

Response to the National Housing and Homelessness Plan

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About TaskForce

TaskForce plays an important role across communities in southeast Melbourne, whether helping individuals and families due to challenges with alcohol and other drugs or family violence, or enabling people through education, training, and employment. Operating for 50 years, we aim to help realise the potential of every client, through achieving outcomes and working towards healthier lives, relationships, and communities.

Statements of recognition

TaskForce is based on the lands of the Boon Wurrung and Wurundjeri people and recognises their continuing connection to lands, waters and communities. We pay our respect to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultures; and to Elders both past and present.

TaskForce values diversity, inclusion and social justice and is dedicated to actively addressing discrimination and ensuring every individual is treated with dignity and respect. We honour and celebrate our differences and uniqueness in cultural and linguistic background, ethnicity, sex, gender identity, intersex status, sexual orientation, age, disability status, health status and religious or spiritual beliefs.

Summary of recommendations

To improve outcomes for young women at risk of justice system involvement, TaskForce Community Agency recommends the following measures:

- People with justice system involvement should be prioritised when allocating social housing, as this can improve community safety and reduce justice system expenditure
- In particular, people caring for children (often women) who also have justice system involvement should be prioritised to reduce intergenerational trauma and reduce child protection system expenditure
- Social housing builds should be prioritised where rates of homelessness and justice system involvement are the highest
- Social housing should be built in areas that allow people to maintain existing connections to their communities and local services and supports
- Apply Housing First principles when servicing people with complex needs, including justice system involvement
- Increase funding for specialist services that provide case management and intervention to people with complex needs, including justice system involvement
- Fund housing or service sector lead agencies to deliver targeted service coordination at a local level to improve outcomes for people with multiple and complex needs, including justice system involvement

Introduction

TaskForce Community Agency feels compelled to submit a response to the National Housing and Homeless plan to highlight the impact that housing and homelessness can have on people with justice system involvement.

TaskForce delivers the Living Free Project, a grassroots project which has supported hundreds of young women who are at risk of justice system involvement. The project addresses drivers of incarceration through health-based intervention and case coordination in the community. We know from our experience that one of the key drivers of incarceration is homelessness, and that the lack of housing supply and the increasing cost of housing is keeping vulnerable women trapped in cycles of homelessness and incarceration.

We have responded to the following three questions from the Social Housing section (3.4) of the issues paper:

2. What factors should state governments and housing organisations consider when allocating social housing?
3. How can governments ensure social housing is built in the right location (including close to amenities, environmental, socio-economic, current and future hazard risk and cultural factors) and will meet current and future needs of social housing tenants and the broader community?
11. How can social housing providers better support people with complex needs (such as people with disability, people from culturally diverse backgrounds and people with mental health, alcohol and other drug issues)?

“My family home was unsafe due to family violence, so I was desperate to not live there. I ended up living with a man who was 18 years my senior who was involved in illegal activities and got me involved by association and into drugs which turned into justice system involvement. If safe housing was available, this could have all been avoided.” - Living Free Participant

What factors should state governments and housing organisations consider when allocating social housing?

Homelessness and justice system involvement are not separate issues.

Across Australia in 2018, 33% of people entering prison were homeless in the four weeks prior to incarceration.¹ Referral data from the Living Free Project paints a similarly grim picture. Fifty percent of the young women aged 18-30 referred to the program between March 2021 and October 2022 reported homelessness or housing instability.

Most referrals to the Living Free Project are received from local police, who have identified that these young women are at risk of entrenched justice system involvement.

A UK study in 2012 also found a clear association between homelessness and recidivism. The study found that 79% of the prison population who had been homeless before entering prison were re-convicted within 12 months of release. This was compared with a re-conviction rate of 47% for those who had housing before entering prison.²

We know that providing long-term affordable housing with secure tenure can reduce justice system involvement. A Mission Australia report into the impacts of providing secure housing under a housing first model reduced justice system costs by 53.3%, or \$1,977 per participant per year at a 2-year follow-up.³

Lauren is a 28 year old client of the Living Free Project who is experiencing family violence perpetrated by her father. She has not been able to access emergency accommodation through local housing services, leaving her to live in her car. Lauren also has pending court matters and has lost her licence. Her Corrections worker has told her that she will be penalised if she is caught even having the keys to her car with her. Her inability to access any form of housing is putting her at risk of further justice involvement and potential imprisonment. *Identifying information has been changed*

Across Australia, young people leaving prison have even higher rates of homelessness than people entering prison.⁴ Once people are incarcerated, the issue of homelessness is compounded, leading to further risk of re-offending.

