

State Budget Submission 2010-2011 Council on the Ageing (COTA) Victoria

Ageing in Victoria – The Need for Age Friendly Environments and Communities

COTA urges the Victorian Government to increase its commitment and to recognise our ageing population with a whole of Government approach to the issues that is reflected in its policy initiatives designed to ensure a safe, secure, equitable and sustainable future for seniors.

We eagerly await the release of the *Ageing in Victoria Strategic Framework*. A well developed and comprehensive framework, adequately funded, has the potential to guide future responses to ageing issues, shape the impact of an ageing population on community planning and capacity building, in conjunction with supporting the development of positive ageing strategies that promote healthy and age friendly environments.

At this time, some of the most significant issues and areas for attention facing older people in Victoria include:

- the varied and complex impacts of climate change, particularly higher temperatures and longer more significant heat waves;
- the increased cost of essential goods and services;
- support for the development of health promotion and prevention;
- support for the development of socially inclusive communities that recognise diversity and address disadvantage; and
- planning for and improving the accessibility of the built environment.

A strategic framework to address these and other issues for seniors should be underpinned by a strong philosophy of human rights, founded upon the UN Principles for Older People that ensure the dignity, participation and independence of older people are foremost in the development of an effective whole of government framework.

A holistic view of the ageing experience is essential to this, incorporating four key dimensions in its strategic actions:

- **Longevity** – the impacts of increasing longevity will include significant changes in: transition to and length of retirement, income and standard of living, intergenerational relationships, health and participation, and inclusion in community life.
- **Life course perspective** – a life course approach is required to address health inequalities and prevent illness. Recognition needs to be given to the importance of addressing health issues across the lifespan, and at its significant transition points.
- **Diversity of the ageing population** – the aged population cannot be viewed as one homogenous group. The variety of cohorts within the broad ageing population need to be considered in any strategic approach. Within the aged cohort, issues of cultural and linguistic diversity, gender, life experience, and sexuality must be considered and addressed.
- **Combating ageism** – a robust, sustainable and resourced approach is required to challenge the ageist attitudes that are still perpetuated through institutions and the community, undermining the rights, dignity, participation and independence of older people.

Victorian seniors urgently need an integrated and comprehensive strategic approach which will provide leadership to realise a fairer and socially inclusive Victoria and that will meet the challenges and opportunities of our ageing population.



Sue Hendy
Executive Director

COTA has identified a number of policy initiatives and service delivery responses that could make a significant difference to the quality of life and well being of senior Victorians. We call on the State Government to prioritise these areas in its 2010/11 State Budget funding allocations, and in so doing demonstrate its commitment to the creation of age friendly communities and environments.

Addressing Climate Change Impacts

Climate change will have significant impacts on vulnerable households and individuals, including older people; we commend the Government's approach to climate change policy outlined in the Green Paper demonstrating the Government's commitment to supporting low income and vulnerable communities. We also welcome the Green Paper's focus on the broader sustainability of Victoria's built environment, transport, health, emergency and essential services.

COTA is concerned that despite the comprehensiveness of the Victorian Climate Change Green Paper, and the range of issues for strategic action that it outlines, there is no coherent policy framework addressing the interface between climate change and older people. There is a need for policies to be focused, coordinated, and specific to the range of impacts a changing climate will have on the lives of an ageing population.

Recommendations

That the energy efficiency of older people's homes be addressed through the following:

- A major program of investment is necessary so that every dwelling is retrofitted to the highest possible standard of energy efficiency.
- Older people in rental accommodation are particularly vulnerable and there is an urgent need for the introduction of minimum rental standards
- In addition there is an urgent need for the upgrading of Government owned social housing to these same standards.
- Regulatory frameworks should be complemented by accessible incentive programs targeted to provide access to energy and water efficiency for vulnerable groups.

- Energy efficiency programs and rebates should be well coordinated between federal, state and local government – a 'one stop shop' access point would ensure that these programs are in the reach of vulnerable households.
- There should be investment in community health and support organisations to work at the grass roots and identify older people and appropriate dwellings that could benefit from such a scheme.

That leadership by older people on climate change be facilitated:

Leadership is required to address the challenge of growing older in a changing climate and to ensure a safe, secure, equitable and sustainable future for older people. *An Older People and Climate Change Task Force* should be established that brings together older people's organisations, key stakeholders, the voluntary sector, government agencies and academia. The initial purpose of the group should be to develop a whole of government policy framework that sets out cross sectoral interventions and policies to improve the quality of life of older people. This collaborative effort would coordinate and focus action to deal with the range of issues and impacts a changing climate will have on the lives of an ageing population.

Utilities and Concessions

As energy and water prices increase it is essential that the value of concessions do not erode over time, especially as climate change impacts and responses such as the implementation of smart meters increases the total cost of utilities to households.

