

Victorian State Budget 2025-26

Submission

November 2024

Acknowledgement of Traditional Owners

Safe and Equal acknowledges Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples as the traditional and ongoing custodians of the lands on which we live and work. We pay respects to Elders past and present. We acknowledge that sovereignty has never been ceded and recognise First Nations peoples' rights to self-determination and continuing connections to land, waters, community and culture.

Honouring Victim Survivors

Safe and Equal acknowledges the strength and resilience of adults, children and young people who have experienced family violence and recognises that it is essential that responses to family violence are informed by their expert knowledge and advocacy. We pay respects to those who have not survived and acknowledge the lasting impacts of this preventable violence on families and communities.

About Safe and Equal

Safe and Equal is the peak body for Victorian organisations that specialise in family and gender-based violence across the continuum, including primary prevention, early intervention, response and recovery. Our vision is a world where everyone is safe, respected and thriving, living free from family and gender-based violence.

As a peak, we work with and for our members to prevent and respond to violence, building a better future for adults, children and young people experiencing, at risk of, or recovering from family and gender-based violence. While we know that most family violence is perpetrated by men against women and children, we recognise that family violence impacts people across a diversity of gender identities, social and cultural contexts, and within various intimate, family and other relationships. We apply an intersectional feminist lens in our work to address the gendered drivers of violence, and how these overlap and intersect with additional forms of violence, oppression and inequality.

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Executive Summary

Family and gender-based violence in Australia is a national crisis. The recent increase in reporting of family and gender-based homicides is just one indication of the need to continue, strengthen and scale up current approaches to ensure all victim survivors in Victoria are safe. According to one count, 85 women and 13 children have died this year, but we know that is not the full picture. Deaths in First Nations communities are not fully acknowledged and nor are we accurately collecting the data on the deaths of children and devastating impacts on their lives.

Recent funding announcements by both the Commonwealth and State Governments are welcomed. These announcements have contributed to community expectations that all victim survivors of family violence can get support individually tailored to address their needs, when they need it. However, for too many victim survivors across the country, including in Victoria, this is not the case.

Feedback from Safe and Equal's members indicates that resources are stretched and do not meet demand, and that significant time and effort is spent triaging to ensure that the clients who are at highest risk receive a timely response. Despite the best efforts of the family violence response sector, support is focused on immediate family violence crisis with little capacity to address ongoing support and recovery. Consequently, many victim survivors wait several weeks to receive support; some victim survivors do not receive the support they need; and some victim survivors are turned away from services because they are not at serious risk.

Victim survivors who do receive support have conveyed that the support is welcomed but insufficient to meet their ongoing needs, including their recovery journey. As one victim survivor expressed, "It feels like the eligibility criteria are designed so that you don't qualify for help."¹

The focus of National Cabinet on preventing family and gender-based violence provides an unprecedented opportunity for collaboration between state and federal governments to continue to fund evidence-based programs, while also exploring innovative approaches and programs across primary prevention, early intervention, response and recovery. To achieve the long-term goal of the *National Plan to End Violence Against Women and Children (2022-2032)* to end family violence within a generation, ongoing, coordinated investment is needed along the entire continuum.

The Third Rolling Action Plan for *Ending Family Violence – Victoria's Plan for Change* is expected to be released in early 2025. Actions contained in the Third Rolling Action Plan require appropriate levels of investment to ensure that the goals the Victorian Government has committed to are achieved. It is essential that we continue to build on the foundational work done in Victoria, to ensure we have a family violence system that gives victim survivors a voice,

¹Victim survivor feedback provided at service system access consultation.

a home, and a timely and clear pathway to recovery. This response must be complemented by primary prevention efforts to stop violence before it starts.

This submission outlines key priorities for the Victorian Government to maintain its commitments to preventing and responding to family and gender-based violence.

Summary of required investment

Safe and Equal's vision is for a world where everyone is safe, thriving, living free from gender and family-based violence. To achieve this vision, Safe and Equal calls on the Victorian Government to prioritise **three critical areas** in the 2025-26 Victorian State Budget:

1) Sustainable specialist family and gender-based violence sectors

For **the specialist family violence response sector**, prioritise:

- Increased, indexed and ongoing core funding for family violence response services and family violence brokerage, including making all short-term funding uplifts permanent.
- Continued investment in targeted family services and specialist Aboriginal Community Controlled Organisations (ACCOS).

