

Victorian Homelessness Election Platform 2018



‘Homelessness should be rare, the experience brief, and it should not recur in cycles of repeated homelessness. With the right measures in place, we know that homelessness is preventable, early intervention achievable, and that keeping people housed is possible.’

— Jenny Smith, CEO, Council to Homeless Persons

Acknowledgements

We respectfully acknowledge the traditional owners of this land.
We pay our respects to elders past and present.

We appreciate and celebrate diversity in all its forms and believe diversity of all kinds makes communities stronger and more effective.



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CEO's message

In 2018, Victoria is the economic success story of Australia. Hundreds of thousands of new jobs have been created, labour market participation is at historic highs¹ and the population continues to grow.

These successes mean that many Victorians are doing well. However, not every Victorian benefits equally. Those who have not seen their incomes grow in response to this success face greater competition than ever in securing housing. Competition for rental properties is fierce, with the beneficiaries of Victoria's economic growth crowding out those left behind. The result is our current homelessness crisis. The map below shows that there is not a single electorate in Victoria which is immune to the crisis.

Happily, the Victorian Government's finances have also benefitted from this economic success, providing the necessary resources to deliver solutions to growing inequality. In the past five years taxation revenue from land transfer (stamp) duty has grown 69 per cent — from \$4.2 billion to over \$7.0 billion annually.² It is the responsibility of the Victorian Government to ensure that windfall gains to the budget from house price inflation are used to mitigate the pain the housing crisis has caused.

"It is the responsibility of the Victorian Government to ensure that windfall gains to the budget from house price inflation are used to mitigate the pain the housing crisis has caused."

This process has begun, with new investments in social housing under the Homes for Victorians strategy and Family Violence Housing Blitz generating growth in Victoria's social housing stock. Yet because Victoria's population is also growing rapidly, social housing as a proportion of all housing has continued to fall, even as the numbers of social housing properties has increased.

Provision of a growing proportion of secure and affordable housing targeted to those on low incomes is the most effective way to increase affordable housing options to those being squeezed out of our rental market. This is also a critical step to ending homelessness, but will not on its own be sufficient. Further work is also needed to build on the new evidence-based initiatives funded in the Victorian Homelessness and Rough Sleeping Action Plan and the response to the Royal Commission into Family Violence.

Ending homelessness is within our means. Homelessness should be rare, the experience brief, and it should not recur in cycles of repeated homelessness. With the right measures in place, we know that homelessness is preventable, early intervention achievable, and that keeping people housed is possible. These measures are detailed in the Victorian Homelessness Election Platform.

It is now up to the next government of Victoria to deliver on ending homelessness. We call on all parties and candidates to commit to these priorities, and to working alongside us to deliver them.

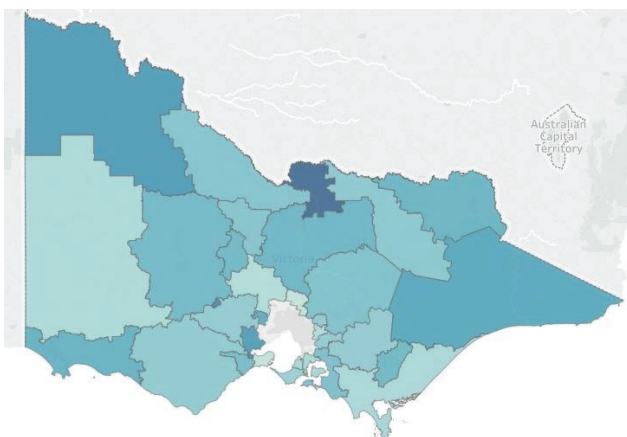
I want to take this opportunity to thank the hundreds of people from across Victoria who contributed to developing this platform. It is with your input that we can truly claim that this document lays out a call on behalf of the Victorian Homelessness Sector. I also want to thank the scores of consumers who contributed ideas and provided feedback on drafts. I am determined that you will always be at the centre of our policy process.

In 2018 we know how to end homelessness. It's our hope that by 2022 we'll be well on our way.

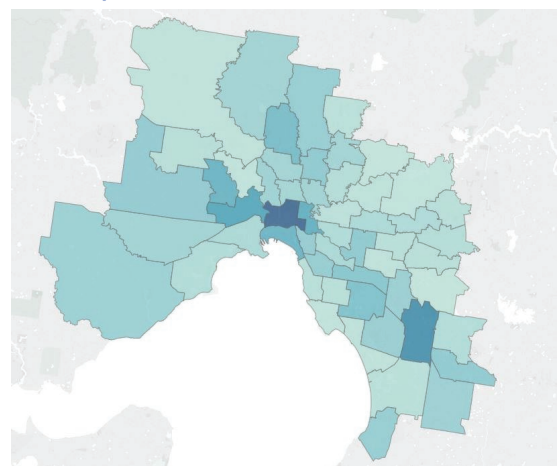


Jenny Smith, CEO, Council to Homeless Persons

Victoria



Metropolitan Melbourne



Number of people experiencing homelessness



Data: Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2016. Analysis: Council to Homeless Persons, 2018



Call for action summary

A housing system that works

1. Build 3,000 new public and community housing dwellings per year for the next ten years.
2. Ensure 1,500 of the 3,000 new public and community housing dwellings are one or two bedroom homes

Closing the Gap on Aboriginal homelessness

3. Expand homelessness service delivery in prevention, early intervention, and ongoing support capacity delivered by Aboriginal Community Controlled Organisations.

The importance of a community: support to prevent homelessness

4. Recurrently fund the successful Private Rental Assistance Program.
5. Prevent exits to homelessness — by delivering dedicated housing and support packages to people leaving prison and acute health and mental health services.
6. Prevent evictions into homelessness — by delivering tenancy focused legal support for vulnerable tenants at risk of homelessness.

A stable home, and a brief period of support; Intervening early to end homelessness

7. Improve the health and wellbeing of people living in marginal accommodation by providing outreach support.
8. Increase Housing Establishment Fund (HEF) funding or flexible funding to reflect increased demand and costs of crisis accommodation.

Ending chronic homelessness; stable affordable housing, and long term support

9. Deliver targeted housing for people experiencing chronic homelessness.
10. Deliver post-housing support to people exiting chronic homelessness.

