



**Victorian Budget
Submission**

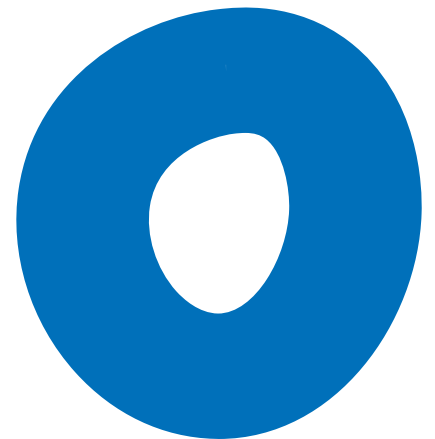
March 2021

About the Centre for Excellence in Child and Family Welfare

The Centre for Excellence in Child and Family Welfare (the Centre) is the peak body for child and family services in Victoria, representing more than 150 community service organisations, students and individuals. The Centre advocates 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. Our vision is to see a community that is fair, equitable and creates opportunities for children and their families to live happy and healthy lives.

Acknowledgement of Country

The Centre acknowledges and pays respect to past and present traditional custodians and Elders of this country on which we work. The Centre also acknowledges the injustices and trauma suffered as a result of European settlement, the Stolen Generations, and other policies such as the forced removal of children from their families, communities, culture and land. We respect the resilience of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community in the face of this trauma and respect their right to, and aspiration for, self-determination and empowerment.



Victorian Budget Submission

The Centre envisions a Victoria in which children's rights to grow up healthy and connected to family, community and culture are fully realised, and their parents are adequately supported in their primary responsibility of raising children. To realise these rights, we need to invest in the capacity of our families and communities, and in the child and family service sector.

During COVID-19, when clients were confined to their immediate local area, the concept of local community became even more important. Child and family service organisations play a critical role in building a sense of place and community that was readily apparent during COVID-19; connecting people, increasing familiarity with local services, understanding and responding to local strengths and challenges, and operating in place-based ways to deliver tailored services. A key example of this is the new Family Preservation and Reunification initiative, which highlights the importance of working with local families in intensive ways, drawing on strong local alliances and referral pathways. Our workforce is more valuable than ever to the wellbeing of our communities as we enter this second year of uncertainty and begin our recovery journey.

We welcomed investment of around \$1 billion over four years for measures included in the November 2020 budget, in particular:

- Intensive Family Preservation and Reunification Response
- Maintaining the capacity of the children and families system
- Better Futures: Home Stretch
- Reforming care services
- Service delivery fund for Aboriginal Community Controlled Organisations and Aboriginal Community Controlled Health Organisations.

Many critical programs received funding for four years, which is welcome, but we cannot afford for families to miss out in the future. These foundational programs must receive ongoing funding to ensure needed services are available and delivered consistently by staff with secure employment.

While these investments primarily targeted the statutory end of the system, now is the time to invest in earlier intervention by building existing capacity in this space.

There is undoubtedly significant and enduring demand for services for children and families. Parallel to that, the sustainability of the child, youth and families sector is of deep concern. The Centre has undertaken some key pieces of work in 2020 and 2021 that signify this very clearly. Structural change to the funding model for child and family services, particularly for out-of-home care, is needed to address the longer-term financial sustainability issues facing the not-for-profit sector. This is a critical moment in time, and we cannot afford not to act.

Our budget submission will make the case for these investments and identify some key gaps in the previous budget across five key areas:

- Strengthening the child and family services sector
- Supporting self-determination for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities

- Ensuring Victoria is the best place for children to live and grow
- Supporting responsive relationships and strong families
- Achieving equity for children and young people in out-of-home care.

We thank our organisational members for their assistance in preparing this submission. There are always a multitude of funding opportunities to improve outcomes for children and families. While we cannot include them all in this submission, we wish to draw attention to the following asks for the 2021-22 budget which have been identified as the most critical for our sector and improving child and family wellbeing. In this budget, we call on the Victorian Government to:

- Increase funding to family services by 25 per cent to prevent families from missing out on crucial support (see page 5)
- Urgently fund increased EFT for ChildFIRST in high demand areas, or provide Orange Door resources now, to enable adequate responses to L17 and police wellbeing referrals (see page 10)
- Strengthen our early intervention response by delivering evidence-based programs to an additional 600 families (see pages 5-6)
- Fund all residential care homes at the therapeutic unit price (see page 17)
- Fully fund the implementation of the new Youth Justice legislation, and amendments to the *Children, Youth and Families Act 2005 (Vic)* (see pages 7-8).

Strengthening the child and family services sector

Funding demand for family services

There have been numerous reports and inquiries examining Victoria's child protection system and drawing attention to significant failings, with the clear and common theme of a system under increasing pressure, where often the basic needs of children and young people are not being met.

Child protection funding has not kept pace with demand. Although notifications, investigations and substantiations have tripled between 2008-09 and 2017-18, there has only been a 73 per cent increase in funding.¹ Over the same period, Victoria has invested about 25 per cent less than the Australian average per child in care.²

The majority of the funding allocated to the child protection system is being spent on more child protection workers and residential care, and not on preventing children and young people from entering the care system in the first place. The Victorian Government is commended for significantly increasing the size of the child protection workforce however, while addressing the immediate pressures on the child protection workforce is important, this investment does not address the drivers of demand.

