

DOMESTIC
VIOLENCE
VICTORIA

Submission to the Inquiry into
Homelessness in Victoria

January 2020

Domestic Violence Victoria

January 2020

Phone: 03 9921 0828

Author and Key Contact:

Kate Mecham

Policy Advisor

Phone: 9921 0825

Email: katemecham@dvvic.org.au

DV Vic CEO:

Alison Macdonald

Phone: 03 9921 0821

Email: alisonmacdonald@dvvic.org.au

Contents

About Domestic Violence Victoria (DV Vic)	3
Family violence and the use of language.....	3
Introduction: The scale and nature of homelessness as a result of family violence.....	4
Safe at Home vs Leaving Home	5
Accommodation for perpetrators	5
Flexible Support Packages and the Private Rental Assistance Program	6
Structural Barriers to a Safe at Home Response.....	7
Family Violence Crisis Accommodation	9
Disability Family Violence Crisis Response Initiative.....	12
Social Housing for victim-survivors of family violence.....	12
Conclusion.....	13
Summary of Recommendations	15

About Domestic Violence Victoria (DV Vic)

Domestic Violence Victoria (DV Vic) is the peak body for specialist family violence response services for victim-survivors in Victoria. As such, DV Vic is recognised as the state-wide voice of Specialist Family Violence Services (SFVS) responding to victim-survivors. DV Vic is a membership-based organisation and is accountable to its members, who also comprise its Board of Governance. DV Vic's core membership comprises state-wide and regional specialist agencies working with victim-survivors of family violence across Victoria. We are an independent, non-government organisation that leads, organises, advocates for, and acts on behalf of its members utilising an intersectional feminist approach. However, the organisation is ultimately accountable to victim-survivors of family violence and works in their best interests.

DV Vic's work is focused on advocating for, supporting, and building the capacity of specialist family violence practice and service delivery for victim-survivors; system reform; and research, policy development and law reform. DV Vic analyses the views and experiences of member organisations, the evidence on family violence, and the lived experience of victim-survivors, and translates this into innovative and contemporary policy, practice, and advocacy.

DV Vic holds a central position in the Victorian family violence system and its strategic governance and is one of the key agencies with responsibility for providing family violence subject matter expertise, technical assistance, capacity building, and policy and practice advice to the SFVS sector, broader sectors, government, and other partners and stakeholders.

Family violence and the use of language

Family violence is predominantly driven by gender-based oppression and inequality.

The majority of perpetrators are men and victim-survivors are women and children. As such, gendered language and terminology is often used in specialist family violence services to acknowledge and communicate about this deeply entrenched social problem.

At the same time, family violence impacts people across a diversity of gender identities, social and cultural contexts, and within various intimate, family and family-like relationships. For this reason, DV Vic uses the terms 'victim-survivor' and 'perpetrator' without assigning binary gendered terms (i.e. women and men) or pronouns (i.e. she/her and he/him) to acknowledge the complex ways family violence manifests across the community. This approach is underpinned by the intersectional feminist framework and human rights principles. It is intended to be 'gender inclusive' by acknowledging that family violence is a gendered issue that also has a far-reaching impact across the community.

Importantly, the term 'victim-survivor' refers to both adults and children who experience family violence. The term 'perpetrator' is only applied to adults who use family violence.

Where this submission uses 'women and children' it is in reference to research and/or statistics pertaining specifically to women's and children's experiences.

Introduction: The scale and nature of homelessness as a result of family violence

Family violence is the most common reason that women and children become homeless.¹

Nearly half (47 per cent) of people accessing Specialist Homelessness Services (SHS) agencies in Victoria in 2017-18 listed family violence as their primary reason for seeking support.² This is compared to only 31 per cent in 2014-15 when Victoria's Royal Commission into Family Violence released its report.³ Nearly half of the people who reported experiencing family violence were single parents and the vast majority (94 per cent) were female.⁴

The increase in family violence-related presentations is likely to be a positive indication. It is a sign that Victoria's family violence reforms are enabling more people to come forward and seek help. However, the increased awareness of family violence among the community means that the increase in demand is unlikely to wane. The Victorian Government needs to plan accordingly.

