



Submission to the
Public Accounts and
Estimates Committee
Inquiry into the
Victorian Government's
Response to the COVID-
19 Pandemic

September 2020



Contents

Introduction	1
About Mallee Family Care	1
Summary of Recommendations	3
Our experience during the COVID-19 Pandemic	4
Our work in response - an overview	4
Adapting service delivery: limitations of digital technology	5
Reporting obligations and communication with funders	6
Uncertain funding	8
Workforce	9
Need for additional funding	9
The Social and Community Services (SACS) Pay Equity Special Account	10
Ensuring Victorians live above the poverty line	12
A safe and secure home	16
Increase social housing supply	16
Ensuring adequate cooling in public housing in North West Victoria	17
Home Stretch Campaign	18
Lessons from Remote and Flexible Learning	19
Cross border communities	19
Attachment 1 - MFC Catchment Area	21



Introduction

Mallee Family Care welcomes the opportunity to provide a submission to the Public Accounts and Estimates Committee Inquiry into the Victorian Government's Response to the COVID-19 Pandemic.

Our submission is drawn from both organisational data and staff experiences in supporting our clients in this ever changing and challenging environment.

Mallee Family Care acknowledges that we as a state are faced with a rapidly changing landscape and, on whole, commend the Victorian Government for their rapid response in these unprecedented times.

Our submission is centered on our experience to date, and the anticipated future need.

About Mallee Family Care

Mallee Family Care is a non-Government, not for profit agency managing more than sixty Commonwealth and State funded programs supporting thousands of vulnerable community members in regional, rural and remote areas of North West Victoria and South West New South Wales. Please see Attachment 1 for a map of our Catchment Area.

Our programs are evidenced based and proven to assist those who find themselves in exceptional need, disadvantage or vulnerable circumstance. We work in the fields of family, youth and children, disability, mental health, housing, legal, financial, research and education. Our work is integral to the social fabric of our community.

Our clients derive from a diverse population, the majority of which experience vulnerability and social and economic disadvantage. Many have also experienced family violence, are people with a disability or mental illness, or are either Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander or from Culturally and Linguistically Diverse backgrounds.



Our greatest challenge, like with all Community Service Organisations, is meeting the demand for our service in a system that is chronically underfunded and under resourced. This limitation on funding and resources also creates a barrier to maintaining and developing our services to meet the growing need of our community. These challenges are even more acute in the context of our current COVID-19 crisis.

Summary of Recommendations

Recommendation 1

Create maximum flexibility on contract requirements for government funded organisations to enable responsiveness to changing community needs and crisis, for example:

- Delay or relax reporting obligations;
- Freeze government reform and new tendering processes;
- Suspend KPIs and outcomes to allow for adaption to new conditions;
- Remove penalties for non-compliance with contracts arising from COVID-19 emergencies; and
- Allow flexibility in how funds are used to support community safety during COVID-19.

Recommendation 2

We urge the Victorian Government to invest in increasing our ability to capacity build and expand our local workforce pool by:

1. Increasing our program funding to allow for additional staff to meet the current, and predicted, demand;
2. Advocating to their federal counterparts against the Federal Higher Education Support Amendment (Job-Ready Graduates and Supporting Regional and Remote Students) Bill 2020; and
3. Continuing the ERO supplementation; or
4. Permanently increasing the base rate of grants where ERO supplementation currently applies so as to incorporate the current rate of ERO supplementation.

Recommendation 3

The Victorian Government must advocate to their Federal counterparts to increase the base rate of JobSeeker payment.

Recommendation 4

The Victorian Government must commit to an immediate and ongoing investment to build enough social housing to end the waitlist.

Recommendation 5

The Victorian Government must urgently install air-conditioning in all public housing in North West Victoria.

Recommendation 6

The Victorian Government must extend the Home Stretch program for every child placed in care now and into the future.




