



Submission to the Victorian State Budget 2017-2018

December 2016

About National Seniors Australia

National Seniors Australia is a not-for-profit organisation that gives voice to issues that affect Australians aged 50 years and over. It is the largest membership organisation of its type in Australia with around 200,000 members and is the fourth largest in the world.

We give our members a voice – we listen and represent our members' views to governments, business and the community on the issues of concern to the over 50s.

We keep our members informed – by providing news and information to our members through our Australia-wide branch network, comprehensive website, forums and meetings, bi-monthly lifestyle magazine and weekly e-newsletter.

We provide a world of opportunity – we offer members the chance to use their expertise, skills and life experience to make a difference by volunteering and making a difference to the lives of others.

We help our members save – we offer member rewards with discounts from thousands of businesses across Australia. We also offer exclusive travel discounts and more tours designed for the over 50s and provide our members with affordable, quality insurance to suit their needs.

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Introduction

National Seniors' Victorian Policy Advisory Group plays a key role in identifying important topics and emerging issues affecting the over-50s throughout the State. It also acts as a conduit between National Seniors members within the State, relevant community organisations and the Victorian government.

Concessions

- 1. Index the utility concession ceilings for gas and electricity to the wholesale prices of gas and electricity as at 1st January 2016, adjusted annually.**
- 2. This is to be adjusted at the beginning of each year by the percentage increase in the wholesale price for gas and electricity.**
- 3. Establish a unit price for water as at 1st January 2016 and the water utility concession ceiling be adjusted by the percentage increase in pricing at the beginning of each year.**
- 4. With the current competition in electricity supply price deals, ensure retailer offers are fixed term and transparent.**

From 1 January 2017, around 330,000 pensioners will lose some or all of their pension. Around 100,000 of those affected will lose their entitlements altogether. Many thousands of these retirees who lose their pension reside in Victoria. There will be a commensurate reduction in Victorian Government expenditure on state based pensioner concessions.

We urge the State Government to maintain the current level of expenditure on concessions. Any potential savings should be redistributed to increase the value of concessions available to Pensioner Concession Card holders and to offer concessions to Commonwealth Seniors Health Card holders. This would ensure those affected by the pension asset test change will have some relief to cope with cost of living pressures.

Health & Wellbeing

- 5. Establish two Special Emergency Centres across Melbourne and one in each regional center. These Special Treatment Centres to be equipped with security sufficient to safely treat violent drug and alcohol affected patients. At the same time to establish and staff Special Paramedic Vehicles that can accept these violent patients and carry them securely to these Special Emergency centres with minimum risk to the paramedics. Speed up the introduction of funds and increase the funds of the Health Service Violence Prevention Fund and review current initiatives to ensure the goals are being met.**
- 6. Continue to pursue and fund initiatives to increase the health and wellbeing of senior Victorians.**
- 7. Increase access to carers' respite within Victoria by improving funding.**

8. Reduce waiting times for publically funded non-life threatening surgery.

National Seniors commends the Victorian government on the previous allocation of the state budget towards a fund for violence prevention in hospitals¹. However, many seniors feel as though not enough is being done or in a timely manner to protect staff and existing patients from patients who are acting violently. The dangers staff and patients are currently being subjected too is inappropriate and unacceptable, particularly when it can be prevented by a better allocation of resources.

In addition, ensuring that older Victorians are active and healthy should be a priority to the government. As such initiatives, like the *Living Longer Living Stronger* initiative, help seniors participate in the community, improve their health and reduce their reliance on the health care system.

Enabling seniors to recover their mobility will assist inclusion and the ability to care for less able partners.

