



State Budget Analysis 2019-2020

This year's Victorian budget was consistent with expectations of a mid-term progressive Labor government. It maintains significant funding for key social security, health and wellbeing strategies and initiatives and continues to invest in family violence response services. However, there are several areas of concern in the budget, including a lack of increased funding for primary prevention of men's violence against women and substantial expenditure on prisons, including a new maximum security prison to be built in Lara and an expansion to the existing women's prison in Ravenhall.

This document outlines the budget's highpoints and key areas of concern and discusses their implications for Women's Health West and the wider sector.

Highlights

Women's health

The budget made provision for some specific women's health needs. For example, the government has committed \$213.6 million for early parenting and maternal and child health supports, including funding extra maternal and child health home visits for families most in need, improving and building new Early Parenting Centres and expanding the 24-hour maternal and child health hotline.

The government will provide free tampons and pads in government schools, contributing to sexual and reproductive health and gender equity. It is also increasing subsidies for IVF treatment to improve accessibility for low income earners.

Family violence intervention and response

The budget includes ongoing funding for specialised family violence response services, including specialised services for Aboriginal women and women with a disability. This is an important acknowledgement that women who experience multiple and compounding forms of disadvantage are over-represented as victim-survivors of men's violence.

The government has also committed more funding for men's behaviour change programs. Little is known about the efficacy of these programs – a body of evidence based on rigorous evaluation is only just beginning to emerge (Babcock, Green & Robie, 2004). There is an opportunity for WHW to contribute to and learn from evolving work in this area.

Mental health

The budget includes a commitment of \$173 million for community mental health supports and treatments. This money is predominantly directed towards crisis, rehabilitation and recovery inpatient care and is in recognition that the current mental health system is

chronically under-resourced and fragmented. However, the budget lacks funding for initiatives that redress some of the primary and gendered determinants of mental health and wellbeing. WHW is making a submission to the Royal Commission into Victoria's Mental Health System that will highlight the need to resource primary prevention and mental health promotion measures.

Treaty

The government has made a significant and historic commitment to enter into treaty negotiations with Aboriginal Victorians. It has committed \$30.4 million to establish a First People's Assembly to design and implement Treaty negotiations with the state, including funding communications to ensure the community understand and can fully participate in the Treaty process, and support for traditional owners to prepare for negotiations.

The Treaty process is a timely reminder of WHW's own role and responsibility in working with Aboriginal communities in our region to promote their own rights, health and self-determination. WHW intends to continue to strengthen its Reconciliation Action Plan so that we are better able to provide culturally-informed, safe, appropriate, meaningful and transformative services and programs for Aboriginal communities in the west. WHW may also want to consider how it can best contribute to supporting Aboriginal communities to achieve their desired treaty process and outcomes.

Climate crisis

The 2019/20 budget supports Victoria's climate change strategy, the big shift to solar and other renewable energy, bushfire risk management and emergency services. However, it does not yet make headway into some of the most pressing health and gender inequities that climate change, extreme weather and disasters create and exacerbate. Extreme weather events have the greatest effect on the poorest and most vulnerable in our community, especially women. For example, women over 50 are the fastest growing group experiencing homelessness and income insecurity, making them more vulnerable to the adverse health and environmental effects of climate change. Women also shoulder the burden of care for the very young and the very old, who are most at risk of ill health during extreme weather.

Climate change is clearly an emerging priority area demanding dedicated advocacy and programmatic responses that redress its gendered effects. The Victorian government has identified climate change as a new priority in its Public Health and Wellbeing Plan (2019 – 2023). With adequate resourcing, WHW is well placed to contribute gendered analysis to the design, implementation and evaluation of climate change initiatives.

Family and early childhood support

The government has committed to a significant reform of early childhood education. For the first time the government will subsidise three-year old kindergarten. The government is also expanding early childhood professional development and investing in initiatives to support children who experience developmental and educational disadvantage.

The government is also creating financial incentives to encourage men to take parental leave, a key contributor to redressing rigid gender norms and promoting gender equity.

It may be important for WHW to monitor the effect of these new investments in the western suburbs, especially for women on low incomes and within refugee and migrant communities.

Multiculturalism

The government is maintaining last year's investment in multiculturalism with increased funding for multicultural community organisations, facilitates, and language schools, and specific funding for increased multicultural aged care facilities. However we note that there is no new money for racism reduction – for example anti-racism workplace training or anti-racism school initiatives. Given the particularly multicultural community WHW serves, we may want to consider racism reduction advocacy and programs that explore and redress the interplay between gender discrimination and racism.

