Catholic Social Services Victoria

Dignity, hope and drawing closer to the margins

Social priorities for the 61st Parliament of Victoria

September 2026

Who we are

Catholic Social Services Victoria (CSSV) is the peak body for over 40 Catholic social service and community organisations operating across Victoria (see Appendix 1). Our members serve more than 300,000 people every year with more than 7500 employees and over 15,000 volunteers. Each is uniquely connected and embedded within a variety of communities and gives practical expression to the social mission of the Catholic Church: grounded in the dignity of each person, solidarity with those who are doing it tough, and working for the common good. With our members, we work to stand with and serve the most disadvantaged and marginalised communities in Victoria, and build a just, equitable and compassionate society.

Our commitment to Reconciliation

CSSV and our members celebrate that our engagement throughout Victoria takes place on the sacred lands and waterways of the many cultural groups of the Aboriginal Peoples of Victoria. CSSV acknowledges the Traditional Custodians of the Kulin Nations, and their Elders past and present, and is committed to listening and walking with them in the true spirit of makarrata: coming together after this long, painful struggle for recognition, true justice and full flourishing for all Australians.

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Our vision

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Introduction

Despite Australia's proud history as a robust and prosperous democracy, our nation is being tested by disturbing developments overseas and within this country. Many people are feeling unsettled and worried about their future, especially for their children. Since the 1980s, a series of crises in the global economic system have exposed extensive malpractice across economic, environmental and social domains. One outcome has been the astonishing inequality growing between the very rich and most of the population.

At the core of our social and economic woes is a crisis in values. Our moral compass has been damaged. In his first major document, Dilexi Te (I have loved you) in October 2025, Pope Leo blamed a mentality that blissfully ignores the effects of poverty. 'Thus, in a world where the poor are increasingly numerous, we paradoxically see the growth of a wealthy elite, living in a bubble of comfort and luxury, almost in another world compared to ordinary people'. A culture persists 'that discards others without even realizing it and tolerates with indifference that millions of people die of hunger or survive in conditions unfit for human beings.' (DT, 11).

The 61st Parliament of Victoria has a particularly important role in attending to this trajectory of inequality and widespread community concern for the future, while also addressing the social issues of the current moment. Social policy settings, legislation and ongoing Government spending must respond to the global reality of our moment while working for a new vision of a society based on the common good. Whoever forms Government must listen to those who are on the margins, those who are working with them, and invest in ways of working that allow people to flourish.

Together with other faith traditions and humanitarian groups, Catholics have contributed to developing one of the world's most enduring and successful democracies. These contributions have been made through many and varied means, including education, healthcare, and social services. We know that work for the common good is best done in collaboration with communities, encouraging participation and mutual support, and with organisations that have specialist knowledge and motivation for working for the common good.

Like Pope Francis, Leo stresses that faith in God demands serious efforts to support the wellbeing of others. Leo highlighted Jesus' parable of the Last Judgment, where God judges us solely on the basis of how we have cared for people who were sick, thirsty, hungry, naked, prisoners or strangers. Jesus declares: 'Just as you did it to one of the least of these brothers and sisters of mine, you did it to me' (*Mt* 25:40). Leo commented that this 'is not a mere human kindness but a revelation'. (DT, 3). 'God has a special place in his heart for those who are discriminated against and oppressed, and he asks us, his Church, to make a decisive and radical choice in favour of the weakest.' (DT, 16).

Our economy must work for and bring out the best in people, not the other way around. Pope Leo recently quoted from Pope Francis's 2013 Evangelii Gaudium (#53) that 'today we have to say "thou shalt not" to an economy of exclusion and inequality. Such an economy kills.' He also reflected that the reality of poverty 'should constantly weigh upon our consciences' (DT, 9) and insisted that our concerns must be brought into the public forum – religion cannot be limited to the private sphere (DT, 112).

Catholic social advocacy has been encouraged and coordinated through CSSV for decades, and our statements in light of the upcoming election are a result of serious cooperation and discernment in a difficult social and economic moment.