Child and youth homelessness; it's time for a joined up approach

11. Prevent youth homelessness by delivering family reconciliation programs across Victoria.
12. Deliver support to young people who are couchsurfing to assist them to stabilise a safe living arrangement and continue their education.
13. Extend education-focussed supports for young people in out of home care to include young people experiencing homelessness.
14. Reform legislation to guarantee housing and support to young people leaving care until the age of 21.
15. Extend youth refuge and education focussed supported accommodation options across Victoria so all young people who need them can access these in their local community.
16. Deliver housing subsidies for young people to support their capacity to move to independent housing options.
17. Deliver intensively supported accommodation options for young people who are homeless and have highly complex needs.



A housing system that works

Every Victorian needs a home as the basis for a good life. A place where they are safe, where they can rest, and which supports their hopes to participate in their community — socially and economically. A home to meet immediate needs like warmth, meals and comfort, and as a foundation for life's big achievements; a place to live, to partner, to raise happy children, to host friends and family, and build a future.

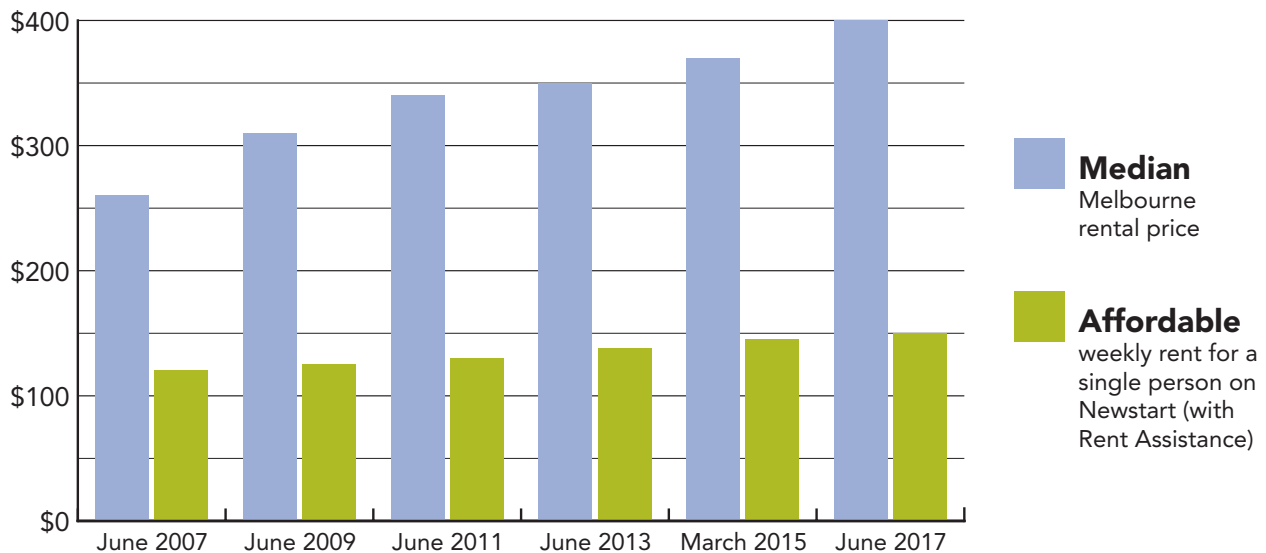
This is not what Victoria's housing market looks like in 2018. Home ownership is concentrating in a rapidly decreasing share of the population.³ Soaring housing costs across all sections of the market leave 142,000 low-income households struggling to pay their rent.⁴ Social housing continues to decline as a proportion of all housing stock⁵ while 82,500 people sit on the waiting list.⁶ Victoria has a current shortfall of between 75,000 and 100,000 affordable properties, and this is projected to grow.⁷ Victoria's housing pressures reverberate throughout the market, as fierce competition forces ever more people to compete for ever more expensive housing.

Victoria is at a crossroads, facing a dramatic choice between a path where wealth and opportunity depends on that of your parents,⁸ or transformational change of the housing market, where we can rely on access to secure and appropriately priced housing. Victoria's next Government can help every Victorian by implementing immediate measures to relieve the housing pressures we all face, while ensuring that future housing needs are both planned for and delivered.

Relieve the pressure: build 3,000 public and community housing properties each year

Victoria's housing market is in disarray. People across a wide range of incomes are competing for the same pool of properties⁹ with next to none of them affordable to those on low incomes.¹⁰ The competition is intense,¹¹ and already almost 50,000 Victorians each year experience homelessness as a result of financial difficulties and housing affordability stress.¹²

Median Melbourne rental prices vs affordable weekly rent for singles on Newstart



Source: DHHS Rent Reports

Despite record dwelling constructions across Victoria in recent years,¹³ new supply alone has demonstrably failed to provide for greater affordability. In the immediate term, only dedicated affordable housing targeted at low-income earners, such as public and community housing can deliver access to affordable housing for low-income earners.¹⁴ This will require a substantial government building program, alongside planning mechanisms such as inclusionary zoning.

It's time to relieve the pressure — time for a housing profile that recognises that a secure home is essential for everybody, including those on the lowest incomes. In the face of record construction, just maintaining the current level of shortage of public and community housing requires 1,700 new properties be added to the stock each year.¹⁵ To begin to relieve the pressure faced by Victorian renters requires a more substantial commitment.

The Victorian Government should relieve some of the pressure in the market by building 3,000 new public and community housing dwellings per year for the next ten years. Eighty per cent of social housing allocations currently go to those with the greatest need — this building program would mean that we can include more of those vulnerable Victorians in Victoria's prosperity, while benefiting all renters by relieving some of the pressure in the rental market.

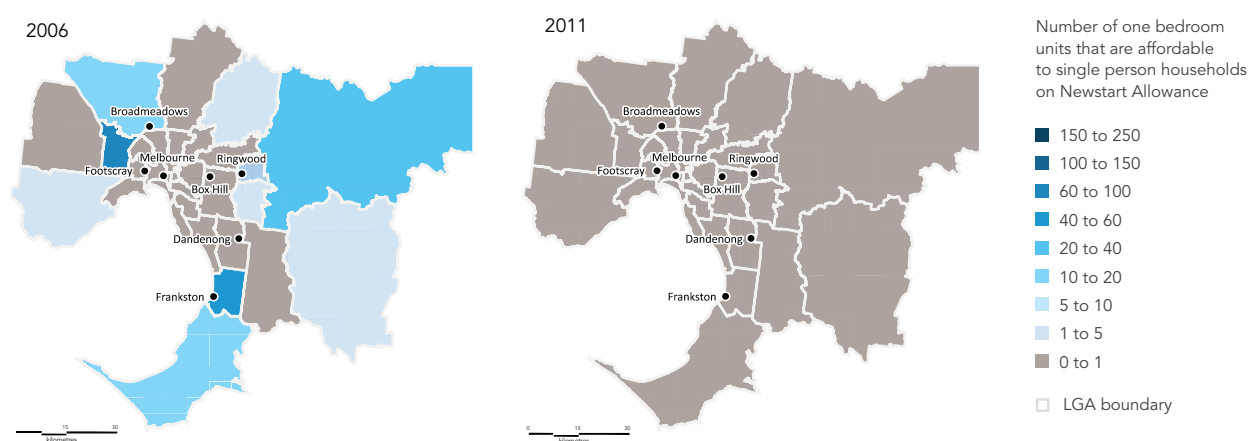
CALL FOR ACTION

1. **Build 3,000 new public and community housing dwellings per year for the next ten years.**