Our experience during the COVID 19 pandemic

Our work in response - an overview

Since the COVID-19 crisis began to unfold Mallee Family Care has done everything within its power to ensure that we maintain client visibility and that our clients continue to receive the support they need. We have responded quickly and creatively to changing community needs, often in the absence of other local services who closed their doors early in the pandemic and/or reduced their services dramatically.

COVID-19 has significantly affected our capacity to deliver our services to the at risk children, families, carers and individuals we assist as it altered and restricted the way we are able to engage with our clients. Our workplace and service delivery modes have been extensively adapted to meet Government restrictions. By way of example, we have moved many of our services from face to face to online and telephone service delivery to maintain client visibility, in some instances with the assistance of funders being able to provide clients with technology that would enable this. We at one point moved to online playgroups and arranged with businesses in our community for care packs to be sent to children and families in need. We have acted as our client's voice and the intermediary between our clients and other service providers, educational institutions or Government Departments, to ensure our clients are not further disadvantaged and there is consistency and fairness in the application of Government policy in regional, rural and remote settings.

We anticipate that there will be a significant increase in demand for the majority, if not all, of our services as the months go by with underemployment and unemployment rates increasing,




leading to increased financial hardship. We expect this to reach a pinnacle once the current safety net measures, such as the Coronavirus Supplement, JobKeeper and eviction moratorium and creditor assistance ends.

Adapting service delivery: limitations of digital technology

With our geographical isolation, digital technology is already an integral part of the way that we deliver our services and engage with counterparts and stakeholders. However, as a result of COVID-19 restrictions, we have placed increased emphasis on its use for service delivery, and in many instances it has replaced face to face service delivery and meetings. For many of our clients, digital technology and reliable internet access is a privilege, either because they simply can't afford it or don't have access to it. Our organisation itself experiences issues with network disruptions which interfere with the efficient running of our daily business and renders meetings via video link unreliable at times.

Whilst access to digital technology and the internet is a concern for many of our clients, a greater concern in light of the data emerging that indicates an increase in domestic violence over the pandemic period, is the inability for practitioners to adequately screen and assess clients who may be victims of domestic violence. A skilled practitioner can identify cues of domestic violence when undertaking a face to face assessment however, over the phone or via video link you're unable to witness what is transpiring in the background, or obtain a full understanding of the person's physical wellbeing and demeanour. Increased reliance on technology also raises concerns over its misuse as a form of domestic violence.




Another area in which the limitations of digital technology and the internet come to the fore is that in service delivery for children, namely allied health or counselling. Children's attention spans lag and there are obvious restrictions to Occupational Therapy and the fitting of equipment.

Whilst digital technology can be a vital tool in enhancing our abilities to deliver services it cannot replace face to face assessments and meetings.

Reporting obligations and communication with funders

As noted above, Mallee Family Care manages a complex suite of more than 60 Commonwealth and State funded programs across multiple disciplines and Government Departments and, particularly in the initial months of the pandemic, we found it incredibly challenging to manage the overwhelming number of requests for information via multiple Departments, in addition to our standard reporting requirements. It was also integral for us to have open lines of communication with our funders and for swift responses to questions and issues raised to be provided. There was little department-wide guidance as the crisis unfolded and there has been little advice since regarding how funders will measure performance and how, if at all, our funding will be affected.

This is also of relevance to our auditing obligations. As a Community Service Organisation trying to maintain visibility of our clients during a pandemic, funders should have considered mechanisms that would ease the burden and assist us in maintaining service delivery as best we could. Once concerns regarding reporting or auditing obligations were raised with the Departments the obligations were relaxed but we argue that, like with other jurisdictions, Victorian Government Departments should have had consideration at the outset as to how they can ease the burden on frontline services in this challenging time




and assist them in maintaining service delivery and adapting as an organisation to the new business parameters they found themselves operating in. By way of example, New South Wales Department of Communities and Justice proactively considered how they could assist our organisation and retracted our auditing obligations and rescheduled them for a further 12 months without it impacting our compliance obligations. They did this proactively to remove any superfluous distractions to allow us to place all our efforts on maintaining visibility of our clients in this challenging time. This was not our experience with Victorian funders.

