



Council to Homeless Persons submission on the Family Violence Rolling Action Plan 2020-23



Contents

Introduction.....	3
Homelessness data for women and children escaping family violence	4
Does the Housing material highlight the reform achievements you consider to have been the most important over the last three years?	5
Do you agree with the following statement: “The proposed activities and milestones are a fair summary of the priority deliverables for Housing over the next three years”?	7
Conclusion	9
References.....	10

Introduction

Council to Homeless Persons welcomes the opportunity to provide feedback on the Family Violence Rolling Action Plan 2020-23 (the Rolling Action Plan).

Council to Homeless Persons (CHP) is the peak Victorian body representing organisations and individuals with a commitment to ending homelessness. CHP works to end homelessness through leadership in policy development, advocacy, capacity building and consumer participation.

Homelessness occurs at the intersection of structural forces, like housing affordability, inadequate income supports, as well as personal disadvantage, like financial disadvantage, family violence, or disability.

Four years ago the Royal Commission into Family Violence handed down its recommendations. The Commission's findings were stark. 'A lack of housing options can exacerbate the trauma and dislocation of the violence, disrupting social and economic participation and education and adversely affect health and wellbeing. In some cases it forces women to choose to return to a violent partner.'¹

The Victorian Government's initial significant commitment following the Royal Commission's findings to the Family Violence Housing Blitz, saw a range of initiatives including investments in social housing, and successful subsidy programs to rehouse women in private rental housing.² However, this investment has proven insufficient to address the systemic problem of family violence driven homelessness. In March 2020, 80 family violence and homelessness organisations wrote to the Victorian Government advising that the finding of the Commission remains as relevant in 2020 as when the Commission reported.

"There is clear evidence that housing pathways are 'blocked up' and not flowing as intended. There is a lack of viable long-term housing options that allow people to 'exit' the system and get on with their lives. There are simply not enough short-term or long-term accommodation options for victims in metropolitan and regional Victoria."³

The Family Violence Rolling Action Plan 2020-23 must include commitments to address the ongoing housing insecurity and homelessness of victim-survivors of family violence.

Homelessness data - women and children escaping family violence

Family violence so often results in homelessness, that it is the primary cause of homelessness for women and children in Victoria. In 2018-19 over 50,000 Victorians attended a homelessness service reporting family violence as contributing to their homelessness or imminent risk of homelessness.⁴ This number is not anomalous, but represents continued growth in homelessness service use by victim-survivors of family violence, up 42 per cent since 2013-14.¹

Not only does the data from homelessness services show that women and children are still fleeing family violence into homelessness, but also that this homelessness is less able to be resolved in 2019 than it was in 2016. Some 62 per cent of adults and children experiencing domestic or family violence who were already homeless when they sought homelessness assistance were still homeless after receiving support in 2018-19; compared to in 2015-16, when 59 per cent remained homeless.⁵

Too little access to housing that women on low incomes can afford continues to create blockages in and out of family violence refuges and crisis accommodation.

As the Royal Commission found, this not only prevents women from leaving violent relationships, but is also a common reason that women and children are forced to return to violent relationships.

¹ 42 per cent is a conservative estimate, as in the 2018-19 financial year, data collection methods changed in order to exclude those for whom L17s were received but who declined to receive support. In 2013-14 these instances were counted where homelessness services had sought to engage these individuals and offered them services.

Does the Housing material highlight the reform achievements you consider to have been the most important over the last three years?

The consultation for the Family Violence Rolling Action Plan 2020-23 asks the question: *Does the Housing material highlight the reform achievements you consider to have been the most important over the last three years?*

The Rolling Action clearly expresses important achievements in the housing support space. In particular, the investments in the Private Rental Assistance Program (PRAP) and Flexible Support Packages (FSP) have been major achievements in keeping victim-survivors safe and housed. PRAP has been shown to be effective in assisting many women and children to continue in their private rental housing, or to find new housing,⁶ while FSPs are an essential tool to support 'Safe at Home' responses, making existing homes safe from perpetrators, as well as supporting women to create homes in new accommodation.

