

COTA Victoria Policy Position



Issue: State Government's role in providing care and support to ageing Victorians

Adopted: December 2021

Review date: December 2023 or as required

Policy principles:

The *Victorian Charter of Human Rights and Responsibilities* establishes the right of all Victorians to be treated with freedom, respect, equality and dignity.¹ These principles must be extended to all older Victorians to ensure they are adequately supported as they age. Care and support of older Victorians has to be seen as broader than the provision of in home and residential care. This is because older people rely on an integrated network of services to assist them to age well. To this end, all older Victorians must:

- Be actively consulted in the development of all policies and programs that may affect them.
- Have access to a broad range of integrated services and supports to enable them to:
 - Maintain their health and wellbeing as they age;
 - Remain living in their own homes for as long as possible;
 - Maintain their wellbeing and connection to their community if and when they enter residential aged care;
 - Be free from violence, abuse or neglect.

Rationale for COTA Victoria's position:

- The number of people aged over 65 is growing at more than twice the rate of the general population. By 2031, Victorians aged over 60 living in Greater Melbourne will comprise 22% of the population. In rural and regional areas, almost 31% of Victorians will be aged over 60. These trends demonstrate the need for high quality and accessible services to assist people to maintain their health, mobility, independence and quality of life as they age.²
- Public confidence in the aged care system is currently lacking. This can be partly attributed to lived experiences highlighted by the *Royal Commission into Aged Care Quality and Safety* and a number of systemic issues that have arisen during the COVID-19 pandemic. The Victorian Government must play a proactive role in the implementation of recommendations from the *Royal Commission into Aged Care Quality and Safety* to ensure aged care services respond to the needs of older Victorians into the future.

- Many older people report feeling as though the Victorian Government has absolved itself of responsibility to people living in residential aged care because it is funded by the Commonwealth. We remind the Victorian Government that these people are still citizens who have legislated rights under the *Victorian Charter of Human Rights and Responsibilities*. Despite this fact, Victorian aged care residents are currently locked out of a range of services including local government programs, community transport and allied health. This places them at increased risk of experiencing social isolation and loneliness and can lead to a range of negative health outcomes.
- We want the Victorian Government to play a more proactive role in safeguarding aged care residents from violence, abuse and neglect. While the Commonwealth Government already funds a Community Visitors Scheme for people receiving Government-funded aged care services, this is solely a companion program.³ Older people consulted want to see the Victorian Government implement a safeguarding program, modelled on the scheme that is currently administered by the Office of the Public Advocate. This program plays a critical role in monitoring Victorian disability accommodation services, supported residential services and mental health facilities to hold them accountable and ensure residents' rights are being upheld.⁴
- It is important to remember that only around 7% of older people live in residential care.⁵ The majority of older Victorians either receive support in their own homes or do not receive Commonwealth funded aged care services at all.
- Local Government has historically played a key role in providing services to support older people to remain living in their own home. While some Councils have decided to discontinue home care, others have continued to deliver services under the Commonwealth Home Support Programme (CHSP). Locally delivered services operated by Councils are held in high regard by many older Victorians and there is strong demand for them to continue. While home based aged care services will be reformed over the next few years, Councils that are delivering services already have a trusted home care workforce that could be utilised under the new aged care framework. At present, however, National Competition Policy prevents Councils from using rates to subsidise the cost of aged care services.⁶ This will make it untenable for many Councils to continue providing services into the future.
- Many Councils also provide important programs to address social isolation and promote health and wellbeing among older adults. In a survey conducted by COTA Victoria in 2020, almost half of respondents told us that social isolation and loneliness had been key sources of concern for them during the COVID-19 pandemic.⁷ This is all the more concerning when considering that social isolation and loneliness have been linked to a range of health problems including mental illness, emotional distress, suicide, dementia, high blood pressure, lowered immunity and premature death.⁸
- Transport plays a major role in determining an individual's level of social and civic participation, as well as access to health and community services. As such, older people who cannot drive risk being disconnected from their local communities if affordable alternatives are not provided.⁹
While community transport has been identified as a vital form of affordable door-to-door transport for many older people, Victoria's Community Transport system is significantly underfunded and unable to keep up with consumer demand.¹⁰

- Many older people still experience ongoing barriers to accessing continuity of care across health services. Key challenges include:
 - Lack of transition care to ensure people are properly supported once they have been discharged from hospital
 - Poor communication between residential care facilities and other health services such as GPs, hospitals and allied health services
 - Language or other cultural barriers
 - The inability of some older people to access digital technology to book or attend appointments.
- Good oral health is essential to maintaining good health and wellbeing. Unfortunately, many older Victorians continue to experience pain and discomfort, the onset of secondary health conditions and poor nutrition as a result of not having timely access to affordable dental care.¹¹ This situation continues to severely compromise peoples' quality of life as they age. While some older people are able to access free or low cost care through Dental Health Services Victoria, they can currently wait up to 30 months to access this support.^{12,13}
- Older people can experience unique risk factors for mental illness that are associated with their stage of life. Despite this fact, older people still encounter a range of barriers to accessing appropriate mental health services. In 2019–20, 46 to 55 per cent of older Victorians experiencing mental illness did not receive the services they needed.¹⁴ We are encouraged by the recommendations that came out of the Royal Commission into Victoria's Mental Health System. We look forward to being actively involved in the implementation of these recommendations to ensure Victoria's mental health system adequately responds to the needs of older people experiencing, or at risk of experiencing mental illness into the future.

