



# HOMES FOR 100 WOMEN **DISCOVERY INSIGHTS**

## INSIGHTS PAPER THREE: CHALLENGES

*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 family violence 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 (transgender and cisgender) and non-binary led households.

A note on language: Whilst the WHA uses the term “women” inclusively to encompass both transgender and cisgender women, it is crucial to note some significant limitations in much of the research informing this document. For example:

- Adoption of a binary approach to gender without acknowledging gender identities beyond the binary of men/ women;
- Conflation of gender and sex, for example using “male/female” language to denote gender;
- Failure to specify how “women” are defined within studies and whether research is inclusive of both transgender and cisgender women.

These limitations must be taken into consideration when examining the insights explored throughout these papers.

### Key Finding 3:

#### **The current system is failing to ensure long-term pathways out of homelessness.**

This paper presents the third key finding from the Discovery Phase for the *Homes for 100 Women* project, exploring how the homelessness system is inadequately responding to homelessness for women and non-binary people. There are an overwhelming number of sources providing insight and evidence into the challenges confronting our current homelessness, housing and family violence systems in delivering a long-term exit from homelessness for those seeking assistance.<sup>1</sup> More and more Australian women are being driven into homelessness and exits from homelessness are taking longer and longer to secure. This paper highlights five key challenges in our current system:

- Demand for services exceeds supply across the entire system.
- There is limited housing supply across all types of housing.
- Multiple barriers prevent women and non-binary people getting help from the homelessness system.
- There is an urgent need for gender-informed services to be funded.

<sup>1</sup> See for example: Flanagan, K., Blunden, H., valentine, k., and Henriette, J. (2019) Housing outcomes after domestic and family violence, AHURI Final Report No. 311, Australian Housing and Urban Research Institute Limited, Melbourne, <https://www.ahuri.edu.au/research/final-reports/311>; Cripps, K., and Habibis, D. (2019) *Improving housing and service responses to domestic and family violence for Indigenous individuals and families*, AHURI Final Report No. 320, Australian Housing and Urban Research Institute Limited, Melbourne, <https://www.ahuri.edu.au/research/final-reports/320> ; and the Victorian Parliament’s own final report on the Inquiry into Homelessness (citation above), amongst many other sources referenced in this summary report.

- Systems are 'siloes' from each other, and this inhibits effective outcomes.

### **Finding 3a: Demand exceeds supply across the housing and homelessness support system.**

*“Victoria’s homelessness system is overwhelmed with those in need, making it increasingly difficult for service providers to adequately respond to the complex and varying problems a person faces.” Inquiry into homelessness in Victoria: Final Report, 2021<sup>2</sup>*

Victoria’s Inquiry into Homelessness in 2020 is just one of many sources underscoring the overwhelming demand for homelessness services, a demand that surpasses the capacity of the system.<sup>3</sup> The following selected data points from Victoria highlight the extent of this challenge:

- The total homeless population in Victoria increased from 38.9 per 10,000 population in 2001 to 47.1 per 10,000 population in 2021, according to Census data.<sup>4</sup>
- On any given day in Victoria in 2023, 86 requests for support from specialist homelessness services were unable to be met.<sup>5</sup> Across Australia, there were 295 unassisted requests per day, with women comprising 65% of those who were unable to be assisted.<sup>6</sup>
- In 2022-23, only 30% of the 21,700 clients who sought support for homelessness in Victoria and presented to a specialist homelessness service for assistance were assisted into housing.<sup>7</sup> Of Victorian specialist homelessness service clients who sought long-term accommodation, only 5% were provided with it, while 72% were neither provided with nor referred to long-term accommodation.<sup>8</sup>
- The 2020 Victorian Government Inquiry into Homelessness found that a majority of the Victorians who sought assistance from homelessness services did not receive the support they needed: 76% could not be provided long-term

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<sup>2</sup> 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> , p. xvii.

<sup>3</sup> See for example: Homelessness Australia (2023) Overstretched and overwhelmed: the strain on homelessness services <https://homelessnessaustralia.org.au/housing-crisis-is-driving-surg-ing-demand-for-homelessness-services/> and Council to Homeless Persons (2024) Employed & At Risk: The new face of homelessness in Victoria. <https://chp.org.au/article/alar-ming-jump-in-working-victorians-seeking-homelessness-help/>

<sup>4</sup> Australian Institute of Health and Welfare (2024) Housing Dashboard, AIHW, Australian Government, accessed 21 March 2024.

<sup>5</sup> Australian Institute of Health and Welfare (2024) *Specialist homelessness services annual report 2022–23*, AIHW, Australian Government, accessed 21 March 2024.

<sup>6</sup> Australian Institute of Health and Welfare (2024) *Specialist homelessness services annual report 2022–23*, AIHW, Australian Government, accessed 21 March 2024.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid.

housing, 62% could not be provided transitional accommodation, and 32% could not be provided crisis accommodation.<sup>9</sup>

- This finding is replicated in specialist homelessness services data, where 75% of short-term accommodation needs were met for clients experiencing domestic and family violence, while only 5% of long-term housing needs were addressed. <sup>10</sup>
- The length of support provided to specialist homelessness service clients has increased, with the median number of days a client was supported increasing to 56 days in 2022–23, up from 39 days in 2017–18.<sup>11</sup>
- Reporting from the Department of Families, Fairness and Housing on unmet housing demand across accommodation types for households affected by family violence in Victoria in 2021 shows high levels of unmet demand, particularly concerning long-term housing:

Accommodation type	For specialist family violence service providers		For other homelessness and family violence service providers		Total unmet demand
	Unmet demand	Met demand	Unmet demand	Met demand	
Short-term and emergency crisis accommodation	101	642	423	908	25%
Medium-term and transitional housing	738	1076	82	269	38%
Long-term housing	280	76	1348	377	78%

**Table 1: Unmet housing need for Victorian households by number households affected by family violence in 2021**

- This report tracked demand for each of these accommodation types across the period 2015-2021 and found substantial increases in demand for all

