

SAFE + EQUAL

Standing strong
against family
violence

SUBMISSION TO THE
2023-24 VICTORIAN BUDGET

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.

RECOGNITION OF VICTIM SURVIVORS

Safe and Equal recognises the strength and resilience of adults, children and young people who have experienced family violence and recognise that it is essential that responses to family violence are informed by their expert knowledge and advocacy. We pay respects to those who did not survive and acknowledge friends and family members who have lost loved ones to this preventable and far-reaching issue.

© 2023 Safe and Equal

Key Contact:

Louise Simms, Executive Director, Policy, Communications and Engagement
louisesimms@safeandequal.org.au

ABOUT SAFE AND EQUAL

Safe and Equal is the peak body for specialist family violence services that provide support to victim survivors in Victoria. The interests of people experiencing, recovering from, or at risk of, family violence is at the heart of everything we do. Our vision is a world beyond family and gender-based violence, where women, children and people from marginalised communities are safe, thriving, and respected. We recognise the gendered nature of violence in our society, and the multiple intersecting forms of power and oppression which can compound the impacts of violence and limit people's access to services, support, and safety. We work closely and collaboratively with other organisations and support the leadership of victim survivors to amplify their voices and create change.

We provide specialist expertise across primary prevention, early intervention, response and recovery approaches and the inter-connections between them. Our work is focused on developing and advancing specialist practice for responding to victim survivors, building the capability of specialist family violence services and allied workforces, organisations and sectors that come into contact with victim-survivors; building the capabilities of workforces focused on primary prevention; and leading and contributing to the translation of evidence and research, practice expertise, and lived experience into safe and effective policy, system design and law reform.

We develop family violence practice and support workforces to ensure that victim survivors are safe, their rights are upheld, and their needs are met. The prevalence and impact of family and gender-based violence will be reduced because we are building a strong and effective workforce responding to victim survivors that can meet the needs of the community we serve, while also having a growing and impactful workforce working to prevent violence.

We work to strengthen and connect organisations, sectors, and systems to achieve safe and just outcomes for victim survivors irrespective of entry point, jurisdiction and individual circumstances. Joining efforts across prevention, response, and recovery we work to ensure the family violence system is informed and supported by a well-resourced and sustainable specialist sector. Our contributions to primary prevention workforces, initiatives and alliances contribute to social change for a safer and more respectful community.

We are building momentum for social change that drives meaningful action across institutions, settings, and systems for a safer and more equal society. Our workforce and practice development efforts are coupled with a partnership approach that builds community awareness and commitment to change. Our expertise and efforts enable citizens across the community to recognise and respond to family and gendered violence,

hold perpetrators to account and support the ongoing recovery and empowerment of victim survivors.

We are a strong peak organisation providing sustainable and influential leadership to achieve our vision. The work we do and the way we work are integrated and align with our values. This is achieved through inclusive culture, and a safe and accessible workplace supported by robust systems and processes.

CONTENTS

Acknowledgement of Traditional Owners.....	2
Recognition of Victim Survivors.....	2
About Safe and Equal.....	3
Executive Summary.....	6
Setting the scene.....	6
Investment focus 1: Increase sustainable funding for the specialist family violence sector.....	8
Investment focus 2: Grow, develop and retain specialist workforces	9
Investment focus 3: Eliminate the impossible ‘choice’ between violence and homelessness.....	11
Investment focus 4: Address gaps and barriers to access and support.....	13
Investment focus 5: Invest meaningfully in strengthening primary prevention	15
Conclusion.....	18
References.....	Error! Bookmark not defined.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The foundations have been laid for a system where every person experiencing or at risk of family violence can access the support they need when they need it. But women are still waiting too long for the help they urgently need, families are still sleeping in unsafe motels, the specialist workforce is burning out, and the system is continuing to fail people and communities.

Victoria has led the way in redesigning responses to family violence, and we need continued investment to keep building a system that works, together.