We need to focus our investment and system response much earlier, when families first show signs of stress, and when a child is returned following statutory intervention. This means helping families through funding for supported playgroups, embedding family services workers in primary and secondary schools, and embedding Maternal and Child Health Nurses (MCH) within Community Services Organisations and Aboriginal Community Controlled Organisations. Providing multiple entry points to services, including self-referral, is crucial to facilitate engagement. The Victorian Government must urgently commence demand modelling for family services to arrive at a proxy indicator of the number of families that need support and are missing out. This information must then translate into increased funding for family services to meet this demand, in both intake and service delivery.

While this work is underway, we call on the Victorian Government to support families to keep children safe and at home by increasing funding to family services by 25 per cent.

Continued investment in early intervention

Thanks to the advocacy of the sector, we have seen a significant cultural shift in Victoria, with child and family services having a stronger focus on effective implementation of evidence-based programs and evidence-informed practices. These programs support children and families experiencing vulnerability by intervening at key points across the system to prevent children entering or re-entering care.³ They also serve to build connections across service systems, through joined-up initiatives between departments who then work together to deliver effective support to known children and families, particularly to 'crossover kids' involved in both child protection and youth justice. Our sector has received a down-payment on these evidence-based programs, and now we need ongoing funds to maintain and build on the great work that has been started.

In November 2019, the Centre and Berry Street asked Social Ventures Australia (SVA) to conduct

1 Commission for Children and Young People (CCYP) 2019, ['In our own words': systemic inquiry into the lived experience of children and young people in the Victorian out-of-home care system](#), CCYP, Melbourne, p. 20.

2 Ibid.

3 Social Ventures Australia (SVA) Consulting 2019, [The economic case for early intervention in the child protection and out-of-home care system in Victoria](#), SVA Consulting, Melbourne.

financial modelling to examine the impact of greater investment in early intervention programs.⁴ This analysis was updated in August 2020 and found that investing approximately \$193 million every year over ten years would deliver cumulative net savings of \$1.99 billion to the child protection and care system alone. Most importantly, SVA estimated that up to 1,460 children could be prevented from entering out-of-home care or progressing to residential care during this ten-year period.⁵ These evidence-based programs also prevent entry (or re-entry) into the Youth Justice System.

We call on the Victorian Government to deliver evidence-based programs to an additional 600 families and provide ongoing recurrent funding for these programs.

Ensuring the sustainability of the sector post-COVID

The child and family services sector has been invaluable throughout these difficult times and will be critical to our successful social recovery. Our sector must be supported and properly resourced to continue our work in the face of the current crisis, and throughout emerging and future social and environmental challenges. Our sector must be strong enough to respond to whatever comes our way so that children and their families are never left behind.

This means funding dedicated roles to support the sector to implement key reforms without drawing existing resources away from service delivery. Implementation Lead roles must be established to lead significant sector change such as MARAM, the Best Interest Case Practice Model, evidence-informed practice, and Common Elements. This could include staff coaching and mentoring to ensure the workforce are confidently applying new practices.

It is often the case that services are not distributed geographically according to population and demand, and the locations of services are not sufficiently monitored. This has resulted in access to vital services becoming a lottery based on where a family resides.



Source: Cube Group Response to recovery Tri-Peaks Project webinar presentation - June 2020

The graph above shows the multiple waves our sector is facing due to COVID-19. It is the Centre's assessment that the sector is currently managing the demands of service delivery across the first

4 SVA Consulting 2019

5 Social Ventures Australia (SVA) Consulting 2020, [Keeping families together through COVID-19: The strengthened case for early intervention in Victoria's child protection and out-of-home care system](#), SVA Consulting, Melbourne.

three waves. We know that prior to the pandemic, the complexity of needs facing families at risk of entering, or already involved in the child protection system had increased. Our members tell us that this complexity has escalated even more due to the challenges resulting from the pandemic. Throughout 2020, the child and family services sector mobilised quickly to help families navigate the pandemic. For many families it was community-based organisations that continued to work with them and monitor child safety risks when universal services like schools had shifted to remote delivery.

The Centre is concerned about the long-term impact of loss of employment, such as poverty, disrupted schooling, and insecure work on families already facing challenges as Victoria moves into the fourth wave. The child and family services system needs to be adequately resourced to assist families to address risk factors before they reach crisis point and enter the child protection system.

We must support our child and family services workers and ensure they are appropriately qualified and skilled, and our organisations are well-resourced and effective no matter where they are in the state. The Centre calls on government to fund a sustainable child and family services sector. This means pricing of state-funded child and family services where they are needed and against the actual cost to deliver. This includes providing fair indexation, the ability to meet costs of CPI and superannuation increases, allowing space for innovation, and ensuring funding keeps pace with demand.