The Royal Commission found a strong link between being able to access long-term housing and victim-survivors' ability to recover from family violence.⁵ It subsequently made a series of recommendations to increase access to housing for victim-survivors of family violence. In response to these recommendations, the Victorian government initiated the Family Violence Housing Blitz and a suite of other reforms including: an increase in private rental brokerage programs, reforms to the Residential Tenancies Act, and expansion of Flexible Support Packages and the redevelopment of communal style family violence refuges to a new core and cluster model.

Despite this dedicated investment, the scale and systemic nature of the housing affordability crisis means that these initiatives have been able to do little to improve access to long-term housing for victim-survivors of family violence. Almost four years after the Royal Commission released its report, the lack of affordable housing in Victoria remains one aspect of the reform where we have seen very little progress and which is a significant barrier to the effective implementation of many of the other family violence reforms.

Homelessness among victim-survivors occurs as a direct result of experiencing family violence – for example, having to leave the home to be safe from a perpetrator's use of violence. However it is also underpinned by structural drivers such as gender-based economic inequality and a systemic lack of affordable housing that prevent victim-survivors from being able to find an affordable, safe place to live where they can recover from the violence they have experienced. As a result, to solve homelessness among victim-survivors, we need good responses to family violence *and* policies that address systemic drivers of homelessness, such as the lack of affordable housing. The family violence

¹ Spinney A. (2012). Home and Safe? Policy and practice innovations to prevent women and children who have experienced domestic and family violence from becoming homeless. Final report no. 196. Melbourne: Australian Housing and Urban Research Institute.

² AIHW (2019) Specialist homelessness services 2017–18: Victoria.

<https://www.aihw.gov.au/getmedia/46473685-40d3-471b-b28d-ae6aaac81e84/aihw-hou-299-vic.pdf.aspx>

³ Royal Commission into Family Violence (2016) v2 p38

⁴ Ibid

⁵ Royal Commission into Family Violence (2016) v2 p38

reforms have put Victoria on the path toward improving responses to family violence. We now need to find a way to create more affordable housing.

The Royal Commission drew together a comprehensive evidence base regarding the nexus between family violence, housing and homelessness. While drawing on this evidence base, this submission seeks to draw the Committee's attention to several ongoing and emerging issues post Royal Commission and point to recommendations for how to reduce homelessness among victim-survivors of family violence.

Safe at Home vs Leaving Home

The Royal Commission found that best housing outcome for many victim-survivors of family violence is to be supported to stay in their own home.⁶ Homelessness as a result of family violence often leads to a lifetime of disadvantage, discrimination and poverty.⁷ This is particularly true for children, as research demonstrates that children who experience homelessness are more likely to experience homelessness as adults.⁸ Enabling victim-survivors to stay in their home therefore prevents them from needing to spend prolonged periods of time in crisis accommodation and prevents them from becoming entangled in the housing and homelessness system.

DV Vic believes that as a principle, a Safe at Home response should be the preferred housing response to victim-survivors of family violence. Safe at Home refers to a variety of interventions that enable victim-survivors to remain in their home, while the perpetrator of the family violence leaves, often with an Intervention Order (IVO) that includes exclusion provisions. Safe at Home interventions are based on the principle that victim-survivors of family violence should not be further punished and disadvantaged by being forced to leave their home and that sanctions should be directed towards the perpetrator instead.

While a Safe at Home response is not appropriate for everyone, particularly if the risk of family violence is high, Safe at Home responses have been successful at minimising housing insecurity for some victim-survivors. Unfortunately, the success and applicability of Safe at Home responses is somewhat constrained due to policy shortcomings:

- Lack of accommodation options for perpetrators of family violence excluded from the family home,
- Lack of certainty regarding the future of flexible family violence support package and private rental assistance funding.

Accommodation for perpetrators

The Royal Commission identified housing for perpetrators of family violence as a significant gap in the system that undermines victim-survivors' safety. If a perpetrator is removed from the family home

⁶ Royal Commission into Family Violence (2016) v2 p38

⁷ Phillips, J. & Vandenbroek, P. (2014). Domestic, family and sexual violence in Australia: an overview of the issues, retrieved from https://www.apf.gov.au/About_Parliament/Parliamentary_Departments/Parliamentary_Library/pubs/rp/rp1415/ViolenceAust#_Toc401045316

⁸ Flatau et al (2013) Lifetime and intergenerational experiences of homelessness in Australia.

and becomes homeless as a result, it makes them more likely to try to return home or harass victim-survivors to take them back. It is also harder to engage perpetrators in services when they are homeless.⁹ It is much safer for victim-survivors to have perpetrators monitored and engaged in programs than being displaced into dangerous rooming houses or sleeping in their cars. It is also common for perpetrators who are excluded from the home to stay with relatives, most frequently elderly parents. This can place other family members at risk of other forms of family violence, such as elder abuse. Despite this gap being identified, the Royal Commission did not make any recommendation in relation to this issue and little progress has been made in increasing access to accommodation options for this cohort.

