



# **2020 – 2021 Budget submission**

## **Old Colonists' Association of Victoria**

September 2020

## **Executive Summary**

Old Colonists' Association of Victoria welcomes the commitment by the Andrews Labor Government to older people, and particularly the assistance that has been made with mental health and other measures through the pandemic.

Nevertheless, all efforts are stymied when we cannot, as a community, end the systemic age discrimination which is a major barrier to the daily social and economic activities of many older Victorians. We believe that these barriers will become even more problematic as we emerge from lockdown, leaving older people – and others – anxious and lacking in social and physical confidence.

We know from our daily interactions with our older Victorian residents in Berwick, Euroa, Fitzroy North and St Helena that they need and want targeted investment to ensure that they, whatever their age and stage, can age well and return to leading as full lives as possible.

We concur with VCOSS that Victoria needs to shift to a Wellbeing Budget, which in part is what has been happening with the various COVID-19 announcements made to date. We would welcome a commitment to bolstering plans to step up the development of 20 minute walkable communities as they promote vibrant and liveable communities, foster community wellbeing and promote civic engagement and participation in democracy. We welcome a budget and reform that puts older Victorians at the forefront of government thinking and investment.

A wellbeing budget approach is like those being delivered in New Zealand, Scotland and Iceland. Under this model, all branches of government are responsible for improving community wellbeing through budget priorities, policy-making and reporting.

By adopting a Wellbeing Budget, Victoria would continue to lead the nation in social policy and the State would finally have a bold and overarching framework to direct investments in housing, justice and family violence and elder abuse, ending the digital divide, healthy ageing – all of which underpin areas of ongoing government reform. To help guide this decision-making and monitor progress, comprehensive data collection and analysis would also be necessary.

We call for investment in these areas:

- Liveable communities that enable positive contributions of older people
- A public transport system that gets all older Victorians where they need to go
- Strengthening the elder abuse response
- Provide a Whole-of-Government Strategy for older Victorians
- Safe, secure and affordable housing

## Liveable Communities

Social participation is essential to building liveable and resilient communities. All Victorians have felt the 'alone' and 'lonely' effects of the coronavirus pandemic this year, and need to be encouraged and supported to reconnect with families and friends physically. Victorians must be encouraged and supported to maintain and develop our connections to family, friends and recreational activities and groups as we age.

The experience of isolation and loneliness is of great concern for the health and wellbeing of Victorians in the 21st century, with one in four Australians reporting being lonely, according to a recent survey conducted by the Australian Psychological Society and Swinburne University of Technology.

The survey confirmed that people feeling lonely often experience poorer quality of life and lower feelings of wellbeing, as well as discomfort in social situations and poorer social connections.

Overall, older Victorians experience isolation and loneliness at similar rates to younger Victorians. However, the risk of becoming socially isolated may be increased by some common experiences of later life, and among groups of older people. Loneliness might not sound like a serious threat, but research has shown that social isolation and loneliness impede people's physical and mental health, and can pose a bigger risk to people's wellbeing than smoking or air pollution.

We draw attention to the impact of Men's Sheds, a well-known community initiative that tackles loneliness, focusing on men who are no longer in paid employment, whether because of retirement, redundancy, health issues or other reasons. Men's Sheds participants build and repair things for the community, but the benefit for participants is coming together to build relationships and find meaningful purpose. They are a cost-effective way of combatting loneliness and social isolation, improving people's wellbeing and reducing their reliance on acute health services.

## Recommendations

- Build community understanding and respect through investment in sustainable initiatives that seek to build positive relationships between generations.
- Provide on-going investment in local communities to foster inclusion of older people and undertake evaluation to develop a knowledge base of what works, depending on different environmental conditions.
- Review current capital works programs that target seniors' groups to ensure equitable investment in the infrastructure needs of all relevant organisations.
- Invest in clubs and groups to continue to provide an essential service for older Victorians, through dedicated support with planning and meeting their financial and legal accountabilities.
- Address the lack of availability of appropriate physical activity programs in rural townships through funding to develop workforce capacity to deliver physical activity programs that meet the needs of older people.

