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Prevention is the best cure

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Homelessness. Family and domestic violence. Kids in child protection. Poor mental health. Alcohol and other drugs. Wicked problems and often on the front page of this masthead, but the community services sector that runs the services managing these issues has a low profile in the public eye.

This week, a landmark report was launched that highlights the size, contribution, challenges and opportunities facing the community services sector.

Commissioned by Community Employers WA and developed by Nous Group, Leaving no one behind: the economic imperative to invest in WA's community sector and its workforce reveals a sector in crisis but lays out a clear path for investment, with significant returns for government.

The report found that the sector is a significant economic contributor, with 2100 not-for-profit organisations delivering $7.4 billion of services across the State.

One in 20 working West Australians is employed by the community sector, with 72,000 paid employees, around 80 per cent of whom are women.

The sector also attracts 110,000 volunteers a year, leveraging an additional $489 million in equivalent wages. With the volunteer workforce included, the sector is the biggest employer in the State, dwarfing retail, mining and manufacturing.

Despite this, under-funding is leaving sector workers on a financial knife-edge. Nearly 40 per cent of frontline staff survive on less than $60,000 a year. Most jobs are part-time, caused by a combination of poor funding and persistent societal expectations for the mostly female workforce to manage caring duties at home.

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Compounding these issues, staff often choose to take on as much as 15 per cent additional unpaid hours rather than leave vulnerable people without support.

Burnout for these essential workers is a major problem, and wages are so bad that stories are emerging of sector staff lining up at Foodbank to put food on their dinner table.

Many roads got us here. Dealing with social problems can create a cringe factor in the public eye, often left out of sight and out of mind.

Some political leaders believe that funding these services is a drain on government budgets, and often expect funding shortfalls to be made up by fundraising and philanthropy.

At a more cynical level, dealing with these issues is not seen as a vote winner and at their worst, politicians can stigmatise vulnerable people as a blight on society.

Of course, turning your back on those who need support isn't a great strategy. Cut homelessness services, and people with chronic health issues will fill every available hospital bed overnight.

Leave alcohol and drug issues unmanaged, and pretty soon we'll be building new prisons.

So is the opposite true? Would boosting funding to community services, especially those focussed on early intervention and prevention, reduce the cost of running expensive services like hospitals and prisons? The short answer is 'yes'.

In the 2021-22 State Budget, the Victorian Government introduced an Early Intervention Investment Framework, aimed at doing exactly that. Such is the success of this model that over the past three years, Victoria has pumped more than $1.5b into the scheme, realising cost savings long into the future.

So what's stopping the Cook Government introducing a similar scheme here? We've had six consecutive years of multi-billion-dollar surpluses, so we're not running on fumes.

We're not short on data, with the launch of PeopleWA at the end of last year, a sophisticated linked dataset that measures individual interactions with State Government agencies.

We also don't lack compassion, with a Premier who at the recent WACOSS New Year Sector Breakfast stated "what we (as a Government) will not do is treat the most vulnerable members of our community as a burden to be dealt with".

Ultimately, the biggest barrier to change is how far we choose to look into the horizon.

With four-year election cycles, there is always a pre-election flurry of ribbons to be cut and achievements tallied, but solving complex social problems cannot be done in any one term of government.

To do this we need sustained investment regardless of political stripes; investment into the wellbeing of everyday West Australians, especially those on the ragged edge of the cost-of-living crisis. Achieve this, and we can truly say we left no one behind.

Tim Grey-Smith is the executive director of Community Employers WA.