Locally, we see global pressures reflected in our own communities, where rising living costs, housing insecurity, growing social division and environmental disasters are placing real strain on many, but particularly those already made vulnerable. Yet we also see signs of hope — people of goodwill working together across faiths, cultures and sectors to support those in need and advocate for a fairer economy; in parishes, social services, healthcare, education and beyond. The challenges facing our state mirror many of those confronting the world, but so too does the opportunity inspired by the values Pope Leo has called us to reclaim.

In 2026, Victorians can help shape a society that resists indifference and chooses compassion if we commit ourselves to the common good with a renewed conviction. Our hope is that this will be modelled and encouraged by candidates in the coming election season, and we will work to hold our prospective leaders to account in pursuit of a more compassionate and just society.

If we work together, place the common good at the centre of social policy, name the failures of our current systems and work in a way that attends to both the immediate needs of people and the deeper yearnings of all humanity, we can build a brighter future for all.

Flourishing Families and Communities

Dignity, hope and drawing closer to the margins

Social policy and law should have serious regard to the inviolable dignity of every human being — and most especially those at the margins of society. As the Church has recently restated, every human person possesses an infinite dignity that is grounded in their very being and that prevails "in and beyond every circumstance, state, or situation the person may ever encounter."[1] That dignity is not earned, and it cannot be forfeited. It belongs as fully to the young offender, or to the person with a disability, as to anyone else.

Victoria can only be a state where families and communities of all kinds can flourish when we turn away from a culture of fear and indifference and draw closer to those made marginalised. Flourishing communities are built when people are supported to participate, are listened to and when public policy works to galvanise our shared responsibility to care for one another. This is especially needed when economic pressure, social change and inequality are pushing some further to the margins and away from realising a hope-filled future.

The Church's social teachings show us that every person is capable of growth and contribution, and that every person deserves the support they need to participate fully in family and community life. Yet recent policy developments have too often departed from this vision, reflecting a culture of disregard for the people most in need of care and support.

The last two years have seen a marked and disturbing change in the Government's policy posture on youth justice. Several of the important reforms secured through the Youth Justice Act have been wound back without proper regard for the best-practice evidence of what constructively works towards a safe and hope-filled future for our communities. Recent reporting suggests further ineffective changes in mandatory minimum sentences for young people convicted of serious offences are being considered — another harmful step that will end up making our communities less safe.

Victorians should be able to feel safe in our state, and social services and faith organisations help build this safety through being involved in the lives of victims, families, communities as well as people who are engaged in criminal and antisocial activities. CSSV maintains that an effective response is not to push those on the margins further away, but to work actively for deeper encounter together, toward positive change[2]. This is both what dignity requires and what evidence shows is more likely to make communities safer and stronger.

[1]Dicastery for the Doctrine of the Faith, *Declaration 'Dignitas Infinita' on Human Dignity* (8 April 2024), n. 1.
[2]See *Community development in action: reducing youth crime* for two programmatic examples making a difference in an Australian context, https://openjournals.library.sydney.edu.au/SWPS/article/view/14202

Many Victorians with a disability and their families, who have already been suffering through inadequate supports, are now experiencing further uncertainty following federal reforms to the NDIS. Such significant changes, without a timely and adequate plan to prevent gaps in care, both risk leaving some of the most disadvantaged people in our state with even fewer supports, and further diminishing their capacity to bring their gifts and perspectives into the broader social and economic life of our community. This is a loss to us all. The 61st Parliament of Victoria should ensure that those impacted by these changes can continue to live with dignity, access the care they need, and allow for their active participation in community life.

For CSSV and our member organisations, 'hope' is never a cheap slogan. True Christian hope rests on the belief that every person can grow, contribute and is capable of redemption, and that Government, services, families and the wider community need to play a practical role in those efforts. This work is not quick, but it is possible. It requires policies, institutions and services that support people at every stage of life and create genuine opportunities for participation, belonging and human flourishing. This is what builds safe and thriving communities.

What CSSV asks of the next Parliament

These asks are addressed to all parties and to every member of the incoming Parliament — Government, Opposition and crossbench — in a spirit of partnership, and in the conviction that good policy and the protection of human dignity are not competing goods but the same good.

