Building on the value of Victoria's community sector

VCOSS
Victorian Council
of Social Service

About VCOSS

The Victorian Council of Social Service (VCOSS) is the peak body of the social and community sector in Victoria. VCOSS works to ensure that all Victorians have access to and a fair share of the community's resources and services, through advocating for the development of a sustainable, fair and equitable society. VCOSS members reflect a wide diversity, with members ranging from large charities, sector peak organisations, small community services, advocacy groups and individuals involved in social policy debates.

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The value of Victoria's community sector

The not-for-profit community sector is a unique and valuable component of Victoria's economy and society, delivering value in many ways. It offers a diverse range of programs and services to help people overcome disadvantage and poverty, advocates strongly for policy solutions, supports a wide range of people with multiple and complex needs, can be innovative and collaborative, and generates significant income, employment and volunteering levels. Through all this, the community sector delivers a far-reaching value to Victoria, strengthening the state in a manner unlike that of any other sector.

In its role as the peak body of Victoria's community sector, the Victorian Council of Social Service (VCOSS) works alongside a wide range of community sector organisations aiming to support people to overcome disadvantage and poverty. In this paper, *Building on the value of Victoria's community sector*, VCOSS seeks to outline the many ways in which these community sector organisations deliver value to Victoria, and outline strategies for further building on that value, to better support people facing disadvantage, and benefit all Victorians.

Building on the value of Victoria's community sector follows on from the May 2015 VCOSS paper, *Strengthening the state*, which provided an important snapshot of Victoria's community sector registered charities, including their income, size, employment and volunteer levels, beneficiary groups and reporting obligations.[1] *Strengthening the state* was prepared using data from the Australian Charities and Not-for-profits Commission, and so encompassed only those Victorian community sector organisations operating as registered charities. *Building on the value of Victoria's community sector* looks beyond this. It discusses the value of all Victoria's community

sector organisations, including those operating with registered charity status and those operating without, while also outlining broader aspects of the community sector's value, beyond just the economic.

Strengthening the state found that community sector registered charities contribute an estimated $13 billion a year to the Victorian economy. It also found community sector charities employ almost 97,000 Victorians, or 3 per cent of the Victorian workforce, and employ more people than in other key industries, such as the utilities, media, telecommunications, IT and automobile manufacturing industries. Its workforce is also more than doubled in number by volunteers, with almost 135,000 people estimated to be volunteering at community sector charities in 2013–14. If the contribution of community organisations beyond those registered as charities was also included, these figures would be higher again.

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1   VCOSS, *Strengthening the state: A snapshot of Victoria's community sector charities*, May 2015.

But while a significant contributor to the Victorian economy, the not-for-profit community sector is also a significant contributor to society's wellbeing. It plays a unique role in supporting people to overcome disadvantage. Operating autonomously and independently, community organisations are able to respond to evolving immediate and long-term community needs. Operating with direct on-the-ground experience of the communities, families and individuals with whom they work, they are able to be flexible in their approach to supporting people to overcome disadvantage, while also helping develop long-term social policy solutions.

Community sector organisations amplify the voice of people facing disadvantage, supporting them to tell their stories. They use their on-the-ground experience and knowledge of the evidence to identify, deliver and advocate solutions to social issues. This informs and improves public policy debate and helps governments to tackle complex social problems.

Highly vulnerable, marginalised people may often be reluctant to trust government services. Not-for-profit community organisations may be the only ones able to engage and build long-term relationships with the people with whom they work, directly supporting them while also advocating on their behalf. Without community service organisations, these people could remain socially excluded and isolated within the community, unable to access support.

Community sector organisations amplify the voice of people facing disadvantage, supporting them to tell their stories. They use their on-the-ground experience and knowledge of the evidence to identify, deliver and advocate solutions to social issues.

Through their wide range of programs, services, policy development and advocacy, delivered by significant numbers of paid and volunteer workers, not-for-profit community sector organisations build stronger, more cohesive communities.

The huge diversity of not-for-profit community organisations enables people to find the most effective style of service and program to help them overcome disadvantage. Different organisations also have the potential to collaborate to provide people with a cohesive range of supports. The independence, diversity and autonomy with which community sector organisations operate mean they are able to be innovative in responding to changing community needs and developing solutions.

Community sector organisations are at the forefront of delivering programs and services aimed at prevention and early intervention. These have been shown to be the most effective way to tackle the causes of poverty and disadvantage, and to ameliorate their effects on individuals, families, and whole communities now, and over generations to come.

Through their wide range of programs, services, policy development and advocacy, delivered by significant numbers of paid and volunteer workers, not-for-profit community sector organisations build stronger, more cohesive communities.

Building on the value of Victoria's community sector outlines some of the many ways in which the sector delivers value to Victoria. It also outlines how government and the community sector can work together to build on this value, helping people to overcome disadvantage, and in turn building stronger, more cohesive, resilient communities for us all.

Building on the value of the community sector

There are many ways in which the not-for-profit community sector brings value to the Victorian economy and society. By recognising these and building further on them, government and the community sector can strengthen the sector's capacity to help people overcome disadvantage, and build a more cohesive, resilient Victoria for all.

● Building on the economic and social value of not-for-profit community sector organisations

Government and the community sector can work together to further deliver economic and social benefits to Victoria by:

- **Utilising the community sector's ability to leverage investment:** Every dollar of funding invested in the community sector is further leveraged through the contribution of volunteer and carer capacity, donations, philanthropic partnerships and in-kind support. Further investing in the community sector can provide significant benefit and value for government and the community.

- **Tackling unemployment:** Recognising the importance of the community sector as a significant employer and generator of economic activity will strengthen programs aiming to tackle unemployment in Victoria. Working with the community sector to develop a workforce participation plan for all Victorians, along with education strategies, would build on the Victorian Government's existing plan for getting Victorians back to work. This would also help ensure a focus is placed on supporting people facing disadvantage, who are often the most vulnerable to unemployment and long-term unemployment.

- **Recognising the community sector's volunteering and social capital contribution:** Community sector organisations build social capital and community cohesion through significant levels of volunteering, which benefits both the volunteers and the communities with whom they work.

● Building on the unique role of the not-for-profit community sector

Government and the community sector can work together to strengthen the sector's unique role and build on the value it delivers to Victoria's economy and society by:

- **Developing strong communication and consultation processes:** Community sector organisations have direct knowledge of the communities they work with, and of their specialist program areas. They are often best-placed to understand the causes, nature and consequences of social problems, as well as to collaboratively devise strategies to tackle them.

- **Respecting strong local knowledge in contracting and tendering processes:** Taking not-for-profit community organisations' strong local knowledge and expertise into account in government contracting, tendering and service commissioning arrangements can help deliver well-targeted services to solve difficult social issues.

- **Creating flexible and autonomous funding agreements:** Structuring funding agreements that provide not-for-profit community organisations with flexibility and autonomy in delivering services will help organisations respond effectively to communities' changing needs.

● **Building on the community sector's ability to amplify the voice of people facing disadvantage**

Government and the community sector can work together to amplify the voice of people facing disadvantage by:

• **Supporting the sector's ability to advocate:** Community sector organisations and their peak bodies base their advocacy on direct experience working with communities, and knowledge of formal research and evidence bases. Ensuring strong mechanisms are in place to enable these organisations to advocate strongly will help build informed and comprehensive public policy debate that helps deliver effective solutions to complex community issues.

