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Introduction

Council to Homeless Persons (CHP) welcomes the opportunity to provide this submission to the Parliamentary Inquiry into Homelessness. CHP is the Victoria peak 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.

At its very core, homelessness is the experience of not having an adequate home. This phenomenon is growing, and every year more people are living in forms of accommodation that are harmful to them. This reflects the lack of housing and support available to Victoria's most vulnerable. The continuous growth in homelessness is not the result of a great social upheaval – it is the result of insufficient attention from Governments to low-income housing and to the support services required for people in need. Tonight 25,000 Victorians will be denied the safety and security of a home.¹ Whether that number is greater or fewer next year is a choice for the Victorian Government.

Homelessness is often thought of in terms of physical deprivation; the experience of being cold if you have to sleep outside or of not having a warm bed; the difficulty of keeping clean and being comfortable if you cannot access a shower; and how to cook a decent meal if you cannot access a kitchen. But people who have been without a home will tell you that while these privations are real, that the loss of a home causes harm that extends beyond physical deprivation. Homelessness denies people a private space; a safe space; a place to recover when times are tough. It involves a shift in people's identity from being someone who is a part of their community, to someone who is pushed to the margins of that community. This presents real challenges for people's wellbeing, that grow the longer they live without a safe, secure home of their own.

In this submission we explore a number of key themes relating to homelessness: housing, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander homelessness, homelessness prevention, early intervention, long term and recurring homelessness, children's homelessness, and youth homelessness. Through each of these themes runs a constant thread; the greatest challenge of addressing homelessness is to gain access to housing that a person can afford. Currently, there is too little such housing, and as a result, homelessness grows.

Beyond subsidised housing for those unable to compete in the rental market, opportunities exist through both homelessness and other health and social services to reduce the number of highly vulnerable people made homeless. Some of the trauma of homelessness can be avoided by intervening early, better structuring support for people experiencing long-term homelessness, and by improving responses to certain cohorts.

As you undertake this Inquiry, CHP invites you to reflect on what a home means to you; what it means for your family, for your sense of self; the role of your home in your happy memories; and also what your home means to you on days that are hard. You are invited to reject the question 'will it work for those people, those different people who are homeless?', and instead ask, would that work for me if I was homeless? Would I put my mum there? Would I put my daughter there, or my brother there? Is that solution helping people to get back that full sense of a home, or is it just about getting people sheltered for a night?

With these questions in mind, CHP offers this submission in the hope that working together with the Committee, Government, and people who have been without a home, we can address homelessness in Victoria.

Recommendations

1. That the Victorian Government invests in 6,000 new social housing properties per year for ten years to increase Victoria's overall proportion of social housing to the national average.
2. That a significant proportion of new social housing be one bedroom stock to reflect the high proportion of wait list applicants requiring one bedroom homes.
3. That an adequate proportion of new social housing be suitable for very large families.
4. That the Victorian Parliament legislate to mandate inclusionary zoning in all new housing developments to deliver at least ten per cent social housing.
5. That the Victorian Government direct ten per cent of all new housing and homelessness funding to Aboriginal Community Controlled Organisations.
6. That the Victorian Government continue to encourage and support continuous improvement in the cultural competence of mainstream service providers.
7. That the Department of Health and Human Services continue to develop the capacity of the 'linked dataset' and provide regular reports in order to target homelessness prevention efforts in other (non-homelessness) service systems.
8. That the Victorian Parliament advocate for reform of federal welfare legislation to strengthen the security and adequacy of social security payments.
9. That the Victorian Government invest in services that bridge critical gaps in NDIS service delivery to people with psychosocial disability.
10. That the Victorian Parliament decriminalise public order offences that unfairly criminalise people experiencing homelessness.
11. That the committee accept the recommendations of Justice Connect Homeless Law.
12. That the Victorian Government invest in a more comprehensive program of post release housing and support to prevent homelessness among prison leavers.
13. That the Victorian Government invest in a significant expansion of tenancy focused legal supports for vulnerable Victorian renters, including those in private rental.

14. That the Victorian Government deliver Housing First approaches, including housing and support to meet the needs of people living with mental illness who are vulnerable to homelessness.
15. That the Victorian Government invest in ongoing funding to the highly effect *Private Rental Assistance Program* and *Flexible Support Packages*.
16. That the Victorian Government fund a comprehensive system of rooming house outreach.
17. That the Victorian Government invest in an additional senior IAP worker in each region to strengthen the capacity to respond to people with complex needs.
18. That the Victorian Government invest in additional resources for the Housing Establishment Fund in line with growth in demand.
19. That the Victorian Government invest in an ongoing flow of suitable social housing properties to ensure Victoria's permanent supportive housing programs can house all clients.
20. That the Victorian Government invest in additional Housing First program capacity across Victoria in order to support high frequency service users to avoid a lifetime of repeated homelessness.
21. That the Victorian Government invest in specialist psychiatric care transition workers to support Victoria's Housing First programs to meet the needs of people exiting acute mental health care.
22. That the Victorian Parliament advocate for an expansion of the Commonwealth Home Support Program's Assistance with Care and Housing (ACH) program.
23. That the Victorian Government work with the Federal Government to deliver the specialist aged care that older people experiencing homelessness require, across a range of residential settings.
24. That the Victorian Government work with the Federal Government and the NDIA to improve My Aged Care processes for people experiencing premature aging.
25. That the Victorian Government invest in education focused advocates and education support workers to support children experiencing homelessness to stay engaged in learning.

26. That the Victorian Government guarantee a suitable social housing offer for all families, whose homelessness is the primary justification for an impending child removal.
27. That the Victorian Government work with the Federal Government to ensure Centrelink processes do not hamper family reunification.
28. That the Victorian Government invest in increased resources and a more systematic provision of family reconciliation for young people at risk of or experiencing homelessness.
29. That the Victorian Government develop a service response to support young couch surfers to assess the safety of their arrangements, and to provide support in appropriate placements.
30. That the Victorian Parliament legislate an extended care guarantee for all Out of Home Care leavers who opt to continue to receive support.
31. That the Victorian Government invest in additional refuge and/or foyer-like accommodation and support in areas with high unmet need.
32. That the Victorian Government invest in a new foyer-like setting to provide accommodation and support for young LGBTIQ people experiencing homelessness.
33. That the Victorian Government provide a housing subsidy to young people who have experienced homelessness and who are ready to live independently in the community.
34. That the Victorian Government provide therapeutically supported residential support services for homeless young people with multiple justice, health, and human services interactions.

Homelessness in Victoria – the data

Homelessness is by nature an often hidden, often transient experience, which makes the number of people without a home difficult to quantify. There are two main publicly available sources of data on homelessness in Victoria: the Australian Bureau of Statistics' (ABS) Census of Population and Housing, and the Australian Institute of Health and Welfare's (AIHW) Specialist Homelessness Services Collection (SHSC).

Census 2016; a point in time count

The Australian Census is Australia's most comprehensive point in time count of the population, demographics, and how people live – including their housing situation. As a point in time count, it tells us about how many people experience homelessness on one day – specifically 9 August 2016. Updated every five years, this data is often used as a measure of the extent of homelessness in Australia.

According to the Census there were 24,817 people experiencing homelessness in Victoria in 2016, of whom 58 per cent were male - 42 per cent female. As Table 1 below shows, more younger people experience homelessness than many in the community would anticipate. The single largest age group of people experiencing homelessness was those aged 25-34, with those aged 19-24 having the highest rate of homelessness per capita. As we will explore later when discussing data from homelessness services, this reflects the vulnerability of these age groups to the primary causes of homelessness; poverty, accommodation issues and family violence.

Table 1. People experiencing homelessness, by age. Census 2016.

Age groups (years)	Number	Percentage of total
Under 12	3,372	13.6
12–18	2,010	8.1
19–24	4,360	17.6
25–34	5,502	22.2
35–44	3,387	13.6
45–54	2,876	11.6
55–64	1,818	7.3
65–74	980	3.9
75 and over	518	2.1

In seeking to better understand homelessness, it's important to recognise that there are many forms of homelessness, and not all of them involve sleeping rough. At any time in Victoria, approximately 5 per cent of the population of people experiencing homelessness are sleeping rough (although many people in other forms of accommodation that are recognised as homelessness will have recently slept rough). Table 2 below demonstrates that many people experiencing homelessness are currently in severely overcrowded dwellings (in houses that require at least four additional bedrooms to appropriately accommodate all residents),¹ in supported accommodation for the homeless, or in rooming houses.

