

Uniting Vic.Tas Submission to 2024-25 Victorian Budget

Stronger communities require a stronger community services sector.

The community sector fills a vital gap in local communities across Victoria. Financial investment from the Victorian Government is essential for the sector to be able to deliver this, and we warmly welcome and appreciate the recent investment of \$259 million over four years to increase annual indexed funding for community services. This decision has provided greater certainty of ongoing funding security for our workforce. However, further investment is required across all funding agreements to reflect the true cost of delivering high-quality services.

Over the past 24 months (FY21-23), Uniting has submitted more than 80 funding applications or tenders to various Victorian Government departments or agencies. The administrative burden of this practice is costly and not recognised by any specific Government investment. Additionally, even when successful in obtaining grant funding, agreements do not cover all items and services necessary to deliver the program, such as vehicles, ICT infrastructure, and refurbishment of facilities.

Uniting calls on the Victorian Government to introduce regular capital grant rounds for community service organisations to acknowledge the increased reliance on organisations to cover the high cost of items, services, and refurbishment of facilities necessary to operate our services. Furthermore, we ask that the government reduce the administrative burden by integrating funding agreements, reducing ad-hoc tendering processes, and standardising longer grant agreements between 5 and 8 years.

Victorians who seek our assistance deserve the highest quality of support. However, the cost of delivering this is too often invisible and continues to rise substantially. This includes costs associated with service design, training, supervision, data collection, maintenance of data management frameworks and systems, evaluation, reporting obligations, practitioner/staff professional development and continuous improvement; and ensuring greater accessibility options to provide services to consumers with additional needs (including interpreter and translation resources).

Uniting calls on the Victorian Government to review the scope of existing and future funding agreements to ensure that all costs associated with delivering services are adequately funded.

Furthermore, the community services sector is not immune to the increasing need to design and implement ongoing and robust cyber security measures necessary to operate in technology environments. The recently released Australian Signals Directorate (ASD) Annual Cyber Threat Report 2022-23 demonstrates the persistent threat that malicious cyber activity continues to pose to Australian organisations. This past year alone we have seen significant data breaches resulting in millions of individuals having their information compromised.¹ Despite community service organisations such as Uniting needing to continuously adapt our systems and processes to secure and protect our consumers' data, this critical work has been self-directed and internally funded.

Uniting calls on the Victorian Government to acknowledge the increasing risk and threat of cyber security incidents in the community services sector and develop and invest in the strategies and infrastructure necessary for prevention.

Safe, secure, affordable, and appropriate housing options for all Victorians.

Victoria is experiencing a housing affordability crisis, the culmination of a chronic social housing deficit coinciding with worsening affordability and availability of private rentals. Uniting is at the forefront of responding to it. We work to provide meaningful support to people experiencing housing stress and homelessness within the vast number of programs we deliver. However, unless the Victorian

¹ Commonwealth of Australia 2023, Australian Signals Directorate, [2022-23 ASD Cyber Threat Report](#).

Government addresses the shortage of social and affordable housing and issues affecting people's ability to meet the cost of private rentals, these programs can only have limited impact.

Victoria's chronic social housing deficit is the result of a steady, decades-long decline in the proportion of dwellings available for public and social housing. The decline in government investment in social housing stock over the past few decades, coupled with a sustained focus from both Federal and State Governments to incentivise investment ownership of housing as a means of wealth generation, has created a housing system that prioritises the monetary value of a house over the emotional, physical, and social value of a home.

Uniting urges the Victorian Government to commit to building 60,000 new social housing dwellings by 2034, with 40,000 completed by 2028 to meet current demand.

As the stock of available social housing decreased, low-income households that would historically be supported by that safety net have been forced to rely on the private rental market or risk experiencing homelessness. Compounding this risk, as we have seen in more recent years, is the cost of private rentals rising dramatically. In the 12 months leading up to September 2023, we saw the highest annual increase in median rents across Melbourne since reporting began in 2000. This same quarter also saw the lowest proportion of all new lettings deemed affordable across Victoria (decreasing to 8.8 per cent, compared to 10.3 per cent in June 2023 and September 2022).²

Uniting urges the Victorian Government to introduce regulations to protect renters from unfair rent increases and to ensure their homes are liveable and of a quality standard.

