

Submission to the National Housing and Homelessness Plan

October 2023



Acknowledgement of Traditional Owners

Safe and Equal acknowledges Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples as the traditional and ongoing custodians of the lands on which we live and work. We pay respects to Elders past and present. We acknowledge that sovereignty has never been ceded and recognise First Nations peoples' rights to self-determination and continuing connections to land, waters, community and culture.

Recognition of Victim Survivors

Safe and Equal recognises the strength and resilience of adults, children and young people who have experienced family violence and recognise that it is essential that responses to family violence are informed by their expert knowledge and advocacy. We pay respects to those who did not survive and acknowledge friends and family members who have lost loved ones to this preventable and far-reaching issue.

About Safe and Equal

Safe and Equal is the peak body for specialist family violence services that provide support to victim survivors in Victoria. Our vision is a world beyond family and gender-based violence, where women, children and all people from marginalised communities are safe, thriving and respected. The interests of people experiencing, recovering from, or at risk of, family violence is at the heart of everything we do.

We recognise the gendered nature of violence in our society, and the multiple intersecting forms of power and oppression which can compound the impacts of violence and limit people's access to services, support and safety. We work closely and collaboratively with other organisations and support the leadership of victim survivors to amplify their voices and create change. We provide specialist expertise across primary prevention, early intervention, response and recovery approaches and the inter-connections between them.

Safe and Equal holds a central position in the Victorian family violence system and its strategic governance. We are committed to being an independent voice to effect sustainable and purposeful systemic and social change.

This submission has been endorsed by Sexual Assault Services Victoria.

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Introduction

Safe and Equal welcomes the opportunity to contribute to the National Housing and Homelessness Plan. As the peak body for specialist family violence services in Victoria, and given that family violence is the leading cause of homelessness for women and children in Australia, this submission will focus on Question 1 in the Summary Paper, for which Safe and Equal holds relevant expertise, and includes four priority recommendations.

Feedback

Response to Summary Paper - Question 1

How can governments and community service providers reduce homelessness and/or support people who may be at risk of becoming homeless in Australia?

Homelessness and family violence are inextricably linked. Family violence is the leading cause of homelessness for women and children in Australia,¹ and, often leads to a lifetime of disadvantage, discrimination and poverty.² This is particularly true for children, as research demonstrates that children who experience homelessness are more likely to experience homelessness as adults.³ There is also a link between sexual violence and homelessness. Sexual violence, including child sexual abuse, can drive homelessness. Escaping violence may seem a viable option for some victim survivors, even though it can lead to homelessness and increase the risk of experiencing sexual violence. Being homeless is not safe for victim survivors: women who are homeless are sexually assaulted more than women who have housing.⁴ If family and sexual violence were reduced, the rates of people being homeless or at risk of homelessness would also reduce.

As per the Commonwealth Government's [National Plan to End Violence Against Women and Children 2022-2023](#) (*National Plan*), affordable and secure housing is critical to enabling victim survivors to flee violence, and to re-establish their lives after leaving a

¹ Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, 'Specialist homelessness services annual report 2021-22', 8 December 2022 <https://www.aihw.gov.au/reports/homelessness-services/specialist-homelessness-services-annual-report/contents/clients-who-have-experienced-family-and-domestic-v>

² Parliament of Australia. (2014). Domestic, family and sexual violence in Australia: an overview of the issues. https://www.aph.gov.au/About_Parliament/Parliamentary_Departments/Parliamentary_Library/pubs/rp/rp1415/ViolenceAust

³ Flatau et al. (2013). Lifetime and intergenerational experiences of homelessness in Australia. Australian Housing and Urban Research Institute. https://www.ahuri.edu.au/__data/assets/pdf_file/0028/1999/AHURI_Final_Report_No200_Lifetime-andintergenerational-experiences-of-homelessness-in-Australia.pdf

⁴ Goodman, L; Fels, K; Gelln, C; and Benitez, J. (2006) "No Safe Place: Sexual Assault in the lives of homeless women. VAWnet <http://www.vawnet.org> [No Safe Place: Sexual Assault in the Lives of Homeless Women \(vawnet.org\)](#)



violent situation.⁵ Unfortunately, the [First Action Plan 2023-2027](#) (*Action Plan*) and the accompanying [First Action Plan Activities Addendum](#) do not include the bold and visionary planning and investment required to meaningfully address – and end – family violence and homelessness across the country in one generation.

