

The Centre for Excellence in Child and Family Welfare

Victorian State Budget Submission 2023-2024



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 Centre) welcomes the opportunity to provide a prebudget submission for consideration by the newly returned Andrews Government.

The next four years represents an exciting opportunity not only to consolidate the reforms which have been implemented in previous years but also to scale up the initiatives that have shown promise, expand the reach and impact of the state's remarkable family services platform, deliver on the commitment to sweeping systemic changes in keeping with Aboriginal self-determination, and build a high quality pipeline of job ready graduates to serve the diversity of Victoria's service user needs.

In the face of significant challenges compounded by a global pandemic, natural and human-made emergencies and rising living costs, the Roadmap for Reform has provided a sound basis for this extensive reform work. In recent years, our sector has seen a wide range of reforms to benefit children, young people and families. In particular, the Centre acknowledges investment in innovative programs and approaches that draw on the best available evidence – from research, practice expertise and service user perspectives – to address complex problems. We recognise the achievements associated with major reforms in relation to prevention of family violence, improving mental health and wellbeing, and supporting the realisation of Aboriginal self-determination.

However, despite these steps forward, there is still much to be done.

Consultations with our members across the state have highlighted the critical importance of investing in the fundamentals of Victoria's service system with a particular focus on the family services platform and the out-of-home care system. The family services platform supports families at the earliest sign of need to prevent family lives progressing into extreme vulnerability and risk and is there at different points in a family's continuum of need. The out-of-home care system is critically important in supporting those children, young people and families who have experienced significant trauma and complex vulnerabilities.

In our budget submission the Centre seeks significant investment in a family services platform that can provide an easily accessed, effective, community-based, culturally safe, entry point for children and families needing early help and targeted or specialist support, and in an out-of-home care system that keeps children safe and in nurturing environments, while supporting reunification with families wherever this is possible.

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Investing in Victoria's family services platform

Victoria has a well-established and unique family services platform compared to other jurisdictions globally, with around 2,000 highly qualified and skilled professionals providing a wide range of services to a rapidly growing number of vulnerable children, young people and their families.

The 2021 census shows Victoria has around 1,058,637 families.¹ Each year, more than 155 different Community Service Organisations (CSOs) and Aboriginal Community Controlled Organisations (ACCOs) support tens of thousands of the most vulnerable families in the state.

The Centre's budget submission highlights the need for significant investment in this core resource, based on the best available evidence, to enable greater numbers of families to be supported with localised responses that prevent further harm and strengthen the capacity and capability of families to safely care for their children. This includes making sure that ACCOs are resourced to provide the holistic and whole of family services they wish to provide their communities and that families from culturally and linguistically diverse communities can engage easily with a range of culturally appropriate services that might be needed at any point in a family's life cycle.

A key reform in recent years has been the roll out of The Orange Door sites, incorporating Child FIRST. The family services platform functions as an entry point for the broader service system, referring cases into and/or receiving cases from the Orange Door and Child Protection, and from other sources including families themselves. Family services connect families to appropriate support at the earliest time but there needs to be consistent, ongoing and sufficient state government funding for our service system to meet demand.

Family Preservation and Reunification Response

The Family Preservation and Reunification Response (the Response) supports the provision of targeted, intensive and flexible support, which is available to families at any point in their service journey.² The Response is based on a model of early intervention and prevention and prioritises support to families with children who are at risk of entering, or have entered, care in the past three months.³

The Response is delivered by CSOs in partnership with ACCOs, DFFH, and the Centre for Evidence and Implementation (CEI) in a range of locations across the state. The initiative uses contemporary, evidence-informed, culturally led, and coordinated support to keep families together and support children in care to return home safely. The initiative recognises the importance of culture in protecting and strengthening Aboriginal families.

1. This includes Couples with children (775,063), One-person families (254,704) and Other families (28,870). See <https://profile.id.com.au/australia/households?WebID=110> which provides a breakdown of ABS 2021 census data for household types in Victoria.

2. The State Government of Victoria, Children Youth and Families, Family Preservation and Reunification Response, <https://providers.dffh.vic.gov.au/family-preservation-and-reunification-response>

3. Ibid.

The Response is delivered using flexible funding and there is the ability to flex up and down as needed. Response practitioners work closely with families to provide support based on the family's needs, values and preferences. For children, the Response may include a comprehensive health, learning and wellbeing assessment, individually tailored support, and facilitated access to community and place-based supports. For parents, the Response may involve step up and down support, a comprehensive, individualised child and family plan, and one-on-one family in-home and community support.

This flexibility of funding and response is a key success factor in the initiative but the Response itself needs to be funded recurrently to attract and retain staff, increase its sustainability and to better meet demand across the state.

Early Help, Family Services

Early Help, Family Services (EHFS) is a very promising, place-based pilot program, in which practitioners work with families at the early stages of need to prevent them from entering a more crisis-focused pathway at critical points in their lives – such as the birth of a new baby or when children begin kindergarten, primary or high school. EHFS involves placing family services practitioners in universal service settings, including hospitals, enabling early warning signs to be picked up promptly by professionals so that families and children can receive a rapid response and appropriate support.

The EHFS uses new and existing evidence-based programs to increase parental confidence and skills in dealing with parenting challenges and to improve the quality of parent-child interactions. It also builds professional confidence and capacity in early identification for those needing assistance and provides better links to other services and increased take-up of support by families.

This model of service gives families a more holistic, flexible, community-integrated and person-centred way of working consistent with commitment to Aboriginal self-determination and intersectionality and can prevent escalation of the challenges a family might be facing.

