and Family Services Industry Plan*, developed by the sector to guide the transition from a service system focused on crisis response to one characterised by prevention, early intervention and evidence-informed practice.

To meet the costs of service delivery, organisations need funding that increases in line with inflation or the costs of service delivery. Without indexation, organisations lose money, compromising their ability to maintain financial stability and sustainability and provide the best possible services to children, young people and families. The Centre's member organisations need flexible, long-term funding and service agreements that reflect the level and complexity of child, young people, family and carer needs; removing eligibility barriers and restrictions to accessing support.

Government needs to better support regional child and family service organisations to overcome the unique challenges of transport, staff retention and rural poverty.

Our member organisations are ready to provide a stronger focus on early intervention. But opportunities for early intervention work are currently being missed due to demand, eligibility restrictions, and short-term program-based funding. Current pricing structures, especially those for out-of-home care, are outdated and do not reflect the additional costs faced by regional services. The child and family services sector in Victoria has undergone, and continues to undergo, massive and complex changes. While government investment has been high, the reforms are not yet cutting through.

Victoria's children need services – from hospitals, schools and universities, through to integrated family services, child protection and youth justice – to be far more child-centred, with the child at the heart of every planning decision. Children and families in regional areas need additional help to overcome extra barriers in accessing fundamental life supports. Children and families at risk of poverty, homelessness, drug and alcohol abuse, community disconnection and isolation, or racism and xenophobia, need early help and support before reaching crisis point.

We need to rethink and modernise child protection in Victoria, to be able to make a demonstrable difference in the lives of children at risk of removal from their family.

Government must fund **Children's Advocates** and **Contact Officers** so every child has someone representing their best interests. We need to stop the trajectory of vulnerable children ending up in our youth justice system. And we must do more to enable our children and young people to be safe, to thrive, and for Victorian families to provide safe and nurturing environments.

Place children at the centre

In 2017-18, the average number of children in out-of-home care in Victoria was 10,305¹ and climbing, with disproportionate representation of Aboriginal children and young people in care.²

In less than a decade, the number of children removed from their families and placed in care has doubled. The *Report of the Protecting Victoria's Vulnerable Children Inquiry* highlighted multiple systemic abuses and made 90 recommendations to improve the lives of vulnerable children and young people. We all 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.

That means every service that works with children – including schools, hospitals, community organisations, Child FIRST, and child protection – is funded to have the capacity for information sharing. And that means children in care have access to the best specialist intensive support and case management, to prevent long-term psychological and behavioural issues.

Overwhelming demand on the service system means at-risk families are missing out on crucial early intervention and access to the right support, as and when they need it. The Child and Family Services Industry Plan calls for demand-driven and needs-based funding to enable and facilitate responsive and adaptable child-centred services; with seamless pathways between programs so that families can receive help based on their needs, for as long as they need.

Government must:

- ◆ Urgently establish a **taskforce to oversee placement decisions** and ensure that in the care system the best decision making and care arrangements are being established for all children
- ◆ Increase funding for child-centred, family sensitive and trauma-informed **specialist and clinical services** to support children's developmental needs through outreach.
- ◆ Increase funding for the **TRAK Forward** (Therapeutic Recovery for Adults and Kids) program to include children who have experienced neglect and abuse.
- ◆ Increase funding for the **Homeless Children Specialist Support Service** and expand into other regions to include children who have experienced abuse and neglect.
- ◆ Restore funding to the **TeachAR program** and expand it to children in informal care arrangements and children who are disengaging from school.
- ◆ Ensure every child who comes into contact with child and family services, family violence specialists, child protection, and Child FIRST has timely access to a **Children's Advocate**.
- ◆ Fund implementation of the **Child and Family Services Industry Plan**, developed by the sector to guide the transition from a service system focused on crisis response to one characterised by prevention, early intervention and evidence-informed practice.

Give all children the best possible start

The first 1000 days of a child's life are critical for future healthy development and wellbeing.³ The attachment between child and their primary caregiver during infancy is critically important to a child's development:

*'A consistently responsive and nurturing relationship between the child and their caregiver encourages a secure attachment and facilitates the development of future relationships throughout the child's life, while providing a secure foundation for learning.'*⁴

But in 2016-17, 3,638 babies under the age of 1, and 9,579 toddlers aged 1-4, were receiving child protection services in Victoria. Of these, 586 and 1407 respectively were Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander children.⁵ On the night of 30 June 2017, 320 babies under the age of 1, and 2143 toddlers aged 1-4, were in out of home care in Victoria.⁶

Children from financially disadvantaged families, refugee backgrounds, Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander families, CALD families, and children who have a disability are less likely to attend an early childhood education or care service before starting school.⁷

The children of parents in prison are also highly vulnerable, at risk of poor developmental and educational outcomes.⁸ We need to invest in the earliest years of every child's life to give each child the best possible foundations for meeting developmental milestones, remaining engaged in learning, socialising effectively with others, remaining connected to community, and living productive lives.