Deliver affordable housing options for single people

Victoria's social housing shortage is particularly grave in relation to one and two bedroom dwellings, with households needing this housing type accounting for around 80 per cent of housing applicants.¹⁶ Currently, 21,957 households are waiting for one bedroom public housing.¹⁷

Long wait times for social housing for singles and two-person households, and the virtual absence of any affordable private rentals, leaves homelessness organisations without options, other than private rooming houses or caravan parks for singles and small families needing accommodation. Often these options are unsafe, particularly for women and children, with many people living in close proximity vulnerable to a build-up of tensions and conflict that sometimes results in assaults, and inevitably results in stress, insecurity and mental ill health for residents.



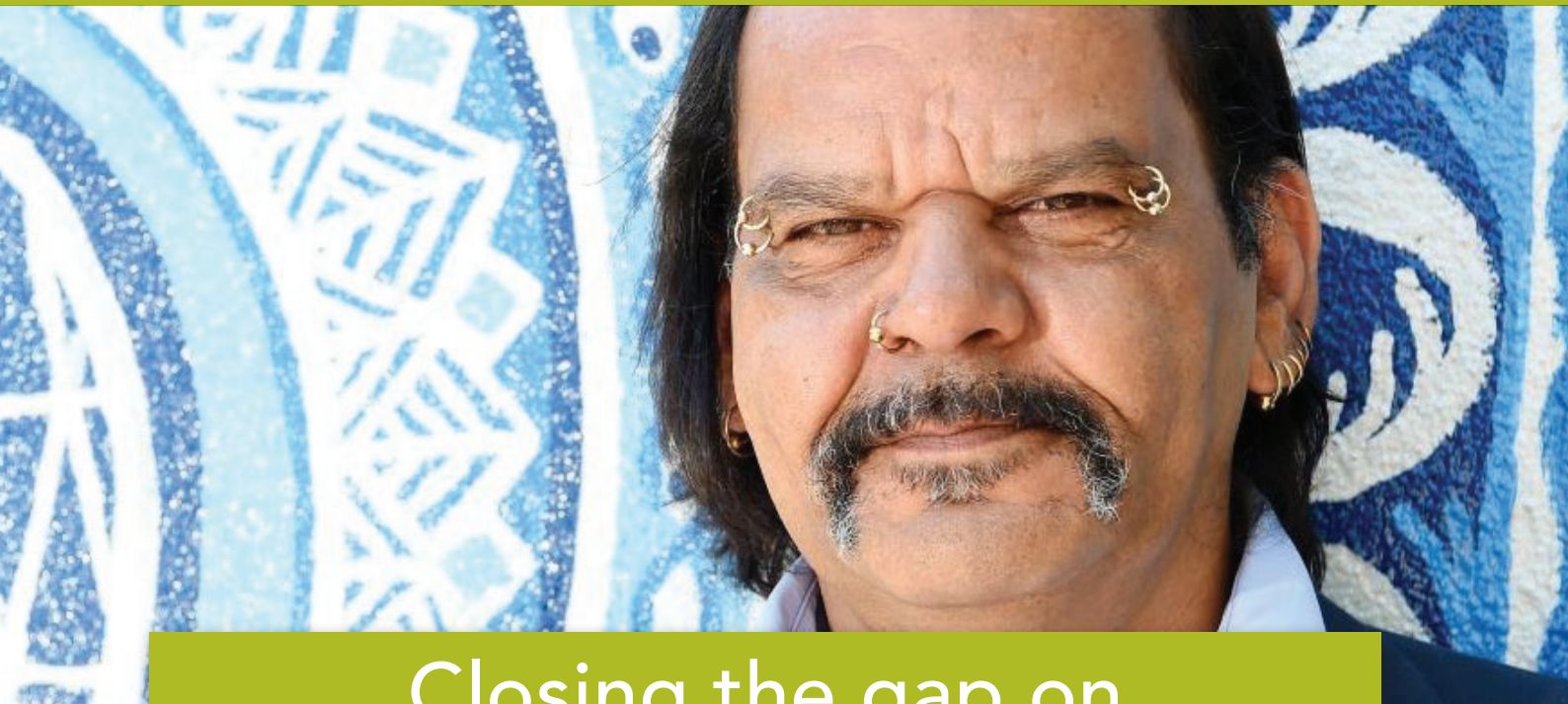
Source: SGS economics, cited in Infrastructure Victoria, Victoria's 30 year infrastructure strategy, 2016

These options are also a poverty trap, as residents typically pay in excess of 50 per cent of their income in rent, making it almost impossible to save up and move out. The result is tenants cycling in and out of these types of marginal accommodation, and other forms of homelessness, with their health typically worsening the longer they are marginally housed.

As noted throughout this document, this accommodation is needed for many highly vulnerable groups, including people experiencing chronic homelessness, those exiting acute health or mental health facilities or prison, and for young people unable to live safely at home. Providing decent and affordable housing options for singles and small families is an urgent priority.

CALL FOR ACTION

- 2. Ensure 1,500 of the 3,000 new public and community housing dwellings are one or two bedroom homes**



Closing the gap on Aboriginal homelessness

There are 48,000 Aboriginal Victorians,¹⁸ 9,000 of whom sought help from one of Victoria's specialist homelessness services last year.¹⁹ A 19 per cent rate of homelessness across the course of a year is a tragedy writ large across our society. Yet there are few Aboriginal specific homelessness services or supported housing providers for Aboriginal people.

Aboriginal Victorians make up 0.8 per cent of the total population, but 9.5 per cent of all homelessness service users. Homelessness compounds other disadvantages experienced disproportionately by Aboriginal Victorians, including poor health outcomes, over-incarceration, parent and child separations, and family violence.²⁰

Working together to build a shared future means ensuring that Aboriginal Victorians can determine the solutions and programs to meet their own needs. Where this happens, it means more service utilisation and better outcomes.²¹ More than just a process issue, it requires strong and well-resourced Aboriginal Community Controlled Organisations empowered to develop and deliver unique, responsive solutions to Aboriginal homelessness.

