



Safe Steps

FAMILY
VIOLENCE
RESPONSE
CENTRE

Submission to National Housing and Homelessness Plan

From: Safe Steps Family Violence Response Centre

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Safe Steps is grateful for the opportunity to provide this submission to the Australian Government’s National Housing and Homelessness Plan. Around 50% women and children using homelessness services have experienced domestic and family and the housing affordability and rental crisis is having a significant impact on victim survivors. Safe Steps hopes this submission will ensure this vulnerable cohort is considered in the National Plan.

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Summary

Family violence incidents recorded by Victoria Police increased by 15 per cent between 2019 and 2023 (from 81,236 to 93,091). While people of all genders are affected by domestic and family violence, it is a primarily a gendered issue and most victim survivors are women and children.

Lack of affordable housing has a profound effect on victim survivors of domestic and family violence. It increases their dependence on abusers, reduces their ability to escape a violent situation, increases the physical, psychological, and economic effects of abuse, and creates significant barriers to breaking the individual and intergenerational cycle of abuse and homelessness.

Most of our clients face an untenable choice between living in a crisis of violence or living in a crisis of homelessness. There are no other options.

Addressing housing affordability and homelessness is essential to ensure safety and recovery for family violence victim survivors. This requires the provision of vital support services that do not cut off until the victim survivor has recovered and rebuilt a life free from violence and implementing policies to support and empower victim survivors.

Children and young people who live with domestic and family violence are also significantly impacted, both as victim survivors in their own right, and as minors accompanying their protective parent into insecure housing, homelessness, or crisis accommodation that is not best practice or compliant with mandatory Child Safe Standards.

NGOs offering support, recovery, and therapeutic care to victim survivors of family violence are currently limited in their ability to support survivors in their long-term financial, physical, and psychological recovery. Without this support, victim survivors experience higher levels of homelessness and risk entrenched poverty and long-term intractable homelessness.

Addressing these needs will reduce short, medium, and long-term homelessness among women and children.

Additionally, there is some evidence¹ that the LGBTIQ+ community experience higher levels of homelessness due to violence, family rejection, and discrimination. The evidence for this is not robust and this lack of evidence is a barrier to the funding and provision of specialist services. The Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) is including LGBTIQ+ questions on the next census, which we applaud, but the ABS does not currently intend to include LGBTIQ+ identifiers on the homelessness short form. This will limit the ability of LGBTIQ+ services to advocate for resources and the homelessness sector's ability to provide adequate specialist services.

¹ McNair, Ruth; Andrews, Cal; Parkinson, Sharon; Dempsey, Deborah, LGBTQ Homelessness: Risks, Resilience, and Access to Services in Victoria, Gay and Lesbian Foundation of Australia, 2017

About Safe Steps

Safe Steps Family Violence Response Centre (formerly the Women's Domestic Violence Crisis Service) was established in 1979 and is now Victoria's primary state-wide domestic and family violence crisis response service.

We operate 24/7/365 to provide a specialist response to all victim-survivors of family violence. Safe Steps is the crisis entry point to the wider family violence service system across Victoria.

In 2021/2022 In the last year, Safe Steps:

- › Responded to 68,661 inbound calls,
- › Made 106,098 outbound calls,
- › Answered 3,119 webchats,
- › Found crisis accommodation for 1783 women and 1,341 children.

Our clients are:

- › 11% Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander,
- › 24 % CALD,
- › 39% under 14 years old,
- › 21 % under 5 years old.

Recommendations:

- › The National Plan provides funding for innovative proposals to repurpose existing sites for crisis accommodation, refuge, and long-term housing for victim survivors of family and domestic violence.
- › The National Plan provides funding for crisis, early intervention, response, and recovery services beyond the short-term (typically 6 to 8 weeks) currently limiting domestic violence services in Victoria.
- › The National Plan provides funding for a therapeutic care approach to crisis response. This would break down a siloed response to victim survivors of family and domestic violence. Long term, secure housing is more achievable for victim survivors who can engage with medical, employment, educational, interpreter, immigration, psychological, mental health, and substance abuse support from the moment of first contact with domestic violence services.
- › The National Plan invests in support services for children and young people who are victim survivors of family and domestic violence to ensure they can recover and heal from trauma, remain engaged with education and employment, and access secure safe housing.
- › The National Plan supports, encourages, and invests in innovative partnerships between government services and NGOs to provide wrap-around therapeutic services for victim survivors of family and domestic violence to maintain specialist expertise until victim survivors can access long term housing options.
- › The Australian Bureau of Statistics include LGBTIQ+ questions in the homelessness short form questionnaire to ensure the effects of violence, trauma, family rejection, and discrimination against the LGBTIQ+ community are fully captured in the census data.

Homelessness and family violence

Around 50% women and children using homelessness services have experienced domestic and family violence². More than 1 in 6 people using homelessness services are children or young people excluded from their home or who have removed themselves from home, often due to abuse or family violence³.

In 2022–23 Safe Steps found emergency accommodation for around 4,000 victim survivors (43 per cent were children), and despite 72 per cent being classed as ‘serious risk’ or ‘serious risk requiring immediate protection’, over 90 per cent of cases were housed in motels because there was nowhere else for them to go. Motel accommodation carries significant risks for victim-survivors, including (but not limited to) high rates of self-harm, easy access for perpetrators, and inadequate services for children.

