



Council to Homeless Persons submission to Family Violence Reform Implementation Monitor
call for submissions: Monitoring the Family Violence Reforms



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Introduction

Council to Homeless Persons welcomes the opportunity to provide information to the Family Violence Reform Implementation Monitor call for submissions: Monitoring the Family Violence Reforms.

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

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

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

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

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

Homelessness data for women and children escaping family violence

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

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

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

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

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

Recommendations of the Royal Commission into Family Violence

Consistent with the Family Violence Reform Implementation Monitor's call for submissions, we detail below housing and homelessness related recommendations of the Royal Commission into Family Violence, progress achieved against these recommendations, and ways in which these recommendations have not progressed far enough and require renewed attention.

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

*"The Victorian Government give priority to removing current blockages in refuge and crisis accommodation and transitional housing, so that victims of family violence can gain stable housing as quickly as possible and with a minimum number of relocations, are not accommodated in motels and other ad hoc accommodation, and spend on average no longer than six weeks in refuge and crisis accommodation."*⁶

Since 2016, the Victorian Government has made welcome investments in the Private Rental Assistance Program (PRAP) that assists women and children to continue in their private rental housing, or to find new housing, and Flexible Support Packages (FSP) which can be used to support women into new accommodation or make a home safe from the perpetrator.

Despite this financial assistance and support, many women fleeing family violence remain unable to access or sustain properties in Victoria's notoriously unaffordable private rental market, necessitating multiple relocations for these households, or preventing them from leaving temporary and crisis accommodation options. This further constrains access to these options for households newly in crisis. These programs are not funded in an ongoing manner, creating concern for the future of these crucial programs beyond the funded period.

Despite the Royal Commission recommendation that victims of family violence not be accommodated in motels or in other *ad hoc* accommodation, a lack of alternative options has meant that to date this practice remains prevalent. Motels are not only ill-suited for providing the stable accommodation for which the Commission called, but also regularly fail to meet suitable levels of safety and amenity for families fleeing violence, exacerbating trauma. The state-wide family violence crisis service, Safe Steps reports that each night they accommodate an average of 60 women and 55 children in either motels or other community crisis accommodation.⁷

Motels also continue to be a necessary option employed by homelessness services seeking to support women and children requiring assistance as a result of family violence. Such short-stay accommodation compounds the instability already experienced by such households. The experience of specialist homelessness services (SHS) is that demand on family violence services can lead to premature case closure, and then former clients presenting to SHS when the financial contribution they have been making to their housing has become unsustainable.⁸

In 2020, it remains that there is a lack of stable accommodation for low-income households whose needs aren't able to be met by the private rental market. Such housing precarity is extremely detrimental to victim survivors of family violence.

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

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

- *quantify the number of additional social housing units required for family violence victims who are unable to gain access to and sustain private rental accommodation*
- *.... plan for the statewide rollout of ... the social housing required"*⁹

The Victorian Government established the Family Violence Housing Assistance Implementation Task Force, which existed for the duration of that term of Government, before having its remaining tasks transferred to the Ministerial Advisory Committee on Homelessness. The Task Force commissioned research quantifying that 1,700 social housing dwellings need to be added to the total stock per year in order to simply sustain the proportion of social housing.¹⁰ More would be required in order to meet unmet demand.

The Task Force further commissioned the development of demand and supply model to aid decision making on housing assistance interventions. The social housing need that was identified has not been funded or delivered. The proportion of all housing in Victoria that is social housing continues to decline.¹¹

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

Conclusion

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

Council to Homeless Persons urges the Family Violence Reform Implementation Monitor to call attention to the significant gap between what the Royal Commission called for in these recommendations, the current state, and what is planned for delivery.

References

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