For **workforce health, wellbeing and sustainability**, prioritise:

- Continued investment in workforce development for the specialist prevention and response sectors, building diversified pathways, workforce data and forecasting models.
- Funding uplifts specifically targeted to support improved pay and conditions for staff, including funding to support worker wellbeing.

For **primary prevention**, prioritise:

- Sustainable funding for key organisations within the prevention system, including community-led prevention initiatives. This includes renewal of funding for Respect Victoria and Rainbow Health Australia.
- Increased funding for crisis and response services working alongside the implementation of the Ballarat saturation model, to address the expected increase in the number of victim survivors requiring assistance and safety.

2) Commitment to building system capability and capacity

For **MARAM as a critical system enabler**, prioritise:

- Ongoing funding to embed MARAM across prescribed workforces, including training and implementation activities to support alignment.

For **improving responses to children and young people experiencing family violence**, prioritise:

- Additional funding to support specialist family violence services to work with children and young people as victim survivors in trauma-informed and age and life-stage appropriate ways, in line with MARAM.

- Resourcing the design, development and implementation of youth-focused family violence programs that are co-designed to support young people at risk of family violence and crises.
- Ongoing funding for, and scaling up of, specialist programs including the Amplify program, the Children in Refuge program and the Adolescent Violence in the Home (AVITH) program.

3) Addressing gaps in the family violence system

For **access to safe and secure housing**, prioritise:

- A commitment and strategy to increase the amount of social housing in Victoria to the national average proportion.
- A commitment to double specialist family violence refuge capacity to at least 340 households, to remove reliance on inappropriate motel accommodation.

For **data and system monitoring**, prioritise:

- Investment in connected data systems that can follow people's journeys through the system.
- Funding to establish an independent systems monitor.

1) Sustainable specialist family and gender-based violence sectors

Sustainable funding for the specialist family violence response sector

Short-term and inconsistent funding for the specialist family violence sector is unacceptable in the face of the number of family violence victims who have been murdered in Victoria and across the country this year. It is critical that funding for services is considered, long-term and strategic to create funding certainty.

Last financial year, the specialist family violence sector stood to lose approximately \$50 million across family violence case management, refuge, and crisis brokerage funding. While funding was extended for a further two years in the last state budget, this short-term extension does not fully address the issue. Agencies need secure, ongoing funding to reliably provide services to victim survivors. Insecure funding creates uncertainty for organisations who are unable to confidently recruit and retain staff or invest in service model innovations. This results in ongoing staff turnover due to short-term contracts and a loss of capability to respond. Successful programs may be scaled back or ended, resuming only when funding is made available. This is disruptive to clients and impacts staff, who may leave the sector because of insecure employment.

Last year, it was indicated that no funding was being lost. However, additional funding provided as part of the COVID crisis response has ceased, despite a continual increase in demand for family violence support. Our member services report that they have experienced cuts to family violence crisis brokerage, flexible support packages, and after-hours programs. These cuts are inconsistent across regions and service providers, with some services reporting no cuts, and other services reporting cuts between 20 to 30 per cent across these programs. This impacts everyday decision-making about the amount of money that can be allocated to increase victim survivor safety. Services must choose to either ration their funding early in a financial year or respond to victim survivor need as it arises and risk not being able to support victim survivors as the year progresses. The cuts to brokerage are further exacerbated by rising costs of living, as brokerage funds do not extend as far as they used to.

To support our sector's ability to continue to respond to family violence crisis and enhance the safety and wellbeing of the most at-risk victim survivors in Victoria, a strategic analysis of current demand, landscape changes and other relevant considerations is required.

Data from Safe and Equal's 2024 Measuring Family Violence Demand and Capacity Survey (2024 Demand and Capacity Survey) highlights a sector under pressure: 46 per cent of organisations reported that they operate a wait list for case management. Another 46 per cent of respondent organisations reported that their local Orange Door supports clients waiting for case management. This indicates that waitlists for case management exist in nearly every area of the state.