1. Taking collective responsibility for our young people

CSSV affirms the important work the Victorian Government did in the development of the Youth Justice Act - including the work of the Expert Review Panel in designing interventions for young people at-risk or under youth justice supervision. Reform directions and recommendations of that period should be revisited, including to:

- Raise the age of criminal responsibility to 14, in line with the consistent recommendations of human rights, medical, legal and First Nations expert bodies.
- Revisit and resource small-scale youth justice facilities and alternative service models as alternatives to large custodial settings — environments that are local, therapeutic and built to strengthen, rather than sever, a young person's connections to family, school and community.
- Continue to expand prevention and early-intervention programs, so that fewer children reach the justice system at all, and so that those who do are met by services equipped to help them change course.

The 61st Parliament has a responsibility, in the interest of community safety and the wellbeing of children, to intensify efforts to provide programs, alternative pathways and custodial interventions that give children and young people the best chance to turn their lives around.

2. A genuine public-health approach to violence reduction

Victoria's Violence Reduction Unit (VRU) should treat violence as a preventable problem — one addressed through upstream, community-based investment, rather than relying primarily on enforcement. A genuine public-health response begins by attending to the root causes of offending and from a belief in the capacity of individuals to change.

We see in the VRU a real opportunity to return to a better culture of policy-making and program delivery that addresses why young people come into contact with the justice system in the first place, invests in the supports, relationships and pathways that help them turn their lives around, and prioritises quality partnerships with communities and community organisations to create lasting change.

This approach should be encouraged and expanded upon to fill gaps in support, and use existing infrastructure — our early education centres, schools, health systems and community infrastructure — to identify needs early and support children and families from the start. It will be particularly important to target postcodes where there remains entrenched intergenerational disadvantage, which we know represent more than their fair share of people in contact with the justice system. Jesuit Social Services' Dropping off the Edge research demonstrates the strong link between intergenerational disadvantage and outcomes for young people, and can provide a basis for locating where targeted supports are most needed.[3]

3. Participation for Victorians with a disability

CSSV understands the intent of NDIS reform and the need for a sustainable disability support system for future generations. In preparing for incoming changes to the NDIS that will shrink eligibility and scope for many current participants, Victoria must ensure people with disability can successfully navigate changing arrangements, access appropriate supports, and remain connected to their communities. No Victorian should be left without a pathway to support because systems are unclear, inaccessible or unprepared for change.

The state must ensure foundational supports and alternative pathways are available, accessible and clearly communicated before people are transitioned from existing NDIS supports. No person with disability should be left without support because pathways are unclear, services are unavailable, or wait times are excessive. A "no wrong door" approach can help ensure people remain connected to the assistance they need.

As NDIS arrangements change, the state Government will also need to invest in and support particular services and initiatives, including:

- Services that enable people with disability to participate in community life, through partnerships with local government, community organisations and existing service providers. Participation in community life is fundamental to wellbeing, independence and social inclusion. As service models evolve, it is important that people with disability continue to have opportunities to build relationships, develop skills, contribute to their communities and maintain social connections.

[3] See Jesuit Social Services, *Dropping off the Edge*

- Services that attend to psychosocial support needs. CSSV member organisations — as with many social and community services — already work extensively with people who have psychosocial support needs. As the NDIS tightens access to psychosocial support, the state should calculate, fund and coordinate this care directly, while advocating to the federal government for better funding of systems of care.

4. Broaden Maternal Childhood Health development assessments to screen for social needs

Early intervention can prevent social issues from taking hold or becoming more serious, giving Victorians the best chance to participate and thrive from a young age while reducing pressure on crisis and tertiary services down the line. Effective early intervention requires a holistic approach, attending to the whole person and to their place within a family and community.

Victoria has a nation-leading Maternal Child Health network, reaching families at scale in the earliest years. This infrastructure should be fully utilised by broadening childhood development assessments to screen for social needs alongside existing health and wellbeing checks, so that risk factors can be identified and responded to before they escalate into entrenched disadvantage.

By choosing early support, genuine participation, and care for those most at risk of being left behind, Victoria can become a safer, more flourishing, and, importantly, more hope-filled community for all.

Houses as Homes

Homes for a flourishing life, not tools for wealth creation

Housing should primarily be homes for a flourishing life – not tools for wealth creation.