Alongside ensuring that mainstream services are culturally competent, we need to deliver new and additional capacity for Aboriginal Community Controlled Organisations to deliver more prevention, early intervention, and ongoing support.

CALL FOR ACTION

- 3. Expand homelessness service delivery in prevention, early intervention, and ongoing support capacity delivered by Aboriginal Community Controlled Organisations.**



The importance of a community: support to prevent homelessness

All of us expect that across the course of our life both good and bad things will inevitably happen. We hope to turn the good things into lasting happiness, and to address the bad circumstances before they are a crisis. We know that job loss, hospitalisation, or a relationship breakdown might be around the corner for any of us. But being part of a community means that when people need support, we give them a hand. Sometimes we look to our friends and family for support, and sometimes we rely on government to help people doing it tough, and prevent a setback becoming a calamity.

The limited homelessness prevention services that we have in Victoria are extremely effective. Last year 91 per cent of people who received a prevention response were successfully supported to avoid homelessness.²² Relatively low-impact supports will be effective in preventing homelessness for many of those facing hardship, while certain groups with higher needs will need more intensive supports to prevent homelessness.²³

When a person is in crisis or highly vulnerable, it is likely that they are engaged with human services prior to becoming homeless. Centrelink, employment agencies, financial counsellors, rental managers, hospitals, foster care agencies, hospitals and material aid providers can all play a role in preventing homelessness.

Even in the face of Victoria's current housing crisis, we can prevent homelessness. By providing support at the time when people need a hand, we can ensure that a negative life experience doesn't become a lifetime of negative experiences.

Investing in successful prevention: Ongoing funding for the Private Rental Access Program

Over 600,000 households are renting in Victoria. Those at risk of homelessness, often on low incomes, have few opportunities to purchase a home, and private rental is the most common form of occupancy for this group.²⁴ While not every eviction causes homelessness, over 13,000 people came to Victorian homelessness services experiencing homelessness predominantly attributable to an eviction last year. Another 8,500 were facing eviction and at risk of homelessness.²⁵



Source: Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, Specialist Homelessness Services Collection, Victoria

For three years the Victorian Government's Private Rental Assistance Program (PRAP) has kept families safely housed, and supported them when their tenancy is at risk. PRAP has created a working framework for Victoria's homelessness services, landlords, real estate agents and tenants to work together to ensure that tenants stay housed in difficult times. This is the first time that real estate agents have made large-scale referrals to homelessness services to support tenants. Through short-term case management, sound financial planning, and the ability to make co-contributions to a tenant's rental arrears, PRAP prevents set-backs from becoming a crisis, preventing homelessness before it occurs. This is how the system should work.

The Private Rental Assistance Program is funded to 30 June 2019. After three years it has become the most important homelessness prevention program in the State. The next Victorian Government should provide recurrent funding for the Private Rental Assistance Program into the future.

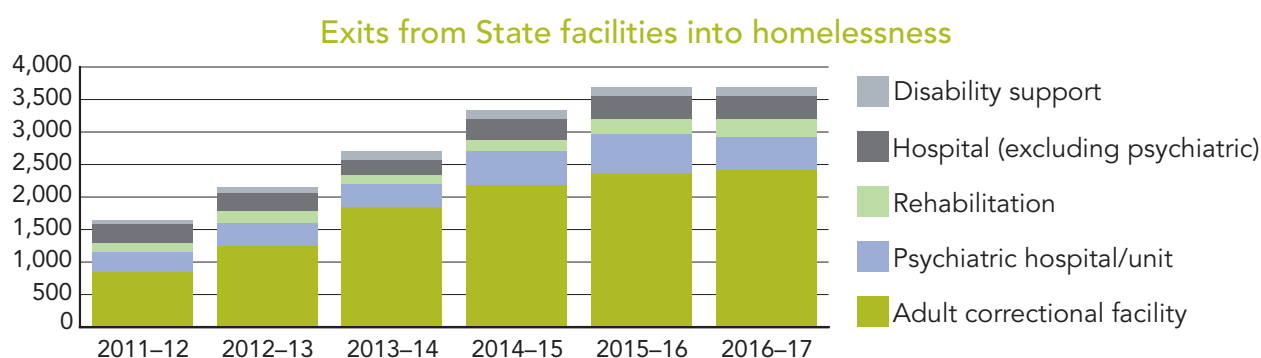
CALL FOR ACTION

- 4. Recurrently fund the successful Private Rental Assistance Program.**

Getting out and staying out: support for people leaving prisons and hospitals

People exiting Victoria's acute health or mental health in-patient services, or correctional facilities experience high rates of homelessness. With low incomes, limited or negative rental histories, and often health issues or disabilities that present additional challenges, it can be difficult to gain or sustain a home once released. Consequently, people exiting prison into homelessness are more likely to reoffend,²⁶ and people discharged from hospital are more likely to experience poor health. Homelessness is both destructive to a person's mental health,²⁷ and also makes it very difficult to deliver the subacute and outpatient support often required by hospital-leavers.

The number of Victorians who have been discharged from mental health facilities into homelessness has grown by 65 per cent over the past five years.²⁸ Prisoner exits into homelessness have grown by 188 per cent over this time.²⁹ Thousands of Victorians are being put at risk as a consequence of lack of housing and transition support for those leaving state services.



Source: Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, Specialist Homelessness Services Collection, Victoria

In Victoria, the number of prisoners on remand has almost doubled from 1,100 in 2014 to 2,200 in 2017.³⁰ Victoria's recent bail reforms mean that this number is likely to continue to grow. An unanticipated impact of the increasing use of remand, is that a growing number of people will be unable to sustain their tenancies. The nature of remand is such that people have little forewarning of their incarceration, and this means little ability to proactively see to their affairs — like paying rent or vacating a property. Those who are unexpectedly imprisoned and admitted to hospitals require support to put their affairs in order. Further to this, a pool of dedicated housing is required to ensure that the justice and health outcomes that the Victorian Government invests in so heavily at the crisis end are not undercut upon release. Such housing should be a widespread feature of post-release and post-discharge care.³¹

CALL FOR ACTION

- 5. Prevent exits to homelessness — by delivering dedicated housing and support packages to people leaving prison and acute health and mental health services.**

A core part of any homelessness prevention strategy: tenancy focused legal supports

Even when protected by Victoria's rental laws, Victorian tenants are not using the protections they are afforded. Landlords initiate 95 per cent of applications to the Victorian Civil and Administrative Tribunal (VCAT) Residential Tenancies List.³² Of these, 80 per cent go undefended, with the tenant failing to appear at the hearing,³³ while in 95 per cent of applications initiated by private landlords, landlords are represented by their agent or property manager.³⁴ Evictions are one of three major pathways into homelessness in Victoria, contributing to about 40 per cent of episodes of homelessness.³⁵

Our consultations with homelessness services across Victoria identified that where tenants attend VCAT hearings, the result is typically a less punitive outcome for that tenant, including a significantly reduced incidence of eviction. With landlords typically represented by professional real estate agents, many tenants require additional support in understanding and pursuing their rights.