Transport

- 9. Provide funding for Vic Roads to be able to issue a Proof of Age card to older drivers who surrender their driver's license.**
- 10. Ensure sufficient funding of all new high density trains and trams to be developed so they encompass the needs of elderly travelers.**
- 11. All funding for innovative new designs must be tested by elderly passengers and meet their approval before designs are accepted.**
- 12. Implement the orange upholstery for priority seating across all public transport vehicles, new and existing.**
- 13. Provide funding to ensure that existing transit vehicles are modified to include all these design principles.**
- 14. Provide funding for innovative projects aimed at providing better public transport services in outer urban and regional areas.**
- 15. Maintain the current level of funding for the Protective Services Officers program.**
- 16. Implement infrastructure projects that will increase conversion of stations into genuine transit centres from trains to buses and vice versa.**
- 17. Remove the higher V/Line ticket rates applied to Seniors Card holders' long distance trips on weekends.**

¹ Victoria State Government health.vic 2016. 'Health Service Violence Prevention Fund' Accessed on 9 December 2016 <https://www2.health.vic.gov.au/hospitals-and-health-services/planning-infrastructure/health-services-violence-prevention-fund>

18. Provide the same investment in V/Line Gippsland services as that already given or committed to Geelong, Ballarat and Bendigo V/Line services.

A large proportion of senior Victorians retain their drivers license as it is an accepted form of identification. It is most frequently used as a form of identification, as often older Victorians will let their passports lapse. National Seniors believes it would be beneficial for seniors to have better access to proof of age cards. Vic Roads already have the means to issue an identification card but currently decline to do so in some stores.

More and more seniors in Victoria are using public transport systems to get around, due to conditions that cause limited mobility and reduced strength. Often the ailments of older passengers are ignored when new vehicles are being designed, for example seats are removed to increase standing capacity or door handle changes to avoid trapping clothing, have been at the expense of usability for older passengers. Each new transport vehicle must have adequate priority seating that considers the scope of those who would use them. Likewise, safe, secure and accessible hand grips for the full range of passenger heights are needed for all passengers (regardless of their age) who are left to stand in transit vehicles.

Many of the existing transit vehicles are relatively new, and as such would be expected to have service lives of many years. Therefore, we recommend that these vehicles be retrofitted so they meet the design principles for passenger comfort and safety we recommend for new high density vehicles.

Commuters in rural and regional areas are holding onto their drivers' licenses as a result of the lack of adequate public transport available. In some instances, older drivers are no longer fit to drive and forced to surrender their licenses making them quite isolated and at risk of depression. This is compounded by that fact that in many cases, those who no longer drive may not have the ability to do simple tasks such as get the milk and bread. The previous Transport Connections scheme was a commendable attempt to address the commuting problem in regional Victoria and we strongly recommend funding be provided to investigate or implement similar schemes.

When using public transport at night, senior travellers are greatly reassured of their safety and well-being due to the Protective Services Officers program which has been provided for Melbourne's train stations. This is an excellent service and should be maintained at current standards.

Seniors want to use Metro trains but find access to their local station almost impossible unless they take a taxi to and from the station or get dropped off by a friend or relative both ways. Station car parks (where available) overflow by 7.30am and local bus services either do not connect with the station or suffer frequency drop off after the morning peak period. Better coordination between bus and rail services at major Metro stations in outer urban areas could alleviate these issues and make better use of existing network capacity.

Housing

19. Reform rental housing agreements by introducing longevity to contracts.

20. Public and social housing redevelopment to require age friendly accommodation.

21. Fund support services, including advice and if necessary legal support, for older consumers on contractual disputes that retirement village residents have with their village owners.

National Seniors commends the Victorian Government for establishing the Residential Tenancies Act Review and looks forward to the reform proposals due to be introduced in 2017.

Under the current legislation 12-month lease arrangements are the norm. These are unsuitable for older tenants who need security of tenure. Consideration of five to 10 year leases, like those available in Europe, would provide a balance between security for tenants and guaranteed income for landlords.

A long term housing strategy must incorporate increasing supply of low rent accommodation with a build design that accommodates the ageing process and promotes a sense of community, as well as providing security of tenure.

The availability of age friendly accommodation in existing public and social housing stock is likely to be significantly less than demand for that type of dwelling. The gap between supply and demand will only increase in time as the Victorian population ages and fewer people have the means to be home owners. Access to Government funding for any planned redevelopment of public and social housing stock should require a minimum proportion of the stock to be redeveloped to meet the safety and amenity requirements of older Victorians on low incomes.

