



Annual Report
2006-07



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ISSN 1324 8588
ABN 23 005 014 988

Contents

What is VCOSS	4
Strategic Objectives	5
President's report	6
Chief Executive Officer's report	8
1. Strong research and advocacy for good quality of life outcomes for all	10
2. Build a strong sector that can lead social change	18
3. Create a strong public presence for the changes required	22
4. Sustain just and equitable outcomes through collaboration	29
VCOSS 60 th birthday celebrations	34
Who's who	35
Concise Financial Report	41

What is VCOSS

Vision

We are a society where people are interdependent of one another and committed to living out the principles of equity and justice. We respect the land we live in and recognise the indigenous custodians of the country.

We have reconciled all injustices with indigenous Australians.

Our vision is one where social well being is a national priority, and:

- Ensures everyone has access to and a fair share of the community's resources and services
- Involves all people as equals, without discrimination
- Values and encourages people's participation in decision making about their own lives and their community

Mission

As the peak body of the social and community services sector in Victoria we pursue just and fair social outcomes through policy development and collaborative advocacy.

Values

The values that guide VCOSS in all the work we do are:

- Energy and vision
- Integrity and result
- Collaboration, inclusiveness and team work
- Continuous improvement and sustainability
- Open constructive communication

Strategic Objectives

1 Strong research and advocacy
for good quality of life outcomes for all

2 Build a strong sector
that can lead social change

3 Create a strong public
presence for the changes
required

4 Sustain just and equitable outcomes
through collaboration

President's report

A Vision and a Mission

A key element of the spirit of 2006–07 for VCOSS is captured in the insertion of a new phrase in our mission statement.

Our mission, from July 2007, will now read:

As the peak body of the social and community services sector in Victoria, we pursue just and fair social outcomes through community sector development and leadership, policy development and collaborative advocacy.

These five additional words signify much about the work of VCOSS staff, Board and members.

- Community sector development includes major work that has gone into advocating for a strong future for the community sector. This includes such work as the Community Sector Futures Task Group, response to the Stronger Community Organisation Project and Strategic Foresight Project.
- Leadership also includes the facilitating role that VCOSS has played in hosting a range of leadership development opportunities, of campaigning collectively and in hosting the Combined Peaks and Statewide Forum.

In addition, much of VCOSS' project work has also focussed on this area of building the capacity

of the sector. The new Training and Development Clearinghouse Project, Human Services Partnership Project and Occupational Health and Safety project are all focussed on strengthening the community sector.

The Board, in developing the Strategic Plan 2008–10, has also recognised that to achieve our mission we must ensure we have a strong sustainable organisation accountable to our various stakeholders. In the Strategic Plan we've consequently added a fifth goal; to *sustain an effective, ethical, healthy organisation*. Reporting against this objective will begin in the 2007–08 financial year.

Much of the work undertaken toward defining this goal has been achieved in the past twelve months. We have created a management structure to cope with a growing organisation. This has included the creation of a Business and Development Director role designed to oversee operational management including finance, administration, human resources and business development functions.

VCOSS advocated strongly in the 2006 state election. While we are pleased with much that has been achieved, too many Victorians are still disconnected and disadvantaged. VCOSS welcomed the third phase of *A Fairer Victoria*, announced in May 2007, particularly the commitment to public housing, public transport and early childhood services. But in a wealthy country, inequalities such as those



VCOSS Board (left - right) Deborah Tsorbaris, Linda Hanock, Georgie Ferrari, David Brant, David Pugh (back).
 Not pictured: Melissa Afentoulis, Sam Biondo, Merrilee Cox, Micaela Cronin, Tony Lang, Paul Linossier, Eric Passaris,
 Barry Pullen, Pauline Spencer, Marilyn Webster

confronting our 500 members daily are unacceptable. It is unacceptable that 6 per cent of Victorians had failed to put food on the table at some point in the past year (McCaughey Centre Community Indicators Launch). It is unacceptable that the rate of reported child abuse continues to rise. We do have the opportunity as a sector and in collaboration with other partners, to create social structures and policy that makes a sustainable difference. At VCOSS our values of energy and vision, integrity and collaboration form a vital platform for our ongoing engagement in social change.