It is only through continued investment that the Victorian Government can realise the ambitious vision set by the Royal Commission into Family Violence. In particular, we are calling for a focus in this year's State Budget on:

1. Increasing sustainable funding for the specialist family violence sector to meet demand
2. Growing, developing, and retaining specialist workforces
3. Eliminating the impossible 'choice' between violence and homelessness
4. Addressing key gaps and barriers in the expanding family violence system
5. Investing meaningfully into primary prevention.

SETTING THE SCENE

Anyone experiencing or at risk of family violence should be able to access the support they need when they need it.

The Victorian Government made an ambitious commitment to rebuild our family violence response and backed this with incredible investment in the years since the Royal Commission into Family Violence. These reforms have laid the foundations for a system that can give victim survivors a voice, a home, and a timely and clear pathway to recovery.

We cannot take our foot off the pedal in our shared efforts to deliver an effective, coordinated, multi-sector approach to addressing and ultimately ending family and gender-based violence in Victoria.

Acquitting the Royal Commission's 227 recommendations is an important milestone on this journey. However, as the Minister for Prevention of Family Violence Ros Spence has acknowledged, "there is still work to do to end family violence once and for all".

While the Andrews Government has recognised that there's more to do, this wasn't backed by election commitments in 2022. On behalf of the specialist family violence sector in Victoria, and all people experiencing or at risk of family violence, we are calling for a continued focus on family violence in the State's policy and reform agenda, and this means continued investment.

Specialist family violence response services are facing ever-increasing demand. We need **increased, long-term investment into these services, commensurate with demand.**

Against this backdrop of unparalleled demand, the impacts of specialist workforce shortages are being widely felt. We need **investment into workforce development which improves the working conditions, strengthens development opportunities, and expands career pathways for people working across the continuum from primary prevention through to crisis response and recovery.**

We know how critical safe and secure housing is to people's safety and recovery from abuse. We need to **immediately grow the capacity of Victoria's stretched specialist family violence accommodation system, while continuing to invest in expanding social and affordable housing stock.**

In order to achieve safe and just outcomes for all victim survivors, support services cannot be 'one size fits all'. We need to **strengthen responses that are tailored to diverse identities, experiences, and life stages and break down the barriers our system poses for people seeking safety and support.**

Our efforts to stop family and gender-based violence before it starts must continue while we strengthen systemic responses. We need to **address the factors that drive this violence, through investing in whole-of-population primary prevention activity, across all settings where people live, work, learn, socialise and play.**

All of these areas are critical to ensuring our system can better support all people experiencing family violence, and ultimately to end this and all forms of gender-based violence.

INVESTMENT FOCUS 1: INCREASE SUSTAINABLE FUNDING FOR THE SPECIALIST FAMILY VIOLENCE SECTOR

Across the state, specialist services are experiencing higher levels of demand than ever before.¹ Part of this increase may be explained by reforms including the establishment of the Orange Door network and bolstered visibility and contact points for family violence services. More people knowing about this support and how to access it is a good thing.

As well as greater demand, services are reporting that more victim survivors are presenting with higher levels of family violence risk and facing complicated barriers to accessing support. Supporting people experiencing significant and complex risk requires specialist skills and takes more time. Together, increasing demand and complexity has put incredible pressure on specialist services.

To manage this, specialist services have implemented a range of strategies, including triaging victim survivors to prioritise those most at risk, implementing active waitlist/active hold functions, and increasing caseloads for case managers. In 2022, our [Measuring Family Violence Demand](#) project found that 48% of specialist family violence services were managing an active waitlist/active hold function and that case management support periods after being placed on a waitlist varied greatly, from one week up to five months.

Caseloads varied between eight and fourteen clients per case manager. In many instances these high caseloads are unsafe due to varying support and access complexities and the level of attention each case needs from a case manager to manage a client's risk. In addition, these numbers do not always encompass work to support children and young people, as they are inconsistently counted in data systems. Unsafe caseloads can be found across the sector, regardless of whether a service has an active waitlist/active hold function in place. This reflects a system that is overextended and a workforce running on fumes.