Programs for young people who use violence in the home

The Centre welcomes the State Government's investment in an evidence-informed overarching Model of Care that supports early intervention for young people using violence in the home and their families. The Centre has been steadily building its expertise in this area, with resources and training to support practice excellence, and we look forward to continuing our work with government to better support these young people and their families.

Aboriginal programs

The Centre recognises that the development and application of effective early intervention and prevention models for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and families should be led by ACCOs and their communities. Despite notable progress in the commitment to and application of self-determination principles, there is still a huge over-representation of Aboriginal children and young people entering out-of-home care and the criminal justice system.

The often harrowing stories shared with the Yoorook Truth Telling Commission make very clear the far-reaching and profoundly disruptive impacts of colonial policies on children, their families and their communities.

The Centre supports recommendations made by ACCOs and our member organisations in response to the Yoorook Commission. We recommend the Victorian Government does not wait until the conclusion of truth telling or treaty to begin system reform. Such reform must examine contemporary funding models for government, mainstream and Aboriginal child and family service providers to make sure ACCOs receive appropriate and sufficient funding to enable delivery of holistic, culturally safe services to their communities.

Recommendations:

1. Expand successful initiatives such as the Family Preservation and Reunification Response and Early Help, Family Services to reach more families in need and provide the recurrent funding necessary to embed them in our service system.
2. Fund family services to respond appropriately to demand so all target cohorts can receive the service they need.
3. Implement an Aboriginal-led child protection strategy and system reform to meet the holistic and intergenerational needs of Aboriginal children and families to avoid statutory intervention.

Investing in Victoria's out-of-home care system

Since 2018, the rates of children entering care have continued to rise in Victoria, with data from the Australian Institute of Health and Welfare showing a 14 per cent rise in the number of children in OOHC between 2018 and 2021.⁴ Children and young people in out-of-home are a particularly vulnerable group in the community.

The Centre believes the best protection for vulnerable children and young people is preventing their entry to statutory systems in the first place by prioritising early intervention, prevention and wrap around supports, based on evidence, to keep families together. Family services and child protection need to be developing new ways of working closely together at the earliest signs of risk to connect families into appropriate supports and services to prevent escalation into the care system.

However, in some situations where removal into care is assessed as being in the best interests of the child, it is the responsibility of systems and workers to make sure that children and young people are supported to achieve their goals and to have the same access to educational, health and life opportunities as their peers who are not in care.

Residential care

At present, the residential care system in Victoria is not adequately funded to operate in the best interests of children and young people in residential care homes, many of whom need highly specialised support. This inadequacy was confirmed in the Deloitte report on residential care funding which was undertaken on behalf of the Centre and providers in 2022. Young people with significant trauma are often placed in care settings with other traumatised young people, in an environment that is not conducive to mental wellbeing. A study into *Cross-over kids* conducted by Monash University and the Children's Court of Victoria found that trauma-specific and therapeutic support is severely lacking in residential care.⁵ The report shows that when therapeutic residential care is made available to young people with complex needs there is often significant improvement in outcomes, an outcome that is also reported by many of our member organisations providing therapeutic support.⁶

Our members have worked tirelessly advocating for improvements in the residential care system to provide the best possible care to young people. We seek an urgent and sustained increase in investment in residential care to expand the number of two-bedroom units available to cater better for the individual needs of young people, and ask that all young people in residential care receive a therapeutic response.

Foster care

In 2020-21, Victoria had around 1,825 active foster carers delivering the equivalent of 2.9 million hours of active caregiving and generating significant economic benefits to the state.⁷

4. Australian Institute of Health and Welfare 2021, *Child Protection Australia 2020-2021*, Australian Government, Canberra 2020, <https://www.aihw.gov.au/reports/child-protection/child-protection-australia-2020-21/contents/out-of-home-care>

5. Ibid, *Maltreatment and Delinquency: Examining the Contexts of Offending Amongst Child Protection-Involved Children*.

6. Ibid.

7. Cube Group 2022, *Valuing something that really matters: The economic value of foster care in Victoria*, unpublished paper, p. 2.

However, this invaluable resource is under significant risk. The number of active foster carers is declining and the model itself is no longer fit for purpose. The recent Victorian home-based Carer Census found that 59 per cent of foster carers regularly use their own funds to cover the costs of care, and 75 per cent report foster caring having a negative financial impact on their lives.⁸ Other alternative models, such as Mockingbird, the Victorian Circle Program, KEEP (Keeping Foster and Kin Parents Trained and Supported), Treatment Foster Care Oregon (TFCO) and ACCO approaches to developing culturally sensitive ways to support Aboriginal carers have all shown success in retaining foster carers and improving outcomes for children in foster care.

Victoria needs a contemporary, fit-for-purpose foster care system that better supports carers and the children they care for.

At a minimum there needs to be:

- Investment in models that work, including Aboriginal-led foster care approaches for Aboriginal children, to provide a range of proven options for carers and children.
- Investment in locally based campaigns which encourage community involvement.
- Implementation of a fast-tracked, efficient system of assessing potential carers.
- Development of a pool of accredited staff for foster care accreditation.
- Provision of flexible, locally relevant, culturally safe, and trauma-informed training.
- Provision of after-hours support 24/7.
- Access to respite care, including cluster models of care with defined respite households.
- Resourcing of a dedicated quality and investigations role.

