

Amplifying the voices of Victorian children, young people, and families.



Acknowledgement of Country

The Centre would like to acknowledge and pay respect to the past, present, and emerging 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.

Introduction

The Centre for Excellence in Child and Family Welfare, the peak body for child and family services in Victoria, calls on all political parties and candidates contesting the 2022 State Election to commit to reducing the prevalence and impact of child maltreatment and promoting safe and supportive environments for all children, young people and their families.

Victoria has seen a wide range of reforms in recent years, aimed at preventing family violence, improving mental health and wellbeing, supporting the realisation of Aboriginal self-determination, and delivering innovative programs and approaches that draw on the best available evidence – from research, practice expertise and service user perspectives – to address complex problems.

During the past three years of a global pandemic, Victoria's child and family services have worked tirelessly to maintain critically important services for the most vulnerable

members of our community. Our colleagues in Aboriginal Community Controlled Organisations (ACCOs) have continued to deliver integrated, whole-of-family services, despite being under-resourced in comparison with mainstream organisations.

Sector sustainability remains an important issue and it is critical that services have the capacity to respond to the flow-on effects of the pandemic, by embedding indexation and CPI and superannuation increases, guaranteeing that funding keeps pace with demand, and ensuring remaining lapsing funding in family services is continued.

While there is much to celebrate in relation to our sector's achievements in the midst of ongoing COVID-19 uncertainty, a dynamic reform environment, and growing demands for timely access to high quality service provision regardless of location, there is also still much work to be done.

The Centre has identified several key policy areas which an incoming state government will need to address as a priority if Victoria is to reduce the risk factors for child maltreatment, keep families together, and develop strong localised responses to support vulnerable community members.

Recently, the Centre embarked on a Connecting Communities regional tour to hear from hundreds of people working with children and families in local communities. Our Election Statement, which draws on our community consultations and other data gathering, outlines an eight-point plan which we are asking an incoming Victorian government to commit to and invest in.

1. Give rural and regional Victorians timely access to high-quality services
2. Help children, young people and their families to thrive
3. Support our most vulnerable children and young people
4. Support children and young people in care
5. Support our carers
6. Support our workers to be the best they can be
7. Listening to what service users tell us about what they want and need
8. Establish family services as the entry point to the broader service system intersecting with children and families



Pictured: The Centre's Connecting Communities Regional Tour in Geelong, August 2022

Give regional and rural Victorians timely access to high quality services

Victoria has many examples of local communities in regional and rural areas working closely together to provide a wide range of high quality services to help improve the lives of vulnerable children, young people and families. Many of these are place-based, drawing on local expertise and networks to provide integrated and tailored support.


However, too many people outside metropolitan areas miss out on the services they need because of where they live. Of Victoria's 40 most vulnerable communities, 25 are located outside of Greater Melbourne. One of the most common forms of disadvantage faced by these families is poverty.

Service access in regional and rural Victoria remains a persistent challenge for our sector. Our Connecting Communities tour highlighted the shortage of affordable, safe housing and mental health challenges as critical gaps in service provision, affecting workers and clients alike but with a particularly significant impact on young people.

One of the strongest themes to emerge from our engagement with regional communities was the shortage of affordable, safe housing which affects people of all ages, and clients and workers.

We ask that the incoming government commits to:

- Creating consistent and reliable transport options in rural and regional areas to make sure children, young people, and their families have better access to basic services.
- Providing proportional investment in regional and rural areas by considering the implications of population, demand, and geographic distribution of service delivery.
- Increasing the number of publicly funded paediatricians and child psychologists in Victoria and locating the new positions in community health services with priority given to regional and rural areas.
- Increasing investment in innovative and low-cost housing solutions to provide stable and safe accommodation to the most vulnerable cohorts in local communities.
- Resourcing ACCOs proportionately so they can continue to deliver a full suite of services to local Aboriginal families in regional communities as a viable option to mainstream services in these areas.
- Continuing to lobby the federal government to review welfare policies and programs to reduce the mutual obligation burden on already disadvantaged families and ensure an adequate income to thrive.



“People still have to travel to Melbourne for the care that they need. There is a lack of appropriate and accessible services in rural and regional areas”

- James Bush, Young Citizen of the Year & HEY Project Worker at Gippsland Lakes Complete Health.

Help children, young people and their families to thrive

Funding in recent state budgets has enabled child and family service providers to expand their reach and support for vulnerable children and families. Some of the reforms now being trialled and expanded are making a demonstrable difference to people's lives.