DV Vic recognises that the lack of housing for perpetrators is symptomatic of the wider housing affordability crisis and that addressing this crisis is complex. However, given housing perpetrators has significant bearing on victim-survivors' safety, DV Vic advocates for the Victorian Government to take urgent action on making accommodation available to perpetrators of family violence when they are excluded from the family home. These accommodation options should not come at the expense of housing for victim-survivors but needs to complement housing for victim-survivors. Accommodation for perpetrators could include a range of accommodation options including short-term residential programs as well as long-term housing to suit a variety of perpetrator needs and circumstances. It should be accessible at short notice and should be attached to case management and men's behavioural change programs to ensure that men are held accountable for their behaviour and risk to victim-survivors is managed and minimised.

Recommendation 1: The Victorian Government invest in a trial and evaluation of accommodation for perpetrators of family violence with an aim to develop a model that is focused on monitoring changes in risk experienced by victim-survivors and which can respond to a diverse cohort of perpetrators. This model should be scaled up state-wide if evaluated to be successful.

Flexible Support Packages and the Private Rental Assistance Program

DV Vic members unanimously agree that flexible support packages (FSPs) have revolutionised the nature of specialist family violence support. FSPs build on other brokerage programs such as the Private Rental Assistance Program (PRAP), which is focuses on supporting people, including victim-survivors of family violence, to stay in or enter the private rental market, by allowing specialist family violence service to flexibly respond to clients' family violence related needs. This could include anything from mental health support to school supplies or the replacement of essential items lost when fleeing family violence. The inherently flexible nature of the packages mean that support can be tailored in a more responsive and agile way that addresses the unique risks, needs and impacts of family violence on each individual victim-survivor, including children. Among the many uses of FSPs is the ability to support a Safe at Home response through the purchase of security measures via the Personal Safety Initiative (PSI). Being able to upgrade the security features of a victim-survivor's home prevents clients from needing to go into crisis accommodation and/or rely on insecure housing arrangements.

To date, the Victorian Government has invested \$64 million in rolling out FSPs. Unfortunately, funding for FSPs runs out this financial year. The loss of this flexible, individually tailored support would be

⁹ Royal Commission into Family Violence (2016) v2 p73

disastrous for the wellbeing of victim-survivors of family violence and significantly undermine services' ability to provide a Safe at Home response. Similarly, funding for PRAP is only guaranteed until mid-2021. Without ongoing funding for this program, a significantly larger proportion of FSP money will need to be used for housing related needs, undermining family violence services' ability to respond to other needs related to family violence and diluting the original intent of FSPs. DV Vic believes that FSPs and PRAP need to be made a permanent fixture of the specialist family violence system in Victoria and therefore call on the Victorian Government to commit to ongoing funding for these programs.

Recommendation 2: The Victorian Government invest in FSPs as a permanent service offering within the integrated response to family violence and guarantee funding for FSPs for the next three years at least at the same amount as previous investment (\$64 million).

Recommendation 3: The Victorian Government commit to ongoing funding for PRAP as a key housing support program for victim-survivors of family violence.

Structural Barriers to a Safe at Home Response

Safe at Home initiatives have supported more victim-survivors to remain in their home. However, it is important to note that a Safe at Home response is not the right housing solution for everyone. In addition to some victim-survivors not being able to stay at home due to safety concerns, Safe at Home responses are predicated on an assumption that a victim-survivor has a home they can keep living in and that they will be able to afford to live there on a single income. For many victim-survivors, this is not the case.