A home is where a life is built – a foundation of good health, work, learning, family and belonging. Yet in Victoria today, a home has become one of the hardest things for the poorest among us to hold onto. More than 57,000 households now wait on the Victorian Housing Register, many in the most urgent need: women and children fleeing violence, people sleeping in cars, families moving from one insecure rental to the next. The private market offers little relief; the median rent in Melbourne has reached $580 a week, beyond reach even for many people in work, let alone those who can only work a little or not all due to health issues, life complexities or disability. As the crisis has deepened, Victoria has taken a number of important steps, but far more is needed to meet its scale.

This is not, at root, a problem of supply. It is a failure to treat housing as what it should be. Victoria's own Housing Statement promised 800,000 new homes over the coming decade – yet only around 16,769 – about 2.1% – is destined to be social housing, in a state that already has the lowest proportion of social housing in the nation.[4] Meanwhile, 31,890 Melbourne dwellings remain completely empty and many more significantly underutilised – a 16% increase from 2023, based on water meter data from Prosper Australia's 2025 count. For too long, our system has treated housing first as an instrument of wealth creation, a commodity, and only second as a home for a human being. All housing and related social policy should aim to move that aspiration into reality, and it should begin with providing for the poorest.

As Pope Francis wrote, "if we accept the great principle that there are rights born of our inalienable human dignity, we can rise to the challenge of envisaging a new humanity. We can aspire to a world that provides land, housing and work for all."[5] The infinite dignity of each person leads us to meet, walk with, and work for those whose dignity is often least regarded and most at risk – including people experiencing homelessness and sleeping rough on our streets.

Victoria stands at a genuine turning point. Recent reforms have handed government real new powers to shape what gets built and for whom, and a decade-long program of public housing redevelopment is now underway. Whether these deliver homes for those in greatest need depends on decisions being made right now. Safe, secure and affordable housing underpins the works of our members; without it, even the best social programs are set up to fail.

[4]CSSV calculation from *Victoria's Housing Statement: The decade ahead 2024–2034*.
[5]Pope Francis, Encyclical Letter *Fratelli Tutti* (3 October 2020), n. 127.

What CSSV asks of the next Parliament

These asks are addressed to all parties and to every member of the incoming Parliament - Government, Opposition and crossbench - in the conviction that a housing system worthy of Victorians is one that measures its success by whether the most vulnerable have a secure home.

1. Make the new affordable housing powers deliver genuinely affordable homes

For the first time, Victoria's 2026 planning reforms gave government the power to require affordable housing in new developments. But a power is only as strong as the definition behind it - and that definition is still to be settled via regulations. It is critical to the integrity of affordable housing delivery that this definition is fit-for-purpose and beyond manipulation.[6] The existing arrangement, under which developments are fast-tracked if they include 10% "affordable housing", shows why the definition matters: a reduced market rate is not the same as a rent a low-paid or essential worker can actually afford.

CSSV calls on all parties to commit that affordable housing be defined, in line with the community housing sector's principles, by what households can afford: rents set at a fixed rate of 30% of the lower limit of the moderate-income range, relative to dwelling size and differing between metropolitan and regional Victoria; homes owned by the not-for-profit community housing sector — or, where ownership is not transferred, head-leased to a community housing organisation to be let fairly and transparently; and eligibility open to people on pensions and other government payments, and to low-paid workers, in aged care, disability, early childhood and other care roles, who are currently locked out of both the private rental market and the social housing waitlist.[7] The Government already set a stronger affordable housing standard for its Homes Victoria program than applies across the planning system — similar standards should apply across the board.[8]

Two principles should guard the scheme. Where a developer's contribution is taken as cash rather than as housing, that revenue should be directed to social housing for those in greatest need. Affordable housing must always add to - never substitute for - a growing supply of public and community housing.

