

SAFE AND EQUAL
STATE ELECTION
PLATFORM 2022

SAFE + EQUAL

Standing strong
against family
violence

Ending family violence is complex. It requires coordinated focus across all levels of our community and all aspects of family violence prevention and response systems.

There has been incredible investment into improving Victoria's family violence response in the years since the Royal Commission into Family Violence made its recommendations. Yet gaps, barriers and pressure points persist. These issues are underscored by an ever-increasing demand for chronically underfunded support services. It is critical that the Victorian Government takes action to ensure that every person experiencing family violence can access the support and safety they need, when they need it, and ultimately prevent this violence from occurring in the first place.

Safe and Equal is the peak body for specialist family violence services in Victoria. We are an independent, non-government organisation that leads, organises, advocates for, and acts on behalf of our members – with a focus across the continuum from primary prevention through to response and recovery. Our vision is a world beyond family and gender-based violence, where women, children and all people from marginalised communities are safe, thriving and respected.

On behalf of Victorian specialist family violence sector, we call on all parties to commit to these five priorities ahead of the 2022 Victorian election:

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



Securing a sustainable footing for the specialist family violence sector

As community awareness around the dynamics and impacts of family violence increases and responses are embedded across an expansive system, demand for specialist services has skyrocketed and support needs have become more complex.

Investment into these services has not increased commensurately. Specialist services need more funding, for longer terms, in order to deliver safe, effective, high-quality supports to all people experiencing family violence.

This means:

- Uplifting ongoing base funding for all specialist family violence services to respond to increasing demand and to improve outcomes for people experiencing family violence. This is essential to ensure that all victim survivors can receive the full support they need, when they need it. This is the only way the system can achieve safe and just outcomes for everyone needing specialist family violence services now and into the future.
- Increasing dedicated infrastructure funding to enable specialist services to meet the administrative requirements of an increasingly complex operating context. So much time and resources go into the work 'behind the scenes' that keep services running and continuing to improve the way our system functions. However, this is rarely funded and tends to be added on to already overwhelming workloads.



Growing, developing and retaining specialist workforces

Primary prevention and family violence responses are highly specialised professions and there aren't enough skilled and qualified people to deliver on Victoria's ambitious vision of ending family violence.

Building a sustainable workforce requires concerted efforts not only to attract and train up new workers, but also to improve working conditions, expand development opportunities and strengthen career pathways to reduce turnover and maintain a healthy workforce.

This will require:

- Putting an end to 'drip funding' services and enabling them to offer long-term employment contracts. Job insecurity is a key factor in workforce turnover and attrition, driven in part by funding arrangements that prevent services from offering employment contracts longer than one or two years. We need to change the way services are funded so we can invest in our people long-term and ensure victim survivors are supported by skilled and experienced professionals.
- Strengthening career progression pathways and reducing the barriers to professional development. In addition to attraction and recruitment, we need to invest in continual learning at every career stage, including the management and leadership pipeline. More resourcing, including backfilling roles, to ensure people can take up professional development opportunities, is crucial to ensuring a robust and evolving workforce.
- Invest in initiatives focused on improving workforce health and wellbeing. Working to prevent and respond to family violence creates the potential for vicarious trauma and burnout. Investment in initiatives like external supervision, job coaching, reflective practice opportunities and family violence-informed employee assistance programs would facilitate a greater focus on long-term workforce health, safety and wellbeing.



Eliminating the impossible 'choice' between violence and homelessness

Homelessness and family violence are inextricably linked, with family violence the leading cause of homelessness for women and children in Australia.

Victoria's commitment to prioritising victim survivors in the development of new social housing has been welcome. Yet specialist services continue to be forced to accommodate people escaping family violence – at their most heightened risk – in unsuitable motels, and the unmet need for long term housing is continuing to grow. We need a housing guarantee for victim survivors and an immediate increase to the capacity of Victoria's stretched specialist family violence accommodation system, while continuing to expand social housing stock.