In addition to the 24,817 people experiencing homelessness on Census night, another 19,780 people were in marginal accommodation such as living in caravan parks, or in overcrowded dwellings (requiring fewer than four additional rooms).

Later in this submission we explore how the experience of homelessness can differ based on the form of homelessness, and make recommendations about how these experiences can be averted, and the impact of homelessness minimised.

Table 2. Dwelling type of people experiencing homelessness. Census 2016.

	Number	Percentage of total
Persons living in improvised dwellings, tents, or sleeping out	1,123	4.5
Persons in supported accommodation for the homeless	7,157	28.8
Persons staying temporarily with other households	3,091	12.5
Persons living in boarding houses	4,406	17.8
Persons in other temporary lodgings	108	0.4
Persons living in 'severely' crowded dwellings	8,930	36.0
All homeless persons	24,817	100.0

The Specialist Homelessness Services Collection

The AIHW also collects data on the number of people being supported by homelessness services in each year. This data is called the Specialist Homelessness Services Collection, and is drawn from the information collected from each person

¹ Note that this definition assumes that couples, and children can share bedrooms.

seeking assistance from a specialist homelessness service in Australia. Unless otherwise stated, all data in this submission refers specifically to Victorian figures.

The 2018-19 data reveals that across that year 112,919 people sought help from Victoria's Specialist Homelessness Services (SHS), 39 per cent of whom were male, 61 per cent were female.

This data shows that at their first presentation, 35 per cent were already experiencing homelessness, and 65 cent were at risk of homelessness. While most people attending homelessness services need support across a range of domains, SHS users are asked to identify their "main reason for seeking assistance". These are outlined in Table 3 below.

Considering Table 3 below, we see that by far the two largest causes of homelessness are accommodation needs, and domestic and family violence. These two causes alone are the main reason that 86,153 people present to homelessness services – 76 per cent of all presentations

The information in Table 3 is further represented in Figure 1 below, which shows the number of people attending homelessness services each year by (grouped) main reason for seeking assistance. It shows that the 31 per cent increase in homelessness service use since 2011-12 is almost entirely attributable to growth in accommodation group reasons and family violence.²

² A small decrease in people presenting for domestic and family violence is evident in 2018-19 in Figure 1. It is important to note that this does not reflect a reduced number of people presenting to homelessness services due to domestic and family violence.

Instead, it reflects a change to data practices, where family violence homelessness referrals from Victoria Police (known as L17s) are now only recorded when the consumer accepts the support. Prior to 2018, the threshold for counting people was whether SHS's had proactively sought to engage such consumers (a service in itself, now recorded elsewhere).

Table 3. Main reason for seeking assistance – first reported, Victoria, 2018-19²

Group	Main reason for seeking assistance—first reported	Client count
Financial	Financial Group total	13,456
	Financial difficulties	12,942
	Employment difficulties	232
	Unemployment	282
Accommodation	Accommodation Group total	47,613
	Housing crisis	20,563
	Inadequate or inappropriate dwelling conditions	10,776
	Housing affordability stress	6,787
	Previous accommodation ended	3,597
	Transition from custodial arrangements	3,860
	Transition from foster care and child safety residential placements	212
	Transition from other care arrangements	268
	Discrimination including racial discrimination	24
	Itinerant	1,212
	Unable to return home due to environmental reasons	172
	Disengagement with school or other education and training	142
	Domestic and family violence	Domestic and family violence Group total
Interpersonal relationships	Interpersonal relationships Group total	5,721
	Time out from family/other situation	779
	Relationship/family breakdown	3381
	Sexual abuse	80
	Non-family violence	537
	Lack of family and/or community support	944
Health	Health Group total	2,640
	Mental health issues	1329
	Medical issues	799
	Problematic drug or substance use	355
	Problematic alcohol use	125
	Problematic gambling	32
Other	Other Group total	4102
Not stated		847

Figure 1. Main reason for seeking assistance, Victoria, 2011-12 to 2018-19³

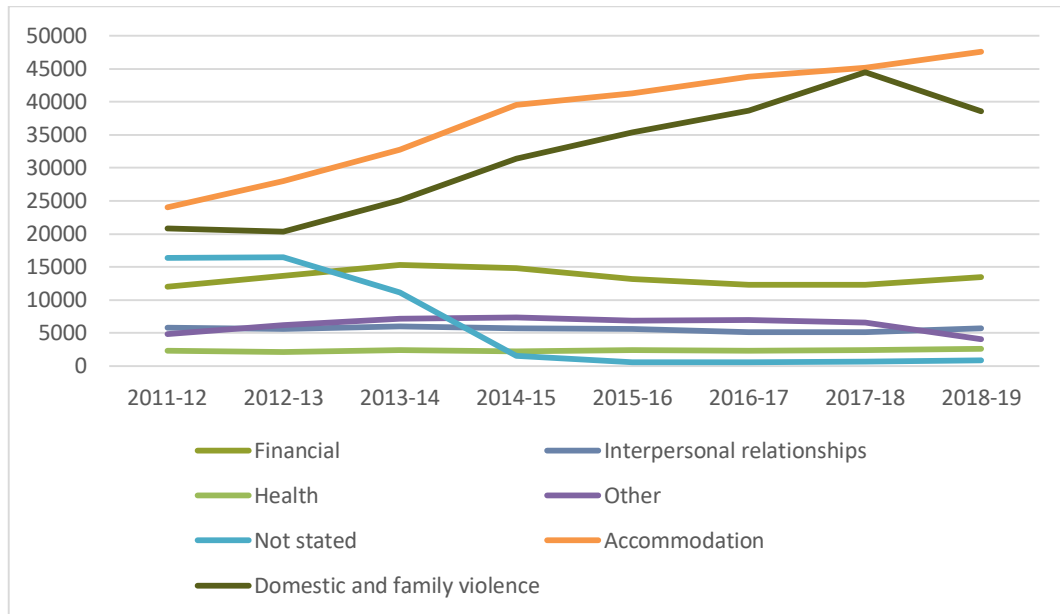


Table 4 (below) shows the housing situation of people accessing specialist homelessness services in 2018-19, both at the start of their support, and at the end. It shows that the greatest share of people at risk of homelessness are currently living in the private rental market. It further shows high use of homelessness services among those in public and community housing, and rooming houses. We will explore the support needs of all four of these cohorts throughout this submission.

Table 4. Housing outcomes

Housing tenure at start and end of homelessness support, Victoria, 2018-19	Tenure—first reported	Tenure—last reported
Renter - private housing	30,566	32,642
Renter - public housing	7,334	9,708
Renter - community housing	1,408	2,122
Renter - transitional housing	2,958	5,994
Renter - caravan park	740	756
Renter - boarding/rooming house	2,253	3,098
Renter - emergency accommodation/night shelter/women's refuge/ youth shelter where rent is charged	1,879	1,782
Other renter	2,673	2,175
Rent free - private housing	5,910	4,855
Rent free - public housing	773	687
Rent free - community housing	108	95
Rent free- transitional housing	278	302
Rent free - caravan park	84	52
Rent free - boarding/rooming house	290	256
Rent free - emergency accommodation/night shelter/women's refuge/ youth shelter where rent is not charged	1,422	1,387
Other rent free	3,507	2,711
Life tenure scheme	4	5
Owner - shared equity or rent/buy scheme	132	120
Owner - being purchased/with mortgage	3,215	3,142
Owner - fully owned	580	586
Other tenure type not elsewhere specified	260	232
No tenure	24,868	18,572
Invalid or missing	21,677	21,640

In 2018-19, 112,919 Victorians accessed services through the SHS. This equates to one in every 57 Victorians.⁴ However, the sector is not able to assist every household that asks for support. In 2018-19, Victorian homelessness services recorded 38,039 instances of unmet demand. For those people who did receive assistance from the SHS, almost 16 per cent of support periods ended because consumers disengaged or lost contact with the service.⁵

Unmet demand is particularly high when it comes to accommodation. While a third of all consumers were identified as needing long-term housing, just 24 per cent of this group were able to be provided with or referred to this accommodation.