While the *Action Plan* contains an entire action for housing and homelessness initiatives, these fall short of the significant investment required to address the critical lack of safe and accessible housing options for people experiencing family violence. We know that this National Housing and Homelessness Plan is able to provide a solution to the problem and we encourage the Government to develop a boldly ambitious and strategic plan; family violence and homelessness cannot be resolved without one.

The problem of homelessness and family violence are clearly articulated in the *National Plan*. The *National Plan* evidences that family violence is the main reason women and children leave their home in Australia; that victim survivors made up 42% of Specialist Homelessness Services clients in 2020-21; that unaffordable or insecure housing is a key decision in a victim survivor's decision to leave; and that even when victim survivors are able to obtain crisis accommodation, upon exiting, the lack of options mean they are faced with the impossible choice of homelessness or returning to the abuse⁶.

We note that this inability to secure sustainable housing for victim survivors results in many cycling back through the system because their needs were not met. Through Safe and Equal's [Measuring Family Violence Services Demand Project](#), 79% of Victorian specialist family violence services reported that repeat clients were common, with the lack of affordable housing being a key reason that victim survivors return to live with their perpetrator to escape homelessness⁷.

The *National Plan* also identifies that victim survivors from other marginalised groups, and victim survivors with intersecting marginalisations face additional barriers, including Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander victim survivors⁸. Expanding on this, we note that:

- Family violence is the leading cause of homelessness among children and young people in Australia. In 2019-2020, almost 42 400 young people aged 15 to 24 years presented alone to specialist homelessness services and family violence was the most common reason for seeking support.⁹ Young people face particular

⁵ Department of Social Services (DSS), *National Plan to end Violence against Women and Children 2022-2032*, 2022. <https://www.dss.gov.au/ending-violence>

⁶ Department of Social Services, 'National Plan to End Violence Against Women and Children 2022-2023', 17 October 2022, pg.57. <https://www.dss.gov.au/the-national-plan-to-end-violence-against-women-and-children/the-national-plan-to-end-violence-against-women-and-children-2022-2032>

⁷ Safe and Equal (2022) Measuring FV Services Demand Project Phase Two Outcomes Report. P 29 https://safeandequal.org.au/wp-content/uploads/REP_Measuring-FV-Services-Demand-Project-Phase-Two-Outcomes-Report_Dec22.pdf

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Australian Institute of Health and Welfare. (2020). Specialist homelessness services annual report. <https://www.aihw.gov.au/reports/homelessness-services/specialist-homelessness-services-annual-report/contents/clients-who-have-experienced-family-and-domestic-violence>



difficulties obtaining rental properties due to a lack of rental history and low incomes, noting that if a young person is receiving Youth Allowance, there are zero private rental properties in Australia that they can afford.¹⁰ If young people are somehow able to obtain a place to stay, they are much more likely to face severe overcrowding, which exposes them to increased violence and abuse.¹¹

- Many victim survivors on temporary visas do not have work rights and also do not qualify for income support payments, leaving them without any income at all. Immigration policies are blowing out wait times for visa applications, leaving many of these victim survivors waiting in limbo indefinitely. It is especially difficult to find long-term housing for victim survivors in this situation. These adult and child victim survivors often get stuck in some form of crisis or transitional housing for extended periods of times, sometimes years.
- Finding suitable crisis accommodation, and/or accessible, appropriate and affordable housing that meets the unique needs of adult and child victim survivors with a disability is already incredibly challenging. Without long-term housing options, many victim survivors with disabilities and their children are pushed into homelessness, or return to an unsafe home, where the chance of serious injury, disability and death can be high.
- Generally, LGBTIQ+ people are twice as likely to have experienced homelessness compared to the general population¹². While there is inadequate data to measure homelessness rates for LGBTIQ+ victim survivors, anecdotally we know that LGBTIQ+ victim survivors in particular are at an increased risk of homelessness. LGBTIQ+ people are also likely to face stigma and discrimination within the housing system¹³.
- Aboriginal victim-survivors are also more likely to have experienced homelessness as a result of family violence than non Aboriginal people¹⁴ and family violence still remains the major driver leading to the involvement of child protection and entry into out of home care for Aboriginal children.¹⁵ The general lack of affordable housing is compounded for Aboriginal victim survivors because systemic racism and discrimination further excludes Aboriginal people from the housing market. The lack of culturally appropriate short and long term housing options is a dangerous deterrent for Aboriginal victim survivors to leave violent

