



Adapting the community sector





VCOSS feedback on the Health and
Human Services Climate Change
Adaptation Action Plan

August 2021

The Victorian Council of Social Service is the peak body for the community services sector in Victoria.

VCOSS members reflect the diversity of the sector and include large charities, peak organisations, small community services, advocacy groups and individuals interested in social policy.

VCOSS advocates for a fair and equitable society by supporting the social service industry and representing the interests of Victorians facing disadvantage.

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VCOSS acknowledges the Traditional Custodians of the land and pays respect to their Elders past and present.

This document was prepared on the lands of the Kulin Nation.



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Introduction

The Victorian Council of Social Service (VCOSS) welcomes the opportunity to provide input to the Health and Human Services Climate Change Adaptation Action Plan (AAP). We commend the legal requirement that all AAPs must support vulnerable communities and promote social justice under the Climate Change Act 2017.

VCOSS considers successful adaptation as improving the wellbeing of people experiencing disadvantage, rather than simply ensuring that they are not worse off. Victoria's response to climate change is an opportunity to reduce entrenched inequality by addressing the factors that heighten vulnerability.

The community sector is pivotal for supporting Victorians to thrive in a changing climate, but organisations must be given adequate resources. The sector provides vital services that help clients prepare for, respond to and recover from emergencies and organisations are already raising awareness about the impact of climate change on health and wellbeing.

Community service organisations are not immune to the impacts of climate change, however, and need funding and direction for how to adapt. This AAP must consider the human services aspect of the system as much as the health component and provide support for the sector in building its climate resilience.

The AAP is split into three domains, all of which require additional consideration of the community sector:

- public health;
- infrastructure resilience, and;
- sector capability.

VCOSS makes the following recommendations:

- Provide immediate and flexible funding to community service organisations after emergencies to meet increased demand.
- Collaborate with the community sector to develop localised and targeted health communications about climate change.
- Improve the climate resilience of premises used by community service organisations.
- Fund the community sector's digital transformation to assist business continuity during emergencies.
- Build the climate resilience of community service organisations.
- Fund peak bodies to improve their members' climate resilience.
- Support the health and wellbeing of workers in the community sector.

The community sector in a changing climate

The community sector is embedded in local communities and provides vital services to people experiencing disadvantage including financial counselling, mental health support, material aid and more. Organisations witness the impacts of climate change on households first-hand and have a deep understanding of local vulnerability.

The sector improves the resilience of their clients by addressing key drivers of climate vulnerability such as poverty, insecure housing and social isolation. The demand for services spikes after extreme weather events and 52 per cent of the organisations surveyed by VCOSS in 2019 predicted that climate change would worsen their ability to meet demand.¹

Organisations are impacted by climate change themselves, however, with detrimental flow-on effects to the safety of staff members and the wellbeing of clients who depend on their services. 43 per cent of organisations had been affected by extreme weather in the 12 months prior to the 2019 survey and impacts included:

- interruptions to staff transport;
- disruptions to clients' access to services;
- increased service demand;
- staff absences;
- staff's health affected;
- destroyed or damaged premises;
- temporary closures, and;
- additional staff required.²

Although the sector is rarely funded to do so, organisations are well-placed to actively support Victoria's adaptation to climate change. This includes advice to individual clients and projects undertaken throughout the broader community.

For example, many organisations prepare community members for worsening heatwaves and help people keep cool on hot days. In 2021 VCOSS surveyed organisations about extreme heat and found that 74 per cent of respondents prioritise extreme heat highly or very highly.³

Meanwhile 55 per cent of respondents directly help their community cope with extreme heat.⁴ Activities undertaken by organisations included:

- calling vulnerable clients;
- communicating health advice;
- providing water and ice blocks;

¹ Victorian Council of Social Service, *Resilience of community sector organisations*, 2019.

² *ibid.*

³ Victorian Council of Social Service, *Survey Report: Extreme Heat*, 2021.

⁴ *ibid.*

- opening up their air-conditioned office space;
- dropping off heatwave packs with water bottles, maps of local cool places and heat health information;
- handing out taxi vouchers for clients to travel to and from appointments, and;
- picking up medication and groceries for clients unable to travel.

Public health

Recommendations

Provide immediate and flexible funding to community service organisations after emergencies to meet increased demand.

Collaborate with the community sector to develop localised and targeted health communications about climate change.

The first two actions of the AAP address the system's responsibility to protect the health and wellbeing of Victorian households in a changing climate.

Climate change not only affects the health of Victorians, but it impacts their social wellbeing. The increasing frequency and severity of extreme weather events drive increases in family violence, mental ill health, alcohol and substance abuse and financial hardship. The AAP currently states that:

“Services will likely experience an overall increase in demand and more frequent demand surges due to climate related hazards and events. Adequate surge staff recruitment and services preparation is essential to ensure responses during emergencies, including relief and recovery, will meet demand.” (p21)

The AAP should include an action that provides immediate grants for community service organisations in the aftermath of extreme weather events to meet this rising demand. The funding could be used for surge staff recruitment to prevent staff shortages, take the pressure off permanent full-time workers and ensure community members are not turned away due to overcapacity.

