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## Submission

# Developing the National Housing and Homelessness Plan

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## Acknowledgement

In the spirit of reconciliation, Council to Homeless Persons acknowledges the Traditional Custodians of country throughout Australia and their connections to land, sea and community. We pay our respect to their Elders past, present and emerging, and extend that respect to all Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples today. Council to Homeless Persons is committed to honouring Australian Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples' unique cultural and spiritual relationships to the land, waters and seas, and their rich contribution to society.

# Introduction

Council to Homeless Persons (CHP) welcomes the opportunity to provide input to the development of the National Housing and Homelessness Plan. CHP believes that it is possible to end homelessness. This would mean homelessness would be rare, the experience brief and well-supported, and homelessness wouldn't recur for people who have experienced it in the past. The National Housing and Homelessness Plan is an unparalleled opportunity to move us towards this vision.

Currently, homelessness is not rare. There were 122,494 people experiencing homelessness on Census night 2021, of whom 30,660 live in Victoria.<sup>1</sup> The National Housing and Homelessness Plan must include measures to bring down the incidence of homelessness across the Australian community. By raising the rate of income support, improving renters' rights, and keeping victim-survivors of family violence safe in the family home, State and Federal Governments have an opportunity to work together to prevent Australians from experiencing this most damaging form of exclusion, and make homelessness rare.

For homelessness to be brief and well-supported, the National Housing and Homelessness Plan must address the fact that so many people experiencing homelessness are unable to be quickly provided with the accommodation and case management support that resolves homelessness and helps people to recover from the circumstances that brought them into homelessness. When 16,000 people are turned away from specialist homelessness services (SHS) in Victoria each year, almost 72,000 instances of requests for assistance are unable to be met with *any* response in Australia, and far more are unable to be met with the responses a person has requested, it cannot be said that homelessness in Australia is well supported. But by increasing the resourcing of specialist homelessness services, more people can get the support they need to end their homelessness quickly, and the level of harm that people without homes experience can be greatly reduced.

For a small (but far too large) number of people, homelessness is more than a period without a stable home during a one-off crisis. It is the result of complex, intersecting exclusions that cause repeated instances of homelessness. For those people for whom the private rental market has proved unable to provide consistent and stable housing, and those returning to homelessness multiple times over many years, housing and intensive supports are required to break the cycle of recurring homelessness. There has been significant innovation in homelessness practice in recent years and we have the potential to end homelessness for multiply excluded people. Currently, the availability of housing and intensive supports in Australia are insufficient to meet that goal. The National Housing and Homeless Plan should rise to the moment by delivering these necessary resources.

The National Housing and Homelessness Plan is an opportunity for State and Federal Governments to deliver the coordinated responses to homelessness that will reduce the incidence of homelessness in Australia, and make homelessness brief, well-supported, and unlikely to re-occur when it does happen. CHP, with specialist homelessness services across Victoria and all those who are dedicated to ending homelessness, implores you to develop a National Housing and Homelessness Plan that meets this opportunity.

# Recommendations

**Recommendation 1:** The National Housing and Homelessness Plan should aim to end homelessness. This includes setting targets and timelines for reducing and ultimately ending homelessness. The plan should coordinate across State and Federal responsibilities.

**Recommendation 2:** The National Housing and Homelessness Plan should deliver policy changes and homelessness programs that reduce homelessness.

**Recommendation 3:** The National Housing and Homelessness Plan should be supported by rolling action plans.

**Recommendation 4:** Support 'first to know' service systems to better identify homelessness risk, and trigger an enhanced service response or referral.

**Recommendation 5:** Trial and evaluate cross-sector housing and support partnerships.

**Recommendation 6:** Recognise that stronger referral pathways into the specialist homelessness service system must be supported by additional capacity to respond.

**Recommendation 7:** Raise the rate of income support to ensure all Australians do not live in Poverty.

**Recommendation 8:** Reduce gendered violence and provide children's and family supports.

**Recommendation 9:** Ensure full implementation, funding, and monitoring of the action plans for the National Plan to End Violence Against Women and Children.

**Recommendation 10:** Reduce gendered violence and provide children's and family supports.

**Recommendation 11:** Improve upon and expand Safe at Home responses.

**Recommendation 12:** Provide appropriate accommodation options for perpetrators of family violence excluded from the family home.

**Recommendation 13:** Increase the availability of medium-term rental brokerage for victim-survivors of family violence.

**Recommendation 14:** Increase the provision of public and community housing for victim-survivors of family violence.

**Recommendation 15:** Increase the provision of family mediation and reconciliation programs for young people at risk of or experiencing homelessness.

**Recommendation 16:** That tenancy legislation across Australia is amended to improve renters' protections against eviction.

**Recommendation 17:** Explore reversing the onus of appeal on rent increases, such that the onus sits with the rental owner.

**Recommendation 18:** That expert representation be made available to more renters with tenancy matters, through community legal centres and specialist homelessness services.

**Recommendation 19:** Expand homelessness prevention programs such as Victoria's Private Rental Assistance Program and TenancyPlus.

**Recommendation 20:** Increase funding to specialist homelessness services to reflect the increase in demand for assistance.

**Recommendation 21:** Recognise that improving outcomes for people experiencing homelessness will require additional resources.

**Recommendation 22:** Fund assertive outreach and multidisciplinary support in regions that do not currently have it.

**Recommendation 23:** Provide a loading for regional service delivery to recognise high levels of disadvantage, and differences in service delivery.

**Recommendation 24:** Provide ongoing funding to meet the increased cost of staffing due to the Equal Remuneration Order.

**Recommendation 25:** Increase the provision of women's refuges in Australia.

**Recommendation 26:** Prioritise homeless families who have child protection involvement for social housing allocations.

**Recommendation 27:** Deliver increased case management and therapeutic responses for children experiencing homelessness.

**Recommendation 28:** Deliver dedicated crisis responses for trans and non-binary people in Victoria.

**Recommendation 29:** Foster the development of expertise in responding to homelessness for trans and non-binary Victorians.

**Recommendation 30:** The National Housing and Homelessness Plan should describe the level of social housing needed in Victoria. This should include consideration for how to achieve throughput from crisis accommodation and women's refuges.

**Recommendation 31:** Rolling action plans under the National Housing and Homelessness Plan should consecutively deliver social housing, building towards the defined level of need.

**Recommendation 32:** At least 60,000 new social properties be delivered in Victoria.

**Recommendation 33:** Prioritise the development of social housing with public money.

**Recommendation 34:** Support the development and implementation of a self-determined national Aboriginal housing and homelessness plan.

**Recommendation 35:** Support the implementation of Mana-na woorn-tyeen marr-takoort, the Victorian Aboriginal Housing and Homelessness Framework.

**Recommendation 36:** Support the delivery of strong specialist homelessness services by Aboriginal Community Controlled Organisations.

**Recommendation 37:** Increase the provision of Housing First programs across Australia.

**Recommendation 38:** Adopt the eight Housing First Australia principles and remove barriers to achieving them in the National Housing and Homelessness Plan.

**Recommendation 39:** Fund the provision of long-term support in Housing First programs.

**Recommendation 40:** Deliver dedicated social housing stock for young people, including 5,000 new properties in Victoria.

**Recommendation 41:** Provide funding for the financial gap between what young people can afford, and the cost of operating the housing.

**Recommendation 42:** Provide support packages for young people who are unable to live in the family home.

# A national plan to end homelessness

We can end homelessness. The National Housing and Homelessness Plan must seek to deliver that vision.