Uniting also recommends increased dedicated funding support for tenants' legal and housing advocacy through programs such as the Tenancy Advocacy Assistance Program, the Private Rental Assistance Program (PRAP) and PRAP Plus to ensure that, where possible, renters can remain in their homes.

As the housing stress increases and is compounded by the rising cost of living, we are seeing increasing numbers of people, especially families, seeking support at our emergency relief, tenancy support and homelessness services. More and more people are finding themselves without the material resources to live, unable to afford basic healthcare and forced out of social and community connections.

The Victorian Youth Housing Alliance, of which Uniting is a member, have long called for a targeted housing and homelessness response for young people in recognition that 16 per cent of people experiencing homelessness in Victoria are aged 15-24.³ Many significant barriers exist to young people acquiring and maintaining private tenancies in the rental market. Most apparent is the financial barrier young people face when compared to others seeking rental accommodation resulting from grossly inadequate Youth Allowance and Commonwealth Rent Assistance entitlements. Due to their financial constraints, young people are often not a priority cohort for many social and affordable housing providers who need to focus on financial viability for operation and sustainability.

Uniting calls for the Victorian Government to dedicate 15 per cent of the combined Social Housing Accelerator Fund and the Regional Housing Fund to social housing for young people.

Working to ensure any period of homelessness is brief and non-recurring.

Uniting practitioners work with ambition and optimism for long-term positive outcomes for every person who accesses our services. However, these ambitions are often hindered by a fragmented and under-resourced specialist homelessness service system, insufficient funding, workforce shortages and burnout. We also have inappropriate and inadequate short and medium-term accommodation options, shortages in long-term affordable public, community and social housing, and limited capacity to refer people to specialist, wrap-around support that addresses concurrent life circumstances and supports people to maintain tenancies.

² Homes Victoria. (2023). Rental Report September Quarter 2023.

³ Australian Institute of Health and Welfare (2023) [Specialist homelessness services annual report 2022-23](#), AIHW, Australian Government.

One of the greatest challenges for our specialist homelessness services is the ever-increasing demand for assistance with decreasing availability of options to support all those seeking assistance. For instance, our Horsham homelessness entry point had to turn away 646 of the 1268 people seeking assistance in the last financial year due to their inability to provide immediate assistance, an average of more than two people every day. In such situations, teams are forced to use demand management strategies, such as imposing limits on support periods or accommodation stays. The Uniting Horsham entry point is funded for 2FTE to support the entire Wimmera region; therefore, it can be said that, on average, both FTEs had to turn away someone seeking assistance every single working day.

While the only long-term solution to reducing this strain on the system is to reduce the number of people that need support, there are short-term solutions that can be implemented while longer-term systemic housing reform is operationalised through larger strategies such as Victoria's Housing Statement and the National Housing and Homelessness Plan.

Increasing funding for specialist homelessness services will not correct systemic failures, but it is a necessary short-term solution to continue to meet growing demand. It must be coupled with strategies and ongoing incentives to attract, train, and retain a highly skilled and resilient workforce and a greater guarantee of sustainability. Practitioners report frustration and often despair when a significant proportion of time allocated for a 'support period' is spent on administrative tasks, such as navigating and preparing applications for various available funding streams within narrow eligibility requirements, issues that are only compounded by the current crisis-level shortages of safe, secure, and appropriate accommodation options. Recent data from AIHW shows that while this problem is widespread across the nation, it is highly concentrated in Victoria. Specialist homelessness services data highlights that in 2022-23, 62 per cent (5,305) of the 8,464 people nationwide who had their support period closed due to 'Maximum service period reached' lived in Victoria.⁴ The inability to continue supporting someone as long as necessary revokes the opportunity to provide holistic, person-centred, and therapeutic responses and can have detrimental impacts on both practitioners and those seeking homelessness support.

