

## 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.<sup>22</sup> 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.<sup>23</sup>

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.<sup>24</sup> 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.<sup>25</sup>



*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

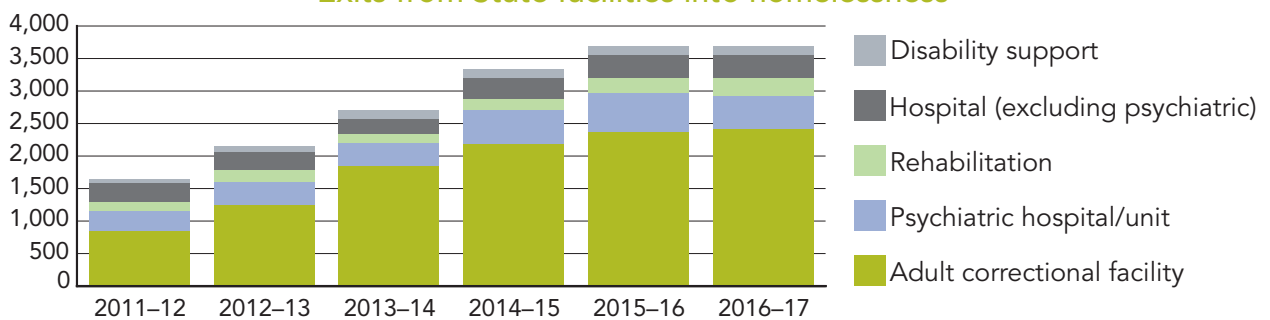
- 4. Recurrently fund the successful Private Rental Assistance Program.**

# 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,<sup>26</sup> and people discharged from hospital are more likely to experience poor health. Homelessness is both destructive to a person’s mental health,<sup>27</sup> 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.<sup>28</sup> Prisoner exits into homelessness have grown by 188 per cent over this time.<sup>29</sup> Thousands of Victorians are being put at risk as a consequence of lack of housing and transition support for those leaving state services.

Exits from State facilities into homelessness



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.<sup>30</sup> 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.<sup>31</sup>

## 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.<sup>32</sup> Of these, 80 per cent go undefended, with the tenant failing to appear at the hearing,<sup>33</sup> while in 95 per cent of applications initiated by private landlords, landlords are represented by their agent or property manager.<sup>34</sup> Evictions are one of three major pathways into homelessness in Victoria, contributing to about 40 per cent of episodes of homelessness.<sup>35</sup>

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**

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