## Transport

One of the enablers of maintaining our social connections as we age is to be able to travel to meet with family and friends, and participate in recreational activities of one's choosing. That's why OCAV urges the Victorian Government to address transport access issues for older Victorians and implement our transport recommendations.

The Andrews Labor Government is investing significantly in large scale infrastructure projects to bring our transport system up to date with the demands of modern day Victoria.

OCAV shares the government's view that a well-integrated and sustainable transport network improves the quality of life for Victorians. It is vital that all infrastructure projects consider the travel amenity needs of older Victorians (that often share similar needs to younger Victorians with disabilities) and that service gaps in transport are addressed as a matter of priority.

Walking is the most accessible physical activity available to most Victorians, regardless of socio economic status and age. Yet, pedestrian safety is of great concern to older Victorians who are over represented in pedestrian fatalities. A more walkable environment can also help foster a sense of social connection and community within cities and neighbourhoods. To this end, we support the notion of 20 minute walkable communities.

In Victoria, there has been a long-standing gap in the provision of supported, community based transport. This type of transport is used by people who cannot access public or private transport.

There is a known unmet demand for this transport by people who do not qualify for, or cannot access adequate transport support through Commonwealth funded aged and disability service systems. This situation is worst in rural, regional and interface areas that are poorly serviced by public transport.

In 2020-21 OCAV calls upon the Victorian Government to:

- Invest in a feasibility study to determine the demand and most suitable model for a community based, supported transport program to service transport disadvantaged Victorians.
- Ensure that all new development and planned refurbishment of public transport infrastructure includes provision of amenities and facilities that will encourage use by older Victorians.
- Increase the ongoing investment in driver awareness programs targeting older drivers to increase their confidence through safer driving practices. Priority should be given to expanding programs to outer urban and regional localities, where drivers typically travel longer distances and have less access to public transport.
- Prevent injuries and deaths and increase older Victorians' uptake of active transport through investing in infrastructure to enhance walkability in local neighbourhoods and safer pedestrian routes. For example, ensure that all traffic light controls are made covid-safe- so that no buttons need to be pushed; further, allow more time for pedestrians to cross roads safely.

## Towards ending elder abuse

Research shows that about one in six older people experience abuse. Victoria needs a whole-of-government strategy to respond to this and improve older people's wellbeing and inclusion in the community.

This strategy could include ongoing support for local elder abuse prevention networks, funding training so frontline staff can detect and respond to abuse, and investing in specialist services. It would need to be designed in a genuine partnership with older people and their advocacy organisations, and recognise both the damaging impact of ageism and the importance of intersectionality.

The Andrews Labor Government has done significant work to recognise elder abuse as a form of family violence. Research suggests that up to 14 per cent of older people may experience it in the form of physical, emotional, financial, social or sexual abuse. Elder abuse can cause stress, anxiety and depression and lead to increased risk of ill health, hospitalisation and early death.

Elder abuse that results in homelessness and poverty can make it more difficult for older people to cope with illness, disability and ageing.

### In 2020-21 OCAV calls upon the Victorian Government to:

- Resource research of perpetrator behaviour to inform the development of behaviour change and other support mechanisms targeting perpetrators of elder abuse.
- Increase support to survivors of elder abuse to access support, move out of crisis, and improve their safety, well-being and independence
- Invest in a workforce development training package for Community Legal Centres to build the sector's capacity to provide specialist advice and representation to elder abuse survivors.
- Fund a specialist, multidisciplinary secondary consultation service for Orange Doors and family violence services working with elder abuse survivors and perpetrators.

## Provide a Whole-of-Government Strategy for older Victorians

There is a need for a Whole-of-Government Strategy for older Victorians to guide development of future measures to address identified issues and challenges faced by older people and coordination and alignment of relevant government policy and programs across portfolios.