Where demand management strategies are not enough to mitigate pressures, some services have been forced to shorten support periods to ensure they can attend to the needs of more high-risk clients trying to access a service. This can have devastating consequences for victim survivors, as it means that while their immediate family violence risk is likely to have been addressed, they are often 'exited' before their support needs are fully met and longer-term recovery support can be provided. This lack of longer-term recovery support increases the likelihood that these victim

¹ Safe and Equal (2022), [Measuring Family Violence Service Demand Project: Phase Two Outcomes Report](#), Safe and Equal website.

survivors will cycle back through the system once their family violence risk increases again.

The data makes a compelling case for increased funding for specialist family violence services to respond to the increased demand and account for the complexity of family violence case management support. Our sector has welcomed some funding increases in response to demand in recent years, but this is due to expire next year. These increases need to be embedded long-term. Further, increasing sustainable funding means more than just increasing capacity of one aspect of service delivery, such as intake. This funding needs to be indexed properly, through a transparent formula applied across all government departments, that genuinely reflects the true impacts of wage growth and other cost increases.

Sustainable funding means funding the critical infrastructure that supports increased service delivery capacity. This includes increases to intake and case management functions; as well as management and supervision support; capacity to provide secondary consultations; and quality assurance and governance infrastructure.

The 2023–24 State Budget must include:

- An ongoing, indexed uplift to base funding for all specialist family violence services to respond to increasing demand and complexity, to improve outcomes for all people experiencing family violence.
- An increase to dedicated infrastructure funding so services can scale up and ensure appropriate management and supervision structures; adequately resource secondary consultation functions to support allied sectors working with victim survivors of family violence; invest in and maintain appropriate operating and oversight systems and equipment; and meet increasing reporting and compliance obligations.

INVESTMENT FOCUS 2: GROW, DEVELOP AND RETAIN SPECIALIST WORKFORCES

Primary prevention and family violence response are highly specialised professions and Victoria currently does not have enough people with the appropriate skills, training and experience to deliver on the state's ambitious vision for change.

The Victorian Government's industry planning throughout the post-Royal Commission reforms has been welcome, as is the focus on attraction and recruitment.

However, fundamental issues persist, such as low levels of pay compared to the qualifications and skills required to do this specialised work; the prevalence of short-term contracts which offer no job security; stressful and high risk working conditions; and limited career development and progression opportunities. All these factors contribute to high staff turnover and limit the effectiveness of recruitment initiatives.

The [Measuring Family Violence Service Demand](#) project produced stark findings on staff vacancy rates across specialist family violence services. During phase one of the project (November 2021), two-thirds of services were operating with case management staff vacancies. Of these, a third had only 50–65% of case management positions filled. Overall, only one in four services was operating with 76% or higher staffing levels. More than half of the services had case management positions vacant for between three weeks and 52 weeks – with half of the positions being vacant for three months or more. Unfortunately, staff vacancies continue to burden the family violence sector. Phase two (December 2022) data highlighted that 58% of services recorded staff vacancies in their case management team. Services also reported that a large proportion of their workforce has been newly recruited into the sector. These specialist practitioners are more susceptible to burnout and vicarious trauma if appropriate supervision and support cannot be provided, compounding staff shortages.

It is a similar story within the prevention workforce. The *2019–20 Census of Workforces that Intersect with Family Violence* included responses from over 500 self-identified primary prevention practitioners. Of these, 54% had worked in their current role for less than five years. The long-term nature of primary prevention work requires a stable workforce. The short-term, insecure nature of prevention roles, alongside project-based funding and high levels of turnover, lead to lost practice knowledge and expertise, which directly impacts the longer-term efficacy, success and continuity of prevention programs. There has not been the same concentrated effort to recruit to the prevention workforce as there has been in the response sector. A prevention workforce strategy has not yet been developed which is stymieing the sector's ability to grow according to need. Such a strategy is critical for the coordination and alignment of the entire prevention workforce at a state level, strengthening collective efforts towards longer-term skill development and goals necessary for effective prevention work.