In addition to providing core services, the sector can also contribute to the *“climate and health engagement program”* (p28) described in action H1. As demonstrated by the COVID-19 pandemic, communities receive public health messages in different ways and communication must be accessible, easy to understand, translated into all necessary languages and targeted through multiple channels.

If funded, community service organisations could collaborate with the state government to develop and deliver targeted messages about *“stay[ing] healthy in a changing climate”* (p28). Local community service organisations would be excellent partners in this work given their trusted engagement with Victorians experiencing disadvantage and deep links with community networks. The current work being undertaken by culturally and linguistically diverse community leaders in response to the COVID-19 pandemic is a good example of this.

Other examples include **Bendigo Community Health Services**, which co-designs bushfire and heatwave information in multiple languages used in the community by engaging recent migrants and asylum seekers. As many channels as possible are then utilised to communicate the messages including social media apps popular with specific communities, a multi-language hotline, audiovisual materials and bicultural staff.

Further examples include community health organisations such as **cohealth, enliven and IPC Health**. They have delivered place-based programs to raise awareness of extreme heat among people most at-risk. Staff members worked with residents in inner-city Melbourne, Dandenong and Brimbank during the *Hot Spots* project to develop practical advice about keeping cool and disseminate it throughout community networks.

Infrastructure resilience

Recommendations

Improve the climate resilience of premises used by community service organisations.

Fund the community sector's digital transformation to assist business continuity during emergencies.

Actions H3 to H9 concern the physical infrastructure of the system.

Although this domain considers social housing and health assets, the physical premises used by community service organisations are often neglected. 72% of surveyed organisations felt that climate change would worsen the comfort and safety of their premises during extreme weather.⁵

Upgrading climate resilience will depend on whether organisations own their own premises or rent an office from a local council, the state government or a private landlord.

Organisations who rent have expressed difficulty in working with their landlord to apply for grants.

The state government should:

- continue providing grants to owner-occupier community organisations;
- immediately upgrade state government-owned infrastructure leased to the community sector, and;
- directly approach local councils with grants to improve the thermal comfort of premises leased to the community sector.

In addition to physical infrastructure, the state government should also recompense the cost of the digital transformation that organisations have undergone throughout the COVID-19 pandemic. The community sector acted rapidly to pivot its services to different sets of restrictions but bore the out-of-pocket expense.

The ability for staff members to work from home or deliver services remotely allows organisations to be more flexible in future emergencies. For example, a regional Primary Care Partnership will use the recent success of telehealth to provide services during heatwaves to prevent clients from travelling to and from their offices in extreme heat.

⁵ VCOSS, *Resilience survey*.

Sector capability

Recommendation

Build the climate resilience of community service organisations.

Fund peak bodies to improve their members' climate resilience.

Support the health and wellbeing of workers in the community sector.

The final five actions of the AAP cover sector capability.

The community sector is so focused on caring for their clients and communities that organisations' own vulnerability to climate change can often be overlooked. Impacts include injury to staff members and disruption to service delivery, which flows on to vulnerable people who rely on the support.

Funding is a barrier for community service organisations to undertake a thorough risk assessment and build their resilience to climate change. Organisations are also reluctant to use scant resources for internal purposes when their budget for service delivery is already spread thin.

The community sector would benefit from hands-on and tailored training about the impacts of climate change and how to improve business continuity. Practical advice that can be implemented immediately is particularly useful because staff members are time poor and may not have capacity to devise strategies from scratch.

For example, **Jesuit Social Services** developed a series of training sessions for social workers in Brimbank and Dandenong with support from RMIT and VCOSS. Attendees learnt about the compounding impacts of climate change on their organisations and participated in scenario planning to assess the risks to their community.

Peak bodies in the community sector are well-placed to deliver training about climate resilience to members as well. Professional development is already a service that many peak organisations provide to members but funding is required to expand this offering to include fields such as emergency management and climate risk.

Peak bodies can also assist their members by developing resources and templates that staff can adapt to their own community. Organisations can share best-practice between service providers by disseminating tools developed by members, hosting an online network where staff members can connect, or running sessions where members outline activities that are working well.

The gap analysis in the AAP identifies that the state government needs to “*better support the health and wellbeing of essential workforces, including the specialist family violence workforce, during times of crisis/emergencies.*” (p27) There is no action to address the impact of climate change of the community sector’s workforce, however, and one should be included.

Staff can be directly impacted by extreme weather while performing their duties. For example, the 2021 survey about extreme heat showed significant concern for workers providing in-home care on hot days.⁶ This was exacerbated when clients lived in homes with poor thermal comfort and no air-conditioning, putting staff members’ health at risk.

Workers are embedded in their local communities and will experience their own personal trauma about extreme weather events affecting their clients. Staff members may also suffer from vicarious trauma when helping people cope with climate risks and they need just as much mental health support to recover.

Investment in workforce wellbeing could include access to an employee assistance program and training for organisational leaders about helping staff cope with climate-related wellbeing impacts. Surge funding could reduce stress and burnout, while peak bodies are also well-placed to provide members with self-care events and resources.

⁶ VCOSS, *Survey Report*.



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