2. Unlock mission-aligned land for housing

Government can play an enabling role in faith communities, agencies and ministries contributing to greater net growth in social housing by better leveraging underutilised, well-located land, much of it close to transport, services and existing community life. CSSV calls on the next Government to establish a mechanism — a fund, partnership facility, or concierge service, sitting naturally

[6]Planning Amendment (Better Decisions Made Faster) Act 2026 (Vic)
[7]This definition follows the principles in CHIA Vic, *Defining Affordable Housing: What it is, who it's for and where it's needed* (2024).
[8]See Government Gazette No. G23 (June 2026), p. 1231, which sets a stronger definition for Homes Victoria.

within State Planning — that enables faith-based and other mission-aligned landholders to utilise this land for social and affordable housing, in partnership with the community housing sector.[9]

Such a mechanism, drawing on lot consolidation and targeted "spot-purchasing", could empower communities to be a genuine partner in solving this crisis and align assets with efforts to grow a safe, secure and affordable housing supply. The Government's success in development facilitation across multiple policy domains is a mandate for further innovation. A recent Swinburne University study found that a modest $80 million annual investment to facilitate 'spot-purchasing' up to 1000 strategic neighbouring sites could unlock between 8730 and 17,160 new social homes – creating savings of $250,000 per home and $2 billion overall.[10]

3. Invest in public and community housing

CSSV joins with the Victorian Housing Peaks Alliance in calling for the building of an additional 80,000 social homes over the next decade, so that supply finally meets the needs of a growing waitlist and a growing Victoria.

This must happen alongside real growth in public housing – the most secure and affordable housing option for people struggling in the housing crisis, with rents capped at 25% of income. It is vital that the public housing stock is not replaced by more expensive "affordable" housing as Melbourne's high-rise public towers are redeveloped. Nor should increases in social housing only be community housing. The redevelopment is a rare chance to reimagine public housing for those who need it most. CSSV calls for at least a 50% uplift in public housing on redeveloped tower sites, alongside the provision of community housing and community-building social programs, and greater clarity on what types of housing and ratios will replace existing towers.[11]

Good housing policy plans for people and understands that services and support cannot just end when a person receives keys to a house. As Pope Francis captured in his Encyclical letter *Laudato Si,* "It is not enough to seek the beauty of design. More precious still is the service we offer to another kind of beauty: people's quality of life, their adaptation to the environment, encounter and mutual assistance."[12] We need to fund the things that make a house a home. New and existing developments need community development programs and social infrastructure, so that individuals, particularly those who have experienced homelessness or persistent housing insecurity, can rebuild their lives and communities can be strong.

Together, these asks form a clear vision: a Victoria that builds homes for those who need them most; treats housing as the foundation of a flourishing life rather than a commodity; and draws on every willing partner, including the faith sector. CSSV and its members stand ready to work with the next Government to make these aspirations a reality.

[9]This aligns with the community housing sector's call for lot-consolidation and 'spot-purchasing' funding: see CHIA Vic, 2026 Election Platform.
[10] Community Housing Industry Association Victoria (2026), *2026 Election Platform*, p. 13
[11]The Legislative Council's December 2025 inquiry into the redevelopment of Melbourne's public housing towers recommended that the Government confirm whether estates will be rebuilt as public housing.
[12]Pope Francis, Encyclical Letter *Laudato Si'* (24 May 2015), n. 150, on planning that takes account those who will live in a place.

Reconciliation

Honouring truth, backing Treaty, strengthening community

Healing broken relationships, making reparations for injustices and coming together after divisions are central principles of the Catholic faith. In Victoria, these principles call us to face the hard truths of our colonial history and the ongoing injustices faced by First Peoples in our communities. The introductory words of the *Yoorrook: Truth Be Told* report cause us to pause as we consider ways forward:

> We walk on stolen land: a truth etched into the soil, in the rivers that have carried stories of a people for millennia, and in the skies that have witnessed it all. The scars of colonial invasion— its massacres, violence and relentless erasure— are not confined to the past. They reside in the present, shaping the lives of First Peoples in Victoria today.[13]

Meaningful reconciliation requires us to first listen and understand, and then to work together for tangible change. When we listen, we not only start the healing process; we also learn how to build stronger communities. Indigenous ways of caring for community and country offer wisdom and challenges to our current care systems, giving us an opportunity to do better for First Peoples, the broader community and the country on which we live, which, in Pope Francis' words, we have a "proper and inalienable responsibility to preserve"[14].

