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# Stabilising the system

## State Budget Briefing 2022-23

December 2021

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### About the VHA

The Victorian Healthcare Association (VHA) is the peak body supporting Victoria's public and community health services to deliver high-quality care. Established in 1938, the VHA represents Victoria's diverse public healthcare sector, including public hospitals, aged care and community health services.

As well as providing a unified voice for the sector, the VHA delivers value for its members by offering tailored professional development programs, networking opportunities, and informative events. The VHA advocates on behalf of its members on sector-critical issues.

### Building on innovations to meet sustained system demand

Victoria's health system has been under considerable and sustained stress since the onset of the pandemic. Community health services have created innovative programs to deliver care within the community, assisting in primary care responses and vaccine delivery. Metropolitan and regional health services have provided quality healthcare when the system's workforce has been stretched to capacity, while the state's ambulances experienced record callout demand. A renewed emphasis on building capacity, public health initiatives, system coordination and out-of-hospital care have led to new forms of health interventions that have improved the health outcomes for Victorians.

The VHA's proposed solutions are centred on building on the healthcare system's strengths as part of its pandemic response, with focus on supporting the system's workforce, outreach to the community and connections with other services.

The short-term recommendations set out below stem from research and engagement carried out as part of the VHA's white paper, [Stabilising the system: Supporting Victoria's public health sector to manage sustained COVID-19 demand](#). The paper highlights opportunities supporting Victoria's healthcare system to continue to deliver its pandemic response, and can be seen as a more comprehensive version of this document.

These solutions mark a starting point on the road to the next state election. The VHA will take a longer-term approach with its recommendations and advocacy in 2022, with a greater focus on the future of healthcare as the state starts to move beyond the pandemic.

### Summary of recommendations



Recommendation 1:  
A whole of system approach  
to workforce wellbeing



Recommendation 2:  
Workforce support



Recommendation 3:  
Supporting continued professional  
development in health governance



Recommendation 4:  
Building leadership capacity



Recommendation 5:  
Funding for an effective  
digital health system



Recommendation 6:  
Infrastructure funding for  
care in the community



Recommendation 7:  
Place-based program to  
support at-risk communities



Recommendation 8:  
Greater preventive health  
funding



Recommendation 9:  
Oral health

## Budget recommendations

### Workforce capacity and wellbeing

The Victorian health workforce has been, and will continue to be, the most important priority for public and community health services, and the Victorian Government. Over the past 12 months, the Victorian Government has announced various programs and initiatives aimed at recruiting healthcare staff and supporting their wellbeing.

However, the state is expected to face ongoing high levels of hospital and community-based activity over the next few months, and in the coming year, as Victoria responds to and recovers from the pandemic.

#### Recommendation 1: A whole of system approach to workforce wellbeing

Workforce wellbeing is one of the biggest issues affecting the Victorian health sector and there is a clear need for effective wellbeing services for the whole workforce. Building on previous government initiatives to create a worker wellbeing centre and offer wellbeing grants for health services, the VHA is calling for the development of a system-wide health workforce wellbeing offering, available to the entire Victorian public and community health workforce by:

- implementing a fully funded multi-year strategy for worker wellbeing, for the whole health system
- increased funding to expand wellbeing grants and initiatives.

The strategy should include both community health and public health services and offer an opportunity to create a minimum state-wide standard of care and supports. The strategy should provide an array of practical initiatives that will help the health system workforce, including, but not limited to, counselling, training, and the provision of backfill support to enable leave. The strategy needs to be holistic, supporting healthcare workers through any means necessary to overcome what has been a difficult couple of years in an already stressful sector. However, public and community health services should also receive increased individual funding for rapid implementation of local initiatives.

#### Recommendation 2: Workforce support

Public and community health services are facing workforce shortages and recruitment issues across Victoria. They are also struggling to utilise current initiatives to attract staff and are being further impacted by COVID workforce changes. Members have repeatedly highlighted these problems to the VHA, particularly those from rural and regional areas. Workforce capacity is an issue across the state – the experiences may be different between metropolitan and regional providers, but it is challenging for every service.

The VHA is calling for further investment for initiatives to enable public and community health services to attract and retain their health workforce. This should include increased pay incentives to counteract other existing initiatives and support from the Victorian Government to address workforce supply issues, such as the increased payments for working in vaccination centres. The Hospital Surge Support Allowance has been welcomed, but further steps are required. As the state begins to look at the next phase of the pandemic response, the Victorian Government needs to ensure that Victorian health services are attractive employers so they can meet the anticipated demand stemming from delayed care.

### Enabling local responses through good governance

The ongoing pandemic response of our healthcare system has resulted in significant turnover and changes for the whole workforce. Increased demand, system reforms and surge requirements have led to many frontline staff being thrust into leadership positions.