There were 122,494 people experiencing homelessness on Census night 2021, of whom 30,660 live in Victoria.<sup>2</sup> Across the course of financial year 2021-22, some 275,256 Australians sought assistance from a homelessness service, include 101,675 Victorians.<sup>3</sup> Many of them received the support that they needed, and ended their homelessness. Others were turned away from inadequately funded homelessness agencies. Every one of them faced the prospect of losing their home in the midst of a significant crisis.

Not only does the loss of a home represent a new, significant barrier to the resolution of that crisis, but it is deeply personally damaging. The loss of a home causes harm that extends beyond physical deprivation, to include profound social deprivation. 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.

I've suffered from anxiety and depression all my life pretty much, and when I was without a home, all of those things became more intense. It would have been nice to have some kind of support so that I didn't decline the way that I did."

**Christine Thirkell, consumer / advocate**

A National Housing and Homelessness Plan is an opportunity to move from a system that manages homelessness, to one that seeks to eliminate it.

## **The role of State and Commonwealth governments in a national plan to end homelessness**

A national plan can address the two major barriers to ending homelessness: the scale of investment needed, and the need to coordinate across areas of divided State and Federal jurisdiction.

As we discuss in the 'Housing' chapter later in this submission, Australia is in a housing crisis. The scale of the shortfall in public and community housing compared to what's needed requires concerted action from all levels of government. In the section titled 'Coordinate responses across State and Federal areas of responsibility' immediately below the current section, we discuss improving preventative responses across the various 'first to know' services.

The example of the last national homelessness strategy, 2008's *The Road Home*, is instructive. As well as providing funding to expand under-funded services that had been effective over many years, funding also flowed to test new approaches in trial sites. Many of these proved enormously effective (see for example the section on 'Housing First' later in this submission). But despite the positive impact demonstrated by these



trials, the envisaged further rollout of these programs never came to fruition. It has now been fifteen years without capitalising on those transformative opportunities revealed by the last strategy.

The next National Housing and Homelessness Plan should set the objective to end homelessness, and support that objective with rolling and funded action plans. If we are to end homelessness, we need State and Federal Governments to work in concert, with a shared responsibility for delivering what works to prevent homelessness from occurring, and resolve it quickly when it does.

There needs to be a government body that regularly and consistently triple checks everything that is happening. Not just here's a plan and lets just stick by that."

**Amanda Bingham, consumer / advocate**

The next National Housing and Homelessness Plan should:

- commit to targets to reduce homelessness by 50 per cent over five years and ending homelessness over ten years
- implement an initial set of policy changes informed by the best current evidence about the changes needed to achieve homelessness reduction targets
- establish a process to monitor and review progress towards the targets every 2-3 years
- develop a revised action plan every 2-3 years to tackle the gaps in the system that were revealed by the review process
- include people with lived experience in the processes of review and decision-making.

**Recommendation 1: The National Housing and Homelessness Plan should aim to end homelessness. This includes setting targets and timelines for reducing and ultimately ending homelessness. The plan should coordinate across State and Federal responsibilities.**

**Recommendation 2: The National Housing and Homelessness Plan should deliver policy changes and homelessness programs that reduce homelessness.**

**Recommendation 3: The National Housing and Homelessness Plan should be supported by rolling action plans.**

### **Coordinate responses across State and Federal areas of responsibility**

Homelessness usually occurs as the result of a significant crisis, escalating to such a point that a person loses their home. When a person in crisis is also subject to structural inequities, like poverty, a deeply unaffordable housing market, or discrimination, homelessness can result from that crisis. That such matters escalate to homelessness is a social policy failure, rather than a failure of any one program or organisation. But there are always opportunities to prevent homelessness before it occurs, and almost half of consumers

come to homelessness services as a result of a referral from a different service system.<sup>4</sup> A plan to end homelessness must include preventative work across the various 'first to know' services.

These 'first to know' services span State and Federal areas of responsibility, including:

- State and Territory housing authorities
- Local government and child and maternal health services
- Centrelink and employment services
- Department of Veterans Affairs
- schools
- health services, including hospitals and mental healthcare
- police or corrections
- family and children's services
- aged care services

The next National Housing and Homelessness Plan represents an opportunity to work within these systems to better identify clients at risk of homelessness, and trigger enhanced service responses to them.

Those enhanced responses could be more intensive support within the 'first to know' agency; referral to a specialist homelessness service; or referral to new dedicated housing and support programs delivered in partnership between 'first to know' agencies and housing and homelessness providers, models of which should be trialled and evaluated under the rolling action plans. To illustrate this with an example, a person who is engaged with the Department of Veterans Affairs (DVA) and at risk of homelessness might be provided with enhanced provision of existing DVA responses such as peer support or mental healthcare; might be referred to a homelessness service for support to sustain their tenancy; or might be provided with a dedicated housing and support program for veterans. If the person's homelessness risk is just one presenting issue among many, it may be appropriate for the DVA to be the lead agency in care-coordination, as indeed children's services often are for children.

**A holistic model like (a dedicated program) offers seems to be a good way to go. One that takes addiction, mental health and physical health into consideration along with housing issues. And giving people living / life skills."**

**Nigel Pernu, consumer / advocate**

Essential to any effort to reduce homelessness by intervening earlier is a recognition that Australia's specialist homelessness services are currently not funded to meet the level of need in the community (see the section 'Fund to the level of need' later in this chapter). Greater incidences of referral to specialist homelessness services can only prevent homelessness when those services are resourced to receive and respond to that referral. By better preventing homelessness at 'first to know' agencies, and more adequately funding specialist homelessness services, we can reduce the incidence of homelessness and better resolve it when it does occur.

**Recommendation 4: Support 'first to know' service systems to better identify homelessness risk, and trigger an enhanced service response or referral.**

**Recommendation 5: Trial and evaluate cross-sector housing and support partnerships.**

**Recommendation 6: Recognise that stronger referral pathways into the specialist homelessness service system must be supported by additional capacity to respond.**

# Preventing homelessness from occurring

Homelessness should be rare. With coordinated State and Federal investment action, it can be.

## Raise the rate of income support

Homelessness almost always occurs in the context of poverty. The types of events that lead to homelessness, like an eviction, a relationship breakdown, or a period of ill-health, occur with far greater regularity than homelessness does. Most people who experience these things do not become homeless. To a great extent, the defining factor in whether or not a person experiences homelessness in these times, is whether they have the funds to avoid it.

**Figure 1. Main reason reported for seeking assistance from a specialist homelessness service, 2021-22.**

	Victoria	Australia
Financial difficulties	11,906	27,521
Housing affordability stress	7,049	18,941
Housing crisis	14,979	53,508
Inadequate or inappropriate dwelling conditions	10,742	29,978
Previous accommodation ended	4,137	11,330
Time out from family/other situation	840	3,284
Relationship/family breakdown	2,975	11,056
Sexual abuse	138	511
Domestic and family violence	33,410	72,904
Non-family violence	525	1,342
Mental health issues	1,195	3,590
Medical issues	636	2,030
Problematic drug or substance use	295	966
Problematic alcohol use	107	479
Employment difficulties	204	398
Unemployment	210	568
Problematic gambling	17	46

<b>Transition from custodial arrangements</b>	3,821	6,075
<b>Transition from foster care and child safety residential placements</b>	151	428
<b>Transition from other care arrangements</b>	275	776
<b>Discrimination including racial discrimination</b>	21	69
<b>Itinerant</b>	984	3,971
<b>Unable to return home due to environmental reasons</b>	207	795
<b>Disengagement with school or other education and training</b>	75	749
<b>Lack of family and/or community support</b>	989	3,506
<b>Other</b>	4,938	14,253
<b>Invalid or missing</b>	849	3,620

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. But income support payments are so low that they no longer reflect the cost of purchasing essentials, such as housing. At the time of writing, the median rent on a one-bedroom flat in Melbourne is \$425 per week<sup>5</sup> – a single person on jobseeker receiving the maximum Commonwealth Rental Assistance receives \$425.15 per week. Figure 2 below shows that median rents (all housing sizes) exceed income support levels in every market. The fact that Melbourne has comparatively lower rents than the rest of Australia further highlights the difficulty a single person on income support faces when seeking to obtain a rental home.