¹ Australian Institute of Health and Welfare (2018). The health of Australia's prisoners 2018, p. 22

² Williams K, Poyser J & Hopkins K 2012. Accommodation, homelessness and reoffending of prisoners: Results from the Surveying Prisoner Crime Reduction (SPCR) survey. United Kingdom: Ministry of Justice

³ Mission Australia (2013). From homelessness to sustained housing: MISHA research report 2010-2013, p.46.

⁴ Youth Parole Board (2022). Annual report 2021–22, <https://www.justice.vic.gov.au/youth-parole-board-annual-report-2021-22>

Additionally, 38% of people (54% of women) had children in their care when entering prison.⁵ Prioritising housing for people who are parenting can also have far-reaching positive impacts for children and families and decrease child protection system expenditure.

Recommendations:

- People with justice system involvement should be prioritised when allocating social housing, as this can improve community safety and reduce justice system expenditure.
- In particular, people caring for children (often women) who also have justice system involvement should be prioritised to reduce intergenerational trauma and reduce child protection system expenditure.

⁵ Justice Reform Initiative (2020). The state of the incarceration nation.
https://assets.nationbuilder.com/justicereforminitiative/pages/356/attachments/original/1680155280/JRI_The_State_of_the_Incarceration_Nation_Paper_V5_APPROVAL2680155280



How can governments ensure social housing is built in the right location and will meet current and future needs of social housing tenants and the broader community?

We know that there is a strong link between homelessness and justice system involvement. We also know that people in certain geographical areas experience these issues more acutely.⁶ In Victoria, the southern and western metropolitan regions had significantly more people presenting to housing services than other Local Area Service Networks.⁷

Considering that homelessness increases the likelihood of offending, and that housing people is a cost saving compared to justice expenditure, housing builds should be prioritised in those areas where there is greatest need.

Our experience delivering the Living Free project tells us that homelessness has significant impacts on offending behaviour, and we endeavour to secure housing for our homeless clients in partnership with local community housing services. However, a problem that we repeatedly face is a lack of housing supply in our catchment. We can't support young women into secure housing if that housing doesn't exist. Despite our efforts, a recent evaluation of the program found that 15% of our clients were still homeless or experiencing housing instability when they ceased engagement with the service.

"Everyone I have spoken to at [Melbourne's southeast] housing entry point have so clearly been burnt out that the first thing they say when you enter the office is not 'hello how I can I help you' but rather 'we're at capacity we don't have any housing.'" - Living Free Worker

Providing housing to people in the areas where they are accessing support, rather than displacing them to other communities, means that they maintain vital access to family, friend and service system supports.

"From seeing families of 5 children living in a three-bedroom home to having to support young women forced to remain in violent homes because their options are so limited, the housing crisis is having the biggest impact on those who need stability the most. - Living Free Worker

Recommendations:

- Social housing builds should be prioritised where rates of homelessness and justice system involvement are the highest
- Social housing should be built in areas that allow people to maintain existing connections to their communities and local services and supports

⁶ Australian Institute of Health and Welfare (2023). Specialist Homelessness Services Collection data cubes 2011–12 to 2021–22, <https://www.aihw.gov.au/reports/homelessness-services/shsc-data-cubes/contents/data-cubes>

⁷ Ibid.

How can social housing providers better support people with complex needs?

Providing housing first, without requirements to access other services before being able to access social housing has been shown to be highly effective in providing housing stability for people with complex needs.⁸ Increasing the supply of social housing, prioritising people with complex needs, especially those caring for children, and building housing in areas with high rates of homelessness and justice system involvement will significantly address ongoing homelessness.