● **Building on the value of community sector organisations' strong relationships with marginalised people who are most in need of support**

Government and the community sector can work together to strengthen the sector's relationships with people who most need support and build on the value this delivers to Victoria's economy and society by:

• **Protecting relationships:** Understanding that relationships between marginalised people and community organisations are based on trust and take time to build, is an important basis for social policy. Sudden disruptions that sever these connections risk destroying these relationships, which can then take many years to rebuild. There is also a high risk people will fail to engage with a new service, if their former organisations cease to offer them programs and services. Funding processes and program design that value the long-term relationships community organisations build with marginalised and disadvantaged people are a sound foundation for their success.

• **Establishing secure funding streams:** Time-limited funding, or short-term extensions when funding is being reviewed, can create significant instability in community organisations. This can lead to high staff turnover, limited tenure appointments and the loss of skills, thus jeopardising relationships with service users. Establishing secure funding streams that enable organisations to offer stability and certainty to clients around programs and services helps strengthens relationships with people facing disadvantage.

● **Building on the value of community sector organisations' prevention and early intervention approaches**

Government and the community sector can work together to utilise prevention and early intervention programs and build on the value the sector delivers to Victoria's economy and society by:

• **Investing in prevention and early intervention:** Prevention and early intervention are more cost effective in tackling disadvantage in the long-term, rather than waiting until problems are entrenched and harder to solve. By investing in prevention and early intervention, as well as funding immediate and urgent needs, governments can contain upwardly spiralling costs in the long-term.

● **Building on the value of a diverse community sector**

Government and the community sector can work together to strengthen the sector's diversity and build on the value it delivers to Victoria's economy and society by:

- **Developing flexible funding, contracting and regulatory systems:** Governments can leverage the value of the sector's diversity by developing funding, contracting and regulatory systems that enhance it. Funding streams and contracting arrangements could recognise the importance of organisations of different sizes and geographic footprints, and those working with specific groups of people.

- **Encouraging a holistic service mix:** Contracting, reporting and regulatory systems that build-in the flexibility for organisations of different sizes and geographic footprints to take a range of approaches to providing assistance, will help the sector meet the diverse needs of people facing disadvantage and poverty.

- **Supporting community organisation stability:** Government tendering and funding arrangements can strengthen the sector's diversity through structures that do not pitch organisations against each other, or create reactive cycles where organisations are frequently applying and re-applying for funding to ensure their survival.

- **Developing tiered and integrated service systems:** Policy approaches that enable universal, secondary and tertiary services to work together, based on progressive universalism approaches, will be most effective for helping people overcome disadvantage.

● **Building on the value of the community sector's innovative nature**

Government and the community sector can work together to foster innovative solutions to community issues and build on the value this delivers to Victoria's economy and society by:

- **Fostering innovation through improved funding and reporting systems:** Government can support the community sector's innovative nature by being willing to fund and trial new ways of working. Funding and service agreements that focus solely on inputs and are overly prescriptive or rigid, can stifle innovation, as can siloed approaches to addressing disadvantage. Exploring options for outcomes-based reporting, longer term funding arrangements and a more partnership-based approach to contractual relationships will help foster greater innovation.

- **Funding research and evaluation that demonstrate the results of innovative models:** Funding ongoing research and evaluation of promising models and practices that look at 'what works' for people facing disadvantage, enables innovation and evidence-based practice to be disseminated throughout the community sector.

● Building on the value of community sector organisations' collaborative nature

Government and the community sector can work together to strengthen the sector's collaborative nature and build on the value it delivers to Victoria's economy and society by:

• **Fostering collaboration in funding approaches:** Developing funding models that promote trust and cooperation, and recognise the value of organisations taking the time needed to adopt collaborative, shared approaches, will help foster this as an effective mode of practice across the community sector. Governance, service and evaluation practices that support collaboration can also be encouraged through the structure of funding and reporting arrangements.

• **Encouraging meaningful long-term collaboration:** Government can help encourage collaboration by developing flexible funding processes, providing collaboration resources and leadership opportunities, and focusing on place-based responses to disadvantage that encourage organisations to work together. However, forced collaborations or mergers are less likely to be as successful and sustainable. Similarly, if organisations are forced to guard against each other in a highly competitive funding and contracting environment, the culture of collaboration can be lost, and can be difficult to rebuild.

• **Encouraging place-based solutions to local needs:** Funding and supporting place-based solutions that respond to local needs, empowers communities to work together to improve and coordinate service delivery in ways that help overcome often complex and entrenched forms of disadvantage.

• **Working together to solve complex problems:** The wealth of knowledge and understanding the community sector holds in relation to complex problems and potential solutions can be of great benefit to governments and policy makers. Developing processes for government and the community sector to capitalise on this by working collaboratively together at federal, state, regional and local levels, can help people overcome disadvantage.

● Building community cohesion through community sector organisations

Government and the community sector can work together to build the sector's ability to improve community cohesion and the value this delivers to Victoria's economy and society by:

• **Supporting the development of community service organisations in emerging communities:** In new and emerging communities it takes time for local community organisations to form. Support may be needed to help establish local organisations, for example neighbourhood houses, to promote community connections, wellbeing and resilience.

• **Encouraging the development of co-design models:** Funding and supporting co-design partnerships between community organisations and the people they work with, incorporates people's lived experience of disadvantage into program and service design. This is an effective way of matching services to people's real needs, and helping them overcome disadvantage.

• **Strengthening community sector programs through research and evaluation:** Commissioning research and evaluation of community sector programs and services helps strengthen their ongoing effectiveness in supporting people to overcome disadvantage and building stronger, more cohesive communities.

• **Developing funding and service design models that utilise and foster community cohesion:** Not-for-profit community sector organisations are the 'social glue' that brings people together from different backgrounds, helping build their understanding of social issues and their willingness to support each other, both in everyday life and in times of crisis. Utilising community organisations to deliver social programs and services helps build community connections, cohesion and resilience.

Generating economic and social benefits

The community sector is a growing industry and a significant contributor to the Victorian economy and society. Investment in the sector is leveraged through a skilled workforce, volunteers and carers, philanthropic partnerships, public donations and in-kind support, providing significant benefit and value for government and the community.

The entire Australian not-for-profit sector turns over more than $107 billion a year and contributes about 4 per cent of our national GDP.[2] The size of its contribution is growing. For more than a decade, the non-profit sector has increased in size by about 8 per cent a year.[3] The health and community services sector is the fastest growing industry and the largest employer in Australia. It is projected to grow by at least 35 per cent over the next 10 years.[4]

