

## Developing the National Housing and Homelessness Plan

### Who we are

WESNET is Australia's national peak body for specialist women's domestic and family violence services, with almost 350 eligible members across Australia. WESNET represents a range of organisations and individuals including women's refuges, shelters, safe houses, and information/referral services. Our member services provide critical front line services and support to family violence victim survivors including children. Our member services deliver crisis response services (many of them 24/7) and provide specialist support and safety and risk assessments that maximise safety and stability, including the provision of emergency, medium and long-term housing responses.

### Key principles

Thank you for the opportunity to provide a submission to the development of the National Housing and Homelessness Plan. WESNET considers that there are three key principles that should underpin the new Plan:

- Safe and affordable housing is essential social infrastructure.
- Access to housing and the experience of homelessness is deeply gendered.
- Family and domestic violence is one of the main reasons women and children become homeless. Women and children's access to housing is critical to keeping them safe from all forms of violence including family and domestic violence.

### Background

#### Women and homelessness<sup>1</sup>

Census data demonstrates that homelessness among women is growing faster than homelessness among men. More than 122,000 people in Australia experienced homelessness on Census night, an increase of 5.2 per cent from 2016. The number of women experiencing homelessness increased by around 10 per cent from 2016 to almost 54,000, or 42 in every 10,000 women.

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<sup>1</sup> ABS (2023) [Estimating Homelessness: Census](#).

Women accounted for 81.7 per cent of the 6,067 increase of people experiencing homelessness in 2021. The rate of homelessness for males decreased in 2021 to 55 males per 10,000 (from 58 in 2016), while the rate for females increased in 2021 to 42 females per 10,000 (from 41 in 2016).

#### Women's employment and income disparities

Women are more likely to live in low-income households, and more likely to work in low-paying feminised industries including essential sectors such as supporting victim-survivors of violence. Access to housing is becoming more and more out of reach, particularly in cities and large regional centres.

Research conducted by the Australian Housing and Research Institute, for example, found that 20 per cent of key workers in Sydney and 17 per cent in Melbourne are in housing stress, while in Melbourne the figure is seventeen percent.<sup>2</sup> Female dominated industries are at particular risk. It is estimated that in Sydney about 8,000 teachers and 4,500 nurses and midwives are in households experiencing housing stress and/or living in overcrowded homes.<sup>3</sup> These households are more likely to be forced into living on the urban fringes and facing long commutes, and experiencing the impacts this has on child care and family life.

#### Single parent families

Nearly 80 per cent of single parent families are headed by a woman, and these families are disproportionately more likely to seek homelessness support, representing 33 per cent of clients but being only 15.9 per cent of the population.<sup>45</sup> Reliance on inadequate income support payments – and disenfranchisement from the workforce due to caring responsibilities – conspires to keep single parent families in poverty which, in turn, leads to the most severe forms of housing insecurity. The 2023 Anglicare Rental Affordability Snapshot taken earlier this year showed that only 40 rental properties across Australia were affordable to a single parent with two young children in receipt of the parenting payment.<sup>6</sup>

#### Domestic and family violence

Domestic and family violence is one of the main reasons that people experience housing insecurity and/or become homeless. It is the number one reason why people ask for help from specialist homelessness services, with data from AIHW showing that 40 per cent of people seeking help from specialist homelessness services have experienced domestic and family violence.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Gilbert, C., Nasreen, Z. and Gurran, N. (2021) [Housing key workers: scoping challenges, aspirations, and policy responses for Australian cities](#), AHURI Final Report No. 355, Australian Housing and Urban Research Institute..

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

<sup>4</sup> ABS (2022) [Labour Force Status of Families](#).

<sup>5</sup> AIHW (2023) [Homelessness and homelessness services](#).

<sup>6</sup> Anglicare Australia (2023) [2023: Rental Affordability Snapshot](#).

<sup>7</sup> AIHW (2022) [Specialist homelessness services annual report 2021–22](#).

Our members report that the housing crisis has doubled the average length of stay for women and children in refuges due to a lack of exit options. Because of a lack of refuge spaces and other affordable housing options, women are left with two choices: stay with a violent partner or become homeless.<sup>8</sup> Access to safe and affordable housing – from crisis care to social housing, from the private rental sector through to home ownership – is essential to mitigate the risk of both homelessness and violence.

## Discussion

### National Plan

If governments are serious about saving lives and ending domestic and family violence – which they say they are in the recent endorsement of the National Plan to End Violence Against Women and Children – more needs to be done to create safe, affordable and accessible housing options.

When a focus and funding support is taken away from specialist services in favour of large corporatised generalist services, such as has happened in the recent past, this impacts the most vulnerable in our community. The efficacy of specialist services are well documented and supported internationally but our services are already stretched, and without improved support will be forced to turn more people away.

Pleasingly the new National Plan to End Violence Against Women and Children recognises the centrality of specialist services in both preventing violence as well as responding to it and supporting recovery. Safe housing is an essential component of all aspects of a women's journey in escaping violence and achieving autonomy and agency. ***The National Plan to End Violence Against Women and Children needs to work alongside the National Housing and Homeless Plan.*** Neither will be successful in isolation.

### Funding

Most of our member services are funded primarily under the National Housing and Homelessness Agreement (NHHA), although almost all also rely on other revenue including federal and state grants and philanthropic and fund-raising sources. ***As the NHHA is currently the most important form of dispersal of funds, the new Plan needs to drive its form and set desired policy objectives.*** It also needs to clearly recognise the difference between specialist family and domestic violence service and homelessness services. Specialist family violence services perform a range of activities beyond other homelessness services such as risk assessment and management and safety planning and this needs to be reflected in the terms and quantum of funding.

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<sup>8</sup> WESNET (2022) [Annual Report 2021-22](#), p. 17.

The Australian Government's current approach to funding tends to use the NHHA to disperse most, but not all, funding support to the domestic and family violence sector. The election commitment to fund 500 more domestic and family violence workers is being effected through the NHHA and anecdotal evidence suggests that in some states this has grossly favoured generalist services ahead of specialist services. On the other hand, the Safe Places Emergency Accommodation Inclusion Round is funded directly from the Commonwealth, and is intended to favour specialist services but project scope often precludes them. Funding arrangements and outcomes – and policy directions – are not clear or transparent. The new housing plan – working in tandem with the National Plan to End Violence Against Women, and with improved data collection mechanisms – would be an ideal vehicle to make sector funding and government policy objectives clearer and, thereby, more achievable. We need to see how much funding is available for family and domestic violence services, where it is going, and if this is optimising progress.

### Gender lens

The causes and experiences of homelessness and housing insecurity vary significantly between women and men. ***The new Plan needs to recognise the fundamental drivers of homelessness and housing inequality, which include gender inequality and family and domestic violence.***

WESNET currently receives no funding from government for its peak body function. This was ceased in 1997 by the Howard Government but, when Homelessness Australia was funded by government, WESNET was contracted to undertake women's policy work for them. The Plan must acknowledge and address gender. The Plan's implementation would benefit significantly by drawing on gender expertise, be that within or external to government.

*Signed*



*WESNET acknowledges and pays respects to the Traditional Owners and Custodians of all the lands on which we live and work.*