Another challenge, of a similar nature, arose when we were required to partake in competitive tender processes during the pandemic. A competitive tender process requires an allocation of considerable resources and is an onerous task in the course of normal business. To be required to partake in this process during a pandemic, and further to all aforementioned additional tasks, was unfathomable and it resulted in considerable unnecessary strain being placed not only on our management team but our operations as a whole. These processes should have been delayed and current contracts extended.

There was, and continues to be, a definite need for a central streamlined information hub or an allocated team or individual to assist when issues arise. Numerous Departmental employees, who we had prior relationships with, were redeployed throughout the pandemic without notice or guidance on who we should defer to when queries arose and this has created great confusion and prevented the swift resolution of issues.

We also wish to raise that whilst funders were relentless in their onerous requests for information, which at times had little bearing on the role or function of the agency, we did not once have direct contact from Departments, be that local offices



or otherwise, to query how we as an organisation were going or whether there was anything we may require assistance with. The onus was always on us, a frontline service whose focus was on maintaining visibility of our clients, to proactively engage with the relevant Departments.

Uncertain funding

As a frontline service provider who never lost sight of our clients we were quick to identify the changing landscape and needs of those who we assist. There were some programs, such as NDIS, that provided flexibility in funding and brokerage that enabled us to adapt our service delivery whilst still meeting the needs of our clients but this was not universal and significant cost has been absorbed by our agency as a result. There was, and continues to be, a need for brokerage funding that enables us to respond flexibly to the changing and complex needs of the people accessing our services.

By way of example, there has been inconsistency in the approach of funders to the expense being incurred by our Agency in cleaning to ensure the safety of programs that continue to run with face to face sessions. Whilst some funders have been very receptive to our requests for assistance there are some that months later, are still yet to respond.

With regards to the challenges noted above in respect of service delivery, Mallee Family Care, concurs with Australian Council of Social Service, the Councils of Social Service network and Australian Service Union and recommends the Government implement the below measures:

Recommendation 1

Create maximum flexibility on contract requirements for government funded organisations to enable responsiveness to changing community needs and crisis, for example:

- Delay or relax reporting obligations;*
- Freeze government reform and new tendering processes;*
- Suspend KPIs and outcomes to allow for adaption to new conditions;*
- Remove penalties for non-compliance with contracts arising from COVID-19 emergencies; and*
- Allow flexibility in how funds are used to support community safety during COVID-19.¹*


Workforce

Need for additional funding

The pandemic will have long lasting impacts on all Australians and we envision that demand for all our services, particularly mental health, financial counselling and legal services, will increase dramatically, notably when Government and Creditor financial measures currently in place are wound back over the coming months. We also foresee that the cohort of clients accessing our services will expand to include many people whom have never been required to access our services before.

There is evidence from the human services sector that, on the whole, there is a decline in available workforce to meet demand. This is amplified by our regional, rural and remote location and the multi-disciplinary nature of our programs and service delivery. We have traditionally found it difficult to secure appropriately qualified employees, often requiring requirement from outside our catchment area which comes with

¹ ACOSS (21 March 2020), https://www.acoss.org.au/media_release/acoss-coss-network-asu-covid-19-community-sector-rescue-package-recommendations/, media release.




its own unique challenges. With this in mind, in 2015 Mallee Family Care created its own Organisational Workforce Strategy to meet the specific needs of our organisation and allow us to form our own partnerships with the sector and stakeholders, such as our local tertiary institutions.

We need Government investment to increase our ability to capacity build and expand our local workforce pool. The Federal Higher Education Support Amendment (Job-Ready Graduates and Supporting Regional and Remote Students) Bill 2020 ('the Bill') currently before the Senate further jeopardises our workforce and Mallee Family Care does not support this legislation and we strongly urge the Victorian Government to advocate to their federal counterparts against these amendments.