#### Recommendation 3: Supporting continued professional development in health governance

The Victorian public health system's devolved governance allows services to make local decisions to meet local needs. Our sector's boards play an important role in enabling local responses. Building the capacity and capability of our health service boards raises the capability of our healthcare system.

The boards of Victorian public and community health services have played a vital role in the pandemic response, whether that be providing strategic direction, support for their CEOs or enabling the quick and effective responses that have characterised the sector's role in managing the impact of the virus.

The VHA recommends government investment in continued professional development for public and community health service board members, to enable continued improvement in governance capabilities in the sector. Effective governance requires different perspectives, especially with the growing emphasis on patients' lived experience. Having a minimum capability standard across the state for board directors, regardless of background, supports strong governance, which in turn supports better health outcomes. Multiple training and development initiatives and opportunities should be established, focusing on issues such as governance requirements, including consumer perspectives and how the Victorian health system functions.

#### **Recommendation 4: Building leadership capacity**

The VHA calls for funding to develop and implement consistent state-wide capacity building programs for public and community health staff in leadership positions. The pandemic, and its impact on the Victorian health system, has led to increased executive and leadership turnover – professional development opportunities for these staff are needed to ensure the sector can continue to provide the current high level, and quality, of care. These programs need to be developed with the sector and associated organisations with ongoing commitment to their delivery.

#### **Strengthening our whole-of-health-system approach**

This Victorian public health system is unique – our diversity and geographical spread of health and community health services allows services to make local decisions to meet local needs. As increased hospital demand and community care is expected to be sustained, we must utilise this special aspect of the Victorian public health system to ensure that health services are prepared for upcoming and ongoing pressures.

#### **Recommendation 5: Funding for an effective digital health system**

The VHA recommends that a secure and interoperable clinical information system is developed and implemented, with a fully funded rollout and state minimum standard. The Health Legislation Amendment (Information Sharing) Bill 2021 passing through Parliament calls for the creation of a centralised electronic patient health information sharing system. Significant funding is required for the eventual system, but, more importantly, for the health sector to enable its effective use. Health information is only as effective as a service's capability to utilise it. Public and community health services need support to ensure they have the capability to effectively be part of this future system, and funding to ensure they have the appropriate cyber security and data integrity support. This also supports the development and implementation of recommendation 62 from the Royal Commission into Victoria's Mental Health System's final report, which calls for the development, funding and implementation of modern infrastructure for Information and Communications Technology (ICT) systems.

#### **Recommendation 6: Infrastructure funding for care in the community**

The VHA is calling for a further infrastructure grant for services that deliver community health. The pandemic has highlighted how important it is to keep people out of hospital; this pressure will only intensify post-pandemic due to the impact of delayed care. Community health, by independent and integrated services, offers an opportunity to meet this demand – more infrastructure funding is required to ensure their facilities can fulfill this role and meet the needs of the community. Fit-for-purpose health infrastructure is essential for a more integrated approach.

#### **Outreach to vulnerable communities**

Public and community health services have signaled that there are ongoing issues in regard to connecting vulnerable Victorians with COVID-19 testing and vaccination services. Our state's health outreach model as part of the pandemic response has been proven to be a marked improvement for some of our most vulnerable communities.

#### Recommendation 7: Place-based program to support at-risk communities

The VHA is calling for funding for an ongoing place-based health program to deliver care to vulnerable Victorians and connect them to supporting services. The High Risk Accommodation Response (HRAR) program has played a vital role during the pandemic, demonstrating the importance of delivering care and support at the heart of at-risk communities. The lessons and infrastructure from the HRAR program should be utilised as the bedrock for a permanent community-health-led program that will support better outcomes for the most vulnerable Victorians.

#### Recommendation 8: Greater preventive health funding

The VHA urges the Victorian Government to increase investment in preventive health as a proportion of total health spending. The [National Preventive Health Strategy 2021–2030](#) includes an aim to increase investment in preventive health to ‘five per cent of total health expenditure across Commonwealth, state and territory governments by 2030’ – Victoria should meet and exceed this target. The pandemic has helped to demonstrate the need to reduce acute healthcare demand and investment in prevention will support keeping people well.

#### Recommendation 9: Oral health

The VHA advocates for increased funding to community dental clinics for the next year to enable greater oral health care post-pandemic. The pandemic has led to delayed oral healthcare, while poor dental health has been found to lead to more acute health issues – this funding is needed to limit further demand on the broader health system and to support better health outcomes. The VHA is a member of the Victorian Oral Health Alliance, which has made a similar recommendation, as well as calling for a greater focus on prevention.



#### For further information contact

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