



Catholic Social Services  
Victoria

*...building a more just and compassionate society*

## **2019 Victorian State Budget Submission**

... Addressing the needs of those on the margins is core business for an inclusive economy...

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## Summary

As the peak body representing Catholic social service agencies in Victoria, our member organisations assist more than 200,000 clients a year, utilising 7,000 staff and more than 17,000 volunteers. Our focus is on the wellbeing of those on the margins of our society.

Victoria has seen unprecedented and sustained economic growth for over two decades. While most Victorians have benefited from this growth, some have not and continue to fall behind in terms of educational attainment, skill development, employment and housing. This affects health and wellbeing outcomes and requires social service responses that provide people with the help they need, when they need it and at the intensity they need it.

Addressing the needs of those on the margins should be part of core business for an inclusive economy, where all can flourish. The 2019-20 State Budget is an important opportunity for the Government to include measures that:

- address the issues that cause disadvantage such as the lack of affordable housing, access to education, health services and employment opportunities
- meet the infrastructure needs of Victoria's future, particularly where there can be a positive impact on the wellbeing of vulnerable Victorians
- ensure a just social and economic structure, which includes addressing the cost of living pressures facing Victorians
- ensure that services and funding meet the needs of those who are disadvantaged or marginalised and adequately protects their rights.

In particular, our call for this budget includes:

- Increase investment to ensure the provision of an additional 3,000 new social and public housing dwellings per year for the next ten years and increase funding for the provision of housing support and homelessness services to address the immediate and growing housing needs across Victoria.
- Increase funding to clinical mental health services in Victoria to the same or above national averages (1.8 per cent per capita) and restore funding to the community mental health services to ensure service provision during the Royal Commission into Mental Health.
- Build safe communities by expanding investment in prevention, early intervention and rehabilitation at all stages of the criminal justice system through extension of programs such as the Judy Lazarus Transition Centre and Restorative Justice Conferencing for young people. In addition, sustain investment to address adolescent family violence.
- Commit to addressing place based disadvantage in regional Victoria through long-term investment, to co-design and implement local solutions that have a long term positive impact.

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## Introduction

[Catholic Social Services Victoria](#) is the peak body for Catholic social service agencies in Victoria. Catholic social service agencies in Victoria reach more than 200,000 clients a year, utilising 7,000 staff and more than 17,000 volunteers. Our member organisations work with disadvantaged groups; supporting people with a disability, providing quality aged care, delivering specialist services to people who experience homelessness, mental illness or addiction and providing a range of services for children and families. A list of [member organisations](#) is provided at the end of this submission.

Catholic Social Services Victoria works with member agencies, as part of the Catholic Church in Victoria, to fulfil the gospel imperatives to stand with and serve those who are poor, disadvantaged and marginalised, and to work for a just, equitable and compassionate society. This submission builds on the experience and expertise of our member agencies who continue this tradition in applying these principles to contemporary issues.

We recognise the challenges that governments face in balancing the allocation of resources across economic and social priorities. An economy is an important part but is not the sum of our society. Culture, values and competing tensions all contribute to creating the communities and society we live in. Addressing the needs of those on the margins is core business for an inclusive economy and enables communities to become safe, equitable, sustainable and compassionate, where all can flourish.

Regional Victoria and metropolitan growth corridors are areas requiring greater investment. Regional and rural areas have seen downturns in traditional industries which has resulted in fewer employment opportunities and entrenched and growing disadvantage. The Melbourne metropolitan growth corridors are experiencing rapid and substantial population growth. As in regional areas, investment is needed to strengthen these communities where many people face similar challenges of isolation, high costs of living pressures and limited access to employment opportunities, public transport and social services.

With the fastest growing population in Australia and sustained and strong economic growth, Victoria is well placed to address the social service needs of its citizens. This submission focuses on investment required to address the underlying causes of disadvantage in addition to the social service needs of vulnerable Victorians, and urges Government to:

1. Increase investment in housing and homelessness services
2. Increase support to Victorians who are vulnerable
3. Build safe communities
4. Invest in jobs, public transport and ease the cost of living.

Investment in these areas underpin the development of a safe, just and compassionate society, where all share in Victoria's wealth.