I would like to acknowledge the tremendous skill and commitment of VCOSS CEO Cath Smith, and of all VCOSS staff and volunteers. Together they have effectively advocated and developed social policy in a community of collaboration with many other partners both in and outside our sector. Together they have created a 'space' where VCOSS and the sector are held in positive regard by many decision makers and where VCOSS and the sector can contribute constructively to social policy in Victoria.

I would also like to acknowledge my fellow Board members who with wisdom, good will and dedication have created a Board that has provided leadership and support to a vital and growing organisation.

David Pugh

Chief Executive Officer's report

The 2006–07 year covered the period from our 60th birthday annual Congress, through the Victorian State Election period and into the early campaign for the 2007 Federal Election. VCOSS expanded rapidly during the year, with a restructure to accommodate the management needs of our growing organisation.

VCOSS used our *Call to Parties*, published in April 2006, to work with all political parties around social policy development in the lead-up to the election, including a major city-based forum and events run with community sector partners in Yarra Ranges, Warrnambool, Rosebud and Bendigo. Our aim was to enable local candidates to meet local community members and respond to questions about the future of the community sector as well as housing, transport and other important local issues.

Feedback received indicates that VCOSS influenced state election policy in a number of significant areas including the commitment to an integrated housing strategy and the commitment to continue on with *A Fairer Victoria* overall strategy to address social and economic disadvantage. The work of the Sector Sustainability Task Group led to greater awareness within all the political parties of the important role of the community sector itself – not just the services and policy advocacy that our members are responsible for.

During the last year the VCOSS sector development and training role expanded exponentially. By the end of

June 2007, we had more than seven projects underway, including the training and development clearinghouse, the Disability Advocacy Resource Unit auspiced by VCOSS for the Victorian Disability Advocacy Network, a sector-wide OHS education project, the regular pro bono collaborators network, an Indigenous governance support project partnering with the Koori Heritage Trust and the annual free training schedule taking off with even more takers – both trainers and trainees.

Internally, VCOSS restructured to enable the employment of a Business and Development Director, Mary Latham, who comes to VCOSS with a strong finance and systems background. Also, we ramped up the roles of our Deputy Director Carolyn Atkins, Policy and Public Affairs Manager Kate Colvin and Sector Development and Training Manager Angela Savage. When you look at our full staff list you will see that we expanded our total staff numbers from about 16 to 32, albeit with many part-timers.

Along with some much needed project funding and an increase to our core funding, the most appreciated financial contribution during the year was the receipt of a major bequest from Leonie Brand, a long term member who left VCOSS a generous legacy for research purposes.

Of course, success breeds expectation! During the year, our members and stakeholders in the community demonstrated incredible support for the expanding role

that we can play together, and have expressed high expectations for the next chapter.

Finally, please accept my appreciation and thanks for your support during the year. The staff team are doing a fantastic job delivering the current strategic plan, and you are warmly invited to partner with us to deliver our new plan, which will be launched at our annual meeting in November.

Cath Smith

Cath Smith



*VCOSS Staff (left to right)
Rivkah Nissim and Mary Latham*



*VCOSS Staff (left to right) front row:
Leah Hobson, Marcia Leonard, Dean
Lombard, Grace Blau, Jess Fritze
back row: Jennifer Heaney, Sharon
Brown, Nicole Wiseman*



*VCOSS Staff (left to right) front row: Carolyn Wallace, Claire Steinke, Cath Smith, Kate Colvin, Sharon Granek
back row: Carolyn Atkins, Kate Johnson, Priscilla Blake, Stephanie Cauchi, Angela Savage*

1. Strong research and advocacy for good quality of life outcomes for all



VCOSS undertakes research and works with the community sector and community members to develop advocacy positions that will address disadvantage. We ensure our voice is heard by using effective lobbying and campaigns, by developing submissions, participating in policy development processes and by building influential relationships with decisions makers.