However, these programs do not meet the housing needs of women and children who cannot sustain private rental housing, and who need social housing to avoid homelessness.

Work that has been undertaken to date to meet the need for social housing, expressed in Recommendation 19 of the Royal Commission into Family Violence is not fully articulated in the Rolling Action Plan, but is critical to addressing homelessness among victim survivors of family violence.

Recommendation 019 - Establish a Family Violence Housing Assistance Implementation Task Force

"The Victorian Government establish a Family Violence Housing Assistance Implementation Task Force which should:

- *quantify the number of additional social housing units required for family violence victims who are unable to gain access to and sustain private rental accommodation*
- *.... plan for the statewide rollout of ... the social housing required"*⁷

In response to Recommendation 19 of the Royal Commission into Family Violence, the Victorian Government established the Family Violence Housing Assistance

Implementation Task Force. The Task Force existed for the duration of that term of Government, before having its remaining tasks transferred to the Ministerial Advisory Committee on Homelessness.

In order to quantify the number of additional social housing units required for victim-survivors of family violence, the Task Force undertook two important pieces of work, not represented in the Rolling Action Plan.

The Task Force first commissioned research quantifying that 1,700 social housing dwellings need to be added to the total stock per year in order to simply sustain the existing proportion of social housing.⁸ This research also identified that more dwellings would be required in order to meet unmet demand.

The Task Force further commissioned the development of a demand and supply model to aid decision making on housing assistance interventions. This significant piece of work was undertaken through the Family Violence Housing Assistance Implementation Taskforce, completed and is available internally to government. Reference to this considerable work is absent from the 'achievements since 2016' section of the Rolling Action Plan. As we explore in the next section, work is expected to flow from the development of this model, to "plan for the statewide rollout of ... the social housing required" and that must also be captured in the Rolling Action Plan.

Do you agree with the following statement: “The proposed activities and milestones are a fair summary of the priority deliverables for Housing over the next three years”?

The consultation for the Family Violence Rolling Action Plan 2020-23 asks the question: *Do you agree with the following statement: “The proposed activities and milestones are a fair summary of the priority deliverables for Housing over the next three years”?*

The future work as detailed in the Rolling Action Plan neither represents the scope of existing commitments by the Victorian Government, nor sufficient undertakings to meet the housing and homelessness recommendations of the Royal Commission into Family Violence.

Recommendation 018 - Give priority to victims gaining stable housing as quickly as possible.

“The Victorian Government give priority to removing current blockages in refuge and crisis accommodation and transitional housing, so that victims of family violence can gain stable housing as quickly as possible and with a minimum number of relocations, are not accommodated in motels and other ad hoc accommodation, and spend on average no longer than six weeks in refuge and crisis accommodation.”⁹

Despite the significant financial assistance and support detailed in the Rolling Action Plan, and recognised earlier in this submission, many women fleeing family violence remain unable to access or sustain properties in Victoria’s notoriously unaffordable private rental market. This necessitates multiple relocations for these households, or prevents them from leaving temporary and crisis accommodation options, unless they either exit to homelessness or return to the perpetrator. As recognised in the Rolling Action Plan, even the essential PRAP and FSP programs are not funded in an ongoing manner, and so must represent future work in the Rolling Action Plan.

Despite the Royal Commission’s recommendation that victims of family violence not be accommodated in motels or in other *ad hoc* accommodation, a lack of alternative options has meant that to date this practice remains prevalent. Motels are not only ill-suited for providing the stable accommodation for which the Commission called, but also regularly fail to meet suitable levels of safety and amenity for families fleeing violence, exacerbating trauma. The state-wide family violence crisis service, Safe

Steps reports that each night they accommodate an average of 60 women and 55 children in either motels or other community crisis accommodation.¹⁰

Motels also continue to be a necessary option employed by homelessness services seeking to support women and children requiring assistance as a result of family violence. Such short-stay accommodation compounds the instability already experienced by such households. The experience of specialist homelessness services (SHS) is that demand on family violence services can lead to premature case closure, and then former clients presenting to SHS when the financial contribution they have been making to their housing has become unsustainable.¹¹

In 2020, it remains that there is a lack of stable accommodation for low-income households with needs that aren't able to be met by the private rental market. Such housing precarity is extremely detrimental to victim survivors of family violence. As this recommendation remains incomplete, the Rolling Action Plan must be updated to include ways in which it can be met.

