

# Priorities for older Victorians

Submission for the Victorian State Budget 2023-2024



February 2023

# About COTA Victoria

**Council on the Ageing (COTA) Victoria** is the leading not-for-profit organisation representing the interests and rights of people aged over 50 in Victoria. For over 70 years in Victoria, we have led government, corporate and community thinking about the positive aspects of ageing.

Today our focus is on promoting opportunities for and protecting the legal rights of people 50+. We see an ageing population as a time of opportunities for personal growth, contribution, and self-expression. We believe there are national, state, community, family, and individual benefits from this approach.

COTA Victoria is a not-for-profit, member-based organisation run by, for and with Victorians aged 50+. We fund our activities and services through the support of government, members, philanthropic trusts, businesses, and the public.

COTA Victoria acknowledges the Traditional Custodians of the land on which we work. We pay respect to elders past and present and those who continue the journey. We recognise the rich Indigenous heritage and culture of this country.

## About this submission

**In presenting this document**, COTA Victoria has attempted to provide a key list of funding initiatives that warrant serious consideration across Victorian Government portfolios. We have focussed on four priorities that require timely attention over the next year – in the 2023-24 Victorian State Budget and beyond.

These build on issues profiled in COTA Victoria's 2022 State Election Priorities and on opportunities to capitalise on concurrent reforms at both State and Commonwealth level. These include, but are not limited to, programs that would be delivered by COTA Victoria itself.

## For further information

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# Executive summary

## Priority

## Actions

## Community benefit

### Listen to older Victorians

Fund COTA Victoria to develop an older person lived experience engagement framework.

Provide \$1.725m, over three years, to expand COTA Victoria's Information Line.

Improve government processes and outcomes through effective evaluation and benchmarking.

Increased capacity for non-digital engagement with digitally excluded older people.

### Meet the needs of Victorians affected by elder abuse

Provide an additional \$2.55m in annual core funding for Seniors Rights Victoria for the next 3 years.

Meet increasing demand for elder abuse support and advice – leading to greater protection and effective redress for older people.

### Help the health system – support older people

Fund the creation of an Older Victorian Health and Wellbeing Action Plan.

The Victorian Government continue taking a leading role in national primary care reform.

Expanding the Community Paramedics program state-wide.

Improve patient outcomes and reduce acute demand on health system.

Reduce acute care demand through earlier intervention.

Proven place-based intervention to support older people and reduce acute care need.

### Ensuring that older people get the support they need

Deliver key recommendations of the final report from the 'Inquiry into support for older Victorians from migrant and refugee backgrounds'.

Fund COTA Victoria to deliver older-person specific community outreach to increase older person participation in the \$250 Power Saving Bonus.

Fund a state-wide scheme to deliver place-based re-skilling programs for Victorians over 50.

Increased access to support by a growing demographic.

Improved reach and outcomes for energy price support.

Increased economic participation in society.

# Victoria is under pressure – and getting older

**Victoria, like the rest of Australia, is currently facing a range of economic pressures.** Higher inflation and increased interest rates, amongst other issues, lead to increased costs of living.

At the same time, Victoria continues to face the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic, both through ongoing infections and the consequences of the pandemic response. The pressure on the health system has been well covered in the media, as has the impact on the available workforce.

These immediate pressures affect all Victorians – but especially older Victorians. And Victoria is getting older.

Older people currently make up more than a third of Victorians, and this number is growing. The number of Victorians aged over 65 is expected to triple by 2058.

Victoria's ageing population has major long-term social and economic implications, but it also has an immediate impact, making more people more vulnerable to the current pressures on the state.

## Support older Victorians to support Victoria

**Victoria needs to empower and enable its older residents** if it is to prosper in current global conditions. They need to be at the core of any response.

We need a positive ageing agenda that will support older Victorians to live the lives they want – which will deliver benefits for them, and a community dividend for Victoria.

COTA Victoria calls on the Victorian Government to commit to and implement our four current priorities for action in the 2023-24 Victorian State Budget and over the next year.

These selective asks should help enable older people to maintain their health, mobility, independence, and enjoyment of life as they age.

This agenda would also offer a significant return on investment by:

- Maximising opportunities for older people to contribute to the community and economy.
- Reducing demand for expensive acute health care.
- Improving the targeting, and effectiveness, of existing incentives and initiatives.

If Victoria can take this opportunity, it can lead Australia – and reap the rewards of positive ageing.

# Priorities for older Victorians 2023-2024

## Listen to older Victorians

**The best advocates for older people are themselves.** They need to be listened to.

Any support for older people needs to be informed by older people. They are a vital resource that can be used across the Victorian Government. Effective engagement means the Victorian Government can inform, evaluate, and measure the impact of reform, investment, and programs – ensuring it is reaching a crucial cohort of Victorians.

The Victorian Government has shown it can listen to the lived experience of the mental health system – now it needs to better listen to those with lived experience of getting older in the state.

We are calling for an older person lived experience engagement framework, similar to that already developed regarding mental health. This will ensure that best practice guidance and tools for engaging older people are available for government and non-government entities – and can be actively promoted and applied to all initiatives and ongoing service improvement processes affecting older people. With our connection to community and older Victorians, COTA Victoria is well-placed to lead on the development of the framework.

To augment that, we need to make sure that current methods of engaging older people are not lost. COTA Victoria's Information Line, which offers phone-based assistance to engage with and support older people who are digitally excluded, is a vital resource to hear from older people directly, to gauge and monitor the issues of concern. Yet, it currently receives limited government support. Funding the expansion of the service will ensure that COTA Victoria can increase the support for digitally excluded older people, which can inform wider policy changes.