We want family violence prevention and response workforces to be filled with people who enjoy and feel supported in their jobs and can see a long-term career trajectory for themselves within the sector. To achieve this, we are calling on the Victorian Government to commit to sustainable workforce investment which will improve working conditions, expand and provide access to development opportunities, and

strengthen career pathways to reduce turnover and maintain a healthy workforce across the response and prevention sectors.

The 2023–24 State Budget must include:

- Longer-term commitments that put an end to ‘drip funding’ services and programs, to enable long-term employment contracts and decrease workforce turnover and attrition.
- Investment into enhanced career progression and education pathways alongside reducing barriers to professional development, particularly for specialist professionals from priority populations.
- Establishment of initiatives focused on improving health and wellbeing for specialist prevention and response workforces, including formal supervision, coaching, reflective practice and family violence-informed employee assistance programs.
- Funding to develop and implement a state-wide primary prevention workforce strategy.

INVESTMENT FOCUS 3: ELIMINATE THE IMPOSSIBLE ‘CHOICE’ BETWEEN VIOLENCE AND HOMELESSNESS

Homelessness and family violence are inextricably linked. All victim survivors of family violence deserve a safe place to call home, and no one should be forced to choose between violence and homelessness.

Family violence is the leading cause of homelessness for women and children in Australia.² The Royal Commission into Family Violence recognised that secure and affordable housing is critical pillar of recovery from violence and, in response, we have seen investment into the specialist family violence accommodation sector as well as other important housing initiatives including the Family Violence Housing Blitz and the Personal Safety Initiative. Whilst the specialist family violence sector has welcomed these initiatives, they have not been sufficient to shift the structural barriers to housing for victim survivors of family violence, namely the lack of safe and affordable housing in this state.

² Australian Institute of Health and Welfare (2022), [Specialist homelessness services annual report 2021-22](#), AIHW website.

Victoria's affordable housing crisis continues to produce devastating consequences for victim survivors. The lack of housing options inhibits victim survivors' recovery as they continue to face uncertainty and the risk of homelessness. This increases the likelihood of victim survivors returning to live with violent perpetrators, which places them at greater family violence risk and increases the likelihood that they will cycle back through the family violence service system. Specialist family violence services report that one of the top patterns and trends amongst re-presenting clients is a lack of safe and affordable housing, with nearly 80% of services reporting that repeat clients are common¹. Lack of affordable, long-term housing also increases a victim survivor's chance of becoming stuck in the family violence system. Family violence accommodation services record longer case management support periods than other family violence services¹. This lengthened support period is overwhelmingly linked to a lack of long-term, affordable housing options across the state and the inability to exit clients, which creates a blockage for other victim survivors who need family violence accommodation but ultimately get placed into unsafe motels because there is nowhere else for them to go. The impacts of the affordable housing crisis are becoming increasingly prevalent as prices in the private rental market continue to rise, making social housing the only option for the majority of victim survivors – a system which is already overwhelmed with demand.

The lack of affordable, long-term housing increases demand on services, leads to poor outcomes for victim survivors, and is ultimately costly for the service system and those who use it.

The 2023–24 State Budget must include:

- An immediate uplift to specialist family violence accommodation capacity, to ensure that at least 320 households can be supported on any given night. Our dedicated refuge system can currently only support around 160 households, while around 100 adult and child victim survivors whose lives and safety are at extreme risk are accommodated in motels across the state every night.
- The development of at least 60,000 new social housing properties over the next ten years. Tenancy vacancy rates are low and rental prices are skyrocketing, meanwhile Victoria has the lowest proportion of social housing properties in Australia. We need 6,000 social housing properties built each year for the next 10 years, including the 12,000 already committed as part of the Victorian Government's Big Build, with a greater proportion set aside for victim survivors.
- Investment into initiatives that will enable and support victim survivors to remain safe in their own homes, including:
 - Reducing the cost of housing in the rental market
 - Increasing access to income and well-paid employment opportunities so victim survivors can afford their rent or mortgage on one income
 - More access to legal assistance so victim survivors can remove perpetrators from leases and property titles and gain financial independence
 - Initiatives that increase perpetrator accountability so more victim survivors can feel that staying safe in their home is a viable option.