Specifically, this will require:

- Ensuring at least 320 households can be supported in specialist family violence crisis accommodation on any given night. Our dedicated refuge system can currently only support 160 households, while around 100 victim survivors whose lives and safety are at extreme risk are accommodated in motels every night. Put simply, we desperately need more fit for purpose accommodation.
- Supporting victim survivors to access private rental properties. Access to affordable housing is critical to ensuring victim survivors do not end up homeless. Rising costs of living have caused the rental market to become inaccessible and unaffordable to many, particularly victim survivors who have experienced financial abuse. We need the government to invest in programs that support victim survivors to obtain a private rental, or maintain an existing private rental property, without falling below the poverty line.
- Investing in the development of at least 60,000 new social housing properties over the next 10 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, and a greater proportion needs to be set aside for victim survivors.



Addressing gaps and barriers in the expanding family violence system

More people are accessing family violence support in Victoria than ever before. One size does not fit all, and we need to tailor inclusive services based on people's experiences, life stage and the barriers they might face to seeking safety and support.

Despite incredible and welcome reform and investment over the last six years, significant gaps in service responses persist.

We need to ensure all victim survivors can access the support they need, when and where they need it, through:

- Meaningfully engaging people with diverse identities and lived experiences in the design and governance of our service system. Listening to the diverse voices of victim survivors is critical. If we want our system to work effectively, it needs to be designed with and for the people who use it. Lived expertise must be centred in all system design and reform activity.
- Expanding access to tailored services for specific communities and cohorts, including those delivered by community-controlled organisations. Every victim survivor across Victoria should have the option to access tailored support if they need it. Growing the reach of community-led services such as those delivered by Aboriginal Community Controlled Organisations, refugee and migrant services, disability services, LGBTIQ+ services and those that work with criminalised women ensures everybody has access to a service that is right for them.
- Supporting victim survivors to safely stay in their homes after family violence. Wherever possible, victim survivors should be supported to stay in their homes after family violence, rather than facing all the disadvantages of having to leave to be safe. Flexible financial support and legal assistance is critical, as is access to education and employment opportunities. Programs that support these outcomes need to be guaranteed long-term to embed a coordinated 'safe at home' approach into Victoria's family violence response.

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Addressing gaps and barriers in the expanding family violence system

We need to ensure all victim survivors can access the support they need, when and where they need it, through:

- Strengthening responses to children and young people experiencing family violence. Children remain invisible in a system that is still not set up to support them as victim survivors in their own right, and young people escaping violence without their parents continue to be failed by a lack of suitable options. We need to embed a victim-centred family violence lens within child and youth services, strengthen the child-centred focus within family violence services, and explore tailored, best practice service approaches for young people escaping violence independently.
- Building the evidence base for long-term recovery supports. The orientation towards a critical crisis response in our system leaves adult and child victim survivors with little support on their long journey to recovery, which we know is not linear or predictable. Dedicated funding to build an evidence base for recovery, as well as investing in ongoing, free therapeutic supports, will ensure that victim survivors have access to a suite of effective options to choose from, based on their individual needs.
- Increasing evidence-based perpetrator interventions that centre accountability to adult and child victim survivors. Perpetrator interventions – programs delivered to people who use family violence – are a core element of the system and critical to keeping perpetrators visible and accountable. These interventions need to reach more people, and they need to be monitored and evaluated to better understand what works to hold perpetrators to account and keep victim survivors safe.



Investing meaningfully into primary prevention

Ending family violence and violence against women requires an enduring approach to challenging the deeply entrenched social norms, attitudes and behaviours that drive it.

Doing this effectively means taking coordinated action across all settings and levels of society at once, and recognising that measurable change will take time.

A scaled-up approach requires:

- Long-term investment into tested primary prevention initiatives. Effective primary prevention requires long-term investment and action to effect change. Funding prevention programs for at least 5-years enables the sector to grow, strengthen and develop the specialist workforce and continue building the evidence base for what works.
- Growing the infrastructure to support and coordinate prevention activity. Though the Victorian primary prevention sector is relatively young, it has experienced rapid growth since the Royal Commission, and has made significant impacts in that short time. To effect sustainable and meaningful change, we need investment into mechanisms that enable and strengthen coordination, collaboration and quality assurance; mechanisms for sector and workforce development; and aligned monitoring, evaluation and outcomes frameworks.
- Ensuring whole-school respectful relationships education is embedded within all Victorian schools. Investment into the rollout of respectful relationships education has declined over the past three years. This is despite this program being a proven, effective method for embedding a culture of respect and gender equality across the education system. We must continue to invest in the Respectful Relationships initiative and ensure it aligns with the evidence base.