Implementation of legislative changes

The separation of the *Children, Youth and Families Act 2005 (Vic)* into two separate Acts will require funding for implementation. We know that ‘crossover kids’, involved in both the child protection and youth justice systems, will be most impacted by this change. We have also seen South Sudanese young people incarcerated at alarmingly high rates, making up 30 per cent of the youth justice population in Victoria, a growth rate of 410 per cent. We must ensure that legislative changes will see significant reductions in incarceration for these overrepresented groups.

Amendments must build on the current legislative framework to improve outcomes for children and provide mechanisms to work with families to keep children and young people out of care and the justice system.

A key mechanism to reduce the number of children entering the child protection system is family group conferencing. Family group conferencing must be available where and when it is needed, rather than rationed to a small number of families. Community service organisations can play a significant role in an expansion of family group conferencing and should be funded to manage the service in a community setting.

There is a real opportunity to build on the experiences of Aboriginal Community Controlled Organisations in the transfer of authority from the state to the community pursuant to section 18 of the current legislation. The child and family services sector sees an opportunity for significant reform if this authority is extended to include mainstream organisations. The transition to community-based management of children and young people on child protection orders must be fully funded.

The new Youth Justice Act must be responsive to what is happening in the community. It should provide mechanisms for community responses to emerging issues and cohorts of young people entering the criminal legal system. The implementation of the new legislation must be fully funded and include funding for community-led crime prevention programs and evidence-based early intervention programs that work to keep children safe in community and divert them from

both statutory child protection and the criminal legal system.

Building service capability through data sharing

The Victorian Government must commit to transparent, timely, and ongoing availability of its linked data work for the child and family services sector. Linked administrative data supports the sector, practitioners, researchers and policymakers in their collective objective of improving outcomes for children, young people and families. Furthermore, data enables the identification of preventive opportunities for policy and service delivery, informs program evaluation, and the best allocation of funding. The Centre recommends that the Department of Families, Fairness and Housing (DFFH) share the child protection linked data work undertaken by the former Department of Health and Human Services with the sector and commit to timely and transparent sharing of its future linked data work. This will enable the sector to work in partnership with the Victorian Government to drive improvements in service delivery and outcomes.

Support for the child and family services workforce

The Centre is currently in the process of updating the *Child and Family Services Industry Plan* which identifies a wide range of workforce challenges experienced by the sector. Key measures that would assist in building capability, resilience and sustainability are described below.

- **Building strong leadership capability**

The Centre has developed plans for an entity that could meet sector needs for leadership capacity building by offering training, coaching and mentoring, and delivering a range of initiatives. To support the early establishment of the entity and to deliver key activities including CEO for a Day, a CEO Study Tour, and a masterclass with recognised leaders, funding for a dedicated full-time role will be required.

- **Increasing opportunities for students to enter our workforce**

Although our sector is already facing significant recruitment and retention challenges, and demand for child and family services continues to grow. We need a strong and consistent pipeline of new workers entering our workforce. A paid student internship program is a key strategy to address this need and would require funding for the recruitment of a dedicated full-time student placement coordinator, based at the Centre, who would build strong connections between training institutions and the sector. Paid internships are necessary to encourage a wide range of potential employees.

- **Extending the Outcomes, Practice, Evidence Network (OPEN)**

Strengthening our workforce can be facilitated by building on the momentum of the sector-led journey of the Outcomes, Practice, Evidence Network (OPEN). OPEN functions in part as an evidence centre, that ‘curates and mobilises a high-quality evidence base of research, data and evaluations to help practitioners, policymakers and others to achieve their objectives’.⁶

OPEN has expanded its reach to over 1500 individual subscribers from across community service organisations, universities, government and other sectors. There is now a better understanding of the importance of evidence in informing decisions about policy, programs and practice to improve client outcomes. OPEN has built a strong understanding of what works, and an extension

6 Bazalgette, L 2020, *A practical guide for establishing an evidence centre*, Alliance for Useful Evidence, London.

of the scope, potential and activities of OPEN, which if supported by additional funds would enable this knowledge to be taken into practice. A sustainable expansion of OPEN that would continue to deliver and build strong outcomes for the sector would require investment of \$5.3 million over three years.

- **Supporting cross-sector collaboration - Extending and embedding the Tri-Peaks Project**

The Tri-Peaks Project is a collaboration between three peak bodies, the Centre, the Victorian Healthcare Association (VHA) and the Victorian Alcohol and Drug Association (VAADA). This project aims to support and promote good governance and integrated practices for common clients across the child and family, alcohol and other drug and community health sectors (i.e., the three sectors). The Tri-Peaks Project delivers a structured approach to supporting continuous improvement in governance and a shared understanding of the services, role and pathways across the three sectors, to support workforce development and improvement in integrated, safe, effective, and person-centred services. This includes a learning, development and knowledge building webinar series and a formal mentor program for board members, CEOs, executive and managers across the three sectors. The Tri-Peaks Project also provides DFFH and the Department of Health a forum to engage with the three sectors on key policy objectives and implementation strategies.