People with complex needs are not adequately supported in motels where phone-based case management is the only option. Children and young people following protective parents into motel accommodation cannot be provided with trauma informed support or risk assessment. This is a sub-standard service, that often leads to victim survivors returning to an abusive partner, risking long term harms and increases the risk of homelessness for children and young people in violent homes.

Critical Incidents:

These are just three of the hundreds of critical incidents that happen in motels where there are no support staff on site and no security arrangements.

No one wants to send women and children in crisis to sit alone in a motel room. Currently however, there are almost no other options.

- › A woman’s violent partner tracked her to the motel room and injured her so badly that she was hospitalised.
- › A woman escaping a violent partner took her teenage daughter to safety with her. The daughter attempted suicide in the motel room.
- › A woman and child who had no food were sent gift cards to use at the local supermarket. She is an Aboriginal woman, the supermarket staff assumed she had stolen the cards and called police.

Support Services Funding Cut-Off

Family violence crisis accommodation and recovery services in Victoria are cut off after around six to eight weeks. While there is some flexibility in ongoing services for longer term needs, many victim survivors are forced to leave family violence refuge after the six to eight week cut-off due to lack of funding. They can move into general homelessness services but struggle to access the specialist care they need to recover from family violence and re-establish an independent life free from violence. This funding limit also puts pressure on refuges to reject victim survivors with complex or long term needs who are unlikely to find alternative accommodation within the funding period.

² AIHW SHS Annual Report 2021-22. Table FDV.1: Clients experienced family and domestic violence, by age and sex, 2021–22

³ AIHW SHS Annual Report 2021-22. Table YOUNG.1: Young people presenting alone, by age and sex, 2021–22 plus data cubes

Housing Affordability Crisis and Family Violence

The housing affordability crisis is having significant impacts on victim survivors of domestic violence, exacerbating the challenges they face in trying to escape abusive situations. The effects can include:

- › Limited Housing Options: Escaping an abusive relationship requires finding a safe place to live. However, the high cost of housing and limited availability of affordable housing options makes it difficult for victim survivors of domestic and family violence to secure suitable accommodation. This can trap them in abusive situations, as they may not have the financial means to leave.
- › Financial Dependency: Domestic violence often involves controlling behaviours, including financial abuse, where the abuser restricts the victim's access to financial resources. Inability to afford housing on their own can perpetuate the victim's financial dependency, making it harder for them to break free from the cycle of abuse.
- › Homelessness: In many cases, victim survivors of domestic and family violence may become homeless due to the lack of affordable housing options. They may not have the financial resources or support networks to secure stable housing, forcing them to live in temporary or unsafe conditions, which further exposes them to various risks and dangers.
- › Housing Instability: Even if victim survivors manage to secure housing, they may face instability due to financial constraints. They may struggle to pay rent, leading to eviction and further housing insecurity. This instability can exacerbate the stress and trauma experienced by victim survivors of domestic and family violence, making it challenging to rebuild their lives.
- › Disrupted Support Networks: Leaving an abusive relationship often involves severing ties with the abuser and establishing a new support network. However, the lack of affordable housing can limit a victim's options in terms of where they can live, potentially separating them from their existing support systems, such as friends, family, or community resources, which are crucial for recovery and healing.
- › Increased Risk of Revictimization: Limited affordable housing options can force victim survivors to return to or stay with their abusers due to the lack of alternatives. This increases the risk of ongoing abuse and revictimization, as they may have no other choice but to remain in a dangerous environment.

The Rental System

High rent and low availability of rental accommodation can have profound effects on victim survivors of domestic and family violence, making it even more challenging for them to escape and recover from abusive situations.

The effects of low availability and high costs of rental properties include:

- › Financial Barriers: High rent prices can pose a significant financial barrier for victim survivors of domestic and family violence, who often have limited financial resources due to economic abuse or financial dependency on their abusers. The cost of renting a safe and secure property may be unaffordable, preventing victim survivors from leaving their abusive environments and accessing stable housing.
- › Limited Housing Options: The scarcity of affordable rental accommodation can severely restrict the housing options available to domestic violence victims. They may encounter long waiting lists for social housing or struggle to find available properties within their budget. This lack of options leaves them vulnerable, as they may have to choose between unsafe living conditions or staying with their abuser.
- › Forced Co-habitation: The scarcity of affordable rental housing can result in victim survivors and their children being forced to live with their abusers due to financial constraints. They may be unable to secure alternative accommodation, leaving them trapped in an abusive environment and exposed to continued physical, emotional, and psychological harm.
- › Delays in Leaving Abusive Situations: High rent and low availability of rental accommodation can delay the process of leaving an abusive relationship. Victim survivors may need additional time to save money or find suitable housing, prolonging their exposure to abuse and endangering their well-being.
- › Homelessness: In extreme cases, the inability to find affordable rental accommodation can lead to homelessness for victim survivors and their children. They may be unable to secure stable housing and may resort to temporary shelters, couch-surfing, or living in unsafe and overcrowded conditions. Homelessness exposes victim survivors to additional risks, including violence, exploitation, and health problems.
- › Increased Isolation and Vulnerability: Limited availability of rental accommodation can isolate victim survivors of domestic and family violence from their support networks. They may be forced to relocate to unfamiliar areas or live in substandard housing far from their social connections, making it harder to access support services, community resources, and the assistance needed to rebuild their lives.
- › Mental and Emotional Strain: The stress and anxiety caused by the high cost of rent and the struggle to find suitable housing can have a significant impact on victim survivors' mental and emotional well-being. This, combined with the trauma of domestic and family violence, can lead to increased levels of depression, anxiety, and post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD).