

OPEN LETTER**April 24 2023****Victorian community health funding cuts: Saving now to spend more later will harm our communities**

The Council of Academic Public Health Institutions Australasia (CAPHIA) is the peak organisation that works to advance public health education and research. CAPHIA leads and represents public health in universities throughout the Australasian region. As CAPHIA membership represents 33 Australian universities and two affiliate institutional members, we set the standard for academic public health curricula. Our vision is for a robust, evidence-informed and well-resourced Australasian public health system with a sustainable workforce that meets existing and future public health needs. This vision aligns with much of the Andrews Labor Government Victorian public health and wellbeing plan 2019-2023, yet the proposed funding cuts directly oppose the "joined up approach"¹ outlined to tackle modifiable risk factors.

CAPHIA is deeply concerned by the Andrew's Labor Government decision to cut crucial funding for community health services. We are at great risk of losing the hard-earned gains over many decades on non-communicable diseases, injuries and prevention work because of the focus on the COVID-19 pandemic. We need investment in preventive health and health promotion, not defunding of critical upstream programs and services which save money in the long term.

We know that investing in health-promotion and illness-prevention pays dividends over time and, delivers the best return on investment in health². This decision, therefore, is likely to generate billions of dollars of additional costs to health services and the wider economy for years into the future, while also impacting the health of Victorians, including vulnerable members of our community². Community health services hold the unique local knowledge and trusted relationships required to deliver targeted and cost-effective services that respond directly to local needs³.

The chronic underfunding of preventive health is contributing to unhealthy Australians, and an overburdened health system, with the burden of ill health often felt most by those experiencing disadvantage, stigma and discrimination. A concerted effort is required to improve health outcomes for all Australians⁴. Community and preventive health services play an important role in reducing this burden by working with local communities - in schools, early childhood centres, sporting clubs and public housing - to keep people out of hospital, and to support the community to live healthier, more productive lives.

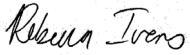
CAPHIA urges the Victorian government to reconsider any planned cuts to preventive health and instead, commit to spend 5% of the total health budget on health promotion and prevention in alignment with the National Preventative Health Strategy 2021-2030 and the strategic priorities laid out in the Victorian public health and wellbeing plan 2019-2023¹. As the fastest growing state in the country, it is critical that we see future-focussed decision making which incorporates cost-effectiveness evidence and equips the health system to meet increased demands, while remaining responsive to diverse community needs and tackling the causes of health inequalities¹. Initiatives delivered by community health services are crucial to delivering on this commitment as the key providers of local-level health promotion in Victoria.

Improved long-term investment in health prevention and promotion now will support the promotion, and protection of health for all Australians and ensure Australia is best prepared for future pandemics, health emergencies and other public health threats.

We implore the Andrews Government to reverse the proposed cuts to this vital sector of health for all Victorians.

Now is the time to invest in the health of our communities, not further harm them.

On behalf of the CAPHIA Board of Directors,



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2. Masters R, Anwar E, Collins B, Cookson R, Capewell S. Return on investment of public health interventions: a systematic review. *Journal of Epidemiology and Community Health*. 2017;71(8):827-834.
3. Merri Health. Urgent call to reverse community health funding cuts to safeguard Victorians and our health system. Available at: <https://www.merrihealth.org.au/news/urgent-call-to-reverse-community-health-funding-cuts-to-safeguard-victorians-and-our-health-system/>.
4. Australian Government Department of Health. National Preventive Health Strategy 2021-2030. Available at: <https://www.health.gov.au/sites/default/files/documents/2021/12/national-preventive-health-strategy-2021-2030.pdf>.