

Victorian Elder Abuse Strategic Alliance (VEASA):

Victorian State Budget Submission 2025/26

November 2024

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2 About VEASA

The Victorian Elder Abuse Strategic Alliance (VEASA) is a coalition of key organisations working at the forefront of family violence and elder abuse in Victoria. Collectively, VEASA is made up of peak bodies, research institutions, legal professionals, and social workers. The mission of VEASA is to lead the development of elder abuse policy to prevent and respond to elder abuse as a pervasive and prevalent form of family violence, within Victoria. VEASA is coordinated and led by the Council on the Ageing (COTA) Victoria and Seniors Rights Victoria (SRV).

3 About this submission

This submission, informed by the work of VEASA, emphasises the need for a more nuanced, inclusive, and well-resourced approach to elder abuse with the 2025-26 Victorian State Budget. It advocates for a comprehensive strategy that expands the capacity of the state's elder abuse response, strengthens preventative measures, and ensures that elder abuse is fully recognised and effectively addressed within existing frameworks.

4 Endorsing members

VEASA's membership includes statutory bodies and other entities that cannot formally endorse government submissions; however, their input and guidance have been instrumental in shaping this submission.



SAFE + EQUAL

5 Executive summary

The 2025-26 Victorian State Budget presents an opportunity to address a clear and urgent need to support elder abuse victim-survivors and the services that assist them. With domestic elder abuse rates surpassing those of comparable countries alongside a rapidly ageing population, Victoria faces an imminent need to address this harm.

Our recommendations align closely with the Victorian Government's *Strong Foundations: Building on Victoria's work to end family violence*. Specifically, our recommendations fall under three priority areas: reducing family and sexual violence, strengthening support for victim survivors, and enhancing impact measurement.

To address the immediate needs of at-risk older Victorians and establish a foundation for long-term prevention and support, VEASA proposes the following three recommendations:

Recommendation 1: Increase recurrent funding for specialist elder abuse services to better support those at risk of, or experiencing, elder abuse. This will ensure they have access to comprehensive legal and non-legal support. This should:

- Cover frontline services and legal support to ensure that older people have access to support services that support their safety.
- Strengthen services supporting older Culturally and Linguistically Diverse (CALD), First Nation, LGBTQIA+, and disadvantaged communities; including case management, therapeutic interventions, and flexible support packages for victim-survivors.

Recommendation 2: Provide new funding for an evidence-based, state-wide approach to elder abuse prevention, including the creation of new elder abuse prevention programs and the expansion of existing efforts.

- Invest in the completion of the Primary Prevention of Elder Abuse Framework, using the input provided by participating organisations, and engagement with the sector.
- Commission the development, as outlined in the Family Violence Reform Rolling Action Plan 2020-2023, of the Victorian Elder Abuse Statement.
- Fund the expansion of existing prevention programs that target the underlying drivers of elder abuse, ensuring efforts are focussed on stopping abuse before it occurs.

Recommendation 3: Invest in better data capture on elder abuse within family violence systems, including perpetrator information and underlying issues driving elder abuse; to inform research, prevention, and targeted interventions. This should:

- Seek to enhance agency capability to collect and store elder abuse data through staff resourcing, skills training, cultural awareness education, and by providing a standardised framework on elder abuse data collection to ensure consistency.
- Centralise data repositories to facilitate real-time information-sharing, enable interagency collaboration, model data to monitor trends, and plan services. It would also mandate the standardisation of collected data, improving consistency.

- Include investment in research analysing elder abuse drivers and the impact of services delivered by elder abuse mitigation and response services. This will ensure decisions are based on a robust and up-to-date evidence base.

6 Context

6.1 An overview of elder abuse in Victoria

Elder abuse is defined by the World Health Organisation as “a single or repeated act or lack of appropriate action, occurring within any relationship where there is an expectation of trust which causes harm or distress to an older person”¹. It can take on many forms including financial, emotional, psychological, physical, social, and sexual abuse, and is typically committed by an adult child but can also involve other family members or individuals in family-like relationships².

Case study example – Rue and Adam

Rue, an older woman, began living with her youngest son, Adam, after he moved back in following a breakup. Initially, Adam took over her finances to assist with daily tasks. However, over time, he started imposing restrictions, such as preventing her from sending money to her family in Vietnam. He controlled her finances, paying her bills and restricting her to a small allowance.