An analysis of wait times by level of family violence risk indicates that the majority of organisations are able to respond to victim survivors assessed as being at *serious risk requiring immediate protection* within 24 hours, and nearly all organisations reported being able to respond to victim survivors at this risk level within five days. This is a positive finding as it is critical to victim survivors' lives that those assessed at this level of risk can access a case manager right away.

However, organisations indicated a large discrepancy between how long victim survivors needing immediate protection wait to access case management compared to victim survivors assessed at lower levels of family violence risk. The majority of services reported that clients at *serious, elevated or at risk* regularly wait up to three weeks to receive case management support. A small handful of organisations reported that clients at these risk levels were regularly waiting for more than 31 days.

This wait list data indicates that services are directing a significant, if not the majority, of resources towards responding to victim survivors at highest risk and have very limited capacity to provide support to victim survivors until they find themselves at crisis point. A delay in accessing case management means that the danger to victim survivors may escalate while waiting for support. It is also a missed opportunity for early intervention and increases the risk that victim survivors will become homeless, as those in need of immediate protection often must flee their home instead of being able to access a safe at home response. The specialist family violence sector must be resourced to respond to victim survivors as soon as they seek support, not when the family violence has escalated to the point that they are in serious danger.

Organisational capacity will be further impacted with the forthcoming implementation of the statewide Children and Young Person's Family Violence Multi-Agency Risk Assessment and Management Framework (MARAM) guidance. Additional funding is critical to increase organisational capacity to undertake this important work. Without it, staff will either have less time for each individual, compromising their ability to provide a comprehensive, wrap-around response; or fewer households will be allocated, extending wait lists and increasing risk for those waiting for a specialist family violence response.

This level of demand without commensurate funding comes at a cost. In the 2024 Demand and Capacity Survey, organisations reported client feedback indicating that victim survivors are concerned and/or dissatisfied with the limited availability of financial assistance and housing options, and desire longer family violence case management support periods and more opportunities to participate in longer-term recovery and therapeutic activities.

The 2024 Demand and Capacity Survey data aligns with the findings of the National Domestic, Family and Sexual Violence Commissioner's first report to Parliament on the Second National

Plan.² The Commissioner's report noted that while funding for domestic violence services has increased steadily, the complexity of responding to it has also increased. Ongoing investment in family violence service response, which is indexed to maintain service funding in real terms, is essential for the sector to function effectively and meet victim survivor needs.

Continued funding for tailored responses for diverse communities and specific cohort organisations is also necessary to ensure appropriate responses to the intersectional needs of communities. This includes funding for targeted family violence services and Aboriginal Community Controlled Organisations (ACCOs). In parallel, there should also be a continued focus on safe and accessible mainstream services to ensure victim survivors have a culturally safe response wherever they choose to access services.

Recommendations

The 2025–26 State Budget must include:

- **Increased, indexed and ongoing core funding** for family violence response services and family violence brokerage. This includes making all short-term funding lifts permanent for case management, Family Violence Crisis brokerage and core and cluster refuge.
- **Continued funding for targeted family violence services and ACCOs.**

Workforce health, wellbeing and sustainability

To maintain the system improvements made in Victoria in both prevention and response, it is essential to continue to invest in and build the capability and capacity of the workforce.

Workforce issues are prevalent and enduring across all social services. Many sectors are contending with workforce pipeline issues and are often competing for the same pool of recruits, making building and maintaining a specialised workforce more difficult. For the specialist family violence sector, the workforce pipeline is impacted by continued inconsistencies between roles, functions and remuneration that does not reflect the skills required and work undertaken, alongside funding models that are not fit-for-purpose. These issues compound to affect staff wellbeing, recruitment and retention. For the sector to grow and reach its full capability, these underlying issues must be addressed.

The 2024 Demand and Capacity Survey highlights that these issues remain a pressure point for most response organisations. An analysis of reported vacancy rates and case management team size across the state indicates that services have an average of 1 FTE vacant in an average case management team size of 10.³ The vacancy rates were slightly higher in rural and regional

² The Domestic Family and Sexual Violence Commission (2024) *Yearly Report to Parliament*, Domestic, Family and Sexual Violence Commission, Australian Government.

³ This figure is an average of all vacancy rates reported by services across the state compared to all case management team sizes across the state. This number does not reflect variation of case management team sizes across services compared to vacancy rates of individual organisations. The impact of vacancies on service capacity varies according to case management size compared to the number of positions vacant.