Uniting calls on the Victorian Government to urgently increase targeted funding and investment for specialist homelessness services increase the number of initial assessment and planning workers at homelessness entry points and review options to ensure more flexibility in funding arrangements. Uniting also calls for an expansion of funding for specialist homelessness services with proven results in reducing the number of people experiencing rough sleeping, like the Street to Home program, which incorporates assertive outreach. *Please see the attached funding proposal to address the lack of a specific service supporting the Wimmera region.*

Similarly, there is an urgent need to increase the stock of purpose-built crisis, short-term, and medium-term supported accommodation. This stock may be newly built or repurposed from existing stock but must be designed with the needs of specific populations in mind. Uniting is particularly concerned with an increasing reliance on motel accommodation as a response to homelessness and the ongoing risk of further harm this causes for women and children escaping family violence. This forced reliance on motel accommodation as a substitute for purpose-built crisis accommodation is incredibly unreliable. Uniting practitioners delivering services in a regional area report that their ability to provide the basic level of crisis response to someone experiencing homelessness is highly vulnerable to such things as school holiday periods, regional events, and other peak times for travel in their local areas.

Uniting urges the Victorian Government to put strategies in place to stop the reliance on private motels for crisis accommodation, including a significant investment in the construction of purpose-built supported crisis accommodation.

Supporting children, young people, and their families.

The increase in the rate of children having contact with the child protection system requires additional, sustained, and consistent investment in early intervention programs. With early intervention, families

⁴ Australian Institute of Health and Welfare (2023) [Specialist homelessness services annual report 2022-23](#), AIHW, Australian Government.

can get assistance before issues escalate, thereby avoiding situations of family breakdown, separation, or external interventions.

Uniting operates several programs that provide early and timely interventions to prevent families from entering the family services sector, including the Early Help pilot program. This program is being delivered across a small number of schools, Maternal and Child Health and Early Learning Centres. Our practitioners involved in delivering this program across multiple regions in Victoria have reported that early outcomes of the pilot indicate a real impact in intervening early with families before their problems become more complex. **Therefore, Uniting urges the Victorian Government** to invest in the expansion of the Early Help Pilot program to ensure more families have access to support that is proving to be successful in intervening early before problems become more complex. We look forward to working with the government to realise the full potential of this program.

Uniting also recommends the Victorian Government increase investment in other crucial early intervention programs within Integrated Family Services, including expanding existing targeted funding for specialist disability practitioners and programs supporting children with complex disability needs.

Child wellbeing in the Orange Door.

Uniting acknowledges that developing and implementing the Orange Door (TOD) model placed Victoria as the national leader in responding to family violence. However, in our experience as a partner agency servicing five Orange Door areas across Victoria, there are barriers in the system to intervening early and providing necessary responses where family violence is not necessarily the primary factor. Our practitioners note that often demand, conflicting practice models and funding disparities limit the capacity of TOD to meet the needs of the entire family, particularly that of children and young people.

While progress has been made to address some of these challenges, and service providers are working to the best of their ability to meet community needs, staff continue to report grappling with complex cases where community need outstrips staffing capacity. These issues are compounded by resource inequity across the state from both a geographical and a therapeutic lens. Some regions where we operate face high staff turnover, ongoing vacancies, high levels of complex needs within a community, and limited referral options for ongoing specialist support, meaning many people are not receiving a timely service response.

This means that high-risk complex family violence cases take priority, and child wellbeing cases are de-prioritised due to a lack of resources. The demands on TOD staff are significant and contribute to high turnover, presenting organisations with challenges filling vacancies and concerns for staff wellbeing.

Uniting recommends the Victorian Government increase funding and resourcing capacity within the Orange Doors to ensure equity across all the domains of the integrated service model and ensure children and young people can access services and support as soon as possible.

Addressing the overrepresentation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children in OoHC.