The Family Preservation and Reunification Response is an example of an evidence-informed, collaborative approach that is making a discernible difference in the lives of families with complex challenges and needs. The model aims to prevent entry into the statutory system through high quality practice guidance and coaching.

Many organisations, including ACCOs, are running successful whole-of-family programs. There are also proven and promising models that support fathers to address their violent behaviour and establish positive relationships with their children.

Child and family services in Victoria have seen a significant shift in recent years from crisis response to prevention and early intervention. An essential enabler for this reform has been the need for the sector to become a learning system, where outcomes are measured and child and family service programs and practice are continually re-evaluated and improved.

Consistent with this, the Early Intervention Investment Framework (EIIF) aims to shift the balance of government investment towards earlier intervention, focus on measurable impact (particularly for service users), reduce demand for expensive tertiary interventions, and scale up promising programs to achieve system change.

What the sector needs now is a sustained financial commitment from government to maintain the momentum of the reform programs and approaches that help children and families early, when need is evident or predicted. Such help needs to be based on robust quantitative and qualitative evidence, including clients' own perspectives on the difference a program or practice approach has made to their lives.

We ask that an incoming government commits to:

- Funding that is certain, predictable and of sufficient quantum and duration to enable implementation and embedding of proven and promising programs to keep children, young people and families safe and thriving.
- Expanding the Family Preservation and Reunification Response and supporting the dissemination of findings in relation to family outcomes to share across our sector.
- Promoting proven and promising programs that support fathers to be better parents and which work with all family members to create safe, nurturing home environments.
- Expansion of the Homes 4 Families (H4F) program to provide long-term, stable housing support for eligible families.
- Funding more youth foyers in regional and rural areas that are linked with education and training, or employment opportunities and pathways.
- Funding for more disability advocates and service continuity for children and their families who are ineligible for NDIS supports.
- Providing proportionate funding for ACCOs across all service types.

Support our most vulnerable children

Amongst the children who are most invisible in our community are those who have been sexually abused, who are victims of crime, whose parents are in prison, and who experience family violence.

The prevalence of child sexual abuse is far higher than reported by service providers, as most child sexual abuse is not reported during childhood, and is often perpetrated by a person the child trusts. Not all children are believed when they do come forward and most specialist services are aimed at adults rather than children. All professionals and workforces who come into contact with children need to have the knowledge and skills to keep children safe from sexual abuse. This includes residential care workers looking after some of the most vulnerable children in the state whose trauma backgrounds make them particularly susceptible to sexual exploitation.

The impact on child victims of crime, including of parental homicide, is under-researched with few, if any, opportunities for the voices of children to be heard. For these children, there needs to be greater recognition of the critical importance of specialist services and supports at the time of the trauma and as needed subsequently in their lives. They also need to have a say in the decisions that are made at the time of the crime regarding their future care and other arrangements.

Children with one or both parents in prison are a similarly invisible cohort in our service system, with no reliable data source on the number of children affected. These children need to be given the very best evidence-informed support to enable them to grow and thrive, and where it is in their best interests, to maintain a positive relationship with the incarcerated parent. We need to listen to what children of incarcerated parents have to say about their lives, what they want and need.

Evidence shows that children who experience family violence are at risk of poorer educational, employment, social and health outcomes than their peers. There is a lack of targeted resources to meet the specific needs of children and young people who have experienced family violence. While there is an evidence base showing short and long-term impacts on children there is still insufficient research about what children themselves say about the nature of their experiences and what would support them to heal and thrive.

We ask that an incoming government commits to:

- Establishing a small specialist hub in Victoria to provide a trusted source of evidence in relation to child sexual abuse, and to develop training and guidance to improve workforce capability in identifying, responding to and preventing child sexual abuse.
- Funding specialist approaches for children who are victims of crime which ensure they receive the necessary intensive support needed at the time of the trauma and as needed subsequently in their lives.
- Investing in the design and provision of specialist therapeutic services to support the recovery and healing of children who have been affected by family violence.



Support children and young people in care

Not all children live in safe, stable and nurturing home environments. When the state makes the decision to remove children from high risk situations, there is an obligation to make sure children are given the best possible care environment in which to thrive.

There is evidence to show that the physical, developmental, psychosocial and mental health needs of children and young people in care are higher than the general same-aged population and that fewer young people who have been in care go on to study at university compared with their peers.

Supporting children and young people in care means providing timely and regular access to appropriate mental, physical and dental checks; making sure they have access to specialists when needed; prioritising children's educational aspirations, engagement and achievements; and supporting connection to culture and community. It also means child protection and justice workers working together to prevent children in care 'crossing over' into the criminal justice system.