An analysis of the 45,895 properties listed for rent in Australia in one weekend in March 2023 revealed that not only are people unable to afford to rent alone but that, even among sharehouses, just 4 rooms across the country were affordable for a single person on Jobseeker, and none were affordable for a single person on Youth Allowance.<sup>6</sup>

**Figure 2. Median rents in Australian capital city markets and nationwide<sup>7</sup>**

	<b>Number of people experiencing homelessness</b>
<b>Sydney</b>	\$733
<b>Melbourne</b>	\$551
<b>Brisbane</b>	\$614
<b>Adelaide</b>	\$549
<b>Perth</b>	\$599

<b>Hobart</b>	\$552
<b>Darwin</b>	\$600
<b>Canberra</b>	\$669
<b>Australia</b>	\$589

This is no minor matter. With over a million Australians currently in receipt of JobSeeker, and over 300,000 on Youth Allowance,<sup>8</sup> the number of people in Australia who are at serious risk of homelessness should they encounter a misfortune is enormous. The benefits of increasing income support extend beyond homelessness prevention. Increasing people’s access to money also helps them to exit homelessness.

There is perhaps no more important step the Federal Government could take to prevent and reduced homelessness than to raise the rate of income support, such that it is adequate to meet a person’s essential needs.

**Recommendation 7: Raise the rate of income support to ensure all Australians do not live in Poverty.**

### **Prevent homelessness as a result of family violence**

Family violence is the main cause of homelessness for women and children.<sup>9</sup> In fact, family violence is listed as the main reason for presenting at homelessness services by women at almost twice the rate of the second most common reason. To prevent homelessness, more must be done to reduce gendered violence and to provide families with the support they need to thrive.

**Recommendation 8: Reduce gendered violence and provide children’s and family supports.**

**Recommendation 9: Ensure full implementation, funding, and monitoring of the action plans for the National Plan to End Violence Against Women and Children.**

Homelessness can be a deeply harmful experience, and Victoria’s Royal Commission into Family Violence found evidence of it “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.”<sup>10</sup> Women and children who survive family violence often have to move repeatedly, disrupting schooling and preventing them from starting a new life free from the perpetrator. The link between housing and safety is perhaps nowhere more plain than in instances of homelessness occasioned by family violence.

One option for preventing homelessness as a result of family violence is a response known as 'Safe at Home'. Safe at Home refers to a variety of responses in which the perpetrator of violence is excluded from the family home, allowing the victim-survivor and any children to remain there. While it is not always an appropriate response, especially in instances where the risk of further or escalating violence is high, it is a preferred response in principle where such risk is not high. Not only does it prevent women and children from experiencing homelessness, it also allows continuity of schooling and community, which can be important in recovering from violence.

Unfortunately, Safe at Home responses have not yet achieved the level of success that has been envisaged. There are a number of important factors contributing to the mixed utility of Safe at Home responses, including a lack of appropriate accommodation options for perpetrators, which results in many perpetrators seeking to return to the family home, and likely occasioning more harm. Improved monitoring of perpetrators is also likely to be a necessary component of keeping women and children safe in their home of origin.

**Recommendation 10: Reduce gendered violence and provide children's and family supports.**

**Recommendation 11: Improve upon and expand Safe at Home responses.**

**Recommendation 12: Provide appropriate accommodation options for perpetrators of family violence excluded from the family home.**

One key factor affecting both Safe at Home responses and rehousing efforts in new locations is victim-survivors' immediate access to financial resources and, hence, their ability to pay rent or mortgages. Divorce and separation are associated with a reduction in household income when one household becomes two. That women provide the majority of unpaid child caring responsibilities, as well as the financial control that may be a factor in an abusive relationship mean that oftentimes, victim-survivors are unable to fund the cost of housing themselves and their children in the short-term. These issues are often exacerbated after a separation, when perpetrators of violence lose other forms of control.

In response to the Royal Commission into Family Violence, Victoria has had some success in increasing the availability of brokerage funding to women and children escaping violence, including through the *Private Rental Assistance Program (PRAP)*. These programs have proven to be very successful in sustaining housing for victim-survivors of family violence. However, these programs are designed as short-term interventions. It is important to improve access to flexible brokerage for women and children in Australia, including over the medium-term, and also to provide more public and community housing for those whose incomes are unlikely to provide for sustainable housing beyond this period.

**Recommendation 13: Increase the availability of medium-term rental brokerage for victim-survivors of family violence.**

**Recommendation 14: Increase the provision of public and community housing for victim-survivors of family violence.**

### Reconcile young people and their families

The major pathway into homelessness for young people is through family conflict.<sup>11</sup> Young people without homes are often framed as “runaways”, but the truth is that many are kicked out of home, and many more are simply escaping unbearable conflict and in some instances violence from their closest loved ones. Unsurprisingly, homelessness can expose young people to other negative experiences and influences, leading to a range of negative outcomes including violence and victimisation, deteriorating mental health, exposure to drug cultures, and contact with the justice system.<sup>12</sup>

Young people experience homelessness at higher rates than any other group in the population (see figure 3 below). Prolonged youth homelessness is also a powerful predictor of a lifetime of episodic homelessness.<sup>13</sup> Key to ending homelessness is reducing the number of young people who experience it in the first place. This means addressing the ‘family conflict to homelessness’ pathway.

**Figure 3. Homelessness by age, and rate per 10,000 people, ABS Census<sup>14</sup>**

Age	Number of people experiencing homelessness	Proportion of all people experiencing homelessness	Rate of homelessness per 10,000 people in the population
Under 12	17,646	14%	47.9
12–18	11,302	9%	53.3
19–24	16,902	14%	90.6
25–34	25,504	21%	70.4
35–44	17,085	14%	49.0
45–54	14,678	12%	45.2
55–64	10,933	9%	36.3
65–74	6,091	5%	24.8
75 and over	2,348	2%	12.2

In some instances, the family home is not safe, and young people should always be involved in a safety assessment prior to engaging in family mediation and reconciliation. But family mediation and reconciliation programs that help young people and their families communicate and understand one another in healthier



ways can be an important tool in ending conflict in the home, and preventing and resolving youth homelessness.<sup>15</sup>

For most young people whose family home is free from violence, reconciling with family and returning home is not only the safest option, and the one that would immediately end their homelessness, but also the option most likely to help them achieve good outcomes, like finishing their education.<sup>16</sup> Importantly, most young people excluded from the family home and their parents desire to improve their relationships, irrespective of whether they desire reunification at first.<sup>17, 18</sup>

The Federal Government already provides family mediation services to young people experiencing or at risk of homelessness through the Reconnect program. But with so many young people experiencing homelessness, it is time to review whether this program is sufficiently large to meet the scale of need.

**Recommendation 15: Increase the provision of family mediation and reconciliation programs for young people at risk of or experiencing homelessness.**

### Prevent evictions

Evictions are a major cause of homelessness in Australia, and are the main cause of homelessness for one in five people attending specialist homelessness services in Australia. Figure 4 (below) shows the number and proportion of people coming to specialist homelessness services whose main reason for presenting was 'housing crisis', a term that describes evictions.