Kinship care

A 2022 Victorian Auditor-General's Report identified key challenges associated with the provision of kinship care in Victoria.⁹ Amongst other things, the report found that the number of children in kinship care grew by 33.3 per cent between 2017 and 2021, that insufficient numbers of assessments were completed within target timeframes, and that kinship carers are not receiving the support they need to provide stable homes for children and young people in their care. The report also noted that 96 per cent of kinship carers receive the lowest level of care allowance compared with 32 per cent of foster carers.

Aboriginal children in care

The Centre welcomes the recent announcement by the Victorian Government that the state's child protection system will be overhauled in response to the ongoing injustices exposed by the Yoorook Truth Telling Commission.¹⁰ Aboriginal children are 10 times more likely to be living

8. Foster Care Association of Victoria 2022, Foster Care Issues, https://www.fcav.org.au/images/FCAV_Advocacy_Priorities_2022.pdf

9. Victorian Auditor General's Office 2022, Kinship care, VAGO: Melbourne.

10. Kovolos, Benita, 2022, Victoria vows to overhaul child protection as Yoorook Justice Commission begins public hearings, *The Guardian* (accessed January 2023) <https://www.theguardian.com/australia-news/2022/dec/05/victoria-vows-to-overhaul-child-protection-as-yoorook-justice-commission-begins-public-hearings>

in OOHC than non-Aboriginal children, and experience higher risks of poor health, wellbeing, and education outcomes than children not in care.¹¹ With the right supports and investment in early intervention and prevention, entry into care could be significantly reduced for Aboriginal children and young people. ACCOs offer a range of culturally appropriate programs based on early intervention and prevention to families who require support. For example, VACCA's *Cradle to Kinder* program 'supports young Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women who are pregnant and experiencing stressful life experiences like financial pressure, social isolation and limited support while being a parent'.¹² The Bubup Wilam Aboriginal Child and Family Centre offers wrap-around services for children and families requiring support due to the impacts of trauma, social challenges, or developmental delay and offers a range of holistic support programs for children and their families.¹³

These types of early intervention and prevention programs are an effective diversion from statutory intervention and require ongoing, reliable investment. Many of the holistic programs offered by ACCOs run on a short-term basis or do not receive adequate funding to meet the rising demand. The Centre supports a shift to long-term and sustainable funding models designed by ACCOs and underpinned by a commitment to self-determination. We also urge the government to pass the Children and Health Legislation Amendment (Statement of Recognition and other Matters) Bill 2022.

Education and health outcomes for children in care

Research shows that children and young people in care are often an academically disadvantaged group¹⁴ whose trauma experiences may have contributed to disengagement from learning.¹⁵ The Raising Expectations initiative, managed by the Centre in partnership with La Trobe University, Federation University Australia and Swinburne University, supports young people in care and care leavers to aspire to, access and succeed in vocational and higher education.¹⁶ Funded by the Department of Education and Training, the program brings together TAFE staff, university staff, community service organisations, other professionals, carers and young people who are or have been in care, to support entry into post-secondary education pathways to achieve their goals.

The Raising Expectations program is currently implementing a Game Changers Peer Mentoring pilot, the first of its kind in Australia, which has increased TAFE and university staff awareness of the challenges that care-experienced young students face and provided them with tools and information to better support these students. Ongoing funding for the Raising Expectations program would enable its reach to be expanded to all children in, and leaving, care across the state to give them the best possible educational foundations to be able to enrol in and complete the post-secondary course/s of their choice.

11. SNAICC, National Voice for Children 2020, Brief on COVID-19 response and recovery issues for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and families in contact with child protection, <https://www.snaicc.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2020/07/SNAICC-brief-on-COVID-19-child-protection.pdf>

12. Victorian Aboriginal Child Care Agency (VACCA), *Cradle to Kinder*, Melbourne, <https://www.vacca.org/page/services/children-and-families/early-years-support/aboriginal-cradle-to-kinder>

13. Bubup Wilam, Aboriginal Child and Family Centre, Health and Wellbeing, Melbourne, <https://bubupwilam.org.au/health/>

14. Department of Communities, Child Safety and Disability Services (2013). Valuing and improving educational outcomes for children in out-of-home care, Practice paper. Queensland Government.

15. Ibid, p.4.

16. Raising Expectations, Everyone's path to TAFE or uni is different, let's find yours (accessed 20 January 2023), <https://www.raisingexpectations.com.au/>

In relation to health, children in care are more likely to have poorer physical, mental, and developmental health than their peers outside of care.¹⁷ Research led by the Murdoch Children’s Research Institute found that of 5,676 children aged under 13 years in foster or kinship care in Victoria, only 37 per cent had seen a general practitioner, 17 per cent had visited a paediatrician and fewer than 10 per cent had seen a dentist, optometrist, or audiologist in the recommended timeframes.¹⁸ Greater investment in evidence-based and evidence-informed models of care and better support for carers would help improve educational and health outcomes for children in care.

Recommendations:

4. Continue to invest in the innovative evidence-based models and evidence-informed approaches delivered by our sector to increase the number of two-bed units available and to provide therapeutic responses for all children in residential care.
5. Develop a contemporary, fit-for-purpose foster care strategy and model/s based on the best available evidence to adequately support carers and the young people in their care.
6. Ensure that all carers receive the financial and other supports needed to enable them to meet the material, developmental and social needs of the children in their care.
7. Continue to invest in the expansion of the Raising Expectations program to support educational access and success for all people with care experience in the state’s vocational and higher education systems.