Figure 1: Relative growth in employment between 2000 and 2014 – Australia

Growth index (base year 2000 = 100%)
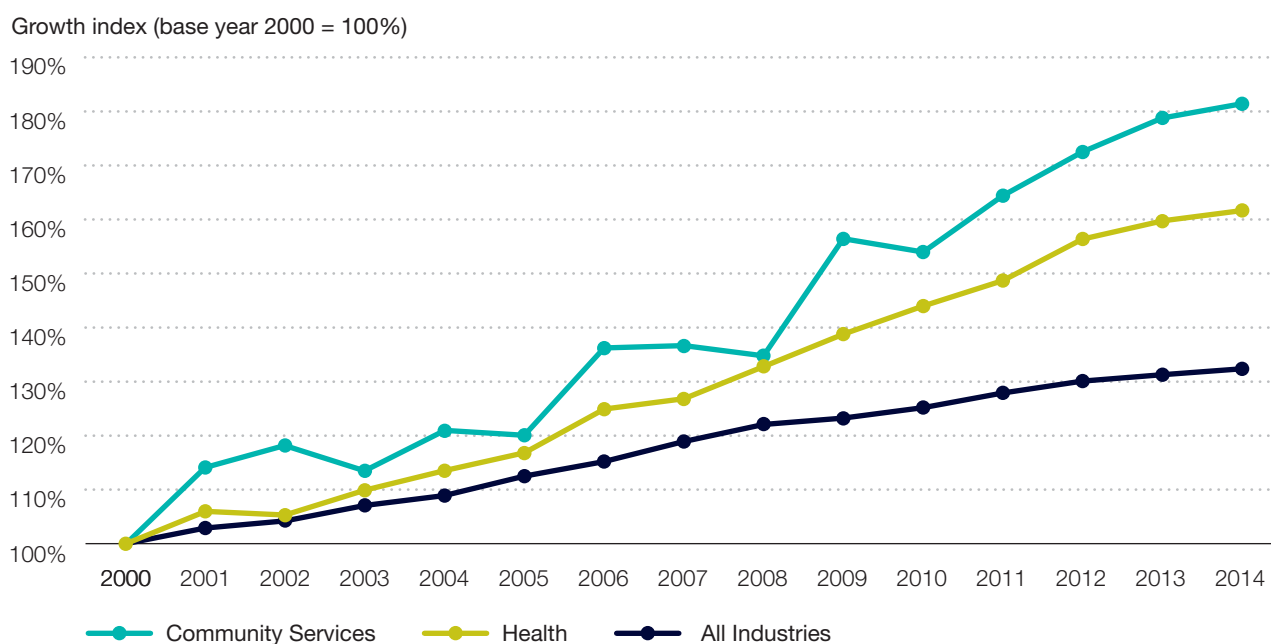
Source: *Building a healthy future: Skills, planning and enterprise*, Community Services and Health Industry Skills Council, 2015, Figure 1, p. 12, using data from Australian Bureau of Statistics (2014b), *Detailed Labour Force Survey* Cat. No. 6291.0.55.003, accessed Dec 2014.

Notes:
1. Figure does not show actual growth, but shows relative growth in employment in relation to the numbers employed in 2000. Reference month for series is May, however only February data available for 2000.
2. Industry groupings were defined using ANZSIC sub-divisions. 'Health' includes Hospitals, Medical and Other Health Care Services. Community Services includes Residential Care Services and Social Assistance Services. The category Health Care and Social Assistance nfd (not further defined) was excluded from these calculations.

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2   Australian Bureau of Statistics, *Australian National Accounts: Non-Profit Institutions Satellite Account*, 2012–13, Cat. No. 5256.0, ABS, Canberra, 2014.

3   Productivity Commission, *Contribution of the Not-for-profit Sector*, Australian Government, 2010, p. 53.

4   Community Services and Health Industry Skills Council, *Environmental Scan 2013; The Care Industry, A Time for Action*, 2013, p. 5.

The community sector also supports a diverse workforce, employing people from a wide range of backgrounds, including people with lived experience of disadvantage and service use.

VCOSS has used data from the Australian Not-for-profit and Charities Commission (ACNC) in its report *Strengthening the state: A snapshot of Victoria's community sector charities*. This analysis provides an insight into the economic contribution of Victoria's community sector, however is an underrepresentation, as it only reflects the activity of those not-for-profit community sector organisations registered as charities.

Strengthening the state found that over 2012–13, there were 2,672 registered community sector charities in Victoria aiming primarily to help people overcome poverty and disadvantage.[5] Of these, about one quarter (699) were classified as large charities, with annual incomes greater than $1 million, 20 per cent (527) were classified as medium-size (annual income of $250,000 to $1 million) and over half (54 per cent, 1,432 charities) were classified as small (annual incomes of less than $250,000).[6]

Using ACNC and Australian Taxation Office data, *Strengthening the state* also estimates the annual income generated by these Victorian community sector charities to be approximately $13 billion.[7] If the contribution of all Victorian community sector organisations were to be considered, beyond registered charities, this figure would be greater. The analysis shows that the community sector makes a significant economic contribution to Victoria.

The community sector is also a significant employer in Victoria. *Strengthening the state* found community sector charities employed almost 97,000 Victorians, equating to more than 3 per cent of the Victorian workforce.[8] The sector employs more people than several other key industries, including utilities, media, IT and telecommunications. Again, this is an underrepresentation of the community sector's

contribution to employment. If the employment provided by all Victorian community sector organisations were to be considered, this figure would be greater. The analysis shows that the community sector is a significant employer in Victoria.

The community sector also supports a diverse workforce, employing people from a wide range of backgrounds, including people with lived experience of disadvantage and service use.

It employs significant numbers of women, and many organisations have flexible arrangements that support different lifestyles and family structures. An increasing number of its workers are from a culturally and linguistically diverse background and many speak English as a second language. Aboriginal community controlled organisations in particular, prioritise recruitment and retention practices that encourage and support Aboriginal people to apply for and remain in employment.

The community sector also employs many people from groups who experience higher than general rates of unemployment. Organisations often offer jobs, training and mentoring opportunities for former service users or other people experiencing disadvantage. This builds the skills and experience of people highly vulnerable to unemployment and long-term unemployment, improving their job readiness.

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5   VCOSS, *Strengthening the state: A snapshot of Victoria's community sector charities*, May 2015, p. 10.

6   Ibid., p. 10.

7   Ibid., p. 22.

8   Ibid., p. 10.

> Volunteering with a community organisation helps build networks and friendships for people who may be at risk of social exclusion, and helps develop skills that can lead to improved employment prospects.

The sector's contribution is also bolstered by the work of unpaid volunteers. Volunteering contributed $4.9 billion to the Victorian state economy in 2006, with some analysis projecting this will grow to more than $40 billion in 2021.[9] In 2012–13, the vast majority (81 per cent) of Victorian community sector charities were supported by volunteers. The volunteer workforce of almost 135,000 people is on top of the paid workforce of almost 97,000 people.[10] Again, this is an underrepresentation of the entire community sector, as it covers only the contribution of volunteers at registered charities. More volunteers would also contribute at community sector organisations not registered as charities.

Volunteers make an enormous social and economic contribution, while also receiving benefits themselves. Social connectedness has been linked to wellbeing, and people with diverse networks of strong relationships are healthier than people who are socially isolated. Volunteering with a community organisation helps build networks and friendships for people who may be at risk of social exclusion, and helps develop skills that can lead to improved employment prospects.

In rural and regional areas, community organisations are recognised as being significant local employers that enable people to live and work in the community, rather than having to travel to larger town centres or cities.

Investment in the sector is further leveraged through a skilled workforce, volunteers and carers, philanthropic partnerships, public donations and in-kind support, providing significant benefit and value for government and the community.

Building on the economic and social value of not-for-profit community sector organisations

Government and the community sector can work together to further deliver economic and social benefits to Victoria by:

- **Utilising the community sector's ability to leverage investment:** Every dollar of funding invested in the community sector is further leveraged through the contribution of volunteer and carer capacity, donations, philanthropic partnerships and in-kind support. Further investing in the community sector can provide significant benefit and value for government and the community.

- **Tackling unemployment:** Recognising the importance of the community sector as a significant employer and generator of economic activity will strengthen programs aiming to tackle unemployment in Victoria. Working with the community sector to develop a workforce participation plan for all Victorians, along with education strategies, would build on the Victorian Government's existing plan for getting Victorians back to work. This would also help ensure a focus is placed on supporting people facing disadvantage, who are often the most vulnerable to unemployment and long-term unemployment.

- **Recognising the community sector's volunteering and social capital contribution:** Community sector organisations build social capital and community cohesion through significant levels of volunteering, which benefits both the volunteers and the communities with whom they work.

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9   Department of Planning and Community Development, *The Economic Value of Volunteering in Victoria*, 2012, p. 4.

10 VCOSS, Op. Cit., p. 15.

Case Study   FamilyCare employment programs

FamilyCare is a medium-sized community organisation providing services to children and young people in regions including Shepparton, Seymour, Wallan, Kinglake and Cobram. As well as providing direct services across a range of areas, FamilyCare is a significant employer in its local regions.