## 1 Increase investment in housing and homelessness services

Shelter is a basic human need and secure and affordable housing is critical to addressing disadvantage and vulnerability. A lack of stable housing for people on a low income affects the sustainability of employment and education. It is foundational enabling people to improve their health outcomes and deal with other issues such as mental health, family violence, drug and alcohol issues. Victoria has the lowest rate of social housing in Australia (3.5%) and this needs to be addressed.

### 1.1 Increase investment in social and public housing

**Increase investment to ensure the provision of an additional 3,000 new social and public housing dwellings per year for the next ten years.** The establishment of the Victorian Social Housing Growth Fund expects to deliver housing and support for around 2200 households over the next five years (440 per year)<sup>1</sup>. While welcome, this falls far below the current need. At present there are 82,500<sup>2</sup> people on the Victorian Housing Register waiting list.

Infrastructure Victoria<sup>3</sup> and the housing and homelessness sector have identified that 2000 to 3000 additional properties per year for the next ten years are needed to meet current demand<sup>4</sup>. We call on Government to take an investment approach that focuses on providing an adequate level of housing and support services over time in the same way that Government planning addresses transport, energy and other physical infrastructure issues.

We also call upon Government to increase the number of housing and support options for people with multiple and complex needs, including for:

- people exiting prison; to ensure they have support to reconnect to community and minimise the risk of recidivism
- older women, who comprising the fastest growing cohort of people at risk of homelessness<sup>5</sup>
- young people leaving statutory care and the youth justice system<sup>6</sup>.

### 1.2 Increase funding for housing support and homelessness services

**Increase funding for post-housing support.** Housing support and homelessness agencies recognise the need for support to maintain housing. The *COMPASS* program<sup>7</sup> will provide two years of housing and support for young people leaving care and is a welcome initiative. Sacred Heart Mission estimates that approximately 600 people per year access their services to secure and sustain housing. Their *Journey to Social Inclusion* (J2SI) program demonstrates that flexible and tailored support and smaller caseloads; provide greater opportunities to build stronger relationships and increase client autonomy<sup>8</sup>. Funding for innovative support programs is a critical component of creating sustainable and safe housing and reduces the risk of tenancy breakdowns which lead to homelessness.

**Increase funding to enable homelessness services to meet current demand.** Member agencies providing housing support and homelessness services report a continuing high level of unmet demand for services. VincentCare estimate that everyday homelessness services turn away one in six people requesting help due to a lack of available housing and resources<sup>9</sup>. Continuing the implementation of Victoria's Homelessness and Rough Sleeping Action Plan is a critical part of reforms underway to address homelessness. In addition, we urge Government to maintain the momentum to implement the recommendations of the Royal Commission into Family Violence, as the lack of timely housing options continues to put victims of family violence at risk.

## 2. Increase support to Victorians who are vulnerable

### 2.1 Work alongside Aboriginal Victorians and communities

**Sustain commitment to closing the gap of disadvantage to achieve equality in health status and life expectancy of Aboriginal Victorians.** In February, the Prime Minister Scott Morrison delivered the eleventh *Closing the Gap Report 2019*<sup>10</sup>. The report reveals a significant lack of progress on all but two of the seven targets. As the first peoples, Aboriginal Victorians and communities have a unique contribution to make to all parts of the community. Aboriginal people continue to be overrepresented on almost every indicator of disadvantage.

We acknowledge in Victoria the Treaty Advancement process supported by Government, the Roadmap for Reform 2018/19 budget commitments made for the Aboriginal 10-Year Family Violence Plan and the Wungurilwil Gagapduir: Aboriginal Children and Families Agreement (\$15.5M) and the Aboriginal health, wellbeing and safety mental health demonstration projects (\$4M). However, there remains much unfinished business requiring ongoing and sustained attention, including:

- Commitment and investment to address trauma and support healing, address racism and promote cultural safety, prioritise culture and self-determination and transfer power and resources to communities<sup>11</sup>.
- Further investment in diversionary, transition and community support services that address the underlying causes of offending behaviour and reduce the risk of Aboriginal people entering the criminal justice system.
- Further support for Aboriginal agencies and communities to provide case management, care and support for children and families in their community.