Truth Be Told urges us to consider our next actions: "Victoria has been presented with an opportunity to take the lessons from our past and apply them to a shared future: a new line of history where guilt and shame are not our concern, but what happens next is."[3]

The last decade has seen Victoria lead the way nationally towards a society that recognises, reckons with and reflects this past. The establishment of the First Peoples' Assembly, Yoorrook Justice Commission, and Australia's first state-wide Treaty, as well as frameworks like Mana-ana worn-tyeen maar-takoort, have demonstrated a genuine commitment to better outcomes for First Peoples, starting with policy made not *about*, but in participation *with*. At the same time, other legislation has gone some way to undermine this progress, particularly the increasingly punitive approaches applied in the justice system.

The 61st Parliament will be tasked with shaping what happens next. Until 2024, bipartisan support existed for Victoria's Treaty process. CSSV calls on the next Parliament to return to this path and take meaningful action together in a spirit of reconciliation by backing Treaty, responding to Yoorrook and strengthening First Peoples-led services.

[13] Yoorrook Justice Commission (June 2025), *Yoorrook: Truth Be Told*, p. 30
[14] Pope Francis, Encyclical Letter *Laudato Si'* (24 May 2015), n.38

What CSSV asks of the next Parliament

These asks are addressed to all parties and to every member of the incoming Parliament — Government, Opposition and crossbench — in a spirit of shared responsibility and with the belief that constructive policy decisions can help set conditions for First Peoples to thrive.

1. United support and resourcing for Victoria's Treaty

The Victorian Treaty, years in the making, paves the way for Aboriginal-led processes to inform and guide policy that enacts practical solutions to address the still vast gaps between First Peoples and other Victorians. The Treaty is a commitment to justice, to returning decision-making powers and to resourcing First Peoples to shape their own futures. Having made the Treaty agreements, and with the new institutions they created now established and functioning, CSSV calls on the next Government of Victoria to continue this good work by fully supporting and resourcing Gellung Warl and by enacting all Treaty commitments that recognise and respect Aboriginal Lore, Law and culture. The language of the Treaty is invitational: "This path asks something of all of us. It asks us to listen, to care, and to walk forward in good faith – not as strangers, nor as adversaries, but as partners and equals."[15] CSSV urges all Parliamentarians to wholeheartedly answer this call.

2. Act on the Yoorrook Justice Commission recommendations

It is now more than 12 months since the Yoorrook Justice Commission handed down its final reports. After four years of investigations, including 9,000 engagements with First Peoples, over 1,300 submissions, 65 public hearing days and more than 10,000 documents from government agencies and other organisations, Yoorrook made a raft of recommendations for creating systemic change to address past and ongoing injustices experienced by First Peoples.[16]

While a response to the *Yoorrook for Justice* report was produced by the Government in 2024, an update on implementation and those items under consideration has not been published since October 2024.[17] Recognising that some of *Yoorrook for Transformation's* recommendations have been addressed by the establishment of the Treaty, CSSV calls for the next Government to continue this work and provide a response and update to all Yoorrook recommendations, and maintain active, transparent monitoring of progress, as a matter of priority.

3. Strengthen First-Peoples led services

It is widely recognised that Aboriginal Community Controlled Organisations (ACCOs) and First Peoples-led services deliver effective care and stronger engagement with First Peoples.[18] Their innovative ways of support and care can also present learning opportunities for mainstream services.

[15] First Peoples of Victoria Ltd and The State of Victoria (2025), *Statewide Treaty*, p.9.
[16] Yoorrook Justice Commission (June 2025), *Yoorrook for Transformation*
[17] In 2024, the Victorian Government published *Inquiry into Victoria's Child Protection and Criminal Justice Systems: Yoorrook for Justice: Victorian Government Implementation Progress Report*
[18] Victorian Government, *Victorian Closing the Gap Implementation Plan 2021-2023*

CSSV members work with and provide services to First Peoples, and we recognise the benefit of and ask for further investment in a strong and vibrant ACCO sector, including:

- Prevention and early intervention services to support First Peoples families and keep children out of the child protection and youth justice systems
- Provision of adequate First Peoples-led early education services
- First Peoples-led health services that deliver maternal and child health services, financial support programs and drug and alcohol services
- First Peoples-led organisations to deliver a holistic range of aged care services, palliative care services and culturally safe funeral and burial services
- Implementation of *Mana-na Woorn-Tyeen Maar-Takoort: The Victorian Aboriginal Housing and Homelessness Framework*[19]
- Homelessness services, transitional housing and culturally safe housing models that meet the range of specific needs of First Peoples
- First Peoples-led justice services throughout every stage of a person's contact with the justice system

Reconciliation is a shared responsibility that calls us to listen deeply and work together towards a Victoria where truth and dignity are honoured – paving the way for a better future for all Victorians.