Demand for homelessness services currently exceeds the sector's capacity to respond. Contributing to this demand is the bottleneck being experienced by homelessness services and their clients as a consequence of a lack of access to housing options that people can afford.

The demand for case management support is far greater than the current workforce can respond to. This, alongside funding criteria that restrict almost all support periods to time limited support, means that support periods must often conclude when a client is re-housed, even though many homelessness service users require ongoing support to sustain housing. This helps to explain why 9.8 per cent of service users attend the service for support several times per year, while an additional 11.3 per cent attend across multiple years.⁶

Despite these challenges, homelessness services do prevent and end homelessness for many people and provide critical support to individuals and households in need. People working across the SHS develop creative responses, find scarce resources and connect vulnerable people to the services they need, through persistence and the mobilisation of established networks.

Victoria's Specialist Homelessness Services System

Victoria's specialist homelessness services (SHS) system includes approximately 150 organisations, delivering around 500 programs.⁷ The SHS provide initial assessment and planning, a variety of supports that may be attached to accommodation or provided on an outreach basis, as well as linking people to available accommodation or housing, and providing brokerage to facilitate service users into those properties.

The needs of people experiencing homelessness are varied. For most people seeking assistance from the SHS, access to a home that they can afford, and a brief period of support to resolve the issues that led to their homelessness will be sufficient to resolve their crises. However, as we explore later in this submission in the section on long term and recurring homelessness, some SHS users are exceptionally marginalised, with multiple and complex needs. To address homelessness in Victoria, the SHS must be equipped to deal with both cohorts, as well as those in between.

The work of the SHS is about supporting people to access a home. At its best, this goes beyond securing housing, and extends to connecting households back into the community, building the skills to improve their financial situation and the resilience and service knowledge that can help people to not only recover from their current crisis, but to avoid repeated instances of homelessness in the future. This is often work undertaken after people are housed and supports them to sustain lasting change. As we will see throughout this submission, in the face of rapid growth in the number of people experiencing homelessness, a service user profile with increasingly complex needs, and funding levels that have not recognised this growth, much of the work of the SHS has had to focus effort on people in immediate crisis, resulting in less resources being available for post-housing support.

Housing

Every person, family and household in Victoria needs somewhere to live. More than a place to sleep, a home provides the safe, secure and consistent base from which to do all of the things that give life meaning; whether that be develop strong family relationships and friendships, build material wealth and a secure future, or create meaningful routines in the community. The basic structures of life are built on a base of a safe and stable home.

The private market in Victoria is not delivering housing that is affordable and available to people on low incomes. Affordable rental opportunities for people on Centrelink incomes have grown so scarce as to be negligible⁸ - and more than half of the time the affordable properties that do exist are rented to people on higher incomes.⁹

We can't end homelessness without a functioning housing system that can include us all. But as things stand in 2020, achieving the goal of homes that are affordable and available across all income groups will require a safety net of housing for those excluded by the private market. In this, Victoria is failing.

Homelessness and public and community housing

To address and prevent homelessness, there is no single factor more effective than social housing.¹⁰ Not only does Victoria spend the least of any state or territory on public and community housing per capita, but we spend the least by a long way – 32 per cent less than the second-lowest state, and less than 60 per cent of the national average. Unsurprisingly, Victoria consequently has the lowest proportion of public and community housing in the country, making up just 3.5 per cent of all Victorian housing.

Having the lowest proportion of public and community housing in the nation, means that Victorians excluded from the private market have the worst access to housing in Australia. This access is projected to continue to worsen, even in the face of the current Government's housing commitments – which are not adequate to maintain Victoria's social housing at 3.5 per cent of all stock. As a consequence of this inadequate investment, homelessness in Victoria will continue to grow.

To reverse this trend, and reduce homelessness in Victoria, the Victorian Government needs to commit to growing Victoria's stock of social housing to at least meet the national proportion of public and community housing. This requires 6,000 properties be built each year for the next ten years. Given the primacy of housing as a response to homelessness, CHP urges the Legal and Social Issues Committee (the Committee) to consider the scale of public and community housing required in your report, and

to recommend that Government build at least 60,000 additional properties over ten years.

Recommendation 1: That the Victorian Government invests in 6,000 new social **housing properties per year for ten years to increase Victoria's overall** proportion of social housing to the national average.

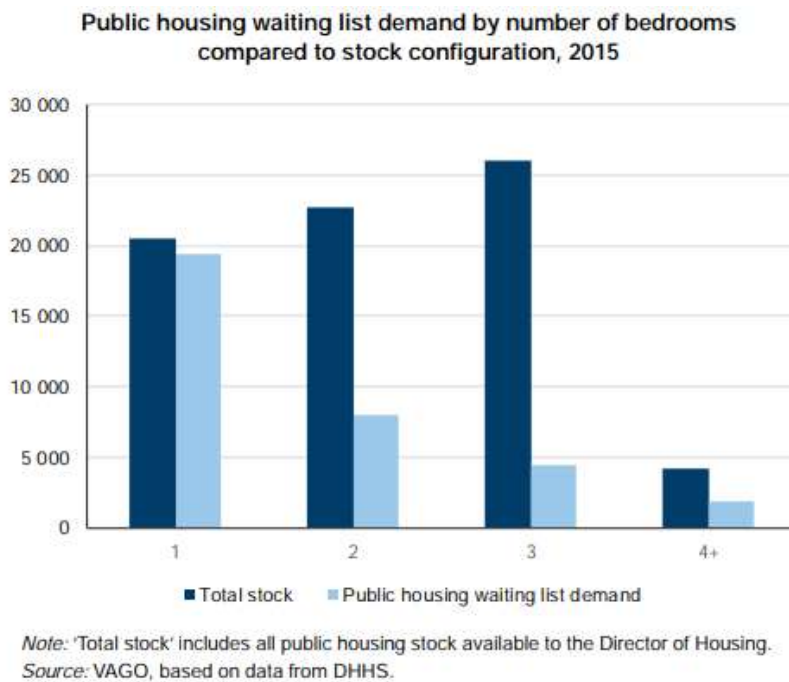
Social housing stock that reflects people's needs

Approximately 60 per cent of Victoria's public housing was built prior to 1990, with much of it built prior to 1960.¹¹ This stock was built to match the housing needs of public housing applicants at the time; predominantly low- and middle- income families and returned servicemen.¹² These families typically required large family homes, and two and three bedroom homes remain the predominant built form of Victoria's public housing stock (see Figure 2 below).

However from the 1990's, declining investment in social housing has seen public housing access increasingly targeted to those most in need.¹³ Today, 90 per cent of public housing allocations in Victoria are to greatest need groups, predominantly those experiencing homelessness.¹⁴ As Figure 2 shows, the three bedroom households which are most prominent in Victoria's public housing stock no longer reflect the housing needs of the large number of housing applicants who are single or two person households. Victoria must prioritise building one bedroom stock if we are to reduce the amount of time people without a home wait to access this vital safety net.

While the data clearly demonstrates the need for more one bedroom stock (see also Table 5), it tells us very little about the experience of very large families experiencing homelessness. Very large families face particular difficulties obtaining appropriate housing in the private rental market, due to the dearth of housing stock that can accommodate them. When these families fall out of the private rental market, homelessness services rely on privately run motels for emergency accommodation. This is particularly inappropriate, with families often having to be split between multiple rooms. Very little social housing stock has four or more bedrooms, and those properties are fully occupied. CHP hears regularly that waiting times for very large families far exceed the waiting time for other cohorts, with consequent inappropriately long periods of time for children to be without a stable home.

Figure 2¹⁵



As Table 5 highlights, there is currently not a category of social housing in which supply is sufficient to meet the needs of tenants and waitlist applicants. For this reason, the Committee should recommend an overall increase in housing stock to meet need.