Rue grew concerned when she realised she didn’t have enough money to attend a social event at her senior citizen’s club. After talking with friends, she began to suspect that Adam was taking most of her pension. When Rue confronted him, Adam reacted angrily and began isolating her by refusing to take her to the social club, leaving her feeling lonely and cut off from her social and support network.

The most detailed and rigorous study of elder abuse prevalence in Australia, published in December 2021, found that 14.8%, or 1 in 5 of those aged 65 and over had experienced at least one recognised form of elder abuse over the previous 12 months. This translates into approximately 160,000 older Victorians experiencing elder abuse every year³.

¹ World Health Organization. (2021, June 15). Abuse of older people. Retrieved: Nov 2024 <https://www.who.int/news-room/fact-sheets/detail/abuse-of-older-people>

² ³ Qu, L., Kaspiew, R., Carson, R., Roopani, D., De Maio, J., Harvey, J., Horsfall, B. (2021). National Elder Abuse Prevalence Study: Final Report. (Research Report). Melbourne: Australian Institute of Family Studies. Retrieved: Oct 2024 <https://aifs.gov.au/research/research-reports/national-elder-abuse-prevalence-study-final-report>

Alarmingly, elder abuse prevalence in Australia exceeds that of comparable countries like Canada (10%)⁴, the United States (9.5%)⁵, and England and Wales (14%)⁶. This is deeply concerning due to its severe impacts on victims, including a higher mortality risk, poorer quality of life, increased depression, anxiety, fear, and suicide⁷.

The prevalence of elder abuse is often linked to risk factors, such as poor mental health, substance abuse, and financial insecurity, however the key driver of elder abuse is ageism—the systemic discrimination and negative attitudes toward older people. Ageism perpetuates the notion that ageing is synonymous with decline, loss, and vulnerability, fostering disrespect and neglect toward older people.

Addressing risk factors can help reduce elder abuse. However, without addressing deeply rooted ageist attitudes in Victoria, elder abuse is likely to persist.

6.2 *We are seeing an increased demand for elder abuse services*

Awareness of elder abuse has grown significantly in recent years, leading to a surge in demand for support service providers. Projections indicate that a quarter of Victoria's population will be aged 65+ by 2030, highlighting the urgent need for action to meet current and future needs. However, specialist elder abuse services are struggling to keep pace with demand due to insufficient capacity and funding.

The Crime Statistics Agency reported a 38% increase in yearly elder abuse cases in the justice system over the past five years, compared to 12.7% across all age groups⁸. Notably, in the context of elder abuse, victim-survivors often avoid the justice system, suggesting that this reported increase may underrepresent the true scale of its prevalence.

Similarly, SRV, the state's only state-wide community legal centre dedicated to older people and elder abuse saw calls more than double from 2022/23 to 2023/24, following a 45% increase from the previous year⁹. Unfortunately, funding cuts have forced SRV to reduce its services, limiting assistance to older people and turning away calls from concerned third parties. In turn, SRV experienced a 30% drop in the volume of outbound contacts in 2023/24.

These capacity constraints particularly affect vulnerable group, including First Nations, CALD,

⁴ Government of Canada, Department of Justice. (2021). Crime and abuse against seniors: A review of the research literature with special reference to the Canadian situation. Retrieved: Oct 2024
<https://www.justice.gc.ca/eng/rp-pr/cj-ip/fv-vf/crim/index.html>

⁵ Patel K, Bunachita S, Chiu H, Suresh P, Patel UK. (2021). Elder Abuse: A Comprehensive Overview and Physician-Associated Challenges. National Library of Medicine. Retrieved: Oct 2024
<https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC8110289/>

⁶ Office for National Statistics. (2018). Domestic abuse: findings from the Crime Survey for England and Wales. [xli]. Office for National Statistics. Retrieved: Oct 2024

⁷ Yunus RM, Hairi NN, Choo WY (2019). Consequences of Elder Abuse and Neglect: A Systematic Review of Observational Studies. Trauma Violence Abuse. Retrieved: Nov 2024

⁸ Crime Statistics Agency, "Family Violence Dashboard," Crime Statistics Agency, Retrieved: Nov 2024, <https://www.crimestatistics.vic.gov.au/family-violence-data/family-violence-dashboard>.