[19] Aboriginal Housing Victoria (2020), *Mana-na woorn-tyeen maar-takoort*

Women and Children Free from Violence

Preventing and responding to gendered violence together

Strong communities are free from violence. Tragically, in spite of considerable Government focus and investment, over 46 women were killed by an intimate partner in 2023-2024[20] and in 2025 the Orange Door across Victoria saw a significant 7.2% increase in presentations, with 219,510 unique clients seeking support for a range of reasons related to use and experience of domestic and family violence.[21] This level of need is indicative of a society in crisis.

The Catholic Bishops of Victoria in 2016 were clear about the vision we need to hold on to:

> "Our goal must be a society where all people are safe in their home, families and close relationships; where violence and abuse are not acceptable; and where all relationships respect the equality and dignity of each person. This is part of the Gospel vision of love and respect."[22]

This vision will take both serious reflection and continued coordination from many different parts of society working together: specialist and family services, housing and welfare support, and the community at large. Government has a key role to play in simultaneously investing in the social infrastructure and systems that allow women and children victim survivors to find healing, stability and security in their lives going forward, resourcing and partnering with communities and organisations in more targeted work to prevent people from using violence in the first place. For those who are using violence, we need strong state and community processes that ensure accountability and real and supported opportunities for healing and change.

Those who make up the 61st Parliament need to take seriously setting a tone in attitude and conduct, and ensuring that processes and legislation uphold the dignity and equality of women. This Parliament needs to support early intervention and prevention programs to improve the attitudes and behaviours of men, and support the expectation of relationships that are respectful, loving and mutually supportive. While violence and abuse do not discriminate in their negative consequences, overwhelmingly, the use of violence within families is by men towards women and children.

The Bishops of Victoria have acknowledged attending to inequality as core in this work: "we need to look at prevention, intervention, supports for victims, accountability and healing for offenders. We need to confront the causes of this violence, including the unequal position of women and men in our community."[23] More recently the 2022 Plenary Council committed "the Church in Australia to acting in ways that witness clearly to the equal dignity of women and men, with their diverse gifts and experiences. It commits the Church to enhancing the role of women in the Church, and to overcoming assumptions, culture, practices and language that lead to inequality."[24]

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[20] Australian Institute of Health and Welfare (July 2025), *Domestic homicide*
[21] Crime Statistics Agency (December 2024), *2023-24 Family Violence Dashboard*
[22] Catholic Bishops of Victoria (November 2016), *A Statement by the Catholic Bishops of Victoria: Committing to prevention and response on Domestic Violence*
[23] Ibid.
[24] Fifth Plenary Council of Australia (2022), *Witnessing to the equal dignity of women and men*

The Bishops of Victoria have stated "…the roots are abuse of power and the control of one person over another."[25] For us to see broad change and attend to this crisis, we need to attend to the roots and drivers of violence and work in partnership – Government, faith communities, educators and community agencies together – if we are to see change. Faith and faith communities play a core part in the lives of Victorians and are settings where we can build up shared work towards preventing gendered violence.

What CSSV asks of the next Parliament

These asks are addressed to all parties and to every member of the incoming Parliament — Government, Opposition and crossbench — in a spirit of shared responsibility and with the belief that constructive policy decisions and community engagement can help set conditions for gendered violence to end.

1. A whole-of-community approach to prevention

At a local level, the work of the Ballarat 'saturation' model, now called Respect Ballarat, is encouraging. With this whole-of-community approach in mind, and based on the evidence available, we advocate that faith communities should be better supported with expertise and funding to work with their communities as part of broader community work for cultural change.

The incoming Government should partner with communities, with an attentiveness to the unfolding outcomes of the Ballarat model, through family and community-led, culturally safe, family violence prevention and response programs. Particular input and care should come from First Peoples, migrants and refugees, faith groups, and culturally and linguistically diverse communities, working hand in hand to address gendered violence.

