

Supplementary Submission to the Hazelwood Mine Fire Inquiry

October 2015



About VCOSS

The Victorian Council of Social Service (VCOSS) is the peak body of the social and community 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. In addition to supporting the sector, VCOSS represents the interests of vulnerable and disadvantaged Victorians in policy debates and advocates for the development of a sustainable, fair and equitable society.

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Introduction

VCOSS is pleased to provide this Supplementary Submission to the 2015 Hazelwood Mine Fire Inquiry, responding to discussion at the Inquiry's Social Disadvantage forum on 30th September 2015.

The Morwell community has a strong appetite to re-establish a sense of place and pride, including among its residents, businesses, community organisations, schools, local government and industry.

The aftermath of the mine fire presents a unique and significant opportunity to take a new approach that acknowledges Morwell's past contributions to the state of Victoria, recognises its strengths and challenges, and provides an innovative and collaborative way forward.

VCOSS recommends the establishment of a locally-based cross-sector taskforce to create shared goals and to collaborate for the rejuvenation of Morwell. The taskforce should include representatives and leaders from the local community, education, health, industry and business, and local government sectors.

All members of the community should be engaged in decision-making about the future of Morwell, to engender ownership and a commitment to change. The community sector is a trusted conduit for people facing disadvantage and vulnerability, and has essential expertise, capabilities and skills to contribute.

This submission elaborates on the key points made to the Board of Inquiry by VCOSS in the afternoon session of the Social Disadvantage forum, stressing the particular need to focus on education, strengthen the community sector, and invest in collaborative social initiatives to address the complex social problems faced by the Morwell community.

Overcoming disadvantage in Morwell

The pathways to poverty and disadvantage are complex. The restructuring and privatisation of the State Electricity Commission in the 1990s led to massive job losses in Morwell and the Latrobe Valley which have accelerated their decline. The 2011 Socio-Economic Indexes for Areas (SEIFA) data shows that Morwell is one of the most disadvantaged towns in Victoria, confirmed by the 2015 [*Dropping Off the Edge*](#) Report.

VCOSS stated to the Board of Inquiry that solutions to overcoming poverty and disadvantage are not simple. There is no single model that will meet all complex needs. However, fostering a diverse range of strong not-for-profit community organisations of different sizes, service models and cultures will optimise Morwell's ability to support a diverse population. This provides choice for people accessing services as well as increasing the sector's ability to reach vulnerable and marginalised individuals and communities. Success requires a range of solutions that acknowledge Morwell's past contributions to the state of Victoria, recognise its strengths and challenges, and provide an innovative and collaborative way forward.

The VCOSS report [*Building on the value of Victoria's community sector*](#) states that an integrated mix of services are required to most effectively help people overcome disadvantage. Universal and primary services are required by the entire community. These should be supplemented by further secondary and tertiary services targeted to people where and when they are needed, proportionate to the extent of disadvantage they face. It is this mix of universal, secondary and tertiary services and the way they work together that can make the biggest difference to people's lives. Universal and 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, and severe problems.

This interlinked model of services more effectively reaches people as there are 'no wrong doors', avoiding the requirement for people to negotiate a maze of services, acronyms and red tape to find the help they need. Solutions should be built upon the existing system of services, with a commitment to long-term change sustained over time. New, short-term programs, developed elsewhere and foisted on the community, are unlikely to succeed.

The model of the social determinants of health as described in the Victorian Health Promotion Foundation (VicHealth) submission to the Inquiry is strongly supported by VCOSS.

Education

Improving educational achievement is an essential component in overcoming disadvantage in Morwell, high disengagement of young people locally. VCOSS reinforced to the Board the requirement for a universally accessible quality education system from early childhood, through school years and at the vocational education level.

In the [*VCOSS Response to the Education State Consultation Paper*](#), VCOSS stated it is imperative that our education system be structured and resourced to operate to support people facing disadvantage to fully participate and achieve strong educational outcomes, from early childhood through to tertiary or vocational levels.