The announcement in the 2009-10 Budget to lift the water concession cap by 14.18 per cent to reflect increasing water prices was welcomed. Raising the cap for the 2009-10 budget year alone will not account for the water price increases in the coming years, and the value of the concession will be eroded over time. The intent of this concession should be to ensure that the most vulnerable households can maintain an affordable supply of essential water in the long term as well as the short term.

We join with VCOSS and other organisations concerned about the impact of rising costs on low income and vulnerable households, and call on the Government to address the following issues:

Recommendations

- That the Water Wise program be extended to all households who have previously received the carted water rebate;
- That there be better promotion of the carted water rebate to ensure all low income households without reticulated water are able to access relevant concessions and rebates;
- That action be undertaken on the urgently needed upgrade of the energy and water efficiency of all social housing properties by 2015.
- That a coordinated, flexible and where appropriate, brokered package of services is available to all low income households regardless of tenure type, by building on existing household efficiency programs for low income households;
- That the value of utility concessions be maintained by increasing the *Winter Energy Concession and Medical Cooling Concession* by 2.5 per cent (to a 20 per cent concession) to reduce the accumulating impact of energy price rises to date;
- That the volumetric cap on the current 50 per cent water concession be removed.

Heatwave Preparedness

The anticipated increase in frequency and intensity of heatwaves and the associated risk of bush fires in fire danger zones will have impacts on vulnerable older people. While significant work is being done to facilitate the role of health, support services and local government to develop community based strategies and to communicate key messages to vulnerable groups, including older people, further resources are required. Vulnerable groups connected to services may need additional or specialised support in heatwave conditions and where people are not connected to services, support may be necessary to assist in the development of individual plans and strategies to manage climate change emergencies. Older people may have limited access to information resources and

reduced participation in the community, and thus this further resourcing is vital. For example, the Red Cross RediPlan for Disaster Preparedness provides a tool for managing heatwave and related possible emergencies but is currently available only on the internet or in otherwise limited forms and through insufficient or inappropriate access points for vulnerable groups such as older people.

Recommendations

- That resources be provided to enable the distribution of, and access to the Red Cross RediPlan Kit for Seniors;
- That the kit be available in multiple accessible formats for people with sensory impairments, low literacy, and with low levels of English proficiency;
- That the Home Wise program to include the installation of the most energy-efficient cooling appliances or to enable the maintenance, repair or replacement of existing cooling for people most at risk from heatwave.

Insurance Levy Increases

The combined effects of the Victorian fire funding system, state stamp duty and the GST add a significant financial burden to general insurance policyholders, adding up to 50 per cent to the cost of a residential general insurance premium in Victoria. Evidence indicates this cost factor impacts on affordability and consequently the purchase of insurance especially for low-income households. The 2009 bushfires tragically demonstrated the severe lack of appropriate insurance in vulnerable communities.

COTA is concerned by the recent increases in the fire insurance levy and the further disadvantage to low and fixed income seniors that this creates, entrenching the inequity of this arrangement.

Recommendation

- COTA urges the Victorian Government to consider a more equitable and sustainable model of funding fire services in Victoria.

Age Friendly Communities

The 4-year Positive Ageing in Local Communities Project has officially come to an end. The project achieved many significant outcomes and it is hoped that local governments will continue their efforts to create communities that are responsive to the needs of older people.

That 73 of Victoria's 79 Councils have developed Positive Ageing Plans is to be applauded. However, many struggle to implement these plans and effect significant and tangible positive change for older people. Leadership and ongoing support is required to see Age Friendly Communities develop. Regional and rural municipalities, in particular, require resources and support to develop and implement Positive Ageing Strategies.

Recommendations

- That dedicated funds be allocated to resource the capacity of COTA and MAV to continue to work collaboratively on the next phase of the Positive Ageing Project. This would enable the facilitation and implementation of Positive Ageing plans.

Seniors Travel in Rural Victoria

Seniors who hold a Victorian Seniors Card or are in receipt of an eligible pension enjoy free travel on metropolitan trains, trams and buses when travelling in certain metropolitan geographic locations on Sundays. However, similarly eligible people who reside in regional areas only have access to this benefit if they reside in a major centre. Seniors in regional Victoria who are not able to access this free travel do not get additional concessions for Sunday travel, and many seniors tell us they are disadvantaged by having to pay higher fares on Sunday. Transport and the cost of travel is already a significant issue for older people in regional Victoria, their inability to access the same benefits available to those in metropolitan areas is inequitable.

Recommendations

- COTA urges the State Government to extend the Seniors Sunday Pass, or further discounted travel on Sunday, for eligible seniors living in *all areas* of Victoria.