Mallee Family Care does not believe in the underlying premise of the Bill and suggests that the Federal Government holds a simplistic understanding of the motivations people have for pursuing professional careers. Furthermore, it does not take account of the extensive disruptions driven by COVID-19 or a predicted change in workforce trends. The legislation also risks introducing a range of perverse incentives for tertiary institutes to direct students into certain courses. Further, it will see negative outcomes for students and particularly, regional, rural and remote Victorians and the organisations that serve them.

The Social and Community Services (SACS) Pay Equity Special Account

In addition to the need for further funding to assist directly with workforce, Community Service Organisations need certainty in the continuation of the Governments contribution to the Social and Community Services (SACS) Pay Equity Special Account.



The Social and Community Services (SACS) Pay Equity Special Account expires on 30 June 2021 and we are yet to hear whether funding will be extended.

Since 2012, the Victorian Government has delivered additional funding, via the SACS Pay Equity Special Account, to certain organisations whose grant program commenced prior to 2012, such as Mallee Family Care. This was to meet the higher wage costs that that were to be incurred as a result of a 2012 Fair Work Commission Equal Remuneration Order (ERO) which would have seen wages increase by up to 45% over 10 years. Most Governments across Australia, including the Victorian Government, provided additional funding to ensure that Community Service Organisations could pay fair wages and maintain essential services to our communities.

If the base grant for our programs currently receiving ERO supplementation does not rise post June 2021, to incorporate the ERO payments, or the supplementation is not continued, our organisation would see a loss of \$583,483.63 in the 2021/22 financial year. This is a significant loss which would result in:

- Funding cuts to our services, which include approximately 60 programs that vulnerable people in our community are reliant upon;
- A negative effect on the financial status, workforce and the capacity of our organisation to deliver the much needed services - we estimate the a loss of 8-9 EFT;
- A loss of gender equity from job cuts in a sector that is predominately female workforce, Mallee Family Care has a 99% female workforce; and
- The sector as a whole will face increased difficulty in attracting and retaining staff, which is already one of

the most challenging aspects for our organisation that services regional, rural and remote areas.

Recommendation 2


We urge the Victorian Government to invest in increasing our ability to capacity build and expand our local workforce pool by:

- 1. Increasing our program funding to allow for additional staff to meet the current, and predicted, demand;*
- 2. Advocating to their federal counterparts against the Federal Higher Education Support Amendment (Job-Ready Graduates and Supporting Regional and Remote Students) Bill 2020; and*
- 3. Continuing the ERO supplementation; or*
- 4. Permanently increasing the base rate of grants where ERO supplementation currently applies so as to incorporate the current rate of ERO supplementation.*

In a time which will see a rising demand for our services we hold a very real concern for our ability to attract and retain a workforce that will enable us to meet the demand. At present we face a convergence of a number of issues, namely existing limitations in workforce, higher education reforms and funding cuts, that will see dire consequences on our ability to deliver our services and capacity build. If this issue is not resolved it will mean hard decisions about the future of our programs and long term consequences for our community.

Ensuring Victorians live above the poverty line

In this time of crisis and recession, more Victorians than ever have become reliant on income support payments and are gaining an understanding of the realities that people face on a daily basis of being able to afford basic essentials and



maintain a roof over their head. And this has all been with the addition of the Coronavirus Supplement, many couldn't fathom what life would be like if it reverted to \$40 per day.


In the Mildura Local Government Area alone we now have approximately 1 in 9 people of eligible age for JobSeeker in receipt of the payment.² We have seen an increase of 1,536 people accessing JobSeeker payments between March and August this year. There was a mere increase of 112 people from December 2019 to March 2020. The effects of Coronavirus on employment are unequivocal.

It is more important now than ever to ensure we have a robust safety net for all Australians. The unemployment rates today highlight the devastation wreaked on people's livelihoods. It will take time to rebuild our economy and we need adequate support for each and every Australian that needs it.