Victoria. In qualitative workshops, services reported that three to six months prior to the time period in which survey data was collected, vacancy rates were much higher. This indicates that rates of staff vacancies can vary substantially across a year. It also indicates that the investment in recruitment and attraction campaigns may be having a positive effect on vacancy rates and should be continued. However, it should be noted that services reported some positions are still taking several months to fill.

Services also reported that when experienced staff leave, this experience is difficult to replace when a significant proportion of the workforce is relatively new. Data from the 2024 Measuring Demand and Capacity Survey indicates that, on average, approximately 40 per cent of family violence case managers had less than two years of experience.⁴ This is a significant proportion of the workforce requiring increased supervision, peer support and professional development. Prolonged vacancies and/or a high proportion of entry level staff impact the workforce by putting pressure on caseload size which reduces organisational capacity and lengthens wait times for victim survivors.

An analysis of responses to questions in the 2024 Demand and Capacity Survey related to caseloads, support periods and service delivery hours⁵ indicates that staff are working an average of nearly 40 hours per week in direct service delivery. Services continue to highlight that the mix of clients in a case manager's case load is increasingly complex. This combination of a significant proportion of staff being new to the sector and delivering approximately 40 hours a week of client facing support to an increasingly complex client cohort, means that it is critical staff have access to sufficient wellbeing supports such as supervision, peer support and professional development to prevent future burnout and attrition from the sector. Retention of the current workforce is just as important as the attraction of new staff for vacancies; in addition to continued investment in workforce attraction, retention initiatives also need to be a focus.

Addressing workforce challenges is also critical to delivering primary prevention programs and initiatives at scale, with the effectiveness and impact to bring about the change required to end family and gender-based violence. Safe and Equal's recent *Foundations for Action* report outlines the current state of the Victorian primary prevention workforce across locations, sectors, settings and communities.⁶ A workforce of skilled primary prevention practitioners,

4 Eighteen of the 42 services which were in scope for questions regarding experience levels of case management staff completed these questions in full. Levels of staff experience may vary across services.

5 This figure is calculated using the average service delivery hours per support period, divided by average length of support period and multiplied by average caseload. Of the 42 organisations that were in scope to answer questions related to these domains, only 18 organisations provided answers to all three domains. Further, individual organisation's responses are averages of their organisational data, which have been averaged across responses. As a result, conclusions drawn from these figures may not be fully representative across all organisations and/or staff experiences.

6 Carman M, Fairchild J, Cooper M, and Ditcham A (2024) *Foundations for Action: Understanding the primary prevention workforce in Victoria*, Safe and Equal.

located in a diversity of organisations, is already in place. This workforce needs support and will benefit from strategically targeted initiatives to develop and grow its work.

Key areas of focus for prevention workforce development involve enhancing entry points; further growing the skills, knowledge and confidence of practitioners; and providing ongoing opportunities for collaboration and connection.

As the National Family, Domestic and Sexual Violence Commissioner's report⁷ found, achieving the priorities of the second National Plan hinges on having an available workforce that is adequately equipped to prevent and respond to family and gender-based violence, with the development of workforce capability prioritised. The report found that the lack of long-term funding is hampering the effectiveness of the family violence service system, entrenching uncertainty and instability for the workforce, and impacting the broader community around availability and continuity of family violence supports.

A sustainable, highly skilled and supported specialist workforce is critical to meet the demand for specialist family violence services, deliver a client-centred family violence service system, and address the drivers of gender-based violence to prevent it from occurring. To achieve this, we need a skilled, capable and diverse workforce that is remunerated appropriately, is valued, and has access to upskilling opportunities, career pathways and wellbeing supports.

Recommendations

The 2025–26 State Budget must include:

- **Continued investment in workforce development** for the specialist prevention and response sectors, building diversified pathways, workforce data and forecasting models. This should include a focus on earn-and-learn models and data that supports effective workforce planning.
- **Funding uplifts specifically targeted to support improved pay and conditions** for staff, including funding to support worker wellbeing.

Strengthening primary prevention

Long-term, sustainable funding for primary prevention is critical to achieving our vision of a world where everyone is safe, respected, thriving, and living free from family and gender-based violence. Primary prevention is a whole-of-population approach that addresses the underlying drivers of violence against women, including family violence, to stop violence from happening in the first place.⁸ Primary prevention initiatives engage people across their life cycle and in different settings where they live, work, learn, socialise and play.