<sup>9</sup> 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>

<sup>10</sup> AIHW 2023, Specialist homelessness services client pathways: Clients returning to homelessness in 2019–20, [SHS: Clients returning to homelessness in 2019–20 - Australian Institute of Health and Welfare \(aihw.gov.au\)](https://www.aihw.gov.au/reports/10-10-2023/specialist-homelessness-services-client-pathways)

<sup>11</sup> Australian Institute of Health and Welfare (2024) *Specialist homelessness services annual report 2022–23*, AIHW, Australian Government, accessed 21 March 2024.

accommodation types over this period.<sup>12</sup> The Department also observed a substantial growth in the number of applicants on the Victorian Housing Register (VHR) and those approved to the VHR during the same timeframe.<sup>13</sup>

- As of March 2024, there were 58,459 total applications on the VHR.<sup>14</sup> This was made up of 33,255 priority applications and 25,204 register of interest applications.<sup>15</sup> 3,947 of the total applications were approved for the reason of family violence.<sup>16</sup> 10% of new applications were for Aboriginal households. 25% of new applications were single parent households.<sup>17</sup>
- As of March 2024, there were 9,839 transfer applications on the VHR, of which 6,806 were priority applications.<sup>18</sup> This data indicates that nearly 10,000 current tenants of social housing are in housing that does not meet their needs.
- There are long waitlists for social housing and demand exceeds supply. The Department of Families, Fairness and Housing 2022/23 Annual Report reveals that in 2022-2023 wait times for long term social housing were 23.6 months for people who have experienced family violence. Over a year more than the targets set by the government.

Application type	2021-22 average wait time	2022-23 average wait time	Target time
People who have experienced family violence	17.1 months	23.6 months	10.5 months
People who have a priority access housing application or a priority transfer	12.4 months	18.1 months	10.5 months

**Table 2: Average wait times for social housing<sup>19</sup>**

### **Finding 3b: There is limited housing supply across all types of housing.**

In addition to the overwhelming demand for homelessness support, the current system is facing a lack of housing availability across all forms of housing, from

<sup>12</sup> Ibid.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid.

<sup>14</sup> Homes Victoria (2024) Applications on the Victorian Housing Register (VHR). Victorian Government. <https://www.homes.vic.gov.au/applications-victorian-housing-register-vhr>

<sup>15</sup> Ibid.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid.

<sup>19</sup> Department of Families, Fairness and Housing (2023) Department of Families, Fairness and Housing Annual Report 2022-23. Victorian Government <https://www.dffh.vic.gov.au/publications/annual-report>

crisis, through to transitional and long-term accommodation types. The following data points illustrate this shortage:

- Victoria has the lowest proportion of public and community housing of any state or territory in Australia, with only 2.8% of households living in social housing (compared to the national average of 4.1%).<sup>20</sup> Victoria's "Big Build" increase in social housing, while important and urgently needed, will still fall short of bringing Victoria up to the national average.<sup>21</sup>
- Victoria has the highest vacancy rate of public housing of any state or territory in Australia, with 6.3% of public housing unoccupied.<sup>22</sup> This represents 4,077 empty public housing homes in Victoria.<sup>23</sup>
- Victoria spends less than average on social housing per capita: with expenditures amounting to \$124.20 per person, compared to the national average of \$185.90.<sup>24</sup>
- The growth in social housing in Australia has not kept pace with the growth in the number of households.<sup>25</sup> While Australia's population has surged by 41% since 1996, social housing has only grown by 3% over the same period, which means that social housing system capacity has been reduced by more than half since the 1990s.<sup>26</sup>
- Victoria's total waiting list registrations increased by 49% in the period 2017-21 (to 52,000), while annual 'new greatest need applications' more than doubled (from under 12,000 to over 28,000).<sup>27</sup> In September 2023, there were almost 51,500 outstanding applications for a home on the Victorian Housing Register.<sup>28</sup> When combined with historically low affordability and availability of market housing, there is a soaring demand for social housing.<sup>29</sup>
- Unmet housing need in Melbourne, meaning households who are: (a) in private rental; (b) on low incomes; and (c) paying more than 30% of their

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<sup>20</sup> Council to Homeless Persons (2024) Victoria rock bottom of Australia's public and community housing rankings <https://chp.org.au/article/victoria-rock-bottom-of-australias-public-and-community-housing-rankings/>

<sup>21</sup> 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>

<sup>22</sup> Productivity Commission (2024), Report on Government Services 2024. Australian Government <https://www.pc.gov.au/ongoing/report-on-government-services/2024>

<sup>23</sup> Ibid.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid.

<sup>25</sup> Productivity Commission (2022) In need of repair: The National Housing and Homelessness Agreement, Study Report, Canberra <https://www.pc.gov.au/inquiries/completed/housing-homelessness/report/housing-homelessness.pdf>

<sup>26</sup> Ibid.