### 2.2 Aged

**We urge the Victorian Government to ensure affordable and secure housing for older Victorians.** This includes: older Victorians living with mental illness; vulnerable older women and older Victorians from cultural and linguistically diverse backgrounds who lack the knowledge or language required to navigate the housing system.

We welcome the establishment of the Commonwealth Royal Commission into Aged Care Quality and Safety<sup>12</sup>. Seventy-five per cent of all complaints received by the Aged Care Complaints Commissioner last year concerned residential care<sup>13</sup>. We urge the Victorian Government to increase monitoring of resources used to improve the care provided to older Victorians living in public sector residential aged care services.

Many older Victorians are facing poverty, health issues and barriers to services and information due to changing technologies<sup>14</sup>. Vulnerable older Victorians need support to maintain health, connection to friends and family and to participate in their community. We urge Government to consider eligibility and access factors when developing programs and services to ensure older Victorians have access to the information and services they need.

As a society we must value and support all Victorians, particularly those facing terminal or painful conditions. Palliative Care Victoria estimate that at least 10,000 Victorians who die, currently miss out on needed palliative care. Palliative care provision data for 2014-15 suggests that up to 80 per cent of those who died in residential aged care and up to 63 per cent of those who died in acute care may have missed out on needed palliative care<sup>15</sup>. **We call on Government to adequately resource palliative care to ensure everyone has access to high-quality end of life care.** This should include the ability to move home from hospital

with real and practical support and should ensure access for those living in regional and rural Victoria.

### 2.3 Children and young people

**We call on Government to extend the election commitment<sup>16</sup> to roll out Home Stretch to provide support for young care leavers until they are 21.** This will ensure young people have the educational opportunities, skills, housing and support that enables them to grow and flourish into adulthood. It includes extending funding to provide secure and supported housing and pathways to further education and work. The Home Stretch campaign<sup>17</sup> demonstrates the research and sector-wide support for this policy change which will help to reduce the risks of homelessness, unemployment and involvement with the justice system for this vulnerable cohort.

**Increase the level of funding for carer allowances and funding to adequately meet the needs of children living in foster and kinship care arrangements.** In 2016-17, 10,312 Victorian children lived in out of home care in either foster, kinship or residential care arrangements<sup>18</sup>. Over a third of these children live in foster care placements and 56 per cent are placed with relative or kinship carers. In many cases, kinship carers are on low incomes, yet Victoria provides one of the lowest levels of carer subsidy<sup>19</sup> in Australia. Increasing the level of household income for foster and kinship carers would have a positive impact on outcomes for the children in their care and would help to keep foster carers caring for children.

**Increased funding for school refusal and school re-engagement programs for young people.** School refusal, as a result of family violence, bullying and trauma, is growing<sup>20</sup>. Programs such as the Navigator program<sup>21</sup> which uses assertive outreach practice is showing some early positive outcomes for young people. While the expansion of the program announced in the 2018-19 budget is welcome, further expansion to include children from 10 years old would help to address issues before they become more serious. In addition, there is a need for more early intervention programs such as Cool2B@School<sup>22</sup> and preventative programs that work in a restorative way with families, children and schools, to address the risk factors that can lead to offending.

### 2.4 Culturally and linguistically diverse Victorians, refugees and asylum seekers

Building a cohesive society where diversity is embraced, means working together to build inclusion and acceptance. Refugees and people seeking asylum come from many countries bringing their experiences, culture and heritage and enriching our communities. Some newly arrived communities have specific needs as they settle and adapt to life in Australia.

While settlement services are provided through the Commonwealth Settlement Grants program, State Governments have responsibility to ensure equitable access for refugees and asylum seekers to public and community services such as housing, concessions and training and employment services. Culturally specific programs help to reduce isolation and exclusion that push people the margins by promoting a sense of belonging, building capacity within communities and building social cohesion and participation<sup>23</sup>.

**We urge Government to invest in, and improve access to culturally specific programs and services,** particularly that address family violence issues, parenting in Australian culture, youth employment, access to legal assistance and health services for young people. Support for families and communities is of critical importance: cultural differences between communities, intergenerational pressures and educational gaps are among the issues that must be a high priority for us all.