VCOSS is currently finalising a submission to the [*Early Childhood Consultation Paper*](#) for the Victorian Government's Education State, which states that while vulnerable children live everywhere in Victoria, the concentration of risk factors is usually greater in communities with high socioeconomic disadvantage, and that exposure of vulnerable children to risk factors is often compounded by their lower participation in quality early childhood education and care. Strengthening protective factors, and reducing the risks faced by vulnerable children, helps promote positive early development experiences.

In a recent [*article*](#), VCOSS stated that a quality education is essential to developing an inclusive society and economy. Too many children and young people have missed out on a quality education as a consequence of experiencing disadvantage. Young people who are underemployed, leave school early or who don't transition successfully from school to further education or employment are some of the most vulnerable in society. High youth unemployment and underemployment rates mean young people who are disengaged from education and are not in training or employment face a bleak future of financial hardship, increased likelihood of health and mental health issues and increased probability of contact with the justice system.

In our [*Submission to the Schools Funding Review*](#), VCOSS outlined the need for equity based school funding, stating that a school system that fails to support disadvantaged children and young people has profound impacts on individual students and their families, as well as the broader community. If schools lack the resources required to support disadvantaged students, these children and young people are more at risk of poor educational outcomes, which can affect their ability to complete school and successfully participate in the labour market, thus entrenching poverty and disadvantage.

The Victorian Government is contributing \$493m in additional equity funding to help address the growing inequality in funding and educational results for students experiencing disadvantage, by recognising both the individual circumstances of students and their families, as well as the adverse effects of concentrated disadvantage within a school.

VCOSS also outlined the Youth Connections Program to the Board of Inquiry. This was an Australian Government initiative that ceased in December 2014 that was designed to support young people who are disengaged or at risk of disengaging from education, to attain Year 12 or equivalent and to help them make a successful transition through education and onto further education, training or employment. Further information is available in the [*Youth Connections Program Guidelines*](#), and the [*Evaluation of the National Partnership On Youth Attainment And Transitions*](#), which includes the Youth Connections Program.

A briefing paper prepared by VCOSS and Youth Affairs Council of Victoria, [Addressing education disadvantage: Supporting young Victorians to complete their education](#), outlines the case for investment in an education re-engagement program that provides intensive, case-managed support targeting students who have already disengaged, or are at risk of disengaging, from school. The state government's announcement of [Navigator](#) program to help support at-risk and disengaged young people will partially address the substantial service gaps left by the loss of the Youth Connections program.

Vocational education provides an important pathway to employment and tackles a range of barriers to workforce participation, including long-term unemployment, early school leaving, low literacy or numeracy skills, and the need to retrain or up-skill. Vocational and Educational Training (VET) also provides an education pathway for Aboriginal students, students from rural and regional areas, and students from culturally diverse backgrounds. The 2012 VET funding reforms reduced TAFE's ability to offer student support services, increased course costs by tightening subsidy eligibility requirements, and reduced rural and regional VET delivery. These changes were compounded by state government funding cuts to Victorian Certificate of Applied Learning (VCAL) Coordinators in 2012, and the closure of a number of programs to support vulnerable young people's education engagement and pathways to employment, including the federally funded Youth Connection program and some Victorian 'work-ready' programs. The [VCOSS submission to the VET Funding Review](#) recommends that people who face barriers can access the VET system, and for VET to provide a pathway to meaningful employment.

The Community Sector

The community sector currently faces unprecedented change, hindering response to people's needs. The recent edition of the VCOSS publication [Insight](#) highlights the upheavals of the funding cuts and retendering processes.

Recent severe federal funding cuts have defunded a range of programs, including carer respite services, children, youth and family services, community mental health services, and emergency relief and financial counselling services. In the [ACOSS Submission to the Australian Senate Community Affairs Committee Inquiry](#), ACOSS stated that funding uncertainty and the Government's cuts to community services and social infrastructure have left many organisations without the resources to provide essential services, policy advice and community connections over major social and economic priorities.

