



Royal Commission
into Family Violence

WITNESS STATEMENT OF HEATHER MARGARET HOLST

I, Heather Margaret Holst, housing and homelessness specialist, of 68 Oxford St, Collingwood, in the State of Victoria, say as follows:

1. I am authorised by Launch Housing to make this statement on its behalf.
2. I make this statement on the basis of my own knowledge, save where otherwise stated. Where I make statement based on information provided by others, I believe such information to be true.

Current role

3. I am the Deputy Chief Executive Officer and Director of Services and Housing of Launch Housing. Launch Housing is a housing and homelessness specialist service which seeks to end homelessness in Melbourne by both getting people housed and keeping people housed. Our emphasis is on supporting access to suitable, affordable and long term housing. We were formed by a merger of HomeGround and Hanover on 1 July 2015.

Background and qualifications

4. I have a Bachelor of Arts degree from the University of Queensland, a Postgraduate Diploma of Education from La Trobe University and hold a Doctorate of Philosophy from the University of Melbourne.
5. Between October 2008 and July 2009, I was the Acting Manager in Homelessness Policy and Partnership Development at the Department of Human Services, Victoria, Australia.
6. Between November 2009 and March 2012, I worked as the General Manager of Client Services at the HomeGround office in Collingwood.
7. Between March 2012 and December 2012, I became the Acting CEO of HomeGround.
8. In January 2013, I became the CEO of HomeGround.

9. My housing experience spans homelessness service delivery, tenancy advice and advocacy, homelessness policy, program development, research, rural homelessness service coordination in both the non-profit sector and government.

Victoria's current housing system

10. Victoria's housing system currently has four main types of housing response for people facing homelessness as a result of family violence: crisis housing; transitional housing; social housing and assistance to get and keep private rental housing.
11. The **first** type of response, and generally the one that forms the initial step, is crisis accommodation or a women's refuge. This type of housing usually requires some level of communal living rather than fully self-contained independent units. As crisis services are often at capacity, Housing Establishing Fund (**HEF**) or similar brokerage funding is also used by homelessness and family violence agencies fund temporary accommodation at motels.
12. The **second** type of response is transitional housing, which involves the provision of independent, furnished accommodation for which the tenant has a lease under the Residential Tenancies Act. These houses are owned by the Director of Housing and managed by 19 community housing agencies on an area basis. They are available at affordable rents (or nil rent if the household is without any income) until permanent accommodation is available. Lengths of stay vary between several weeks and several years, with the current average at around 12 months. There are approximately 3,700 units of transitional housing in Victoria, which does not meet the demand. It is targeted to those with the highest needs who are most likely to require ongoing support and subsidised housing.
13. The **third** type is social housing (public and community housing), which is long term and affordable, and is owned and managed by the Director of Housing or by community housing agencies. Where appropriate, we attempt to have as many people move directly into long term social housing as possible.
 - 13.1. Social housing in Victoria is currently at capacity and there is a lack of infrastructure to support all people in need of long term housing. Social housing stock represents 3.5% of residential properties in Victoria, as compared to other states, where the number is closer to 5%. Due to the recent population growth in Victoria, an infrastructure boost is required for the number of people who require long term housing.

- 13.2. The waiting lists for public housing in Victoria are prohibitively long, and the longer people wait, the more vulnerable they are to homelessness.
14. The **fourth** type of housing response is assistance to get and keep private rental housing. A growing number of homelessness and family violence agencies have brokerage funds and worker expertise to connect people to private rental and to help them retain their private rental through a period of personal and financial crisis. This brokerage can pay for bonds, rent in advance or arrears and sometimes for an ongoing rent subsidy. When combined with financial assistance with storage and removals as well as the worker expertise in negotiating with owners and agents, it is usually successful in housing people who already have some experience as a private tenant.