2. Continue to support respect in relationships – resource work beyond the school gates

The Respectful Relationships program that many schools across the state are engaging in should be further developed in consultation and with consideration to the diversity of Victorian communities to broaden conversations and understandings of respectful relationships. Young people need support and education to prevent and address harmful sexual behaviour, the damage associated with the ubiquity of pornography, the impact of technology-facilitated abuse and the influence of online discrimination and hate. A holistic approach to respectful relationships should also include improved education about forced marriage and modern slavery practices. Parents and families need to be part of this conversation so that what is taught can be reinforced and relates to their own cultural settings and faith teachings.

This work would require cooperation and coordination, listening and dialogue, if we are to see real and ongoing change. The education and social service sectors need to be resourced to work together with Government and faith leaders to build up a culture of peace where loving relationships can flourish, and families are foundations of security and care – beyond the school gates and into the community more broadly.

3. Resource and promote healing and connection

[25] Catholic Bishops of Victoria (November 2016), *A Statement by the Catholic Bishops of Victoria: Committing to prevention and response on Domestic Violence*

A safe and secure place to stay is an essential first step for victim survivors, but accompanying supports must also be properly resourced so that, beyond places of safe accommodation, refuges are also pathways to healing and connecting back to community.

It takes dedicated resourcing to allow for innovative and effective responses in the specialist sector that attend to this. Funding refuges and other innovative supports to provide pathways to healing and connection recognises that rebuilding relationships, a sense of community, pathways to employment and healing that is holistic, long-term and restores dignity is crucial to the ongoing wellbeing of victim survivors. Children and young people who have experienced family violence and child abuse also need dedicated support to heal and recover.

These supports must be available regardless of visa status. Family violence impacts a broad cross section of people living in our country. No person's ability to be safe, feel safe and recover from violence should depend on their migration status.

4. Continue to build up specialist and general supports for victim survivors

There has been substantial investment in family and domestic violence prevention and response since the Royal Commission into Family Violence, which has delivered important reforms. Despite this, the need remains significant and services continue to face challenges meeting this need due to resource constraints. The Orange Door has provided a clear entry point for victim survivors in need of support, but while services are strained and under-resourced, some people are not receiving the timely response they need through existing referral pathways.

A lack of accessible and affordable housing also remains a significant issue for the sector, with limited suitable options for women and children to move on to as they progress through the system reducing the availability of crisis or transitional accommodation for other victim survivors. Housing and gendered violence are not issues we can treat in isolation. Access to safe, secure and affordable housing is fundamental to recovery from violence and to the effectiveness of the broader service system. Continued and increased investment in social and affordable housing, designated housing for victim survivors, as well as innovative programs that support victim survivors to remain in their home and community, is as important as ever.

A Victoria free from violence is everyone's responsibility. It begins with the immediate resourcing of response and extends to ongoing work in communities to change attitudes, behaviours and provide the supports needed to prevent violence in the first place.

Appendix 1 – Catholic Social Services Victoria Member Organisations

Aboriginal Catholic Ministry Victoria
Assisi Centre ACRATH (Australian Catholic Religious Against Trafficking in Humans)
Brigidine Asylum Seekers Project
Cabrini Outreach
CatholicCare Victoria
CatholicCare Victoria Housing Limited
Corazon
Don Bosco Youth Centre and Hostel
Edmund Rice Community Services Victoria
Family Care Sisters
Good Samaritan Inn
Good Shepherd Australia New Zealand
House of Welcome Ballarat
Jesuit Social Services
JoCare
John Pierce Centre
Joseph's Corner
Keysborough Learning Centre
Links and Consolidation Network (LinCoN)
MacKillop Family Services
Mary Aikenhead Ministries
McAuley
Missionary Sisters of Service
NazarethCare– Sisters of Nazareth
Olympic Village Exodus Community
Order of Malta Australia
Pregnancy Assistance Frankston
Rosies Oblate Youth Mission
Sacred Heart Mission
Saltbush Balnarring Beach
St John of God Accord
Saints College
St Joseph's Home for the Aged – Little Sisters of the Poor
St Mary's House of Welcome
St Vincent de Paul Society Victoria
Vietnamese Catholic Family Mutual Assistance Network
VincentCare Victoria
VincentCare Community Housing
Wellsprings for Women
Xavier Social Justice Network