17. McLean, K, Hiscock, H and Goldfield, S 2021, 'Timeliness and extent of health service use by Victorian (Australian) children within first year after entry into out-of-home care: retrospective data linkage cohort study' *Children Health Services Review*. DOI: 10.1016/j.chilyouth.2021.106359

18. McLean et.al. 2021.

Addressing homelessness and housing

During the Centre's 2022 Connecting Communities Regional Tour, the most consistently raised issue of concern was the lack of the lack of safe, secure, affordable housing. The ramifications of insecure housing, and of living in or on the precipice of homelessness, are enormous. Without the foundation of a safe and secure home it is very difficult for children and families to leave violent situations, gain employment and move off income support payments, work on alcohol and drug dependence, and achieve their overall goals. Since the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020, there has been an influx of people moving into the regions in Victoria, further straining housing availability.¹⁹

The Centre welcomes Victoria's Big Housing Build and commends the State Government for the progress already made into building social and affordable housing. However, the experiences of our member organisations demonstrates that housing needs are not being met and that the situation is dire particularly for women fleeing family violence, young people leaving care, young parents and families living in poverty and/or at risk of child protection involvement. Findings from ACOSS suggest the access to safe and secure accommodation is the largest barrier facing victim survivors and their children, who often return to perpetrators due to a lack of other options.²⁰ Having secure housing is also critically important for children as they grow to ensure they can be in stable, safe and nurturing environments.

In a recent survey of child and family services examining the impact of rising living costs on families' ability to care for themselves and their children, our members provided a range of examples of innovative housing solutions, such as unlocking rural land and/or vacant blocks for housing villages, supporting tiny-home options, higher density options for specific needs, refurbishing buildings which might be empty or no longer fit for purpose, (where feasible) using holiday homes and Airbnbs for short-term or medium-term accommodation, and exploring alternative living options. Low-cost innovative solutions need investment that could be based on shared value concept: government, not-for-profit and corporate investment models. Seed funding to coordinate and activate is also needed for new solutions.

We urge the State Government to increase the reach of the Big Housing Build and to consider investment in proven innovative solutions from overseas and other jurisdictions.

Homes 4 Families

One existing pilot showing early promise is the Homes 4 Families initiative. Delivered in partnership with Homes Victoria and DFFH, it aims to keep families safe and together; reduce demand for ongoing homelessness, statutory and acute services; and improve the health and wellbeing of families. Homes 4 Families provides secure and stable medium to long-term housing and flexible family services support for two years to assist families currently living in emergency accommodation such as hotels, motels or caravan parks and provides practical assistance to families including furnishing the home, setting up the necessary utilities and linking the families into resources in their local community such as local childcare and schools. A key element of the program is the leveraging of existing local partnerships with government

19. Australian Bureau of Statistics 2022, More growth in the regions during the pandemic, <https://www.abs.gov.au/media-centre/media-releases/more-growth-regions-during-pandemic>

20. Ibid, Helping people in need during a cost-of-living crisis: Findings from the Australian Community Sector Survey.

organisations, businesses, community services, sporting clubs, philanthropic organisations and education providers and the development of new community partnership opportunities to link families into the local community where the housing is located.

The length of the family services involvement, the intensity and step up/step down model of practice in supporting families, alongside the financial packages (in particularly the specialist intervention funding) can be individualised to meet the needs of the carers/parents and their children. These elements, alongside the subsidised housing have meant a more targeted, responsive service for families. While this pilot is still in its early stages, the results have been very promising as the evidence base continues to build guided by a Performance Monitoring and Reporting framework and data collection.

Youth housing

Around 26 per cent of people experiencing homelessness in the state are aged between 12 and 24, despite only making up 16 per cent of the population.²¹ On any given night in Victoria, approximately 6000 young people are homeless.²² Most young people who experience homelessness are couch surfing or living in overcrowded and unsafe dwellings.²³ Youth homelessness has been of particular concern for our regional members, who report a severe lack of housing options for young people, including young people leaving care.

Youth Foyers are a proven early intervention and prevention model to address youth homelessness, providing integrated learning and accommodation settings for young people and enabling them to develop and transition to education and employment pathways.²⁴ The Centre recommends the further investment and expansion of youth foyers in the state, particularly in regional Victoria.

Recommendations:

8. Continue to investigate low-cost innovative solutions to the housing emergency in other countries and jurisdictions to identify how stock can be increased for women and children fleeing family violence situations, families at risk of homelessness and child protection involvement, and young people who have left care or who are young parents.
9. Fund the expansion and continued evaluation of the Homes 4 Families initiative beyond the pilot program.
10. Expand the number of Education First Youth Foyers with a particular focus on regional Victoria.

21. Antione S, Ryken L 2020, Ending Youth Homelessness, Solutions from Young People, Youth Affairs Council of Victoria, <https://www.yacvic.org.au/assets/Documents/YACVic-EndingYouthHomelessness-report-FINALweb.pdf>

22. Ibid.

23. Ibid.

24. Foyer Foundation, How Foyers Work, (accessed 5 January 2023), <https://foyer.org.au/foyers-in-australia/>

Supporting children with complex needs and vulnerabilities

Supporting children's right to be safe

While children in Australia are frequently victims of violent crime, there remains limited data or a clear service response to meet the needs of these children. Often children who experience crime go unrecognised by our system and service response. While supports are offered through the Victims of Crime Assistance Tribunal and Victims Support Agency, Victoria lacks targeted, specialist programs for children to heal.