People seeking asylum

Following Commonwealth funding cuts, the state government has committed \$3 million to services to support asylum seekers in Victoria. It can be difficult to determine exactly how many people in the western suburbs are seeking asylum, however Refugee Council of Australia data indicates it is at least 1500 people (Refugee Council of Australia, 2019).

The Strategy, Advocacy and Community Engagement (SACE) stream is exploring a partnership with the Asylum Seeker Resource Centre in Footscray to provide financial capability programs for women seeking asylum. WHW may wish to consider asylum seekers a priority population and explore other ways to partner with and support organisations advocating for and providing services to asylum seekers.

Lowlights

Prevention of men's violence against women

No new money has been allocated to primary prevention of men's violence against women (although previously announced money has been reannounced). This significantly inhibits our sector's primary prevention work and its ability to maintain workforce capacity and capability. WHW will need to continue to advocate for increased funding of primary prevention, including promoting the effectiveness of existing prevention initiatives through robust evaluation and evidence.

Disability services

No new money was allocated to disability services. This is concerning though perhaps not surprising given the State government's lack of clarity about the consequences of the NDIS and its ability to fund disability services and programs. This adds to the climate of confusion and uncertainty that the NDIS has created in the disability and health sector, as well as for people with disabilities, their carers and communities.

The SACE stream is already actively considering and pursuing new ways to meet the health promotion needs of women with disabilities, and women who care for people disabilities. This includes exploring diverse funding options and re-orienting existing work in response to a changing disability landscape and a deepening need for tailored, responsive, women-led programs that redress the social and gendered determinants of health for women with disabilities.

Women in sport

The budget allocates funding to increase women's participation in specific male-dominated sports, including shooting, motor sports and golf. This funding could be more effectively spent on initiatives that promote cultural change in sporting associations and clubs. WHW's

Preventing Violence Together partnership is supporting the development of a regional action plan to increase women's participation in sport and has gained excellent traction with all 15 implementing partners. This means we are well-placed to advocate for evidence-based initiatives to promote gender equity in sport.

Prisons

It is extremely disappointing that the budget included a substantial expenditure on prisons, which includes an extra \$1.8 billion to be spent on expanding existing prisons and building a new mega-prison. Overcrowding in prisons is a problem (Murray, 2019) however we would urge the government to invest much more in measures designed to reduce incarceration rates. We are particularly concerned by the high and growing rates of women in prisons, particularly Aboriginal women. Over the past five years there has been a 50 per cent increase in the total number of women prisoners in Victoria. In comparison, the men's prison population has risen 40 per cent. This increase is particularly stark for Aboriginal women, with a 240 per cent jump in the number of female Aboriginal prisoners in Victorian prisons over the past five years. The government has allocated \$20 million over four years to reduce women's imprisonment, with a focus on Aboriginal women and women with a mental illness or intellectual disability, however this figure pales in comparison to the amount to be spent on increasing capacity in prisons.

We know that the drivers of incarceration, such as poverty, homelessness and mental ill-health disproportionately affect women. Worryingly, an overwhelming majority of women in prison have experienced family violence with evidence suggesting between "70 per cent and 90 per cent of incarcerated women have been physically, sexually or emotionally abused as children or adults — an experience experts say frequently leads to their offending and criminalisation" (Gleeson & Baird, 2018). Further, in a recent review, the Women's Legal Service found almost 60 per cent of clients who were named as the respondents to police intervention orders had been incorrectly identified as the perpetrator (Perkins, 2019).

WHW could consider its role in advocacy, prevention of and response to rising rates of incarceration. As some examples, WHW could:

- explore preventative strategies to redress the drivers of incarceration, develop programs for women in, or at risk of entering or re-entering prison.
- explore capacity building programs for Victoria Police or other agencies who provide services for women in or at risk of coming into contact with the justice system.
- engage in advocacy to decriminalise drugs and public drunkenness which disproportionately affect women, in particular Aboriginal women.

Housing and homelessness

The budget contained a commitment to build 1,000 public housing units over three years, making good on an election pledge. However, it is well short of the 3,000 a year the Council to Homeless Persons (CHP) says are needed "just to house those on the priority waitlist" (Henriques-Gomes, 2019).

According to the most recent [Victorian Housing Register and Transfer](#) list for social housing (March 2019), the Western Region had the greatest number of priority access applicants, with the Western Melbourne office in particular holding the greatest number of priority access applicants.

A Productivity Commission report in 2018 found the Victorian government spent an annual \$82 per person on social housing, less than half the national average. As of June 2018, there were 82,500 people on the state's public housing list, which was growing by 500 people each month.

This continuing homelessness crisis could warrant further attention by WHW, particularly as older women are the fastest growing population experiencing homelessness (Gorman, 2018).

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