Supporting self-determination for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities

The Centre is committed to the principles of self-determination and self-management, through Aboriginal Children in Aboriginal Care (ACAC), Wungurilwil Gapgapduir: Aboriginal Children and Families Agreement and participation in the Aboriginal Children's Forum. The Centre supports more funding and a stronger role for Aboriginal Community Controlled Organisations (ACCOs) in the design and delivery of local services and supports that are culturally responsive and safe, as this is known to improve outcomes for Aboriginal children and families. We support calls from our Aboriginal colleagues for a fair share of funding for Aboriginal-led early childhood education and care and early intervention. The Centre also calls on the Victorian Government to provide funding for Integrated Family Services and the Orange Door to develop cultural support plans as per legislative requirements.

Ensuring Victoria is the best place for children to live and grow

Access to the benefits of early childhood education and care

Despite being among those in greatest need, only 38 per cent of children known to child protection access 3-year-old kinder. A key reason for this low level of access is the cost of transport, particularly in regional and rural Victoria.

Improving equitable access to the benefits of early childhood education and care for children experiencing vulnerability during this critical development stage can be facilitated through the extension of the school student transport allowance to kindergarten children so that their families and carers receive the financial support they need to overcome this barrier. This will build on previous investment for the progressive roll-out of kinder for every 3-year-old.

The Centre would like to work alongside the Department of Education and Training to identify further initiatives to address access gaps.

Responding to family violence experienced by children

The Centre commends the Victorian Government for its commitment to implement all the recommendations of the Royal Commission into Family Violence. A key gap identified by the Royal Commission is recognition across all service systems that children are victims of family violence in their own right and therefore require a targeted service response.

Managing family violence risk is a core part of family work. Our members tell us that a dramatic increase in L17 and police wellbeing referrals into Child FIRST over the past year, particularly in three areas across the state that have not yet transitioned to the Orange Door, is resulting in significant system pressure. This means that many children and their families are missing out. The government needs to work with the sector to narrow the gap between capacity and demand, and urgently fund increased EFT for Child FIRST in high demand areas or consider providing Orange Door resources now rather than wait for the rollout to be finalised. The Centre would like to investigate this emerging trend and work with government to develop solutions to meet the current funding gap.

Dedicated services for children who have experienced trauma and removal from family

While most children and young people in care reunite with their family as soon as safely possible, we know that the experience of removal can have a lifelong impact. Removal interrupts a child's connections to family, community, culture and education, all of which are vital to their wellbeing, health and development.

There is a dearth of services targeted specifically to children with a removal or trauma experience. Specialised counselling must be funded and made widely available to meet the needs of these children.

Raise the age of criminal responsibility

In Victoria, children as young as 10 years old can be charged with a crime and sent to prison. Young children are being criminalised and imprisoned for actions they are not developmentally able to comprehend and for adverse experiences outside their control. The evidence is clear that locking up children does far more harm than good. The Centre continues to call on the Victorian Government to raise the age of criminal responsibility to at least 14 years of age.

Expanding targeted investments in programs that are known to work can support this policy shift and is needed to ensure that children under 14 years of age receive the support they need to stay out of the justice system.

The \$1748 per day that Victoria spends for each child and young person in prison would be better spent on interventions that work such as Functional Family Therapy – Youth Justice (FFT-YJ) and Multisystemic Therapy (MST). Many programs exist that effectively support children under 14 to reduce criminal behaviour and contact with the justice system.

Government and service providers have been working hard to provide alternative solutions and have succeeded in reducing the number of young children in prison in Victoria, demonstrating that it is possible to support these children without resorting to imprisonment. If prison is removed as the default response, this process will only become faster and easier, without the risk of children falling through the gaps.

The health of children and young people in regional areas

Access to specialists such as paediatricians and psychologists becomes increasingly difficult the more remote the area. Recruitment and retention of specialists in such areas is notoriously challenging, and our members report that wait lists for a paediatrician in regional areas of Victoria can be over six months.

Recent Victorian research shows that foster and kinship carers find mental health and paediatrics to be among the most difficult of all health services to access for the children in their care.⁷ According to 2016 Department of Health data, the number of paediatricians in Victoria falls below that of several other states when compared by ratio to population.⁸ Active internship programs and training institutions located in regional towns could help address this issue. We recommend that the Victorian Government increases the number of publicly funded paediatricians in Victoria and locate the new positions in community health services, with priority given to regional and rural areas.

Children who are survivors of child sexual abuse

The Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse, Victoria's Child Safe Standards, and the Reportable Conduct Scheme have improved organisational prevention of and responses to child sexual abuse. However, we know that most child sexual abuse occurs within a family setting. Victoria is currently lacking in specialist evidence-informed programs to target the prevention of child sexual abuse in the home.

There is also a lack of specialist treatment programs for children who have been the victim of sexual abuse and no clear pathways for children to receive treatment for the abuse within the community. The Centre is calling on the government to fund research on child sexual abuse prevention and the best treatment options for children in community settings.

Children who are victims of crime

Many Victorian children have been or are currently victims of crime. While supports are offered to children through the Victims of Crime Assistance Tribunal and the Victims Support Agency, there are only limited targeted or specialist services to children who are victims of crime. Families currently need to access mainstream services for their children to receive treatment. Dedicated programs to support children who are victims of violent crime in Victoria should be developed and expanded.

The Centre would like to draw on its expertise in helping government to identify service gaps in emerging areas, articulate the needs of children who are victims of crime, including child sexual abuse, and work with our members to design appropriate and targeted service responses.

Continuing efforts to alleviate poverty for Victoria's children

Prior to the pandemic, around 198,600 Victorian children were living in poverty, and we know this figure will have increased given the financial insecurity caused by measures to reduce the spread of coronavirus.⁹ We thank the Victorian Government for efforts to mitigate these effects and to

7 McLean, K, Hiscock, H, Scott, D & Goldfeld, S 2019a, 'Foster and kinship carers' experiences of accessing health services for children and young people in out-of-home care', *Journal of Paediatrics and Child Health*, vol. 55, no. S2, pp. 15-24.

8 Department of Health 2017, *Paediatrics and child health: 2016 factsheet*, Australian Government, Canberra.

9 Tanton, R, Peel, D & Vidyattama, Y 2018, *Every suburb, every town: poverty in Victoria*, NATSEM, Canberra.

support families in need, and we recognise the value of family services brokerage in alleviating some of the acute financial struggles experienced by families. Unfortunately, the Australian Government persists with policies that trap families in poverty and compromise the wellbeing and development of children. The Centre continues to call on the Victorian Government to advocate through National Cabinet for a permanent and adequate increase to social security payments so that families can meet their basic living expenses.

Children with disability

Over the past two years, the Centre has worked with the Association for Children with Disability to train more than 2,000 child and family services practitioners in how to support families to access and navigate support from the National Disability Insurance Scheme (NDIS). This has resulted in children and families experiencing vulnerability and complex challenges accessing higher levels of support however, given the substantial and rising demand on our services we recognise that more can be done.

It is well known that NDIS outcomes are greatly influenced by education, access to resources, and capacity to navigate bureaucracies. The latest NDIS quarterly report shows that NDIS payments for children with a disability are 23 per cent higher in affluent families compared with the least advantaged.¹⁰ Without support to build their capacity, parents and carers in less advantaged families are likely to receive worse outcomes from the NDIS.

The Centre recommends that the Victorian Government fund advocates for children with disability and their families in contact with child protection to access, navigate and maintain support from the NDIS. This is a smart investment for Victoria, as the more assistance children and their families receive, the more money they are likely to secure from Commonwealth funds to meet their support needs. At a minimum, every organisation that provides integrated family services should be funded to employ a Practice Lead (disability liaison) whose role would be to assist families to navigate the NDIS and apply for the best plans for their children.

Support in the middle years

Extension of established programs that are working well in Victoria would enable earlier intervention and support for children in the middle years, generally defined as children between 8 and 14 years, before problems become entrenched. Victoria has some well-established programs focused on wellbeing, mental health and school engagement issues. However, these are predominantly targeted to high school students, despite these challenges often beginning much earlier. We recommend expansion of the Navigator program and the 'mental health professionals in secondary schools' initiative to all Victorian primary schools, and investment in programs that can support the parent-child relationship during this critical period of growth and development.

Supporting responsive relationships and strong families

Many families cannot access services that would support them to stay together, and we are seeing a drastic increase in the number of children entering out-of-home care.¹¹ This situation is expected to accelerate further because of the COVID-19 pandemic. Recent modelling indicates that without increased investment in early intervention, the number of children in care could potentially increase to around 27,500 over the next five years as a result of the pressures arising

¹⁰ National Disability Insurance Scheme (NDIS) 2021, Stay informed with the CEO, 16 February, viewed 11 March 2021, <<https://www.ndis.gov.au/news/ceo/stay-informed-ceo>>.

¹¹ SVA Consulting 2019.

from COVID-19.¹²

We also recognise that many babies were born during COVID-19 at a time when there were additional barriers to support systems and limited opportunities to connect with other children.¹³ We must ensure there is capacity for outreach to these families to ensure they are connected with the support they need, because we know that infants are the largest cohort entering the care system.

The recommendations in this section are consistent with the *Roadmap for Reform: Strong Families, Safe Children* direction two ‘supporting children, young people and families in need with integrated wraparound supports and targeted early interventions’.

Preventing and responding to homelessness

The Centre recently welcomed the final report of the Legislative Council Legal and Social Issues Committee’s *Inquiry into homelessness in Victoria*. We know that children’s safety, development and wellbeing are at risk when families do not have a stable place to live.

The needs and experiences of children must be recognised and responded to in all of our service systems, with dedicated resources, training and support to enable this. We call on the Victorian Government to commit to implementing the recommendations of the inquiry, in particular the provision of additional funding for early intervention services for young people experiencing family conflict. We look forward to working more closely with the housing and homelessness sector to deliver the best possible outcomes for children and families.

Expanding family services to school settings

During COVID-19, greater collaboration was evident with CSOs working across sectors and workforces. Child and family service workers engaged with local schools to make sure children’s social and learning needs were being met and that families had the technology for their child to engage in learning.

Services can support families to meet the challenges of raising children by connecting with them where they are. Our schools and family services organisations will achieve the best results if they work together to support child wellbeing.