Gender inequality in employment, pay and working conditions and as well as a trend for women to provide the majority of unpaid caring responsibilities undermine women's financial welfare¹⁰ and can compromise their ability to continue to pay rent or a mortgage repayment in order to stay in their family home. Furthermore, divorce and separation have more severe and longer-term impacts on a women's household income than on men's, which means women are less likely to financially recover from separation even after a long period of time.¹¹ Punitive social welfare policies, including cuts to single parenting payments and mutual obligation programs like Parents Next, compound financial barriers and disadvantage, particularly for single mothers.¹² Economic disadvantage can be further compounded for women from marginalised communities, including Aboriginal women, women with disabilities and those from refugee and immigrant backgrounds.

Victim-survivors of family violence are likely to face additional economic disadvantages as a result of family violence. Research estimates that up to 90 per cent of family violence cases involve economic abuse¹³ which can include a range of types of behaviour including preventing victim-survivors from being able to work or study, controlling or limiting access to household finances, making a victim-

¹⁰ Australian Bureau of Statistics. (2017) *Gender Indicators, Australia, Sep 2017* (Cat. No. 4125.0) Retrieved February 2, 2018 from <http://www.abs.gov.au/ausstats/abs@.nsf/mf/4125.0>

¹¹ David de Vaus et al., (2017) *The Economic Consequences of Divorce in Six OECD Countries*. Australian Journal of Social Issues 52, no. 2.

¹² Canberra: Australian Government Department of Jobs and Small Business. (2018) *ParentsNext Evaluation Report*, https://docs.jobs.gov.au/system/files/doc/other/final_parentsnext_evaluation_report.pdf

¹³ Camilleri, O., Corrie, T., and Moore, S., (2015). *Restoring Financial Safety: Legal Responses to Economic Abuse*, Abbotsford: Good Shepherd Australia New Zealand & Wyndham Legal Service Inc.

survivor live on an allowance, forcing someone to take on debt in their name or forcing them to claim income support payments to which they are not entitled.¹⁴ Economic abuse is also likely to increase post separation as the perpetrator of violence loses other forms of control. Ongoing economic abuse post separation can manifest in prolonged family court proceedings, joint property or debt settlements and non-payment of child support.¹⁵ Finally, victim-survivors of family violence are also more likely to be dependent on income support payments, which are known to keep people in poverty¹⁶ and have been found to be inadequate to cover the cost of private rental or mortgage repayments in the current housing market.

We can see the effects of victim-survivor's financial marginalisation in their ability to access and maintain stable housing. Research, as well as anecdotal evidence from DV Vic member services, indicates that even if victim-survivors can be stabilised in their home initially as part of a Safe at Home response, many victim-survivors find that paying their rent or mortgage on their own is unsustainable.¹⁷ Most programs funded to support victim-survivors to remain in their home, such as those funded through the Family Violence Housing Blitz including the Rapid Housing Program and PRAP are short-term interventions that subsidise rent for up to 12 months. Although these programs are focused on tenants achieving stability and capacity to manage financially once the program ceases, once the subsidies end, victim-survivors can be at risk of losing their tenancies because they are unable to make ends meet and cover rent, which places them at ongoing risk of housing insecurity and homelessness.

Victim-survivors experiencing intersecting forms of oppression and marginalisation such as racism, ableism and homophobia are even less likely to be able to access Safe at Home response because they are more likely to be deeply excluded from the workforce and private housing market. For example, research into housing pathways among Aboriginal victim-survivors found that combinations of kinship networks, financial constraints, limited housing options and difficulty in accessing mainstream services play a critical role in determining housing choices.¹⁸ Aboriginal perpetrators of family violence are also more likely to become homeless upon needing to leave the family home, making it more difficult to provide a Safe at Home response to Aboriginal victim-survivors.¹⁹

Victim-survivors on temporary visas are another cohort that are extremely unlikely to be able to access a Safe at Home response. Many victim-survivors on temporary visas have either come to Australia on a sponsored partner visa or as asylum seekers or refugees. They usually do not have work rights or access to income support or Medicare and may not be proficient in English. Without any

¹⁴ Women and Money. What is financial abuse? https://www.womenandmoney.org.au/what-is-financial-abuse/?gclid=CjwKCAiApOvwBRBUEiwAcZGdG0t8csY00mUO5pfXYiFMHPpWaZ8GujK_9YdOaBQ0yVzLa3e7GMDVehoCxTsQAvD_BwE

¹⁵ Nilmini Fernando (2018) *Financial 'Teachable Moments' for Women Affected by Family Violence*. WIRE. <https://www.wire.org.au/assets/Uploads/WhenIsTheRightTimeToTalkAboutMoney.pdf>.