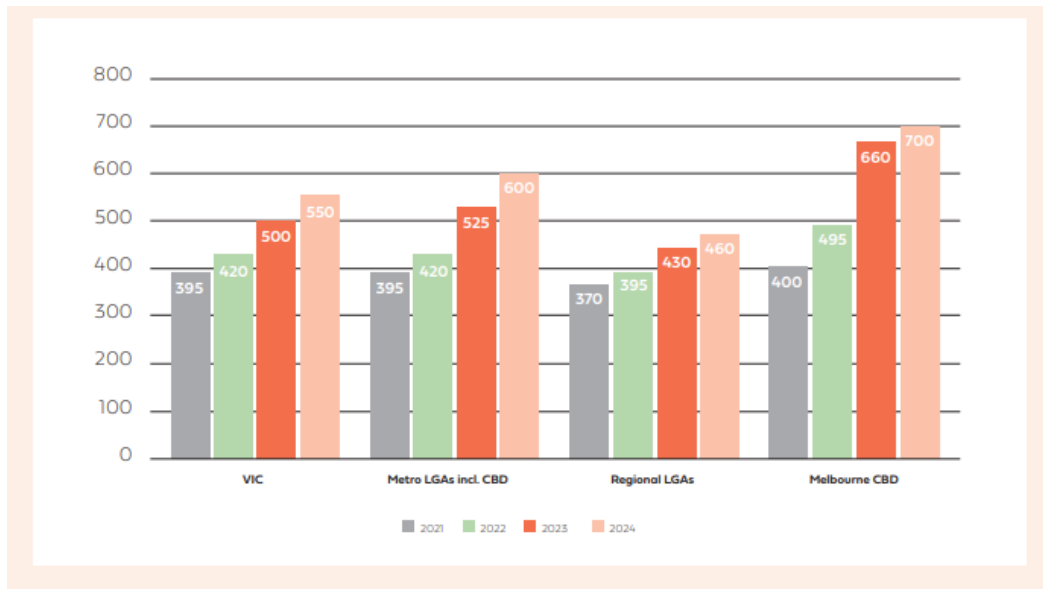
<sup>27</sup> Pawson, H. and Lilley, D. (2022) Managing Access to Social Housing in Australia: Unpacking policy frameworks and service provision outcomes; CFRC Working Paper; Sydney: UNSW City Futures Research Centre.

<sup>28</sup> Victorian Ombudsman (2024) Social housing complaint handling – progress report. <https://www.ombudsman.vic.gov.au/our-impact/investigation-reports/social-housing-complaint-handling-progress-report/>

<sup>29</sup> Ibid.

income on rent, has grown by 4% since 2016.<sup>30</sup> At the 2021 Census, 6% of households in Melbourne were in the unmet housing need category (109,800 households).<sup>31</sup> In 2021, 50% of those in unmet housing need in Melbourne were families.<sup>32</sup>

- The residential vacancy rate in Melbourne in February 2024 was 1.0%.<sup>33</sup> In just the last twelve months (as at March 2024), weekly rents have increased by 14.9% in Melbourne.<sup>34</sup>



**Figure 1: Median weekly rent on snapshot day, 2021-2024, Source: Anglicare<sup>35</sup>**

- In Anglicare’s 2024 Rental Affordability Snapshot, across metropolitan Melbourne, only 0.3% of properties were affordable for households living on income support payments without placing them in housing stress.<sup>36</sup> For a single parent with two children earning minimum wage, only 2.0% of properties across Victoria (0.4% across metropolitan Melbourne) were affordable and appropriate; for a single parent of one child on either Parenting Payment or Job Seeker there were no affordable properties available in Victoria.<sup>37</sup>

<sup>30</sup> van den Nouwelant, R., Troy, L and Soundararaj, B. (2022) Quantifying Australia’s unmet housing need: A national snapshot, November 2022. UNSW City Futures Research Centre.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid.

<sup>33</sup> SQM Research (2024), Residential Vacancy Rates, City: Melbourne,

[https://sqmresearch.com.au/graph\\_vacancy.php?region=vic-Melbourne&type=c&t=1](https://sqmresearch.com.au/graph_vacancy.php?region=vic-Melbourne&type=c&t=1), accessed 21 March 2024

<sup>34</sup> SQM Research (2024), Weekly Rents, City: Melbourne, <https://sqmresearch.com.au/weekly-rents.php?region=vic-Melbourne&type=c&t=1>, accessed 21 March 2024.

<sup>35</sup> Ibid.

<sup>36</sup> Ibid.

<sup>37</sup> Ibid.

### **Finding 3c: Multiple barriers prevent people getting help from the homelessness system.**

As highlighted above, homelessness services are experiencing surging demand – a demand that is overwhelming the system’s capacity to provide support. Despite this overwhelming demand, there is a wide range of data – both quantitative and qualitative – demonstrating that there remain many barriers to support that are preventing women and non-binary people from either reaching out to the system when in need, or from obtaining support when they do seek it.

***We also have a lot of women who don’t articulate as being homeless but are coming to us with a lot the risk factors such as housing vulnerability, loss of employment, being older, retirement income, health issues, or divorce. These are not directly homelessness of family violence but definitely are impacting and meaning the plans they were relying on need to change. (WIRE expert interview, December 2024)***

- Results from the 2014 General Social Survey showed that approximately 67% of those who reported experiencing homelessness in the last 10 years did not seek assistance during their most recent experience of homelessness.<sup>38</sup> This finding is supported by evidence that women and non-binary people will often self-manage homelessness through their personal networks and resources rather than seek support from services.<sup>39, 40</sup>
- Some research has shown that women are unaware of what support is available and how to access it.<sup>41</sup> This has been highlighted as an issue for women who are on temporary visas, in particular, for whom fear of deportation, loss of custody of their children, lack of social networks, understanding of their rights and English language skills can all act as barriers to seeking out support.<sup>42</sup>
- Women on temporary visas face many significant structural barriers to accessing housing in Australia. For instance, most long-term public housing is only available to permanent residents and citizens, they often have limited or no access to Centrelink payments, limited or no working rights and lack of entitlements to childcare subsidy.<sup>43</sup> Along with these structural barriers, women on temporary visas often experience social

<sup>38</sup> Ibid.

<sup>39</sup> Bullen, J. (2019). Didn’t feel heard, didn’t think I had a voice, didn’t feel safe: Gender responsive strategies for assisting women experiencing long-term and recurrent homelessness. Crows Nest, NSW: The Mercy Foundation.

<sup>40</sup> McNair, R., Andrews, C., Parkinson, S., and Dempsey, D. (2017) LGBTQ Homelessness: Risks, Resilience, and Access to Services in Victoria. GALFA LGBTQ Homelessness Research Project. <https://www.lgbtihomeless.org.au/research-and-policy/reports/>

<sup>41</sup> Bullen, J. (2019). Didn’t feel heard, didn’t think I had a voice, didn’t feel safe: Gender responsive strategies for assisting women experiencing long-term and recurrent homelessness. Crows Nest, NSW: The Mercy Foundation.