Other steps include; ongoing funding for homework clubs which provide practical and tangible support to both students and families. In addition, the Victorian Government increased funding for language services in the 2017/18 budget<sup>24</sup>, however as Victoria's population continues to rapidly increase, there remains a growing need for interpreter and translation services, particularly for those on low income.

## 2.5 Disability

**Increase outreach support to assist the most vulnerable to access NDIS.** The recent State Government announcement of \$70 million to support those with psychosocial disabilities to increase participation with NDIS is welcome, but more funding for assertive outreach is needed to ensure the most vulnerable receive the support assistance and advocacy needed for treatments identified in plans. Without this support, the most vulnerable and complex clients fall through the cracks<sup>25</sup>.

The NDIS has had a massive impact on families and individuals, but there is concern that the NDIS is leaving some of the most vulnerable people behind. Sacred Heart Mission has found that the complexities involved in NDIS application and planning process means that vulnerable people, particularly for those experiencing homelessness and mental health disabilities, are struggling to access the treatment they need. Only 1,800 of 4,400 Victorians with psychosocial disabilities granted approval under the NDIS, accessed the services identified for them.

## 2.6 Mental health and Alcohol and other drug dependence

People living with mental illness are entitled to a quality of life that builds hope, resilience and recovery. **We call on Government to:**

- **increase funding to clinical mental health services** in Victoria to the same or above national averages (1.8 per cent per capita),
- **commit recurrent funding for dual diagnose services**
- **restore funding to the community mental health services** to ensure service provision during the Royal Commission into Mental Health.

Victoria has the lowest per capita expenditure on mental health in the country at 13 per cent below the national average. 11,337 people receive help through mental health community support services, but this is far below the estimated 35,900 Victorians needing this support<sup>26</sup>.

We welcome the establishment of a Royal Commission into Mental Health and the broader inquiry being undertaken by the Productivity Commission<sup>27</sup>. However, **we urge the Victorian Government to** develop and fund an interim plan and transition measures **to address the following urgent service needs** during the estimated two-year<sup>28</sup> inquiry process to:

- **increase funding to mental health services in Victoria** to the same or above national averages for acute beds, community support, early intervention, homelessness, suicide prevention and services for young people, to prevent further deterioration of the mental health system and restore services.
- **advocate with the Commonwealth Government to ensure adequate funding of psychosocial rehabilitation services in Victoria**, including for those people who are not eligible for, or are not accessing the NDIS. It is estimated that 135,000 adult Victorians living with severe mental illness will rely on non-NDIS mental health services<sup>29</sup>.

**We urge Government to increase investment in alcohol and drug treatment (particularly day programs) and rehabilitation services** in regional Victoria and other areas where there is little or no access to services. Recent research show that alcohol is the most common drug for which people seek treatment in Australia at 32 per cent, compare to Amphetamines (26 per

cent) and Cannabis (22 per cent)<sup>30</sup>. Problematic alcohol and drug use has devastating impacts on individuals, families and communities. Stigma and discrimination can stop people seeking the help they need to address issues and reconnect with the community.

### 3. Build safe communities

**We call on Government to build safe communities by expanding investment in prevention, early intervention and rehabilitation at all stages of the criminal justice system** through the extension of programs such as the Judy Lazarus Transition Centre and Restorative Justice Conferencing for young people. In addition, sustain investment to address adolescent family violence.

Building safe communities requires us all to addressing the root causes that contribute to offending; disadvantage and poverty. This means:

- continuing to address family violence
- invest in measures which reduce gender inequality
- challenge gender stereotypes and help people to develop healthy relationships
- strengthening support for victims of crime
- increasing access to legal support so that just outcomes can be achieved for all
- invest in prevention, early intervention and rehabilitation for adults and young people involved in all stages of the criminal justice system.

We remain concerned about the large commitment to increasing police numbers and the planning of additional prisons. While offenders need to take responsibility for their actions and victims of crime need to receive redress and support, building safer communities also requires us all to address the root causes of offending. Further investment is needed in programs for communities that face disadvantage and poverty; including additional prevention, early intervention, rehabilitation programs and post prison release support, and continued commitment to addressing family violence and gender inequality. Only when there is greater structural equality and compassionate responses, will community safety improve.

