



HOMES FOR 100 WOMEN **DISCOVERY INSIGHTS**

CONTEXT AND BACKGROUND

*A GENDER-TRANSFORMATIVE HOUSING PROJECT
BY THE WOMEN'S HOUSING ALLIANCE*

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Introduction

The Victorian Women's Housing Alliance (WHA) formed in 2019 to address the systemic barriers and housing crisis being faced by women and children fleeing family violence. The WHA's members are leading organisations across the family violence, homelessness, and housing sectors with expertise in delivering safe, sustainable housing (both transitional and social), and providing family violence support, homelessness support, and a range of allied services. The WHA is committed to driving systemic change to deliver effective solutions to homelessness for women (trans gender and cis gender), non-binary people and their families.

The WHA recognises the critical need for stable, secure and affordable housing, along with necessary support for women, non-binary people and their families experiencing homelessness in Victoria. Through our combined knowledge and experience, the WHA is keenly aware of the systemic barriers within Victoria's current service system. These barriers are leading to a growing housing crisis with dire impacts for women, non-binary people and their families.

To address this urgent need, the WHA have secured philanthropic funding to develop a gender-informed pilot project that responds to the unique needs of women and non-binary people who have experienced homelessness or are at risk of homelessness. With a target of supporting 100 families, *Homes for 100 Women* will partner with women and non-binary people who have experienced homelessness (including victim-survivors of family and domestic violence) and sector stakeholders. Together, we will co-design an integrated housing-led response that not only ensures a sustainable pathway out of homelessness but also supports participants to recover from crisis and build economically secure and thriving futures.

The project addresses:

- The increasing numbers of women entering into the homelessness service system,
- The deficit in appropriate, safe and sustainable housing for women and non-binary people,
- The system delays between housing support requests and securing permanent accommodation,
- The lack of integrated support available once housing is secured,
- The need for a coordinated program of gender specific supports to assist people to not only maintain their tenancy but thrive once housed, including health, legal, financial, income, education and employment,
- Incorporating insights from the emerging international evidence base on effective gender-informed approaches to housing and homelessness response.



This project is a major initiative of the WHA and is auspiced by Juno. Once co-designed, the project will build government and philanthropic support to fund the model, thereby delivering an integrated, evidence-informed model that can be piloted with women (trans gender and cis gender) and non-binary led households.

Discovery Phase

Grounding in the evidence base and best practice

The first stage for this project was to conduct a review of existing literature investigating best practice (both nationally and internationally) in housing and support models for women and non-binary people and their children at risk of homelessness and violence. During the discovery phase, there was a particular focus on literature that included the voices and lived experiences of women and gender diverse people who have experienced housing instability and family violence. This phase also included expert interviews with agencies that provide gender specific housing and support services.

The Discovery Insights Papers present the findings and recommendations from the discovery phase for the *Homes for 100 Women* project. The papers are designed to be read either individually or jointly to provide a holistic understanding of the existing literature on homelessness for women and non-binary people. To accompany the papers, there is also a mapping of current services in Victoria that provide homelessness and family violence support. Collectively, these resources form a substantive evidence base for the *Homes for 100 Women* demonstration project and will guide the subsequent co-design process.

The next stage of the project will involve trialing the insights gathered from the research with women and non-binary people with lived experience, along with a range of system experts, through a co-design process. The co-design stage will then move into a collaborative and participatory process to develop a model for an effective response for women and non-binary people and their children at risk of homelessness and violence in Victoria.

The final project phase will focus on securing funding to pilot the model. Through this tri-partite process—grounding in evidence, co-designing with experts by experience and system experts, and securing funding—the *Homes for 100 Women* project will make a much-needed contribution to the urgent, and expanding, housing crisis facing women and non-binary people in Victoria.

Social Context

Homelessness for women and non-binary people is getting worse

Homelessness is a growing crisis in Australia, and especially for women and girls. Australian data indicates a concerning trend: while homelessness among men is declining, it's increasing for women and non-binary people:

- 2021 Census data shows us that men made up 55.9% of people experiencing homelessness; and women made up 44.1% reflecting a decrease in the rate of homelessness for men and an increase in the rate of homelessness for women.¹
- Women accounted for 81.7% of the increase of people experiencing homelessness in the 2021 Census.²
- The number of homeless women in Australia rose from 49,017 in 2016 to 53,974 in 2021, which represents a 10% increase (compared to the 2% increase in the number of homeless men).³

This shift is also being reflected in data on homelessness service usage, which shows that we are seeing an overrepresentation of women presenting to homelessness services for support:

- 58% of clients seeking support from Specialist Homelessness services (SHS) in Victoria in 2022-2023 were female.⁴
- Among them, 40% of clients seeking support from Specialist Homelessness services in Victoria in 2022-2023 cited family and domestic violence as their primary reason for seeking assistance.⁵

¹ 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). Australian Bureau of Statistics (2021), Estimating Homelessness: Census, ABS Website, <https://www.abs.gov.au/statistics/people/housing/estimating-homelessness-census/latest-release>, accessed 19 December 2023.