There is significant capacity to reduce the number of evictions in Australia, by both enhancing renters' protections in the various tenancy legislation across the country, and by improving the provision of support available to people whose property owners are seeking an eviction.

**Figure 4. 'Housing crisis' as the main reason for presenting to a specialist homelessness service in Australia<sup>19</sup>**

Financial year	Housing crisis	Proportion of SHS clients*
2011-12	26,037	13.3
2012-13	29,781	14.5
2013-14	35,149	15.5
2014-15	51,586	20.5
2015-16	63,234	22.8
2016-17	67,956	23.7

2017-18	60,611	21.1
2018-19	57,049	19.8
2019-20	50,736	17.7
2020-21	48,446	17.6
2021-22	53,508	19.9

\*Missing data excluded

The experience of Victoria's *Residential Tenancies Act* reforms is worth further consideration. Victorians have had increased protections against eviction since financial year 2019-20, first in the form of pandemic-related protections, and now through the amended *Residential Tenancies Act*. Since this time, the number of people seeking homelessness assistance due to eviction has decreased. Evictions have also fallen as a proportion of all reasons for presenting to homelessness services.

**Figure 5. 'Housing crisis' as the main reason for presenting to a specialist homelessness service in Victoria<sup>20</sup>**

Financial year	Housing crisis	Proportion of SHS clients*
2011-12	9,776	14.0
2012-13	11,165	14.7
2013-14	14,068	15.8
2014-15	19,036	18.8
2015-16	20,450	19.5
2016-17	22,526	20.6
2017-18	22,625	19.5
2018-19	20,563	18.3
2019-20	16,316	14.2
2020-21	13,743	13.1
2021-22	14,979	14.9

\*Missing data excluded

While this provides support for the idea that strengthening renters' rights can meaningfully bring down the number of people experiencing homelessness, every jurisdiction (including Victoria) can do more to protect renters against unreasonable and unfair evictions.

Rental regimes across Australia should be further improved by recognising the power imbalance between renters and rental owners. An example of this would be to reverse the onus of appealing a rent increase from the renter to the rental owner, as occurs in the Australian Capital Territory. Under the model operating in the ACT, rents may be raised to a certain threshold (tied in the ACT to movements in the market) by a rental owner. Should a rental owner desire an increase beyond such a threshold, it is their responsibility, rather than that of the tenant, to appeal to the tribunal, such as the Victorian Civil and Administrative Tribunal (VCAT).

Such a reform would retain the principles that rent increases should be in line with the market, while seeking to overcome the issues that currently exist around renters' hesitancy to exercise their powers for review.

**Recommendation 16: That tenancy legislation across Australia is amended to improve renters' protections against eviction.**

**Recommendation 17: Explore reversing the onus of appeal on rent increases, such that the onus sits with the rental owner.**

Stronger renters' rights are part of the solution, but significant barriers exist in seeking to enforce those rights. In Victoria, real estate agency property managers provide expert representation for property owners in tenancy matters before the *Victorian Civil and Administrative Tribunal (VCAT)*. No such expert representation is available for renters in most instances. While the data is relatively old now, VCAT data showed that rental property owners initiate 95 per cent of applications to the VCAT Residential Tenancies List.<sup>21</sup> Of these, 80 per cent go undefended, with the tenant failing to appear at the hearing.<sup>22</sup> While data is not available on the proportion of those that are defended that have expert representation, we propose that it is low. Meanwhile, in 95 per cent of residential tenancy hearings initiated by private rental property owners, their agent or property manager represents them.<sup>23</sup>

As far as CHP is aware, this imbalance is repeated across the country. It is true that community legal centres and some specialist homelessness services provide representation in these matters, but these resources are scarce, and most renters are not assisted through tenancy matters and evictions at the tribunal. Specialist homelessness services in Victoria report that where tenants attend VCAT hearings, the result is typically a less punitive outcome for that tenant, including a significantly reduced incidence of eviction. In order to improve renters' access to the rights afforded to them by law, greater support in tenancy matters should be made available.

**Recommendation 18: That expert representation be made available to more renters with tenancy matters, through community legal centres and specialist homelessness services.**

Victoria's homelessness services are remarkably successful at homelessness prevention. Almost two thirds of people who come to homelessness services do so before they become homeless, and 84 per cent of this group are supported to remain housed.<sup>24</sup>

Interventions to prevent homelessness can involve workers helping to resolve conflicts with landlords, supporting people to access Centrelink entitlements, to submit rental applications, or assisting with arrears. Case managers might work with young people to resolve conflict at home so they can return, or assist people to navigate other services they need, such as health or mental health, the NDIS, or family violence services.

However, the lack of capacity to undertake prevention work in SHS means that opportunities to make critical and time sensitive interventions are missed, and people lose their homes even where tenancies could be saved.

Victoria's highly successful *Private Rental Assistance Program (PRAP)* and *TenancyPlus* programs are key tools in saving tenancies that are at risk, and supporting people to remain housed. Not only does this prevent significant harm to people who might otherwise experience homelessness, but these programs do so at a greatly reduced cost to government when compared to the cost of homelessness. Victorian specialist homelessness services report that, with these programs, they exceed their funding targets multiple times over. Demand exceeds even the level of support that agencies stretch to be able to provide.

Preventing homelessness is a core part of ensuring homelessness is rare. Expanding homelessness prevention programs like PRAP and TenancyPlus to better reflect the level of need is an essential element of that goal.

**Recommendation 19: Expand homelessness prevention programs such as Victoria's Private Rental Assistance Program and TenancyPlus.**

# Responding to people in crisis

Where homelessness does occur, it should be brief and well-supported. But currently, too little accommodation and case management is available to people without homes.

**On an average night in Victoria, 30,660 people are homeless and in crisis. We have tens of thousands of people without a home tonight, sleeping in their cars, couch surfing, sleeping rough, living in an unsafe rooming house, or considering returning to a violent relationship.**

## Fund to the level of need

Last year across Australia there were 71,962 instances where people were turned away from specialist homelessness services without any form of assistance at one of the most difficult points in their life (see figure 6 below for State and Territory breakdown). The demand for homelessness support in Australia so exceeds the level of support that is funded, that many people simply miss out.

**Figure 6. Number of unassisted requests at Specialist Homelessness Services 2021-22<sup>25</sup> <sup>26</sup>**

National	71,962
NSW	9,842
Vic	16,111
Qld	3,435
WA	20,555
SA	840
Tas	13,969
ACT	232
NT	6,978

While figure 6 shows that some 16,111 people were unable to receive assistance at homelessness services in Victoria last financial year, we know the true number to be far higher. Victorian homelessness services report being so overwhelmed by demand, that phone calls and messages go unanswered, and people are turned away from the door without even receiving a basic intake assessment of their needs. All of these people go unreported in the data. Many of them have substantial needs. In Victoria, 45 per cent of SHS consumers are experiencing family violence, 32 per cent describe having poor mental health, and 8 per cent describe misusing alcohol and other drugs. For these people, as with all people experiencing homelessness, the availability of support is inadequate, and most will need to address these conditions sleeping in their

cars, couch surfing, sleeping rough, living in an unsafe rooming house, or considering returning to a violent relationship. These living situations detract from people's recovery.