In the case of family violence, children are not always recognised as victim survivors in their own right or have access to services that can support them through the trauma of family violence. Service delivery has changed considerably since the onset of COVID-19, with children and young people becoming less visible as service provision is more widely provided via telephone and online. We recommend the expansion of locally based services that support recovery from family violence for children, and the funding of further research into service delivery gaps and evidence-based programs for children.

There are also evidence-based programs such as Caring Dads, which encourages violent fathers to better understand the impact of their violence on their children, to improve their parenting practices, improve their relationship with their children, reduce controlling and violent behaviours, and engage in respectful relationships with the mothers of their children.

The Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse highlighted the inadequacies of system responses to child sexual abuse, the stigma surrounding reporting abuse and the lack of knowledge surrounding sexual abuse within services and the community, which enables abuse to go undetected.²⁵ Victoria currently lacks specialist evidence-informed programs to target the prevention of social abuse in the home and our members have highlighted the need for increased investment in awareness raising, capability building and evidence building, and support to strengthen and expand existing programs in Victoria, such as the Power to Kids program developed by MacKillop Family Services and the University of Melbourne.²⁶

The long-term cumulative impacts and costs of unresolved trauma requires the earliest possible identification and intervention to re-direct the trajectory of children and young people who have experienced violent crime and abuse in their lives.²⁷ The gaps in our service system and effective responses to children who are victims of crime, of family violence, of neglect and of sexual abuse warrant more research. The Centre is well placed to assist the State Government to collaborate with members to co-design service responses.

25. The Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse 2017, *Final Report, Nature and Cause, Volume 2*, Canberra, https://www.childabuseroyalcommission.gov.au/sites/default/files/final_report_-_volume_2_nature_and_cause.pdf

26. The MacKillop Institute, Power to Kids, Strengthening prevention and responses to sexual exploitation, harmful sexual behaviours and dating violence for young people in residential care, <https://www.mackillopinstitute.org.au/programs/power-to-kids/>

27. For example, the annual CYDA surveys show the varied forms that discrimination takes in school settings. See Children and Young People with Disability Australia (CYDA) 2016, Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse: Consultation paper – Institutional responses to child sexual abuse in out of home care submission, Melbourne: CYDA.

Supporting children living in poverty

Consultations with our members via a recent survey developed by the Centre and through our regional tour in 2022 highlight the devastating impact the pandemic, emergencies and rising cost of living are having on children and families in Victoria.

Amongst the most commonly reported impacts from our survey (n-137) were the following: going without food, inability to pay rent or energy bills, inability to meet basic educational costs for children, delayed assessments and development for young children, inability to access specialist health clinicians, inability to leave perpetrators without sufficient income and safe housing options, disengagement from education, isolation, reduced parenting confidence and the profound impact of continually living on the edge of a precipice.

Our survey also highlighted the impact on service providers with many reporting increased use of brokerage funding to help families meet very basic needs, pressure to continually source funds and goods and to connect families with other crisis services.

While many of the levers to address poverty in Victoria rest with the Federal Government, our members identified the need for the State Government to be more actively engaged in advocacy work, lobbying the federal government for changes in the welfare system and seeking greater funding to help meet the growing demand for material and other aid.

Supporting children with disability

While lack of available data makes it difficult to determine the level of discrimination children with disability experience, research confirms their vulnerability. For example, children with disability are more at risk and are more likely to have experienced repeated incidents of sexual abuse by the time they are 18 years old than children without disability.²⁸ Children with disability are nearly three times more likely to be at risk of sexual violence than children without disability.²⁹ They are also disproportionately vulnerable to maltreatment in institutional care.³⁰

Most children with disability who enter care do so due to the lack of supports for their family or carers. Children with disability who end up in out of home care 'are more than likely to have never been the subject of the child protection system',³¹ meaning that their entry into care is a last resort option for parents rather than because the state has identified protective concerns for the child.

Research by the Commission for Children and Young People (CCYP) has found that children with disability living in residential care can experience the environment as violent and dangerous, often due to the behaviour of others in care.³² The lack of care options available for young people with complex behaviours and disability can result in 'poor placement mix' and a lack of supports for these children and young people in residential care.³³

28. Australian Human Rights Commission 2019, *Children's Rights Report: In their own right*, Sydney: Australian Human Rights Commission, p. 109.

29. Jones, L, Bellis, M, Wood, S, Hughes, K, McCoy, E, Eckley, L, Officer, A 2012, Prevalence and risk of violence against children with disabilities: A systematic review and meta-analysis of observational studies. *Lancet*, 380 (9845)

30. Ibid.

31. Australian Federation of Disability Organisations 2019, *Issues for children with disability in Out of Home Care*, <https://www.afdo.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2019/08/AFDO-Children-with-Disability-in-Out-of-Home-Care-August-2019.pdf>

32. Commission for Children and Young People 2020, Royal Commission into Violence, Abuse, Neglect and Exploitation of People with Disability General Submission, Melbourne.

33. Ibid.

Staying in the family home should be prioritised for children with disability, and efforts should be made to support the mental health and wellbeing of parents and carers of children with disability to keep the children out of statutory systems.³⁴ Too often, family challenges reach crisis point before intervention occurs. What is required is earlier intervention and prevention responses, including in-home care and respite for families caring for children with disability, assistance to navigate the NDIS and opportunities to join networks that support parental mental and physical health.

Members have highlighted the difficulties children and young people in care face getting access to assessments and NDIS packages suited to their needs.