¹⁰ Anglicare Australia, 'Rental Affordability Snapshot: National report 2023, Fourteenth edition. Pg. 8

<https://www.anglicare.asn.au/wp-content/uploads/2023/04/Rental-Affordability-Snapshot-National-Report.pdf>

¹¹ Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, 'Australia's Youth: Homelessness and overcrowding', 25 June 2021.

<https://www.aihw.gov.au/reports/children-youth/homelessness-and-overcrowding>

¹²State Government of Victoria, 'Snapshot: LGBTIQ+ homelessness in Victoria' 26 April 2021.

<https://www.vic.gov.au/snapshot-lgbtqi-homelessness-victoria>

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, Family, domestic and sexual violence in Australia: continuing the national story (2019), pg. 106. <https://www.aihw.gov.au/getmedia/b0037b2d-a651-4abf-9f7b-00a85e3de528/aihw-fdv3-FDSV-in-Australia2019.pdf.aspx?inline=true>

¹⁵ Djirra, Monitoring the Family Violence Reforms: Djirra's Submission to the Family Violence Reform Implementation Monitor, (July 2020), pg.22 <https://djirra.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2020/08/Djirras-Submission-to-the-Family-Violence-Reform-Implementation-Monitor-July-2020-FINAL.pdf>



relationships.¹⁶ Lack of culturally appropriate and affordable housing is therefore not only putting Aboriginal victim survivors at increased risk of family violence, but putting Aboriginal children at increased risk of being removed from their family and their culture.

Where victim survivors live can also provide unique risks, and the *National Plan* recognises that housing risks are exacerbated for victim survivors in rural, regional and remote areas of Australia¹⁷.

Significantly, the *National Plan* identifies that housing is essential to ending family violence in a generation¹⁸. We wholeheartedly agree and note that housing plays a **critical role** in preventing, mitigating and helping victim survivors escape and recover from violence.

In general, housing responses for victim survivors include crisis accommodation (such as family violence refuges and unsuitable motel and hotel accommodation), and longer-term options of private rental and public and community housing. We advocate that victim survivors and their children should also be able to remain in their own homes when they choose to do so, as also stated in the *National Plan*¹⁹, noting that the possibility of this occurring safely and sustainably is reliant on the broader response system.

Crisis accommodation: Motel and hotel accommodation, family violence refuges

While motels and hotels are often used as crisis accommodation for victim survivors, including children, unfortunately they are not fit for purpose. They are often of poor quality, highly unsuitable for children, and do not provide the level of care and safety needed. For example, hotel and motel staff are not trained in responding to family violence or may not respond to emergency situations appropriately. Additionally, hotels and motels are often pseudo-public spaces, with many people coming and going, which increases the risk of perpetrators finding victim survivors through their networks.

Due to the shortage of crisis accommodation, many community service sectors rely on motels to accommodate people at risk of homelessness, which can lead to adult and child victim survivors being exposed to people with difficult and/or confronting

¹⁶ Aboriginal Housing Victoria (June 2021) *Mana-Na Woom-Tyeen Maar-Takoort: Every Aboriginal Person has a Home: Family Violence Position Paper* p 2

¹⁷ Department of Social Services, 'First Action Plan 2023-2027, Under the National Plan to End Violence Against Women and Children 2022-2032. Pg. 59 https://www.dss.gov.au/sites/default/files/documents/O8_2023/np-first-action-plan.pdf

¹⁸ Department of Social Services, 'National Plan to End Violence Against Women and Children 2022-2032', 17 October 2022, pg.57. <https://www.dss.gov.au/the-national-plan-to-end-violence-against-women-and-children/the-national-plan-to-end-violence-against-women-and-children-2022-2032>