¹⁶ <https://raisetherate.org.au/>

¹⁷ Australia's National Research Organisation for Women's Safety. (2019). *Domestic and family violence, housing insecurity and homelessness: Research synthesis* <https://www.anrows.org.au/publication/domestic-and-family-violence-housing-insecurity-and-homelessness-research-synthesis/>

¹⁸ Cripps, K. and Habibis, D. (2019) *Improving housing and service responses to domestic and family violence for Indigenous individuals and families*. AHURI. P 14 https://www.ahuri.edu.au/_data/assets/pdf_file/0011/45200/AHURI-Final-Report-320-Improving-housing-and-service-responses-to-domestic-and-family-violence-for-Indigenous-individuals-and-families.pdf

¹⁹ Ibid p 19

income, accessing private rental either through a private rental brokerage or Safe at Home response is impossible for this cohort. This is a significant cohort of clients for the specialist family violence sector which is increasingly at high risk of homelessness.

For victim-survivors who are unable to safely remain in their home, either as a result of safety concerns or structural barriers that make it unfeasible, alternative housing and accommodation options need to be made available.

Family Violence Crisis Accommodation

For victim-survivors unable to stay at home, their housing pathway usually will involve a stay in some form of emergency (e.g. motel) or crisis (e.g. family violence refuge) accommodation.²⁰

Historically, family violence crisis accommodation, commonly referred to as family violence refuge, has been conflated with other crisis accommodation in the housing and homelessness system. This is because of the way specialist family violence services are funded as part of the Specialist Homelessness Services (SHS) system through the National Housing and Homelessness Agreement (NHHA). However, unlike other crisis accommodation provided by homelessness agencies, the purpose of family violence refuge is not to provide a response to family violence-precipitated homelessness alone. It is primarily to provide a safety response to victim-survivors of family violence who are at such high risk of family violence that they cannot safely remain at home. Accessing a family violence refuge reduces homelessness among victim-survivors by addressing the initial family violence risk and safety crisis. This is a critical steppingstone in helping victim-survivors recover from violence and avoid homelessness, but it is not exclusively a housing response to the homelessness that family violence creates.

Traditionally, the model of family violence refuge involved victim-survivors staying for several weeks to a few months in family violence refuge while their initial safety crisis was stabilised, after which point, they transitioned into stable, long-term housing. However, for approximately the past fifteen years, the lack of affordable housing in Victoria – both private rental and social housing – largely prevents this from happening. Home ownership is out of reach for most, if not all, clients of specialist family violence services, due to many of the structural economic factors discussed in the previous section of this submission. The high cost, and lack of vacancies in the private rental market means that a large proportion of victim-survivors are also unable to afford private rental. This leaves social housing (public and community) as the only remaining long-term housing option for many victim-survivors.

The introduction of the Victorian Housing Register and segmented waitlists that give priority to social housing applicants experiencing family violence had a positive effect on access to social housing for victim-survivors. Unfortunately, waitlists for public and community housing are at an all-time high,

²⁰ The term “family violence crisis accommodation” in Victoria can be used to refer to a range of short term accommodation options that includes family violence refuge (funded to work with clients for 6-8 weeks) and other shorter-term, crisis accommodation that is funded by government but run by a specialist family violence community service organisation, such as Safe Steps Safe House (usually funded to work with clients for 1-2 weeks).

with over 81,000 people on the social housing wait list, including approximately 25,000 children.²¹ These long wait lists make it nearly impossible to access any form of social housing, even for victim-survivors on the priority housing list. Our member services tell us that many victim-survivors will wait years before being offered a social housing property.

The lack of exit points into long-term housing from crisis accommodation creates a bottleneck in family violence refuges and is resulting in victim-survivors staying in family violence refuge well past the point where their safety crisis has been stabilised. Originally intended to house victim-survivors for six to eight weeks while their family violence crisis was stabilised, some victim-survivors are staying in family violence refuges for many months. This is particularly true for victim-survivors on temporary visas, who in addition to having no access to income or income support payments, are more likely to have large families in need of a home with more than three bedrooms. Strict immigration policies are blowing out wait times for visa applications, leaving many of these families waiting in limbo indefinitely. It is especially difficult to find long-term housing for families in this situation. Data from the Victorian Government's *Support funding for victim-survivors on temporary visas in refuge* shows that 55 per cent of victim-survivors on temporary visas assisted by family violence refuges in the first three quarters of the 2018-19 financial year were in refuge for more than 26 weeks.²² Our member services report that there are some cases in which victim-survivors on temporary visas remain stuck in family violence refuges for years.