Various inquiries in Victoria have shown the challenges and gaps in our care system, particularly in relation to residential care, while also highlighting some of the innovative work that our sector is doing in supporting children in care to stay engaged with learning, the health system, culture and community.

We ask that an incoming government commits to:

- Continue reforming the current system to make sure children's health, educational and cultural needs are prioritised with better monitoring of what is happening to each child in the care system and better training for professionals and carers in caring for children who have experienced and/or are experiencing trauma in their lives.
- Providing access to free medication for children in out of home care and making sure every child entering care has a comprehensive health assessment.
- Delivering a more equitable system that provides therapeutic opportunities for all children and young people placed in residential care and funding the residential care system to the level needed for this to occur.
- Investing in the professional development of workers to make sure every person working with children from 0 to school age has a sound understanding of the impact of trauma on children's development and can connect caregivers and other professionals to the appropriate services and supports as needed.
- Continuing to invest in the Raising Expectations program to provide all young people in care with the opportunity to pursue post-secondary studies at university or TAFE
- Ensuring all magistrates in the Children's Court are trained in child development, trauma, adolescent mental health, cognitive and communication difficulties, and Aboriginal cultural safety.
- Continuing to invest in the successful research collaboration between the Centre and the Centre for Community Child Health to deliver better healthcare outcomes for children in care.



Pictured: Residential care workers at Resi ROCKS 2018

“One extra mouth to feed is a lot for a vulnerable community. We need to ensure that our kinship carers have more support.”

- Shellee Strickland, CEO at GEGAC

Support our carers

Victoria's foster, kinship and permanent carers provide safe, stable, and loving homes when children are most in need of this intensive care in their lives. They must be recognised and supported to maintain the crucial safety net that they provide.

While foster and kinship carers have the potential to change children's lives for the better, they do this at some financial cost to themselves. A recent carer census found that 40 per cent of kinship carers have a yearly household income below \$40,000, with many reporting inadequate financial assistance. Many of these are grandparents and some are young carers looking after siblings or other family members with minimal financial support.

A recent Cube Consulting report, commissioned by the Centre to demonstrate the economic value of foster care in Victoria, highlighted the need for urgent government investment in more contemporary and fit-for-purpose models of foster care. Such models need to take into account the experiences and insights of foster carers, emerging models which are showing promising results in relation to retention of foster carers and increased placement stability for children in their care, the importance of culturally safe approaches consistent with Aboriginal self-determination, and the continuing reform of the child and family service sector.

There are already models that have been shown to be effective in improving carer retention and satisfaction (e.g. Treatment Foster Care Oregon, KEEP, Mockingbird) and also Aboriginal-led (e.g. VACCA's Nugel Program, which could be adapted for use by mainstream organisations seeking guardianship responsibilities).

We ask that an incoming government commits to:

- Investing in evidence-based and evidence-informed programs to build carer confidence in managing complex and challenging behaviours by children in their care and in providing culturally appropriate and holistic support for Aboriginal children in Aboriginal care.
- Increasing kinship carer re-imbursements to meet the rising cost of living and enable them to meet all the basic material and developmental needs of the children in their care.
- Increasing foster carer payments to enable children in foster care to benefit from the same educational and extra-curricular experiences available to their peers who are not in care.
- Investigating proven and promising models of home-based care which could be implemented more broadly in Victoria.
- Providing foster and kinship carers with more respite options to support sustainability of placements and provide additional tailored and intensive support for children.
- Commit to the transfer of kinship care case management from government to the sector.

Support our workers to be the best they can be

The child and family services sector is characterised by highly qualified and skilled workers who provide expert support for children, young people, and families experiencing disadvantage and vulnerability.

However, like workforces in other industries, our sector is finding it difficult to maintain an adequate supply of appropriately skilled graduates to meet the challenges of complex service delivery, particularly in regional and rural areas and as we emerge from COVID-19. The impacts of the global pandemic, particularly the demand for highly skilled and adaptable workers, and the shift to remote and technologically innovative ways of working, require service systems to rethink how to attract and retain the very best workers.

‘Earn and learn’ and/or paid internship programs, and models which seek to attract high calibre graduates from non-traditional sectors, have all shown promise. The Victorian Government’s Jobs that Matter campaign provides a whole-of-government approach to attracting much needed workers.

Providing more tailored support and training for people with lived experience of our service system could also strengthen the quality, quantity, and potentially the impact of our workforce on service users. There also needs to be a greater focus on increasing the diversity of our workforce to better reflect the diversity of service users.