Recommendations:

We are calling on the Victorian Government to:

1. Play a proactive role in the redesign of Australia's aged care system by actively consulting with older Victorians and representing their needs and preferences to the Commonwealth Government. This includes the need for locally based services to:
 - Help older people and family members to navigate the complex systems of health and aged care (recommendation 29 of the *Royal Commission into Aged Care Quality and Safety*).
 - Provide individualised advocacy support to people accessing or seeking to access aged care services (recommendation 106 of the *Royal Commission into Aged Care Quality and Safety*).
2. Play a direct role in safeguarding Victorians living in residential aged care, initially by investigating the feasibility of establishing a safeguarding community visitors program modeled on the program which is already administered by the Office of the Public Advocate.
3. Ensure Victorian local government is adequately funded to provide locally delivered programs, services and supports to facilitate active ageing. These services must be

available to older Victorians living in residential care as well as those living in the community.

4. Work with local government to reduce non-financial barriers preventing them from registering as providers under the Commonwealth aged care system, such as the requirement to comply with National Competition Policy.
5. Establish a thoroughly costed, community-based transport program to support older Victorians experiencing transport disadvantage. This program must:
 - Be properly funded to ensure effective resourcing and coordination and must not rely solely on existing infrastructure
 - Be regulated by the Department of Transport
 - Be available to older people living in residential care as well as those living in the community
 - Establish consistent eligibility criteria and service fees for older people across all geographic regions
 - Effectively service older people living in regional and rural areas.
6. Undertake targeted consultation with older Victorians, including those living in residential care, to identify and resolve existing barriers affecting continuity of care across health services.
7. Improve access to oral health care for older Victorians by:
 - Working with the Commonwealth Government to progress the establishment of a Seniors Dental Benefits Scheme in line with recommendation 60 of the Royal Commission into Aged Care Quality and Safety.
 - Funding a mobile dental service to provide oral health care to Victorians living in residential aged care until such time that recommendation 60 of the Royal Commission into Aged Care Quality and Safety has been fully implemented.
 - Increasing funding to Dental Health Services Victoria to reduce wait times and improve access to free and low-cost dental care for older people living in the community.
8. Ensure older people are actively consulted throughout the implementation of recommendations from the Royal Commission into Victoria's Mental Health system.

Other relevant documents: [COTA Victoria position statement on access to assistive technology](#)

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- ¹ Victorian Equal Opportunity and Human Rights Commission (2020) 'Human rights', accessed 20 September 2021, retrieved from <<https://www.humanrights.vic.gov.au/for-individuals/human-rights/>>.
- ² Victorian Department of Environment, Land, Water and Planning (2019) 'Victoria in future 2015 population and household projections to 2051'.
- ³ Australian Government Department of Health (2021) 'Community Visitors Scheme', accessed 21 September 2021, retrieved from <<https://www.health.gov.au/initiatives-and-programs/community-visitors-scheme-cvs>>.
- ⁴ Office of the Public Advocate (2021) 'Community Visitors', accessed 21 September 2021, retrieved from <<https://www.publicadvocate.vic.gov.au/opa-volunteers/community-visitors>>.
- ⁵ Australian Institute of Health and Welfare (2021) 'Aged care', accessed 20 September 2021, retrieved from <<https://www.aihw.gov.au/reports/australias-welfare/aged-care>>.
- ⁶ Victorian Government (2020) 'Competitive Neutrality Policy', accessed 20 September 2021, retrieved from <<https://www.vic.gov.au/competitive-neutrality-policy>>.
- ⁷ COTA Victoria and The City of Whittlesea (2020) 'Checking in on the older people's experience', accessed 21 September 2021, retrieved from <<https://www.cotavic.org.au/wp-content/uploads/sites/2/2020/12/COVID-19-report.pdf>>.
- ⁸ Australian Institute of Health and Welfare (2019) 'Social isolation and loneliness', accessed 16 September 2021, retrieved from <<https://www.aihw.gov.au/reports/australias-welfare/social-isolation-and-loneliness>>.
- ⁹ Gerard Mansour, Commissioner for Senior Victorians (2020) 'Ageing in a changing world', accessed 21 September 2021, retrieved from <<https://www.seniorsonline.vic.gov.au/-/media/seniors/files/commissioner-for-senior-victorians/report-ageing-well-in-a-changing-world-2020.pdf?la=en&hash=5E937926E554413FB59249427FBF8BD0B84F13E0>>.
- ¹⁰ VicTas Community Transport Association Petition (2021) 'Community Transport Funding Equity for Older Victorians', accessed 21 September 2021, retrieved from <<https://www.change.org/p/minister-for-senior-australians-and-aged-care-community-transport-funding-equity-for-older-victorians>>.
- ¹¹ COTA Victoria (2018) 'Improving support for older Victorian's dental health', accessed 21 September 2021, retrieved from <<https://www.cotavic.org.au/news-items/improving-support-for-older-victorians-dental-health/>>.
- ¹² Department of Families, Fairness and Housing (2021) 'Dental services', accessed 21 September 2021, retrieved from <<https://services.dffh.vic.gov.au/dental-services>>.
- ¹³ Victorian Oral Health Alliance (2021) 'Data', accessed 24 September 2021, retrieved from <<https://voha.org.au/data/>>.
- ¹⁴ Royal Commission into Victoria's Mental Health System (2021) P289.