⁷ The Domestic Family and Sexual Violence Commission (2024) *Yearly Report to Parliament*

⁸ Our Watch (2021) *Change the story: A shared framework for the primary prevention of violence against women in Australia*, 2nd edn, Our Watch, Melbourne, Australia.

Through dedicated funding, policy frameworks and integrated government action plans across prevention and response, Victoria has built on a proud history of community-level primary prevention activity and activism to further establish a system of organisations and initiatives, with overlapping interests in working to prevent family and gender-based violence. A broad and multi-disciplinary cohort of skilled primary prevention practitioners and organisations is leading and growing this work across a range of sectors, settings, communities and locations. This includes work being done in women's health services, family and sexual violence services, community services, schools, councils, TAFEs, and many more. Safe and Equal also plays an important role in practice leadership and the development of a specialised primary prevention workforce.⁹ While change is underway, significant and ongoing investment is needed to achieve the long-term goals of primary prevention.¹⁰

The report by the Victorian Family Violence Reform Implementation Monitor on Primary Prevention System Architecture¹¹ specifically states that Victoria requires a strong and coordinated system that:

- has the appropriate infrastructure
- is clear about the roles and responsibilities of all parties
- retains a skilled prevention workforce
- is backed by sufficient and sustained funding
- is committed to ongoing, evidence-based improvement and refinement.

There is a particular need to value and fund work being undertaken in community-led prevention with a range of priority communities, including Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities, LGBTIQ+ communities, people living with disabilities, and multicultural and refugee communities. It is also important to recognise and support the grassroots prevention work being undertaken by specialist family violence services.

In line with our calls to maintain current funding investments and build on the successes of the reform process, we continue to advocate for a minimum five-year funding commitment for key specialist organisations and programs delivering primary prevention in Victoria. This includes women's health services, councils, Respectful Relationships Education, and organisations leading primary prevention for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities, LGBTIQ+ communities, women living with disabilities, and refugee and migrant communities.

The Victorian Government has funded a four-year project to prevent gender-based violence in Ballarat. Led by Respect Victoria in partnership with the Ballarat community, the Ballarat saturation model is an opportunity to strengthen and intensify primary prevention and early intervention efforts. However, we know that the number of victim survivors of family and sexual

9 Carman M, Fairchild J, Cooper M, and Ditcham A (2024) *Foundations for Action*.

10 Respect Victoria (2023) *Progress on Prevention: Summary of the three yearly report on preventing family violence and violence against women*, Respect Victoria.

11 Family Violence Reform Implementation Monitor (2022) *Monitoring Victoria's family violence reforms: Primary Prevention System Architecture*, Office of the Family violence Implementation Monitor, Victoria.

violence seeking support increases during significant events and as a result of prevention efforts which increase people's knowledge and awareness of violence against women.¹²

Demand for family violence and sexual assault services spiked across the state during COVID and has not reduced to pre-COVID levels. In Ballarat, this increase in demand has been further compounded by a spike in requests for support following the murders in the local area in February 2024, with data from the local sexual assault service showing a 146 per cent increase in referrals from January 2024 to February 2024. This spike is on top of growing demand across the region, with family violence and sexual assault services in Ballarat experiencing an approximate 16 per cent increase in demand for support in recent years.

The saturation model in Ballarat will increase awareness of gender-based violence and increase the number of victim survivors who come forward for support. The current funding for family violence and sexual assault services cannot be expected to meet the anticipated increase in demand across the life of the project on top of an already strained response system across the region.

Recommendations

The 2025–26 State Budget must include:

- **Sustainable funding** for key organisations within the prevention system, including community-led prevention initiatives. This includes renewal of funding for Respect Victoria and Rainbow Health Australia.
- **Increased funding** for crisis and response services working alongside the implementation of the Ballarat saturation model, to address the expected increase in the number of victim survivors requiring assistance and safety.

