



Council to Homeless Persons Budget Submission 2020 –2021



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Introduction

Homelessness in Victoria continues to grow at a much faster rate than the population. In 2017-18, more than 116,000 people sought assistance from homelessness services in Victoria, six per cent more than the year before.¹ To reverse this trend the Victorian Government needs to invest in a stronger response.

In this Budget Submission, Council to Homeless Persons has identified critical system gaps contributing to increased homelessness, including the need for: more social housing; housing and support for young people exiting statutory and psychiatric care; and specialist assessment and support for a growing number of people with complex needs.

Homelessness is a devastating experience for individuals, and in its own right, a significant public policy issue. It should also be of enormous concern to budget-conscious governments. Repeated use of high-cost government service systems, including justice² and acute mental healthcare³, is often preceded by experiences of homelessness. Adequate, appropriate interventions are not only good for individuals and the community, but can also reduce cost to Government.⁴

Currently, lack of social housing is undermining the Victorian Government's proactive and progressive agenda, locking many people out of opportunities for education, employment and for a safe family environment. Victoria's social housing proportion, already the lowest in the nation,⁵ is on track to fall further. Victoria's per capita spend on social housing remains the lowest in the nation.⁶

Lack of access to decent and affordable housing is particularly acute for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Victorians, who make up 0.9 per cent of the state's population,⁷ but 9.8 per cent of all homelessness service users.⁸ Aboriginal Community Controlled Organisations are uniquely placed, to provide the solidarity and skill needed to support Aboriginal people without a home.⁹ In order to strengthen outcomes, and to deliver on Aboriginal self-determination, CHP calls for ten per cent of both housing and homelessness budget initiatives to be directed to Aboriginal Community Controlled Organisations.

Building more social housing, and supporting people out of homelessness, are the most important investments the Victorian Government can make to give vulnerable Victorians access to opportunities for a good life.

Housing

Every person, family and household needs somewhere to live. We all need a home that we can afford, where we can sleep safely, and that's stable enough that we can get on with our lives; enrol our children in school, plan our next career move, and build rewarding routines with family and friends. The impact of a safe, stable and affordable home extends beyond housing; it provides the opportunity to take control of and realise our aspirations.

Tonight 25,000 Victorians will be denied the safety and security of a home.¹⁰ This year more than 116,000 Victorians will turn to a homelessness service for help.¹¹ Almost a quarter of them will be children.¹² They won't have a safe place to sleep, and it will impact negatively on their education, employment, relationships, and their sense of self. The biggest cause of homelessness is also the biggest barrier to escaping homelessness; there are far too few properties that people on low incomes can afford to rent.

In Victoria's rental markets, private rental opportunities for people experiencing homelessness have grown so scarce as to be negligible.¹³ To address and prevent homelessness, there is no single factor more effective than social housing.¹⁴ Yet, Victorians' access to public and community housing is contracting. The number of social housing properties in Victoria last peaked in 2014 and has been falling since.¹⁵ Now 44,152 households are on the social housing wait list.¹⁶ The Victorian Government's commitments in previous budgets will see the raw numbers begin to grow again soon – yet critically, the share of Victorian housing that is social housing will continue to fall.

More than any other factor, diminishing access to social housing is contributing to Victoria's ever growing homelessness. To address the deficit in Victoria's social housing stock, the Victorian Government must invest in building thousands of new properties every year. To make a real impact on homelessness, the Victorian Government needs to increase Victoria's social housing stock to the national average of 4.5 per cent of all housing - an increase of 6,000 per year over ten years.¹⁷ Reflecting that one in ten people attending a homelessness services is Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander,¹⁸ one tenth of these properties should be managed by Aboriginal Community Controlled Organisations.

	2020-21	2021-22	2022-23	2023-24
Number	6,000	6,000	6,000	6,000
Cost	\$2.1B	\$2.1B	\$2.1	\$2.1B

Expanding Housing First teams to reduce recurring homelessness

For most people who experience homelessness, the solution is access to a home that they can afford, and a brief period of support to help them resolve their current crisis. But some people's needs are more substantial and short periods of support aren't sufficient for them to gain and sustain housing. Both Australian and international research is clear, that for people experiencing chronic homelessness, housing, assertive outreach and ongoing flexible support is needed; a solution called Housing First.^{19 20}

A recent study revealed that ten per cent of households using homelessness services in Victoria are using 26 per cent of support days, and returning to services multiple times every year.²¹ These households were three to four times more likely to have complex needs like problematic drug or alcohol use, a lack of family or community support, mental health issues, and to be unemployed.²² Many people are returning to homelessness even after housing outcomes are achieved.

For people who are long term rough sleepers or frequent service users, integrated assertive outreach and longer-term support is needed to interrupt this cycle of chronic recurring homelessness.

In January 2018, the Victorian Government invested in eight assertive outreach teams and six supportive housing teams, to deliver new services in some locations. These new services are achieving very positive results, but many places in Victoria missed out, and others gained only assertive outreach but not Supportive Housing.

In 2020-21, it is time to build on this investment and build an integrated assertive outreach and supportive housing response across all of Victoria. To maximise the impact of additional support, these teams also need to have dedicated access to the new social housing identified as an urgent priority earlier in this submission.