Any plan to prevent homelessness in Victoria must include as a core component tenancy focused legal supports for the vulnerable among Victoria's 512,000 renting households.

CALL FOR ACTION

- 6. Prevent evictions into homelessness — by delivering tenancy focused legal support for vulnerable tenants at risk of homelessness**



A stable home, and a brief period of support; intervening early to end homelessness

Homelessness doesn't just happen. It is usually the result of a crisis escalating to the point that a person can no longer sustain housing. People have an incredible capacity to overcome hardship and work towards achieving a good life. But when people lose their housing, attending to their immediate needs overrides the need to achieve higher order goals. By intervening early, we can arrest a deepening crisis, and set people up to continue to work towards a stable, contributing future.

Ending homelessness doesn't mean that people will never find themselves without shelter. It means that homelessness will be rare, the experience brief and well supported, and that it will not recur in a cycle of repeated homelessness. In the previous chapter we explored measures that can ensure that crises are prevented from escalating, and ways to support the sustainment of housing for those doing it tough. In this chapter we explore measures to ensure that where homelessness does occur, that the experience is brief.

In responding to the Royal Commission into Family Violence, Victoria is leading the way in early intervention. Family violence is the second largest contributor to homelessness in Victoria,³⁶ and the largest contributor for women and children. New responses to family violence are delivering access to affordable housing and support to ensure that women and children's experience of homelessness is brief. It is important that this work to achieve the Royal Commission's aims remains a priority for the next Victorian Government.

Resolving the major causes of homelessness, like family violence or financial trouble, can be complex. It takes time and substantial initiative to navigate complex systems such as the family court, banks, justice, Centrelink and employment. It is a challenge to achieve refinancing and deal with utilities companies, while attending to your child's wellbeing, separating assets and responding to debt collectors. The onset of homelessness is a particularly difficult period for most people, and as well as a stable home from which to attend to these challenges, many people need short periods of support to resolve these issues

Outreach into marginal accommodation: a low cost support with big outcomes

There are 1,184 registered rooming houses in Victoria³⁷ and 128 supported residential services (SRS's).³⁸ While some operators of marginal housing like rooming houses and SRS's provide safe environments, others are unsafe and of poor quality. Residents' health and wellbeing can suffer as a consequence.³⁹

Even a small support resource can make a huge difference to the lives of people living in marginal accommodation. One Victorian program found that when a specialist homelessness service partnered with a homelessness outreach nurse to provide a fortnightly social meal at privately operated rooming houses, it allowed them to engage with residents and link them in with agencies to support their health, employment, volunteering, legal, and housing needs.⁴⁰ Other critical support service referrals included dental, antenatal, drug and alcohol, social inclusion, mental health, education, pest control, financial and clothing.⁴¹

This approach has support from specialist homelessness support agencies, rooming house operators, and rooming house residents.⁴² With all stakeholders in agreement, the next Government should fund outreach support workers into rooming houses and other forms of marginal accommodation. This simple and low cost intervention can support many of Victoria's most marginalised people to live healthier lives, participate in our community more fully, and be better connected.

CALL FOR ACTION

- 7. Improve the health and wellbeing of people living in marginal accommodation by providing outreach support.**

Emergency response capacity: keeping pace with demand

The Victorian Government's Housing Establishment Fund (HEF) provides flexible funding for accommodation for people at risk of or experiencing homelessness. Funds can be used to prevent homelessness, to provide an immediate crisis accommodation response, or to establish a longer-term housing option.⁴³

Rapid growth in demand for homelessness services in Victoria, which grew 28 per cent from 86,150 people to 109,901 between 2012 and 2017, has put pressure on the Housing Establishment Fund.⁴⁴

Preventing homelessness and assisting people to find a new permanent home will always be the main priorities of those working to end homelessness. However, when a person or family do experience homelessness, an immediate short-term response must be available, while more permanent arrangements are made. As demand has increased, this has increasingly meant scarce HEF funds are primarily used to accommodate people who have no other option but rough sleeping, in short stay temporary accommodation options, such as motels.

Since 2012, the cost of these temporary accommodation options has increased significantly. This means that the Housing Establishment Fund must support more people, while support costs more. Add to this the increasing difficulty that those on low incomes face in obtaining long-term housing such as private rental, which tends to result in longer reliance on HEF, and hence the resource is under enormous strain.

The Housing Establishment Fund is now too small to be effective, with many highly vulnerable people being turned away from homelessness services without receiving immediate crisis support.

CALL FOR ACTION

- 8. Increase Housing Establishment Fund (HEF) and or flexible funding, to reflect increased demand and costs of crisis accommodation.**



Ending chronic homelessness; stable affordable housing, and long term support

Rough sleeping accounts for just 5 per cent of homelessness in Victoria,⁴⁵ and almost half of these experiences are relatively short.⁴⁶ However, there is no doubt that the needs of longer term rough sleepers, and those experiencing chronic homelessness who cycle in and out of rough sleeping and marginal accommodation are substantial. Both Australian and international research and practice evidence is clear, that people experiencing chronic homelessness need both housing and intensive or longer term supports if they are to participate fully in the benefits of life in Victoria.

It has long been Victorian Government policy that everyone who has the capacity to, should be supported to live safely and independently in the community. That those among us with a need for ongoing supports are entitled to receive them in such a way that strengthens rather than restricts their full participation in the community. It is policy that we all have the right to see our friends and family, to cook our own meals, enjoy the local amenities like parks and libraries, and to develop satisfying and meaningful routines.