We recommend that the Victorian Government fund positions for family services practitioners in all Victorian public schools, with an urgent rollout to schools where there are high numbers of children with complex needs and high rates of child protection reports. Co-location would enable schools and family services to identify emerging vulnerabilities within families and could facilitate holistic supports to families while also providing a soft entry point for more intensive services as needed.

LGBTIQ+ children and families

Our vision is for a society in which LGBTIQ+ Victorians and their families are safe, equal, and enjoy the benefits of full economic, educational and community participation. To best support

¹² SVA Consulting 2020. This figure is based on the rate of Victorian children in out-of-home care increasing 20 per cent above projected figures in FY21 to FY25, then continuing to grow at the historical rate of 8 per cent per year.

¹³ Bhopal, S & Fearon, P 2021, ‘Pandemic babies: how COVID-19 has affected child development’, *The Conversation*, 10 March, viewed 11 March 2021, <<https://theconversation.com/pandemic-babies-how-covid-19-has-affected-child-development-155903>>.

LGBTIQ+ children and their families, investment is needed in community-controlled services. We call on the Victorian Government to support and sustainably fund the LGBTIQ+ sector to enable service provision to LGBTIQ+ Victorians across the state, in parallel to efforts that build the inclusive capacity and knowledge of mainstream sectors.

We also need adequate support for families to be able to understand their LGBTIQ+ children and must ensure that LGBTIQ+ children in out-of-home care are placed in affirming environments with carers that are not only accepting but can fully support children and young people's identity and development.

Culturally and linguistically diverse families

People from culturally diverse, migrant and refugee backgrounds often experience significant barriers to the support and services they need, and their experiences and challenges remain largely invisible in mainstream discussions. Existing service systems are not adequately tailored or nuanced to recognise or respond to the needs of these families.

We must give renewed attention to how cultural diversity impacts on how families experience, understand and access family services and related service systems. Key steps include promoting cultural awareness, addressing intersectionality, capturing lived experiences, building evidence, developing family-centred approaches, and strengthening capacity to address the challenges faced by culturally diverse communities.

The Victorian Government can strengthen responses to culturally and linguistically diverse families by investing in the capacity of child and family services to provide culturally safe services through cultural awareness capacity building, funding of Practice Lead (CALD) positions in key areas of need, and recruitment of a pool of bi-cultural and bilingual workers.

Support for children and families experiencing alcohol and other drug dependency

Many parents in Victoria are currently struggling to access services to address their alcohol and other drug (AOD) dependency. This is because of long waiting times for services, a lack of services most particularly in rural and regional areas and limited family-friendly facilities. Many families are unable to access vital support services. For example, refugees experiencing family violence have difficulty accessing services, because of co-existing AOD dependency.

Our members tell us that this is resulting in children entering the care system, who might otherwise have been able to remain with their families. The Centre supports calls for increased AOD services, and for parents with AOD issues in contact with the child protection system to be able to access the assistance they need in a timely manner.

Supporting good mental health and wellbeing

The Centre recently welcomed the final report of the Royal Commission into Victoria's Mental Health System, and in particular, the focus on redesigning the mental health system to deliver a rights-based approach to service delivery, as well as recommendations to address prevention and mental health promotion for infants, children and new parents.

With parental mental health a key driver of entry into care, it is critical that we consider how infants, children and families, particularly those in contact with the child protection system, will be supported by the mental health system and connected service systems moving forward. We are concerned at the absence of recommendations specifically targeting children and their families at risk of entering and involved in the child protection system to address the rising

number of children entering out-of-home care.

The Centre looks forward to working with the Victorian Government and other stakeholders to build stronger connections between child and family services and the mental health system to ensure that children and families experiencing vulnerability and disadvantage do not miss out and do receive full access to the benefits of a reformed mental health system.

Addressing adolescent violence in the home

Young people using violence against family members is a complex area of practice, and one where service responses are lagging behind. The Centre has been working to better understand the nature of adolescent violence in the home and the approaches that work. Recent data collected by the Centre identified a lack of services for children aged between 8 and 12 years, when violence might be starting to manifest against family members, and a lack of rigorously evaluated programs targeting adolescents in the home. We recommend that the Victorian Government invest in the development of new services for this young cohort, and the evaluation of new and existing programs to continue building the evidence-base.

Achieving equity for children and young people in out-of-home care

As a society, we expect outcomes for children in care to be better than if they had remained at home, yet too often this is not the case. Too many children in our care system experience multiple placements, struggle to engage in education, have poor health outcomes, are victims of crime, and enter the criminal legal system at a young age. Many young people exit the care system into homelessness. We can and must do better.

The recommendations in this section are consistent with the *Roadmap for Reform: Strong Families, Safe Children* direction three ‘strengthening home-based care and improving outcomes for children and young people in out-of-home care’.

The health of children and young people in out-of-home care

Children living in the care system are known to have higher rates of physical, mental and developmental health needs than the general population.¹⁴ It is critically important that all children in out-of-home care have opportunities for early identification of health and developmental needs for their wellbeing and future outcomes, to prevent disengagement from school, and to disrupt a potential trajectory into the justice system. The *National Standards for out of home care* require that ‘children and young people have their physical, developmental, psychosocial and mental health needs assessed and attended to in a timely way’. While the *National Clinical Assessment Framework* requires an initial health check within 30 days of the child entering care and a comprehensive assessment within three months,¹⁵ data shows that these standards are not being achieved for Victorian children in out-of-home care.¹⁶

In Victoria, around 250 children have access to comprehensive health assessments through

14 McLean, K, Little, K Hiscock, H, Scott, D & Goldfeld, S 2019b, ‘Health needs and timeliness of assessment of Victorian children entering out-of-home care: an audit of a multidisciplinary assessment clinic’, *Journal of Paediatrics and Child Health*, vol. 55, no. 12, pp. 1470-1475.

15 Department of Families, Housing, Community Services and Indigenous Affairs & National Framework Implementation Working Group 2011, *An outline of National Standards for out-of-home care: a priority project under the National Framework for Protecting Australia’s Children 2009-2020*, Commonwealth of Australia, Canberra, p. 10.

16 McLean et al. 2019b.

Pathway to Good Health (PTGH) multi-disciplinary clinics across North and West metropolitan Melbourne and Gippsland. Research has shown that rates of attendance at paediatrician and mental health clinics increased after the introduction of PTGH compared to areas without.

Co-located health clinicians within child protection and child, youth and family service teams have been shown to facilitate more timely healthcare for highly vulnerable children and young people. These roles need to be rolled out state-wide, in partnership with the relevant local health services, so that it is no longer the 'luck of the draw' for a child entering out-of-home care as to whether their health needs will be identified and addressed.

To act as a good parent would, and ensure the health of children and young people in the care of the state, the Centre recommends that the Victorian Government:

- Amend legislation to include a requirement for health assessments and follow up services for children entering care within a set time frame
- Fund a state-wide rollout of the successful Pathway to Good Health multi-disciplinary clinics to enable the delivery of health and mental health assessments and reviews for all children and young people in out-of-home and all children known to child protection within the timelines agreed to in the *National Standards for out of home care*; and
- Expand the co-location of health clinicians within child protection and child, youth and family service teams state-wide.

The lived experience of children and young people

In 2019, the Centre designed the Young Leaders Collective. This was in response to an identified need in both the Centre and the sector for young people with lived experience of out-of-home care to be meaningfully included in projects, events, policy discussions, consultations and day-to-day work.

Our Young Leaders have told us they want to be embedded in our work – both at the Centre and across the child and family services sector. As an organisation and a peak body, we are working to co-design a transformative model that focuses on working with and for young people. In the social recovery period post-COVID, it is more important than ever that we hear the voices of our children and young people and act on their ideas and solutions.

As part of the Working for Victoria program the Centre has employed three Youth Engagement Facilitators. These positions are funded to run until the end of June 2021. The Centre advocates for small teams of youth engagement facilitators to be funded in relevant peak bodies such as the Centre. This is a key requirement of the Child Safe Standards and the National Child Safe Principles.

The Voice of Parents

The Voice of Parents project, a two-year project led by the Centre and supported by Gandel Philanthropy and Equity Trustees - The Arthur Gordon Oldham Charitable Trust, is developing an evidence and lived experience-informed systemic approach to parental participation, working directly with parent consultants who have had child protection contact.

The project is currently funded to the end of 2021 to deliver the model and resources. However a consistent, scalable, system-wide approach to embedding parental participation in development, design and delivery of child and family services for those parents with child protection contact

will require ongoing commitment. A full-time position and funding to engage an ongoing Parent Advisory Group at the Centre will support a systemic approach to parental participation, improving outcomes for Victorian children and families.

Fairness for our carers

Home-based carers go above and beyond to provide homes for children who are unable to live with their birth parents. In 2017, the Victorian Ombudsman identified significant concerns regarding the financial assistance provided to kinship carers, with 96.8 per cent of kinship carers receiving the lowest level of care allowance.¹⁷ Renumerating carers based on the needs of the child they care for regardless of the placement type is only fair and would ensure both children and carers are not unduly disadvantaged. We recommend that the Victorian Government commit to and fund equity of care allowances, brokerage, and client expenses across home-based placements.

Equity for all children in residential care

Children in residential care often present with histories of trauma, challenging behaviours, emotional and social difficulties and complex mental health needs. Traumatic experiences can have a profound impact on a child's psychosocial, cognitive and psychological development.

Providers of residential care are significantly underfunded to provide an adequate residential care service. We know that significant and enduring operating deficits are apparent across all out-of-home care programs in Victoria. Residential care is the principal contributor to the operating deficits. These operating deficits are structural in nature and a result of significant underfunding. All residential care units must be funded to meet the true cost of service delivery.

At minimum, all residential care homes must be funded at the therapeutic unit price. At present, only 40 per cent of residential care placements are funded at the therapeutic level. This means they receive an additional \$400,000 in annual funding. We know that there is no difference in the therapeutic care needs of all children in residential care; it is not fair that some children and young people receive additional support while the majority do not.