¹⁹ Department of Social Services, 'First Action Plan 2023-2027, Under the National Plan to End Violence Against Women and Children 2022-2032. Pg. 58 https://www.dss.gov.au/sites/default/files/documents/O8_2023/np-first-action-plan.pdf



behaviour, further compounding trauma and feelings of insecurity²⁰. This form of crisis accommodation is unsuited to the needs of unaccompanied minors fleeing family violence as motels cannot meet the safety needs for these children and young people. Children and young people who experience homelessness are at high risk of further trauma²¹ and they require high levels of support that cannot be provided in motel and hotel accommodation. Hotels and motels are also highly unlikely to be able to provide suitable accommodation that caters to victim survivors with further support needs, including victim survivors with disabilities or mental health conditions.

In contrast, family violence refuges provide victim survivors with accommodation that is safe and secure. Unfortunately, the limited supply of, and demand for refuges mean it can be competitive to find a refuge space. While the Commonwealth Government's Safe Places grant program is a positive initiative to increase refuge spaces, it does not go far enough. For example, there is currently capacity to accommodate only approximately 170 households in family violence refuges in Victoria per night. This is insufficient and consequently approximately 100 women and children are inappropriately placed in motels on any given night. We require a doubling of the capacity in Victoria alone to accommodate at least 340 households in refuge per night.

In addition, it is imperative that victim survivors housed within crisis accommodation have access to high quality family violence support services, to ensure ongoing safety, risk management and recovery support. Unfortunately, demand for specialist family violence services is at unprecedented levels – services are stretched beyond capacity and are providing support to well over the number of people they are funded to work with. It is therefore critical resources are provided to these specialist family violence services to ensure they can continue to provide high-quality support to victim survivors in family violence accommodation.

When victim survivors manage to get into family violence refuge, their inability to afford longer-term housing and a chronic shortage of social housing can mean they become stuck in this accommodation for many months. In a recent survey of Safe and Equal member services, refuge providers in Victoria reported that 75% of their case support periods were recorded at four months or longer,²² with some victim survivors remaining in refuge for six months up to many years, despite six to eight weeks being the intended average length of stay. This blocks others from accessing a place in refuge and perpetuates the need to house victim survivors in motels.

²⁰ AHURI, 'Crisis accommodation in Australia: now and for the future', August 2023. <https://www.ahuri.edu.au/sites/default/files/documents/2023-08/AHURI-Final-Report-407-Crisis-accommodation-in-Australia-now-and-for-the-future.pdf>

²¹ AHURI, 'Final report: Towards a Youth Homelessness Strategy for Victoria, December 2021. <https://www.ahuri.edu.au/sites/default/files/documents/2021-11/AHURI-Prof-Services-Final-Report-Towards-a-Youth-Homelessness-Strategy-for-Victoria%20%282%29.pdf>

²² Safe and Equal (2023) Specialist Family Violence Demand and Capacity Snapshot Survey 2023 (forthcoming)



Recommendation 1: Increase funding for refuges, and attach sustainable ongoing operational funding

The Commonwealth Government must work with states and territories to increase funding for family violence refuges, by increasing the funds available in the Safe Places grant program, and via other mechanisms.

Alongside the investment to build refuges across the country, it is critical that the family violence workforce within refuge are sustainably funded, to maintain the critical case management support needed by victim survivors. It is unrealistic to expect services to manage additional capacity for crisis accommodation without commensurate operational funding. It is therefore important for the Australian Government to work directly with states and territories to ensure operational funding is provided alongside any refuge investment, including increasing the operational funding included in the Safe Places grant program. Increased operational funding must also be provided to any already successful family violence grant recipients.

Longer-term options: private rental, social housing and remaining safely in the home

When victim survivors are attempting to move on from crisis accommodation, or attempting to find housing options away from the violence, there are difficulties in obtaining longer-term safe, appropriate, and affordable housing. Victim survivors also have the right to remain in their homes, which might occur after a stay in crisis accommodation, or may occur immediately with the removal of the perpetrator. While victim survivors have the right to remain at home, research has found numerous structural barriers that prevent this from becoming a reality. The high cost of maintaining housing is one, however there are countless other barriers external to the housing market, which require a whole-of-systems response approach by the government, to make remaining at home a feasible option for victim survivors.