The flow-on economic and social advantages of the inclusion of older people in our society are substantial in indicators such as economic productivity, social contribution, community resilience and intergenerational cohesion. The Victorian community does suffer from endemic ageism that diminishes the capacities and contributions of many older people. A strategy would assist overturning this.

Although not in the aegis of the Victorian government, aged care has come under the spotlight largely due to the COVID-19 pandemic. As part of its role in the National Cabinet, we encourage the Victorian Government to press for systemic reform and for the recommendations to be followed through. While aged care is significant, it is not the only issue facing older people. Employment and housing policies, for example, are a key underpinning of an effective retirement income policy. Good primary health care has a significant influence the wellbeing of older people. These three policy arenas are under the direct influence of the Victorian government and should be connected under a whole of government strategy.

### *Gender lens*

In addition to adopting the development of a whole-of-government strategy for older Victorians, we also recommend that especial attention is given to older women who are most affected by lack of housing, elder abuse, and lack of finances.

We recommend a gender lens is applied in budget and policy-making. This would allow the Government to be more attuned to how policies and programs affect women, and therefore to reduce gender inequality, combat harmful gender stereotypes and empower women.

### *Energy and health*

Many health conditions can increase a person's energy consumption and drive up their power bills. Daily charging of an electric scooter increases power use, a person with respiratory illness might need to keep their house warmer than usual, and people recovering from illness or injury, or who live with chronic illness or disability, might spend much of their time at home and therefore consume more energy daily.

Victoria's existing Medical Cooling Concession is narrowly defined, and only available to people who have a medical condition that stops them maintaining their body temperature. The Victorian Government could introduce a broader 'Energy for Health' concession to apply to people with conditions that are exacerbated by temperature changes, affect body temperature maintenance, require charging or using communication, medical and mobile devices or require lengthy periods of time at home.

## Safe, secure and affordable housing

As a distinctive way to jumpstart the economy which has suffered greatly during 2020 because of the coronavirus pandemic, we encourage the Victorian government to do even more than its announcements to date to build new public and community housing properties.

In 2019, the Victorian Government followed through with a commitment to address the state's chronic shortage of public and community housing by building 1,000 new properties over four years. But more than 82,000 Victorians remain on the wait list for public and community housing,<sup>25</sup> and this figure is tipped to hit 100,000 by mid-2020.

Public and community housing currently makes up just 3.2 per cent of all housing in Victoria, well below the national average of 4.5 per cent.<sup>26</sup> With limited access to public and community housing, many older Victorians are struggling to maintain private rental accommodation, paying more rent than they can afford, going without essentials for daily life, or on the edge of homelessness.

*Old Colonists' Association of Victoria was established 151 years ago to provide housing for older Victorians in need. Our waiting list continues to grow. We have several housing projects which require investment to test new ways of housing baby boomers and to upgrade our existing housing stock. Over half of our 500 residents were either homeless or at risk of homelessness before coming into one of our four retirement villages.*

In 2020-21 OCAV calls upon the Victorian Government to:

- Commit to building at least 6,000 new public and community houses each year for the next 10 years. This will do much to keep pace with population growth, to house Victorians on the wait list and those living in extreme housing stress
- Assist NFP retirement villages, such as OCAV, with matching funds to plan and develop social housing specifically for older Victorians. This includes ensuring new housing is both age and dementia friendly rather than investing in dementia- specific communities which contribute to endemic ageism.
- Champion accessible housing standards. Currently Victorian housing standards are not suitable for many people with disability, older people and other diverse community needs. Only five per cent of Australian homes are fully accessible. Simple changes to the building code, such as requiring adequate door widths and step-less shower recesses, would make homes more liveable for people with different needs.
- The Victorian Government can accelerate the increase of public and community housing by encouraging the private sector to play its part, and to partner with known and respected NFP housing providers. Victoria builds about 30,000 new apartments every year. Making sure a percentage of these are social housing for older people would provide many more Victorians with a home, and help shorten waiting lists.