² Ibid.

³ Australian Housing and Urban Research Institute (2024), What are the real costs of Australia's housing crisis for women?, AHURI website, <https://www.ahuri.edu.au/analysis/brief/what-are-real-costs-australias-housing-crisis-women>, accessed 15 March 2024.

⁴ Australian Institute of Health and Welfare (2023) *Specialist homelessness services annual report 2022–23*, AIHW, Australian Government, accessed 19 December 2023.

⁵ Australian Institute of Health and Welfare (2023) *Specialist homelessness services annual report 2022–23*, AIHW, Australian Government, accessed 19 December 2023.

- Among those experiencing persistent homelessness, women and children affected by family and domestic violence are particularly evident.⁶
- 62% of SHS clients in 2022–23 who experienced family and domestic violence had previously sought assistance from an SHS agency– demonstrating a pattern of persistent homelessness.⁷
- In 2022-23, women accounted for 65% of unassisted requests to SHS and 87% of unassisted requests made by single adults with children were from women.⁸
- 63% of clients with a current mental health issue presenting to SHS services in 2022-23 were women.⁹
- Housing unaffordability, particularly rental unaffordability, is having a disproportionate impact on women, driving more women to seek support from homelessness services. In Victoria, 58% of people seeking assistance from homelessness services are women and among those employed seeking assistance, 70% are women.¹⁰

Not only is the problem of women's homelessness getting worse, but our system responses are failing them. Over the last decade, Australian data reveals alarming trends:

- the number of women and children sleeping rough or in a car at the end of homelessness support more than doubled, from 1,041 to 2,428;¹¹
- the number of women and children couch surfing at the end of support more than doubled from 3,465 to 7,214.¹²

And, in just the last year, the number of women and children sleeping rough or in a car after receiving homelessness support increased by 23%.¹³

⁶ Full note: The number of people experiencing persistent homelessness (more than 7 out of 24-months homeless while a client of an SHS agency) increased between 2018-2023, from 29,500 clients in 2018–19 to 36,600 in 2022–23. Increases were particularly evident among *clients aged under 25, women and children affected by family and domestic violence, and Indigenous people*. Australian Institute of Health and Welfare (2023) *Specialist homelessness services annual report 2022–23*, AIHW, Australian Government, accessed 19 December 2023. (Italics author's own)

⁷ Australian Institute of Health and Welfare (2023) *Specialist homelessness services annual report 2022–23*, AIHW, Australian Government, accessed 19 December 2023.

⁸ Australian Institute of Health and Welfare (2023) *Specialist homelessness services annual report 2022–23*, AIHW, Australian Government, accessed 19 December 2023.

⁹ Australian Institute of Health and Welfare (2023) *Specialist homelessness services annual report 2022–23*, AIHW, Australian Government, accessed 19 December 2023.

¹⁰ Council to Homeless Persons (2024), *Employed and At Risk: The new face of homelessness in Victoria*, CHP Website, accessed 29 April 2024.

¹¹ Homelessness Australia (2024) *Homelessness and domestic and family violence State of Response Report 2024*. <https://homelessnessaustralia.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2024/03/IWD-2024-3.pdf>

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Ibid.

While we don't have accurate or adequate data on the number of non-binary people experiencing homelessness, we do know that trans gender, non-binary and gender diverse people are overrepresented amongst the homeless population. Thus, with the rising homelessness rates, it's reasonable to assume this also extends to non-binary people.

For each of them, homelessness is a difficult and even devastating experience that can have severe and life-long consequences.

Systems Context

Housing support in Victoria

The Specialist Homelessness System in Victoria is funded by the Australian and Victorian governments through service agreements managed by the Victorian government. Services are delivered by approximately 130 different agencies.¹⁴

The system operates based on the 'Opening Doors' framework and assists people to find housing and the support they need. Central to this system is a regional place-based structure coordinated through a Local Area Service Network (LASN) comprising specialist housing and homelessness support service providers. These service networks mirror the operating regions of the Department of Families, Fairness and Housing. Some aspects of the family violence system, including refuges, certain specialist family violence services (often connected to refuges) and housing services, are integrated into LASNs and are considered part of the homelessness system.