In an area like Shepparton, which has an unemployment rate significantly higher than national and state averages, providing secure and supportive jobs to local community members significantly improves the community's wellbeing.

FamilyCare provides a range of services that assist people to develop their job readiness for a career in community service provision. For example it runs formal and informal mentoring programs for secondary school students, offers job placements to students in relevant disciplines, a variety of volunteering opportunities, and has a developing partnership with an Aboriginal service to provide training and workplace exposure for Aboriginal young people.

As important as the job readiness skills and experience, FamilyCare shows disadvantaged community members the opportunities that may be available to them, assists in goal setting, and identifies pathways to those goals and opportunities.

As a major regional service provider, FamilyCare believes it is important for rural and regional communities to be developing a broad range of real and sustainable new employment opportunities. ●

Playing a unique role

Victoria's not-for-profit community organisations play a unique role in strengthening the state's economy and society. Their focus on supporting people to overcome disadvantage and poverty drives them to respond effectively to short and long-term community needs, supporting people to overcome disadvantage, advocating on their behalf and building stronger communities overall.

While there is a great diversity in the range of community sector organisations delivering programs and services, they generally share a common aim of helping people overcome disadvantage. By supporting people in the short-term while advocating for solutions in the long-term, they bring benefits for those facing disadvantage and poverty, and the community as a whole. Because they work directly with individuals and communities, they are often the best-placed to understand the causes, nature and consequences of social problems, as well as to collaboratively devise strategies to tackle them.

Like all organisations, not-for-profit community organisations must operate efficiently and effectively. They must demonstrate good governance and financial management to achieve their goals and remain sustainable. Not-for-profit community organisations are unique however, in their focus on reinvesting any operating surpluses back into communities.

They generally operate independently, while complying with a range of statutory and regulatory frameworks. This autonomy is valuable, as it provides the flexibility to respond to communities' changing needs, and enables them to deliver services independently of political issues that may arise. They can perform work and fill gaps in areas that government or the private sector might not take on because of political sensitivities, or lack of commercial viability. Without the community sector, some support services may

Like all organisations, not-for-profit community organisations must operate efficiently and effectively. They must demonstrate good governance and financial management to achieve their goals and remain sustainable.

not be provided, meaning vulnerable and marginalised people could remain socially excluded and isolated within the community, unable to access support.

Building on the unique role of the not-for-profit community sector

Government and the community sector can work together to strengthen the sector's unique role and build on the value it delivers to Victoria's economy and society by:

- **Developing strong communication and consultation processes:** Community sector organisations have direct knowledge of the communities they work with, and of their specialist program areas. They are often best-placed to understand the causes, nature and consequences of social problems, as well as to collaboratively devise strategies to tackle them.
- **Respecting strong local knowledge in contracting and tendering processes:** Taking not-for-profit community organisations' strong local knowledge and expertise into account in government contracting, tendering and service commissioning arrangements can help deliver well-targeted services to solve difficult social issues.
- **Creating flexible and autonomous funding agreements:** Structuring funding agreements that provide not-for-profit community organisations with flexibility and autonomy in delivering services will help organisations respond effectively to communities' changing needs.

> Amplifying the voice of people facing disadvantage

Community organisations amplify the voice of people who face disadvantage, and in doing so, help governments and the community understand and tackle the causes and effects of inequality.

Operating independently of government and directly with communities, the community sector is uniquely placed to amplify the voice of people facing disadvantage and shine a spotlight on the causes and effects of inequality, poverty and disadvantage.

Informed by direct on-the-ground experience, and knowledge of formal research and evidence bases, community organisations work to identify, advocate and deliver cohesive strategies that tackle complex social problems.

The community sector seeks to work with all levels of government to identify and address complex social problems. Informed by direct on-the-ground experience, and knowledge of formal research and evidence bases, community organisations work to identify, advocate and deliver cohesive strategies that tackle complex social problems. This practical experience and knowledge of the evidence base helps inform and improve public policy debate.

Community service organisations, from grassroots program providers, to peak bodies, often undertake research and evaluation, to inform future advocacy and services. However, recently the federal government has cut funding for key policy and advocacy community organisations, such as peak bodies in the housing, disability and a range of other social service sectors, which threatens the community sector's ability to advocate for people facing disadvantage.

Through their services, programs and advocacy, community sector organisations highlight the benefits of making social change that will help individuals, families and communities overcome disadvantage. They validate the experiences of people facing disadvantage and empower them to engage with the community and tell their stories. This helps foster a more tolerant, secure, resilient and equitable society.

Building on the community sector's ability to amplify the voice of people facing disadvantage

Government and the community sector can work together to amplify the voice of people facing disadvantage by:

- **Supporting the sector's ability to advocate:** Community sector organisations and their peak bodies base their advocacy on direct experience working with communities, and knowledge of formal research and evidence bases. Ensuring strong mechanisms are in place to enable these organisations to advocate strongly will help build informed and comprehensive public policy debate that helps deliver effective solutions to complex community issues.

Case Study — Every Australian Counts

The Every Australian Counts campaign for a National Disability Insurance Scheme (NDIS) is an example of a partnership of community organisations (the National Disability and Carer Alliance) successfully raising public awareness of an issue affecting disadvantaged Australians.

After the Productivity Commission reported that the disability support system was not meeting the needs of people with a disability, their families and carers, the alliance launched a campaign demanding the introduction of an NDIS. The campaign involved not only public faces, but many volunteers including people with disabilities and their families, who used their experiences to inform meetings with politicians and talk to local communities and groups.

The campaign combined grassroots community efforts with political and media advocacy, eventually resulting in significant social change, through a bipartisan commitment to the NDIS at a national level. The passion of the people involved and the involvement of people with lived experience of disability and their families in the campaign are cited as being essential elements of its success.

"I think that when people with a disability were able to explain what their lives were currently like and what difference the NDIS would make, that had a great impact."[11] ●

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11 Annecto, *Interview with Kirsten Deane* – NDIS, 10 April 2014.

Building strong relationships with people who most need support

People facing multiple and complex forms of disadvantage are often the ones who are most in need of support, and yet are often the most marginalised and disengaged from society. Not-for-profit community organisations invest in building long-term relationships with these individuals and communities, who may often be reluctant to trust government services. The evidence shows that building these strong relationships is the foundation for delivering effective programs for social change.

"In a review of 57 Australian intervention programs funded under the Commonwealth Stronger Families and Communities Strategy designated as demonstrating 'promising practice'... the cultivation of trust was acknowledged to be one (if not the key) ingredient to program effectiveness across the programs."[12]

Victorians in the greatest need of support are also often the most marginalised and disengaged from society. They may often be reluctant to engage with government systems and face many barriers to getting help.

By developing positive long-term relationships with the people they work with, not-for-profit community organisations hold a position of trust and legitimacy in their communities. Often, these relationships have been developed and nurtured over years, or even generations.

By employing peer workers and people with lived experience of disadvantage, community organisations can also help to create a safe environment for service users, because people feel their experiences are validated and that they are understood.

Through all this, community organisations seek to reach people who would otherwise be socially excluded and isolated. They create an environment where marginalised people are respected and valued, and more likely to return for support. Sudden disruptions that sever these connections risk destroying these relationships, which could take many years to rebuild. There is also a high risk people will fail to engage with a new service.

Without community organisations engaging in this long-term, relationship-building work, some people could remain disengaged from the mainstream system and not receive support when they need it. They also may not seek help before reaching crisis point and requiring acute care, when early engagement could have prevented them and those around them from experiencing trauma, as well as saving the intensive community and government resources required for acute care.