Table 5: Applications on the Victorian Housing Register by bedroom number as at 31 December 2017¹⁶

	Wait list		Transfer	
	Number	Percentage	Number	Percentage
1 bedroom	21,957	61	3,018	42.6
2 bedrooms	7,608	21.1	1,706	24.1
3 bedrooms	4,653	12.9	1,447	20.4
4 bedrooms	1,353	3.8	665	9.4
5+ bedrooms	442	1.2	244	3.4
Total	36,013	100	7,080	100

Recommendation 2: That a significant proportion of new social housing be one bedroom stock to reflect the high proportion of wait list applicants requiring one bedroom homes.

Recommendation 3: That an adequate proportion of new social housing be suitable for very large families.

Inclusionary zoning

Victoria's rapid population¹⁷ and housing¹⁸ growth has not been met with a commensurate increase in Government funding for public and community housing. Inclusionary zoning is one measure available to governments seeking to maintain comparative access to public and community housing in the face of population and housing growth. Inclusionary zoning is a mechanism whereby developers of private housing are required to provide social housing (public or community housing) as part of housing developments.

Victoria currently has voluntary mechanisms in place for inclusionary zoning. Consistent with Australian¹⁹ and international evidence²⁰ that shows that voluntary inclusionary zoning requirements are ineffective, Victoria's inclusionary zoning program has had negligible outcomes to date.²¹

Local governments have long advocated for mandatory zoning to be included in inclusionary planning legislation.²² Inclusionary zoning could provide an opportunity to provide more social housing (public and community housing) while meeting the aims of all levels of government.

Recommendation 4: That the Victorian Parliament legislate to mandate inclusionary zoning in all new housing developments to deliver at least ten per cent social housing.

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander homelessness

Victoria's population includes around 58,000 Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Victorians²³, of whom 9,837 people sought help from Victoria's specialist homelessness services in 2018-19²⁴. This means Aboriginal Victorians make up 0.9 per cent of the total population²⁵, but 10.1 per cent of all homelessness service users. That approximately 1 in 6 Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Victorians are facing homelessness each year should be a matter of deep concern to all Victorians.

As we explore later in this submission, homelessness almost always occurs in the context of poverty, and the resultant lack of housing options. The ongoing impact of dispossession, means that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders experience high rates of poverty; with one in five Aboriginal people in Melbourne living in poverty, and an even higher rate of poverty in regional Victoria.²⁶ This poverty significantly contributes to homelessness. These experiences of homelessness then compound other disadvantages experienced disproportionately by Aboriginal Victorians, including poor health outcomes, over-incarceration, parent and child separations, and family violence, further entrenching poverty.²⁷ Stable housing can disrupt this process of entrenching disadvantage and be a foundation for better outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Victorians across a wide range of domains.²⁸

More than 4,000 Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander households are on the Victorian waiting list for social housing^{3,29}. Population projections show that 5,085 additional public and community housing properties for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Victorians will be needed by 2036 just to prevent the waiting list growing.³⁰ To bring the number of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people without a home down, will require an even larger housing investment.

Aboriginal people without a home must commonly navigate a complex service system, which often does not meet their needs, alongside the challenges of homelessness. Aboriginal Community Controlled Organisations are uniquely placed to provide the solidarity and skill needed to support people to navigate this complexity. Where Aboriginal Community Controlled Organisations have been resourced to work with their communities to determine the solutions and programs

³ The Victorian Housing Register is Victoria's shared waiting list for public and community housing.

to meet their own needs, it has been shown to improve service utilisation and achieve better outcomes.³¹ Yet there are few Aboriginal specific homelessness services or supported housing providers for Aboriginal people, and fewer yet in Aboriginal community control.

Recommendation 5: That the Victorian Government direct ten per cent of all new housing and homelessness funding to Aboriginal Community Controlled Organisations.

Recommendation 6: That the Victorian Government continue to encourage and support continuous improvement in the cultural competence of mainstream service providers.

Prevention

Homelessness services are extraordinarily effective at preventing homelessness when they are able to respond to people seeking help prior to losing housing. In 2018-19, 87 per cent of clients at risk of homelessness were successfully supported to sustain housing and avoid homelessness.³² The evidence shows that relatively low-intensity supports are effective in preventing homelessness for many of those facing hardship, while some groups with higher needs require more intensive supports to prevent homelessness.³³

Yet despite this success in prevention, homelessness in Victoria continues to grow as the conditions that lead to greater rates of homelessness grow. Notable among these structural drivers of homelessness are housing unaffordability, family violence, incarceration rates, and severe mental ill-health. The problem of housing affordability is addressed earlier in this submission. This chapter considers how Victoria can strengthen homelessness prevention to avoid the harm of homelessness. It should be read together with the chapter on housing, which is itself a powerful homelessness prevention tool.

There are two major spheres in which Victoria can improve homelessness prevention efforts.

1. Enhancing support to those identified as at immediate risk of homelessness (secondary prevention), and
2. Improving screening and the availability of support in systems that work with cohorts known to have a very high risk of homelessness (primary prevention).

While primary prevention measures for homelessness are not particularly widespread, they have been shown to be effective. This effectiveness has been demonstrated both internationally (as in the United States' universal screening for homelessness among veterans through the Veterans Health Administration),³⁴ and in Victoria, where The Geelong Project screens the homelessness risk of all students in a small number of low socio-economic status public schools, an initiative that has been shown to reduce youth homelessness.³⁵

Using data to target prevention efforts

The Victorian Department of Health and Human Services has developed the means to identify the use of multiple service systems by individuals, known informally as the 'linked dataset'. Such a resource could prove invaluable in assisting Victoria's efforts to target primary prevention work in the areas of greatest need. The dataset shows that 17.3 per cent of people accessing public specialist mental health services attend

a homelessness services within a year,³⁶ and fully half of all prison leavers used a homelessness service in the year after their release.³⁷

Recommendation 7: That the Department of Health and Human Services continue to develop the capacity of **the 'linked dataset'** and provide regular reports in order to target homelessness prevention efforts in other (non-homelessness) service systems.

Homelessness and social security

Homelessness almost always occurs in the context of poverty. Where people are unable to work, or do work but receive low or insecure incomes, they are often simply unable to afford housing in the private market.

Australia's social security system is a critical part of the safety net intended to support people who are not employed, or who have intermittent or very low incomes. Yet currently many benefits are not adequate to avert poverty for recipients; 55 per cent of households that are headed by a Newstart recipient are living in poverty, and 64 per cent of Youth Allowance recipient headed households are in poverty³⁸.

In the three months to September 2019, just 27 newly rented properties in Melbourne were affordable for a single person on Newstart.³⁹ This means that many people on benefits pay more for their housing than they can afford, putting them on the brink of homelessness, or being simply unable to secure a tenancy.

The problem of the inadequacy of social security benefits is exacerbated by the jobactive compliance regime, which makes **people's incomes** insecure. The compliance regime has seen at least 55,000 people experiencing or at risk of homelessness across the nation '**breached**', and **having** their payments suspended.⁴⁰

Increasingly tough eligibility requirements for the Disability Support Pension⁴¹ have meant that many people with a disability, whose disabilities make it very difficult for them to meet the compliance requirements, are on the lower Newstart payment and subject to the activity tests.

These issues contribute to the large, and growing number of people who come to homelessness services without any income at all. In 2011-12 there were fewer than 2,000 people seeking homelessness support without any income (less than 3 per cent of all people seeking assistance). In 2018-19 this number had grown to 6,653 people, over 7 per cent of all homelessness service users.

Recommendation 8: That the Victorian Parliament advocate for reform of federal welfare legislation to strengthen the security and adequacy of social security payments.

Homelessness and the NDIS

Effort is also needed to address gaps in support for people with psychosocial disability whose needs are not being met by the NDIS. In Victoria, funding for community mental health services was rolled into the NDIS, and existing services defunded. This has created many support gaps that exacerbate people's risk of homelessness, particularly for people who cannot or have not demonstrated eligibility for the NDIS.

Even where people with psycho-social disability at risk of homelessness have been deemed eligible for the NDIS, many are not receiving support that meets their needs.

This means more people with psycho-social disability are becoming homeless, presenting far greater challenges for homelessness and other support services in assisting them to be rehoused.

Recommendation 9: That the Victorian Government invest in services that bridge critical gaps in NDIS service delivery to people with psychosocial disability.