For victim-survivors with a disability, it is a similar story. While traditionally it has been difficult to find a family violence refuge that meets a victim-survivor's disability-related needs, the redevelopment of the communal family violence refuges into a core and cluster model is improving physical access to family violence refuge for victim-survivors with a disability. However, finding an affordable, accessible long-term housing option that meets a victim-survivor's and/or their children's unique needs continues to be extremely challenging in the current housing environment. Without long-term housing options, many victim-survivors with disabilities and their children are forced to stay in violent relationships.

The lack of exit points from refuge creates a backlog in the system which means victim-survivors who are just entering the system are not able to access a bed in a family violence refuge. This backlog has forced services to place more and more victim-survivors in motels as temporary emergency accommodation while they wait for a bed.

The Royal Commission recommendation to redevelop all of Victoria's communal refuges into core and cluster models has been a very welcome investment for family violence services. This redevelopment is marginally increasing bed capacity and increasing access to vulnerable victim-survivors who have historically not been served well by communal family violence refuges, such as victim-survivors with a mental illness or who use alcohol or other drugs, the LGBTIQ community, Aboriginal victim-survivors, and victim-survivors with a disability. However, the number of family violence refuge beds still sits at only approximately 100 beds across the state. The state-wide family violence crisis service, Safe Steps reports that each night they accommodate an average of 60 women and 55 children in either motels

²¹ DHHS, Housing Assistance: Additional Service Delivery Data 2018 – 19, September 2019, Table 15, p8. & Department of Health and Human Services cited in Parliament of Victoria, Legal and Social Issues Committee 2018, Inquiry into the Public Housing Renewal Program.

²² Family Safety Victoria (June 2019) *Q3 Acquittals report summary: Support for funding for victim survivors on temporary visas in refuge' 1 January 2019 – March 2019.*

or other community crisis accommodation like Safe Step's Safe House. The amount of community-run family violence crisis accommodation is so small that by default most of these women and children will be in motels.

Motels are an inappropriate crisis accommodation response for anyone, but particularly for victim-survivors of family violence who are likely to be experiencing trauma and to have accompanying children. Unfortunately, the use of motels to house victim-survivors of family violence has become a necessary part of the family violence service system. Safe Steps, reports that some victim-survivors are forced to stay in motels for weeks while they wait for an available bed in a family violence refuge. These prolonged stays in emergency accommodation and refuge put victim-survivors at serious risk. Too often victim-survivors decide that it is easier to go back to the perpetrator and live with the violence in order to avoid further housing instability and homelessness.

The bottlenecks and lack of capacity within family violence crisis accommodation also mean that services need to triage victim-survivors and prioritise victim-survivors at the highest risk of family violence. There is now a distinct need for non-high-risk family violence crisis accommodation for women who have experienced family violence and are homeless or at risk of homelessness but who are not at high enough risk to require a family violence refuge response. The systemic lack of affordable housing, combined with economic inequality and the traumatic effects of family violence, mean that some victim-survivors may continue to struggle to maintain housing even after the family violence crisis has passed. These victim-survivors often need coordinated support for family violence related mental illness, drug and alcohol abuse or other complex issues resulting from trauma in order to maintain housing. For victim-survivors with complex needs, large, mainstream crisis accommodation facilities can be frightening and retraumatising. Mainstream services are also less likely to have the specialist expertise to help women recover from family violence related trauma which often results in victim-survivors in this situation bouncing around the family violence and housing and homelessness systems for extended periods of time. Family violence and trauma informed, supported accommodation that can coordinate support with other service systems including mental health and alcohol and drugs is a critical gap in the housing system for victim-survivors of family violence which needs to be addressed in order to respond to the spectrum of need among victim-survivors.