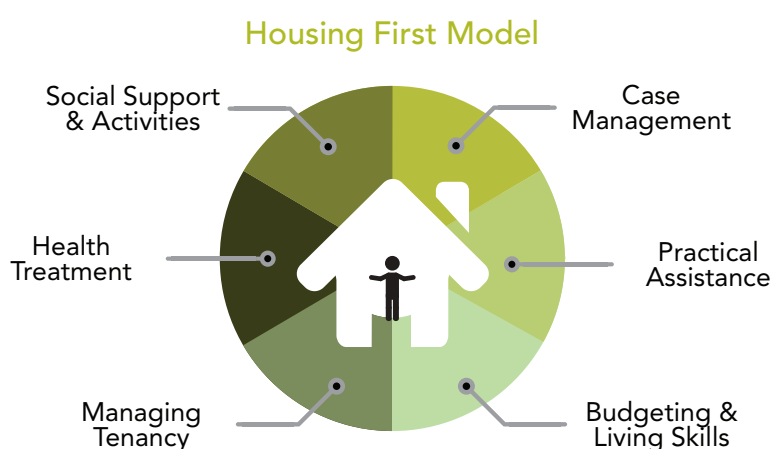
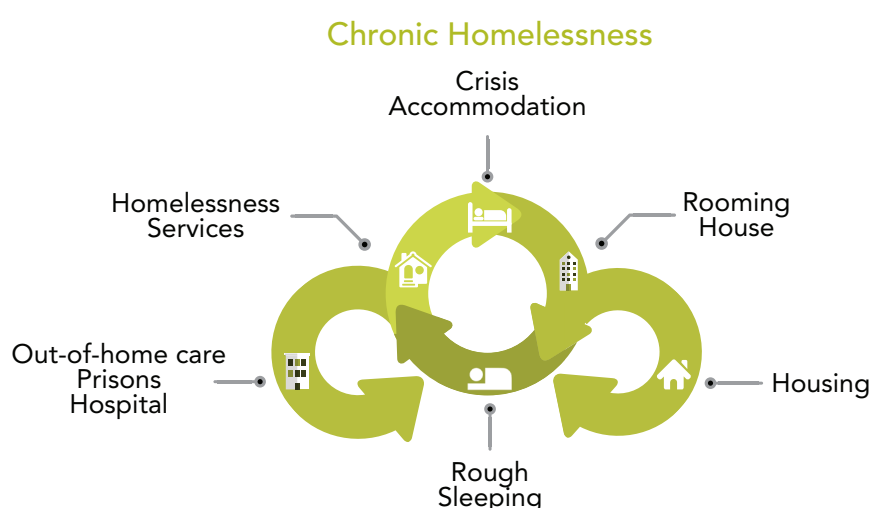
Yet we fail to live up to the promise of this policy. The reality is that many people in our community who need ongoing support with disability or mental illness or with recovery from significant trauma as children, do not receive that support, and as a consequence are highly vulnerable to becoming chronically homeless.

Some public policy issues are 'wicked' in nature; the solutions aren't apparent, the stakeholders too opposed. Chronic homelessness is *not* a wicked issue. Stable and affordable housing, and long-term support have been clearly demonstrated to be the effective solution. Victorians are united in the call to do more and do better to end chronic homelessness.⁴⁷ Government leadership to achieve it is needed.

Delivering housing options for 'Housing First' approaches

Homelessness experts in Australia and across the world have conclusively demonstrated that the solution to housing chronically homeless populations is housing and support for as long as recovery may take;⁴⁸ an approach known as Permanent Supportive Housing or 'Housing First'.

Without Housing First approaches, including assertive outreach, intensive case management, multidisciplinary supports, and housing, people experiencing chronic homelessness have high frequency interactions with costly services including hospitals, mental health facilities, prisons and remand centres.^{49, 50} While extremely costly, these interactions fail to achieve positive outcomes due to their episodic, crisis driven, and time limited nature. Permanent Supportive Housing responses have been rigorously tested and found to achieve far greater housing sustainment outcomes for those who experience chronic homelessness.^{51, 52}



Source: *Housing First: Permanent supportive Housing*, Council to Homeless Persons, 2018

Victoria now has many of the critical elements of a Permanent Supportive Housing response. The *Victorian Homelessness and Rough Sleeping Action Plan* released in January 2018 includes assertive outreach, intensive case management, and the multidisciplinary supports required by people with multiple complex needs. A small number of people will require accommodation with on-site support.⁵³ The one missing element is access to housing.

As more people are supported to reduce their support needs, and even to full independence, permanent supportive housing workers will engage new consumers, ensuring a flow of people through the program. A matching flow of housing will be required. By ensuring that there is growth in Victoria's social housing stock, and setting part of it aside for 'Housing First' programs, we can complete the suite of resources required to ensure that Victoria's chronically homeless rough sleeping population have the supports that they need.

CALL FOR ACTION

- 9. Deliver targeted housing for people experiencing chronic homelessness.**

Supporting the transition to secure housing; follow up support for the rehoused

Among the many tragedies of chronic homelessness is the fact that once a person who has been chronically homeless has housing, they can find the experience of having a home again deeply distressing. People describe experiencing anxiety, loneliness, and being overwhelmed; and feeling like an outsider who doesn't fit in, who can't cope, and doesn't belong in their community.^{54, 55}

Homelessness agencies currently focus the limited resources available on supporting people into housing, and to resolving issues that contributed to their homelessness. Yet very little support is typically available to a person making the transition that comes with access to secure housing. This adds to the stress of this transition, and in some instances can result in people returning to their previous (homeless) living arrangements in order to seek the comfort of familiar people and routines.^{56, 57}

In prioritising addressing homelessness and its causes, insufficient attention is paid to its impacts. Our goal should not be simply to see people rehoused, but to see them able to enjoy the benefits of such housing, a goal that requires some support for this transition.

CALL FOR ACTION

10. Deliver post-housing support to people exiting chronic homelessness.

Child and youth homelessness; it's time for a joined up approach

A happy childhood is the essential building block for a happy life. It can be the basis of a person's health, the capacity to develop positive relationships, the groundwork for a lifetime of learning, and a precursor to positive employment. In short, a happy childhood built on love, attention, and dedication to a child's needs is the most important way that we can deliver on the promise of a good life for every Victorian. As a society, there is no clearer shared responsibility than that which we have for the protection and positive development of children.

For adults, the goal of ending homelessness is to create the conditions where people can control the circumstances of their own well-being. It's access to a secure and affordable home, and sometimes it's a helping hand through a hard time. For children and young people, creating the conditions necessary to ensure their well-being is more complicated. Children require care and guidance, and do not control the circumstances of their own health, safety and positive development.