	2020-21	2021-22	2022-23	2023-24
Number	1,488	2,080	2,080	2,080
Cost	\$20.1 M	\$20.7 M	\$21.3 M	\$22.0 M

Housing First for the transition from psychiatric care

The Royal Commission into Victoria’s Mental Health System has heard that people with mental illness are cycling through psychiatric care into homelessness, and that it is destructive to their mental health.²³ Every psychiatric care discharge is an obvious opportunity to intervene in a person’s long-term wellbeing and to provide support. This opportunity is being missed, with more than one in six people using public mental health services also using a homelessness service in the same year,²⁴ and 500 people discharged each year from psychiatric care straight to homelessness services.²⁵ These services need the capacity to respond.

Housing is key to mental health recovery. A stable home is a precondition for accessing needed services and reduces the risk of relapse.²⁶ In a service environment that includes the NDIS, a gap remains for people who require proactive assistance. Homelessness services know all too well that some people counter-intuitively disengage from supports just as their health deteriorates.²⁷

To aid the step from hospital-based care to in-community treatment, dedicated psychiatric care transition workers should be attached to Victoria’s Housing First responses across the state. With dedicated access to housing, and the capacity to work with clients at an intensity that responds to their changing needs, Housing First programs support the wellbeing and independence of people living with complex mental illnesses, helping people to remain housed and recovery-focused. Transition workers would maximize NDIS-eligible participants’ engagement with the scheme, and provide support for those who are ineligible.

In announcing the Royal Commission into Victoria’s Mental Health System, the Premier called for Victoria to answer the question “what do we need to do to save thousands of lives, and bring thousands more back from the brink of homelessness and substance abuse”.²⁸ This proposal is a critical piece of the solution needed to achieve this important goal.

	2020-21	2021-22	2022-23	2023-24
Support places (new)	216	138	126	126
Support places (continuing)	-	195	222	225
Support places (total)	216	333	349	351
Cost	\$5.4 M	\$5.6 M	\$5.7 M	\$5.9 M

Improving Initial Assessment and Planning and immediate response

Key to accessing homelessness services in Victoria, are homelessness 'entry points'. Entry points find out about a person's needs, and match them with the housing and supports available locally, a process known as 'Initial Assessment & Planning' (IAP).²⁹ Entry points are effectively gatekeepers to Victoria's homelessness services.

But lack of funding for demand growth over many years means many entry points don't have enough staff to see each person that arrives at their door. Every day 90 people are turned away³⁰ from any access to homelessness supports that they are seeking.

Growth in demand relative to staff levels has also reduced the capacity for IAP workers to fully assess people's needs and to provide effective immediate interventions. This means opportunities are being missed to reduce the impact of homelessness and enhance safety by helping people to get onto the right Centrelink payment, update their public housing application and/or comprehensively assess their family violence risk.

The dismantling of community mental health services is also having an impact, with more highly vulnerable and unwell people coming to homelessness services who no longer receive the support that they need. Assessing the complexity of people's needs in these circumstances, and providing an effective immediate intervention, requires specialist skills including enhanced mental health and family violence expertise.

In order to deliver effective immediate interventions to the growing number of people with more complex needs, entry points require additional experienced established workers who can provide an enhanced assessment and initial response to people with complex needs and family violence risk.³¹ This will free up other IAP workers to respond to the overall level of increased demand.

	2020-21	2021-22	2022-23	2023-24
Number	31,500	31,500	31,500	31,500
Cost	\$2.6M	\$2.6M	\$2.7M	\$2.8M

The Home Stretch

Where children are living in an unsafe environment, they are placed in the care of the state in “out of home care”, where it is intended that they will be safer. Yet there is a well-worn path from Victoria’s out of home care arrangements to homelessness services, with 63 per cent of young people seeking homelessness support having been in out of home care.³² In 2017-18 Victoria’s specialist homelessness services supported 477 young people transitioning from out of home care arrangements,³³ a majority of Victoria’s young care leavers aged 15 and over.³⁴ It is clear that at the age of 18, there is more nurturing to be done.

In 2018, the Victorian Government committed to extending care to the age of 21 for 250 young people over five years.³⁵ Labelled ‘The Home Stretch’, this reform is backed by significant evidence.³⁶

The first 50 places in this program were funded from July 2019. As 500 young people leave statutory care each year, it is clear that 50 places are not adequate to meet demand and many young people will continue to leave out of home care into homelessness. This reform has not gone far enough.

It isn’t acceptable that vulnerable young people’s access to much needed support is contingent on a one in ten chance of that support being funded. In the 2020-21 Budget, fully funding the Home Stretch supports that young people require is a critical priority – for as many young people as need them. Secondly, we should legislate this reform to ensure young people have a right to proper support.

When we take young people away from their families, it’s in the expectation that we can support them to a positive life trajectory as adults. This work and the State’s responsibility remains unfinished at 18 years old. As The Home Stretch campaign has said; let’s finish what we’ve started.

	2020-21	2021-22	2022-23	2023-24
Number	172	312	435	444
Cost	\$3.8 M	\$7.2 M	\$10.4 M	\$10.9 M

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