There is a clear need for increased capacity within family violence crisis accommodation in order to reduce the use of motels to house victim-survivors. However, an increase in crisis accommodation will not fix the systemic shortage of affordable housing, and on its own, an increase in crisis accommodation is not the solution. It is also difficult to know how much additional family violence crisis accommodation is needed due to unreliable data about unmet demand across the family violence and housing and homelessness sectors, the under reporting of family violence and the lack of long-term housing exit options. To be able to truly know how much additional family violence crisis accommodation we need, in depth demand modelling needs to be done that can accurately record current unmet demand, account for the under reporting of family violence and account for the effects of the chronic lack of affordable housing that is causing a backlog in the system.

Recommendation 4: The Victorian Government conduct comprehensive demand modelling for family violence refuges and other forms of family violence crisis accommodation across the state to determine how many additional family violence refuge beds are truly needed to meet victim-survivors' needs and reduce the reliance on motels.

Disability Family Violence Crisis Response Initiative

Regarding crisis accommodation for victim-survivors with a disability, DV Vic wishes to draw the Committee's attention to the Disability Family Violence Crisis Response Initiative (DFVCRI). This initiative is a fund that is currently managed by Safe Steps that can be used to pay for support workers, equipment and/or accessible transport that a victim/survivor with a disability needs in order to be able to leave a violent relationship and stay in crisis accommodation or other temporary accommodation.

This initiative fills an important gap in services for victim-survivors with a disability because the funds can be distributed quickly and flexibly at short notice to facilitate a victim-survivor's escape. Other schemes such as the NDIS are unsuited to a crisis response because NDIS packages can be slow to negotiate and difficult to change to meet rapidly changing needs. DFVCRI is also an important supplement to other brokerage programs like FSPs, as it provides supports related to disability, thereby leaving FSP money available to provide other supports related to family violence that victim-survivors are likely to need regardless of their disability.

Funding for DFVCRI ends at the end of this budget cycle and no assurance has been given that it will be renewed. This initiative is critical in enabling victim-survivors with a disability to leave a violent relationship. We call on the Victorian Government to commit to ongoing funding for this program.

Recommendation 5: The Victorian Government commit ongoing, long-term funding to the DFVCRI to ensure victim-survivors with a disability have the disability-related support they need to leave a violent relationship.

Social Housing for victim-survivors of family violence

For victim-survivors unable to stay at home or access private rental, social housing is the only long-term housing option. Yet, Victoria has the lowest percentage of social housing of any state in Australia (3.2 per cent) and its recurrent spending on social housing per capita is less than half the national average²³. Unsurprisingly, waitlists are impossibly long with only a handful of properties allocated each year.

It is DV Vic's view that the private housing market is limited in its ability to cater to the housing needs of poor and marginalised people, including victim-survivors of family violence. We cannot encourage people to leave a violent relationship if we cannot offer them a safe place to go. It is the State's responsibility to ensure that these members of our community are safely and adequately housed with dignity and respect.

DV Vic is a member of the State-wide alliance of Housing Peaks. As a member of this alliance we urgently call on the Victorian government to develop a social housing strategy and increase social housing stock by 6,000 properties (including 300 Aboriginal specific social housing properties) per

²³ Australian Productivity Commission (2019) *Report on Government Services 2017-18, Part G Housing and Homelessness*

year over 10 years in order to match the national average of social housing accounting for 4.5 per cent of total housing stock.

A social housing strategy that can deliver this number of social (public and community) housing will have a direct effect on the wellbeing of victim-survivors by 1) directly housing victim-survivors, reducing the time they need to stay in crisis and emergency accommodation and providing opportunities to establish stability and safety post-violence and 2) by increasing accommodation options for perpetrators which will enable more frequent and effective Safe at Home responses for a greater number of victim-survivors.

Without more social housing, it is not possible to end homelessness among victim-survivors of family violence. Access to more safe, stable and affordable housing is the one piece of the family violence system that has not been addressed. If the Victorian Government is serious about ending family violence and ending homelessness, it will commit to building more social housing to ensure that the most vulnerable members in our society, including victim-survivors of family violence, are safe and housed.

Recommendation 6: The Victorian Government develop a Social Housing Strategy that commits them to creating 6,000 new social housing properties every year for the next 10 years to bring the proportion of housing stock in Victoria that is social housing up to the national average of 4.5 per cent.

Conclusion

Family violence is the most common reason women and children become homeless, but it is not the only driving factor. Experiences of family violence would not need to lead to homelessness if victim-survivors could easily access affordable and safe, long-term housing that met their needs.