INVESTMENT FOCUS 4: ADDRESS SYSTEM GAPS AND BARRIERS TO ACCESS AND SUPPORT

In order to achieve safe and just outcomes for all victim survivors, the family violence system must be resourced to provide services which are tailored and inclusive. Service provision must be based on people's experiences, life stage, and the barriers they might face when seeking safety and support. Despite incredible and welcomed reform and investment over the last six years, significant gaps in system responses persist.

Embedding lived experience

Despite efforts to embed lived experience into policy and service design, specialist family violence services remain under-resourced to engage survivor advocates in planning and quality improvement efforts and compensate them for their time. This

lack of resourcing for services to meaningfully engage with victim survivors means their voices continue to be marginalised and inconsistently incorporated.

Access and inclusion

Unfortunately, people from marginalised communities continue to face significant barriers to accessing family violence services and support. While specialist family violence services are working to change this, the systems we are working within remain racist, colonial, misogynist, homophobic, ageist and ableist. To ensure our family violence system can respond to all victim survivors, we need community and population-specific specialist services, tailored to diverse circumstances and needs. We know from ongoing conversations with sector that victim survivors often experience multiple and intersecting forms of marginalisation and discrimination, which work in a compounding manner to escalate family violence risk and limit their ability to safely exit from the family violence system. Funding and resource constraints that force the family violence system to focus on immediate crisis responses, targets, and concentrated shortened periods of family violence case management support has disproportionately adverse impacts on victim survivors from priority groups, as our membership struggles to respond to the intersecting and compounding nature of complexities.

Recovery

Our system's orientation towards a crisis response leaves adult and child victim survivors with little support on their long journey to recovery. Without access to long-term support, victim survivors are more susceptible to ongoing perpetrator abuse and tactics designed to coerce and control them. In Victoria, there is currently no dedicated funding stream for long-term recovery supports, increasing the risk of intergenerational trauma and the likelihood of children and young people who have experienced violence growing up without the opportunity to heal. We need investment into building the evidence base around what works to promote and support long-term recovery for adults and children, and funding to deliver these kinds of services.

Children and young people

In all that has been achieved by the Victorian Government and various sectors to improve victim survivors' experience of the family violence service system, responding to the needs of young people, which was a key focus of the Royal Commission into Family Violence, remains a critical gap. This was highlighted in the report released by Melbourne City Mission (MCM) – Amplify: Turning Up the Volume on Young People and Family Violence, which shows clearly that young people have

unique experiences of family violence that the service system currently does not meet.

Specialist family violence services are genuinely committed to embedding and maintaining child-centred best practice approaches within their case management practice and administration. However, funding, administrative and reporting processes often do not count or accurately account for the work we undertake with children and young people. Services want to work well with children, but in a system when they are struggling to meet huge demand, giving each child the direct support they need within existing case load capacity is nearly impossible. Furthermore, supporting children and young people as victim survivors in their own right requires increased specialisation, capability building and resourcing.

Investment into capability building, both within the specialist family violence and youth support sectors, is critical to ensuring effective and accessible responses for young people experiencing family violence.

The 2023–24 State Budget must include:

- A fund to support specialist family violence services to meaningfully engage people with lived experience in governance, planning, implementation and evaluation.
- Increased funding for services tailored for specific communities and cohorts, including those delivered by community-controlled organisations.
- Investment into building the evidence base for long-term recovery services.
- Funding to support collaboration across the family violence and youth sectors, for mutual capability building and to develop, test and evaluate new ways of working with children and young people experiencing family violence.

INVESTMENT FOCUS 5: STRENGTHEN PRIMARY PREVENTION APPROACHES

Our vision for the future is a world without family and gender-based violence. To achieve this, we need to address the underlying drivers of violence – or factors that lead to violence – and stop people from choosing to use violence in the first place. This requires investing in primary prevention activities which are focused on whole-of-population initiatives, in different settings where people live, work, learn, socialise and play.