2) Commitment to building system capability and capacity

MARAM as a critical system enabler

One of the most far-reaching systemic reforms that emerged from the Victorian Royal Commission into Family Violence was the introduction and legislation of the MARAM Framework. This is a crucial pillar of our family violence system, supporting specialist family violence services and a range of other intersecting workforces to work together when addressing family violence. The success of the MARAM Framework as a critical system enabler of consistent family violence risk assessment and response is dependent on the continued workforce development of government agencies, service providers, and a host of key stakeholders prescribed with MARAM responsibilities.

¹² Our Watch (2021) *Change the story*.

Changes in the operating environment, staff movements within and across MARAM-prescribed entities, and increasing demand across all fronts of service delivery mean that the systemic capacity to deliver MARAM responsibilities is never static. All workforces prescribed under MARAM experience turnover, resulting in the need to continually refresh institutional memory. Ongoing training and capability building is required to ensure workforces have a common shared understanding of family violence risk and safety needs, and the required level of knowledge and skills to meet their MARAM responsibilities.

There are also several components of MARAM that are still in development, including the practice guides and assessment tools for children and young people as victim survivors and for young people using family violence. These areas of practice are less established, and embedding the associated change management, organisational development, knowledge and skills across workforces will take time. Ongoing capability and capacity building must be properly funded so that prescribed agencies – regardless of size, geographic region, targeted client cohort, or other factors that might impact on operational capacity – can align from governance through to the clinical level.

As the evidence base underpinning MARAM evolves, so too will the Framework. Prescribed workforces must be continually resourced to ensure they align to emerging best practice and evidence.

Funding for MARAM implementation is due to lapse at the end of the 2024–2025 financial year; with continued workforce development required, including on components still in development, we need a renewed commitment and associated funding from the Victorian Government.

Recommendations

The 2025–26 State Budget must include:

- **Ongoing funding** to embed MARAM across prescribed workforces, including training and other implementation activities to support alignment.

Improving responses to children and young people experiencing family violence

The specialist family violence sector is committed to supporting children and young people as victim survivors of family violence in their own right.

Working directly with children and young people requires dedicated effort, time, and staff who can work in trauma-informed, age and life-stage appropriate ways. However, current funding amounts and service delivery targets do not support specialist family violence case management services to work directly with children and young people. This is because current funding and target structures for specialist family violence services are designed to support adult victim survivors. This is a critical gap in funding that requires urgent attention.

Within these system constraints, some specialist family violence services have developed ways to provide support to children and young people. According to the 2024 Demand and Capacity Survey, 61 per cent of respondents have a dedicated individual or team to work with children and young people in their service. The number of children and young people, and the degree to which they are supported, varies significantly based on service size and type. Across the state, services reported supporting anywhere between a handful of children and young people up to several hundred.

Most activity to provide dedicated support to children and young people is funded through uncoordinated, piecemeal resourcing. Many services reported that the funding they rely on is short-term and insecure, either via time-limited government or philanthropic funding. This approach is insufficient and unsustainable, with services reporting that resources do not meet the needs of every child and young person in their service.

Members have expressed concern over their capacity to support children and young people should their current short-term uplifts in funding lapse. Refuges that rely on the Children in Refuge funding to support children and young people in their accommodation are particularly concerned that funding will be reduced and/or lapse. As one organisation stated, "This crucial and specialist work needs to be recognised and funded... and the workforce [must be] appropriately skilled to support their healing and recovery".

Supporting children and young people requires dedicated and permanent funding streams. With the scheduled release of the Children and Young Person's MARAM practice guidance in 2025, this is critical. Without specific resourcing, specialist family violence services – who are already struggling to meet current demand – will not have the capacity to provide the level of support required by the new MARAM practice guidance for children and young people accessing their services.

The release of the Children and Young Person's MARAM practice guidance is a critical opportunity to provide additional and dedicated funding to specialist family violence services to be able to support children and young people.

Young people aged 15–17

There is a specific gap in the system for young people aged 15–17 who present without a protective parent. Many specialist family violence and mainstream counselling services do not provide services to children under the age of 18, and the child protection system focuses on children under the age of 15. As a result, these young people are often referred to youth services, who usually do not have specialist family violence expertise.