Homelessness and the justice system

People experiencing homelessness demonstrate high rates of incarceration, with 22 per cent of police detainees having experienced homelessness or transience for most of the preceding 30 days.⁴² People without a home, who are sleeping rough, are also subject to a far higher level of public scrutiny than others, with many activities that are legal within the home, subject to criminal sanctions when performed in public. Termed 'public order offences', these laws contribute to the over-incarceration of people without private spaces to call home. Council to Homeless Persons has had the opportunity to review the submission by Justice Connect Homeless Law and endorses their recommendations to reduce the criminalisation of homelessness.

Recommendation 10: That the Victorian Parliament decriminalise public order offences that unfairly criminalise people experiencing homelessness.

Recommendation 11: That the committee accept the recommendations of Justice Connect Homeless Law.

While homelessness can unfairly increase people's contact with the justice system; the justice system can also increase people's vulnerability to homelessness. People remanded in prison are likely to lose both their tenancy and their employment, making it difficult to secure a home on release. For most prisoners, the combined impact of low incomes, limited or negative rental histories, and health issues or disabilities that present additional challenges, mean that it is difficult to gain or sustain a home once released. As Victoria's incarceration rate has rapidly grown in recent years,⁴³ the number of prisoner exits directly into homelessness has also grown; increasing by 317 per cent since 2011-12.⁴⁴ Now 50 per cent of prison leavers use a homelessness service in the year following their release.⁴⁵

The evidence shows that people exiting prison into homelessness are more likely to reoffend.⁴⁶

This 'revolving door' of imprisonment and homelessness results in devastating outcomes for those caught up in this cycle, and increases the incidence of crime.

A pool of dedicated housing is required to ensure that the justice 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 care.⁴⁷

Recommendation 12: That the Victorian Government invest in a more comprehensive program of post release housing and support to prevent homelessness among prison leavers.

Legal support to prevent homelessness

In addition to the prevention measures that we have discussed so far in this chapter, opportunities also exist outside of the specialist homelessness service system for new targeted prevention work for those most at risk of homelessness. As mentioned previously in this submission, the most common pathway into homelessness is by falling out of the private rental market.⁴⁸

Tenants are notoriously poorly represented at the Victorian Civil and Administrative Tribunal (VCAT). At VCAT landlords typically rely on their expert real estate agents to represent their interests. There is not a systemic equivalent for tenants, despite the enormous risk of homelessness faced by tenants whose tenancy is before VCAT.

As a result, landlords initiate 95 per cent of applications to the VCAT Residential Tenancies List.⁴⁹ Of these, 80 per cent go undefended, with the tenant failing to appear at the hearing.⁵⁰ In 95 per cent of applications initiated by private landlords, landlords are represented by their agent or property manager.⁵¹

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 under the *Residential Tenancies Act*.

Recommendation 13: That the Victorian Government invest in a significant expansion of tenancy focused legal supports for vulnerable Victorian renters, including those in private rental.

Homelessness and mental ill health

Housing access is also a significant challenge for those experiencing mental illness. A survey of people experiencing a range of mental illnesses found that 90 per cent believed that they had experienced discrimination in the private rental market.⁵² Mental illness also results in poverty for many people, with poor mental health strongly associated with reduced employment⁵³, and 34 per cent of those receiving the Disability Support Pension doing so due to mental illness⁵⁴. As highlighted above, many other people experiencing significant mental illness receive the lower Newstart Allowance.

The crisis in housing access is particularly dire for those with serious mental illnesses. Some 12.8 per cent of people with psychotic illnesses experience homelessness within the course of a year, while a further 25 per cent are fearful that they will experience homelessness.

These challenges, which all increase people's vulnerability to homelessness, show that the Victorian Government need to both plan for and deliver access to appropriate and affordable housing for people with mental illness in order to prevent homelessness for this group. While most people with less severe mental illness may only need access to housing they can afford to avoid homelessness, research and practice evidence is clear that many people with more severe mental illness need Housing First approaches, providing both housing and support to achieve housing security.

Where people are also eligible for NDIS services, service models can be developed that integrate NDIS supports, and the housing and other supports people may need. However, as discussed in the section on NDIS, many people experiencing serious mental illness, will not be eligible for the NDIS, despite that their psycho-social disability makes them extremely vulnerable to homelessness. In these circumstances, complementary housing and support programs are needed.

Recommendation 14: That the Victorian Government deliver Housing First approaches, including housing and support, to meet the needs of people living with mental illness who are vulnerable to homelessness.

Early intervention

Homelessness doesn't just happen. It is usually the result of an underlying problem escalating to the point where a person can no longer sustain housing. People have an incredible capacity to overcome hardship, but when people do lose their homes, the need for safe and stable housing becomes all-encompassing, and resolving the issues that led to their homelessness becomes more difficult. The longer individuals or households experience homelessness, the harder it is to end their homelessness, as existing health and financial conditions worsen and the connections and supports that help people sustain housing typically fall away.

Homelessness and family violence

As mentioned earlier in this submission, family violence is the second largest contributor to homelessness in Victoria⁵⁵, and the largest contributor to the homelessness of women and children. Once homeless, the experience can exacerbate trauma for victim survivors of family violence, as well as “disrupting social and economic participation and education and adversely affecting health and wellbeing. In some cases it forces women to choose to return to a violent partner”.⁵⁶

Victoria's Royal Commission into Family Violence also reported that:

“The Commission found that women often have to move repeatedly, leading to dislocation from community and existing supports and increasing the likelihood that they might become homeless. Women and children need support and a stable environment in order to recover from the trauma and uncertainty of family violence. Safe, secure and affordable accommodation is essential if they are to have this stability. At present Victoria is failing in this.

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.”⁵⁷

This situation remains much the same in 2020. As stated by *Domestic Violence Victoria* in their submission to the *Parliamentary Inquiry into Homelessness*, the lack of affordable housing in Victoria remains an area of reform where victim survivors of family violence have seen very little progress. This is proving to be a significant barrier to the effective implementation of many other reforms stemming from the *Royal Commission into Family Violence*.

Data from Victoria's specialist homelessness services shows that 62% of adults and children experiencing domestic or family violence who were already homeless when they sought assistance were still homeless after receiving support in 2018-19; compared to 2015-16, when 59% remained homeless.⁵⁸ In response to the *Royal Commission into Family Violence*, the Victorian Government commissioned work that showed that preventing a contraction in the proportion of social housing would require 1,700 properties be added each year.⁵⁹ They further commissioned work to determine total demand and supply needs.⁶⁰ Total commitments to social housing since the Royal Commission have been significantly less than the projected need.

While overall there has been a contraction in Victorians' access to public and community housing over the past five years, the Victorian Government has implemented a suite of housing measures since the Royal Commission to facilitate the rapid rehousing of women and children escaping family violence. Two such initiatives in particular have become essential features of Victoria's specialist family violence and specialist homelessness services. These are the *Private Rental Assistance Program (PRAP)* and *Flexible Support Packages (FSB)*.

Since 2016, the *Private Rental Assistance Program (PRAP)* has kept families safely housed, or supported them to successfully obtain a new tenancy. 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. PRAP is currently supporting 6,000 households to gain or sustain housing each year after an experience of family violence. Extended for two years in 2019, the Victorian Government recently announced *PRAP Plus* to provide additional outreach support, including to targeted 'difficult to engage' groups currently underserved. This is a model of how early intervention should work.

Flexible Support Packages are used to meet the various needs of women and children escaping family violence, not just their housing needs. The flexibility of these packages allows specialist family violence services to support households in ways that PRAP cannot; for example to meet health needs, buy school necessities, or to replace essential items left behind when escaping. Despite the vast array of important uses to which a FSP may be put, practice wisdom suggests that approximately 60 per cent of funds have been used to address accommodation-related costs. FSP's have become the essential funding mechanism for Victoria's 'Safe At Home' response, which operates under the assumption that victim-survivors

and their children should remain in the family home (where it can be made safe), rather than “escaping” into homelessness while the perpetrator retains the property.

The *Private Rental Assistance Program* and *Flexible Support Packages* have become essential measures for supporting woman and children escaping violence to avoid homelessness or end it quickly. However, neither program has ongoing funding, with PRAP funded to July 2021, and FSP’s until just July 2020.