Preventing the criminalisation of children in residential care

The *Framework to reduce the criminalisation of young people in residential care* ('the Framework') was released in February 2020 and includes an intent to develop an 18-month action plan. This action plan is currently being developed. For the Framework to be effective in reducing the number of children and young people in residential care who have contact with the criminal legal system, successful implementation is a priority. This means making sure that every child and young person in residential care has a comprehensive behaviour support plan, and residential care providers must receive adequate funding to implement the framework, including funding to attend local governance alliances and conduct data collection and analysis.

Expanding Raising Expectations state-wide

A recent report from the Commission for Children and Young People (CCYP) found that most care leavers did not have supports in place to help them engage in further education, training or employment after they leave care.¹⁸ Even with recent policy changes to benefit current care leavers, there remain significant challenges for young people leaving care and people who have

¹⁷ Victorian Ombudsman 2017, [Investigation into the financial support provided to kinship carers](#), *Victorian Ombudsman*, Melbourne.

¹⁸ Commission for Children and Young People (CCYP) 2020, [Keep caring: systemic inquiry into services for young people transitioning from out-of-home care](#), CCYP, Melbourne.

left care when it comes to engagement in tertiary education; an issue with implications for their future life outcomes.

Raising Expectations provides a unique platform for government, universities, TAFEs and the community sector to work together to improve access, provide dedicated support and enable successful completion of vocational and/or higher education study for individuals who have been in care.

The model has contributed to tangible improvements in the education and life opportunities for individuals who have been in care, seeing the number of care leavers enrolled in further or higher education rise to 366 students across three institutions in 2020 (or by over 800 per cent since the program started five years ago). Scaling up this proven model across the state would reach more care leavers to improve their life opportunities through improved access to post-secondary education. We estimate that this would cost an additional \$800,000 over three years.

Our members

Jewish Care

Kids First

Good Shepherd Australia New Zealand

Cohealth

The Salvation Army SalvoCare Eastern

Lighthouse Foundation

Relationships Australia

TaskForce Community Agency

CareChoice (Aust) Pty Ltd

Bethany Community Support

Colac Area Health

Camcare

Brophy Family & Youth Services Inc -
Warrnambool

Youth Support and Advocacy Service
(YSAS) - Fitzroy

Windermere Child & Family Services Inc.

Safe Steps

Family Access Network Inc

Moira Inc

Kara House

Concern Australia

Baptcare

Rumbalara Family Services

Jesuit Social Services

Christian Brethren Community Care Ltd T/A
Temcare

City of Melbourne

Drummond Street Services

City of Yarra

Victorian Aboriginal Community Controlled
Health Organisation Inc. (VACCHO)

Aruma (formerly E. W. Tipping Foundation/
House with No Steps)

Victoria Legal Aid

Oz Child: Children Australia Inc

Odyssey House Victoria

Junction Support Services Inc.

Make A Difference Dingley Village Inc.

CatholicCare

Kyabram Community & Learning Centre

Key Assets

Mallee Family Care

Relationship Matters

The Bridge Youth Service

CatholicCare Sandhurst (formerly
CentaCare Sandhurst)

Brotherhood of St Laurence

The Reach Foundation

Eastern Domestic Violence Service
(EDVOS)

Anglicare Victoria

Quantum Support Services Inc

Gippsland Lakes Community Health

Permanent Care and Adoptive Families

MacKillop Family Services - Head Office

Barwon Child, Youth & Family

IPC Health

Australian Childhood Trauma Group

Tweddle Child and Family Health Service

Berry Street - Richmond

UnitingCare Victoria and Tasmania

The Alannah and Madeline Foundation

ONCALL Personnel and Training

VICSEG New Futures

Bendigo Community Health Services

Cobaw Community Health Service

Life Without Barriers
Zoe Support Australia
Save the Children Australia
Mirabel Foundation Inc
Upper Murray Family Care
Thorne Harbour Health
EACH Social and Community Health
City of Darebin
City of Port Phillip - Family and Children's Services
VANISH Inc.
Victorian Association for the Care and Resettlement of Offenders (VACRO)
Child and Family Services Ballarat
Moonee Valley City Council - Family and Children's Services
Community Living and Respite Services (CLRS)
FamilyCare
Benalla Rural City Council
Doncare
Bubup Wilam
Melton City Council
Australian Childhood Foundation
Anchor Inc - Ringwood East
The Salvation Army Crossroads - Coburg North
Family Life
Allambi Care Ltd
No to Violence
Caroline Chisholm Society
Centacare Ballarat
QEC
Gippsland & East Gippsland Aboriginal Cooperative (GEGAC)

Subscriber members

YMCA Victoria
Council of Single Mothers and their Children
Mansfield Shire Council
Youth Affairs Council of Victoria (YACVic)
Allah Muhammad Ali Fatima Hassan Hussain Federation
Catholic Social Services
Federation of Community Legal Centres (FCLC)
Inner Eastern Local Learning & Employment Network
The Pyjama Foundation
Gunditjmara Aboriginal Cooperative
Playgroup Victoria
Kids Under Cover
Settlement Services International
Ability Assist