Young people aged 15–17 face a number of systemic barriers to accessing support. This includes needing parental consent to access services such as Centrelink, which impacts their

ability to afford suitable housing.¹³ Consequently, young people who cannot live at home due to family violence are at increased risk of violence, homelessness and poverty.¹⁴

Young people who cannot live with their families due to family violence require youth-focused services that provide tailored supports including specialist family violence case management, access to housing, and engagement with study or employment. There are promising examples of successful pilot youth-focused programs and services, such as *Amplify*, run by Melbourne City Mission and Youth Foyers; however, these programs have limited capacity and time-limited funding.

An evaluation of Melbourne City Mission's *Amplify* program indicates promising outcomes for young people experiencing family violence: 80 per cent of participants were supported to leave violent households and relationships and 97 per cent of those participants have not entered into new violent relationships or returned to violent households. In addition, the program has been able to support young people to remain engaged or re-engage with their education: 25 per cent of participants were actively supported to remain at school and a further 25 per cent were supported to re-engage with their schooling.¹⁵

The Amplify program, and other similar programs, represent an opportunity to facilitate recovery and healing and ensure that young people who present to the service system without a protective parent, are seen and heard. Youth-focused family violence programs must be developed, expanded and supported with ongoing and sustainable funding, in consultation with youth services, specialist family violence services, and young people.

Recommendations

The 2025–26 State Budget must include:

- **Additional funding** to support specialist family violence services to **work with children and young people as victim survivors** in trauma-informed and age and life-stage appropriate ways, in line with MARAM.
- **Resourcing the design, development and implementation of youth-focused family violence programs** that are co-designed to support young people at risk of family violence and crises.
- **Ongoing funding for, and scaling up of, specialist programs** including the Amplify program, the Children in Refuge program and the Adolescent Violence in the Home (AVITH) program.

¹³ Azize M (2024) *Priced Out: An Index of Affordable Rentals for People on the Lowest Incomes*, 2nd edn, Everybody's Home, Melbourne.

¹⁴ McHale R, Brennan N, Freeburn T, Rossetto A, Richardson E, Boon B, and Christie R (2023) *Youth Survey Report 2023*, Mission Australia, Sydney, NSW.

¹⁵ RMIT University Centre for Innovative Justice (2024) *"...the first people that had listened..." Evaluation of Melbourne City Missions's Amplify Program – Preliminary Findings Report*, (unpublished).

3) Addressing gaps in the family violence system

Access to safe and secure housing

Access to safe and affordable housing is critical to support effective family violence response and recovery. Where possible, it is preferable to support victim survivors to remain safely in their home rather than being displaced by violence. Supports such as the Personal Safety Initiative are essential to increase security and assist victim survivors to feel safe and secure in their home. However, increasing costs of housing and rising costs of living means that both private rental properties and mortgages are increasingly unaffordable.¹⁶ Even if a perpetrator is successfully removed from a home, most victim survivors cannot afford to cover rent or their mortgage on one income, heightening the risk of homelessness for financial reasons as opposed to safety concerns. This is compounded by the fact that victim survivors are particularly at risk of experiencing poverty due to the deep and lasting financial impacts of family violence, including specific experiences of economic abuse.¹⁷ Therefore, many victim survivors have an impossible choice of continuing to live with violence or leave and face poverty and homelessness.

In the 2024 Demand and Capacity Survey, 98 per cent of Safe and Equal's members who participated identified housing and homelessness as the most common issue impacting victim survivors seeking support from their services, after addressing their initial family violence risk. Conversely, in the homelessness sector 44 per cent of clients seeking assistance from SHS services are reported to have or currently be experiencing family violence.¹⁸

In 2022–23, 23,415 women and 13,294 children who had experienced domestic and family violence were assisted by homelessness services in Victoria.¹⁹ Unfortunately, data indicates that homelessness upon exiting support from homelessness services is increasing. Over the past two years, from 2020–21 to 2022–23, the number of women and children sleeping rough or in a car after receiving support has increased by 33 per cent and, as of 2022–23, 8,509 women and children were reported to be in housing situations that are forms of homelessness.²⁰ In reality, the number is likely to be much higher. Currently, there are approximately 100,000 people on the Victorian Housing Register, half of which are in the priority access category – a

¹⁶ Anglicare Australia (2023) *Rental Affordability Snapshot. Collated Regional Reports*, 14th edn, Anglicare Victoria, pp. 92–109.