Submissions

July 2006

- Response to the Equal Opportunity (Miscellaneous Amendments) Bill Issues Paper

September 2006

- Submission to the National Electricity Consumers Advocacy Panel: A structured approach to the allocation of the panel's funding budget

February 2007

- Submission to Essential Services Commission's Small Scale Licensing Framework: Draft Recommendations

March 2007

- Submission to the Legislative Council Select Committee on Gaming Licensing
- Submission to Education and Training Reform (Education) Regulations Exposure Draft
- Response to the Essential Services Commission's Draft Decision and Draft Guideline on Energy Retailers' Financial Hardship Policies

April 2007

- Response to the Australian Energy Market Commission's draft statement of approach in the review of the effectiveness of competition in the gas and electricity retail markets

May 2007

- Submission to the Productivity Commission Inquiry: Consumer Policy Framework
- Response to the Victorian Energy Efficiency Target Scheme Issues Paper
- Submission to State Services Authority Non-Profit Regulatory Review

June 2007

- Response to the Final Report of the Review of the Essential Services Commission Act 2001
- Submission to the East West Link Needs Assessment
- June 2007 - Submission to the Inquiry into Strengthening Government and Parliamentary Accountability

Victorian Government Policy and Advisory Committees

- Advanced Metering Infrastructure Project Functionality Working Group (Department of Infrastructure and Department of Primary Industries)
- Corrections Stakeholder Forum (Department of Justice)
- Customer Consultative Committee – Residential (Essential Services Commission)
- Energy Hardship Working Group (Department of Infrastructure and Department of Primary Industries)
- Energy Hardship Training Project Steering Committee (Consumer Affairs Victoria)
- Maintaining Mobility: The transition from driver to non driver project (Department of Infrastructure)
- Melbourne 2030 Implementation Reference Group (Minister for Planning)
- Ministerial Advisory Committee on Juvenile Justice (Minister for Community Services)
- Ministerial Advisory Committee for Victorian Communities (Minister for Victorian Communities)
- Ministerial Advisory Committee for Vulnerable Children, Young People and Families (Minister for Children)

- Ministerial Advisory Committee for Vulnerable Children, Young People and Families – Indigenous Issues Working Group (Minister for Children)
- Ministerial Advisory Committee for Vulnerable Children, Young People and Families – Legislation Implementation Working Group (Minister for Children)
- Public Transport Access Committee (Department of Infrastructure)
- Taxi Working Group (Equal Opportunity and Human Rights Commission of Victoria)
- Working Together Forum (Consumer Affairs Victoria)

Federal Government Policy and Advisory Committees

- Department of Families, Community Services and Indigenous Affairs Emergency Relief State Consultative Committee

A Fairer Victoria

In 2006–07 VCOSS continued to engage the community sector in identifying ways to strengthen the implementation of the *A Fairer Victoria* strategies especially via the 12 month VCOSS *A Fairer Victoria* Community Sector Engagement Project, funded by the Department for Victorian Communities. Project outcomes included improved cross-sector and inter-departmental relationships; an acknowledgement that both community and government sector reform takes time, and that different governance structures are required; a willingness to work differently across the community sector and government by personnel from both; coordinating community sector input to identifying implementation successes, roadblocks, learnings to date, and areas for future focus in *A Fairer Victoria* strategies



Children, young people and families

VCOSS advocated for children young people and families by contributing to planning for the implementation of the new *Child, Youth and Families Act 2005*.



VCOSS participated in the Ministerial Advisory Committee (MAC) for Vulnerable Children, Young People and Families as well as two MAC working groups- Indigenous Issues and Legislation Implementation. The Indigenous Issues Working Group produced a report based on the premise that health and wellbeing outcomes for all Indigenous children, young people and families should be the same as those of other Victorians. The Legislation Working Group provided strategic policy advice including the Best Interests framework, the new Child FIRST model, and the learning and development strategy.