In Victoria, around 10,000 children and young people live in out of home care (OoHC) at any one time, with this number growing at a rate of 10 per cent each year. Most of these children live in kinship or foster care homes. Children and young people in OoHC are more likely to experience mental ill health than their peers, have complex behaviours related to past trauma and the prevalence of suicidal ideation is higher than in the general population.⁵

Uniting welcomed the 2023-24 budget announcement of \$548 million to meet the growing demand for residential care and to provide more therapeutic support in residential care homes. For many years, Uniting had strongly advocated that all children in residential out of home care should have access to therapeutic care tailored to meet their needs, including employing appropriately skilled and trained staff who can provide specialist trauma-informed care to children and young people.

⁵ Anglicare Victoria (2019) *Media release: [Improving mental health outcomes in Out of Home Care](#)*

However, there is work to be done particularly to address the continuing unacceptable over-representation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children in out-of-home care, with First Nations children now making up over one quarter (26 per cent) of all children in out-of-home care in Victoria. We draw the Government's attention to the work of the Yoorrook Justice Commission and the recommendations contained in the *Yoorrook for Justice* report calling for systemic reform to the OoHC system in Victoria to enable culturally safe and appropriate care to be provided to First Nations children and young people.⁶

Educational outcomes for children and young people in OoHC.

In 2022, Uniting provided a submission to the *Educational Experiences of Children in Out-of-Home-Care Inquiry*, which included recommendations to address the individual learning needs of children and young people, protecting and promoting their right to education.

The importance of trauma-informed care for young people in OoHC is well-established. However, there is a gap in the understanding and provision of trauma-informed care throughout mainstream schooling in Victoria. In Uniting's discussions with young people, we were told of a lack of theoretical understanding of trauma-informed care and about the real impact it is having on educational experiences.

It is extremely important that children and young people who have experienced complex trauma and who are living with its functional impacts on their internal state, levels of physiological hyperarousal, and their psychology and capacity to regulate are not unconsciously penalised and shamed by being misunderstood, by expectations that they cannot live up to and by the imposition of cognitive interventions such as suspensions, detentions, and exclusions. It is understood that this creates a systemic tension that will be difficult to manage in a mainstream school setting.

Uniting calls on the Victorian Government to support an initiative requiring the Department of Education to fund regular professional development and ongoing training for Victorian teachers relating to trauma and trauma-informed care.

This should be undertaken in consultation with services that specialise in working with traumatised children. There are, for example, training packages for working with the impacts of trauma that apply behavioural and strongly cognitive approaches when it is well documented by trauma experts that these are not appropriate for use with traumatised individuals on the basis that they require greater levels of executive brain function than traumatised children and young people are able to manage at certain points in their lives.

Uniting urges the Victorian Government to provide better access to a range of alternative schooling options that are responsive to the needs of children and young people in OoHC, including online classes and flexible learning approaches and schools.

Supporting carers of children and young people.

Uniting operates a range of home based care options for children and young people, including foster care. Analysis of statewide foster care data, commissioned by the Centre for Excellence in Child and Family Welfare, reveals a statewide crisis where cost of living pressure is significantly impacting the number of new foster carer enquiries and the number of new carers completing the carer accreditation process in Victoria has dropped by 26 per cent in 2023.⁷

Victoria has the lowest Care Allowance of any state in Australia, and consequently, many volunteer carers are forced to use their own money to pay for day-to-day expenses. Data from the Foster Care Association of Victoria shows that approximately 60 per cent of carers report using their own finances to pay for the costs of care, and this is disproportionately impacting women, who make up around 80 per cent of carers.⁸ A Victorian carer of a child up to 7 years of age only receives \$213.50 per week to

⁶ Yoorrook Justice Commission (2023) *Yoorrook For Justice. Report into Victoria's Child Protection and Criminal Justice Systems*, Yoorrook Justice Commission, Melbourne.

