

# Victorian Government Response

## LEGISLATIVE COUNCIL LEGAL AND SOCIAL ISSUES COMMITTEE INQUIRY INTO CHILDREN AFFECTED BY PARENTAL INCARCERATION

The Victorian Government welcomes the Report and recommendations of the Committee's Inquiry into children affected by parental incarceration (the Inquiry).

The Government thanks the Committee for its review and the many positive recommendations that are aimed at improving the social, emotional and health impacts of parental incarceration on affected children and families. Firstly, the Government would like to acknowledge the overrepresentation of First Nations people in custody and the importance of family connection in addressing overrepresentation.

Victoria's custodial system plays an essential role in the Victorian criminal justice system. It works to keep Victorians safe by rehabilitating people in custody and supporting their transition back into the community at the end of their sentence or period of remand. The Victorian Government recognises the importance of family connections in promoting these objectives.

The Government is already undertaking actions that address several of the Inquiry's recommendations, including those outlined in the Committee's separate Inquiry into Victoria's Criminal Justice System. These include a commitment to introduce legislation into Parliament this year to make Victoria's bail laws fairer and safer for groups experiencing vulnerability, while maintaining an appropriate approach to those accused of serious offending or who pose a risk to community safety.

The Government has invested more than \$140 million over the last four years in services and programs designed to improve employment pathways for men and women in prison, strengthen family relationships and reunification, boost transitional support and improve access to housing for people leaving the corrections system – particularly those at risk of homelessness.

The Government has also taken steps to ensure women in prison have better access to primary health services that are tailored to meet their needs and improve health outcomes. From 1 July 2023, public health providers commenced delivery of primary healthcare at the Dame Phyllis Frost Centre and Tarrengower prison, offering people in custody at these two locations greater support from a network of community and specialist providers. As of 1 July 2023, the new primary health providers are also providing primary health services to children living with their mothers or primary carers in prison.

In addition to facilitating in person visits and video visits, phone contact, letters, emails, and reintegration leave permits, Corrections Victoria provides a wide range of programs and services aimed at increasing family engagement opportunities for people in prison. These include the school holiday visits programs, family therapy, family visits programs, Family Engagement Officers in women's prisons, life skills and parenting programs. Over recent years, parenting and family engagement initiatives have expanded.



The 2022-23 State Budget included funding of more than \$3 million over four years to roll out the family visits program to men's prisons. This program, which is already delivered in the women's prisons, provides structured and supported visits to people in prison to repair relationships and assist with reunification of family units. The 2023-24 State Budget provided \$1.1 million to continue Family Engagement Services, which provide family engagement workers, family engagement support and family therapy in women's prisons. Funding was also provided for the Women's Justice Diversion Program, which diverts women into housing. Other funded initiatives include enhanced mental health services, case management, and financial and legal services.

In addition, the Living with Mum program enables women in prison to have their child (up to 5 years old) reside with them in designated cottage style units. This program has been in place since the 1980s and is designed around what is in the best interest of the child or children. The program has evolved over this time, and a range of supports are provided through this program including Parenting Support Workers, the Maternal and Child Health Nurse, Save the Children playgroup and Parenting Support Workers.

The Victorian Government is also transforming the child and family system to create a diverse range of flexible, evidence-informed earlier intervention supports for families that match their needs, experiences, stage of life and risk profile. The government has more than tripled Family Services funding from \$120 million per annum in 2012-13 to more than \$398 million per annum in 2023-24.

The 2023-24 State Budget provides \$11.2 million to ensure that over 3,300 families receive help when they need it through the continuation of the Early Help Family Services trial.

A further \$49.5 million over four years has provided to expand early intervention supports for Aboriginal children and families. By 2025-26, this investment will provide for the delivery of 144 additional Koori Supported Playgroups and for 330 Aboriginal families each year to receive Aboriginal led rapid engagement Family Services aimed at diverting families from the child protection system. An additional 85 Aboriginal families will receive the Aboriginal Family Preservation and Reunification Response each year by 2026-27.

This builds on an investment of over \$500 million in Family Services in the prior three State Budgets to address growing demand for family services and test, trial and expand service models such as Early Help Family Services; Family Preservation and Reunification Response; Putting Families First; Family Service disability programs; and Family Group Conferencing.

The Government acknowledges that more work must still be done to further strengthen Victoria's criminal justice system. Work will be considered in the context of other major reforms and inquiries, including the Cultural Review of the Adult Custodial Corrections System. Government will continue to be guided in its work through partnership with key stakeholders including the Aboriginal Justice Caucus, Yoorrook Justice Commission and Treaty processes.