The Coronavirus Supplement, which initially doubled the previous JobSeeker payment rate, had meant people could breathe a little easier about their other expenses and for the first time in a long time, many were able to catch up on bills or buy essentials like fresh fruit and vegetables. The increased rate of JobSeeker transformed people's lives. This was highlighted by a recent survey undertaken by Australian Council of Social Services that found that before the introduction of the Coronavirus Supplement, there were very high rates of financial and personal distress among people on JobSeeker Payment, Youth Allowance, and other payments:

- 66% of people had less than \$14 a day to live on, after paying their rent or mortgage;

² Based upon data contained in the JobSeeker Payment and Youth Allowance recipients – monthly profile for August 2020 and the 2016 Census data for population of working age in Mildura LGA.


- 
- 75% of people said they skipped meals because of a lack of funds, with 20% of people saying they were skipping at least 1 meal per day; and
 - 70% of people were struggling with medical costs, including the costs of medicines and seeing a dentist, as well as specialist services like physiotherapy.

After the introduction of the initial Coronavirus Supplement amount, there were significant declines in the number of people reporting hardship:

- The number of people skipping meals because of a lack of funds had dropped by over half, to 33%;
- People's ability to purchase nutritious food has dramatically increased, with 93% reporting that they can afford more fresh fruit and vegetables, and 86% reporting that they can afford more meat;
- The number of people reporting that they were struggling with medical costs had dropped by over 40%, with only two in five people now reporting that they were experiencing difficulties paying for medicines and health services; and
- 94% reported that the end of the additional payment would have either a significant or severe impact on their finances.

These findings are consistent with reports from our clients.

Our financial counselling team have advised their clients were reporting that they were able to afford day to day living expenses such as proper food, medications, clothing and utility bills. Our clients were able to do small jobs that they have been putting off such as car repairs, buying new tyres or replacing white goods that are well past their use by date and are inefficient. Some clients were trying to put a little of the Coronavirus Supplement away for when it comes



to an end. The initial Coronavirus Supplement helped the self-esteem and mental health of those living in severe poverty.

*Kelly's Story*³

Kelly has a complex history of mental illness, trauma and substance abuse which has seen her seek the assistance of our mental health service for many years. The initial Coronavirus Supplement meant that for the first time in her life she was able to take control of her finances. This enabled her to achieve one of her long term goals, purchasing her first car, which in turn afforded her a sense of empowerment and ownership which she had never experienced before. Kelly reported a marked improvement in her self-confidence and self-worth which had an incredible flow on effect to the frequency of her recreational drug use which decreased dramatically. Kelly reported feeling that she had control of her life, something she never thought possible. The initial Coronavirus Supplement had such a profoundly positive impact on her life that she recently informed our service that after years of assistance, she no longer requires our help.

The recent decrease in Coronavirus Supplement has jeopardised the positive outcomes for our clients noted above. We must never return to income support payments of \$40 a day. Given the precarious economic environment, it is now more important than ever that we have a robust safety net for the millions of Australians affected. We have an opportunity now to transition from crisis measures, such as the Coronavirus supplement, to enduring reforms to deliver a system that assists people to lead happy, healthy and productive lives.

³ The name of our client has been changed for confidentiality purposes.

Recommendation 3

The Victorian Government must advocate to their Federal counterparts to increase the base rate of JobSeeker.

A safe and secure home

Increase social housing supply

The COVID-19 pandemic has highlighted the acute vulnerability that comes with experiencing, or being at risk of, homelessness. Housing is the frontline defence against Coronavirus and Government policies aimed at fighting the spread of the virus, such as proper sanitation and social distancing, are predicated on the assumption that everyone has a home which would enable adherence. Safe and secure housing is a privilege for many.

The Victorian Government has shown a willingness to act quickly and to support vulnerable people by providing interim investment in housing measures, which we commend them for, but now is the time to focus on ongoing permanent solutions.

As of June 2020, Mallee alone had a deficit of 883 social housing properties.⁴ This means there were at least 883 vulnerable people, many with families, who were awaiting a home. We foresee that number will only rise given the recession we find ourselves in.