Private rental

According to Anglicare’s Rental Affordability Snapshot in 2023²³, of the 45,895 total rental properties available in Australia, only 345 (0.8%) could be afforded by a single person earning minimum wage. For a single person (with or without children) on Jobseeker and/or Parenting Payments, this dropped to 117 total available properties. It worsens even further if a person is on the Disability Support Pension – a total of 66 properties were marked as affordable, but there is a low likelihood these properties would be appropriate for the person’s particular disability. Significantly, no properties were affordable for young victim survivors on Youth Allowance²⁴.

²³ Anglicare Australia, ‘Rental Affordability Snapshot: National report 2023, Fourteenth edition. Pg. 8 <https://www.anglicare.asn.au/wp-content/uploads/2023/04/Rental-Affordability-Snapshot-National-Report.pdf>

²⁴ *ibid*



Victim survivors are likely to support themselves and their children on very low, to low incomes. Nationally, people in the lowest twenty-fifth percentile for median income are currently spending 51.6% of their total income on rent²⁵. This severe housing stress will likely push victim survivors into poverty, homelessness, or force them to return to the abuse.

With the rapid increase in housing prices and cost of living stress, plus the likelihood victim survivors will be on lower incomes, properties that are not capped as a proportion of a household income are increasingly out of reach. We note that while there are some schemes that are intended to reach lower income earners (external to a social housing model), these can often be unaffordable in real terms. For example, in Victoria, the Homes Victoria Affordable Housing Rental Scheme sets prices in metropolitan Melbourne at least 10 per cent below the market rental cost. This pricing is still likely to be completely out of reach for victim survivors.

Recommendation 2: Support victim survivors to access private rental properties

We need the government to invest in programs that support victim survivors to obtain a private rental, or maintain an existing private rental property, without falling below the poverty line and forcing them into extreme housing stress. In addition to schemes that make private rental affordable to those on low incomes, increased access to financial counsellors to address family violence related debts that may impact on a victim survivors' ability to pay rent, and increased community legal fees to help victim survivors navigate their rights to remain in private rental when experiencing family violence all need to be explored.

Social housing

Victim survivors of family violence are especially vulnerable to poverty due to the deep and lasting financial impacts of family violence, including but not limited to specific experiences of economic abuse.²⁶ If victim survivors are part of a marginalised group that is also impacted by structural oppression within broader society (such as racism against Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, or victim survivors on temporary visas without work rights), the likelihood of poverty and the risk of homelessness increases. These factors mean it is more likely that people who experience family violence will be on low incomes, as well as receiving Commonwealth support payments, and will therefore be more likely to access social housing than other cohorts. We also note that victim survivors with a negative rental history (likely caused by the

²⁵ ABC news, 'What broke the rental market?', Published 26 August 2023. <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2023-08-26/how-the-rental-market-broke-can-it-be-fixed/102767494>

²⁶ 23% of Australian women have faced direct economic abuse from a cohabiting partner: Australian Bureau of Statistics 2022, *Personal Safety Survey 2022*, <https://www.abs.gov.au/statistics/people/crime-and-justice/personal-safety-australia/latest-release#cohabiting-partner-violence-emotional-abuse-and-economic-abuse>.



perpetrator) or young victim survivors without a rental history, may struggle to find a rental property, and social housing might be their sole sustainable option.

As prices in the private rental market continue to rise, this makes social housing the only option for the majority of victim survivors. This system is already overwhelmed with significant demand and is unattainable for most victim survivors, despite family violence being a factor for prioritisation.

Recommendation 3: Significant investment in the development of new social housing properties

We recognise that the recently established *Housing Australia Future Fund* and the \$2 billion *Social Housing Accelerator* will make some impact, Australia requires significant investment in public housing over a sustained period to make up for the decades of lack of investment. Safe and Equal has signed up to *Make Social Housing Work*, which, in 2020, outlined the need for 6,000 social housing properties to be built each year for the next 10 years in Victoria alone. It is likely this number is now outdated due to the rapid changes in the housing market, and current estimates indicate much more housing would be needed. This must be scaled up to apply nation-wide, with a greater proportion set aside for victim survivors, including unaccompanied young victim survivors, and for all social housing properties to be built to best practice disability access standards. This requires a joint commitment from the Commonwealth and states and territories, recognising both hold the responsibility to ensure these social homes are delivered.