In an environment in which homelessness in Australia has grown significantly (the number of people experiencing homelessness on any given night grew by 20 per cent between 2011 and 2021)<sup>27</sup>, little attention has been paid by governments to growing the core elements of homelessness responses, such as intake, case management, and housing. In the face of such a significant dearth of resources, specialist homelessness services are already doing more with what they have, supporting increasing numbers of people without an equivalent increase in staffing, brokerage, or dedicated housing. The unavailability of supports described above may be an early sign that the strain is starting to show. In this environment, there is little scope to improve outcomes for people without homes through greater coordination of existing supports. Instead, the National Housing and Homelessness Plan must consider the level of resourcing required to achieve stronger outcomes for more people seeking homelessness assistance.

**Recommendation 20: Increase funding to specialist homelessness services to reflect the increase in demand for assistance.**

**Recommendation 21: Recognise that improving outcomes for people experiencing homelessness will require additional resources.**

There are still other instances of unmet demand that go unrecorded in the official data. The high incidence of people being turned away from homelessness services, or offered supports that are insufficient for their needs, means that a significant number of people experiencing homelessness - especially those sleeping rough - are not seeking assistance from agencies. Homelessness services are actually quite adept at working with the potential consumers, through a model known as assertive outreach. Assertive outreach is a method of building a relationship with people who may otherwise not be utilising support services that are designed for them, offering practical support in the short term, and building rapport with a view to linking people in with the multidisciplinary supports they may require.

Unfortunately, the provision of assertive outreach (and of multidisciplinary supports) is inconsistent across different geographies. However, the need for assertive outreach is high, including in rural and remote areas. The example of one assertive outreach program in rural Victoria may prove instructive. As highlighted in a recent edition of *Parity Magazine*, Uniting Vic.Tas recently ran a six-month pilot program in the Wimmera region of Victoria. As the final month of the pilot neared, the program had identified 62 people rough sleeping and in need of assistance.<sup>28</sup>

Council to Homeless Persons has recently been consulting with the needs of services in regional Victoria. A major priority in many regions consulted was that they lack assertive outreach programs, and so are hampered in their work to address escalating levels of rough sleeping. The National Housing and Homelessness Plan should improve the geographic coverage of assertive outreach programs so that all communities are equipped to support people sleeping rough.

**Recommendation 22: Fund assertive outreach and multidisciplinary support in regions that do not currently have it.**

Delivering homelessness services in regional areas is particularly difficult. Despite typically higher levels of disadvantage, services in regional areas are often only funded part-time. Where they're able, agencies will cobble together a full time position by having one worker deliver multiple programs. For example, a worker might work 38 hours per week by delivering homelessness, family violence, and material aid services to a town. While this has a beneficial impact on service operation hours, it creates a structural issue, whereby any personal leave, attendance at meetings, or staff professional development results in the almost total unavailability of community support in that location at that time.

The nature of homelessness service delivery in regional areas is also not reflected in funding agreements. Much of homelessness service delivery is in assisting consumers with transportation and advocacy support at appointments. Longer travel distances mean that attending these appointments requires a far greater time commitment in regional areas. This is not reflected in increased staffing.

With high levels of disadvantage, and low levels of staffing, many regional areas have insufficient homelessness support available. A regional service loading should be made available to address the barriers to homelessness support experienced by people in regional areas.

**Recommendation 23: Provide a loading for regional service delivery to recognise high levels of disadvantage, and differences in service delivery.**

To date, indexation has been provided based on (often inadequate) calculations of staffing costs and inflation, without regard to increased demand. Even the indexation that governments do provide is regularly threatened. A prime example of this is the Equal Remuneration Order supplement.

In 2012 the Fair Work Commission raised the wages of workers in the social, community and disability sectors, through the Equal Remuneration Order (ERO), in response to an application by unions and the then-Federal Government. By raising the wages of homelessness workers (which CHP strongly supported), the provision of homelessness services became more expensive. To meet the increased costs of the services funded under the National Housing and Homelessness Agreement, the Federal Government provided additional funding via a supplementation fund attached to the National Housing and Homelessness Agreement (NHHA). The initial supplementation fund expired in June 2021.

Since this time, Federal Governments of various parties have omitted to include the supplementation in Commonwealth budgets. While this funding has ultimately been supplied by Federal Governments in each instance that it risked withdrawal, the decision regularly comes so late that many workers, facing job cuts once funding no longer meets staffing costs, have left the homelessness sector towards the end of their contracts. This is particularly damaging, as homelessness services are funded at lower levels than comparable sectors (at least in Victoria), making recruitment and retention more difficult even when funding

certainty is available. Nor is it encouraging for the future of the ERO supplementation that it has over successive years been omitted from Commonwealth budgets. While significant campaigns by homelessness services have thus far been successful at seeing the ERO supplementation renewed by Federal Governments, the success of these campaigns was not guaranteed. The next National Housing and Homelessness Plan should recognise the actual cost of providing specialist homelessness services, and embed the ERO supplementation as an ongoing component of wages.

**Recommendation 24: Provide ongoing funding to meet the increased cost of staffing due to the Equal Remuneration Order.**

### Responding to women and children in crisis

Forty per cent of specialist homelessness service clients indicate that part of the reason they need assistance is that they are experiencing family violence (see figure 7 below). Family violence is the number one cause of homelessness among both women and children. While family violence case management is a specialist skill, many of the needs of women and children who have been made homeless by family violence are similar to those of other people experiencing homelessness – trauma informed supports, a safe place to rest in the short-term, and a home that they can afford. Not only is addressing family violence necessary to reduce homelessness, but homelessness supports are essential supports for women and children escaping family violence.

**Figure 7. Number and proportion of SHS clients indicating family violence, all genders, all age, by State, 2021-22** <sup>29</sup>

	Experiencing family violence	Not experiencing family violence	Percentage experiencing family violence
National	109,165	166,191	40%
NSW	26,259	42,214	38%
Vic	45,999	55,676	45%
Qld	13,511	28,076	32%
WA	10,128	14,579	41%
SA	5,238	12,792	29%
Tas	1,741	5,236	25%
ACT	1,505	2,306	39%
NT	4,784	5,312	47%



It is clear there is a dearth of crisis accommodation options for women and children escaping family violence in Australia. Recommendation 18 of the Royal Commission into Family Violence in Victoria was that:

*“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 [within two years].”<sup>30</sup>*

Despite this, an average of 97 households are accommodated in emergency accommodation, typically low-cost motels, every night by Safe Steps.<sup>31</sup> This does not include the many other victim-survivors whose emergency accommodation is funded through homelessness or local family violence services. As identified by Victoria’s Royal Commission into Family Violence, the use of hotels as emergency accommodation for women and children experiencing family violence is inappropriate, insufficiently safe, and disruptive to children’s access to education and their existing natural supports.

### **Recommendation 25: Increase the provision of women’s refuges in Australia.**

The lack of safe housing options doesn’t just impact the duration of families’ stay in inappropriate hotel accommodation. It significantly harms women’s ability to leave their partners, endangering them and their children. Every year an estimated 7,690 women across Australia return to perpetrators because they have nowhere affordable to live; and 9,120 women become homeless after leaving their homes due to domestic and family violence and being unable to secure long-term housing. Around 45,000 women in Australia want to leave a violent home but don’t, because they can’t afford to leave or have nowhere to go.<sup>32</sup>

Without safe housing, mothers risk child protection involvement and the prospect of their children being removed. This risk falls most heavily on Aboriginal families, with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Island children already overrepresented in statutory care.

### **Recommendation 26: Prioritise homeless families who have child protection involvement for social housing allocations.**

Housing is of fundamental importance for families. The costs to families and children, as well as to other expensive government services, such as child protection, are so significant, that there cannot be any justification for continuing the shocking situation in which women have to choose between violence and homelessness.