⁷ The Centre for Excellence in Child and Family Welfare (2023) [Media release: "Rethink" needed to address foster care crisis](#)

⁸ Department of Families, Fairness and Housing (DFFH) (2022) [Stronger Carers, stronger Children](#)

cover general household, education, and health expenses. In addition to financial pressures facing foster carers, CFECFW research has shown that rigid care models act as barriers to both recruitment and retention of foster carers.⁹

Uniting calls on the Victorian Government to invest in Home Based Care by appropriately funding foster care services at levels required to recruit, train, and retain carers to support children impacted by trauma.

Supporting households experiencing energy hardship.

Rates of energy hardship are increasing in Australia and are particularly prevalent among those on the lowest incomes, as well as those on income support, people with a disability, and single parent households. Energy hardship manifests in a variety of ways, including difficulty paying bills, energy rationing, reduced spending in other areas and negative effects on health and wellbeing.

Energy Efficiency Services, like those delivered by Uniting, work with individuals and families on low incomes and those experiencing energy hardship to support households to better understand and manage their energy use and costs.

In 2022, we released research undertaken by Uniting in partnership with the Centre for Social Impact at Swinburne University of Technology, looking at the benefits and gaps of Uniting Energy Support Services. The research drew on three datasets, including billing data for 847 households across three states (NSW, Victoria, and QLD) and interview and survey data from 40 households.

Overall, *'It's a lifeline': the long term approach to improving energy support programs for households experiencing vulnerability* found that households experienced a complex set of factors contributing to their energy hardship.¹⁰ While the Uniting Energy Efficiency Service produced a range of energy, health and wellbeing outcomes, energy hardship often persisted due to a range of factors beyond the control of households.

Experiences of recurrent or ongoing poverty and poor-quality housing intersected with factors such as negative landlord and energy retailer behaviour, which in turn exacerbated individual and familial factors, including poor health, disability, family circumstances and insecure employment. The research also found that many households were already using less than the Australian average energy use, including a third of Victorian households, meaning that under-use rather than over-use is the substantive issue for many households. Some households were 'rationing' their energy use, meaning they would go without necessary energy use (such as heating or cooking) to try and manage their bills.

These structural issues beyond the control of households were keeping many low-income households trapped in energy hardship. Uniting is deeply concerned about these findings, particularly the under-use and rationing of energy by low-income Victorian households. Unless matters like tenancy rights, access to quality and energy efficient housing, energy retailer and landlord behaviour are addressed, energy hardship is likely to continue.

Uniting calls on the Victorian Government to improve the regulation of housing standards, both for rental homes (public and private) and/or for homes at the point of resale.

Making housing more energy efficient is one mechanism to help reduce energy hardship. **Uniting asks the Victorian Government to** commit to targeted investment to improve the energy efficiency of poor-quality homes, including subsidies and rebates to support appliance upgrades and replacements – with no co-payment requirement for people in financial hardship.

Further, Uniting calls on the Victorian Government to:

⁹ The Centre for Excellence in Child and Family Welfare (2023) [Media release: "Rethink" needed to address foster care crisis](#)

¹⁰ Wilson. E., Ambrose, M., Qian-Khoo, J., Bedggood, R., Rinnovasi, K., Cairns, M., Goncalves, J. & Maile, S. (2023). ['It's a lifeline': A long-term approach to improving home energy support programs for households facing vulnerability](#). Centre for Social Impact, Swinburne University of Technology

- implement 'minimum standards' regulations for existing dwellings and mandatory reporting on a property's energy efficiency rating;¹¹
- invest in the design of schemes that support householders (including tenants) to upgrade home fixtures, solar installation and electrification upgrades.¹² The design of these strategies needs to carefully address access by all groups (owner-occupiers, landlords, tenants of both public and private rentals) and all types of housing stock.¹³

Investment in strategies to address the needs of low income and disadvantaged households is also required. **Uniting recommends** the expansion of targeted government supplements, such as the Victorian Government's 'Power Saving Bonus', to ensure they are widely and automatically available to all those who need them.

Building and protecting household resilience by supporting financial wellbeing.

Financial counselling plays a pivotal role in making sure a person maintains housing, has access to essential needs, keeps children engaged in education, fosters family connections and productivity, and contributes to the work towards ending intergenerational poverty.