VCOSS continued to prioritise advocacy to support and promote the wellbeing of Indigenous children and young people in its broader work. VCOSS was invited to become a member of the Moondani Family Centre Steering Committee following our participation on the Victorian Aboriginal Child Care Agency's Aboriginal Family Centre Feasibility Study Advisory Group. The fundraising campaign for Moondani was launched at the VCOSS Congress 2006 by the Minister for Children, The Hon Sherryl Garbutt. VCOSS also participated on the Advisory Group for the Centre for Excellence in Child and Family Welfare's Indigenous Monograph.



VCOSS was an active contributor to the ACOSS-led campaign response to the Federal Government's intervention in Aboriginal communities in the Northern Territory; VCOSS coordinated the Victorian community sectors open letter to Minister Brough expressing concerns at the Federal Government's proposals.

VCOSS worked in partnership with the Youth Affairs Council of Victoria (YACVic) to collate a range of evidence around the gaps in generalist youth support services in Victoria and the impacts of these gaps on both young people and existing youth service providers. The resulting report, *Who's carrying the can? Youth support services - A report into youth services gaps in Victoria*, was used as a basis for advocacy to the State Government and contributed to the Office for Children and Office for Youth's commissioning KPMG to develop a youth service system model for Victoria.

Disability

In 2006–07 VCOSS continued to work towards ensuring that people with disability can participate fully in all aspects of the Victorian community. We advocated alongside people with disability and service providers for improved access to buildings and transport, and increased resources for disability supports and services. Sustained advocacy by a coalition of Victorian disability service providers and VCOSS saw welcome resources allocated in the 2007–08 State Budget to clear the backlog of demand for aids and equipment; however unmet need in other areas of disability services is a continuing, and growing, problem. A key focus of VCOSS' advocacy in 2007 was ensuring that a renegotiated Commonwealth State and Territory Disability Agreement (CSTDA) provides resources to account for unmet need in support and accommodation in Victoria and ensures the sustainability and viability of disability services. VCOSS will continue to advocate for a strong CSTDA as negotiations continue over the coming months.

Emergency relief

VCOSS has continued to fulfil its role strengthening the research and systemic advocacy capacity of the emergency relief sector. In 2007, in conjunction with the Emergency Relief Victoria (ERV) Network and RMIT, we began a research project to better understand why people are accessing emergency relief assistance around Victoria. Data on the reasons why people seek emergency assistance in different areas of the state has not been consistently collected for many years. This information is essential for the emergency relief sector to better advocate for changes to government policies which cause or increase both the financial difficulties of people on low incomes, and demand for emergency relief. The first of the three surveys to be conducted during the project was distributed through 35 agencies to emergency relief recipients in early 2007, with an excellent response received. The project will conclude in early 2008 with the publication of a report and broad distribution of the findings.

Health and wellbeing

VCOSS continued to prioritise addressing health inequalities in Victoria through-out 2006–07. We advocated for the establishment of a broad health and equity strategy, based on a social model of health, to ensure a more integrated approach across government. Within the health and equity strategy VCOSS called for an increased focus on prevention and early intervention supports at the primary end of the system, and for the initial focus of initiatives to be on access to services and community infrastructure in rural and regional and outer metropolitan areas.

VCOSS also identified that the accessibility of public and community transport needs to be addressed by whole of government initiatives. A key development was the establishment by the Social Development Committee of Cabinet of a Health Inequalities Task Group, led by the Department of Human Services.

VCOSS was a founding member of Victorian Health Inequalities Network that received 18-months funding from VicHealth to facilitate cross-sectoral dialogue to identify policy actions to address health inequalities. Monash University co-convened the Network with VCOSS, and the management group members included representatives from the Victorian Aboriginal Community Controlled Health Organisation, Wesley Mission, The University of Melbourne, La Trobe University and VicHealth. Four roundtables during 2007 will enable VHIN to achieve a cross-sectoral dialogue and to facilitate future action on health inequalities. The first of these roundtables, which focused broadly on what health inequalities are, was held in April 2007 and brought together 41 people from a range of sectors, including government, community, health and academia.