Supporting young people at risk of entry into youth justice

The Centre has consistently called on the State Government to raise the age of criminal responsibility to at least 14 years. Studies show that young children are being criminalised and imprisoned for actions they are not developmentally able to comprehend and for adverse experiences outside their control.³⁵ There is also significant evidence to suggest that children who have contact with the criminal justice system between the ages of 10 and 14 are far more likely to experience sentenced detention in their future than young people and adults who come into contact with the criminal justice system at a later age.³⁶

Victoria has seen extensive youth justice reform in recent years, including investing further into youth diversion programs which are creating better outcomes for young people and the community.³⁷ The majority of youth justice diversion programs are available to young people pre-sentence, sentenced, pre-court and pre-charge, where children are already known to police. To reduce youth offending further, a greater focus needs to be on the risk factors for offending, such as disengaging from education, experiencing family violence, living in poverty, living in out-of-home care or being known to child protection.

Raising the age of criminal responsibility to 14 years in Victoria and investing in proven youth diversion programs could reduce the likelihood of long-term involvement in the criminal justice system.

Recommendations:

11. Fund the development of research into appropriate and targeted programs to address the trauma experienced by child victims of crime and child victims of family violence.
12. Fund the design of tailored training for identifying and responding to child sexual abuse for service providers, professionals, parents, and carers and increased sexual safety literacy for children in or at risk of entering out of home care.
13. Identify and fund models and approaches that work to support families with complex disability needs, including access to crisis response pathways to avoid entry into care.

34. Australian Federation of Disability Organisations 2019, *Issues for Children with Disability in Out of Home Care* <https://www.afdo.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2019/08/AFDO-Children-with-Disability-in-Out-of-Home-Care-August-2019.pdf>

35. Tsorbaris, D, Pro Bono Australia 2022, *Intervening early to prevent criminalising of children*, <https://probonoaustralia.com.au/news/2022/11/intervening-early-to-prevent-criminalisation-of-children/>

36. Sentencing Advisory Council 2016, *Reoffending by Children and Young People in Victoria*, State Government of Victoria, 31.

37. The State Government of Victoria, Department of Justice and Community Safety: *Diversion, keeping young people out of youth justice to lead successful lives*. <https://www.justice.vic.gov.au/youth-diversion-statement#:~:text=The%20CCYD%20program%20provides%20a,progression%20into%20the%20justice%20system.>

14. Lobby the Federal Government to urgently address the drivers of poverty, reinstate the allowances that were made available during COVID-19 under the previous federal government, and make available more funding at the state level to immediately address the acute material needs of our most vulnerable members of the community.
15. Work with the Federal Government to improve processes so children and young people in care get timely access to assessments and the correct type of NDIS package suitable for their specific needs.
16. Fund the expansion of proven youth justice diversion and evidence-based programs to encompass children and young people who are at risk of involvement in the criminal justice system.

Improving access to quality education

Victoria has seen a sustained and significant commitment to improving education opportunities for children and young people across the state. The 2022-2023 State Budget included many welcome commitments to improving student literacy and numeracy outcomes, supporting student health and wellbeing, preparing the education system for self-determination, and enhancing the Navigator program.³⁸

Despite these promising investments, our members are concerned about the reported rise in children and young people disengaging from school following the COVID-19 pandemic and recent natural disasters across the state, and the increasing pressure which the cost of living is putting on families supporting their children to attend school.

Supporting re/engagement in learning

Our members have reported increased numbers of requests to assist families with children and young people who are having difficulty engaging with school and learning following the pandemic. Programs such as Navigator and the Transforming Educational Achievement of Children at Risk (TEACHaR program) have been shown to be effective in re-engaging students in school in a supportive learning environment. However, entry into the Navigator program requires children or young people to be attending 30 per cent or less of their classes, at which point they are already disengaged from school, and TEACHaR currently does not have the capacity to meet demand across the state, particularly in regional areas.

The Centre calls for expansion of the Navigator program and widening the threshold to provide early intervention to children and young people who are beginning to show signs of disengagement from school. In addition, the TEACHaR program requires increased investment to be able to expand and meet the needs of children and young people across the state.

Meeting the costs of education

Members have highlighted that following the pandemic and associated rise in the cost of living, many families are struggling financially to support their children to attend school and are turning to services for financial support. This includes paying for uniforms, school lunches, extracurricular activities and transport. Unfortunately, many children are missing out on important aspects of education, such as school excursions, school camps, timely access to specialist services, and other extracurricular activities that their peers can attend.

The Centre recommends working toward making public schooling genuinely free in Victoria and designing support services, in collaboration with the child and family services sector, to assist families on low incomes to cover associated costs of schooling, including textbooks, digital devices, school uniforms, lunches and transport.

38. State Government of Victoria 2022, Department of Treasury and Finance, *State Budget Overview 2022-2023*, <https://s3.ap-southeast-2.amazonaws.com/budgetfiles202223.budget.vic.gov.au/2022-23+State+Budget+-+Budget+Overview.pdf>

Supporting access to early childcare and kinder

The Centre welcomes the Victorian Government's \$9 billion commitment to expanding kindergarten programs across the state under the 'Best Start, Best Life' reforms.³⁹ Many families experience complex and interconnected barriers which prevent their children from accessing early years education, including financial barriers, parental mental health and/or disability, housing stress, family violence, low parental education levels and geographic isolation.⁴⁰

Prior to the rollout of Best Start, Best Life, three priority cohorts were receiving free kinder in Victoria, including Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children, children from refugee backgrounds and children known to child protection. Engagement of these priority cohorts in education is currently measured by their enrolment in free kinder. However, often children from these cohorts may be enrolled in kinder but are not able to engage at the same level as their peers due to other barriers leading to non-attendance or disengagement with learning.