<sup>42</sup> National Advocacy Group on Women on Temporary Visas Experiencing Violence (2018) Path to Nowhere: Women on Temporary Visas Experiencing Violence and Their Children.

<sup>43</sup> Ibid.

isolation (frequently as a direct consequence of family violence) and may have no or limited social networks able to provide informal support.<sup>44</sup>

- The highly gendered nature of accommodation options in the homelessness service sector acts as a major barrier for transgender, non-binary and gender non-confirming people.<sup>45</sup> Discrimination, harassment, violence, fears and negative experiences of accessing services, mis-gendering and a risk of gender inappropriate placement, a lack of felt safety, and a dearth of safe, inclusive accommodation options, all present barriers to support.<sup>46</sup> Many of these same barriers also apply more broadly to lesbian, bisexual and other members of the LGBTQIA+ community.<sup>47</sup>
- Various barriers affect the access to housing and housing support for people with disabilities in Australia. These include discrimination, stigma, the high cost of housing, limited affordable and accessible housing stock, lack of service integration between disability, housing and other supports, as well as issues regarding staffing quality and the interface between formal and informal carers.<sup>48, 49</sup> Compounding these challenges, the current system also often allocates funding and service provision based on available budget rather than individual need.<sup>50</sup>
- There are many barriers to support for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women. Eurocentric definitions of home and homelessness, employed at both policy and service level, conflict with Indigenous practices and create discrimination and injustice within the system. This contributes to the overrepresentation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people experiencing homelessness.<sup>51</sup> According to AHURI research, "Inadequate funding for homelessness services, limited crisis and transitional accommodation, the shortage of affordable housing, barriers to housing access and inadequate attention to tenancy sustainment, create a

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<sup>44</sup> Ibid.

<sup>45</sup> McNair, R., Andrews, C., Parkinson, S., and Dempsey, D. (2017) LGBTQ Homelessness: Risks, Resilience, and Access to Services in Victoria. GALFA LGBTQ Homelessness Research Project. <https://www.lgbthomeless.org.au/research-and-policy/reports/>.

<sup>46</sup> Ibid.

<sup>47</sup> Ibid.

<sup>48</sup> Parker, S and Fisher, K. (2010) Facilitators and Barriers in Australian Disability Housing Support Policies: Using a Human Rights Framework. *Disability Studies Quarterly*. Vol. 30, No. 3/4.

<sup>49</sup> Franz, J., Adkins, B., Petriwskyj, A, Bittner, G, Ward, M, & Rolfe, A. (2014) Person-centred approaches to private housing for people with disability: impediments, difficulties and opportunities. The Disability Policy and Research Working Group, QUT and UQ, Australia.

<sup>50</sup> Parker, S and Fisher, K. (2010) Facilitators and Barriers in Australian Disability Housing Support Policies: Using a Human Rights Framework. *Disability Studies Quarterly*. Vol. 30, No. 3/4.

<sup>51</sup> Tuall, S., Tedmanson, D., Habibis, D., McKinley, K., Akbar, S., Chong, A., Deuter, K. and Goodwin-Smith, I. (2022) Urban Indigenous homelessness: much more than housing, AHURI Final Report No. 383, Australian Housing and Urban Research Institute Limited, Melbourne, <https://www.ahuri.edu.au/research/final-reports/383>

revolving door of housing and homelessness for many Indigenous people."<sup>52</sup>

- Also, critically, the intersections between the housing and family violence systems and child protection system have profound unintended and negative consequences for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women and children.<sup>53, 54</sup> The lack of housing options and limited pathways to stable housing significantly heighten the risk of Indigenous women losing custody of their children, through no fault of their own, but rather as a consequence of systemic failures.<sup>55</sup> Similarly, current child protection policy and related legislation often holds women accountable for the safety of children, which can result in Indigenous women being punished by the system through the removal of their children, instead of being supported to create safety for themselves and their children.<sup>56</sup>
- A Victorian Parliamentary Inquiry in 2010 identified housing as “the most overwhelming problem” facing criminalised women, and one closely linked to women’s offending and reoffending.<sup>57</sup> The Committee referred to evidence of women being placed on remand or having release from prison postponed purely due to lack of available housing.

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<sup>52</sup> Tually, S., Tedmanson, D., Habibis, D., McKinley, K., Akbar, S., Chong, A., Deuter, K. and Goodwin-Smith, I. (2022) Urban Indigenous homelessness: much more than housing, AHURI Final Report No. 383, Australian Housing and Urban Research Institute Limited, Melbourne, <https://www.ahuri.edu.au/research/final-reports/383>, p.2

<sup>53</sup> Cripps, K. and Habibis, D. (2019) Improving housing and service responses to domestic and family violence for Indigenous individuals and families, AHURI Final Report 320, Australian Housing and Urban Research Institute Limited, Melbourne, <http://www.ahuri.edu.au/research/final-reports/320>