As highlighted in more detail by Financial Counselling Victoria in their 2024-25 Budget Submission, at present, there is an urgent need to allocate resources promptly to the financial counselling sector to alleviate pressure and reduce service wait times. Our practitioners supporting Victorians with their financial wellbeing call for the expansion of the Financial Counselling Program (FCP) as an essential component of addressing the growing demand and complexity stemming from the current cost of living crisis.

Uniting urges the Victorian Government to commit to renewing current funding agreements (with indexation) for another three years to provide certainty and stability during the current review process and, in that time, increase the FCP by 10FTE each year, with a commitment to retain additional positions within ongoing funding.

Reducing the harm of alcohol and other drugs.

Uniting is a provider of specialist youth, adult and family alcohol and other drug treatment services, providing outreach, counselling, therapeutic day programs, harm reduction and overdose prevention services and a range of specialist forensic programs for those involved in the criminal justice system. We also deliver residential services, including two specialist youth withdrawal services – Tabor House in Ballarat and Williams House in Coburg and operate Victoria's only mother-baby withdrawal service co-located in our adult withdrawal services in Ivanhoe. In addition, we opened the Gippsland Youth Residential Rehabilitation Service in 2021.

The benefits of AOD treatment services are well established. At Uniting, outcomes commonly reported by our consumers include reduced AOD-related harm, reduction, or cessation of AOD use, improved health and wellbeing, improved social functioning and improvements to relationships with family. Importantly, consumers frequently report improvements in their mental health and wellbeing.

However, despite these well-documented benefits to individuals, families, and the broader community, AOD services across Victoria are under increasing demand and cannot currently provide timely access to all those seeking support.

Supporting and growing the specialist AOD workforce

The AOD workforce comprises many passionate, dedicated and committed individuals working under significant pressure. While working in the AOD field can be rewarding, research undertaken by the

¹¹ This has been called for in previous research by Perényi Á, Bedggood RE, Meyer D, Bedggood P, Farquharson K, Johansson C, Milgate G. (2019). [*Exploring the Effectiveness of an Energy Efficiency Behaviour Change Project on Well-Being Outcomes for Indigenous Households in Australia.*](#)

¹² Bryant, D, Porter, E, Rama, I & Sullivan, D. (2022), Power pain: an investigation of energy stress in Australia, Brotherhood of St. Laurence, Fitzroy.

¹³ *Ibid*

National Centre for Education and Training on Addiction (NCETA) found more than 40% of the workforce were reporting moderate to high levels of burnout.¹⁴

Elevated levels of stress combined with increasing demand, the complexity of client issues, the administrative burden of service delivery and the negative community attitudes towards AOD and, by extension, the AOD workforce present an increasingly challenging work environment for our staff.

Retention of qualified and experienced workers is a long-standing issue for Uniting and our colleagues across the Victorian AOD service system. These include recruitment and retention of AOD counsellors, nurses, and other medical professionals, such as General Practitioners and Addiction Medicine Specialists.

Increased nursing and medical staffing is required across specialist AOD services, particularly in residential settings, to ensure appropriate clinical care for people experiencing acute withdrawal and underlying chronic health conditions. Our residential services support people with highly complex drug withdrawals alongside dealing with experiences of complex trauma and often untreated health conditions.

For these reasons, Uniting has sought to re-imagine the service delivery model where Addiction Medicine is more closely aligned with community treatment settings.

Uniting calls on the Victorian Government to develop a statewide AOD workforce strategy. The strategy should address the stigma associated with working in the AOD sector, challenge attitudes that deter medical professionals from specialising in addiction medicine, address retention rates within the sector and focus on preventing stress, burnout, and vicarious trauma for AOD workers.

Uniting asks the Victorian Government to resource a medical operation budget for residential and non-residential withdrawal services to allow for the purchasing of General Practitioner, Nurse Practitioner and Addiction medicine or Addiction psychiatry sessions.

¹⁴ NCETA (2020)