Where children and young people are not responsible for creating their own well-being, it is essential that the supports are available to support this outcome across all necessary domains. Children experiencing homelessness are not having their shelter needs met. It is also likely that they have unmet needs in relation to education, family support, counselling, guidance, and financial support. Currently the provision of these supports is *ad hoc* and lacks a comprehensive youth homelessness strategy or framework — it's time for a joined up approach.

In addressing the needs of children, we need to make sure that the supports that they require are available. And we need to recognise that the needs of children and young people experiencing homelessness are likely to be different from those of adults. We shouldn't require young people to fit into the service system that was designed to meet the needs of adults — we should have a service system that fits the needs of children and young people.

Reconcile and reunify: supporting families to end youth homelessness

Many young people experience homelessness as the result of family conflict.⁵⁸ Their home environment becomes so negative and distressing that they leave.

For some children and young people, it is not safe to return to living in their family home, but for many, reconciling with family and returning home is the best possible option.⁵⁹ Even where they leave home, it is rare for children and young people to desire a complete break of ties with family. As such, an opportunity exists to reconcile and strengthen the capacity for ongoing family connections.⁶⁰

Currently, family mediation and reconciliation services are provided in an ad hoc way across Victoria, and many young people do not get the support they need, precipitating unnecessary and often prolonged experiences of homelessness. Once they are homeless, young people are more likely to disengage from education; increasing their susceptibility to a range of negative outcomes include mental health issues, substance misuse, criminal involvement, violence and victimisation.⁶¹ Prolonged youth homelessness is also a powerful predictor of a lifetime of episodic homelessness.⁶²

“Many young people do not get the support they need, precipitating unnecessary and often prolonged experiences of homelessness.”

Young people who reengage with their families not only address their immediate homelessness, but are more likely to remain engaged in school and education.⁶³ School engagement is a powerful protective factor against future homelessness for children who have experienced homelessness.⁶⁴ By supporting families in need, we can make life easier for parents, but also make significant gains in ensuring that young people at risk remain on the trajectory to the positive adult life that we owe all young people.

CALL FOR ACTION

11. Prevent youth homelessness by delivering family reconciliation programs across Victoria.

Keeping children and young people safe: support for young couchsurfers

Many children and young people who experience homelessness stay temporarily with friends or family. Known as 'couchsurfing' these arrangements are typically informal. This informality can lead to problems, including disparate understandings of the arrangement between host and guest, transience, and a dangerous lack of oversight.

Couchsurfing should not be understood as an extended form of kinship care. Typically young couchsurfers stay a short while with one household until they are no longer welcome, and then secure a similar short stay with another. Often, this process continues until they have exhausted their options.

At this point many children and young people find themselves in increasingly risky scenarios. They may stay with newer acquaintances, and even with strangers who offer them a place to stay. In a near-stranger's home, having recently exhausted their personal support networks, children and young people are vulnerable to exploitation. Girls, young women and LGBTIQ young people are particularly vulnerable to sexual violence or to sex-as-payment arrangements.^{65,66} Unfortunately, young people are making decisions about the safety of these arrangements at a time when they have limited remaining support.⁶⁷

Currently, there are next to no programs focussed on supporting young people who are couchsurfing. Young people need support to assess the safety of their arrangements, and where they are unsafe, to support them to access more formal youth homelessness programs.

"Currently, there are next to no programs focussed on supporting young people who are couchsurfing."

Where an arrangement is safe and provides a positive home environment, supports should be made available to both the couchsurfer, and the 'couch' provider to stabilise the living arrangement, including assisting 'couch' providers who may be struggling to provide support to a traumatised young person, or struggling to meet the costs of an additional household member.⁶⁸

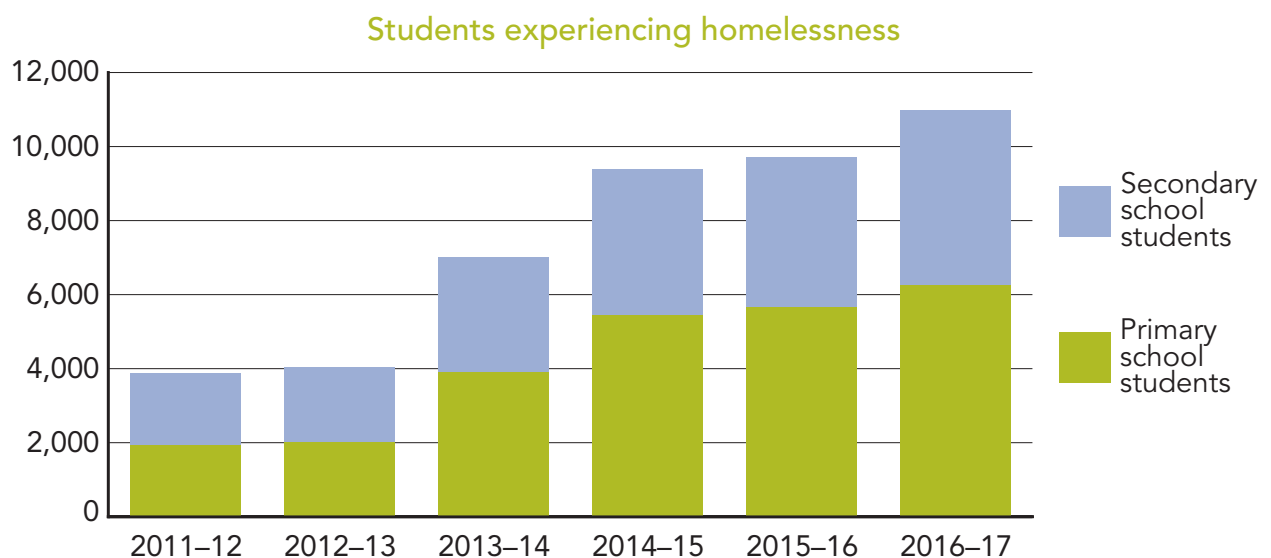
CALL FOR ACTION

12. Deliver support to young people who are couchsurfing to assist them to stabilise a safe living arrangement and continue their education.

Education focused support for young people experiencing homelessness

In the past five years homelessness services have seen a 284 per cent increase in the number of school students attending our services.⁶⁹ From nearly 4,000 school students experiencing or at risk of homelessness in 2012, there are now nearly 11,000 each year. It can be extremely difficult for children and young people who are experiencing homelessness to retain their links to education.

Homelessness for children often means multiple incidences of moving house, including school relocations, living in cars or motels, and often, living in severely overcrowded houses. These conditions can make it very difficult to attend school, and to complete homework.