Human Rights and Older People

The introduction of the Victorian Charter of Human Rights and Responsibilities is an important step in ensuring that the human rights of all people are upheld in Victoria. Consideration of a National Human Rights Act will potentially add to these safeguards. However, the impact of ageism on the health and well-being of older people and the detrimental effect it has throughout the community has received very little acknowledgement as a form of discrimination that breaches fundamental human rights.

Older people experience ageism in a variety of ways – in the community, in the workplace and in many service delivery situations. Without a commitment to identifying and combating ageist attitudes and behaviours as a breach of human rights, ageism is perpetuated, and there will be no tangible change for older people now and into the future.

Recommendations

- That an education and awareness raising program be developed for employees and staff of government departments and programs to assist in understanding the implications of ageism and the implementation of strategies to overcome its perpetuation.
- That funding be allocated to the Victorian Equal Opportunity and Human Rights Commission to undertake a project examining government policies and programs through an 'ageism lens'

CALD Ageing Issues

Demographic data shows that the already significant proportion of CALD groups within the aged population of Victoria will increase over the coming decades. This growth will have a sustained negative impact on health and aged care services in Victoria if the diverse needs and issues of these groups are not appropriately acknowledged and addressed.

Language and cultural barriers can prevent access to timely and appropriate information and service provision in a range of settings if organisations are not adequately informed and resourced to cater to these varying needs. This can have a detrimental impact on the independence and well being of many CALD older people. It is imperative that information and services be available equitably. This includes access to interpreters in health and community situations, or where interpreters are available, adequate utilisation of their services. In addition, essential information produced by key services and agencies should be available in appropriate community languages. This inclusive practice ensures that CALD older people are afforded equitable access to services and information, and subsequent increased health.

Recommendations

- That free interpreter services be available for seniors from CALD backgrounds to access health, aged care service provision, and information.
- That there be requirement for key services and agencies to ensure that essential information in community languages is available in a range of accessible and appropriate formats.

Mental Health

COTA Victoria welcomed the *Because Mental Health Matters Mental Health Reform Strategy 2009-2019* that will facilitate improved service delivery and responses to mental health needs of people of all ages. While the initial focus of reform has been on the needs of children and young people, more is now required in responding to the particular needs of older people.

The emergence of mental health issues as people age has only recently begun to be acknowledged. Very often mental health issues have not been identified and treated at earlier stages of life, with serious impacts on older people's health and quality of life. Responsiveness to the needs of older people regardless of their age or stage of life is as important as the on-going treatment of life-long mental health issues.

In particular a focus on prevention and early intervention for older people is required. Appropriate programs and service responses in the early stages of mental illness need to be developed. In addition, the significant role HACC and other community support services play in prevention and early intervention for depression and other mental health issues for older people should be acknowledged, and resourced, as part of a system wide response to the mental health needs of Victorians.

Recommendations

- That targeted mental health promotion, prevention and early intervention initiatives for older people be developed;
- That there be a greater focus on programs, services and facilities appropriate for older people within and alongside mainstream mental health service settings;
- That barriers obstructing access to aged care, community support, and supported accommodation for older people with mental health issues and illnesses be addressed;
- That care options specific to mental health within mainstream services such as aged care and supported accommodation be improved;
- That research for effective prevention and early intervention strategies for older people be undertaken.

Seniors Information

Information that is timely, accurate, accessible, and relevant not only helps older people make informed decisions, but increases community participation and connectedness, and subsequently improves health and wellbeing. When older people do not have access to information that is necessary and appropriate, and their needs are unmet, the repercussions can be extreme, with a ripple effect that impacts the whole community.

COTA has identified the need for a coordinated and integrated approach to streamline information provision and access for older people across Victoria, and is developing a strategic framework to guide and facilitate action across a range of organisations and at many levels of the community. An education and media campaign on where to access information is also required so that older people know where to go to find the required information.

Recommendations

That the Government provide adequate resources to COTA to lead and implement strategic action to guide the future enhancement of information service delivery and promotion for seniors by drawing together existing information services for older people, identifying gaps in current service delivery, and aligning services so that information retrieval is easy and appropriate.

Council on the Ageing (COTA) Victoria

Council on the Ageing (COTA) Victoria's mission is to mobilise older people and those who work with them, to age well in a just society.

It is committed to human rights, social justice and the eradication of ageism.

COTA Victoria is a non-profit organization, of individual older people and organizations representing older people, committed to improving the well-being of all older Victorians.

COTA Victoria's role

- Provides information, education and services to older people, their relatives and the wider community
- Provides policy advice on behalf of older people to state and local governments, service providers and the general community
- Undertakes research and policy development on issues affecting older people
- Promotes and publicizes the needs and preferences of older people to the general community
- Encourages a high level of involvement of older people in the organisation and its activities.

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