There needs to be better data collection to gain a clearer picture of these cohorts who are either not accessing early childcare and kinder or who are not engaging and thriving once there in comparison to their peers.

At present, the Access to Early Learning program supports children and families with complex needs to engage in kindergarten.⁴¹ However it is currently only available to 25 Local Government Areas across the state and works specifically with families experiencing barriers to accessing three-year-old kinder. We recommend the program is expanded to every Local Government Area and funded to extend to four-year-old kinder so that children experiencing barriers to accessing early education do not fall significantly behind their peers before they begin primary school.

Recommendations:

17. Fund the expansion of the Navigator program to include a lower threshold for school disengagement and permanently extend the program to include primary school aged children.
18. Collect data to show which children in at-risk cohorts are either not accessing early childcare and kinder, or who are not engaging and thriving once there in comparison to their peers and use this data to inform and complement the Best Start, Best Life reforms.

39. The State Government of Victoria, *Best Start, Best Life* (accessed 10 January 2023), <https://www.vic.gov.au/give-your-child-the-best-start-in-life>

40. Moore, T 2021, Developing holistic integrated early learning services for young children and families experiencing socio-economic vulnerability, Centre for Community Child Health, Murdoch Children's Research Institute, Melbourne

41. The State Government of Victoria, Access to Early Learning, Helping children from families with complex needs to engage in a quality kindergarten program, <https://www.vic.gov.au/access-early-learning>

Investing in regional Victoria

During 2022, the Centre met with over 320 child and family services workers in regional Victoria across a wide range of services, and sector and community leaders from 130 organisations. Our members described a range of barriers faced by children and their families in regional areas.⁴² These challenges included lack of access to services and inadequate service coordination, a shortage of workers in the child and family services sector, declining mental health for young people and the need for additional support in response to COVID, the floods and the rising cost of essentials.

Research from Vic Health in 2018 highlighted that a lack of mental health services, employment opportunities, access to education, transport and the internet was creating a mental wellbeing gap between the city and regional areas. In the years following this research, Victorian regions have experienced concurrent crises, making the lack of access to mental health services in regional areas even more acute. Members have reported exceptionally long wait times for child psychologists and paediatricians. There is an urgent need to increase the number of publicly funded paediatricians and child psychologists in Victoria with priority given to regional and rural areas.

Regional services are working together to overcome these barriers and draw upon community resources and knowledge to provide tailored support for children and families. However, without a consistent and sustained response to these challenges, it is difficult for regional organisations to deliver the best possible care.

The Centre urges greater strategic oversight of and ongoing investment in regional and rural infrastructure including better access to transport, health services and housing.

Recommendation:

19. Develop a coordinated strategy, informed by people with lived experience of regional service provision, to increase the infrastructure needed immediately and in the longer-term in Victoria's regional and rural areas to ensure timely access to transport, health services and housing.

42. Vic Health 2018, Bright Futures: young people in rural and regional Victoria, <https://www.vichealth.vic.gov.au/media-and-resources/publications/bright-futures-rural-regional-report>

Building a strong and sustained workforce

Attracting and retaining a skilled workforce to support increased community need has been a key issue for the child and family services sector, exacerbated by COVID-19 and workforce shortages in allied workforces which could previously have been drawn on.

The 2022-2023 Victorian State Budget supported our workforce, with funding allocated to help CSOs cover the impacts of minimum wage and consumer price index cost increases, establishing the Social Services Regulator, funding for statutory reforms and bodies and strengthening the community workforce through an attraction and recruitment campaign to raise the profile of the community services workforce. The Centre supports and welcomes these measures, however, the sector is still facing demand that far outstrips workforce capacity.

In addition to an attraction and recruitment campaign, the sector requires a commitment to long-term and sustainable funding reform and a dedicated workforce strategy. Our members regularly highlight the difficulties they face in recruiting and keeping a skilled workforce when they can only offer short-term contracts, usually spanning six months to a year, with little room to raise staff salaries and provide opportunities for professional development and training to employees, which is offered in Government and competing sectors.

Many programs offered within the child and family sector are highly innovative and offer support for people experiencing hardship covering a range of areas such as family violence, AOD, men's behaviour change, parenting support and mental health. However, programs are often funded on a short-term basis, which makes it difficult to recruit highly specialised staff to fill these roles and make meaningful progress with participants.

Recommendations:

20. Fund the development of a dedicated workforce strategy in the form of an Industry Plan for the child and family services sector, with a separate strategy to support the growth of an Aboriginal workforce within ACCOs.

Responding to emergencies

In recent years, like much of the world, we have witnessed an increase in large-scale emergencies across Victoria, including the COVID-19 pandemic, severe bushfires in Australia and extensive flooding across Victoria. While our child and family services sector has consistently demonstrated adaptability and innovation in responding to these crises, there needs to be a more coordinated response state-wide to plan for and respond to emergencies in the state. This is particularly important when it comes to meeting the needs of more vulnerable groups in our community such as children, people with disability, and children and families experiencing homelessness.

The previous state budget had a welcome focus on disaster relief for communities affected by recent events. However, we are still lacking a consistent, state-wide framework to support children, families and vulnerable members in our community during and following emergency situations. The child and family services sector has an enormous amount of knowledge and expertise with a central role to play in prevention, response and recovery. With support from Government, our sector could make an invaluable contribution to the creation of a Framework to plan for and respond to future emergencies in the state, particularly in relation to our most vulnerable citizens.