The Royal Commission into Family Violence identified the complex relationship between family violence and homelessness and the need for more housing. In response the Victorian Government's Family Violence Housing Blitz enabled a trial of innovative housing initiatives and options for victim-survivors. However, without a state-wide scale up and ongoing investment, they are not able to address the problem of family violence and homelessness.

A Safe at Home response is the preferred housing response for victim-survivors because victim-survivors should not be forced to leave their homes on top of being subjected to violence. Increased access to FSPs, PRAP and Safe at Home initiatives like PSI have also increased victim-survivors' ability to live safely at home and avoid needing to enter the housing and homelessness systems. These programs should be extended. However, a Safe at Home response is not appropriate for everyone. Some victim-survivors may be at such high risk they are not able to safely stay at home and the lack of accommodation for perpetrators further limits Safe at Home options for many victim-survivors.

Even if they were able to stay at home from a safety perspective, the structural nature of poverty and economic disadvantage among victim-survivors of family violence means that many victim-survivors cannot afford the private rental market or wholly take over mortgage repayments. Rental assistance packages and other subsidies are too short-term to address the social and economic disadvantages

that family violence and other intersecting forms of oppression create. For many victim-survivors unable to stay at home, social housing is the only other housing option but a chronic underinvestment in social housing means there is simply not enough housing to meet demand.

Unfortunately, the lack of affordable housing is undermining the specialist family violence system's ability to keep victim-survivors safe and is actively contributing to their homelessness. The continued shortage of affordable and social housing means victim-survivors of family violence are frequently forced to choose between staying in a violent relationship or becoming homeless.

Prolonged periods of time stuck in the family violence and housing and homelessness systems, often bouncing between multiple forms of emergency and crisis accommodation, make victim-survivors more likely to return to violent relationships or into dangerous and insecure housing, putting them at serious risk of harm, injury and possibly death.

An urgent, sustained increase in investment is needed from all levels of Government to address the housing affordability crisis. New social housing needs to be built to meet the needs of a diverse group of people to ensure everyone that needs safe and affordable housing can access it.

The increase in demand for family violence related housing and supports also needs to be met by increased investment in family violence crisis accommodation. The Victorian Government has invested a significant amount of money into crisis accommodation following the Royal Commission. However, demand continues to outstrip supply. Even with a fully functioning housing market, crisis accommodation will always play a role in the family violence system. We need improved demand modelling and research to determine the true level of demand and then sustained investment to match.

This Inquiry into Homelessness is an opportunity to build upon the Royal Commission and draw attention to the link between family violence, homelessness and the lack of affordable housing. We cannot keep victim-survivors safe without more safe, affordable and readily accessible housing. We need all levels of government to commit to investing in a long-term social housing strategy that enables everyone to have access to a safe, affordable and stable home.

We look forward to working with the Committee and the Victorian Government towards a Victoria where victim-survivors of family violence do not become homeless and that is ultimately free of family violence and homelessness.

Summary of Recommendations

Recommendation 1: The Victorian Government invest in a trial and evaluation of accommodation for perpetrators of family violence with an aim to develop a model that is focused on monitoring changes in risk experienced by victim-survivors and which can respond to a diverse cohort of perpetrators. This model should be scaled up state-wide if evaluated to be successful.

Recommendation 2: The Victorian Government invest in FSPs as a permanent service offering within the integrated response to family violence and guarantee funding for FSPs for the next three years at least at the same amount as previous investment (\$64 million).

Recommendation 3: The Victorian Government commit to ongoing funding for PRAP as a key housing support program for victim-survivors of family violence.

Recommendation 4: The Victorian Government conduct comprehensive demand modelling for family violence refuges and other forms of family violence crisis accommodation across the state to determine how many additional family violence refuge beds are truly needed to meet victim-survivors' needs and reduce the reliance on motels.

Recommendation 5: The Victorian Government commit ongoing, long-term funding to the DFVCRI to ensure victim-survivors with a disability have the disability-related support they need to leave a violent relationship.

Recommendation 6: The Victorian Government develop a Social Housing Strategy that commits them to creating 6,000 new social housing properties every year for the next 10 years to bring the proportion of housing stock in Victoria that is social housing up to the national average of 4.5 per cent.