



Victorian
Youth Strategy
Submission – Carers Victoria
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Introduction

Carers Victoria welcomes the opportunity to contribute to the *Victorian Youth Strategy*. The Andrews Labor Government has demonstrated its commitment to working with and supporting carers throughout Victoria, this is further reflected in the Discussion Paper.

Carers Victoria is passionate about supporting people from diverse communities. It was particularly encouraging the Discussion Paper was built around the diverse backgrounds of Victoria's young people. Thank you for recognising young carers as a key cohort. All the diverse communities acknowledged throughout the discussion paper need to also be recognised within the context of being a young carer too. Many young carers from culturally and linguistically diverse communities

tell us the support they are providing to their family is part of their duty and that their family does not feel comfortable with the provision of external services. This provides several additional layers to the role of 'young carer'.

Our submission will build on the acknowledgement in the Discussion Paper that young carers are often hidden and experience a range of challenges. We will suggest responses the Victorian Government can take to ensure better outcomes for young carers.

Recommendations



RECOMMENDATION 1

Department of Education and Training implement a 'Young Carer Action Plan' at every school to ensure all young carers are identified and supported.



RECOMMENDATION 2

All teachers and welfare staff to receive training about the needs and experiences of young carers to ensure young carers are confident that staff understand their role and impacts on their studies.



RECOMMENDATION 3

Develop a campaign to increase awareness of Support for Carers Program amongst school welfare staff and youth services to increase uptake amongst young carers.



RECOMMENDATION 4

Expand the Support for Carers Program so that young carers have access to funding for school essentials, recreational activities, driving lessons etc.



RECOMMENDATION 5

Young carers to be recognised as a priority cohort within initiatives targeting the mental health of young people.



Impact of Caring on Education

A recent study was published highlighting the impacts providing unpaid care can have on a young person's education. The study, *Young Carers and their Engagement with Education: No Space in My Brain to Learn*, was commissioned by Carers Australia and conducted by researchers from the Australian Centre for Child Protection (UniSA) and the School of Primary and Allied Health (Monash University)¹ and underpins this section of our submission.

IMPACT OF BEING A YOUNG CARER ON EDUCATIONAL OUTCOMES

Research from the Australian Institute of Family Studies indicates that young carers are, on average, by year nine, one year behind the education standards of young people who don't have care responsibilities.²

'One third (34 percent) of young carers reported that they were the main carer in their family and twenty-nine percent reported that they did not receive support from anyone else within or outside of their family.'³

This gap in educational outcomes occurs over time due to a range of factors. These can be categorised by impacts on attendance and impacts on health and wellbeing.

Attendance

Twenty-two percent of young carers, were unable to attend school at least once per week due to caring responsibilities.

This equates to about 40 of the 180 school days students usually attended each year. A further 39 percent were unable to attend

¹ Moore, T., Bourke-Taylor, H., Greenland, N., McDougall, S., Bromfield, L., Robinson, L., & Brown, T., (2019). *Young carers and their engagement with education: 'No space in my brain to learn'*. Adelaide, SA: University of South Australia, https://www.carersaustralia.com.au/wp-content/uploads/2020/10/Young-Carers-Report-FINAL_vsmall_compressed1.pdf, accessed 06.11.20.

² Australian Institute of Family Studies, 'The Longitudinal Study of Australian Children Annual Statistical Report 2016', 2017, <https://aifs.gov.au/publications/longitudinal-study-australian-children-annual-statistical-report-2016>, accessed 02.07.2019.

³ Moore, T et al., *Young carers and their engagement with education*, 2019, p. 35.

school once, twice or three times each month due to caring responsibilities, equating to between 10 and 30 school days per year'.⁴

'In relation to 'attendance', studies have demonstrated that many young carers find it difficult to regularly attend school due to the weight of their caring responsibilities, challenges related to transport and a lack of in-home supports that are available to meet cared-for relatives' assistance needs to enable young carers to leave the household'.⁵

Health and Wellbeing

'Many young carers reported...a lack of sleep, ongoing stress and mental health issues which affected their motivation or ability to get up in the morning or to go to school. Those young carers who frequently missed school reported that it was difficult to 'catch-up' on work and to feel part of the school community'.⁶

To address the impacts of being a young carer, better approaches are needed to identify young carers and then to support young carers. Doing this will fulfill the second priority area of the Victorian Carer Strategy: 'Carers are supported in school, study and work environments'.⁷

IDENTIFICATION OF YOUNG CARERS

There are over 62,400 young carers in Victoria.⁸ Whilst 87% of young carers are aged 15-24⁸, there are still at least nearly 8,000 young carers aged under 15⁸. Combined, three per cent of all people under 25 are young carers⁸. That is, on average, a young carer in every classroom.