We ask that an incoming government commits to:

- Examining ways to increase the number of people with lived experience working in child and family services and to appropriately resource these approaches and models.
- Resourcing targeted campaigns that focus on non-traditional graduates and workers or professionals from other allied fields to increase the diversity of the child and family services workforce.
- Investing in ‘earn and learn’ programs – such as paid internship models – that provide graduates with an income while being embedded in a host organisation, integrating classroom learning with practical application, and providing mainstream organisations and ACCOs with an opportunity to be employed by the host organisation.
- Continue investing in the Centre as the peak industry body for child and family services to design and deliver evidence-informed training that builds confidence and capability in working with children and young people across all relevant workforces.

“Workforce issues are massive in rural and regional areas. It is becoming harder and harder to recruit qualified staff”

- Cindy Pullar, Executive Director of Client Services at Quantum.



Pictured: The Centre's Connecting Communities Regional Tour 2022



Pictured: CEO Deb Tsorbaris presenting at the Connecting Communities Regional Tour 2022

Listening to what people tell us about what they want and need

If services are to be the best they can be, they need to be informed by feedback and insights from service users. We need to create meaningful opportunities for their voices to be heard and incorporated into programs and practice approaches.

While child and family services stress the importance of child-centred and child-focused approaches, and the importance of supporting child safety and wellbeing, in practice children and young people are often invisible in our service system. All children, including those who are Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander, from CALD backgrounds, in the care system, and/or living with a disability, must have a say in the decisions that affect them.

Adults whose lives intersect with the services system also need to be given meaningful opportunities to contribute to the design, implementation and evaluation of practice approaches that are intended to support them.

We ask that the government commits to:

- Promoting the meaningful inclusion of children and young people with lived experience of disadvantage in decision-making and policymaking forums and opportunities.
- Increasing investment in promising and proven approaches to engaging parents and carers in the design, delivery, and evaluation of child and family services.
- Working with the child and family services sector to develop a state-wide Client Outcomes Framework that encourages consistent, robust and culturally appropriate indicators for measuring the outcomes of program and practice approaches from the perspectives of service users.
- Supporting the work of the Outcomes, Practice and Evidence Network (OPEN), funded by government and managed by the Centre, to showcase and disseminate examples of successful client-focused outcomes programs and approaches.

“We need to do more collaborative work with the people who use our services. We need to hear about their aspirations rather than projecting our own aspirations onto them”

- David Tennant, CEO at Family Care.

Establish family services as the entry point to the broader service system intersecting with children and families

Family services are at the heart of local communities. When there is a natural disaster or public health crisis, when families are too poor to buy food or pay rent, when trauma is evident, when accommodation is scarce, when individuals struggle with substance use or mental health, when children are not developing as they should, when parents or carers need guidance or reassurance in relation to their parenting approaches, when someone with a disability is not getting the appropriate supports they need, when children or adults are victims of abuse or violence, when parents no longer feel they can manage their child's behaviour, when it is not clear who to go to for help, family services are there to support without judgement.

Family services are connectors, linking families to the most appropriate service or support needed for the particular challenges being experienced at the time. Two recent strategic papers by EY and Cube demonstrate the breadth, richness and value of family services. They highlight the role of family services at every point along the continuum of need – from preventative care and promotion of wellbeing through to protective risk management.

COVID-19 has affected many families in adverse ways. Service providers have needed to be creative in their responses. To continue to respond during a period of global uncertainty, escalating financial pressures, housing scarcity, mental health concerns, and workforce shortages, Victoria needs to resource family services to be the entry point for the broader service system to connect families, no matter how simple or complex their needs, to appropriate support at the earliest possible time.

The Child and Family Services Alliances have a clear role to play in consolidating and analysing data being captured at the local level, using this to inform planning and program implementation decisions, and sharing examples of what is working with particular cohorts of service users and why.

We ask that the government commits to:

- Expanding the Early Help Family Services pilot program in which family workers are placed in universal service settings to provide an all-inclusive approach to support the health, wellbeing, education and development of children and families.
- Resourcing family services to be the entry point to the broader service system, referring cases to the Orange Door and Child Protection as necessary, to enable more families to be identified and referred to the appropriate services earlier, regardless of complexity of need.
- Resourcing the Child and Family Services Alliances to provide more integrated responses locally to data collection, analysis and use to support practice excellence.
- Continuing to resource the building of an Aboriginal evidence base around what works for Aboriginal families and support dissemination of this evidence across workforces.