VCOSS participated as a panel member at a key seminar, *Acting on health inequality*, organised by VicHealth and the Public Health Branch of the Department of Human Services on 9 May 2007.



Housing

In 2006–07 VCOSS' advocacy on affordable housing made a significant contribution to the Victorian Government's decision to commit \$510 million to public and community housing - making this the largest ever budget commitment in Victoria's history. This very welcome outcome was achieved by sustained media work, lobbying and collaboration with other active community sector colleagues.

However, in spite of this win, the amount of affordable housing available to low income households remains in serious shortage. In order to increase the impact of VCOSS and the community sector's work on housing, VCOSS has, over the last year, focussed energy on supporting the development of a community sector housing affordability alliance, chaired by Michael Perusco, CEO of Sacred Heart Mission.

The alliance is now a national campaign called *Australians for Affordable Housing*. A key priority has been to raise the media profile of the housing crisis to make it a 'top five' political issue. Between the launch on 27 March and 30 June 2007, *Australians for Affordable Housing* generated 55 print media stories and over 20 radio and television stories around Australia. This media attention has translated into significantly increased political attention.

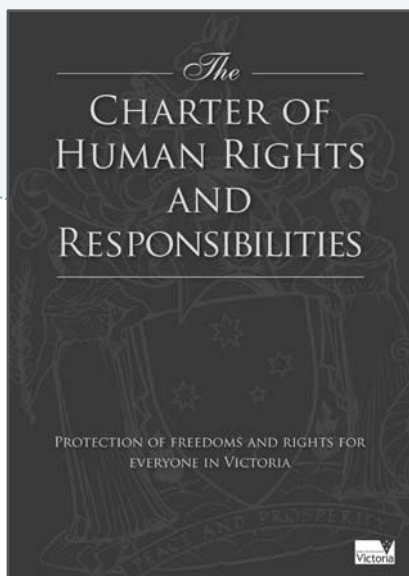
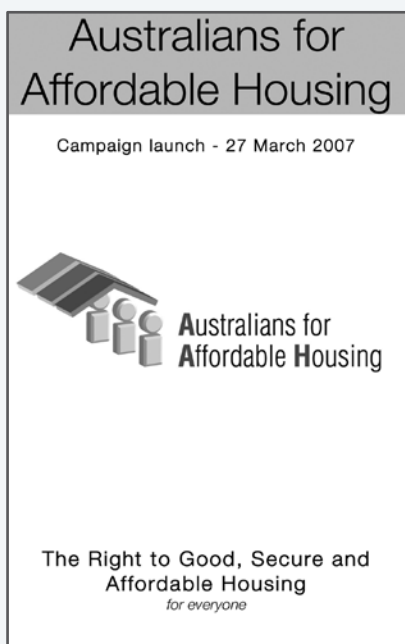
In 2006–07, VCOSS also advocated for a State Affordable Housing Plan to integrate broader mechanisms available to government to increase affordable housing supply. The Government's October release of *Towards an Affordable Housing Strategy* was an important step towards such a whole of government housing plan.

VCOSS was also successful in campaign work around accessible housing. Following sustained lobbying, media work and participating in the Government's Accessible Housing Taskforce, a pre-election policy was announced enabling councils to include low and no cost features in a proportion of multi-unit and high rise developments. We are continuing to work on this issue to further strengthen the policy outcomes.

Human Rights

VCOSS work on human rights in 2006–07 has been primarily focussed on supporting the introduction of the new Victorian *Charter of Human Rights and Responsibilities*, which was passed in July 2006 and came into effect on 1 January 2007. VCOSS had been substantially involved in the consultation process surrounding its introduction and final drafting and continued to play a key role in education, implementation and awareness-raising of the Charter among community sector organisations, and of the impact of the Charter on marginalised and disadvantaged groups among government, the legal and academic communities.