## Recommendations

### Improve government processes and outcomes for older people by:

- Funding the Department of Families, Fairness and Housing and COTA Victoria to develop and implement an older person lived experience engagement framework.
- **Providing \$1.725m**, over three years, to expand COTA Victoria's Information Line.

# Meet the needs of Victorians affected by elder abuse

**Elder abuse is a unique, and often very personal, form of abuse.** Those experiencing it must be supported.

Seniors Rights Victoria (SRV) provides a state-wide focal point for elder abuse prevention and response and is a leader in the elder abuse sector. It is the only state-wide integrated legal and advocacy service specialising in elder abuse. But increasing demand impacts its ability to meet the needs of these older Victorians.

Elder abuse is a real and ongoing threat in our community. Approximately 15 per cent of older people experienced elder abuse in the past 12 months.

Meanwhile, the ongoing effects of the pandemic and economic stresses are increasing the pressures that contribute to elder abuse. Between February and July 2022, SRV received 500 more calls than in the same period in 2020, and 370 more calls than in the same period in 2021. The complexity of cases has also increased.

Despite increasing demand, elder abuse services continue to be severely underfunded in comparison with other family violence services. This was recently recognised by the 'Inquiry into support for older Victorians from migrant and refugee backgrounds', which called for the Victorian Government to increase funding for SRV, elder abuse health justice partnerships and community legal centres.

Greater funding for SRV is required if community demand is to be met, as well as increasing the emphasis on preventing elder abuse in the first place.

## Recommendations

**Increase the availability and extent of elder abuse support for older Victorians by providing an additional \$2.55m in annual core funding for SRV for the next 3 years. This would enable:**

- Engagement with harder to reach communities, such as those for culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds.
- Reduced wait times for support.
- Establishment of a financial counselling function to better respond to the needs of the more than 60 per cent of clients who experience financial abuse. SRV delivered \$1.5m in client financial gain alone last financial year.
- Greater focus on primary prevention, capitalising on existing relationships with referral agencies and community-based prevention initiatives.

# Help the health system support older people

**The pressure on the health system is clear** – services across Victoria, as well as the rest of the country, are facing record demand, which has resulted in longer wait times for care. At a time of great pressure on our health system, we need to ensure older people get the support they need when they need it.

Older Victorians are disproportionately affected by this pressure as older people are more likely to use health services, relative to their population size. They are also more likely to be admitted into hospital when visiting emergency departments, and to be triaged as having more severe symptoms.

Older Victorians are ending up in hospital unnecessarily. Data from 2020-2021 shows that of 159,851 admissions for conditions that can be avoided through effective community-based care, over 80 per cent were for Victorians aged 50+.

Struggles to access care are heavily associated with higher acuity and worse outcomes, which can limit the ability of people to return to their lives. Over two million Victorians have a chronic long-term health condition, with a strong link between these conditions and ageing.

We are calling for the creation of an Older Victorian Health and Wellbeing Action Plan to inform how the health system is treating and caring for older people. Created in partnership with older people, the Action Plan would provide initiatives to drive delivery of care that addresses the needs of older Victorians.

Supporting older people in their health requires a high-functioning primary care system – so Victoria's national leadership on this issue has been welcome. This needs to continue, ensuring the Strengthening Medicare Report has impact – and older Victorians benefit.

Part of that leadership is in rolling out innovation. A state-wide rollout of [the Community Paramedics \(CP@clinic\) program](#) could increase access to primary healthcare for those that struggle. It is [based on a Canadian model](#) which showed significant reductions in acute care access for vulnerable older people, reducing emergency services calls between 19-25 per cent.

## Recommendations

### Improve the health of older Victorians by:

- Funding the creation of an Older Victorian Health and Wellbeing Action Plan by the Department of Health to improve the mental and physical health of older people.
- The Victorian Government taking a leading role in shaping and delivering national primary care reform, ensuring consideration of the needs of older people.
- Expanding the Community Paramedics program state-wide.

# Ensuring that older people get the support they need

**In a time of economic, health, and pandemic pressures**, older Victorians need support that covers the full experience of ageing. Without this, older people may need more extensive, and expensive, assistance. We need to make sure that older Victorians can access support now.

For instance, [a recent parliamentary report on support for older Victorians from migrant and refugee backgrounds](#) highlighted “the many barriers” faced. Over 1/4 of Victorians aged over 60 are from non-English speaking backgrounds. Among many issues, this report recommended connecting older people to care and ensuring older people are not digitally excluded. The recommendations from the report need to be implemented.

These access issues become more acute when coupled with recent energy cost increases. Older Victorians are more vulnerable to energy price rises as they often have fixed incomes, while Victoria is the state most reliant on gas for household use. While we support the return of the \$250 Power Saving Bonus, a key election commitment, it must reach those that need it. Better outreach to older people, which COTA Victoria can deliver, is required so more older people can access the Power Saving Bonus.

More can be done to support, and leverage, older Victorians in the workplace. COTA Victoria previously delivered the place-based Reach, Train and Employ program, re-skilling older jobseekers for aged care and disability services sector work. Evaluation found that almost half of the participants saw their fortnightly employment income more than quadruple. We need to see place-based older person employment programs across the state.

## Recommendations

### Improve access to age-friendly housing by:

- Delivering the recommendations of the final report from the ‘Inquiry into support for older Victorians from migrant and refugee backgrounds’, including:
  - Implementation of a care finder or community connector initiative to help culturally diverse older people find and access support in their local areas.
  - Continued resourcing of face-to-face service options and non-digital communication methods for people who cannot access online services.
  - Developing a communications strategy for each department that addresses digital exclusion.
- Funding older-person specific community outreach as part of the Community Outreach Program to increase older person participation for the next iteration of the \$250 Power Saving Bonus.
- Funding a state-wide scheme to deliver place-based re-skilling programs for Victorians over 50 – building on the Reach, Train and Employ program.