¹⁷ Cortis N, and Bullen J (2016) *Domestic violence and women's economic security: Building Australia's capacity for prevention and redress: Final report*, ANROWS and Horizons, Sydney.

¹⁸ Australian Institute of Health and Welfare (2022) *Specialist homelessness services 2021–2022: Victoria*

¹⁹ Homelessness Australia (2024) *Homelessness and domestic and family violence: State of response report 2024*, pp. 5

²⁰ Ibid

vast majority being survivors of family violence. People prioritised due to their experience of family violence are now waiting an average of nearly 24 months for housing.²¹

A recent national survey of homelessness services, including specialist family and domestic violence services, paints a dire picture of unanswered calls and unmet demand. On 43 per cent of the survey days, there were 325 of missed calls and 666 emails unanswered. These emails included support referrals, housing assistance requests and queries from other service providers including specialist family and domestic violence services.²²

The absence of long-term, affordable housing creates a domino effect throughout the family violence system, where victim survivors in family violence crisis accommodation and refuge are unable to move on to longer-term accommodation. In the 2024 Demand and Capacity Survey, refuge providers reported that victim survivors who had permanent residency or citizenship stayed in refuge for an average of 102 days (3.5 months), with some victim survivors remaining in refuge for six months. The situation is even worse for victim survivors on temporary migration visas, with refuges reporting the average length of stay as 266 days (nearly nine months), with one family remaining in refuge for 700 days (nearly two years) at the time of reporting.²³

Though the number of refuge spaces has increased to approximately 170 households, refuge services are operating at capacity and unable to exit people out. Every night, there are victim survivors accommodated in motels because there is not a place available in a family violence refuge. Motels are not appropriate, for short- or long-term durations. Services are doing their best to ensure that all victim survivors can access the support that they need at the time that they need it; however, too often it is simply not available.

The 2024 Demand and Capacity Survey data regarding exits from refuges indicates that unstable exit options are commonplace. For example, refuges reported that leaving to stay with family or friends was the third most utilised exit option. Eleven refuges reported that at least one household returned to live with the perpetrator in the three months the data was collected.

The critical lack of options, from specialist crisis accommodation through to long-term housing, creates devastating consequences for victim survivors and places further pressure on the family violence system. Without structural change to the housing market that enables victim survivors to obtain a safe home, they will continue to experience entrenched disadvantage despite their best efforts to rebuild their lives.

Recommendations

The 2025–26 State Budget must include:

²¹ Kovolvos B (1 November 2023) 'Victorian domestic violence victims wait two years for public housing, data shows', *The Guardian*, <https://tinyurl.com/4tudwcdx> Accessed 25 November 2024.

²² Impact Economics and Policy (2024) *Call unanswered: Unmet demand for specialist homelessness services*, pp18

²³ Safe and Equal (forthcoming) *Measuring Family Violence Demand and Capacity Survey, 2024*.

- A commitment and strategy to **increase the amount of social housing in Victoria** to the national average proportion.
- **A commitment to double specialist family violence refuge capacity** to at least 340 households, to remove reliance on inappropriate motel accommodation.

Data and system monitoring

The Family Violence Implementation Monitor performed a critical function in providing system-level oversight and accountability for the family violence reforms. We know that oversight often leads to strengthened implementation, and that we cannot address what we do not measure.

Victoria's response to family and gender-based violence currently has no centralised oversight to ensure transparency, accountability and ongoing improvement at the systems level. As it stands, no entity or agency in Victoria currently has a full, accurate sense of the scale and nature of support needed across the state, or our service system's capacity to meet this. A new approach and mechanisms are required to undertake the function previously provided by the Family Violence Implementation Monitor. We need strengthened data systems to build a robust understanding of victim survivors' met and unmet support needs, to consider client journeys through the system from different entry points and contexts, and to better understand systemic barriers and enablers.

Systems oversight should include a focus on the coordination and integration of primary prevention initiatives and investments, as well as ways of bringing together various mechanisms that are currently seeking to measure progress and track the impact of this work. This information should be regularly and publicly reported. It is also essential that there is investment in the capacity to analyse and interpret this data in a way that can be used to inform ongoing service system development and design.

Recommendations

The 2025–26 State Budget must include:

- **Investment in connected data systems** that can follow people's journeys through the system.
- **Funding to establish an independent systems monitor.**