Recommendation 15: That the Victorian Government invest in ongoing funding to the highly effect *Private Rental Assistance Program* and *Flexible Support Packages*.

Homelessness and rooming houses

The lack of affordable rentals, particularly for singles, sees many Victorians forced to live in rooming houses. While reforms have introduced minimum standards,⁶¹ and a fit and proper persons test for operators,⁶² the reality is that many rooming houses are still damaging environments and residents’ health and wellbeing can suffer as a consequence.⁶³

Rooming house residents include many of Victoria’s most vulnerable citizens: 62 per cent of residents have health issues, 65 per cent are experiencing family breakdown and/or family violence, and 62 per cent have substance use issues.⁶⁴ Research further indicates that many people living in rooming houses are stuck in a cycle of entrenched rough sleeping: 25 per cent of rooming house residents come directly from rough sleeping,⁶⁵ and 25 per cent of rough sleepers were last housed in rooming houses.⁶⁶ Rough sleepers who were previously in a rooming house are 8 per cent less likely to exit rough sleeping. Intervening early with systemic rooming house outreach may prove a significant means for Victoria to reduce the number of people who transition to rough sleeping, and the duration for which they sleep rough.

Yet despite this vulnerability, this is an almost completely unserved population. Most residents speak to only a few people each week – including fellow residents⁶⁷ and have little to no contact with support services.⁶⁸

Even in the face of the extreme vulnerability of rooming house residents, several pilot programs delivering outreach support into rooming houses have achieved dramatic improvements in residents’ wellbeing. Approximately 10 per cent of residents moved into private rental, while almost a third were helped to improve their housing situation. Residents re-engaged with physical and mental healthcare, were supported to seek employment, accessed children’s support programs, and improved their nutrition.^{69 70}

In order to support the wellbeing of this extremely vulnerable group, and to more effectively break the cycle of homelessness, a comprehensive approach to outreach into rooming houses is needed. Outreach teams of homelessness workers and community health nurses should be established in all areas with sizeable rooming house populations. This approach has support from specialist homelessness support agencies, rooming house operators, and rooming house residents.⁷¹ This simple and low cost intervention can support many of Victoria's most marginalised people to live healthier lives, to participate in our community more fully, and to be better connected.

Recommendation 16: That the Victorian Government fund a comprehensive system of rooming house outreach.

Fund homelessness services to meet growth in demand

Victoria's homelessness service system operates via front door 'entry points'. Entry points find out about a person's needs, and match them with any housing and supports available locally, a process known as 'Initial Assessment and Planning' (IAP).⁷² Entry points are effectively gatekeepers to Victoria's homelessness services.

But a 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 doors. Every day 105 people are turned away⁷³ from even being assessed for their eligibility for housing and support, let alone being matched with services to meet their needs.

Neither has funding grown for the Housing Establishment Fund (HEF) which purchases accommodation for people at risk of or experiencing homelessness. HEF can be used to prevent homelessness, to provide an immediate crisis accommodation response, or to establish a longer-term housing option.⁷⁴ Rapid growth in demand for homelessness services in Victoria, which grew 32 per cent from 2011, has put pressure on HEF.

Entry points are now able to accomplish less than they were established and funded to do in the past. Growth in demand relative to staff levels has reduced the capacity for IAP workers to provide effective immediate interventions. The dismantling of community mental health services is also having an impact, with people increasingly coming to homelessness services in poor health. 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/or family violence risk.⁷⁵ They also require additional funding to purchase accommodation.

Recommendation 17: That the Victorian Government invest in an additional senior IAP worker in each region to strengthen the capacity to respond to people with complex needs.

Recommendation 18: That the Victorian Government invest in additional resources for the Housing Establishment Fund in line with growth in demand.

Long term and recurring homelessness

For most people without a home, the solution is access to a home that they can afford, and to a brief period of support to help them resolve their current crises. But some people's needs are more substantial and short periods of support aren't sufficient for them to gain and sustain housing. Rough sleeping accounts for around 5 per cent of homelessness in Victoria,⁷⁶ while 10 per cent of households using homelessness services in Victoria are returning to services multiple times every year, and using 26 per cent of support days. Many people are returning to homelessness even after housing outcomes are achieved.^{77 78} There is no doubt that the needs of people experiencing long term and recurring homelessness are substantial, and that existing support systems are failing to meet their needs.

Homes for **Victoria's Housing First responses**

Among the myriad tragedies of homelessness is the fact that once a person who has been homeless on a long term and recurring basis 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.^{79 80}

Both Australian and international research is clear, that for people experiencing long term and recurring homelessness, housing, assertive outreach and ongoing flexible support is needed; a solution called Housing First.^{81 82} In January 2018, the Victorian Government announced a new approach to supporting people sleeping rough, and invested in many of the elements of a Housing First response, including eight assertive outreach teams and six supportive housing teams in a number of locations. These new services are achieving very positive results. Yet these programs are being stymied by a lack of access to appropriately priced housing.

Inadequate supply of social housing, particularly one bedroom units, means that Victoria's six new supportive housing teams have not had access to a sufficient flow of housing options for clients. The consequence is support workers spending months working with people experiencing long term and recurring homelessness who remain unhoused.

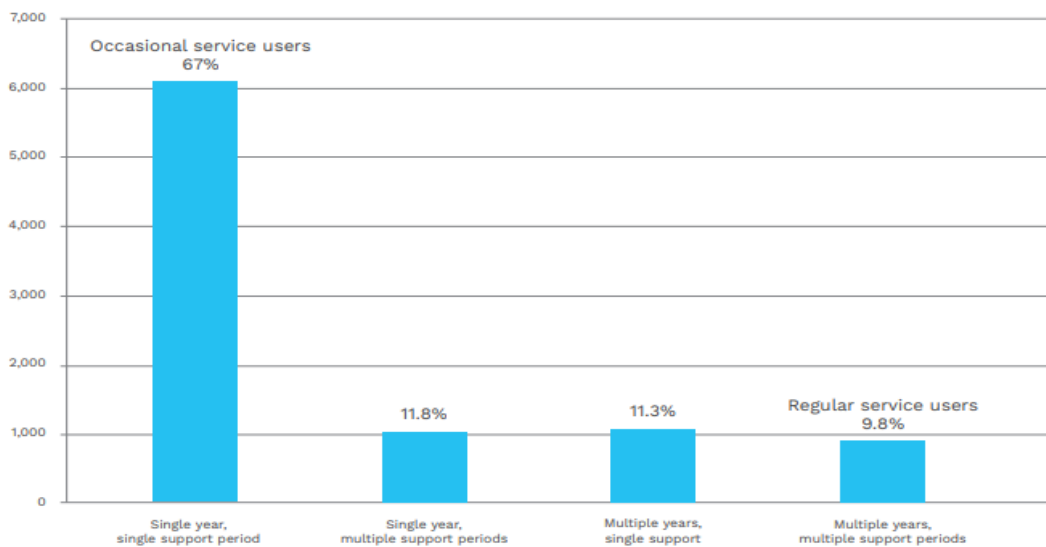
This completely undermines the Housing First model, in which housing is a critical element^{83 84}, and consequently these programs have not been able to maximise their potential impact.

Recommendation 19: That the Victorian Government invest in an ongoing flow of suitable social housing properties to ensure Victoria’s permanent supportive housing programs can house all clients.

Housing First across Victoria

Victoria’s six new supportive housing teams have been rolled out in localities with a high incidence of rough sleeping. This is an extremely positive development, providing the support that people need to transition gradually from rough sleeping to sustainable tenancy management.⁴ However, Housing First programs have the capacity to be enormously successful at supporting not just people who are sleeping rough, but also the far larger group of people who are long term and recurring homelessness service users. Figure 3 below shows the results of a study of high frequency service users at one Victorian homelessness ‘entry point’. It shows that 9.8 per cent of service users attended the service for support several times per year for multiple years, while an additional 11.3 per cent attended across multiple years.⁸⁵ Similar patterns exist across every part of Victoria, as people with long-term support needs instead receive only the time-limited support funded in Victoria’s specialist homelessness service system.