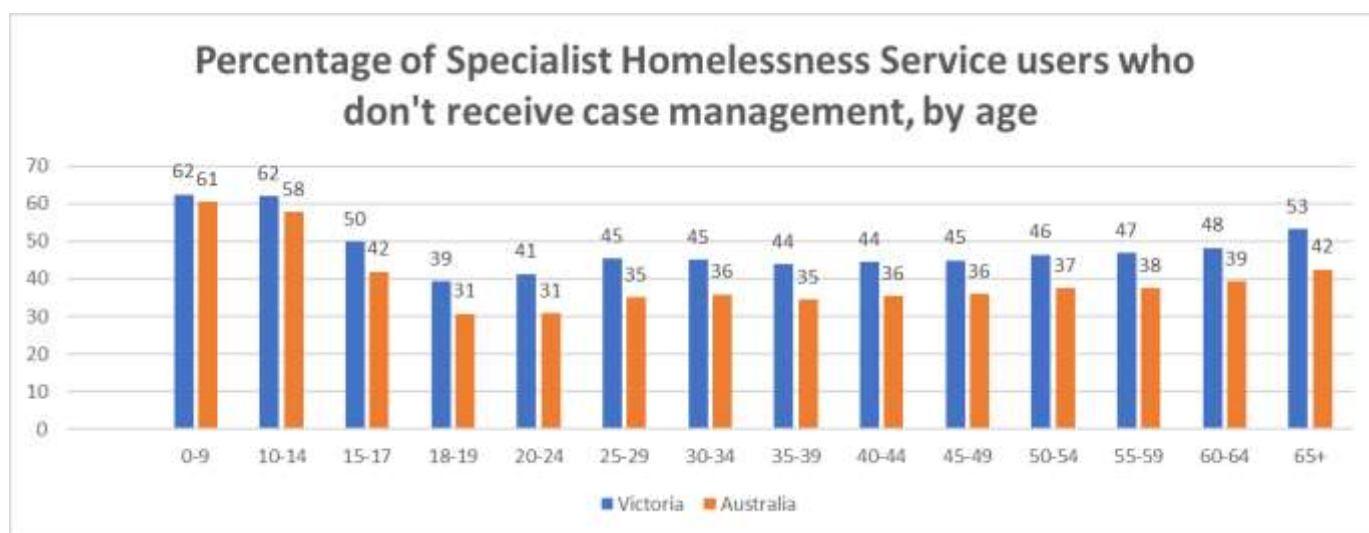
## **Recognise children as clients in their own right**

When children experience homelessness, the impacts can last long after they’re safely rehoused. Homelessness can impact children’s physical, mental and social development, and lead to mental health and/or behavioural problems.<sup>33 34</sup> These impacts can have lifelong consequences.

Children currently receive the lowest rates of case management at homelessness services (see figure 8 below). There is also poor availability of evidence-based children’s therapies, supporting children with their physical, cognitive, and psychosocial development after the disruptions of homelessness. These therapies can also support parents to better understand how homelessness has impacted their child, providing the family with the holistic support needed to thrive.<sup>35</sup>

To treat children as clients in their own right, with their particular needs for support recognised and addressed, funding models must reflect the need for those services to be delivered – whether through case management or dedicated therapeutic supports.

**Figure 8. Percentage of Specialist Homelessness Service users who don't receive case management, by age**



**Recommendation 27: Deliver increased case management and therapeutic responses for children experiencing homelessness.**

### Crisis accommodation for trans and non-binary people

LGBTIQ+ Victorians experience homelessness at rates far higher than the general population. Research suggests that 20.8 per cent of bisexual people and 33.7 per cent of lesbian/gay people experience at least one period of homelessness across a lifetime in Australia, compared to 13.4 per cent of heterosexuals.<sup>36</sup>

While specific data on incidence of homelessness amongst transgender, non-binary, or gender diverse<sup>37</sup> peoples do not exist, health surveys of LGBTIQ+ people indicate trans and gender-diverse people experience higher levels of homelessness than lesbian, gay and bisexual people.<sup>38</sup> At a recent consultation with specialist homelessness services, CHP heard from one agency that 90 per cent of the young people with whom they were working were trans or gender diverse.

Despite high rates of homelessness, there are very few dedicated LGBTIQ+ homelessness programs in Victoria. Those that have been trialled found that clients needed substantially more support than was anticipated in the program design, with clients having extensive histories of trauma.<sup>39</sup> Unfortunately, LGBTIQ+ people also face additional barriers in achieving accommodation outcomes, including stigmatisation and victimisation.<sup>40</sup>

This results in trans and non-binary people in crisis, transitional and other higher density housing continuing to be at risk of harassment, violence, sexual violence, and the use of threats to compel participation in unwanted or illegal <sup>41</sup> [redacted].

Targeted crisis and transitional accommodation for trans people without homes should be made available to deliver a short-term option that is not only safe, but is experienced as safe. It is also important to begin to address barriers that can prevent trans and non-binary people from seeking assistance from the homelessness service system. A trans and gender diverse crisis and transition accommodation facility also provides an opportunity to further develop support that specialises in meeting the unique needs of trans people, who have experienced trauma related to their specific experiences.

**Recommendation 28: Deliver dedicated crisis responses for trans and non-binary people in Victoria.**

**Recommendation 29: Foster the development of expertise in responding to homelessness for trans and non-binary Victorians.**

# Housing and intensive supports

Where people experience homelessness on multiple occasions over their lifetime, it is a failure of social policy. Thankfully, the solutions are now known.

## **Set a target for social housing in Australia**

To address and prevent homelessness, there is no single factor more effective than social housing.<sup>42</sup> But there are material differences in the level of social housing in different Australian jurisdictions. Victoria has by far the lowest level of social housing per capita of any State or Territory.<sup>43</sup>

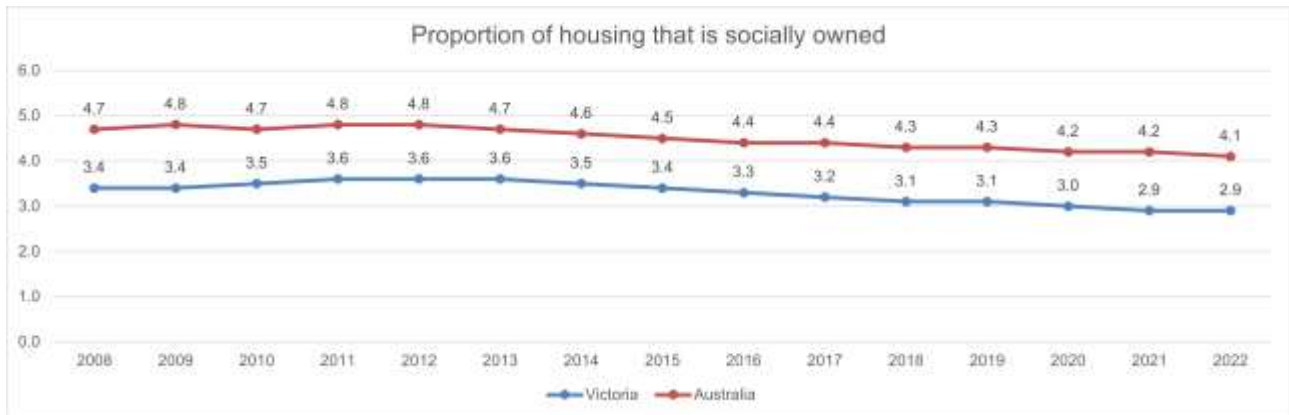
The primary challenge facing our frontline workers, in addition to the immense scale of need and complexity they contend with, is the deficiency in "throughput." This means that while a frontline worker can provide support to individuals experiencing homelessness, the lack of temporary accommodation, crisis beds and, more urgently, available homes for placement poses a significant obstacle. A lack of available homes means that people's stay in crisis accommodation extends well beyond the period initially intended when these buildings were designed. Those long stays mean that crisis beds are rarely available for people who have lost their homes.

