

Support carer mental health and wellbeing

Key points

- › Recently released census data shows the number of Victorian carers has grown by over 22% in the past 5 years, a significantly higher growth rate than the national average of 15%.
- › These people play a critical social and economic role but being a carer can be tough, and they need support in a range of areas including mental health and wellbeing.
- › Carers are at significantly higher risk of poorer mental health and wellbeing than the general population. They report social isolation and loneliness at 2–3 times the rates of the general population. During the pandemic, over three-quarters of all carers reported increased levels of loneliness.
- › Investing in programs that help the growing number of Victorian carers maintain good mental health and wellbeing needs to be a priority, and an innovative pilot program in this area is showing strong results.¹
- › Carers Victoria is calling for dedicated staff and programs to support carers' mental health and wellbeing embedded in the new Victorian Local Adult and Older Adult Mental Health and Wellbeing Centres.
- › These vital support programs will help ensure that Victorian carers can continue to care for the most vulnerable in our society, a role that delivers economic benefits to this state of over \$19 billion each year.

The challenges

Caring is an important role...

Across Victoria, there are over 700,000 people are in unpaid caring roles helping family members, friends and other Victorians with a range of disabilities, health and other conditions. They play a critical social role and deliver economic benefits in excess of \$19 billion every year.

...but carers' own mental health and wellbeing is suffering.

Care roles can be time-consuming, physically demanding, mentally challenging, and socially isolating. As a result, carers often deprioritise or neglect their own needs and health goals. The COVID-19 pandemic exacerbated these issues for many Victorian carers with a recent survey of Victorian carers finding:

- › 76% of carers reported increased levels of loneliness during the pandemic which is substantially above the 54% rate reported for the general population.
- › 80% of carers said they spent more time in their caring role compared to pre-pandemic.
- › 86% of carers said their satisfaction with life was worse.
- › More than 33% of respondents reported barriers to accessing psychological services during the pandemic and nominated such supports among the most important they needed to transition to COVID-normal.

¹ The University of Melbourne evaluated the Carer Wellbeing and Connection program throughout 2020–21, the results of which showed a significant decrease in participants' psychological distress (as scored by the Kessler Psychological Distress Scale K10+).

- › Over 70% of carers reported their resilience had deteriorated since the pandemic commenced.

The overall size of these challenges is also growing as the number of Victorians in caring roles grows, with recently released census data showing that the number of carers in Victoria grew by over 22% in the past 5 years, a significantly higher rate than the national average growth of 15%.

The solutions

Additional funded programs are required to help carers maintain good mental health

Creating opportunities for carers to build resilience and develop skills that can help them maintain good mental health and wellbeing is key to sustaining them in their caring role.

A recent innovative group counselling program delivered online, was able to significantly improve carer wellbeing and reduce the loneliness and psychological distress reported by participants. This is a practical demonstration of how targeted investment in tailored programs can make a concrete difference.

Include funded staff for carers in at least 20% of Local Adult and Older Adult Mental Health and Wellbeing Services so that all carers can access timely mental health and wellbeing support

The roll-out of local adult and older adult mental health and wellbeing services as part of the Victorian Mental Health reform agenda offers a unique opportunity to help carers build resilience and develop skills that can help them maintain good mental health and wellbeing. This can be done by embedding carer-specific staff who have expertise in those services as part of the agenda so that all carers can be actively supported to maintain their own mental health and wellbeing.

What will it deliver?

These strategies will help ensure that a group in our community at significantly higher risk of poorer mental health and wellbeing – the 650,000+ carers who are not in scope for the proposed mental health family and carer-led centres – can access services and support to help them maintain good mental health and wellbeing.

This will in turn better equip them to sustain their caring role and the substantial contributions this makes to Victoria's society and economy.