⁹ COTA Victoria and Seniors Rights Victoria. (2023). COTA Victoria and Seniors Rights Victoria Annual Report 2022-2023. [PDF]. Retrieved: Nov 2024 <https://cotavic.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2023/04/COTA-Victoria-and-Seniors-Rights-Victoria-Annual-Report-2022-2023.pdf>

and LGBTIQA+ communities, where seeking help from mainstream services is already lower due to systemic barriers¹⁰. Many older people in these communities rely on trusted third parties to facilitate support but are often left without resources when services cannot meet demand.

6.3 *We have incomplete data on elder abuse*

The lack of comprehensive data on elder abuse limits the state's ability to develop effective policies and interventions. Elder abuse is excluded from key systems like the Family Violence Information Sharing Scheme (FVISS), creating gaps in data collection and information sharing. This exclusion hinders coordination among elder abuse services and family violence systems.

Uncertainty among practitioners about how to identify and address elder abuse further exacerbates the issue. Health and community service providers are hesitant to screen for elder abuse without clear guidelines, leading to inconsistent data collection. The National Ageing Research Institute has highlighted that elder abuse data is not collected with adequate consistency across services, stating that “In [their] consultations with services that respond to elder abuse, respondents reported that data relating to incidences of elder abuse are not collected with adequate consistency”¹¹. This poses a significant risk of cases falling through the cracks.

Furthermore, a lack of data reduces our understanding of elder abuse trends, making it harder to identify at-risk groups, and service evaluation and improvement is likely to remain a challenge.

7 Opportunities to address key challenges

7.1 *Access to support*

Although awareness of elder abuse has increased, this heightened visibility has led to a corresponding increase in older people seeking support, placing a strain on under-resourced services.

Specialist services now focus only on the most severe cases of elder abuse, leaving many older Victorians without essential support, and while elder abuse tends to occur within the family, family violence services often focus on intimate partner violence which has different relationships dynamics. Better Place Australia, a family violence organisation with a specialist elder abuse prevention service, has highlighted that the relationship dynamics of intimate partner violence are inherently different to those of elder abuse, and hence such services are

¹¹ National Ageing Research Institute. (2024). *Submission to the Inquiry into capturing data on family violence perpetrators in Victoria*. Victorian Legislative Assembly's Legal and Social Issues Committee. Retrieved: Nov 2024 www.nari.net.au/Handlers/Download.ashx?IDMF=9cbfa36b-1af8-4224-bd80-6cf5f56a1cf5

less effective for addressing elder abuse.¹²

Similarly, Djirra—who are not a specialised elder abuse organisation but play a vital role in delivering family violence services within the Aboriginal community—reported a 33% increase in service demand in 2023, followed by a further 22% rise in intakes in the first quarter of 2024 alone.¹³ The growing reliance on organisations that are not set up to respond to and support victim-survivors of elder abuse indicates the current market gap in support services for this growing population.

It is also worth noting, that while organisations like Better Place Australia, SRV and Djirra report increasing demand, they have not seen a corresponding funding increase.

To address these challenges, culturally appropriate and community-led services must be expanded to support older people from diverse backgrounds. These services can better meet the unique needs of CALD, First Nations, and LGBTQIA+ communities by providing tailored support and case management.

Recommendation 1

Increase recurrent funding for specialist elder abuse services to better support those at risk of, or experiencing, elder abuse. This will ensure they have access to comprehensive legal and non-legal support. This should:

- Cover both frontline services and legal support to ensure that older people can access the help they need to stay safe.
- Strengthen services supporting older Culturally and Linguistically Diverse (CALD), First Nation, LGBTQIA+, and disadvantaged communities; including case management, therapeutic interventions, and flexible support packages for victim-survivors.

7.2 Preventing elder abuse through primary prevention

Ageism is the primary driver of elder abuse, and addressing it is critical to meaningful prevention. This is due to the negative attitudes held toward ageing and the harmful stereotypes of decline, loss, and vulnerability that it reinforces.

Since the release of the Royal Commission into Family Violence's final report, the Victorian Government has made substantial efforts to develop and implement family violence prevention measures, while acknowledging the importance of similar actions for elder abuse. However, despite these acknowledgments and several related commitments, follow-up on elder abuse prevention has been limited compared to that of family violence more broadly.