VCOSS presented conference papers on these themes at the University of Melbourne *Human Rights Education* conference, the Victorian Equal Opportunity and Human Rights Commission's *Freedom, Respect, Equality and Dignity* conference and the Law Institute of Victoria's *Charter of Human Rights* conference. VCOSS also produced a special human rights



edition of *Just Policy*, which aimed to open the debate on the Charter and on human rights theory and practice within the field of social policy.

Acknowledging that the introduction of the Charter is part of a broader human rights dialogue in Australia, VCOSS partnered with the Women's Rights Action Network Australia to run three workshops on women's rights in Melbourne, Bendigo and Warrnambool, and provided training at the Human Rights Law Resource Centre's annual human rights training program on international human rights mechanisms. VCOSS also contributed to the visit by the United Nations Special Rapporteur on the Right to Adequate Housing, who produced a country report damning of Australia's housing situation, particularly that of Indigenous Australians. VCOSS has also been contributing to the preparation of the Shadow Report to the Australian Government's report on obligations under the *International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights*, which will be reviewed in 2008.

VCOSS undertook an audit and needs analysis of human rights and training in the community sector, and worked with the Department of Human Services and the Victorian Equal Opportunity and Human Rights Commission to prepare a series of 18 rural and regional training sessions on the Charter which will be run in late 2007.

Justice

In December 2006, the Victorian Equal Opportunity Commission (EOCV) released its report on Women in Prison in response to a submission made by VCOSS and the Federation of Community Legal Centres calling for a systemic inquiry. While acknowledging that the submission raised allegations which would support such an investigation, the EOCV decided against doing so on the basis that a better response would be for Corrections Victoria to initiate an independent human rights audit of women's prisons. Corrections have declined to conduct such an audit and a focus of VCOSS' work has been to continue to advocate for a satisfactory response to the submission and to the acknowledged problems with women's imprisonment.

VCOSS also contributed to a coalition advocating for a whole of government approach to family violence in response to the recommendations in the recently released Law Reform Commission's report. In the lead-up to the state election in 2006, the coalition secured bi-partisan in principle support for the reforms, and continues to advocate for implementation of legislative

and non-legislative measures to reform the response to family violence, in addition to the \$31 million allocated in the 2006-07 budget to support victims of sexual assault.

VCOSS has also been closely monitoring proposed changes to sentencing practices, particularly the proposed abolition of suspended sentencing and the debate on post-sentencing detention of high-risk offenders. VCOSS has strongly advocated for retention of all measures which support a criminal justice response which is based on rehabilitation and a flexible response to the social, environmental and economic causes of offending rather than purely punitive.

VCOSS participated in the Ministerial Advisory Committee on Juvenile Justice, which provided strategic policy advice on key issues affecting young people interacting with the criminal justice system. VCOSS also worked with Youthlaw and the Youth Affairs Council of Victoria (YACVic) on the impact of the Graffiti Prevention Bill on young people.

State Election and the State Budget

Advocating for election policies and budget outcomes that address disadvantage is a top priority on the VCOSS calendar. In 2006 VCOSS published *Building a strong and fair community: Call to political parties, 2006 Victorian State election*. This platform was backed up with lobbying visits to each of the major parties and media work to highlight our priorities – and we were very pleased with the result. The November 2006 election was characterised by debate on social policy issues, and delivered policy from each of the parties to address disadvantage.

Significant commitments from the Labor victors included major investment in education, reducing kindergarten and public transport costs, investment in Children's Centres and consumer protections and rebates to replace old appliances for energy users.

VCOSS worked hard to translate election policies into State Budget outcomes, submitting *Maintain the momentum on social policy investment: VCOSS State Budget Submission 2007-08* to Government in December. VCOSS had another good result with housing the main winner, gaining \$510 million in capital investment for public and community housing upgrades, redevelopments and stock increases. Also pleasing was the translation of pre-election commitments into policy spending in the 2007-08 State Budget.