Young carers are 'hidden' due to a range of factors. They may not realise the unpaid support they are providing to a family member or friend constitutes a caring role. Young carers may be providing this support from a sense of obligation, as well as doing so proudly, pleased to be able to assist.

'Early identification appears to be crucial as the longer a child or young person is caring, the more significant the impacts on their health and wellbeing become'.⁹

'Better and earlier identification of young carers in schools and the provision of in-school support might reduce some of the educational and psychosocial impacts of care and improve educational engagement'.¹⁰

After overcoming the initial hurdle of self-identifying or being identified as a young carer, young carers experience uncertainty in the reaction they will receive.

'Young carers identified by school and welfare staff have had mixed responses. Some studies have suggested that young carers have been dis-believed, misunderstood or silenced¹¹ while others have presented the appreciation that young carers assign to the support that they have received by staff who are empathetic, supportive and respectful and schools that have been flexible in their expectations about assessment, creative in the ways that curriculum is delivered and responsive to the child or young person's physical, emotional and social needs'.¹²

4 Moore, T et al., *Young carers and their engagement with education*, 2019, p. 4.

5 Moore, T et al., *Young carers and their engagement with education*, 2019, p. 19.

6 Moore, T et al., *Young carers and their engagement with education*, 2019, p. 4.

7 State of Victoria, Department of Health and Human Services, *Recognising and supporting Victoria's carers: Victorian carer strategy 2018-22*, 2018, p. 25

8 Australian Bureau of Statistics, 'Survey of Disability, Ageing and Carers: Victoria', Table 29.1, 2018.

9 Moore, T et al., *Young carers and their engagement with education*, 2019, p. 78.

10 Moore, T et al., *Young carers and their engagement with education*, 2019, p. 7.

11 Cree 2003, Eley 2004, Martin 2006, Bolas, Wersch et al. 2007, Earley, Cushway et al. 2007, Moore and McArthur 2007 in Moore, T et al., *Young carers and their engagement with education*, 2019 p. 21.

12 Moore, T et al., *Young carers and their engagement with education*, 2019, p. 21.

Young carers should be able to have certainty to know that their status as a young carer will be believed and supported, wherever they attend school.

Carers Victoria recommends that Department of Education and Training implement a 'Young Carer Action Plan' at every school to support the identification and assistance needed for young carers in their education. This would be a powerful mechanism in acknowledging the barriers young carers can face in achieving their potential at school. Engagement would be fostered throughout the school community including school leadership, administration staff, teachers and pupils to find place-based solutions to those barriers identified by young carers at the school.

A 'top-down' approach here will ensure young carers don't feel they have to identify as a carer if they don't want to but it provides teachers and other school staff with an understanding of how to support them in case they come late to school, are disengaged (temporarily or longer term) or experiencing significant distress.

To complement this approach all teachers and welfare staff will need to receive training about the needs and experiences of young carers to ensure everyone is on the same page.

The government's existing Mental Health Practitioners in Schools initiative can further strengthen support for young carers in schools. Mental Health practitioners can actively support young carers, helping them to identify their needs and assistance required.

RECOMMENDATION 1

Department of Education and Training implement a 'Young Carer Action Plan' at every school to ensure all young carers are identified and supported.

RECOMMENDATION 2

All teachers and welfare staff to receive training about the needs and experiences of young carers to ensure young carers are confident that staff understand their role and impacts on their studies.

ADDITIONAL SUPPORTS NEEDED FOR YOUNG CARERS

Whilst it is crucial that young carers are identified and supported in school settings, young carers need support across all areas of their life. This is particularly true for young carers who are in primary carer roles (that is, the main carer) as well as young carers who experience poverty.

'For many young carers, financial support may assist them to overcome some of the barriers to them attending, achieving and participating in education by helping them to pay for educational courses, materials and extra-curricular activities. However, the analysis confirms previous findings that suggest that ultimately young carers' educational engagement may only be improved if families are provided with resources to minimise young people's caring loads, while providing supports that reduce the physical, emotional, social and educational impacts of caring.'¹³

'Additional in-home support is required for those young carers who are caring for more than 10 hours a week to both improve their educational engagement and wellbeing.'¹³

¹³ Moore, T et al., *Young carers and their engagement with education*, 2019, p. 7.



