

VICTORIAN STATE ELECTION 2026

Joint statement

Five steps to better support Victoria's most vulnerable young people

Too many young Victorians continue to face barriers to accessing the support they need. Despite strong policy solutions and a clear roadmap for reform provided by the Royal Commission into Victoria's Mental Health System, young people and the organisations that support them are still confronted with a system that is fragmented, reactive and under increasing pressure.

These challenges are not experienced equally. Young people in rural and regional communities, those experiencing homelessness, those involved with the justice system, and students in under-resourced schools face multiple, compounding barriers to good mental health and wellbeing compared with their peers.

We know what works. Prevention, early intervention and community-based approaches improve outcomes, reduce demand on crisis services and deliver long-term social and economic benefits. Yet these approaches remain underfunded and are often delivered through short-term funding arrangements that undermine their impact.

As Victoria prepares for the next state election, we are united in calling for practical reforms that place prevention and equity at the centre of the mental health system. These priorities will help ensure every young person has the opportunity to thrive, regardless of who they are or where they live.

VCOSS Victorian Council of Social Service
ADF Alcohol and Drug Foundation
Youthlaw
Quantum Support Services
YLab
mcm. your future, your way
Prevention United
Smiling Mind
VACVIC Youth Affairs Council Victoria
Live 4 Life
batyr
REACH
headspace
Rainbow Health Australia
ory gen
The Youth Impact Foundation
Centre for Excellence in Child and Family Welfare
The Push Music is for every young person.

Our shared priorities

1. Equitable access for young people in rural and regional areas

Young people in rural and regional communities face significant and compounding barriers including fewer services, workforce shortages, transport challenges, and rising social exclusion.

We call on the Victorian Government to:

- Apply a clear equity lens to funding and service distribution
- Invest further in workforce attraction and retention in regional areas
- Fund practical access supports, including transport
- Scale place-based, locally led service models

Every young person deserves a fair share of the system, regardless of where they live.

2. 500 supported housing units for young people experiencing homelessness (Royal Commission recommendation 25)

In 2023–24, 11,301 young Victorians presented alone to specialist homelessness services, and more than half reported living with a mental health condition[1]. Too many young people are cycling through homelessness, crisis systems and emergency care. Without stable housing and access to integrated, trauma-informed supports, recovery is not possible.

We call on the Victorian Government to:

- Deliver the 500 youth-specific supported housing units promised in the Royal Commission, over five years, by repurposing existing housing in the short term and developing new builds in the long term
- Implement integrated models linking housing, mental health care, alcohol and other drug services, education, transport and family violence services.
- Address gaps in psychosocial care and support.

This reform is essential to reduce crisis presentations, save lives, and deliver long-term system savings.

3. Investment in prevention and addressing the social determinants of mental health and wellbeing

Victoria's mental health system remains heavily focused on crisis and treatment, despite clear evidence that prevention improves young people's lives, delivers better outcomes and stronger economic returns, with up to $3.06 return on investment for every $1 invested in prevention.[2]

Young people would directly benefit from prevention efforts, given 50% of mental health conditions emerge before age 15, and 75% before age 25. This investment could support young people to thrive and prevent mental health challenges escalating to crisis and increasing pressure on an already stretched service system. The latest AIHW data confirms young people aged 16-24 continue to experience the highest rates of mental health disorders of any age group in Australia.

We call on the Victorian Government to:

- Increase government investment in mental health prevention and promotion, recognising prevention as core mental health infrastructure, and resourcing the delivery of *Wellbeing in Victoria: A Strategy to Promote Good Mental Health.*
- Embed prevention targets and shared outcomes across government portfolios through coordinated action across health, education, housing, child and family services, employment and justice. Establish clear accountability and public reporting on prevention investment, targets and outcomes shared within and across portfolios.
- Increase government investment in alcohol and other drugs prevention, recognising the intersect between mental ill-health and problematic substance use.

This investment will improve young people's mental health and wellbeing, population mental health outcomes, increase participation in education and employment, and reduce long-term pressures on the mental health system.

4. Community-based programs to divert at-risk young people away from the justice system

There has been a shift towards more punitive responses to young people experiencing disadvantage and engaging in anti-social behaviour, including the recent 'adult time for adult crime' legislation. These approaches fail to address the underlying drivers of offending, disengagement and poor mental health. Young people who come into contact with the justice system experience disproportionately high rates of mental ill-health and substance use disorders, highlighting the need for earlier and more effective support.[3]

At the same time, structural, systemic, and colonial injustices continue to drive the overrepresentation of First Nations children and young people; multicultural young people, particularly those from African, Māori and Pasifika backgrounds; children living in residential care; girls and young women with complex needs; and young adults aged 18–25. While these groups are overrepresented in the criminal legal system, they often remain underserved by housing, health, education and community support systems. Community-based prevention and early intervention programs can reduce justice system involvement, but many remain constrained by short-term and insecure funding.

We call on the Victorian Government to:

- Rebalance investment away from punitive responses and towards prevention, early intervention and community-based supports
- Expand access to evidence-based diversionary and restorative justice initiatives
- Scale proven community-led programs, including culturally responsive initiatives developed and led by First Nations and multicultural communities
- Invest in family preservation, reunification and whole-of-family supports that address the drivers of disadvantage before young people enter the justice system
- Provide sustainable, long-term funding for organisations already delivering impact
- Introduce a standard minimum five-year funding agreement for critical community services that prevent poor mental health outcomes and justice system involvement

Safe and healthy communities are built through connection, equity and opportunity, not punishment alone. Long-term funding certainty is essential to sustain impact, retain skilled workforces and ensure young people and families can access the support they need when they need it.



5. Audit and reform the school mental health menu

The school mental health menu is not consistently reaching the young people who need support the most. There is limited transparency around how funding is allocated and used, and concerns that resources are not equitably benefiting students with the highest levels of need.

We call on the Victorian Government to:

- Refocus the school mental health menu on equity, ensuring resources are directed to schools and students with the greatest need
- Conduct a full public audit of the menu, including how funding is allocated and who is benefiting
- Provide stronger guidance to ensure funding is used for evidence-based mental health supports
- Embed accountability, evaluation and youth voice in decision-making

This reform is critical to ensuring that mental health support in schools reaches the young people who need it most.

These priorities are practical and grounded in the lived experience of young people and the organisations that support them.

By acting on these recommendations, the Victorian Government has the opportunity to:

- Put equity at the centre of the mental health system
- Reach the young people who are currently missing out
- Strengthen system integration and accountability
- Deliver on the intent of the Royal Commission
- Invest in prevention to reduce emergence of mental health conditions and future service demand, and the impacts on broader society that poor mental health can produce (i.e., school disengagement, un/underemployment, anti-social behaviours, family violence)
- Improve outcomes for young people, families and communities

A fair and effective mental health system is one that works for all young people, not just those who can most easily access it.

[1] Australian Government. Specialist homelessness services annual report 2023–2024. In: Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, editor. 2024.

[2] National Mental Health Commission, 2023

[3] https://www.mcri.edu.au/news/action-needed-improve-poor-health-and-disadvantage-youth-justice-system