Remaining safely in the home

Another option is a Safe at Home response, where victim survivors are able to remain safely in their homes (or potentially return following a stay in crisis accommodation), with the perpetrator of family violence removed, often with an Intervention Order that includes exclusion provisions. Safe and Equal supports this as a preferred housing response, in recognition that victim survivors of family violence should not be further punished and disadvantaged by being forced to leave their home, and that sanctions should be directed towards the perpetrator instead.

However, this is reliant on victim survivors being able to afford their mortgage or tenancies on one income, and for perpetrator accountability mechanisms to be strengthened to protect victim survivors adequately. The success of a victim survivor being able to remain safely at home also relies on the availability and effectiveness of safety technologies, and key justice measures. It is critically important for victim survivors to also be supported with family violence case management support. We acknowledge this will not be suitable for all victim survivors who may not wish to remain in the home for a variety of reasons, including trauma and fear.

While a Safe at Home response is a preferred housing response to victim survivors in principle, many of solutions to the systemic barriers preventing a Safe at Home



response from being a viable option for many victim survivors exist outside the housing and homelessness system. Enabling Safe at Home responses to victim survivors of family violence should be included within the National Housing and Homelessness Plan. However, this will require the Commonwealth government to think laterally about systemic barriers and link with other areas of social policy.

Recommendation 4: Investment into initiatives that will enable and support victim survivors to remain safe in their own homes, including:

- Reducing the cost of housing in the rental market
- Increasing access to income and well-paid employment opportunities, and increases in social security payments, so victim survivors can afford their rent or mortgage payments on one income
- Repealing immigration laws that keep victim survivors on temporary visas waiting for years for decisions on their visa status while simultaneously denying them access to any form of income support payment, right to work or government support.
- More access to legal assistance so victim survivors can remove perpetrators from leases and gain financial independence
- Increased housing for perpetrators, alongside initiatives that increase perpetrator accountability so more victim survivors can feel that staying safe in their home is a viable option

Conclusion

The housing affordability crisis is increasing demand on specialist family violence services and is ultimately costly for the service system and those who use it. Specialist family violence services in Victoria report that one of the top patterns and trends amongst re-presenting clients is a lack of safe and affordable housing, with nearly 80% of services reporting that repeat clients are common.²⁷ For other areas of the service system, it can be difficult to provide quality support to victim survivors and their children if they do not have a safe or reliable place to call home.

The absence of housing heightens a victim survivor's chance of becoming stuck in the family violence system. Family violence accommodation services in Victoria record longer case management support periods than other Victorian family violence services.²⁸ This lengthened support period is overwhelmingly linked to a lack of long-term, affordable housing options across the state and the inability to exit clients, which

²⁷ Safe and Equal (2022), Measuring Family Violence Service Demand Project: Phase Two Outcomes Report, https://safeandequal.org.au/wp-content/uploads/REP_Measuring-FV-Services-Demand-Project-Phase-Two-Outcomes-Report_Dec22.pdf Safe and Equal website.

²⁸ Ibid.



creates a blockage for other victim survivors who need family violence accommodation (for example, beds in refuge) but ultimately get placed into unsafe motels, or are forced to return to a violent perpetrator, because there is nowhere else for them to go.

We call for wider systemic reform to the housing and homelessness system, and support the reforms as outlined in the Everybody's Home Campaign. We also support calls from Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities for self-determination and for Aboriginal community based organisations to be funded to address homelessness and family violence in their communities.

If victim survivors of family violence could be housed quickly, in safe and affordable housing, a significant amount of homelessness would cease to exist. To make this happen, we require robust connections between the Commonwealth Government's [National Plan to End Violence Against Women and Children 2022-2023](#), this National Housing and Homelessness Plan, and strong reform to the areas as covered within this submission. We call for the bold and visionary planning and investment required to meaningfully address – and end – family violence and homelessness across the country in one generation.