#### 3.1 Family violence

There were 75,263 family violence incidents reported by Victoria Police last year: 1 incident every 7 minutes<sup>31</sup>. This figure remains unacceptably high and requires ongoing investment to address the root causes of violence. In recent years there has been unprecedented funding to transform our response to family violence by addressing gender inequalities, working with perpetrators to address behaviours and underlying attitudes and improving services and safety for women and children. We urge Government to sustain long-term, bi-partisan commitment to addressing family violence. This includes:

**Increase investment for the range of legal programs that help reduce the incidence of family violence**, build support and safety for women and children and address the causes and behaviours of perpetrator violence.

**Increase investment to adequately fund current family violence support services and fund more flexible and culturally-sensitive support programs.** Family violence is not acceptable in any community or culture.

**Increase funding for crisis, refuge and intensive case management for victim survivors** using services over multiple times, particularly to enable crisis services to develop suitable housing options to build empowerment, awareness and resilience for victim survivors.

**Fund programs that provide childcare to enable parents or carers to attend legal appointments and court.** The *Court Support for Kids* program, successfully piloted by McAuley Services for Women provides play opportunities for children accompanying women at court; and has supported 615 women and 837 children over three courts during family violence proceedings over the past year<sup>32</sup>. An evaluation found that the program reduced the experience of trauma for children and helped to make the legal process run more smoothly for women, legal practitioners, police and the courts. We urge Government to consider expansion of the program across all Victorian headquarter courts in accordance with the rollout of the expanded Specialist Family Violence Court Division<sup>33</sup>.

**Invest in support services for young women in forced marriage arrangements.** Forced marriage is a form of family violence. The current criminal justice response does not address the safety of women who are forced to marry. Consideration of a range of responses to prevent the practice and meet the needs of those at risk, needs to take into account many challenges, including the reluctance of individuals to engage with police, fearing that seeking help could result in criminal proceedings against a close family member. In addition, many women are fearful of violence, are concerned about their children and have a limited understanding about options available to them. We urge the Government to establish services specifically designed for victims of forced marriage that includes:

- support services for individuals that do not require engagement and participation with law enforcement as a gateway to support
- outreach to local communities to provide prevention resources and targeted community-led strategies in areas of high prevalence,
- capacity building of mainstream and specialist workforces including child protection and police on forced marriage issues and a wider community and school education program to build awareness and understanding
- investment to develop a framework that considers and defines; engagement with state and federal laws, service needs and gaps, data collection and monitoring and interventions that protect individuals at risk<sup>34</sup>.

### 3.2 Men's violence

Changing men's behaviour and attitudes will improve men's health and wellbeing, increase community safety and reduce family violence.

**We urge Government to introduce policies in the areas of mental health and wellbeing, crime prevention, alcohol harm reduction and road safety which explicitly recognise the influence that men's attitudes and behaviour can have on poor outcomes and invest in preventative interventions to deliver on this priority<sup>35</sup>.** As a society we need to confront, understand and challenge men's violent behaviours. Corrections Victoria data indicated that 93 per cent of the prisoner population is male<sup>36</sup>. The Men's Project (Jesuit Social Services) is working with men and boys to understand their behaviours and attitudes and support them to build positive relationships and realise their potential<sup>37</sup>

### 3.3 Adults in the justice system

Reducing reoffending must be a key priority for Government, if as a society we are serious about community safety. **We urge Government to commit to targets to reduce offending and recidivism and fund programs to achieve this,** including:

- introducing targets to reduce the number of Aboriginal people and other vulnerable cohorts in the justice system

- more intensive transition programs and therapeutic support for highly vulnerable people leaving prison to ensure meaningful reintegration back into the community, such as the Judy Lazarus Transition Centre
- expanding long term housing and support options to reduce the likelihood of further offending<sup>38</sup>
- Limit the use of isolation so that is only used as a last resort and for no longer than 14 consecutive days, for both adult and young people in prison<sup>39</sup>
- Implement the recommendations developed by the Enabling Justice project<sup>40</sup>, and fund specific specialist supports for women in prison with intellectual disability or cognitive impairment.

