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## Keeping Victorians healthy and out of hospital: The role of community health services

### Victoria's health system under sustained pressure

The COVID-19 pandemic has placed sustained stress on Victoria's healthcare system. Prior to the pandemic, the system was already under mounting pressure due to rapid population growth, extended life expectancy and growing rates of chronic disease and disability. Currently there are system flow issues, long elective surgery wait times, serious workforce challenges, reports of poor patient experiences, and patients are presenting in the hospital system with more acute and complex conditions. The result is a weakened system and unsustainable health expenditure.

### Community health keeps people out of hospital

The mounting pressures on Victoria's acute health system requires new and innovative ways to deliver healthcare. Community health services (CHSs) are well placed to relieve system pressures and reduce health expenditure by providing care in the community.

Community health services are a uniquely Victorian asset that deliver a range of services across metropolitan, rural and regional Victoria, spanning primary care, allied health, prevention and health promotion. They sit alongside general practice and privately funded services to make up part of the primary health sector in Victoria.

There are currently 78 services that fall into two organisational types: 23 independently managed registered CHSs and 55 CHSs that are part of rural or metropolitan health services, including small rural health services.

Throughout the pandemic, CHSs have demonstrated that they are agile, adaptable, and able to connect with vulnerable communities and provide them with quality care in a way that other healthcare providers cannot.

'...they [community health services] support people in all sorts of ways, both to deal with chronic illness, which in turn would keep people out of hospital, but also to prevent it in the first place...'

'...when you put them together, they have a population-health-wide effect of keeping the population healthier and, of course, they're much cheaper than hospitals.'

[Professor Fran Baum AO \(2022\)](#)



**>0.5  
million  
Avoidable ED  
presentations**

There were 556,000 avoidable ED presentations that could have been diverted through contact with primary health in 2020-21.<sup>i</sup>



**>20% of  
hospitalisations  
preventable**

More than 20% of hospitalisations for Victorians aged over 65 are preventable with appropriate care in primary and community settings.<sup>ii</sup>

### Community health services provide innovative models of care

Community health services have a long and well-documented history of delivering innovative models of care. This includes the provision of GPs in community health, maternity outreach services, allied health, dental services or the delivery of other supports in community settings that are familiar, welcoming and accessible.

The community health sector has a deliberate focus on improving access to healthcare for key groups of people. This includes community members that are socially or economically disadvantaged, experience poorer health outcomes and have complex health needs or limited access to appropriate health care. They offer an ideal platform to:

- drive local initiatives
- deliver integrated models of care
- support people to manage chronic conditions in community
- provide care that addresses the social determinants of health to stop people from getting sick in the first place.

In the context of the COVID-19 pandemic, CHSs have been able to step into settings to provide care, prevent infection and provide information and vaccines to vulnerable community members where others could not. This has been supported by the sector's trustworthy reputation and relationship with the community, agility and responsiveness to community needs, and ability to establish and leverage well-placed partnerships and ensure the delivery of high-quality healthcare. **Recent examples of innovation include:**

- **COVID Positive Pathways:** partnerships with hospitals to provides clinical care, monitoring and support for all people who test positive for COVID-19
- **Better at Home:** partnerships with hospitals to deliver acute, rehabilitation, geriatric evaluation and management, health independence program and specialist clinic services in the home
- **High Risk Accommodation Response:** program to support public housing and other high-risk accommodation settings with shared facilities to prevent and respond to COVID-19 outbreaks and provide social support
- **GP Respiratory Clinics:** free service staffed by doctors and nurses and delivered in CHS settings to treat mild respiratory symptoms or other COVID-19 symptoms.

### Support community health services to keep people out of hospital

The CHS sector faces challenges that affect its capacity to realise its full potential and respond to the changing health needs of Victorians. Despite having demonstrated their capacity to deliver high-quality clinical and preventive healthcare, their role in the health system is not clearly articulated. In addition, community health services are trapped in a cycle of 'boom and bust' funding and have ageing infrastructure. This affects their ability to plan, drive innovative reforms, attract new investment, grow the sustainability of their organisations, and meet the needs of the growing population.

#### Recommendations

The VHA recommends the following steps to bolster community health services' potential to relieve pressure on the acute system and provide care in the community:

- **Formalise the role of community health in the health system**
  - Formal agreement that community health services are the preferred delivery partner in clinical and preventive healthcare service delivery
- **Leverage community health services to reduce avoidable hospital demand and increase access to care in the community**
  - Invest in innovative local solutions to provide care in the community to keep people healthy and out of hospital
- **Victorian Government to endorse VHA representation on the Strengthening Medicare Taskforce to ensure that community health services have a voice in national primary healthcare reform**



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**References**

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<sup>ii</sup> AIHW (2019) Potentially preventable hospitalisations in Australia by age groups and small geographic areas, 2017–18  
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