Reforms to re-tendering processes, alongside stringent contract terms and conditions, undermine the sector's capacity to provide continuity of care, and place people and families at risk of falling through the cracks. Competitive tendering also creates an environment of competition that discourages collaboration and information sharing,

For example, the [VCOSS Submission to the Finance and Public Administration References Committee Inquiry](#) on the Commonwealth Indigenous Advancement Strategy tender process

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highlighted the adverse effects of these budget cuts on Aboriginal people and services, and recommended that the most vulnerable people should be protected from budget savings measures. Further, in its [*Joint Submission to the Community Sector Reform Council Discussion Paper*](#), VCOSS noted that the reform of the Community Mental Health and Alcohol and Other Drugs services came at a significant cost to the community sector and recommended that government funding arrangements need to provide flexibility for organisations to identify the needs of their communities and how best to meet them.

A series of [*briefing papers*](#), prepared by VCOSS in consultation with members of the Ageing, Disability and Mental Health Collaborative Panel, outline the climate of change community organisations are operating in, and explain a range of parameters and models and the opportunities and implications they present to organisations.

Governments can reduce poverty and inequality in Morwell and the LaTrobe Valley by recognising the unique contribution the community sector makes, not only in 'welfare' terms but as a large and growing industry with significant social and economic benefits. The value the sector brings to the community includes its ability to amplify the voice of people facing disadvantage and build relationships with those who most need its support, its diversity, innovative and collaborative nature, focus on prevention and early intervention, and ability to build community cohesion and wellbeing.

In the recent [*Building on the value of Victoria's community sector*](#) report, VCOSS outlines the ways in which the community sector delivers value and areas that can be built upon to improve service delivery and outcomes for clients.

Government must work with community service organisations to determine adequate funding levels to meet community needs and ensure social and economic participation; and to invest to meet those levels over a minimum five year timeframe.

Social services will be one of the most important contributors to economic growth and employment in the decades ahead. An article in the recent edition of [*Insight*](#), noted that for a very large number of Australians the social sector will be their future industry of employment. They will start and end their lives working in a rapidly growing industry, pursuing professional careers helping a diverse range of clients and organisations, some of which may be public, but most of which will be private or not-for-profit entities. Recent labour market projections make this clear, with employment in health and social services predicted to lead the way over other industry sectors.

Collaboration and co-design

VCOSS endorsed the benefits of collaboration and co-design to the Board of Inquiry.

The recent VCOSS report, [*Walk alongside: Co-designing social initiatives with people experiencing vulnerabilities*](#), describes the value of co-design: a 'ground-up' approach to service design that begins by asking people what their needs are, and then exploring possible solutions with them. It is

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characterised by the pursuit of social transformation, and focuses on positive goals of growth, wellbeing and social cohesion.

[Go Goldfields](#), an alliance of local and state government, community service providers and community members, has been designed for organisations within the Central Goldfields Shire to work together taking a place-based approach to deliver locally relevant solutions to complex social problems. A recent VCOSS [article](#) and [Go Goldfields: 'Hatching' ideas, plans and a community](#) provides further detail on this program.

Professor Peter Shergold, in his [Victorian report on sector reform](#), recommended that contracting of services to the community sector should involve consultation on all significant issues, including the development of policy, planning and service design. Similarly an ACOSS [fact sheet](#) has recommended that where there are significant changes to the size, scope or nature of services tendered, government should undertake clear and open consultation and collaboration with services concerning program design and services outcomes. The recent edition of the VCOSS publication [Insight](#) also explores opportunities for collaborative and innovation in working with communities.

Collaboration, co-design and coordination require resources for oversight, administration and evaluation in order to be effective. Collaboration and cooperation will require an additional dedicated resource component for the joint effort to be successful in promoting the future development of Morwell.

Victorian Council of Social Service