Source: Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, Specialist Homelessness Services Collection, Victoria

Children who experience prolonged episodes of homelessness are especially susceptible to a lifetime of intermittent homelessness.⁷⁰ However, schooling is a highly protective factor against lifetime homelessness, supporting educational attainment and ultimate employment outcomes, but also in terms of self-esteem, countering the stigma of homelessness, and maintaining a pro-social identity.⁷¹

Unfortunately, many schools make it very difficult for students to continue to engage. By failing students who do not meet attendance requirements (even where they have kept up with their school work), refusing to send work home with students who are transient, and declining to enrol students who need a short-term enrolment while they are in crisis accommodation, schools can exclude children from education.

Students who come through homelessness services require education-focused advocates who can help with the administrative burdens imposed by schools making decisions that exclude kids from school. They may need brokerage to meet the costs of textbooks or uniforms at multiple new schools, or transport to and from a school that is far from their temporary accommodation. And they may require educational support to check in with their home-based study, or support their readiness to pick up where their new school is at the curriculum. Multidisciplinary support teams such as this are currently in place for young people in out of home care. These teams should be scaled up so that young people experiencing homelessness have the best chance possible of staying in school.

CALL FOR ACTION

13. Extend education-focussed supports for young people in out of home care to include young people experiencing homelessness.

Let's finish what we've started: An extended care guarantee for young people leaving care

Each year in Victoria, 700 – 800 young people in foster and residential care (out of home care) turn 18, and at this point the Government withdraws support for their housing and care. In 2016–17, 440 of the 729 young people who aged out of care⁷² came to a homelessness service.⁷³

Young people who have been in out of home care are also heavily over-represented among all young people experiencing homelessness.⁷⁴ The safety net for young people in the care and protection of the state is failing to set them on the positive life trajectory that they need.

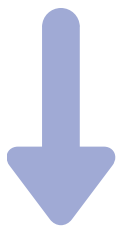
There is growing recognition internationally that young people leaving care require support after the age of 18. In jurisdictions where this has been implemented, considerable improvements have been achieved in education, employment, housing stability, physical and mental health, reduced alcohol and drug dependency, and reduced interaction with the justice system and incarceration.⁷⁵

Outcomes for young people who receive extended out-of-home care

50%
reduction in
homelessness



35%
reduction in
hospitalisation



45% decrease
in arrests



532% decrease
in substance
misuse



150% increase in
pursuing further
education



Source: Deloitte Access Economics, *Raising our children; Guiding young Victorians in care into adulthood*, Anglicare Victoria, 2016

In Victoria, there is a dearth of post-care support available for Victorian care-leavers. The Victorian Government funds post-care support places for some young care leavers, but these are too few, and often too limited in scope.⁷⁶ Legislatively guaranteed rights to extended care should exist for young people aging out of the system.

This must include continued access to the support services that they need, and financial support to either maintain their current housing, or establish and sustain a new housing option. Where necessary the Victorian Government should provide a rental subsidy as a form of ongoing care to these young people.

Over three quarters of Victorians agree that the Victorian Government should extend care for all young care leavers.⁷⁷ The next Victorian Government should embed these principles in law, and provide the funding to deliver this outcome. When we take young people away from their families, it's in the hope that we can support them to a positive life trajectory as adults. This work remains unfinished at 18 years old. Let's finish what we've started.

CALL FOR ACTION

14. Reform legislation to guarantee housing and support to young people leaving care until the age of 21.

Getting back on track: meeting young people's housing needs

With nearly 20,000 young people aged 15–24 seeking support from a homelessness agency in 2016–17, young people account for nearly a fifth of those experiencing or at risk of homelessness in Victoria.⁷⁸ Where young people don't have safe living environments it is imperative that appropriate housing is available with support as needed.

Currently Victoria has 18 youth refuges, and seven foyer-like facilities. These services have been developed in a piecemeal fashion over the decades,⁷⁹ with many parts of Victoria missing out as a consequence. This makes it difficult for young people who have to leave their local community to access accommodation to continue with school, tertiary education, or work⁸⁰ and to remain connected to important people in their lives.⁸¹

“Young people account for nearly a fifth of those experiencing or at risk of homelessness in Victoria.”

LGBTIQ young people are particularly vulnerable to homelessness.⁸² Yet despite the extremely high prevalence of LGBTIQ youth homelessness, there are very few specific specialist homelessness services for this cohort, and they often experience challenges in mainstream services. A dedicated housing and education facility should be a priority for this underserved group.

When settled, young people are encouraged to leave crisis facilities and live in the community. A snapshot of the nearly 14,000 rental properties advertised in Victoria over a weekend in March 2018 found that not one was affordable to a young person on Youth Allowance — including if that young person was seeking a share house arrangement.⁸³ Meanwhile, not all young people have the capacity to live in shared accommodation. In order to secure safe and affordable long-term housing for young people experiencing homelessness, they need a housing subsidy, linked with supports, education or employment.

CALL FOR ACTION

- 15. Extend youth refuge and education focussed supported accommodation options across Victoria so all young people who need them can access these in their local community.**
- 16. Deliver housing subsidies for young people to support their capacity to move to independent housing options.**

Preventing a lifetime of homelessness; multidisciplinary support for young people with highly complex needs

Children and young people who are subject to abuse and neglect are among the most highly vulnerable people in our society. This is especially true of the small but underserved group of children where neglect manifests in early complex behaviours, including cognitive disability, severe psychological distress, homelessness, and increased contact with police. The neurological impacts of early childhood trauma, can become a lifelong disability if left untreated.⁸⁴

Such disabilities can result in reduced capacity to regulate emotions, poor impulse control and limited independence.⁸⁵ Without support young people with concurrent cognitive disability and mental health disorders can incur a lifetime of costs between the homelessness, hospital, and corrections systems.⁸⁶ However, for young people with multiple complex needs, including disability, mental illness, homelessness, and substance abuse, there are few intensively supported therapeutic residential facilities available to support them to recovery.

**“The neurological impacts of early childhood trauma,
can become a lifelong disability if left untreated.”**

With no single government agency equipped to support the various needs of this cohort, police are often required to provide the frontline response to their housing, child protection, mental health and cognitive disability needs.⁸⁷ For their part, police express frustration at the inability of support services to intervene at this critical stage. A police led response is destined to fail to deliver long-term outcomes for the young people in question.

A small, but desperately underserved group of young people require accommodation with on-site multidisciplinary support. To break the cycle of prison and homelessness for young Victorians with disabilities and complex behaviours, more of this type of accommodation needs to be provided.

CALL FOR ACTION

17. Deliver intensively supported accommodation options for young people who are homeless and have highly complex needs

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