Building on the value of community sector organisations' strong relationships with marginalised people who are most in need of support

Government and the community sector can work together to strengthen the sector's relationships with people who most need support and build on the value this delivers to Victoria's economy and society by:

- **Protecting relationships:** Understanding that relationships between marginalised people and community organisations are based on trust and take time to build, is an important basis for social policy. Sudden disruptions that sever these connections risk destroying these relationships, which can then take many years to rebuild. There is also a high risk people will fail to engage with a new service, if their former organisations cease to offer them programs and services. Funding processes and program design that value the long-term relationships community organisations build with marginalised and disadvantaged people are a sound foundation for their success.
- **Establishing secure funding streams:** Time-limited funding, or short-term extensions when funding is being reviewed, can create significant instability in community organisations. This can lead to high staff turnover, limited tenure appointments and the loss of skills, thus jeopardising relationships with service users. Establishing secure funding streams that enable organisations to offer stability and certainty to clients around programs and services helps strengthens relationships with people facing disadvantage.

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12 G Soriano, H Clark and S Wise, *Promising Practice Profiles Final Report*, Melbourne, Victoria: Australian Institute of Family Studies, 2008.

Case Study — Aboriginal Family Violence Prevention and Legal Service Victoria

The Aboriginal Family Violence Prevention and Legal Service Victoria (FVPLS Victoria) is an Aboriginal community controlled organisation that provides legal assistance to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander victims/survivors of family violence and sexual assault. FVPLS Victoria's clients often present with complex and interconnected legal and non-legal needs, such as drug and alcohol abuse, psychological distress, and experiences of intergenerational trauma.

Although on average Aboriginal people are more likely to experience legal problems than non-Aboriginal people, they face many barriers to accessing legal assistance services and are less likely to engage with a mainstream service than an Aboriginal specific service.

Many clients of FVPLS Victoria are connected to the service by culturally safe, community-based activities such as the Sisters Day Out® program, which brings together Koori women and children to promote wellbeing and prevent family violence.

One Aboriginal woman named Sue* attended a Sisters Day Out event where she heard an FVPLS Victoria lawyer speak about victim's compensation. Sue had been in an on-again/off-again relationship with the father of her four children for 12 years and had been too scared to report to police the many times he had assaulted her.

After the community event she felt confident enough to approach FVPLS Victoria for assistance. The service discovered Sue was in fear for her life and had accrued significant debts due to her partner's ice addiction. FVPLS Victoria's lawyer helped Sue secure an intervention order in the lead-up to her ex-partner's anticipated release from prison. The lawyer also helped her with victim's compensation matters because her ex-partner had accrued fines, and had crashed the family's car.

FVPLS Victoria's lawyer was able to have many fines revoked and helped Sue by taking her claim to the Aboriginal-specific Koori List of the Victims of Crime Assistance Tribunal, where she was awarded a vehicle to take her children to school. Throughout this process, Sue was supported by a paralegal support worker who understood her anxieties and assisted her to remain engaged in the legal process, attended each court hearing with her, and linked her into counselling services and new accommodation. ●

* Names have been changed.

Utilising prevention and early intervention approaches

Making prevention and early intervention programs accessible for people facing disadvantage is the one of the most effective ways of identifying emerging issues, preventing greater trauma occurring down the track, saving government and the community money over the long term, and improving social wellbeing.

The old adage that prevention is better than cure holds just as true when dealing with social issues as in any other setting. It also saves the community vast amounts of money in the long term. A number of studies have shown that tackling the causes of disadvantage is far less costly than trying to deal with its consequences. Preventive and early intervention measures are the best strategy for effectively and efficiently stretching budgets further across a range of social issues in the long term.

A sizeable part of the work of community organisations is focused on prevention and early intervention. Community and supported playgroups, early childhood intervention services, community health, youth support and neighbourhood houses are examples of these programs, which reduce the risk of harm and improve resilience among people facing disadvantage. They engage, support and treat people, helping keep them out of more costly and traumatic crisis systems, including child protection, homelessness services, hospital and prison. Cost-benefit analyses of interventions for vulnerable families, children and young people consistently show strong returns on investment, in some cases as high as 19:1.[13]

Organisations providing early intervention services also build long-term relationships with service users. If these people face new challenges, they are more likely to seek support from a known and trusted service, and prevent the situation from escalating.

Prevention and early intervention programs also help break cycles of disadvantage, intervening to address problems before they become entrenched and metastasise, causing further problems. Breaking the cycle of disadvantage for individuals, families and whole communities can deliver long-lasting benefits, potentially across future generations.

The evidence shows that taking a long-term view and investing in prevention and early intervention programs is one of the most effective ways of building a positive, sustainable future for generations to come, and saving far greater levels of future expenditure.[14] Through investing in prevention and early intervention, governments have the chance to build healthier, more resilient, economically sound communities.

Building on the value of community sector organisations' prevention and early intervention approaches

Government and the community sector can work together to utilise prevention and early intervention programs and build on the value they deliver to Victoria's economy and society by:

- **Investing in prevention and early intervention:** Prevention and early intervention are more cost effective in tackling disadvantage in the long-term, rather than waiting until problems are entrenched and harder to solve. By investing in prevention and early intervention, as well as funding immediate and urgent needs, governments can contain upwardly spiralling costs in the long term.

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13 Queensland Council of Social Service, *Prevention and Early Intervention*, 2009.

14 See for example: Committee for Economic Development, *The economic promise of investing in high-quality preschool: Using early education to improve economic growth and the fiscal sustainability of states and the nation*, Washington, United States, 2006, p. 3; and P Fortin, L Godbout and S St-Cerny, *Impact of Quebec's low fee child care program on female labour force participation, domestic income and government budgets*, Research Chair in Taxation and Public Finance, University of Sherbrooke, 2012.

Developing diverse approaches to overcoming disadvantage

The Victorian community is complex and so too are the needs of those facing disadvantage. There is no single community sector model or organisation that will meet all these complex needs. Fostering a diverse range of strong not-for-profit community organisations of different sizes, service models and cultures optimises Victoria's ability to support a diverse population living in greatly varying circumstances. It means choice for people accessing services and it increases the sector's ability to reach vulnerable and marginalised individuals and communities.

People facing disadvantage and living in poverty encompass a wide range of varying circumstances. There is no 'one-size-fits-all' way to overcome the challenges they face. To make real inroads, a diverse range of community services are needed to reach a wide array of people and offer them program and service options that best meet their circumstances.

As Victoria's not-for-profit community organisations often establish and evolve to meet changing community needs, there is great diversity in their size, resources, structures, cultures, and service and governance models. Some operate at the neighbourhood level, others across local government areas, and others statewide. Some large national and international organisations also offer services in Victoria.

