

Meet Luke Donnellan

— Minister for Carers

With the re-election of the Labor Government and significant election promises to deliver, Premier Daniel Andrews has for the first time appointed a dedicated Minister for Carers. In this special interview, meet Luke Donnellan — Minister for Carers.

Has giving or receiving care affected you or your family and friends?

Personally, it has touched me during my time as a part-time carer for a friend of mine who was suffering from Parkinson's disease. I experienced firsthand how difficult it is to care for someone you care about and watch them struggle, but also how difficult it can be to juggle caring with other parts of your life.

The reality is caring is something that is likely to touch all of us at some stage of our lives — either through giving care or receiving care from a family member, friend or professional. Across Victoria, almost 737,000 carers give their time and effort to look after a family member or friend who needs them. More than 71,000 of these are young people. Carers vary enormously in age and they might be caring for a parent, child, partner, sibling or a close friend. So the provision of care is something that affects almost all of us.

As the very first Minister for Carers, why has the Victorian Government chosen to highlight carers in this way?

This is the first time that carers has its own dedicated government portfolio, and I'm very proud to be the Minister for Disability, Ageing and Carers. Carers make an incredible contribution to our community, providing a \$15 billion benefit to the economy every year, so the Victorian Government firmly believes they deserve a hand.



Above // Minister for Disability, Ageing and Carers Luke Donnellan.

Creating this dedicated role in government is just one way we are seeking to better recognise carers and the important role they play, as well as making sure they get the support they need. It also gives us more opportunity to simply say thank-you to all those who make sacrifices to enhance someone else's life.

What do you identify as the biggest challenges for carers?

As your readers know, the care role can be hugely rewarding, but also challenging. Being a carer can affect people in different ways. It can be tough financially, and often means missing out on ordinary things you would usually do. Carers are less likely to be involved in activities outside the home, finding the time for a run or a movie with a friend can be hard. Reducing the mental, physical and financial stress for carers is a priority for me.

What are the key actions of the Victorian government to address those challenges?

Carers make a significant contribution to Victoria and carers are of all ages. We've put together a suite of programs to make sure carers get the practical help they need. These are packaged up in the Victorian carer strategy 2018–2022, which was released last year.

I'm looking forward to engaging with carers and carer organisations like Carers Vic at our first annual forum that's planned for later this year. It will be a great chance for the Parliamentary Secretary for Carers Lizzie Blandthorn and I to hear firsthand how these programs are tracking, and what else we can do.

There are five priority action areas that we're focused on; as well as providing greater access to support groups, financial advice services and

transport, and better identification of and help for young carers, we particularly want to ensure they are supported in school, study and at work. We've also invested an additional \$1.2 million in extra respite, school holiday programs and more support for carers of people with mental illness.

We're also pleased to support Carers Victoria in providing new information for carers on the new combined Carers Victoria and Everything Carers website (launch May), resources to help carers identify benefits and concessions, and with the carer awareness campaign with GPs.

Australian Government funded carer support services are changing significantly in 2019. How will you ensure Victorian carers continue to get the support they need in their caring role?

There is a lot happening this year, and not just with these changes. We are also transitioning to the National Disability Insurance Scheme and providing support for the Commonwealth Royal Commissions into Aged Care Quality and Safety, and the Victorian Royal Commission into Mental Health.

Nonetheless, respecting carers is a priority for the Andrews Labor Government. In 2018, we committed an additional \$49.5 million over four years to better support carers with an extra 100,000 hours of respite annually and \$4 million over four years in grants to grass-roots carer support groups statewide. The money will also fund a year-round 50 per cent concession on public transport, and free travel across the state during Victorian Carers Week in October, for Victorian Carer Card holders.

You hold very important but often stressful portfolios. What are your top 3 self-care tips?

Many of us live very busy and hectic lives and while technology has made many parts of our lives easier, it also means we can struggle to switch off. Having a smartphone means we're constantly contactable and checking emails, texts and social media. Considering this, I think it's really important that we take time to fully switch off, spend time doing things we love and reflect on our lives.

While everyone is different, the three ways I look after my mental and physical health are:

- Spending time with family — I love relaxing with the family and enjoy watching my boys play cricket on the weekend. I find it very relaxing to wander down to Edinburgh Gardens, sit under a tree and (hopefully) see my boys make a few runs.
- Gardening — I spend a lot of time in the garden tending to my tomatoes and while I have had mixed success with the quality of the produce, I find time in the garden extremely therapeutic.
- Exercise — while we all have long, tough days that make it seem tempting to just sit on the couch when we get home, exercise can play a big role in our mental health. I go for a run every day and I often find this is the only time I completely switch off and clear my head.

What personal message would you like to send to Victoria's 736,000 carers?

The work you do is invaluable — for thousands of Victorians caring for a loved one, it's a 24/7 job. It's time for us to make sure you get the time out and practical support you need. I look forward to working with you to make that happen.