

MEDIA RELEASE

+ WOMEN'S HEALTH GOULBURN NORTH EAST

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FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

Tuesday 1 March, 2022

Victorian women are sick of small change: Under-investment in women's health increases illness and depression

Today CEOs of Victoria's 12 women's health services, along with Rainbow Health Australia, are calling for an immediate uplift in investment to secure the health and wellbeing of Victorian women, following the release of alarming data which shows Victorian women have gotten sicker, more anxious and depressed since the commencement of the COVID19 pandemic.

Representing the interests of three million women across every region of Victoria, CEOs are coming together to address the deterioration of gender-equal health outcomes including:

- **The continued erosion of Victorian women's mental health, which has seen a drastic increase in the diagnosis of depression and anxiety in women, up to 38.2% from 29.0% five years ago.**

"We are concerned that close to a third of Victorian women – 27% - are reporting high or very high psychological distress and that self-harm hospitalisations are double the rate of Victorian men," said Dianne Hill, CEO of Women's Health Victoria.

- **The worsening of women's fitness, body mass index and heart disease.**

“Less than half of Victorian women are getting the recommended level of physical activity and daily exercise, with self-reported body mass index (BMI) climbing during the pandemic and a 34% increase in the diagnosis of heart disease in Victorian women,” said Kit McMahon, CEO of Women’s Health in the South East.

- **Growing cancer cases and less access to cancer treatment**
- In 2020, due to the pandemic, there were:
 - 8% less cancer diagnostic procedures,
 - 16% lower breast cancer procedure and
 - 13% decrease in gynaecological cancer procedures.

“Women are at significant risk of illness and death due to preventable cancer treatment being postponed, delayed or cancelled during the pandemic. We need education and campaigns to encourage women back to health prevention and seeking the support they need,” said Amanda Kelly, CEO of Women’s Health Goulburn North East.

Victorian women’s health is deteriorating because not enough money is spent on preventing illness and disease, with a gender bias in investment and priority.

“Victorian women are sick of small change,” said Tricia Currie, Women’s Health Services Chair.

“Women’s Health Services were funded \$4.35 per woman when we started, now it’s down to \$2.05 per woman. This is not enough to beat the crisis we’re seeing in women’s health in Victoria.

“This spare change funding is making women sicker.

“Before the pandemic, women’s health was under significant strain, now it is so much worse.

“It is essential that we have an adequately funded women’s health services sector to be able to respond to the crisis in women’s health.

“And we need new and boosted investments in LGBTIQ, people, women with disabilities, Aboriginal women and migrant and refugee women whose health is disproportionately affected by inequality.”

Women’s Health Services have today released a joint statement calling for the Victorian Government to act now in addressing the crisis of Victorian women’s health.

They are calling for a per woman increase of \$5.75 to fund urgent health prevention and promotion programs and for first time, dedicated investments for women with disabilities, Indigenous women and LGBTIQ women and trans and gender diverse people, as well as a boost to migrant and refugee women. [Read the joint statement here](#) with quotes from all women's health services.

The Women's Health Services Council has not yet met with Hon Martin Foley Minister for Health or the Hon James Merlino Deputy Premier and Minister for Mental Health. The Council is continuing to seek their commitment to increasing funding for women's health services across the state to address the significant impact of COVID-19 on women's health and wellbeing.

ENDS

A media event is scheduled for today, Tuesday 1 March 2022 at 10am-11:30am. At the event you will hear from Women's Health Victoria on the current crisis of women's health, followed by a panel addressing intersectional experiences of women's health, and a panel of women with lived experience of poor health outcomes.

Visit the following link to join the event:

Join Zoom Meeting

<https://us02web.zoom.us/j/88127380826?pwd=N0g4azY1V1ZhTGdtdllyRWVZVVBEdz09>

Meeting ID: 881 2738 0826

Passcode: 262967

Media will have the opportunity to speak directly to WHS CEOs from a statewide and regional perspective.

For state-wide women's health service media contact:

Dianne Hill, CEO of Women's Health Victoria on 0400653649

Adele Murdolo, CEO of Multicultural of Women's Health on 0438 823 299

Nadia Matiazzo, CEO of Women with Disabilities Victoria on 0407887366

Marina Carman, Director of Rainbow Health Australia on 0414 788 852

For metro and regional media contact:

Goulburn North East Victoria – Amanda Kelly, CEO of Women's Health Goulburn North East on 0418856345

Southeast Metropolitan – Kit McMahon, CEO of Women's Health in the South East on 0408250272

East Metropolitan – Elly Taylor, CEO of Women's Health East on 0498 455 161

North Metropolitan – Helen Riseborough, CEO of Women's Health in the North on 0417536552

West Metropolitan – Kate Phillips, Acting CEO of GEN WEST on 0418 136 107

Loddon Mallee – Tricia Currie, CEO of Women's Health Loddon Mallee on 0428365929 .