This diversity helps meet the equally diverse needs of people facing disadvantage. Some organisations are expert in delivering specialist services and working with specific groups of people or types of social issues, and closely understand the complexities and sensitivities of these particular groups and issues. Some focus on a specific local area and join with other local organisations and businesses to provide a seamless suite of community services across that area. Others work universally with the community and can offer a wide range of services and programs to meet people's needs holistically.
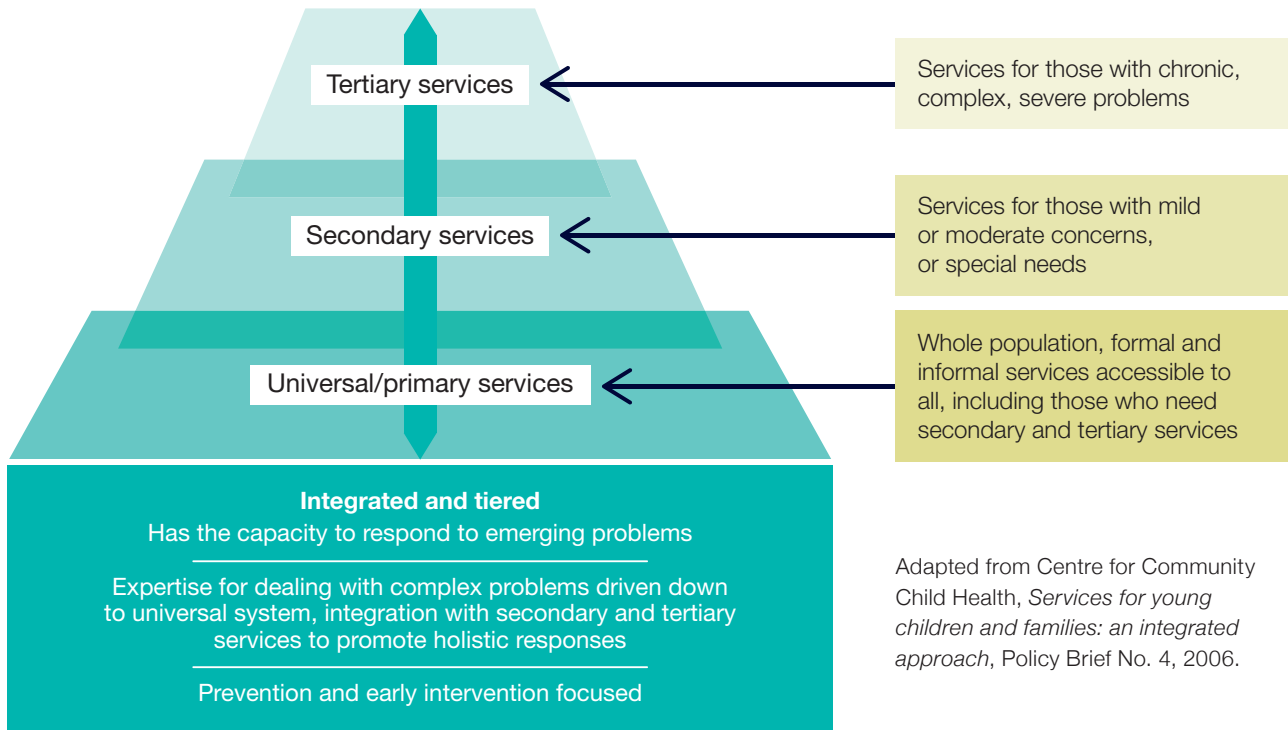
As Victoria's not-for-profit community organisations often establish and evolve to meet changing community needs, there is great diversity in their size, resources, structures, cultures, and service and governance models.

Community organisations also use a range of strategies to maximise and leverage their resources to provide the best quality services to those who need them. Different organisations take different approaches to this, in line with what will best suit their style of organisation, and the people with whom they work. Different approaches can include developing economies of scale, or using strong local connections to provide in-kind expertise, volunteers and donations.

Many of Victoria's social policies focus solely on targeting the community's most severely disadvantaged community groups or geographic areas. However, research shows that to best help people overcome disadvantage, an integrated mix of services are needed. Universal/primary services are needed across the entire community, and these need to also draw in further secondary and tertiary services targeted to people where and when they are needed, proportionate to the extent of disadvantage they face.[15] Such a model is shown in Figure 2.

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15 *Fair Society, Healthy Lives: The Marmot Review*, 2010 http://www.instituteofhealthequity.org/projects/fair-society-healthy-lives-the-marmot-review

Figure 2: Progressive universal/Integrated community services

Tertiary services ← Services for those with chronic, complex, severe problems

Secondary services ← Services for those with mild or moderate concerns, or special needs

Universal/primary services ← Whole population, formal and informal services accessible to all, including those who need secondary and tertiary services

Integrated and tiered
Has the capacity to respond to emerging problems

Expertise for dealing with complex problems driven down to universal system, integration with secondary and tertiary services to promote holistic responses

Prevention and early intervention focused

Adapted from Centre for Community Child Health, *Services for young children and families: an integrated approach*, Policy Brief No. 4, 2006.

It is this mix of universal, secondary and tertiary services and the way they intersect and work together that can make the biggest difference to people's lives and help them overcome disadvantage. Universal/primary services are offered to the whole community, secondary services are targeted to those with moderate concerns or special needs, and tertiary services are available for those with chronic, complex, severe problems.

This model is often described as 'progressive universalism' or 'proportionate universalism', where the intensity of services increases, based on the level of vulnerability services are responding to; but all are embedded within a universal platform, requiring all tiers of the service system to work together. The community sector's diverse range of organisations suits the delivery of this model.

Building on the value of a diverse community sector

Government and the community sector can work together to strengthen the sector's diversity and build on the value it delivers to Victoria's economy and society by:

- **Developing flexible funding, contracting and regulatory systems:** Governments can leverage the value of the sector's diversity by developing funding, contracting and regulatory systems that enhance it. Funding streams and contracting arrangements could recognise the importance of organisations of different sizes and geographic footprints, and those working with specific groups of people.
- **Encouraging a holistic service mix:** Contracting, reporting and regulatory systems that build-in the flexibility for organisations of different sizes and geographic footprints to take a range of approaches to providing assistance, will help the sector meet the diverse needs of people facing disadvantage and poverty.

- **Supporting community organisation stability:** Government tendering and funding arrangements can strengthen the sector's diversity through structures that do not pitch organisations against each other, or create reactive cycles where organisations are frequently applying and re-applying for funding to ensure their survival.

- **Developing tiered and integrated service systems:** Policy approaches that enable universal, secondary and tertiary services to work together, based on progressive universalism approaches, will be most effective for helping people overcome disadvantage.

Case Study — McAuley Community Services for Women

McAuley Community Services for Women provides accommodation, services, advocacy and support to women who are homeless, and women and their children who have experienced family violence. It runs the only mainstream safe house in Victoria open 24 hours a day, seven days a week.

McAuley provides women and their children with emotional support as well as practical assistance with housing, legal, medical and financial needs, vocational training, and assistance accessing employment, to help them assess their next steps with freedom, safety and sound information.

To many women, securing meaningful employment is a way of regaining control of their lives, building financial security, self-esteem and community connections. McAuley Works has grown to fill this need by providing tailored and personalised support for women. Workers assess women's vocational and training needs, provide them guidance and career planning, and help them obtain sustainable, meaningful employment. As well as learning job-seeking skills such as résumé preparation, addressing selection criteria and effective interview techniques, women are assisted to build their confidence and self-esteem.

Post-placement support also helps these women to keep their jobs, and to remain safe and securely housed. McAuley's services remain available to women once they move into their own housing, as the links they have built continue to provide protection against spiralling ill-health and repeat instances of homelessness. Particularly important is the capacity to provide quick access to respite accommodation should women feel vulnerable or become unwell.

McAuley's outcomes are clear. Despite receiving very little government funding, the McAuley Works program shows outstanding results. Of the 200 women assisted in 2013–14, 134 found jobs and 45 were no longer receiving welfare payments at the end of the period. This alone represents an annual government cost saving of around $1 million.

As a specialist organisation of a smaller scale, offering a unique service, McAuley faces challenges in competitive tender processes, being forced to compete with large generalist services with bigger budgets and grant writing specialists. ●

Fostering innovative approaches to community issues

The community sector is a key driver of social innovation, using its experience and independence to respond to changing community needs through new and different approaches to often complex, multiple and interlinked forms of disadvantage.

The community sector is a key driver of social innovation, using its on-the-ground experience to identify emerging issues and trends, and developing new and improved ways of tackling complex disadvantage. The independent, diverse and collaborative nature of the community sector provides the perfect incubator for social innovation that, if successful, can transfer across to other sectors, to help further expand the effectiveness of social justice programs.