Recommendation 019

As mentioned briefly earlier in this submission, the Family Violence Housing Assistance Task Force commissioned work modelling how the need for social housing among victim-survivors of family violence might be measured, in order to meet recommendation 019 of the Royal Commission into Family Violence.

Having determined how to measure the social housing need of victim-survivors of family violence, part of this recommendation is acquitted. However the essential part of the recommendation remains. Unfortunately, it is not clear from the Rolling Action Plan how the Government intends to "plan for the statewide rollout ... of the social housing required", as far less social housing than is needed has been funded or delivered by the Government.

Since the Commission ended, the Government has made welcome investments in social housing, but stock grew by only 2,554 properties over the last four years.¹² While a further 1,000 new properties were committed in the 2019-20 Budget for the next three years, and 1,100 are to be head-leased in response to COVID-19, this means that by 2021, stock will have grown by a total of 4,654 since 2015-16, or 776 properties a year; less than half the 1,700 needed to maintain the proportion of social housing at the level it when the Royal Commission concluded. The consequence is that the proportion of all housing in Victoria that is social housing continues to decline.¹³

Further focus is required in the Rolling Action Plan to reflect the Government's commitment to achieving this recommendation.

Conclusion

The Family Violence Rolling Action Plan 2020-23 is right to include housing among its core themes. The achievements to date have been numerous, and the plans expressed in the Rolling Action Plan are important.

However, the Rolling Action Plan neither reflects all of the most important work done in this reform to date, nor represents a plan to ultimately deliver on the housing related recommendations of the Royal Commission into Family Violence. More must be done to ensure that the Rolling Action Plan is able to achieve these important reforms.

Recommendations 018 and 019 of the Royal Commission into Family Violence have not progressed sufficiently to address problems outlined by the Commission. As such, renewed attention is required to these recommendations in order to support victim-survivors of family violence to safely leave violent relationships, remain apart from perpetrators, and recover from their experiences of family violence.

Only by including all of the important work required to finally acquit the housing and homelessness recommendations of the Royal Commission into Family Violence in the Rolling Action Plan, can we have confidence that women and children are safe and free from violence.

References

- ¹ State of Victoria, 2016, *Royal Commission into Family Violence; Summary and recommendations*, Parl Paper No 132 (2014-16), p.37
- ² State of Victoria, [Family Violence Housing Blitz Package Evaluation](#), July 2018
- ³ State of Victoria, 2016, *Royal Commission into Family Violence; Summary and recommendations*, Parl Paper No 132 (2014-16), p.75
- ⁴ Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, 2019, *Specialist Homelessness Services Collection data cubes 2011-19*, Australian Government, Canberra.
- ⁵ Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, 2019, *Specialist Homelessness Services Collection data cubes 2011-19*, Australian Government, Canberra.
- ⁶ State of Victoria, [Family Violence Housing Blitz Package Evaluation](#), July 2018
- ⁷ State of Victoria, 2016, *Royal Commission into Family Violence; Summary and recommendations*, Parl Paper No 132 (2014-16), p.50
- ⁸ Yates, J., 2017, *Victoria's social housing supply requirements to 2036*, State of Victoria, Department of Health and Human Services
- ⁹ State of Victoria, 2016, *Royal Commission into Family Violence; Summary and recommendations*, Parl Paper No 132 (2014-16), p.50
- ¹⁰ Safe Steps, Submission to the Legal and Social Issues Committee Inquiry into Homelessness in Victoria, February 2020
- ¹¹ Domestic Violence Victoria, 2020, *Submission to the Parliamentary Inquiry into Homelessness*, pp.9-11.
- ¹² In 2015-16, Victoria had 85,195 social housing dwellings, and in 2019-20, this has increased to 87,749 dwellings. (Victorian Government, State Budget Papers 2015-16 and 2019-20)
- ¹³ Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, 2020, *Housing Assistance in Australia*, Australian Government, Canberra.