Finding competent legal advice on lengthy retirement village contracts is very difficult. Often solicitors will merely check that the contract is legal and fail to interpret the risks and liabilities within these lengthy contracts. We firmly believe that dedicated support services are needed that go beyond contract interpretation on a prospective purchase. We suggest funding dedicated support services to provide advice and expertise to residents who find themselves in financial dispute with the residential village owner.

Energy

- 22. Establish a Parliamentary Inquiry into reforming planning regulations to facilitate environmentally friendly building practices. The inquiry would examine the feasibility of installing distributed generation solutions into new and existing buildings (both public and private). Further to this we ask for changes to planning regulations to encourage installation of energy saving devices in all new residential housing.**

Victorian seniors support reducing the current dependence on coal generation and moving towards a greater mix of environmentally friendly energy solutions that can provide affordable electricity well into the future. Energy saving devices in households can provide substantial relief from rising electricity prices and is particularly relevant to seniors living in older, less energy efficient homes. We believe that Victoria can become a national leader in generating environmentally friendly power.

Employment and Skilling

- 23. Fund mature age employment re-training within TAFE.**
- 24. Victorian Government to lead by example to ensure there is no discrimination in employing mature age job seekers into state government service.**
- 25. Remove age restrictions from all state legislation affecting employment including WorkCover.**
- 26. Fund computer literacy programs for elderly Victorians to improve accessibility to government services.**

The Victorian workforce has been and will continue to be, subject to very significant changes in skills requirements. Our State has been the manufacturing heartland of Australia and this has been in steady decline for 20 years starting with the textile, clothing and footwear sector. Many older workers with specialist skills find themselves unwanted.

Mature age job seekers are excluded from the CentreLink/Job Network support systems if they have moderate disposable assets or their partner is employed. Our member experiences suggest there are many older job-seekers in such situations who are unable to access new skills development and re-training because it would be cost prohibitive.

We suggest TAFEs in Victoria provide approved bona fide re-skilling/re-training to mature aged job seekers, funded by the State Government. The costs of this re-skilling/re-training would be paid back by the client as an attachment to their earnings when they achieved employment. In the same way that HECS is re-paid except that on this occasion the State Government is being re-paid.

The Human Rights Commission's national prevalence survey of age discrimination² in the workplace found that over a quarter (27 per cent) of Australians aged 50 years and over indicated that they had experienced some form of age discrimination on at least one occasion in the workplace in the last two years. The highest incidence of age discrimination was observed in the population aged between 55 and 64 years old. Another key finding was that a third (33 per cent) of people who had been discriminated against gave up looking for work as a result of experiencing age discrimination. In the year to January 2015, there were 80,000 unemployed Australians aged 55 and over, an increase of 12 per cent in that year. Increasing paid employment of Australians over 55 years by five per cent would add \$48 billion to the bottom line of our national economy every year.

Digital literacy is an ongoing challenge for many senior Victorians, with some members indicating they do not have a computer at home. Yet, government support services are increasingly pushing consumers to communicate on-line (MyGov is a prime example) which creates barriers for seniors accessing the services they need. While the number of older Victorians who have access to the internet is expected to increase, there will still be a significant proportion of the community without access to the internet and with limited ability to use digital resources. We suggest the Victorian Government provide funding to support access to computer facilities and digital literacy programs that would assist seniors with their on-line activities and help them stay connected.

Community Safety

27. Immediately fund increased capacity in Juvenile Detention; Prisons, and Remand Centres. This removes any excuses for granting bail, and parole on the basis of facilities being full. Community safety is a fundamental duty of every government.

Recent increases in funding for police and new police stations is appreciated and very welcome. However, we are gravely concerned about the performance of the judicial system as well as Parole Boards. The community is not being protected and the elderly feel especially vulnerable. Too many repeat offenders are allowed bail and re-offend whilst on bail. Too many detainees are released on parole and then re-offend on parole. At the same time sufficient funds must be made available for rehabilitation of the inmates. Especially trade and industry qualification training for juveniles.

² Australian Human Rights Commission 2015, National Prevalence Survey of Age Discrimination at <https://www.humanrights.gov.au/our-work/age-discrimination/publications/national-prevalence-survey-age-discrimination-workplace>