Primary prevention infrastructure

To achieve sustainable and meaningful change, we need long-term investment into mechanisms that enable and strengthen collaboration and quality assurance; and mechanisms for developing and sharing good practice and creating aligned monitoring, evaluation and outcomes frameworks. These mechanisms are currently held by key organisations that form critical primary prevention sector infrastructure, including Respect Victoria. However, short-term and insecure funding for these infrastructure bodies puts the ongoing health and sustainability of the primary prevention sector at risk.

Respectful relationships education

Respectful relationships education is a generational change initiative and one of the most well-known and well-funded examples of effective primary prevention activity. While the positive impacts have been identified in evaluations undertaken to date (for example by Our Watch, Acil Allen, etc.), achieving the collective, larger scale positive outcomes of the state-wide initiative will take time³. An ad hoc, stop-start and short-term approach to prevention programs limits the scope and impact of long-term objectives. Respectful relationships education must also adopt a whole-of-school approach in its implementation. As found by Our Watch, evaluations of gender-based violence prevention programs in schools have consistently shown that program efficacy and sustainability is dependent on the involvement of all stakeholders who are important in children and young people's lives.⁴

Prevention in marginalised communities

It is imperative to undertake further research to understand the experiences of particular communities and how to increase the effectiveness of prevention programs and community messaging. As the prevention sector grows and matures, continuing to build on and embed intersectional practices will ensure prevention work is effective, sustainable and reaching all communities where they live, work, learn and play.

Primary prevention and natural disasters

The COVID-19 pandemic impacted the Victorian primary prevention sector in a number of unexpected ways. Prevention professionals across the state conveyed their experiences of primary prevention activities and initiatives being delayed, put on

³ Acil Allen (2021) Respectful Relationships Evaluation 2019–2021: Phase Two Evaluation Summary, <https://www.education.vic.gov.au/Documents/about/programs/rr-phase-2-evaluation-summary.pdf>, p.V

⁴ Our Watch (2016), [Respectful Relationships Education in Schools: The Beginnings of Change – Final Evaluation Report](#), Our Watch website.

hold or abandoned as a result of resource limitations and other pressures. Many prevention workers had their focus redirected to response, to deal with the increase in experiences of family and gendered violence. Pertinently, the pandemic emphasised how little is known about the impact of external disasters – particularly environmental and climate – on current and upcoming primary prevention work.

To build a cohesive, effective and sustainable primary prevention sector, specific gaps and initiatives must be addressed to achieve long-term success.

The 2023–24 State Budget must include:

- Long-term baseline and programmatic prevention funding that lasts for a minimum of five years. This longer-term funding is needed to support and evaluate the outcomes from shorter-term programmatic funding that is linked to key projects and outcomes. It also requires whole-of-sector coordination that is supported by a skilled and valued specialist prevention workforce.
- Ongoing funding for Respect Victoria, Safe and Equal and women's health services to continue to scale up, evolve, coordinate and develop mutually supporting prevention work over the long-term.
- Continued investment into scaling up whole-school respectful relationships education in Victorian schools, to maintain the momentum gained in this initiative and achieve the long-term cultural change needed to end all forms of gendered violence.
- Increase funding for primary prevention programs led by and working with marginalised communities to support an intersectional approach to primary prevention. This includes long-term funding for programs that work to prevent violence experienced by communities including Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people; people from migrant and refugee communities; people of colour; LGBTIQ+ communities; and people with disabilities, amongst others.
- Investment into research on the effects of natural disasters on primary prevention activity and how to mitigate these effects and minimise ongoing disruption.

CONCLUSION

In the years since the Royal Commission into Family Violence, the Victorian Government has made significant strides in family violence reform. In many areas, we are paving the way for how to effectively prevent and respond to family violence. Despite this success, our specialist family violence sector remains underfunded, overstretched, and faces critical barriers to providing *all* victim survivors the support they need, when they need it.

We all want to see Victoria continue to create a family violence system which gives victim survivors a voice, a home, and a timely and clear pathway to recovery.

Our work together is not done. We call on the Victorian Government to invest in the areas we have highlighted throughout this submission. Through continued investment, collaboration and action, we can create a world where family and gender-based violence does not exist.