

29/03/19

Hon Luke Donnellan
Minister for Child Protection
Minister for Disability, Ageing and Carers
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Dear Minister Donnellan

I am writing to you on behalf of the 736,600 Victorian carers and more specifically our 7,800 Carers Victoria members. Unlike previous years, in the lead up to the 2019-20 State Budget to be delivered on 30 April 2019, Carers Victoria has not prepared a formal pre-budget submission. This decision has been made in light of the Andrews Government's 2018 election commitment to fund over \$50 million of additional respite through the Support for Carers Program, and other carer supports and services. Instead, I wish to briefly outline our organisation's priorities for delivering the greatest benefit to more Victorian carers. The planned expansion of support in Victoria will be especially welcome for carers not currently receiving support, as these commitments have addressed many issues identified by carers in state-wide consultations conducted by Carers Victoria.

Victorian Carer Strategy 2018-22

Through the Victorian Carer Strategy 2018-22, the Victorian Government has recognised carers' rights as citizens and begun to strategically lead better recognition and support for Victoria's carers. The Strategy addresses unique and specific needs of carers across areas such as employment, health, education and financial disadvantage. Carers Victoria has already begun work on a number of projects arising from the Strategy and briefed you on these and other matters relevant to carers.

We commend the Government's intention to monitor and review data from various services to see what progress is being made as changes are introduced; however Carers Victoria calls on you as Victoria's first Minister for Carers to commit to deliver and build on all five priorities of the Strategy.

Carers Victoria fully supports the intention to include carers when conducting annual forums to review the Strategy implementation from July 2019. This is a positive step in supporting a community of empowered carers and we are seeking your commitment to:

- Provide clear timelines for developing new program and service guidelines
- Develop frameworks to connect data from a range of government departments
- Develop a comprehensive community engagement plan
- Ensure carers who are engaged in decision making and monitoring of the Carer Strategy reflect the diversity of Victoria's carers, as well as address the barriers carers can face in engaging with feedback mechanisms
- Establish an independent review of the current Strategy commencing in 2021; and
- Determine priorities for the next whole-of-government Carer Strategy in 2021.

Election commitments

The Victorian Government's commitment to boosting funding for carer support is significant in the context of the Australian Government's recent tender for regional delivery partners for the new National Integrated Carer Support Service (ICSS). The current Carer Information and Support Service and National Carer Counselling Program operated by Carers Victoria and the nine Victorian Commonwealth Respite and Carelink Centres are all subject to this new competitive tender.

However, the total funding available is approximately 20 per cent less than existing Commonwealth funding. Carers Victoria has concerns about a reduction in carer access to respite care services as part of ICSS. Instead, carers will be directed to the NDIS or My Aged Care to access planned respite care with ICSS responsible for emergency respite services. We also anticipate increased demand from carers for support as a range of existing programs are rolled into the NDIS.

Together with some local governments and community health services, many existing Commonwealth funded carer services are also funded under the Victorian Support for Carers Program. We are very concerned that with recent funding changes for aged and disability services, many of these organisations have already withdrawn from facilitating carer support groups, carer wellbeing events and delivering services to people aged under 65. Of additional concern, some are also withdrawing from providing Commonwealth Home Support Program services for people aged over 65.

When the Support for Carers Program was first launched in 1997, the Victorian Government strategically allocated funds to those organisations delivering services under the then National Respite for Carers Program. This combination of Federal and State funding enabled the development of a unique Victorian approach to support for carers that has not been apparent in other jurisdictions. However, Carers Victoria is deeply concerned the benefits of the Victorian system for carers may be lost in the transition to the new model.

We call on the Victorian Government to ensure the allocation of Support for Carers Program funding is directed to carer service providers and review the existing allocation to those providers no longer delivering Commonwealth or State funded aged care, disability or mental health services. This will ensure government funds are allocated in an equitable way as well as protecting Victorian carers from being disadvantaged in the transition to the new system.

Address the gaps

Carers Victoria calls on the Victorian Government to commit to funding services and supports to address the remaining gaps in providing comprehensive support for all carers. In brief, these are:

Individual Advocacy

The Victorian Government has announced \$6 million for disability advocacy funding, but carers of people with a disability report these services do not advocate for carers needs in their own right. Carers also need funded individual advocacy supports to protect and promote their rights. In Carers Victoria's 2018 election survey, advocacy was rated as the second most important service required by carers to improve the situation for people in care relationships

Older Carers

The Victorian Carer Strategy identifies the average age of Victorian carers is 55. Older carers need additional funded and targeted support to maintain their wellbeing, to engage in their community and to plan for future care and support needs. They may also need assistance to access formal services for people receiving care.

Rural and Regional Carers

Carers in rural and regional areas experience higher rates of disability and chronic health conditions, lower employment rates and greater financial hardship than carers in metropolitan areas. Distance to or lack of adequate services in rural and regional areas is a major difficulty. Targeted services need to be easily accessed and readily available to address these additional needs of carers in rural and regional Victoria.

Housing Solutions

The Victorian Carer Strategy includes priority actions to provide increased information to carers about their social housing options. Many carers are on low incomes and can experience housing stress if the person they care for lives separately. Permanent housing solutions are needed for both carers and people receiving care to have genuine choices about living together or living apart.

Carers Victoria makes these recommendations in the firm belief all carer support services should take into account the needs of individuals and the family as a whole and be available across the life course, especially during key life transitions.

Carers Victoria will be publishing this letter to inform carers about our prebudget priorities and would be pleased to also publish your response if you wish.

I look forward to our next meeting with you to discuss these and any other issues brought to you by Victorian carers.

Yours sincerely

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'S. Walker', written in a cursive style.

Scott Walker
CEO