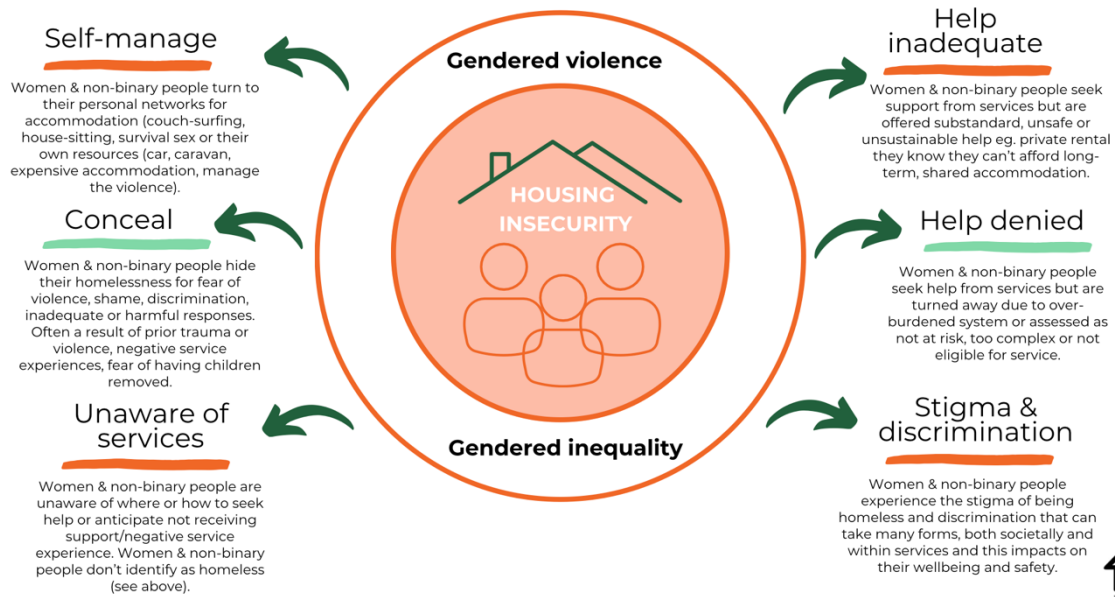
<sup>54</sup> valentine, k., Cripps, K., Flanagan, K., Habibis, D., Martin, C., and Blunden, H. (2020) Inquiry into integrated housing support for vulnerable families, AHURI Final Report No. 339, Australian Housing and Urban Research Institute Limited, Melbourne, <https://www.ahuri.edu.au/research/final-reports/339>

<sup>55</sup> Cripps, K. and Habibis, D. (2019) Improving housing and service responses to domestic and family violence for Indigenous individuals and families, AHURI Final Report 320, Australian Housing and Urban Research Institute Limited, Melbourne, <http://www.ahuri.edu.au/research/final-reports/320>

<sup>56</sup> valentine, k., Cripps, K., Flanagan, K., Habibis, D., Martin, C., and Blunden, H. (2020) Inquiry into integrated housing support for vulnerable families, AHURI Final Report No. 339, Australian Housing and Urban Research Institute Limited, Melbourne, <https://www.ahuri.edu.au/research/final-reports/339>

<sup>57</sup> Centre for Innovative Justice, RMIT University (2021) Leaving custody behind: A fact sheet on drivers and alternatives to women’s incarceration, [https://cij.org.au/cms/wp-content/uploads/2021/07/leaving-custody-behind-fact-sheet\\_final.pdf](https://cij.org.au/cms/wp-content/uploads/2021/07/leaving-custody-behind-fact-sheet_final.pdf)

## THE CURRENT SYSTEM IS FAILING WOMEN & NON-BINARY PEOPLE



**Figure 2: Summary of ways the current system is failing to meet the needs of women and non-binary people**

- The acute shortages in accommodation across the system create significant bottlenecks, leading to women and non-binary people being turned away from services. With few alternatives, they are often forced to rely on their own networks and resources for a place to stay, or worse, return to an unsafe home.<sup>58, 59</sup> According to data from the specialist homelessness services annual report 2022–23, almost two thirds of clients of SHS services in 2022-23 had also received SHS assistance at some point since 2011. This demonstrates that homelessness support is not providing a permanent pathway out of housing instability for many service users.<sup>60</sup>
- The 2020 Victorian Government Inquiry into Homelessness highlighted fixed service lengths as a key driver of an ineffective and crisis-oriented system response, noting that it results in people needing to re-present to a homelessness service at the end of a period of support because their needs were still unmet.<sup>61</sup>

<sup>58</sup> Cripps, K. and Habibis, D. (2019) Improving housing and service responses to domestic and family violence for Indigenous individuals and families, AHURI Final Report 320, Australian Housing and Urban Research Institute Limited, Melbourne, <http://www.ahuri.edu.au/research/final-reports/320>

<sup>59</sup> Equity Economics. (2021). Nowhere to Go: The benefits of providing long-term social housing to women that have experienced domestic and family violence. <https://everybodyshome.com.au/report-social-housing-keeps-women-safe-from-family-violence-expands-economy/>

<sup>60</sup> Australian Institute of Health and Welfare (2024) *Specialist homelessness services annual report 2022–23*, AIHW, Australian Government, accessed 21 March 2024.

<sup>61</sup> 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>

- Multiple studies with women who have experienced homelessness have shown that the cessation of support once housing has been provided jeopardises long-term housing stability and recovery from homelessness and family violence.<sup>62, 63, 64</sup> The current system response where support ends once housing is obtained fails to address the ongoing impacts of trauma, violence and mental health issues, and thereby ensure a long-term exit from homelessness is sustained.
- Research with women who have been homeless in Australia shows that the following factors act as barriers to seeking help from services: stigma, discrimination and judgmental attitudes from service providers; fear and concern for safety in services; inadequate or inaccessible services; and lack of knowledge of services.<sup>65</sup> When women do seek help, research shows that services are often experienced as complex, confusing and difficult to comply with and that although help was sometimes inadequate, women felt scared to complain or that they did not have the right to ask for outcomes that would better suit their needs.<sup>66</sup>
- AHURI research has shown that there are differences in the quality of service provided to some groups of women and children, which are based on systemic discrimination and views of 'deservingness'.<sup>67</sup> This is particularly the case for Indigenous women, for whom racism, stereotypes, complacency and discrimination continue to create significant barriers to receiving a model of care that is respectful, culturally safer and supportive of social and emotional wellbeing.<sup>68</sup>
- Notwithstanding these challenges, women in one qualitative study were able to identify both individual relationships with staff in services as supportive, helpful, and offering valued connections in a time of crisis, as well as identifying their own strengths and resilience which enabled them to find a

<sup>62</sup> Phipps, M, Dalton, L, Maxwell, H and Cleary, M. (2021) More than a house: Women's recovery from homelessness in Australia. *Health and Social Care in the Community*. 2021; 00:1–11.