Using their depth of experience and operational independence, community organisations are able to develop new programs, services or processes, targeting different service user groups. The Productivity Commission noted in its 2010 report that "not-for-profits are usually established by people who want to do something that is not being done or do it in a different way".[16]

The independent, diverse and collaborative nature of the community sector provides the perfect incubator for social innovation that, if successful, can transfer across to other sectors, to help further expand the effectiveness of social justice programs.

The diversity of community organisations increases the likelihood that new ways of creating more effective social change will be found. The fact that organisations can interlink and be collaborative in their operations and service delivery also means that successful innovations developed by one organisation or network can be transferred quickly and adapted elsewhere within the sector.

Building on the value of the community sector's innovative nature

Government and the community sector can work together to foster innovative solutions to community issues and build on the value this delivers to Victoria's economy and society by:

- **Fostering innovation through improved funding and reporting systems:** Government can support the community sector's innovative nature by being willing to fund and trial new ways of working. Funding and service agreements that focus solely on inputs and are overly prescriptive or rigid, can stifle innovation, as can siloed approaches to addressing disadvantage. Exploring options for outcomes-based reporting, longer term funding arrangements and a more partnership-based approach to contractual relationships will help foster greater innovation.

- **Funding research and evaluation that demonstrate the results of innovative models:** Funding ongoing research and evaluation of promising models and practices that look at 'what works' for people facing disadvantage, enables innovation and evidence-based practice to be disseminated throughout the community sector.

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16 Productivity Commission, *Contribution of the Not-for-profit Sector*, Australian Government, 2010, p. 16.

Case Study   FamilyLife

FamilyLife has been operating since 1970 and develops innovative solutions to complex social problems. It initiated the PeopleWorx program to help people get the skills, support and work experience they need to get a job, go back to school and become active members of society, through volunteering.

PeopleWorx addresses the problems of youth and adult disengagement, homelessness and unemployment. FamilyLife's PeopleWorx is a social enterprise where business and social strategies combine to achieve powerful outcomes. It provides vulnerable and unemployed young people and adults with:

• Work experience in up-market opportunity shops and a warehouse

• Professional counselling and welfare support from FamilyLife staff

• Training in retail and logistics/warehouse skills

• Personal support and encouragement from trained adult volunteers

• Support in looking for a job

• Support in going on with further education

• A social network

In 2012–13 the program helped 200 people. Achievements included:

• Certificate II in Retail – 32 people

• Certificate III in Retail – 4 people

• VET Certificate II in Retail – 1 person

• VET Certificate III in Retail – 5 people

• Personal Development – 6 people

• Work experience – 4 people

• Community Service – 10 people

• Reconnections support group – 65 people

• RRR activity group – 5 people

• Mental Health Group – 27 people

• eBay course – 1 person

• ComputerWorx course – 4 people

• Get Working course – 3 people

• Retail Basics course – 6 people

In 2013–14 FamilyLife's Social Enterprises raised almost $900,000, which provides funding to meet gaps for responding to community needs. This includes employment pathways for diverse individuals needing tailored support; managing quality large volunteer initiatives; community engagement; and cutting waiting lists for high need/high risk services like Children's Contact Services. ●

> Collaborating to get best results

Community organisations have the potential to collaborate and work together, to provide the full range of supports that help people with multiple and complex needs overcome disadvantage and engage positively in community life.

People often have many factors contributing to the disadvantage they face, and experience many consequences across different aspects of their lives as a result of disadvantage. A single organisation can rarely provide the full range of support a person with complex needs requires, as well as advocating for the range of policy changes needed to prevent people experiencing similar issues.

However, community sector organisations can work together to provide the range of services that enable people to build their capabilities and re-engage in community life, while also creating an environment where the causes of social problems can be identified and tackled.

An example of this is when community organisations join together to help form place-based solutions to social issues in local communities. Given that place-based models are responsive to community need, they vary significantly in their design, including in their focus, rationale, geographic scale and target populations.[17] However, they share common goals of empowering the community to work together to improve outcomes, helping improve service delivery and coordination, addressing specific issues such as poverty, and driving positive outcomes more generally for the community.[18] Place-based models are therefore particularly useful when trying to address complex social problems and entrenched social disadvantage.[19]

"Collaborative place-based approaches are called for when the problems are complex or 'wicked' and the solutions either uncertain or require multiple forms of intervention."[20]

Community sector organisations can work together to provide the range of services that enable people to build their capabilities and re-engage in community life, while also creating an environment where the causes of social problems can be identified and tackled.

When community sector organisations see each other as a network of companions and allies with a shared vision for a fairer society, they often pool resources and expertise, and align their services to achieve more together than they could in isolation. If organisations are forced to guard against each other in a highly competitive funding and contracting environment, the culture of collaboration can be lost, and can then be difficult to rebuild.

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17 S Wilks, J Lahausse and B Edwards, *Commonwealth Place-Based Service Delivery Initiatives, Key Learnings project*, Australian Government's Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet and the Australian Institute of Family Studies, April 2015.

18 T.G Moore, H McHugh-Dillon, K Bull, R Fry, B Laidlaw and S West, *The evidence: what we know about place-based approaches to support children's wellbeing*, Murdoch Children's Research Institute and The Royal Children's Hospital Centre for Community Child Health, Parkville, Victoria, 2014.

19 S Wilks, J Lahausse and B Edwards, Op. Cit.

20 T. G Moore et al., Op. Cit.

Problems such as family violence, child abuse and obesity are generally complex and multi-causal. The evidence suggests several collaborative elements are needed in effective strategies for tackling these and other complex problems. These elements include:

- Taking multi-level approaches
- Designing integrated service systems based on progressive universalism
- Improving communication between communities and services
- Engaging service users in co-design and co-production of services
- Building local competencies
- Adapting interventions to local circumstances and needs
- Developing a better understanding of how to help people change
- Using evidence-based interventions
- Allowing time for outcomes to improve.[21]

Building on the value of community sector organisations' collaborative nature

Government and the community sector can work together to strengthen the sector's collaborative nature and build on the value it delivers to Victoria's economy and society by:

- **Fostering collaboration in funding approaches:** Developing funding models that promote trust and cooperation, and recognise the value of organisations taking the time needed to adopt collaborative, shared approaches, will help foster this as an effective mode of practice across the community sector. Governance, service and evaluation practices that support collaboration can also be encouraged through the structure of funding and reporting arrangements.

Problems such as family violence, child abuse and obesity are generally complex and multi-causal. The evidence suggests several collaborative elements are needed in effective strategies for tackling these and other complex problems.

- **Encouraging meaningful long-term collaboration:** Government can help encourage collaboration by developing flexible funding processes, providing collaboration resources and leadership opportunities, and focusing on responses to disadvantage that encourage organisations to work together. However, forced collaborations or mergers are less likely to be as successful and sustainable. Similarly, if organisations are forced to guard against each other in a highly competitive funding and contracting environment, the culture of collaboration can be lost, and can be difficult to rebuild.
- **Encouraging place-based solutions to local needs:** Funding and supporting place-based solutions that respond to local needs, empowers communities to work together to improve and coordinate service delivery in ways that help overcome often complex and entrenched forms of disadvantage.
- **Working together to solve complex problems:** The wealth of knowledge and understanding the community sector holds in relation to complex problems and potential solutions can be of great benefit to governments and policy makers. Developing processes for government and the community sector to capitalise on this by working collaboratively together at federal, state, regional and local levels, can help people overcome disadvantage.

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21 T. G Moore et al., Op. Cit.