Figure 3. Entry point use frequency groups⁸⁶



⁴ As mentioned above, this transition would be quicker, and the programs able to support more people with dedicated access to public and community housing

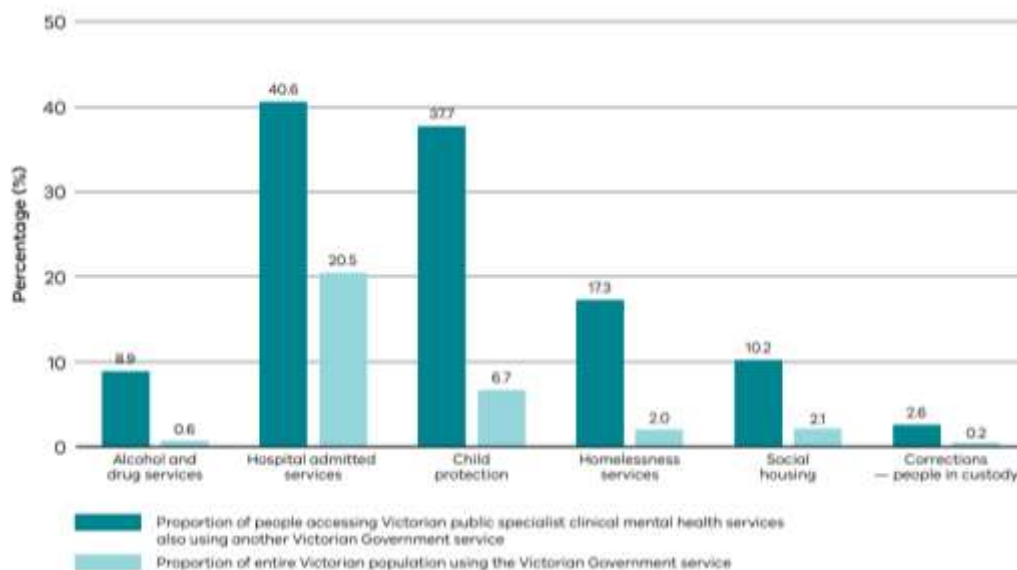
Research also shows that frequent service users share with people who are sleeping rough an extreme vulnerability to health, mental health, and justice interactions.^{87 88} These service users would benefit from the Housing First / Permanent Supportive Housing approaches for those who experience long term and recurring homelessness.^{89 90}

Recommendation 20: That the Victorian Government invest in additional Housing First program capacity across Victoria in order to support high frequency service users to avoid a lifetime of repeated homelessness.

Housing First and mental health

The Royal Commission into Victoria’s Mental Health System found that 17.3 per cent of Victorians who used public specialist clinical mental health services in 2017-18 also used homelessness services in the same year (see Figure 4).⁹¹ This is because the lack of housing access means that as many as one in every four people discharged from acute mental healthcare is discharged into homelessness.⁹² This homelessness has devastating consequences for their health and wellbeing.⁹³

Figure 4. Proportion of people accessing public specialist mental health services utilising other Victorian Government services, 2017-18⁹⁴



The solution is the same as is described above, of permanent supportive housing, which has also been demonstrated to work effectively for people with mental illnesses.⁹⁵ Dedicated psychiatric care transition workers can provide a seamless entry into Victoria’s Housing First programs for those being discharged from acute mental healthcare, providing the necessary link to housing and support that this cohort often requires.

Recommendation 21: That the Victorian Government invest in specialist psychiatric care transition workers to support **Victoria's Housing First programs** to meet the needs of people exiting acute mental health care.

Homelessness and aging

While only a small proportion of people without a home are older (see Table 1 previously reported), this small cohort is growing rapidly, with 58 per cent more people aged 55 and over without a home on Census night in 2016 compared to 2006.

A relatively small program funded by the Federal Government, called the Commonwealth Home Support Program's Assistance with Care and Housing (ACH) provides specialised support for older people without a home to navigate services and access appropriate housing. This specialised assistance is important because people over 55 are often able to access housing options not available to younger service users. If funding were expanded for ACH, this small program could assist more people in need, and play a greater role preventing homelessness for older people.⁹⁶

Specialised services are also needed to support older people with more complex needs. While people aged 55 are not considered 'older' in the general community, there is broad agreement in the homelessness literature that long term and recurring homelessness prematurely ages people,⁹⁷ with people as young as 50 demonstrating high rates of multiple age-associated conditions.⁹⁸

Further to this, many people who have experienced long term and recurring homelessness can be reluctant to utilise the services that they may need.⁹⁹ This may be particularly true for older people whose experiences of service engagement across a lifetime have not permanently ended their vulnerability to homelessness, and for whom the prospect of a highly institutionalised (and restrictive) response is particularly likely.¹⁰⁰

Supporting older people who have been without a home on a long term or recurring basis is a specialist skill; it requires the persistent, relational engagement skills exemplified by specialist homelessness services, with the high levels of personal care and residential support provided by aged care providers.

Recommendation 22: That the Victorian Parliament advocate for an expansion of **the Commonwealth Home Support Program's Assistance with Care and Housing (ACH) program**.

Recommendation 23: That the Victorian Government work with the Federal Government to deliver the specialist aged care that older people experiencing homelessness require, across a range of residential settings.

Homelessness, My Aged Care, and the NDIS

The Commonwealth Aged Care Act recognises that people who have experienced homelessness can prematurely experience age related conditions, and specified that they are eligible for aged care services from the age of 50.

The introduction of two new systems for meeting the support needs of Australians with disability or in advanced age (the NDIS and My Aged Care) have been designed to create a clear delineation of responsibilities; those under age 65 are supported through the NDIS, while those aged 65 and over are supported through My Aged Care.

For people experiencing homelessness and premature aging, there are significant unintended consequences from this delineation. Many people who have been without a home and have premature aging are being directed to first seek support through the NDIS before My Aged Care will consider their eligibility. They are then required to undertake a range of administratively burdensome assessments to seek a diagnosis that would qualify them for the NDIS. Such a diagnosis is often not possible, as the applicant's care needs are not related to specific disabilities.

As previously mentioned, many older people can be reluctant to engage with services.¹⁰¹ This is especially true where processes for engagement are particularly burdensome. Where Australia's policy settings recognise that people who have been without a home are eligible for aged care services from the age of 50, it is disappointing that a process failure is preventing many of them from receiving the care that they need.

Recommendation 24: That the Victorian Government work with the Federal Government and the NDIA to improve My Aged Care processes for people experiencing premature ageing.

Children's homelessness

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.

When children experience homelessness alongside their families, the transience and multiple forced relocations inherent in that experience often leads to disrupted schooling.¹⁰² Too many of these children never successfully re-engage, setting them on a path towards lifelong economic exclusion and poor health.¹⁰³ Children who experience prolonged episodes of homelessness are especially susceptible to a lifetime of intermittent homelessness.¹⁰⁴

Homelessness and schooling

Retaining a link to schooling is a highly protective factor against lifetime homelessness. Schooling supports educational attainment and ultimate employment outcomes, as well as self-esteem, and helps children to maintain positive routines.¹⁰⁵

Homelessness services have seen an explosion in the number of school students attending our services. Where 3,819 school students sought homelessness assistance in 2011-12, there were 12,668 in 2018-19.¹⁰⁶

Unfortunately, many schools inadvertently make it very difficult for students to continue to engage. Policies that fail students who do not meet attendance requirements (even where they have kept up with their school work), not sending work home with students who are transient, and declining to enrol students who need a short-term enrolment while they are in crisis accommodation, can all effectively 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 inadvertently exclude children and young people 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 in the curriculum.

Multidisciplinary support teams providing this support are currently in place for young people in out of home care. These teams should be scaled up so that young people experiencing homelessness also have the best chance possible of staying in school.

Recommendation 25: That the Victorian Government invest in education focused advocates and education support workers to support children experiencing homelessness to stay engaged in learning.

Homelessness and child protection

A growing problem in Victoria is the interaction of Child Protection with homeless families.