<sup>63</sup> Warburton W, Whittaker E, Papic M. Homelessness Pathways for Australian Single Mothers and Their Children: An Exploratory Study. *Societies*. 2018; 8(1):16. <https://doi.org/10.3390/soc8010016>

<sup>64</sup> O'Campo P, Nisenbaum R, Crocker AG, Nicholls T, Eiboff F, Adair CE. (2023) Women experiencing homelessness and mental illness in a Housing First multi-site trial: Looking beyond housing to social outcomes and well-being. *PLoS One*. 2023 Feb 10; 18(2) :e0277074. <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC9916643/>

<sup>65</sup> Bullen, J. (2019). Didn't feel heard, didn't think I had a voice, didn't feel safe: Gender responsive strategies for assisting women experiencing long-term and recurrent homelessness. Crows Nest, NSW: The Mercy Foundation.

<sup>66</sup> Champion, T., Gander, C, Camacho Duarte, O, Phibbs, P, Crabtree, L, and Kirkby, M. (2009) The impact of housing on the lives of women and children – post domestic violence crisis accommodation: A study undertaken by the NSW Women Refuge Movement and the UWS Urban Research Centre.

<sup>67</sup> valentine, k., Cripps, K., Flanagan, K., Habibis, D., Martin, C., and Blunden, H. (2020) Inquiry into integrated housing support for vulnerable families, AHURI Final Report No. 339, Australian Housing and Urban Research Institute Limited, Melbourne, <https://www.ahuri.edu.au/research/final-reports/339>

<sup>68</sup> Ibid. See also: Tually, S., Tedmanson, D., Habibis, D., McKinley, K., Akbar, S., Chong, A., Deuter, K. and Goodwin-Smith, I. (2022) Urban Indigenous homelessness: much more than housing, AHURI Final Report No. 383, Australian Housing and Urban Research Institute Limited, Melbourne, <https://www.ahuri.edu.au/research/final-reports/383>.

way out of homelessness despite the limitations of the support offered to them.<sup>69</sup>

### **Finding 3d. There is an urgent need for gender-informed services to be funded.**

The need for gender-informed services within the homelessness and housing systems has never been greater:

- Over the last decade exits into homelessness for women and children experiencing family violence and presenting for homelessness support are increasing.<sup>70</sup>
- Data from the specialist homelessness services annual report 2022–23 highlights that the overwhelming majority of people who turn to specialist homelessness services for support to access either medium term or long-term housing after family violence are not being provided with it.<sup>71</sup>
- Over the past two years, from 2020-21 to 2022-23, the number of women and children sleeping rough or in a car after receiving homelessness support has increased by 33%.<sup>72</sup>
- The inability of the system, and/or the long delays, to provide suitable housing for women experiencing family violence is a key driver of unsafe housed homelessness for women – women choosing to remain or return to an unsafe home and relationship in order to avoid homelessness.<sup>73</sup>
- AHURI analysis of specialist homelessness services data has found that the support provided by specialist homelessness services is not working as a pathway to long-term housing and that there currently exists no reliable systems pathway from family violence crisis to stable housing.<sup>74, 75</sup> From the AHURI Report *Inquiry into integrated housing support for vulnerable families*:

“the system is under considerable pressure, much of it deriving from the lack of realistic, appropriate exit points from crisis assistance into stable, long-term housing. The shortfall in exit points is itself driven by the fact that SHSs often cannot facilitate access to long-term housing and must

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<sup>69</sup> Phipps, M, Dalton, L, Maxwell, H and Cleary, M. (2021) A qualitative exploration of women's resilience in the face of homelessness, *Journal of Community Psychology*. 2021;1–16.

<sup>70</sup> 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>

<sup>71</sup> Ibid.

<sup>72</sup> Ibid.

<sup>73</sup> valentine, k., Cripps, K., Flanagan, K., Habibis, D., Martin, C., and Blunden, H. (2020) *Inquiry into integrated housing support for vulnerable families*, AHURI Final Report No. 339, Australian Housing and Urban Research Institute Limited, Melbourne, <https://www.ahuri.edu.au/research/final-reports/339>

<sup>74</sup> Flanagan, K., Blunden, H., valentine, k., and Henriette, J. (2019) *Housing outcomes after domestic and family violence*, AHURI Final Report No. 311, Australian Housing and Urban Research Institute Limited, Melbourne, <https://www.ahuri.edu.au/research/final-reports/311>

<sup>75</sup> valentine, k., Cripps, K., Flanagan, K., Habibis, D., Martin, C., and Blunden, H. (2020) *Inquiry into integrated housing support for vulnerable families*, AHURI Final Report No. 339, Australian Housing and Urban Research Institute Limited, Melbourne, <https://www.ahuri.edu.au/research/final-reports/339>

rely on other parts of the system, including social housing and the private rental market. Women leaving violent relationships are routinely unable to obtain long-term, safe, affordable, accessible and appropriate housing<sup>176</sup>

Expert interviews with providers across the WHA revealed that the lack of housing pathways occurs throughout all stages of the system, from a lack of available refuge and crisis accommodation, through to transitional housing and long-term social housing.

***And people often self-exit from motels too because there is a whole heap going on. They might call the [person using violence] at the motel. The data tells us it's the time most of the harm (for example critical incidents within motels) is done. (Safe Steps expert interview, March 2024)***

The current system in Victoria, where refuge and family violence case managers are increasingly undertaking housing assessments and housing readiness plans, creates distinct challenges for support providers. For example, support providers noted that when a social housing offer became available too early, they felt obliged to promote this offer to clients even if it resulted in exiting onsite support before a person was ready. This was due to the fear of a suitable housing offer not being available when the client was ready for permanent housing and to exit support.