In addition, the findings of Anglicare's April 2020 Rental Affordability Snapshot highlighted the dire situation for the vast majority of our clients; there were only 9 properties nationwide that were affordable for those in receipt of Jobseeker payment and, with the inclusion of the Coronavirus Supplement, a mere 1.5% of national rental listings were affordable for singles, the figures

⁴ Victoria Government, 2020, *Housing Register and transfer list June 2020*. Retrieved from <https://www.housing.vic.gov.au/victorian-housing-register>

little better for those single parent families with the highest affordability rate of 3% for those single parent families with a child under 5.

Recommendation 4

The Victorian Government must commit to an immediate and ongoing investment to build enough social housing to end the waitlist.

Ensure adequate cooling in public housing in North West Victoria

Mallee Family Care is deeply concerned about the impending summer, which will bring prolonged periods of extreme heat, and the impact of COVID-19 restrictions on our most vulnerable community members who reside in public housing and who do not have access to adequate cooling systems in their homes.

Research undertaken by Mallee Family Care with the University of Sydney's School of Public Health has found that the absence of adequate cooling systems in Public Housing in Mildura is having a detrimental impact on the resident's physical, mental and social health and wellbeing.

Our research indicates that without adequate cooling systems many public housing residents are left with no choice but to congregate in public spaces or overcrowded homes of family members or friends who are fortunate enough to have adequate cooling systems in order to escape the extreme heat their homes foster.

In a number of months these vulnerable residents will be forced to contravene Government policies aimed at fighting the spread of coronavirus, such social distancing, because their homes, provided

by the Victorian Government, do not enable adherence to these measures and are unfit for habitation.

Recommendation 5

The Victorian Government must urgently install air-conditioning in all public housing in North West Victoria.

Home Stretch campaign

Mallee Family Care has been advocating for the Victorian Government to adopt the Home Stretch Campaign for many years after seeing the detrimental impacts on kids who have had their care terminated simply because of their date of birth, without consideration of the circumstances they find themselves in. Research both nationally and internationally indicates that a high proportion of care leavers end up homeless, in the criminal justice system, unemployed or a new parent within the first year of leaving care and that these detrimental impacts can be significantly reduced when care is extended until the age of 21.

Mallee Family Care commend the Victorian Government on the Home Stretch program, launched in April this year, that will enable 250 young people who are turning 18 this year to choose to stay in care until their 21st birthday. Whilst we commend the Government for tis initiative we urge them to ensure this program becomes a universal policy for all kids leaving care from this point forward.

Recommendation 6

The Victorian Government must extend the Home Stretch program for every child placed in care, now and into the future.



Lessons from Remote and Flexible Learning


At Mallee Family Care we offer a number of programs that aim to support parenting and children's early learning and development. These programs provide us with visibility and insight into vulnerable children and families and since the initial announcement of a move to remote and flexible learning, Mallee Family Care has played an integral role in acting as an intermediary between local schools, the Department and families to ensure our children were supported in their learning.

We understand that the Victorian Government has commissioned three reports, recently released, about the experience of remote and flexible learning in Term 2 for students, teachers and families during the COVID-19 pandemic. Our experience was echoed within these reports and we commend the Victorian Government on the advances made to address the issues raised. We have witnessed in our community the positive results which have stemmed from the changes made.

Cross border communities

We wish to briefly draw the Committee's attention to the disruptive impacts our clients, staff and organisation experienced as a result of our multi-jurisdictional function and location.

Mallee Family Care's primary office is located in Mildura, North West Victoria, which is directly across the river from New South Wales and approximately 100km from the South Australian border. We have service delivery sites and outreach programs in both New South Wales and Victoria and at times have delivered services to clients from South Australia. Our staff and clients work and live across all three jurisdictions. This at times has created significant issues when dealing with differing COVID-19 restrictions and border closures and has had a significant detrimental impact on our



community, which has seen minimal cases of COVID-19 since the pandemic began.

From an organisational perspective, the Covid-19 operational restrictions and border restrictions have been a minefield to navigate with very little, or delayed, guidance provided by relevant funders and Departments. Further, little assistance was gleaned from either the New South Wales or Victorian Cross Border Commissioners.

Attachment 1