The lack of a safe and stable home can be extremely damaging for children, and can hinder their development. However, it is also recognised that removing children from their family of origin is a significant adverse life event in its own right that can cause lasting harm to both children, parents, and to the parent-child bond. As such, it is perverse that child removal is a regular response to family homelessness, where providing access to a home would both end the harm of homelessness for children, as well as avoid the harm of child removal.

Child Protection actions can be particularly complex for people experiencing family violence. Child Protection workers provide advice that families feel that they must abide by in order to avoid child removal. Adherence to these directives is not always easily achievable. For example, Child Protection can advise women not to return with their children to a home in which violence is occurring, occasioning homelessness. Yet should that homelessness, precipitated by Child Protection's advice, not be well supported by government agencies, that very homelessness can be a trigger for child removal. These complex interactions fall particularly heavily on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women and children.

Whether precipitated by Child Protection or not, homelessness should be a trigger for government agencies to respond with dedicated housing access, not with traumatic child removal. Other jurisdictions include a right for housing for homeless children.¹⁰⁷ At a minimum, the Victorian Government should ensure that a suitable social housing offer is made to all families whose homelessness is the primary justification for an impending child removal.

Recommendation 26: That the Victorian Government guarantee a suitable social housing offer for all families whose homelessness is the primary justification for an impending child removal.

Homelessness, child protection, and Centrelink

Even for the lowest income families, Centrelink incomes for families are widely recognised by homelessness services as sufficient to maintain rents across Victoria, including in many parts of Melbourne. Yet homelessness services regularly report that while they are working with a family to secure them a home, children are

removed from that household. This triggers a reduction in a household's Centrelink income (as the allowances for children are withdrawn), and creates an additional perverse situation: families are caught in a bind, where they are ineligible for the return of the children until they have a suitable home in which to raise them, but ineligible for an income that would enable them to rent a property large enough to accommodate their children.

Recommendation 27: That the Victorian Government work with the Federal Government to ensure Centrelink processes do not hamper family reunification.

Youth homelessness

Young people experience homelessness differently from adults. 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 young people, creating the conditions necessary to support their well-being is more complicated. Young people need care and support, and are not usually developmentally ready to fully control the circumstances of their own health, safety and positive development.

The challenge of supporting young people without a home includes accessing a stable home, but goes beyond that. A homelessness service system built around the needs of young people must also find a way to provide the support and guidance so necessary to all young people, but often inconsistent in the lives of young people without a home. Solutions to youth homelessness must also recognise that most young people have insufficient income to live independently.

In addressing the needs of young people without a home, we need to recognise that their needs are likely to be different from those of adults. A service system designed to meet the needs of adults *won't work* – we need a service system that fits the needs of children and young people.

Homelessness and family conflict

The major pathway into homelessness for young people is as the result of family conflict.¹⁰⁸ Their home environment becomes so negative and distressing that they no longer feel able to remain living with their family. In some instances, this reflects the fact that it is not safe to remain living in the family home. Yet for most young people experiencing homelessness, reconciling with family and returning home is the best possible option.¹⁰⁹

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 susceptible to a range of negative outcomes include mental health issues, substance misuse, criminal involvement, violence and victimisation.¹¹⁰ Prolonged youth homelessness is also a powerful predictor of a lifetime of episodic homelessness.¹¹¹

Young people who reengage with their families not only address their immediate homelessness, but are more likely to avoid the negative consequences of homelessness.¹¹²

Recommendation 28: That the Victorian Government invest in increased resources and a more systematic provision of family reconciliation for young people at risk of or experiencing homelessness.

Youth homelessness and couch surfing

Many young people without a home stay temporarily with friends or extended family. Known as 'couch surfing' these arrangements are typically informal. This informality can lead to problems, including disparate understandings of the arrangement between host and guest (both with regard to length of stay, and to expectations on the young person), transience, and a dangerous lack of oversight.

Couchsurfing should not be understood as an extended form of kinship care. Typically young couch surfers 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. From this point, many 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, these 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.^{113 114} Unfortunately, young people are making decisions about the safety of these arrangements at a time when they have limited support.¹¹⁵

Where there is a large number of young people highly vulnerable to exploitation, and without interpersonal supports, it is surprising that there are also very few institutional supports. Currently, there are next to no programs focussed on supporting young people who are couch surfing. Instead, young people bear the responsibility for determining the safety of their next couch surfing arrangement at a time of great desperation.

Programs should be developed to support young people to assess the safety of their arrangements, and where they are unsafe, to support them to access more formal youth homelessness programs. Where an arrangement is safe and provides a positive home environment, supports should be made available to both the couch surfer, and the "couch" provider to stabilise the living arrangement. This may include 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.¹¹⁶ Such a program would allow Victoria's response to young people without a home to harness the love and guidance of friends and extended family, rather than seek to emulate it through a service response.

Recommendation 29: That the Victorian Government develop a service response to support young couch surfers to assess the safety of their arrangements, and to provide support in appropriate placements.

Homelessness and Out of Home Care

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. These arrangements expire at the age of 18, and in most instances, supports are summarily withdrawn on a young person’s 18th birthday.

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.¹¹⁷ In 2018-19 Victoria’s specialist homelessness services supported 507 young people transitioning from out of home care arrangements,¹¹⁸ a majority of Victoria’s young care leavers aged 15 and over.¹¹⁹ It is clear that at the age of 18, there is more nurturing to be done.

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.¹²⁰

In 2018, the Victorian Government committed to extending care to the age of 21 for 250 young people over five years.¹²¹ Labelled ‘The Home Stretch’, this reform is backed by significant evidence.¹²² 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.

Young people’s access to much needed support should not be contingent on a one in ten chance of that support being funded. Instead, the Home Stretch supports that young people require, should be made available for as many young people as need them. This reform should be legislated as a guarantee for all young people aging out of the Out of Home Care system.

Recommendation 30: That the Victorian Parliament legislate an extended care guarantee for all Out of Home Care leavers who opt to continue to receive support.

Youth homelessness and community

Young people account for nearly a fifth of those experiencing or at risk of homelessness in Victoria. As highlighted earlier in this submission, with 20,000 young people aged 15-24 seeking support from a homelessness agency each year,¹²³ and young people typically on lower incomes (whether statutory or through employment), it is preferable to find solutions to youth homelessness that don't require them to meet personal and financial responsibilities for which they may be ill-equipped. In most instances this can be achieved by bolstering the capacity of families of origin, friends, or extended family to provide the support that young people need.

However, not all young people experiencing homelessness have safe and supportive homes that they can access. In these instances 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 decades¹²⁴, with many parts of Victoria missing out as a consequence. This means that many young people have to leave their local community to access accommodation, impeding their efforts to continue with school, tertiary education, or work¹²⁵ and to remain connected to the important people in their lives.¹²⁶

Recommendation 31: That the Victorian Government invest in additional refuge and/or foyer-like accommodation and support in areas with high unmet need.

LGBTIQ young people and homelessness

LGBTIQ young people are particularly vulnerable to homelessness.¹²⁷ 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.

Recommendation 32: That the Victorian Government invest in a new foyer-like setting to provide accommodation and support for young LGBTIQ people experiencing homelessness.

Homelessness and housing affordability for young people

After a short period of support, young people are encouraged to leave crisis facilities and live in the community. However, homelessness services can do little within this short time to improve a young person's income, supporting their financial capability to live independently. 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 arrangement¹²⁸. 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, those without other options require access to a housing subsidy or income supplement beyond that which is provided by the Commonwealth Government.

Recommendation 33: That the Victorian Government provide a housing subsidy to young people who have experienced homelessness and who are ready to live independently in the community.

Homelessness and young people with multiple complex needs

Among the most highly vulnerable people in our society is the group of young people with highly complex needs. This small but underserved group of children can demonstrate 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.¹²⁹

Such disabilities can result in reduced capacity to regulate emotions, poor impulse control and limited independence.¹³⁰ Without support, such young people can incur a lifetime of costs between the homelessness, hospital, and corrections systems.¹³¹ 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 their recovery.

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.¹³² For their part, police express frustration at the inability of support services to intervene at this critical stage. A police led response is not designed for and cannot deliver long-term positive outcomes for these young people.

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.

Recommendation 34: That the Victorian Government provide therapeutically supported residential support services for homeless young people with multiple justice, health, and human services interactions.

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