Additionally, support providers indicated they were increasingly being asked to guarantee ongoing outreach support for clients for up to six months after receiving a housing offer. WHA providers who were part of the project indicated that they would guarantee this support as part of the housing offer, but critically highlight that extended case management is not part of their government supported funding. This has been evident through some of the newer “Big Build” projects:

***We've got a partnership where we have access to a floor, but we have to provide outreach into there. But again, we are not funded to do that support. (Support provider interview, January 2024)***

The transitional housing system is also experiencing crisis and is under review. The availability of transitional housing with support should create a bridge to longer-term social housing. But the lack of availability of the latter has resulted in people being ‘parked’ in transitional housing for years.

***The longest we have is 17 years, and because of the other complexities such as mental health and hoarding, there's other elements there. People that are in these transitional properties are just not going to get into those next properties. And it was created to get into the housing, it was a stepping stone. Now there's none of that. So, workers are asked to do housing exit plans for people who are in transitional housing general properties. If you put public housing the property manager will turn back around to you and ask for a reasonable exit. If people are on DSP, there is no other option that is reasonable/affordable - that is it! (Flat Out expert interview, January 2024)***

The crisis-driven allocation of social housing and the rationing of social housing to those assessed as meeting priority criteria acts as a significant barrier to social housing access for many households who are in housing insecurity and/or housing stress.<sup>77,78</sup> Increasingly sophisticated advocacy is needed to support women and non-binary people to secure social housing.<sup>79</sup> Even though social housing provides an essential safety net for people experiencing, or at risk of, homelessness and for people unable to access or sustain housing in the private rental market, social housing is not accessible for those for whom poverty or low income is their only need.<sup>80</sup>

Social housing providers observed that as their funding for tenancy management does not cover case management support often, they lacked the resources to link women to the support needed for them to thrive following homelessness and family violence. Social housing providers indicated that the system delays in women receiving a housing response were also making it harder:

***I think we've been noticing it more because the women that we are housing have possibly been homeless for longer. They are coming to us with more complex needs than they might have had originally and because of that I think their ability to engage as well as they might have. There are so many more women that are homeless for a long period of time that it has to impact their mental and emotional health and their physical health. (Women's Property Initiative expert interview, January***

Support providers noted extra communication and education was needed when working with non-gender specific social housing providers to advocate for a suitable housing outcome for their clients. Forging partnerships between refuges, support organisations and housing providers to establish pathways for clients have been spoken about as beneficial for facilitating smoother transitions. However, agencies within the Northern Local Area Service Network noted that the absence of nomination rights (ensured access to specific properties or vacancies) in their area meant these partnerships could not occur.

***We've had some really challenging interactions with some providers around some judgement around family violence. Some not understanding that its impacts, whilst devastating, are not necessarily life-long. So if they've asked if a victim survivor has had any substance abuse issues in the past .. A lot of the people we have worked with have never touched substances before in a way that is harmful until when they've left the family violence relationship, or a lot of family violence survivors are being injected by the partners as a way of control. They've never had an addiction before being in that relationship. Or, even though we've seen no evidence of them using, they say oh that sounds like they are too complex, and they are not ready. And that's the same with any interaction with mental health systems – we want these women to be accessing these services. But there've been a couple [of housing providers] that means that they have issues. It's not a bad thing to have had complexity. (Refuge Victoria expert interview, March 2024)***

### Key Finding 3e: Systems are 'siloed' from each other, and this inhibits effective outcomes.

Multiple sources describe the systemic challenges and barriers that are created by the lack of service integration and a 'siloed' service system. In this system, issues such as homelessness or family violence are typically treated in isolation by service providers who are equipped to handle single issues.<sup>81, 82, 83, 84, 85, 86, 87, 88</sup> It is widely acknowledged that women presenting to services for support as a result of homelessness and family violence are likely experiencing multiple and layered issues that intersect in often complex and unique ways.<sup>89</sup> Despite this understanding, the lack of integration between the family violence and housing systems acts as a major hurdle for women attempting to leave unsafe relationships and reestablish safety through securing stable, independent housing.<sup>90, 91</sup>

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<sup>81</sup> valentine, k., Cripps, K., Flanagan, K., Habibis, D., Martin, C., and Blunden, H. (2020) Inquiry into integrated housing support for vulnerable families, AHURI Final Report No. 339, Australian Housing and Urban Research Institute Limited, Melbourne, <https://www.ahuri.edu.au/research/final-reports/339>

<sup>82</sup> Parker, S and Fisher, K. (2010) Facilitators and Barriers in Australian Disability Housing Support Policies: Using a Human Rights Framework. Disability Studies Quarterly. Vol. 30, No. 3/4.

<sup>83</sup> Australia's National Research Organisation for Women's Safety. (2020). Working across sectors to meet the needs of clients experiencing domestic and family violence (ANROWS Insights, 05/2020). Sydney: ANROWS.

<sup>84</sup> Equity Economics. (2021). Nowhere to Go: The benefits of providing long-term social housing to women that have experienced domestic and family violence. <https://everybodyshome.com.au/report-social-housing-keeps-women-safe-from-family-violence-expands-economy/>

<sup>85</sup> Brackertz, N., Wilkinson, A. and Davison, D. (2018) Housing, homelessness and mental health: towards systems change, Australian Housing and Urban Research Institute, Melbourne, <https://www.ahuri.edu.au/housing/trajectories/Housing-homelessness-and-mental-health-towards-systems-change>

<sup>86</sup> Flanagan, K., Blunden, H., valentine, k., and Henriette, J. (2019) Housing outcomes after domestic and family violence, AHURI Final Report No. 311, Australian Housing and Urban Research Institute Limited, Melbourne, <https://www.ahuri.edu.au/research/final-reports/311>

<sup>87</sup> Cripps, K. and Habibis, D. (2019) Improving housing and service responses to domestic and family violence for Indigenous individuals and families, AHURI Final Report 320, Australian Housing and Urban Research Institute Limited, Melbourne, <http://www.ahuri.edu.au/research/final-reports/320>

<sup>88</sup> Franz, J., Adkins, B., Petriwskyj, A, Bittner, G, Ward, M, & Rolfe, A. (2014) Person-centred approaches to private housing for people with disability: impediments, difficulties and opportunities. The Disability Policy and Research Working Group, QUT and UQ, Australia.