In addition, an increase in **early intervention and prevention programs** that address the social drivers of crime such as housing, unemployment and education and training is needed in communities that have experienced long-term disadvantage. This should include a community capacity building approach to crime prevention for a minimum of ten years to ensure that interventions have meaningful impact and that sustained change occurs<sup>41</sup>.

**Fund and establish an Independent Custodial Inspectorate** that is responsible for overseeing prisons in Victoria and reports directly to Parliament. Concerns regarding the lack of accountability and transparency within Victoria's prison system continue to be raised. The establishment of an independent inspectorate would help to address issues such as; the use of isolation and the monitoring of risk management techniques used by custodial staff to ensure prisons are accountable, and that the human rights of those who are incarcerated are upheld<sup>42</sup>.

### 3.4 Young people and diversion

**We urge Government to ensure that the design and funding of the Cherry Creek children's prison includes a strong focus on education, therapeutic support, resocialisation and skill development by highly skilled staff** and that the prison design will encourage transparency and community engagement; central to the rehabilitation process for young people<sup>43</sup>. **We also urge Government to retain and upgrade the Parkville site** for specific vulnerable cohorts which should include a purpose-built transition facility at the site, with a portion of the facility providing accommodation for young women<sup>44</sup>.

International research by Jesuit Social Services found that best practice examples for young people in detention include measures to reduce negative public perceptions that dehumanise and demonise young people. In addition, strengthening custodial and transition support would also help to set young people up for success when they return to the community.

The *Youth Justice Review and Strategy: Meeting needs and reducing Offending* found that over half of youth justice spending is dedicated to youth justice custody<sup>45</sup>. **We urge Government to shift investment away from prisons and towards prevention and early intervention to keep young people away from the justice system wherever possible.** This means strengthening diversion opportunities for young people at all points in the justice system and includes:

- reduce the number of children and young people on remand
- expand and increase the use of restorative justice conferencing to out-of-home care placements to ensure young people are supported to take responsibility for their actions and thus increase confidence in the justice system for families and victims<sup>46</sup>

- restore the dual track system for young people to reverse the erosion of the system cause by recent legislation and expand the system to include young people up to the age of 24<sup>47</sup> to recognise the specific needs of this age group
- increase the capability of the youth justice workforce so they can effectively address the trauma and complex needs of young people; ensure their ongoing education, training and skill development and support the young people to successfully reintegrate back into the community
- ensure that planning for youth justice is underpinned by research and evaluation, data collection, monitoring and reporting that are transparent and collaborative so that all stakeholder share responsibility for improving outcomes for young people<sup>48</sup>.

### 3.5 Addressing place based disadvantage

**We call on Government to commit to addressing place based disadvantage in regional Victoria through long-term investment**, particularly in the following regions: Gippsland, North Eastern Victoria and North Western Victoria. High levels of disadvantage require long-term funding, commitment and local engagement to address the drivers of crime such as poverty, housing, education, training and employment, as well as support services to address issues of family violence, substance addition and mental health. A community capacity building approach to engage the community in co-design and implement local solutions will build sustainability and long term positive impact in addressing disadvantage.

Communities that experience entrenched disadvantage need long term investment to improve community safety. Jesuit Social Services' and Catholic Social Services Australia's *Dropping off the Edge 2015: Persistent Communal Disadvantage in Australia* examination of 667 postcodes in Victoria across 22 different indicators of disadvantage found that that people living in the most disadvantaged postcodes are more likely to have criminal convictions, to have experience of long term unemployment, or have been exposed to child maltreatment and family violence, than other Victorians<sup>49</sup>. The St Vincent de Paul 2016-17 *Annual Review - Face to Face*<sup>50</sup> support these findings and the need to address place-based disadvantage in Gippsland, North Eastern Victorian and North Western Victoria.

**Improve access to legal services for people who are disadvantaged.** Investment in these communities also needs to recognise that people experiencing disadvantage are often more vulnerable to legal problems and are disproportionately represented within the justice system. The *Justice Project Final Report* found that access to justice and law reform should be considered integral components of addressing poverty<sup>51</sup>.