Government must

- ◆ Double current funding to **\$200 million per annum for 4 years to integrated family services** to prevent families going into crisis.
- ◆ Establish ongoing funding for the **new kinship care model**, enabling earlier kinship carer identification through new kinship networks, and strengthened connections for Aboriginal children and young people with family reunification supports.
- ◆ **Increase funding for Aboriginal agencies** to continue to build the evidence base of Aboriginal practices and programs for submission to the Menu of Evidence-informed Practices and Programs – as per the *Wungurilwil Gapgapduir* strategic plans.
- ◆ Allocate a **\$5000 package per child per annum to carers of children and young people** years to enable them to purchase services in a targeted way to give children in care the best possible start.
- ◆ Expand **promising programs** – such as Cradle to Kinder; Aboriginal Cradle to Kinder; Healthy Mothers, Healthy Babies; and the Enhanced Maternal Child Health Nurse service – giving babies and children access to intensive specialist support early in life.
- ◆ Fund a **Family Support Worker** in each school to assess the needs of families and link them into the relevant services and supports.
- ◆ Expand the **Navigator program** to reduce student disengagement.

Support our most at-risk children and young people

Studies show the positive impact that extending care supports beyond 18 can have on the lives of young people,⁹ reducing the likelihood of poor outcomes for the next generation, and reducing the need for a crisis response.¹⁰ The Centre welcomes the government's commitment to extend care to 21 years, but this must extend to all young people leaving care. There are also specific areas of support required for children and young people involved in youth justice and those with a disability.

For children and young people who are leaving care, government must

- ◆ Establish ongoing funding for the **new kinship care model**, to enable better and earlier identification of kinship carers through new kinship networks, and strengthen Aboriginal family reunification supports.
- ◆ Provide **accommodation** to *all* young people leaving care.
- ◆ Ensure that every young person in care has a **transition plan connected to all available support services**, well before they leave care, with supported pathways into education, training or work.
- ◆ Fund **Raising Expectations** to support care leavers attending TAFE and university.

For children and young people in the youth justice system, government must

- ◆ Commit to providing every young person in the youth justice system with **access to literacy, numeracy and life skills** training opportunities.
- ◆ Require a **minimum qualification** in youth work for all youth justice custodial workers, to ensure they have the appropriate skills, knowledge and expertise to meet the developmental, safety and wellbeing needs of young people with complex needs and challenges.
- ◆ Provide **post-release access** to accommodation, mental health services, and pathways into education, training or employment.
- ◆ Ensure every child who comes into contact with the youth justice system has timely access to a **Contact Officer** who will advocate on their behalf.
- ◆ Invest in **evidence-based youth justice programs** to divert young people in CALD communities from entering or remaining in the youth justice system.
- ◆ Extend funding for **adolescent family violence** programs.
- ◆ Invest in pilot programs to improve educational outcomes for refugee and migrant families through cultural mentoring and community-based programs.

For children and young people with a disability, government must

- ◆ Establish a **publicly available disability inclusion index** at every Victorian school.
- ◆ Ensure **input of the direct experiences of children and young people with disability** into all early childhood and school education reform.
- ◆ Increase **long term funding for the Victorian State Disability plan** – in particular in the establishment of new treatment and support initiatives for clients with complex needs, including a new clinical child specialist to improve child treatment.

Support all child and family services to learn, collaborate and share

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.

The Fostering Connections project is an initiative that has enabled whole-sector collaboration, cooperation and data collection – through a foster carer attraction campaign, website and enquiry line and a centralised Carer Management System. In addition, Fostering Connections has provided opportunities for agencies to share resources to make the carer recruitment experience more efficient and the recruitment process more accessible for enquirers.

The government has also set up a learning system to make sure services know what works and that evidence is embedded in all decision making. A key part of the learning system is OPEN, which is funded by government and managed by the Centre.

An emerging need is for a coordinated approach to building and sharing evidence-informed practice with and across child and family services – including with government and statutory child protection. A 'Knowledge to Action Hub' would be able to do this work with a focus on translating knowledge into action to support children and families.

Government must:

- ◆ Significantly increase funding to implement and evaluate **evidence-based programs** (EBPs) to \$50 million per annum – in line with other states – to build a critical mass of proven programs aimed at radically reducing the high numbers of children going into care and into youth justice, helping parents to parent, and keeping families together.
- ◆ Enhance **service delivery in regional areas**, including transport and training for regional service workers, and more support for regional community health centres.
- ◆ Increase its funding for **family group conferencing** so that families can be directly involved in coming together in making decisions for the benefit of, and where necessary, attending to any harm experienced by 'one of their own'.
- ◆ 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 meet the national average and are indexed.
- ◆ Urgently provide funding for the **Fostering Connections** to continue its work in promoting, recruiting and retaining foster carers, and enabling whole-sector collaboration, cooperation and data collection.
- ◆ Fund the establishment of a **'Knowledge to Action Hub'** at the Centre to connect EBPs, OPEN, the 'Common Elements Approach', and other research-to-practice activities – to build sector knowledge of what works, when, and in what circumstances with children, young people and families.

References

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- ⁴ Ibid.
- ⁵ Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, (2018) *Data tables: child protection Australia 2016–17*, Child welfare series no. 68 cat no. CWS 63, AIHW, Canberra.
- ⁶ Ibid.
- ⁷ Rosier, K. & McDonald, M. (2011) Promoting positive education and care transitions for children, Australian Institute of Family Studies.
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- ¹⁰ Ibid.