Case Study — Connect Central Youth Services Bendigo

Connect Central Youth Services (CCYS) was initiated in August 2010 in Bendigo, to better integrate local youth services and to make it easier for young people experiencing vulnerability and disconnection to access support. CCYS was developed by St Luke's in partnership with the City of Greater Bendigo's Better Youth Services Initiative.

CCYS brings together a range of services including Reconnect, Youth and Family Mediation Service, Youth Support Service, Funding Solutions, Youth Specialist Homelessness Service and the Youth Homelessness Early Intervention Program. It includes:

- A single intake and entry point for the range of youth services under the CCYS banner that enables simple access for young people and their families seeking support.
- Intake and assessment processes that provide advice, information, secondary consultation, immediate outreach support and links to ongoing youth support and case management services.

- Arrangements with other youth services to ensure a 'no wrong door approach' to young people seeking support.
- An MOU with local schools that outlines clear arrangements for schools wishing to refer young people to a youth support service.
- Entry and links to CCYS based on youth vulnerability and the young person experiencing disconnection, not on service criteria that focuses on single issues facing a young person.
- CCYS works closely with Child FIRST and the Department of Health and Human Services Child Protection Intake and Response team. These links are critical as they ensure a coordinated approach to providing youth support in Bendigo.

CCYS has demonstrated the value of simplifying access and entry points to youth services, recording a significant increase in the number of young people and their families seeking support, particularly at the 'early intervention' phase. ●

Case study from VCOSS and Youth Affairs Council of Victoria, *Building the Scaffolding; Strengthening support for young people in Victoria*, 2013, p. 94.

Building community cohesion

Community organisations help build strong, cohesive, resilient communities where people are able to connect and support each other generally, and in times of crisis. Through their advocacy, services, programs, and volunteer and peer workforce models, they promote social responsibility and enable meaningful community involvement.

Community sector organisations provide a space for people to join together as service users, volunteers and employees. They are the 'social glue' that bring people together from different backgrounds and walks of life. In 2010, 71 per cent of Australian adults actively participated in a social, community or political group.[22]

Through their range of services, programs, volunteer and peer workforce models and their advocacy, community organisations encourage meaningful community involvement and promote a greater sense of social responsibility. This helps build stronger, more cohesive communities, in which people are more aware of the causes and consequences of inequality, poverty and disadvantage, and more willing to help tackle them. When people get involved with community organisations they connect with their community in a way that extends beyond the direct service provided.

Through their range of services, programs, volunteer and peer workforce models and their advocacy, community organisations encourage meaningful community involvement and promote a greater sense of social responsibility.

The direct interaction community organisations have with individuals, families and communities through their work, enables them to potentially also engage in co-design of programs and services.

Co-design involves working alongside people who experience vulnerabilities to create interventions, services and programs that will work in the context of their lives, and reflect their values and goals. It involves 'letting go' of professional assumptions about a group's perspectives and experiences, and actively learning from what people say and do. Expertise, professional knowledge and research is then considered in relation to group input, to devise potential solutions to social problems with specific groups.

This is different from traditional feedback methods, which ask user groups to comment on their use and satisfaction regarding services that have already been planned or implemented. Co-design begins by working with the people who will ultimately use services, drawing on their perspectives, challenges, experiences, values and understandings.

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22 Australian Social Inclusion Board, *Social Inclusion in Australia; How Australia is Faring*, 2010.

Community organisations also help build communities' resilience, equipping people to support one another in times of crisis. Because many community organisations currently working in Victoria were established some time ago to meet particular community needs at a particular time, many new and emerging communities do not have these established community organisations in their area. This means they experience significant service gaps. This is the case in many new and emerging communities on Melbourne's fringe, covered by the group of local councils known as the 'Interface Councils'.

"Interface Councils are characterised by relatively low average incomes, poor educational and health outcomes, high unemployment rates, and high levels of youth disengagement with regard to higher education and workforce participation. Early intervention through the delivery of appropriate and timely infrastructure and services is critical to alleviate this situation."[23]

Building community cohesion and wellbeing through community sector organisations

Government and the community sector can work together to build the sector's ability to improve community cohesion and the value this delivers to Victoria's economy and society by:

- **Supporting the development of community service organisations in emerging communities:** In new and emerging communities it takes time for local community organisations to form. Support may be needed to help establish local organisations, for example neighbourhood houses, to promote community connections, wellbeing and resilience.

- **Encouraging the development of co-design models:** Funding and supporting co-design partnerships between community organisations and the people they work with, incorporates people's lived experience of disadvantage into program and service design. This is an effective way of matching services to people's real needs, and helping them overcome disadvantage.

- **Strengthening community sector programs through research and evaluation:** Commissioning research and evaluation of community sector programs and services helps strengthen their ongoing effectiveness in supporting people to overcome disadvantage and building stronger, more cohesive communities.

- **Developing funding and service design models that utilise and foster community cohesion:** Not-for-profit community sector organisations are the 'social glue' that bring people together from different backgrounds, helping build their understanding of social issues and their willingness to support each other, both in everyday life and in times of crisis. Utilising community organisations to deliver social programs and services helps build community connections, cohesion and resilience.

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23 Essential Economics, *One Melbourne or Two: Implications of Population Growth for Infrastructure and Services in Interface Areas*, Report Prepared for the Interface Councils, 2013.

Community organisations also help build communities' resilience, equipping people to support one another in times of crisis.

Case Study   Neighbourhood houses

Neighbourhood houses are an example of the way community organisations bring people from different backgrounds and lifestyles together to create strong, socially responsible communities.

Neighbourhood houses bring people together to connect, learn and contribute in their local community through social, educational, recreational and support activities, using a community development approach that enables communities to identify and address their own needs.

Activities are generally run at low or no cost to participants. Among the most common are:

• Health and wellbeing activities

• Art and craft

• Computer training/digital literacy

• Community lunches/social eating groups

• Self-help and support groups

• Seniors' groups

• Life skills education

• Playgroups

• Internet access

• English as a Second Language.

There are almost 400 neighbourhood houses and learning centres across Victoria, attended by more than 157,000 people each week.[24]

Neighbourhood houses engage people facing disadvantage, and people at risk of social isolation. The proportion of neighbourhood house participants who report having a disability or identify as Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander is higher than that among the general Victorian population.[25]

The benefits for participants of involvement at a neighbourhood house include reduced social isolation, stronger community connectedness and activity. Participants themselves identify meeting new people, spending time with others and improving personal wellbeing as the main benefits of being involved. For older people, participation in the community is linked to social connectedness, which reduces the risk of cognitive decline, and leads to better physical and mental health.[26]

Neighbourhood houses leverage the income they receive from governments and add value; for every dollar invested by governments, on average neighbourhood houses raise $6.23.[27]

Across Victoria, almost 5,500 people volunteer with neighbourhood houses each week. In one survey, 78 per cent of neighbourhood house volunteers reported feeling they were helping their community, indicating a strong sense of community responsibility among people involved with neighbourhood houses.[28]

More than 50 per cent of volunteers also said they saw benefits in spending time with other people through their volunteering,[29] indicating that neighbourhood houses reduce isolation and strengthen community cohesion. ●

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24 Association of Neighbourhood Houses and Learning Centres, *Neighbourhood Houses Survey 2013*, 2013.

25 Association of Neighbourhood Houses and Learning Centres, *Multiple Benefits; How Neighbourhood Houses are good for individuals, communities and government*, 2013, p. 4.

26 Ibid., p. 5.

27 Association of Neighbourhood Houses and Learning Centres, *Neighbourhood Houses Survey 2013*, 2013.

28 Association of Neighbourhood Houses and Learning Centres, *Multiple Benefits; How Neighbourhood Houses are good for individuals, communities and government*, 2013, p.18.

29 Ibid.

VCOSS
Victorian Council
of Social Service