An increasing dearth of housing options means that specialist homelessness services increasingly rely on inappropriate accommodation, such as rooming houses or motels. Agencies report celebrating every instance where a person is assisted to find a long-term home as a significant win, despite this being the desired outcome for each client.

Having the lowest proportion of social 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 worsen, even in the face of significant State and Federal housing commitments – which are making a meaningful difference, but will see the share of housing in Victoria that is socially owned continue to decline in coming years. As a consequence of this inadequate investment, homelessness in Victoria will grow.

While the very low levels of social housing are particularly pronounced in Victoria, the problem is being faced nationwide. The proportion of all housing that is socially owned has been declining in Australia for many years (see figure 9 below). This is a direct result of Governments failing to set a target proportion of social housing in Australia, nor plans to deliver it. Even now, when both Victorian and Federal Governments are investing in social housing, the commitments are sporadic. It is a grave failing of social policy in Australia that Governments have declined to articulate the level of social housing needed in Australia, let alone deliver it.

## **Figure 9. Proportion of housing that is socially owned<sup>44</sup>**



Council to Homeless Persons recommends that at least 60,000 social housing properties are needed in Victoria just to bring the proportion of housing that is socially owned up to the national average. Beyond that, only by defining the scale of need can Governments truly commit to delivering it.

**Recommendation 30: The National Housing and Homelessness Plan should describe the level of social housing needed in Victoria. This should include consideration for how to achieve throughput from crisis accommodation and women’s refuges.**

**Recommendation 31: Rolling action plans under the National Housing and Homelessness Plan should consecutively deliver social housing, building towards the defined level of need.**

**Recommendation 32: At least 60,000 new social properties be delivered in Victoria.**

### **Retain emphasis on vulnerability in subsidised rental housing**

Over the course of approximately the past eighteen months, both the Victorian and Federal Governments have made substantial commitments to funding the delivery of affordable housing products, which are distinct from social housing.<sup>45</sup> While models and definitions vary, affordable housing is typically provided at a slight discount on market rent – often set around 80 per cent of market rent. Given that market rents represent such a large proportion of income support payments (the median one-bedroom flat in Melbourne rents at 100% of Jobseeker plus Commonwealth Rent Assistance), it is clear that this product does little to serve people on very low incomes, including those on income support payments. Indeed, recent experience has shown that the affordable housing properties, which are well-located and newly built, often charge rents that are higher than Greater Melbourne median, as the market values such amenities. For many people without homes, government subsidised affordable housing products are not a viable housing option.

Council to Homeless Persons recognises that the housing crisis in Victoria and Australia is so severe that people on low and moderate incomes face difficulty obtaining a home they can afford – as evidenced by the

increasing numbers of employed people at specialist homelessness services<sup>46</sup>. However, CHP contends that the answer to providing low and middle income housing must be to drastically improve the availability of housing at an appropriate price for these groups, as recent State and Federal Government efforts to facilitate the development of private residential properties do. It is a significant misallocation of public money to expand government-subsidised housing to middle income groups, while at least 188,300 people at significant risk of homelessness (perhaps already experiencing it) are on social housing waiting lists nationwide.<sup>47</sup> Desperately low levels of social housing make social housing allocations for people experiencing homelessness akin to a lottery – and rather than improve the functioning of that system, governments have expanded the lottery to new entrants.

It is essential that the National Housing and Homelessness Plan retain an emphasis on housing the most vulnerable - those for whom the private market has proven unable to provide stable accommodation. While measures to foster greater levels of private development for people on middle incomes may be an appropriate role for government in a housing crisis, the priority for the spending of public money should be on achieving outcomes that cannot be achieved by other means.

**Recommendation 33: Prioritise the development of social housing with public money.**

### Self-determination in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander housing and homelessness responses

Dedicated responses to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander homelessness are needed. While the two highly regarded sources of information on the incidence of homelessness in Australia (the ABS Census, and the AIHW Specialist Homelessness Services Collection) identify different geographical locations as having the greatest over-representation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people without homes, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people experience homelessness at rates far exceeding the rest of the community in every jurisdiction across the country (see figures 10 and 11 below). There can be no avoiding the conclusion that bringing down the rate of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander homelessness in Australia must be a major priority for Australia.

**Figure 10. Rate of homelessness per 10,000 people, by Indigenous status, ABS Census<sup>48</sup>**

	NSW	Vic	Qld	SA	WA	Tas	NT	ACT	Aust
<b>Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander(d)</b>	90.2	168.9	201.0	326.8	380.9	81.8	1,864.5	140.8	306.8
<b>Non-Indigenous</b>	37.6	38.5	33.2	30.2	22.4	36.5	68.5	30.5	34.9
<b>Not stated</b>	120.3	203.1	79.7	143.2	64.6	107.5	351.9	211.4	129.6
<b>Total homeless persons</b>	<b>43.4</b>	<b>47.1</b>	<b>43.5</b>	<b>41.7</b>	<b>36.6</b>	<b>42.1</b>	<b>563.6</b>	<b>39.1</b>	<b>48.2</b>

**Figure 11. Rate of homelessness service use per 10,000 people, by Indigenous status, AIHW SHSC<sup>49</sup>**

	NSW	Vic	Qld	SA	WA	Tas	NT	ACT	Aust
<b>Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander(d)</b>	678.5	1,769.0	599.0	678.5	1,098.6	364.7	906.8	794.4	798.7
<b>Non-Indigenous</b>	63.0	128.5	53.4	63.0	50.2	128.5	75.5	71.8	79.0
<b>Total homeless persons</b>	84.6	155.3	79.7	100.0	89.8	122.9	405.1	84.0	106.2

In Victoria, work to address the shockingly high rates of homelessness – one in six Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Victorians will seek support from a homelessness service this year – are driven by self-determination. With funding from the Victorian Government, Aboriginal community-controlled housing provider *Aboriginal Housing Victoria* was funded to work across the Aboriginal community to develop a self-determined housing and homelessness framework, *Mana-na woorn-tyeen maar-takoort*<sup>50</sup>. A major objective of this framework was the development of an Aboriginal focused homelessness system, a pathway towards which is outlined in the *Blueprint for an Aboriginal-specific homelessness system in Victoria*<sup>51</sup>.

These two documents prioritise Aboriginal community control of homelessness services and housing, alongside culturally competent housing and homelessness sectors. Aboriginal community control of service delivery has been shown to be highly effective at improving outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander consumers.<sup>52</sup>

These documents, and the governance arrangements that support them, have had a significant impact in galvanising government, sector, and ACCOs around a shared vision from the Aboriginal community around the next steps to address Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander homelessness and housing exclusion. This is essential, as there can be no reconciliation in Australia without addressing the enormous over-representation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people among those experiencing homelessness.

CHP does not propose that these documents can be retrofitted and applied outside of Victoria. But a self-determined Aboriginal housing and homelessness plan, with support at the highest levels of government, is an appropriate and effective means for addressing Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander homelessness and housing disadvantage.