Barwon South West Victoria – Emma Mahony, CEO of Women's Health and Wellbeing Barwon South West on 0455944093.

Grampians Region – Marianne Hendron, CEO of Women's Health Grampians on 0429265724.

Gippsland Region – Kate Graham, CEO of Gippsland Women's Health on 0410 460 250

Quotes from leaders of Women's Health Services across Victoria

Metropolitan Women's Health Services

Women's Health in the South East

"The evidence is in. Women need their health and wellbeing looked after now," said Kit McMahon, CEO of Women's Health in the South East (WHISE).

"For too long women have held the mental and physical load of our society – in our expectation of women doing unpaid care, in their take-home pay, in the insufficient health care they receive, in the violence that they experience, in their homelessness and even in their retirement."

"The issues women face across our region are significant. In the inner city region of Port Phillip, more women than men are self-harming and are hospitalised because of this, which is double the rate across Victoria. This is the same in the outer southern suburbs around Casey where just under triple the number of women are being hospitalised for self-harm compared to the rest of the state."

"Women are weary and COVID has exacerbated it. If we really are going to recover from the pandemic and create a truly equal society then it is time to show that we do respect women enough to care for them," Ms McMahon concluded.

GEN WEST (previously Women's Health West)

"We have not received a real increase in funding since the day we were founded in 1988," said Kate Phillips, CEO of GEN WEST. Concerningly, Ms Phillips said that the funding allocation for women's health failed to consider population growth.

"With two of the fastest growing government areas in Victoria, the population in the West has doubled in the last 34 years, which means our capacity to do work has in effect been halved," Ms Phillips added.

Furthermore, she said that "within GEN WEST's service catchment area, there were 15,475 incidents of family violence reported by police alone in 2021, with more than double the clients needing mental health support and reporting risk of homelessness compared to before the pandemic."

"We must resource large scale, evidence based primary prevention interventions with urgency, if want to see these staggering rates of violence decrease and create the generational change we know is possible," Ms Phillips concluded.

Women's Health East

"In Melbourne's eastern region, we are seeing high rates of women self-harming that result in hospital admission with six of our seven local government areas sitting above the state average. This is alarming given that we know that self-harm is linked to increased risk of suicidal behaviour and suicide," said Elly Taylor, CEO of Women's Health East.

"Over 40% of women living in the Yarra Ranges report having even been diagnosed with depression or anxiety, which is a 14% jump over 5 years. Women in Melbourne's east are experiencing significant rates

of poor mental health due to a chronic underinvestment in health promotion and prevention initiatives. We need urgent action now to ensure the health and wellbeing of women in our region,” Ms Taylor concluded.

Women’s Health in the North

“Melbourne’s northern region is multiculturally diverse, with nearly one third of residents born overseas and nearly one third speaking a language other than English at home. With continued net reductions in funding to Women’s Health Services over the past thirty years, migrant and refugee women’s health outcomes and access to health services will plummet further downward”, said Helen Riseborough, CEO of Women’s Health in the North (WHIN).

According to Ms Riseborough, the pandemic COVID-19 and economic uncertainty has compounded existing social and economic inequality of women in northern Melbourne region. She added that family violence incidents have grown.

“In the City of Hume, for example, the number of women experiencing family violence and reporting incidents to police is a rate of 160 compared with a state average of 123 cases per 10,000 in 2020,” Ms Riseborough explained.

Furthermore, Ms Riseborough said that “Demand for WHIN’s services - for sexual and reproductive health information and rights, for gendered violence prevention, for financial literacy and capability services, and family violence services - has grown hugely in the past two years. A lack of investment in the future of women’s health is a failure on the part of government. Resourcing women’s health to deliver primary prevention services means that women are enabled to live healthy and safe lives, and reach their full economic potential. The whole of society benefits,” Ms Riseborough explained.

Regional Women’s Health Services

Women’s Health Goulburn North East

“Women across our region live the impact of chronic and ongoing under-investment in their health, wellbeing and gender equality every day,” said Amanda Kelly, CEO of Women’s Health Goulburn North East.

“We see this in the family violence rates in Wangaratta, which are higher than the state average; we see it in the data that demonstrates that more than half (53.5%) of the women in Benalla have experienced anxiety or depression at some stage in their lives and even in the fact that women carry the care burden at home in every single local government area in our region.

“COVID-19 has decimated women’s health and wellbeing, and gender equality gains in north-east Victoria and the Goulburn Valley, and without dedicated investment in our services and primary prevention as a whole, the health and wellbeing of women in our region will continue to decline.”