<sup>89</sup> valentine, k., Cripps, K., Flanagan, K., Habibis, D., Martin, C., and Blunden, H. (2020) Inquiry into integrated housing support for vulnerable families, AHURI Final Report No. 339, Australian Housing and Urban Research Institute Limited, Melbourne, <https://www.ahuri.edu.au/research/final-reports/339>

<sup>90</sup> Ibid.

<sup>91</sup> Equity Economics. (2021). Nowhere to Go: The benefits of providing long-term social housing to women that have experienced domestic and family violence. <https://everybodyshome.com.au/report-social-housing-keeps-women-safe-from-family-violence-expands-economy/>

***It's time for government to step up in terms of how they fund our services. The way their policies are. You have two critical overlapping services in terms of homelessness and family violence that work completely differently. And it is making people's experiences worse. In terms of IAP and Family Violence Services, they are handballing to each other. People keep on getting bounced around. Someone can ring us and disclose family violence and we can do an intake with them and if they ring up and they're in housing crisis we are not actually supposed to do anything directly. It is confusing, we are lucky we do both and we can manage it quite well. (Juno expert interview, December 2023)***

Research conducted by AHURI and ANROWS has found that the needs of those experiencing homelessness as a result of family violence cannot be met by one sector alone.<sup>92, 93, 94, 95</sup> And yet, the disconnect between the provision of housing and the operation of the family violence system undermines system efficacy and the capacity for services to provide a sustainable exit from homelessness for those leaving unsafe homes.<sup>96</sup>

The need for integrated services is further supported by research that has explored the intersection of mental health support and housing: programs that combine housing and mental health services not only yield cost savings for the government, particularly in healthcare, but also result in better outcomes for service users.<sup>97, 98</sup>

Similarly, research commissioned by the Disability Policy & Research Working Group<sup>99</sup> emphasised the importance of an ecological framework capable of

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<sup>92</sup> valentine, k., Cripps, K., Flanagan, K., Habibis, D., Martin, C., and Blunden, H. (2020) Inquiry into integrated housing support for vulnerable families, AHURI Final Report No. 339, Australian Housing and Urban Research Institute Limited, Melbourne, <https://www.ahuri.edu.au/research/final-reports/339>

<sup>93</sup> Flanagan, K., Blunden, H., valentine, k., and Henriette, J. (2019) Housing outcomes after domestic and family violence, AHURI Final Report No. 311, Australian Housing and Urban Research Institute Limited, Melbourne, <https://www.ahuri.edu.au/research/final-reports/311>

<sup>94</sup> Cripps, K., and Habibis, D. (2019) *Improving housing and service responses to domestic and family violence for Indigenous individuals and families*, AHURI Final Report No. 320, Australian Housing and Urban Research Institute Limited, Melbourne, <https://www.ahuri.edu.au/research/final-reports/320>

<sup>95</sup> Australia's National Research Organisation for Women's Safety. (2020). Working across sectors to meet the needs of clients experiencing domestic and family violence (ANROWS Insights, 05/2020). Sydney: ANROWS.

<sup>96</sup> Ibid. See also: Equity Economics. (2021). Nowhere to Go: The benefits of providing long-term social housing to women that have experienced domestic and family violence. <https://everybodyshome.com.au/report-social-housing-keeps-women-safe-from-family-violence-expands-economy/>

<sup>97</sup> Brackertz, N., Wilkinson, A. and Davison, D. (2018) Housing, homelessness and mental health: towards systems change, Australian Housing and Urban Research Institute, Melbourne, <https://www.ahuri.edu.au/housing/trajectories/Housing-homelessness-and-mental-health-towards-systems-change>

<sup>98</sup> Brackertz, N., Borrowman, L., Roggenbuck, C., Pollock, S., and Davis, E. (2020) Trajectories the interplay between housing and mental health pathways, Australian Housing and Urban Research Institute Limited, Melbourne, <https://www.ahuri.edu.au/housing/trajectories>

<sup>99</sup> The Disability Policy & Research Working Group (DPRWG) is a standing committee of the Community and Disability Services Ministers' Advisory Council (CDSMAC). It comprises members from Australian, State and Territory Governments disability agencies, nine jurisdictions in total. This website contains information about the work of the DPRWG, and provides a forum for sharing information and publications about important issues in the disability sector. <https://meteor.aihw.gov.au/Organisation/10>

recognising the ways that housing intersects with all systems in society.<sup>100</sup> Their report identified how the siloed nature of broader policies, legal frameworks and funding environments perpetuate a single-issue, disconnected, piecemeal and siloed approach within service provision, and hinders both individuals and organisations from navigating systems effectively and achieving holistic responses.

## Recommendations

8. Adequate supply of affordable, safe, sustainable and fit for purpose housing is crucial to provide long-term solutions to homelessness.
9. A whole-of-government approach to housing and homelessness is necessary, with investment across the spectrum of intervention, focusing on prevention and early intervention with the aim of diverting people from crisis.
10. Priority funding for gender-informed homelessness and housing programs is essential to redress gender-neutral approaches that have failed women and non-binary people.
11. Integrated responses to family violence and homelessness are urgently needed at a system-wide and service level to enable holistic and effective responses to homelessness for women and non-binary people.

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<sup>100</sup> Franz, J., Adkins, B., Petriwskyj, A, Bittner, G, Ward, M, & Rolfe, A. (2014) Person-centred approaches to private housing for people with disability: impediments, difficulties and opportunities. The Disability Policy and Research Working Group, QUT and UQ, Australia.