Recommendation:

21. Develop a co-designed Emergency Framework specifically for child and family services to support coordinated prevention, planning for, response to, and recovery from emergencies to support all Victorian children, young people and families, and our most vulnerable citizens.

Supporting LGBTQIA+ Communities

People who identify as LGBTQIA+ are more likely than the wider community to experience discrimination when seeking support from services because of, or connected to, experiences of stigma, discrimination, or violence.⁴³ Many community service organisations across Victoria are seeking to improve their ability to deliver LGBTQIA+ inclusive services and support specific health and wellbeing needs and have opted to undertake Rainbow Tick accreditation, whereby they improve the quality of their services and organisational practice for LGBTQIA+ consumers and staff, and gain accreditation as a safe and affirmative organisation.

Undertaking Rainbow Tick accreditation requires dedicated staffing, time, and funding for organisations. As a result of the findings from the Royal Commission into Family Violence, community service organisations delivering family violence services are funded to undertake Rainbow Tick accreditation and improve their service delivery to better support LGBTQIA+ people experiencing family violence.⁴⁴

The Centre supports this investment and calls for further funding to assist a wider range of services to work towards accreditation. We ask call for an increase in the range of LGBTQIA+ run services, expanding community-led responses and choice for LGBTQIA+ communities.

Recommendation:

22. Support all community service organisations to work towards accreditation of their services as safe and affirmative.
23. Work with LGBTQIA+ communities to determine existing service gaps for their communities and resource more LGBTQIA+ run services.

43. Hill A, Lyons A, Jones J, McGowan I, Carman M, Parsons M, Power J, Bourne A, 2020, Writing Themselves In 4: The health and wellbeing of LGBTQIA+ young people in Australia. Victoria summary report, ARCSHS monograph series number 127. Australian Research Centre in Sex, Health and Society, La Trobe University: Melbourne.

44. The State Government of Victoria, All funded family violence services achieve Rainbow Tick accreditation, <https://www.vic.gov.au/family-violence-recommendations/all-funded-family-violence-services-achieve-rainbow-tick>

Summary of Recommendations

1. Expand successful initiatives such as the Family Preservation and Reunification Response and Early Help, Family Services to reach more families in need and provide the recurrent funding necessary to embed them in our service system.
2. Fund family services to respond appropriately to demand so all target cohorts can receive the service they need.
3. Implement an Aboriginal-led child protection strategy and system reform to meet the holistic and intergenerational needs of Aboriginal children and families to avoid statutory intervention.
4. Continue to invest in the innovative evidence-based models and evidence-informed approaches delivered by our sector to increase the number of two-bed units available and to provide therapeutic responses for all children in residential care.
5. Develop a contemporary, fit-for-purpose foster care strategy and model/s based on the best available evidence to adequately support carers and the young people in their care.
6. Ensure that all carers receive the financial and other supports needed to enable them to meet the material, developmental and social needs of the children in their care.
7. Continue to invest in the expansion of the Raising Expectations program to support educational access and success for all people with care experience in the state's vocational and higher education systems.
8. Continue to investigate low-cost innovative solutions to the housing emergency in other countries and jurisdictions to identify how stock can be increased for women and children fleeing family violence situations, families at risk of homelessness and child protection involvement, and young people who have left care or who are young parents.
9. Fund the expansion and continued evaluation of the Homes 4 Families initiative beyond the pilot program.
10. Expand the number of Education First Youth Foyers with a particular focus on regional Victoria.
11. Fund the development of research into appropriate and targeted programs to address the trauma experienced by child victims of crime and child victims of family violence.
12. Fund the design of tailored training for identifying and responding to child sexual abuse for service providers, professionals, parents, and carers and increased sexual safety literacy for children in or at risk of entering out of home care.
13. Identify and fund models and approaches that work to support families with complex disability needs, including access to crisis response pathways to avoid entry into care.
14. Lobby the Federal Government to urgently address the drivers of poverty, reinstate the allowances that were made available during COVID-19 under the previous federal government, and make available more funding at the state level to immediately address the acute material needs of our most vulnerable members of the community.

15. Work with the Federal Government to improve processes so children and young people in care get timely access to assessments and the correct type of NDIS package suitable for their specific needs.
16. Fund the expansion of proven youth justice diversion and evidence-based programs to encompass children and young people who are at risk of involvement in the criminal justice system.
17. Fund the expansion of the Navigator program to include a lower threshold for school disengagement and permanently extend the program to include primary school aged children.
18. Collect data to show which children in at-risk cohorts are either not accessing early childcare and kinder, or who are not engaging and thriving once there in comparison to their peers and use this data to inform and complement the Best Start, Best Life reforms.
19. Develop a coordinated strategy, informed by people with lived experience of regional service provision, to increase the infrastructure needed immediately and in the longer-term in Victoria's regional and rural areas to ensure timely access to transport, health services and housing.
20. Fund the development of a dedicated workforce strategy in the form of an Industry Plan for the child and family services sector, with a separate strategy to support the growth of an Aboriginal workforce within ACCOs.
21. Develop a co-designed Emergency Framework specifically for child and family services to support coordinated prevention, planning for, response to, and recovery from emergencies to support all Victorian children, young people and families, and our most vulnerable citizens.
22. Support all community service organisations to work towards accreditation of their services as safe and affirmative.
23. Work with LGBTQIA+ communities to determine existing service gaps for their communities and resource more LGBTQIA+ run services.