"I have found it very difficult to support clients specifically within the [southeast of Melbourne] who are in need of accessible and affordable accommodation. Every time I have contacted the southeast specific housing entry point I have been told that clients (including my client and her 2 month old baby in her arms) need to wait at the office for an available worker, just to be to 'come back when they have enough money for bond for a rental,' or that private rental was their only option." - Living Free Worker

But for many people with complex needs, including many of the women in the justice system we support, they may also need specialist service support to live independently in long-term accommodation. Some may be impacted by mental health issues and/or alcohol and other drug misuse. Some may need parenting support, or support to engage in education and/or employment.

Some of these specialist support services are already being funded, however demand currently exceeds their capacity.⁹ Additional funding is required to address these needs. We know that investing to intervene early saves money in the housing and justice systems – for example, alcohol and other drug treatment provides a return on investment of \$8 for each dollar spent¹⁰ - and will help people maintain housing.

Another barrier to people receiving the support they need to maintain housing is that in many cases the service and housing sectors are siloed, and do not have the resources to collaborate to address complex needs and improve outcomes.¹¹

The Living Free Project is integrating housing and support services through the coordination of the Young Women's Secondary Consult Panel. This panel meets 6-weekly to discuss the housing and support needs of young women in the Frankston/Mornington Peninsula area who have been reported missing to the police. The panel is a partnership between the police, service sector (the Living Free Project, YSAS), housing services (Whitelion), the Department of Families, Fairness and Housing and the Department of Education.

The panel has strengthened referral pathways and collaboration across sectors, and provided opportunities to identify emerging needs in the local community so that responses can be coordinated.

⁸ Roggenbuck, C. (2022). Housing First: An evidence review of implementation, effectiveness and outcomes, report prepared by AHURI, Australian Housing and Urban Research Institute Limited, Melbourne.

⁹ Launch Housing (2019). Explainer: The homelessness services system and demand for services, <https://www.launchhousing.org.au/explainer-the-homelessness-services-system-and-demand-for-services>

¹⁰ Coyne, J, White, V, and Alvarez, C. (2015). Methamphetamine: focusing Australia's National Ice Strategy on the problem, not the symptoms, Australian Strategic Policy Institute, Barton, 2015

¹¹ Roggenbuck, C. (2022). Housing First: An evidence review of implementation, effectiveness and outcomes, report prepared by AHURI, Australian Housing and Urban Research Institute Limited, Melbourne.

This panel could provide a model for other communities to coordinate services working with people with complex needs. Part of its success is due to its place-based, local approach which can consider the unique housing and support needs of the community. To maintain this local approach, funding for service coordination panels could be distributed to lead agencies through Primary Health Networks.

Before Lilah came to the Living Free Project at 18, she was living at home with her father. The house they were living in, rented to them through a real estate agent on behalf of the landlord, was old and had significant electrical wiring issues which resulted in loss of power to the property. An electrician attended the property and informed the landlord that significant works were needed. The landlord proceeded to evict the family several months before their lease expiration, giving them two weeks to exit the property. This was a violation of their tenancy rights.*

As a result, Lilah and her father were made homeless. The house was eventually repaired and put back on the rental market, but at a significantly higher price that excluded Lilah and her family from being able to return to the property.

Lilah and her family continue to live under the poverty line. Due to the short notice period and experience of poverty, my client and her father were unable to find somewhere safe to live. This was a deeply stressful and traumatic experience which triggered significant mental health crises for Lilah and perpetuated a relapse into drug use. Lilah lost her job because she could no longer live in the area, and was exploited by older men so that she would have somewhere to stay each night. Exposure to antisocial peers and an inability to afford essential items like food and clothing led to Lilah engaging in illegal activities to have her basic needs met.

**Identifying information has been changed*

Recommendations:

- Apply Housing First principles when servicing people with complex needs, including justice system involvement
- Increase funding for specialist services that provide case management and intervention to people with complex needs, including justice system involvement
- Fund housing or service sector lead agencies (through local Primary Health Networks) to deliver targeted service coordination at a local level to improve outcomes for people with complex needs, including justice system involvement

Further Information

TaskForce Community Agency would welcome the opportunity to discuss the content of this submission should any further information be of assistance. [REDACTED]

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