Services for young carers

Young carers are especially impacted by the introduction of the Federally funded Carer Gateway. The Carer Gateway is a new centralised intake service which registers carers based on their geographic location and the urgency of their need. It is intended to capture carers at the early stages of care roles.

Previously dedicated funding was used for specific young carer programs to employ specific carer advisors who could develop rapport with young carers and their families. These carer advisors provided 1:1 support including advocacy to the young carer's school and mental health services where recognition of young carers is likely to rely on the young person identifying themselves and the supports they need in a context/circumstance where they feel especially vulnerable. Other areas of support for young carers included, funding for school essentials, recreational activities, driving lessons etc.

The current Carer Gateway Model eliminates this crucial 1:1 support for young carers whose family life by its very nature reduces the potential for parents to be able to provide advocacy for their children as well as set them up for adulthood with the skills and capabilities needed to be full citizens.

Whilst the respite that is available to young carers through the expanded Victorian Support for Carers Program is a fantastic initiative, the program needs to be expanded to include the areas of support mentioned above.

RECOMMENDATION 3

Develop a campaign to increase awareness of Support for Carers Program amongst school welfare staff and youth services to increase uptake amongst young carers.

RECOMMENDATION 4

Expand the Support for Carers Program so that young carers have access to funding for school essentials, recreational activities, driving lessons etc.

Young carers and COVID 19

Carers NSW completed a literature review of publications relating to carers and COVID 19 from Australia, the United Kingdom, Ireland and the United States of America.¹⁴ The findings indicate that young carers experienced additional challenges with remote learning compared to young people without caring responsibilities. Young carers experienced more pressure in their caring role as they were constantly at home.¹⁵ They were required to provide additional assistance to the person receiving care and found it difficult to have an environment conducive to study or work.¹⁵

The Youth Strategy Discussion Paper highlights mental illness experienced by young people:

‘1 in 4 young people in Australia experience a mental illness each year, and young people aged 15 to 24 experience mental illness at higher rates than any other age group.’¹⁶

Across the lifespan, 56 per cent of carers are estimated to experience at least moderate depression and 20 per cent severe depression.¹⁷

We conclude that young carers, from their dual experiences of being young as well as their caring role, are particularly at risk of mental illness. This is particularly concerning due to increase rates of mental illness being experienced by young people due to COVID 19.

‘Victorian Agency for Health Information shows a 72 per cent increase compared with last year in the number of serious self-harm and suicidal-ideation presentations in emergency departments for those aged under-18 during the final six weeks of lockdown.’¹⁸

RECOMMENDATION 5

Young carers to be recognised as a priority cohort within initiatives targeting the mental health of young people.

¹⁴ Carers NSW, *COVID 19 and Carers*, July 2020.

¹⁵ Carers NSW, *COVID 19 and Carers*, July 2020, p. 3.

¹⁶ Department of Premier and Cabinet (2020). *What matters to young people in Victoria: Victorian youth strategy discussion paper*. Melbourne, Australia, Victorian Government, p. 18.

¹⁷ Australian Unity Wellbeing Index: *The Wellbeing of Australians – Carer Health and Wellbeing*, Survey 17.1, Report 17.1, 2007, p5.

¹⁸ Victorian Agency for Health Information quoted in *The Age*, ‘Experts warn of deepening mental health crisis as youth bear brunt of COVID-19 lockdown’, 13.11.20, <https://www.theage.com.au/national/victoria/experts-warn-of-deepening-mental-health-crisis-as-youth-bear-brunt-of-covid-19-lockdown-20201113-p56e9d.html>, accessed 16.11.20.



Conclusion

‘Young Victorians need a plan that will help them to be their very best.’¹⁹

We couldn’t agree more and have appreciated the opportunity to contribute to the Victorian Youth Strategy. We commend the government for recognising young carers as an intersecting identity of Victoria’s young people.

Implementation of our recommendations will make it easier to identify and support young carers at school and more broadly in their caring role as well as improving their mental health.

¹⁹ Department of Premier and Cabinet (2020), p. 7.

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by Carers Victoria's Sector Leadership Team

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Carers Victoria acknowledges the
traditional owners of this land and pays
respect to elders both past and present.