Transport

VCOSS transport advocacy aims to improve low income and disadvantaged Victorians' access to jobs, education, services and community life by advocating for affordable, high quality, accessible and safe transport options which are available to all Victorians.

The impact of ongoing high petrol pricing and the threat of peak oil was a significant theme in 2007. VCOSS worked closely with other environmental and public transport advocacy groups through the VCOSS and Environment Victoria convened Coalition for People's Transport to convene the *Peak Oil, Petrol Prices and Climate Change: Preparing Victoria for the Future* conference at the Department of Infrastructure. This event attracted 96 participants from across the government, business, environment and community sectors and was successful at putting peak oil on the government agenda. Recommendations from this event will be incorporated into a peak oil policy.



VCOSS completed a submission to the East West Link Needs Assessment calling on the government to provide fairer access to public transport services across Melbourne as an alternative to a new freeway. VCOSS also supported other community organisations to make submissions to this enquiry through organising an information forum and website.

VCOSS also undertook focus group and survey research on the transport issues faced by young parents. Focus groups were held across Melbourne as well as in Wodonga and Geelong. This research found significant accessibility issues with the current transport system for young mums travelling with their children leading to high levels of reported difficulties in accessing services, educational and social opportunities.



The accessibility of the public transport system for people with disabilities was also a priority. VCOSS hosted the project worker for the joint VCOSS, Disability Resources Centre, and Disability Advocacy and Information Service Accessible Transport Watch Project. In 2006-07, the project developed surveys for people with disabilities to use to report on their experience of public transport. These surveys will provide important information to support advocacy for more accessible public transport.

Utilities

In 2006–07 VCOSS had multifaceted involvement in the Government’s implementation of its response to the Inquiry into Financial Hardship of Energy Consumers. Outcomes included regulatory change (all retailers are now required to have hardship policies), concessions adjustments (access to utility relief grants was greatly improved), and some capacity-building for front-line workers assisting people in bill payment difficulty. Significantly, the principle that no-one should be disconnected solely due to incapacity to pay was made explicit in the Electricity and Gas Industry Acts. Victorian households are now the best protected in Australia, a testament to the constant work of many consumer advocates over many years.

We were also engaged in the development of the regulatory regime for the imminent National Energy Market (NEM). Working together with consumer advocates from around Australia, we have participated in an intensive consultative process and jointly planned submissions then lodged by key members. We’ve also independently submitted on critical issues – the most recent being the Inquiry into the Effectiveness of Competition in Gas and Electricity Retail Markets in Victoria. We expect this inquiry will recommend the curtailment of price regulation in Victoria – so the main advocacy issue going forward is the necessity for some form of price moderation to keep essential energy usage affordable.

The third major activity for the year was our participation in the Advanced Metering Infrastructure (AMI) Project, which will oversee the replacement of domestic electricity meters with ‘smart meters’ that measure consumption in half hour blocks and can be remotely read, connected, and disconnected. Functionality specifications for the meters are currently being developed. VCOSS is one of four consumer representatives in an industry-saturated process, attempting to safeguard outcomes for low-income households.

NEM and AMI work will continue in 2007–08, along with greater attention to household energy efficiency, and more work around energy and water pricing.

Welfare

VCOSS has been a key participant in the initiative led by ACOSS and the Australian Federation of People with Disabilities (AFDO) to monitor the impacts of the Federal ‘Welfare to Work’ legislation on people experiencing disadvantage. As well as contributing to national advocacy efforts on Welfare to Work, we have supported local networks and organisations to develop their own initiatives to collect evidence of the impacts of Welfare to Work on their stakeholders. In addition, VCOSS gave presentations on the policy and advocacy implications of Welfare to Work to a wide range of networks and forums across the Victorian community sector during 2006–07, including a roundtable jointly organised with the VCOSS Essential Services Working Group to inform utilities providers about the implications of the legislation for their customers.