**Increase support for families.** VCOSS research in *Every Suburb Every Town Poverty in Victoria*<sup>52</sup> provides an analysis of poverty across all Victorian communities. The report found that more than one in six Victorian children live in poverty and that the majority of people living in poverty live in families with children<sup>53</sup>. Support services for children and families should be targeted to areas where there are high levels of poverty within the community, including Narre Warren North, Woolert, Melton West, Mornington, Alfredton and Robinvale<sup>54</sup>.

## 4 Invest in jobs, public transport and ease the cost of living

Finding work can be tough in the current environment where there are more people competing for fewer jobs: particularly for young people, people exiting prison or those who have experienced disadvantage over a long time. In addition, people living in the most disadvantaged places in Victoria are more likely to experience long term unemployment. When work is available, getting to work can also present barriers; the rising price of fuel,

traffic congestion, the lack of frequent and regular public transport services leads to long expensive commute times and increases child care costs, adding to the pressures faced by families.

The solution to these issues does not rest with State Government alone – all levels of government, Government, local communities, industry and employers need to work collaboratively to increase the number of jobs available in, and accessible to local communities.

#### 4.1. Invest in job creation

**We urge Government to expand investment in employment initiatives and job readiness programs to create jobs and pathways into employment for those who experience intergenerational disadvantage**, to ensure they have access to support and training to build skills and gain work-readiness. Programs such as Skills First Reconnect and Jobs Bank<sup>55</sup> offer practical support for Victorians who have been unable to secure employment.

The continued strong job growth in Victoria<sup>56</sup> forms a base from which job creation for those who face barriers to employment can occur. We welcome the initiatives the Victorian Government has made to improve skill development and training through free TAFE qualifications<sup>57</sup>.

*Plan Melbourne 2017-2050* (which includes regional Victoria) proposes the development of '20 minute neighbourhoods' – where citizens can live, within 20 minutes travel time to their work, to social and health services, education facilities and retail and community centres<sup>58</sup>. This means investing in job creation and employment opportunities in the rapidly expanding growth corridors of Greater Melbourne (Northern, Western and Southeast) and in regional areas where there have been down turns in industries: La Trobe valley, due to the closure of Hazelwood Power Station; North Eastern Victoria that has seen a down turn in the dairy industry; North Eastern Victoria which has been affected by the drought.

#### 4.2. Improve public transport

**Improve frequency, affordability and reliability of public transport in regional and rural Victorian and metropolitan growth corridors.** Access to affordable and reliable public transport is critical to people on low incomes or concessions as well as for many people accessing employment, education and services. Public transport fares continue to rise<sup>59</sup>, having a greater impact for those on low incomes. We urge Government to review public transport costs to ensure fair pricing for people on concessions. We also urge Government to increase regional bus networks across Victoria to improve frequency, efficiency and reliability.

Ensure infrastructure planning and budget projections make adequate provision for future growth, expansion and maintenance of public transport.

#### 4.3. Ease the cost of living pressures

Cost of living pressures have increased significantly in Victoria. Energy, digital access, high housing and transport costs have a disproportionate impact on low income and disadvantaged households. Food insecurity is an emerging issue for our member organisations. Victorian Council for Social Services research show that more than one in six Victorian children live in poverty and that the majority of people experiencing poverty live in families with children<sup>60</sup>. St Vincent de Paul Society reports a significant increase in the number of people seeking material assistance, particularly where households are feeling the pressure of the rising costs of living and stagnant wage growth<sup>61</sup>. People are choosing between paying bills and buying food.

Expanding foodbank programs can help to alleviate this pressure in the short term, but systemic solutions that address poverty are needed.

**Invest in and regulate fairer energy markets.** Further regulation is required to ensure the reasonable and equitable cost of energy for consumers. There has been a 52% rise in energy costs across Victoria. Since privatisation of the energy market in 2002, gas and electricity prices have almost tripled. Victorians would also benefit from a fairer energy market environment and adequately indexed assistance measures that reduce the cost for low income and disadvantaged households. Greater focus is needed to ensure energy saving programs and subsidies benefit those most in need. The Victorian Council for Social Services estimates that 180,000 Victorians households have persistent bill payment difficulty and almost 60 per cent of these are household with children<sup>62</sup>.