The entry points into this system for people seeking assistance are centrally located 'Homelessness Access Points'. There are approximately 75 entry points across Victoria. This is where an Initial Assessment and Planning (IAP) worker will assess the person's support needs and refer them on to other services. In many metropolitan areas these 'access points' are larger non-profit organisations, such as Launch Housing, who provide a range of homelessness services from support to the provision of social housing. There is a small Intake and Assessment program specifically for women through Women's Housing Ltd, however most women and non-binary people must access the homelessness system through these generalised access points. Younger individuals may access the system through youth-specific access points. There is similarly a specialised access point for LGBTQIA+ Victorians (Pride in Place), although this is limited to only a few regions and is not statewide. Efforts are currently underway to establish a culturally safer access point for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples in Victoria.

This initial phase of seeking support should focus on 'early intervention' and assistance to maintain housing (where appropriate), options for immediate, short-term crisis or emergency accommodation, discussions about medium and long-term housing options, and a broader needs assessment. People seeking support

¹⁴ Parliament of Victoria (2021) Inquiry into homelessness in Victoria: Final Report. <https://www.parliament.vic.gov.au/get-involved/inquiries/inquiry-into-homelessness-in-victoria/reports>



may also receive interim support from the access point, including financial assistance to maintain or secure a private rental (e.g. Housing Establishment Fund, Private Rental Assistance Program, or linking to Commonwealth Rental Assistance) and/or assistance with a priority application to the Victorian Housing Register to become eligible for social housing.

The initial assessment also serves to connect individuals with support provided by homelessness support services and on-site support in temporary crisis accommodation. Temporary crisis accommodation includes mainstream adult and families' crisis accommodation, youth refuges and women's and children's refuges. The family violence risk level assessed for entry into a refuge is immediate and life-threatening, meaning refuges are part of both the family violence and the homelessness systems. Individuals experiencing family violence may also be eligible for family violence case management, which is not provided by the homelessness support system.

The average stay in many refuge accommodation services is close to four months due to a lack of suitable housing options for women to transition into, effectively causing a bottleneck that results in a lack of refuge accommodation.¹⁵ It is important to note that where crisis accommodation is unavailable, homelessness services and the family violence support service system may provide accommodation in private motels. The WHA asserts that substandard motels are not and should not be considered a housing option within the state's homelessness and family violence response.

Homelessness support or transitional support is provided by a range of larger homelessness organisations and a range of smaller support organisations catering to specific communities. Transition support provides assessment, referral and case managed support, life skills training, information and advocacy and assistance with accessing appropriate long-term housing, and training and employment opportunities. Some services, such as McAuley Community Services, provide family violence support, homelessness support and refuge crisis accommodation. The primary goal of support, whether provided within or outside of refuge, is to advocate for and connect individuals to secure, affordable, long-term housing.

However, the availability of affordable housing options in Victoria falls significantly short of demand. Limited private rental options exist across the State, particularly in Melbourne. Social housing includes public housing owned by the State and community housing run by not-for-profit providers. Public housing rent is set at 25% of gross household income, whereas community housing rent ranges between 25-30% of gross household income, with tenants potentially eligible for Commonwealth Rental Assistance. These properties vary from high-density, such as the public housing towers that are visible in the urban streetscapes of Melbourne, or lower density, stand-alone houses. Properties managed by housing

¹⁵ Safe and Equal (2023), 'Measuring Family Violence Service Demand and Capacity: an emerging picture of the specialist family violence sector', p11, [REP_2023-Safe-and-Equal-Measuring-FV-Service-Demand-and-Capacity-Report-FINAL.pdf \(safeandequal.org.au\)](#).



providers such as Women's Property Initiatives or Women's Housing Limited may blend in within a broader apartment complex, making them indistinguishable as individual units.

To access public housing or community housing, individuals must be on the Victorian Housing Register. Public housing is allocated based on order of priority on the Victorian Housing Register Waitlist. Community housing providers also access this waitlist but consider a range of contributing factors that may assist in ensuring successful tenancies. In many areas, nomination rights and partnerships exist between support providers and community housing providers, facilitating access to priority housing. This may be through nomination rights or partnerships and varies between regions. Once a person has secured social or affordable housing, homelessness support generally ceases within two weeks.

Transitional housing serves as a medium-term form of social housing, that provides people with housing while awaiting a longer-term social housing offer. One significant advantage of this housing model is the provision of ongoing homelessness case management for the duration of a participants' stay. However, the effectiveness of this option is hindered by the dwindling levels of housing stock. In addition, rooming houses operated by non-profit organisations, with separate bathrooms and kitchens may also be an option for tenants whilst they are supported to find longer-term accommodation.

See the accompanying *Victorian homelessness and family violence systems map* for additional information on what support is available to women and non-binary people seeking help.