**Recommendation 34: Support the development and implementation of a self-determined national Aboriginal housing and homelessness plan.**

**Recommendation 35: Support the implementation of *Mana-na woorn-tyeen marr-takoort*, the Victorian Aboriginal Housing and Homelessness Framework.**

**Recommendation 36: Support the delivery of strong specialist homelessness services by Aboriginal Community Controlled Organisations.**

## **Housing First**

Until recently, homelessness responses for people experiencing significant and multiple exclusion have achieved mixed success, comparable with other areas of complex social policy. Formerly, people experiencing long-term or recurring homelessness achieved slightly less than 50 per cent housing sustainment rates when receiving support to end their homelessness. Today, Housing First programs deliver an almost 90 per cent housing sustainment rate for this group.<sup>53</sup> Australia has discovered the solution to resolving long-term homelessness.

Since 2008's *The Road Home* homelessness strategy, many Australian service providers have implemented the Housing First model of ending long-term and recurring homelessness and rough sleeping. Housing First models are now an essential part of the toolkit for addressing homelessness in Australia, not just for people sleeping rough, but for the small number of people for whom traditional homelessness service delivery models have not proven effective at achieving sustained results.

Yet despite the almost unprecedented success of Housing First programs, provision of Housing First in Australia still largely reflects the historical funding of trial sites almost fifteen years ago. Across much of Australia, this essential part of the toolkit in ending homelessness is simply not available.

It is true that many programs have been developed across Australia that seek to emulate the success of Housing First programs. But many of these have been hampered by a lack of fidelity to the Housing First principles (reproduced below).<sup>54, 55</sup> One factor that has been identified as contributing to lower fidelity to Housing First principles, and a resultant reduction in achieving permanent outcomes is Federal (and State, CHP contends) funding models which emphasise discrete support periods.<sup>56</sup> A core principle of Housing First is that support is flexible and provided for as long as it is needed.

It is further true that even where the Housing First Australia principles recognise that quick (rather than immediate) access to a home may better reflect the reality of Australia's housing market, this quick access is not always a meaningful reality in Housing First programs in Australia. One option adopted in Victoria to address the housing needs of Housing First participants is prioritised access to social housing, through a mechanism of backdating housing applications to the point at which the person first met the eligibility criteria. This has improved the effectiveness of Housing First programs, but has likely meant longer social housing wait times for other applicants, including those who are experiencing homelessness but are not currently being supported by a Housing First program. As discussed earlier in this chapter, a critical element of the new National Housing and Homelessness Plan must be to increase the provision of social housing in Australia.

Housing First is a model characterised by eight principles<sup>57</sup>:



- People have a right to a home
- Flexible support for as long as it is needed
- Housing and support are separated
- Choice and self-determination
- Active engagement without coercion
- Recovery oriented practice
- Social and community inclusion
- Harm reduction approach

**Recommendation 37: Increase the provision of Housing First programs across Australia.**

**Recommendation 38: Adopt the eight Housing First Australia principles and remove barriers to achieving them in the National Housing and Homelessness Plan.**

**Recommendation 39: Fund the provision of long-term support in Housing First programs.**

### **Meeting the housing and support needs of young people**

Most young people live with their parents. But in 2021-22, 52,836 young people aged 15 to 24 years came to specialist homelessness services in Australia.<sup>58</sup> Most did so as a result of family conflict which is distressing in its own right. But when a young person is kicked out of the family home, or feels compelled to escape it, the harms of family conflict are compounded by the danger and traumas of homelessness. As discussed above in the section “Reconcile young people and their families”, where a family home is safe, it is usually the most positive environment for a young person.

But not every family home is safe. Some young people, like those leaving out of home care or escaping family violence, cannot or should not return to live with their family of origin. Young people in this position will need to live independently of parental support, in a rental of their own.

Securing affordable and appropriate housing for young people is particularly challenging because they have much lower incomes than older adults; they face discrimination in the rental market; and many young people, especially those who have had inconsistent positive adult role models, may need support both to recover from their experiences and to sustain a tenancy. For some of these young people, a medium-term form of public or community housing should be made available to provide them with the security, affordability, and support linkages they need.

Currently, very few social housing nominations go to young people. In 2021-22 just 123 allocations to social housing were made under the “single – youth” category in Victoria.<sup>59</sup> A recent Parliamentary Inquiry into Homelessness in Victoria found that only 541 transitional and 66 long term properties are designated for young people, and in 2021 young people were allocated 238 public housing tenancies.<sup>60 61</sup> Nationally in 2021-22, just 1,457 public housing properties were allocated to households headed by a young person aged 15-24 (see Figure 12 below).<sup>62</sup>

**Figure 12. Newly allocated households, by age, public housing<sup>63</sup>**

Age	Public housing allocations
15-19 years	363
20-24 years	1,094
25-29 years	1,441
30-34 years	1,506
35-39 years	1,625
40-44 years	1,398
45-49 years	1,289
50-54 years	1,341
55-59 years	1,435
60-64 years	1,152
65-69 years	874
70-74 years	619
75+ years	641
Not stated	245
<b>Total</b>	<b>15,023</b>

Of the Victorian young people accessing services in 2021-22, 8,027 needed medium and/or long-term accommodation, yet over half didn't receive a home or a referral to a service that could assist them with housing<sup>64</sup>. One-fifth received a referral to a service that could assist with accommodation but a referral usually doesn't mean suitable accommodation is found.<sup>65</sup>

Homelessness services in Victoria are calling for dedicated accommodation to be made available to young people who can't return home. This call goes beyond bricks and mortar, and beyond financial support to meet housing costs. Young people who are unable to live at home must adopt the responsibilities of heading their household – whether or not they have the essential tools to do so. Delivering a housing model for young people experiencing homelessness requires that support packages be provided to the young people, such that they may recover from the traumas that occasioned their homelessness and the negative experiences that homelessness caused them, develop the skills needed to live independently, and to support their transition from income-set social housing into the private rental market and sharehousing once they are ready. This requires a significant investment in case management resources.

To address the housing needs of young people who are still building their readiness for the private rental market, three things are required: dedicated social housing properties for young people; a subsidy to make

that housing financially viable; and a youth homelessness strategy that supports those young people to recover from their experiences and gain skills they can take to the private rental market.

**Recommendation 40: Deliver dedicated social housing stock for young people, including 5,000 new properties in Victoria.**

**Recommendation 41: Provide funding for the financial gap between what young people can afford, and the cost of operating the housing.**

**Recommendation 42: Provide support packages for young people who are unable to live in the family home.**

# Conclusion

The National Housing and Homelessness Plan is an opportunity for State and Federal Governments to deliver the sort of coordinated responses to homelessness that will reduce the incidence of homelessness in Australia, and make homelessness brief, well-supported, and unlikely to re-occur when it does happen.

To end homelessness, we must first recognise that most experiences of homelessness in Australia are avoidable. By providing universal prevention, such as protections against poverty through an improved social security system and targeted prevention like support for families where there is conflict with their young person, we can drastically reduce the incidence of homelessness in Australia.

Far fewer people should experience homelessness, but those who do should find the experience brief and well-supported. Unfortunately, a dearth of resourcing means that many people are unable to receive support from homelessness services, while many more receive support that is insufficient. Additional case management and accommodation is sorely needed.

Today, some people experience homelessness multiple times over multiple years. It is clear that more intensive support and dedicated housing are required to break this cycle of homelessness. Australian specialist homelessness services have trialled a variety of responses that have achieved results for this group that were previously unimaginable. Now we must bring them to scale.

These are the challenges that the next National Housing and Homelessness Plan must grapple with. But they are also opportunities - for a better Australia with fewer people experiencing the harms of homelessness. CHP, with specialist homelessness services across Victoria, and all those who are dedicated to ending homelessness, implore you to develop a National Housing and Homelessness Plan that meets this opportunity.

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