¹² Paul, M. (2023, July 10). Mary-Lou says an elder abuse service saved her from her son — now the Victorian trial's ending. [ABC News]. Retrieved: Nov 2024 <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2023-07-10/victorian-elder-abuse-government-funding-cut/102574702>

¹³ Djirra. (2023, November 23). *Victorian Government fails on Aboriginal women's and children's safety*. Retrieved: Nov 2024 <https://djirra.org.au/victorian-government-fails-on-aboriginal-womens-and-childrens-safety/>

An example is the *Primary Prevention of Elder Abuse Framework*, which had been in development for several years with input and advice of over 30 organisations across various sectors and reference groups. This process exemplified effective cross-sector collaboration led by government on a framework with clear practical value in providing organisations and government with clear guidelines in addressing ageism and preventing elder abuse. Despite multiple drafts, the work has now stalled.

Further, the *Family Violence Reform Rolling Action Plan 2020-2023* called for the development and release of a *Victorian Elder Abuse Statement*. Like the *Victorian Housing Statement*, such a statement would present a broad strategy to address elder abuse as a pressing policy issue and would require and prompt research into the drivers of elder abuse, as well as collaboration with the sector. However, this commitment was never realised.

Compared to the family violence sector, there are relatively few programs that address the root causes of elder abuse. Expanding funding for these programs—both within existing organisations and across the sector—would strengthen proven prevention strategies. Notable examples include SRV’s Planning Ahead program, the Southern Melbourne Elder Abuse Prevention Network’s Framing Age, and Respect Victoria’s role as Victoria’s dedicated prevention agency. Additionally, evaluating the Elder Abuse Prevention Networks would help enhance their effectiveness and strengthen their role.

Recommendation 2

Provide new funding for an evidence-based, state-wide approach to elder abuse prevention, including the creation of new elder abuse prevention programs and expansion of existing efforts.

- Invest in the completion of the Primary Prevention of Elder Abuse Framework, using the input provided by participating organisations, and engagement with the sector.
- Commission the development, as outlined in the *Family Violence Reform Rolling Action Plan 2020-2023*, of the *Victorian Elder Abuse Statement*.
- Fund the expansion of existing prevention programs that target the underlying drivers of elder abuse, ensuring efforts are focussed on stopping abuse before it occurs.

7.3 *Improving data collection and research*

Compared to other forms of family violence, there is scarce research and data on elder abuse. This lack of data slows policy and strategy development, while inhibiting the creation of targeted intervention programs. According to Safe and Equal, the peak body for family violence prevention, how data is “captured, used and analysed is critical to keeping victim survivors of family violence safe”. Without this information, it becomes difficult to understand trends, identify at-risk populations, or measure the effectiveness of existing services and interventions.

Despite these challenges, the infrastructure necessary to support elder abuse research and data collection is already partially in place within Victoria’s broader family violence sector. By leveraging the existing frameworks and systems used for family violence data collection, Victoria can fill these gaps and develop more robust elder abuse prevention and early

intervention strategies.

This approach will depend on engaging Tier 3 and 4 organisations within the family violence system, as outlined in the Family Violence Data Collection Framework. These include organisations that work with older people who may be victim-survivors of elder abuse but are not necessarily family violence service organisations. For example, this could include health and aged care, banking, and other community services, as well as programs like the Aged Care Volunteer Visiting Scheme and similar initiatives.

With better data, the state could move beyond crisis-driven responses and focus more on prevention and early intervention, reducing long-term funding needs by addressing abuse before it escalates. By ensuring that perpetrator information and the underlying issues driving elder abuse are systematically captured, Victoria could target its interventions and resources more effectively.

Recommendation 3

Invest in better data capture and infrastructure on elder abuse within family violence systems, including perpetrator information and underlying issues driving the abuse, to inform research, prevention, and targeted interventions. This should:

- Enhance agencies' capabilities to collect and store elder abuse data through sufficient resourcing, skills training, cultural awareness education, and by providing a standardise framework on elder abuse data collection to ensure consistency.
- Centralise data repositories to facilitate real-time information-sharing, enable collaborations, model data to monitor trends, and plan services. It would also mandate the standardisation of collected data, improving consistency across the state.
- Invest in research to analyse elder abuse data, investigate drivers, and evaluate the impact of services delivered by providers and associated agencies. This will ensure decisions are based on a robust and up-to-date evidence base.

8 Conclusion

Through these investments, the Victorian Government can foster a more coordinated and effective response to elder abuse. This includes addressing the unique needs of diverse communities, facilitating information sharing among service providers, developing a more comprehensive service model, and strengthening data collection frameworks. These initiatives will better equip the sector to ultimately build a safer future for all Victorians.