Women’s Health Loddon Mallee

“In the North West of Victoria, the health and wellbeing data maps are bright red, flagging alarming rates of poor health for rural women,” said Tricia Currie, CEO of Women’s Health Loddon Mallee. She further added that “over 50% of the women in the Shires of Loddon and Central Goldfields have experienced anxiety and /or depression. Meanwhile, family violence rates in Mildura, Swan Hill, Central Goldfields and Greater Bendigo are among the highest in the state. Before COVID women’s health was declining. This is the time to uplift the investment in women’s health services and primary prevention for a recovery which will benefit all.”

"COVID has exacerbated gender inequality, with women being left to shoulder the burden of the pandemic and put the health needs of others before their own, significantly impacting their mental health and wellbeing. We need investment now to engage women in prevention and build their resilience through this crisis and beyond. This is the time to uplift the investment in women's health services and primary prevention for a recovery which will benefit all," said Ms Currie.

Women's Health Grampians

"An already concerning outlook for women's health and wellbeing in the Grampians region has been further exacerbated by the pandemic," said Marianne Hendron, CEO of Women's Health Grampians.

Ms Hendron further added that "four local council areas in the Grampians region feature in the top five in Victoria for teen birth rates, with Yarriambiack having a rate almost 4 times the state average. In addition to that, according to Ms Hendron, access to sexual and reproductive health services and support is extremely limited especially for young people in remote areas."

"Rates of mental illness and self-harm also significantly exceed state averages in several areas, as do reported family violence incidents, particularly in Northern Grampians, Horsham and Ararat," Ms Hendron explained.

Ms Hendron added that "due to economic disadvantage, three council areas record the highest rates in Victoria for gynaecological, bowel and lung cancers in women. Furthermore, the prospects for women's economic equality, and consequently better health and wellbeing, are hampered by limited access to childcare, which is simply non-existent in many towns, diminished by the pandemic."

"Women and girls in the Grampians are being further disadvantaged by underinvestment in their health," Ms Hendron concluded.

Women's Health and Wellbeing Barwon South West

"A lack of adequate investment in primary prevention, sustained over decades, has led to poor health for women in the Barwon South West further compounded by COVID-19 pandemic" said Emma Mahony, CEO of Women's Health and Wellbeing Barwon South West.

Ms Mahony further added that in her rural and regional area of services, there are barriers to accessing services, such as availability of local and affordable services, transport and confidence that community members privacy is guaranteed.

"High rates of family violence, depression and anxiety all echo the need to address the health needs of rural and regional women urgently. Now is the time to invest in bridge the health gap between men and women; and rural and metropolitan communities," said Ms Mahony.

Gippsland Women's Health

"On the back of significant climate change disasters, the COVID pandemic has further exacerbated the already high rates of gender inequality, health inequality and violence for women living in rural areas," said Kate Graham, CEO of Gippsland Women's Health.

She further added that "women have shouldered the burden of the pandemic at home, in front line work and in important regional infrastructure such as agriculture, tourism and other rural businesses."

"Consequently, we are now seeing even greater incidence of violence against women, anxiety and depression, psychological distress, homelessness, harmful drinking, inactivity and obesity, sexually transmitted infections, teenage pregnancy and smoking in rural areas like Gippsland."

“The continued lack of timely and appropriate access to a range of health services and support options is no longer acceptable to our women and we call for a greater investment so that rural and remote women can remain healthy and safe and continue to contribute to Victoria’s recovery,” said Ms Graham concluding.

Statewide services

Women’s Health Victoria

“It is clear from the data that women’s health across the state has reached a crisis point. Social, economic and health data all show women have borne the brunt of the pandemic, further entrenching gender inequality and impacting the lives of women, families and communities,” said Dianne Hill, CEO of Women’s Health Victoria.

“Women have shouldered the burden of care at home and on the frontline workforce, while experiencing job losses and financial hardship in other industries, as well as difficulty accessing vital health services and increased mental distress.

“We need urgent and dedicated investment in primary prevention through the women’s health program to reverse this decline so we can support and sustain women to build a strong, resilient and gender equal society where no-one is left behind,” Ms Hill concluded.

Women with Disabilities Victoria

“Women with disabilities face higher health service requirements and greater service access barriers,” said Nadia Mattiazzo, CEO of Women with Disabilities Victoria. She further added that “current funding for essential capacity building has not increased with rising demands including our increasing demographic, our pandemic requirements, and preparing for our looming climate change needs.”

Multicultural Centre of Women’s Health

“Migrant and refugee women have lower levels of access to health services and as a result, have poorer health outcomes than the general Victorian population,” said Adele Murdolo, CEO of Multicultural Centre of Women’s Health.

“If we continue to reduce funding to women’s health services, migrant women’s health will continue to deteriorate, and the health inequality divide will become a chasm,” said Dr Murdolo concluding.