**Improve digital access for those most in need.** Government and business services are increasingly moving to online platforms. People who don't have digital access due to the high cost of technology, lack of skills or service, face disadvantage as a result. Greater public access to digital and internet services is needed to ensure equal access to services and opportunities. Victorians in regional and rural Victoria need greater access to affordable Wi-Fi and internet services. Greater priority should be given to funding programs for people who have low digital literacy skills, to ensure they are not left behind in the digital age.

**Increase access to financial counsellors.** With many households experiencing cost of living pressures, more people are turning to predatory payday lenders to meet costs but find themselves trapped in spiralling debt and high interest rates. Increasing access to financial counsellors, particularly in regional areas, would help people to manage financial stress and reduce debt<sup>63</sup>. In addition, programs that provide financial management skills, while improving financial literacy and diverting people away from predatory lenders (such as Good Shepherd's Firmer Foundations<sup>64</sup>) should be more widely funded across regional Victoria.

**Improve housing affordability.** Many middle and low income earners experience housing stress – spending over 30 per cent of income on housing. This impacts on all areas of the housing sector: making private rental less affordable for low-income families and increasing the number of people seeking housing support and homelessness services. The increase of 680 social housing rental properties this year through the Social Housing Growth Fund<sup>65</sup> and the First Home Owner Grant<sup>66</sup> measures are welcome. However, additional housing through the release of housing lots and improving the timing of planning processes for new developments, would help to ease pressure in the housing affordability.

## Conclusion

We all share responsibility for creating the sort of society we want to live in. Victoria has a vibrant and capable social service sector who work alongside some of the most vulnerable people in Victoria. Government has a responsibility to ensure adequate budgetary provision is made to address the social service needs of all Victorians, particularly for those who are vulnerable.

## Catholic Social Services Victoria members

Aboriginal Catholic Ministry	MacKillop Family Services
Assisi Centre	Marist180
Australian Catholic religious Against Trafficking in Humans (ACRATH)	Mary Aikenhead Ministries
Brigidine Asylum Seeker Project	McAuley Community Services for Women
Cabrini Health	Missionary Sisters of Service
CatholicCare Victoria Tasmania	Nazareth House – Sisters of Nazareth
CatholicCare Melbourne	Office for Justice and Peace, Archdiocese of Melbourne
CatholicCare Sandhurst	Order of Malta Hospice Home Care (Vic) Inc.
Centacare Ballarat	Pregnancy Assistance Frankston
CatholicCare Sandhurst	Rosie's Oblate Youth Ministry
Catholic Womens League Victoria and Wagga Wagga	Sacred Heart Mission St Kilda Inc.
Centacare, Diocese of Ballarat	Society of St Vincent de Paul Society Victoria Inc.
Corazon	St John of God ACCORD
Corpus Christi Community	St Joseph's Flexible Learning Centre
Don Bosco Youth Centre & Hostel Inc.	St Joseph's Home for the Aged - Little Sisters of the Poor
Edmund Rice Camps (Amberley)	St Mary's House of Welcome Ltd
Edmund Rice Refugee and Community Services	The Way Community
Edmund Rice Services – Mt Aitkinson	Vietnamese Catholic Family Mutual Assistance Network
Good Samaritan Inn	Villa Maria Catholic Homes
Good Shepherd Australia New Zealand	VincentCare Victoria
Griefline	Wellsprings for Women
Jesuit Social Services	
John Pierce Centre for Deaf Ministry	
Kewn Kreestha (Family Care Sisters)	
Keysborough Learning Centre	

Agencies that contributed to this submission include:

- Brigidine Asylum Seeker Project
- CatholicCare Victoria and Tasmania
- Centacare Ballarat
- Catholic Sandhurst
- Good Shepherd Australia New Zealand
- Good Samaritan Inn
- Jesuit Social Services
- MacKillop Family Services
- McAuley Community Services for Women
- Sacred Heart Mission, St Kilda
- St Vincent de Paul Society Victoria
- St John of God Accord
- Villa Maria Catholic Homes
- VincentCare Victoria.

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