Launch Housing

15. Launch Housing is an independent, secular and non-profit organisation with approximately 340 staff across fourteen offices. We are a Registered Housing Provider and accredited under the Quality Improvement Council (**QICSA**), Homeless Assistance Service and Psychiatric Disability Rehabilitation and Support standards.
16. Launch Housing manages nearly 600 transitional housing properties, over 100 units of crisis housing, around 100 units of long term social housing and HomeGround Real Estate, the first non-profit real estate agency in Australia. We have a strong focus on advocacy and innovation.
17. We operate Entry Points to the homelessness service system in Collingwood, St Kilda and Cheltenham with outreach points at the Victorian Aboriginal Health Service in Preston, Melbourne Magistrates Court, Sunshine Magistrates Court, Morwell Magistrates Court, the Neighbourhood Justice Centre in Collingwood and Windsor Centrelink.
18. This past year, HomeGround has assisted approximately 11,500 households experiencing, or at risk of, homelessness and Hanover a further 6,500. In addition, we conduct research projects and make strategic advocacy on critical housing and homelessness issues.

Launch housing support

19. If a person presents to Launch Housing, we have a range of different accommodation options and support services depending upon their need; outlined below:
 - 19.1. Preventing homelessness by helping people sustain their current public, private or community housing. This involves a brokerage service to assist in liaising with private accommodation options, such as private rental properties, as well as providing rent and mortgage support for people at risk of becoming homeless;
 - 19.2. Ending homelessness by assessing the needs of the client and creating a housing plan. The housing plan is designed to source the best available accommodation for the client and provide support services should they be needed. The housing options available include crisis accommodation and refuges, transitional housing, public housing, and private rental;
 - 19.3. Creating housing access by working on projects that increase the amount of affordable housing options. We run a Private Rental Access Program and the Private Rental Management Program, which help inform potential tenants of the best way to present to a real estate agent. Often, there are difficulties experienced by people who have experienced homelessness in re-entering the private property market as they are not considered a 'good prospect' to the real estate agent. This is especially common following family violence situations when the potential tenant may be an unemployed single mother with children. The Private Rental Access Program assists in outlining the questions to ask, and provides information on how to fill out the application forms to help persuade the real estate agent that they are a good prospective tenant.
 - 19.4. We also provide Supportive Housing services for vulnerable people, which couples accommodation options with access to support services.
 - 19.5. Launch Housing operates its own Real Estate agency, which generates further affordable rental properties for clients.
20. Although the above services address family violence situations alongside all the other situations that people are homeless, Launch Housing has a designated system to assist people who have suffered from family violence to ensure that perpetrators of family violence are not accommodated near the associated victim survivor.

21. We are also part of the Families@Home program in Whittlesea led by Kildonan Uniting Care. This program aims to keep women and children safe and secure in their homes or to rapidly rehouse them through coordinated access to a range of early intervention services.
22. Launch Housing has formal referral partnerships with Inner South Domestic Violence Service, Kildonan, Berry Street and Safe Steps.
23. Launch Housing has philanthropic funding from realestate.com.au (REA Group) to operate a rapid rehousing program for women and their children leaving family violence. This in its first year of operation and enables extra brokerage for rent and other private rental expenses. Realestate.com.au also donate a large amount of new furniture to assist women to set up a new home.

Homelessness and Family Violence

24. Whilst Launch Housing provides generalist homelessness and housing services, the homelessness sector sees many people utilising its services as a result of family violence, both as victims and as perpetrators. In our experience, it is often highly vulnerable people who do not access police or family violence services when they experience homelessness as an effect of family violence. So agencies like Launch Housing essentially become first response agencies. The homelessness sector is a crucial conduit between victims of family violence and legal and specialist support services which can assist during a crisis.
25. We support a number of women who have experienced family violence, including a large number of children, mostly under the age of 12, who have been displaced due to incidents of family violence. The case study outlined in our Submission to the Royal Commission indicates that 59% of our clients have experienced some form of family violence. **Attached** to this statement and marked '[HH-1]' is a copy of 'Hanover Welfare Services and HomeGround Services Submission to the Royal Commission into Family Violence' dated May 2015.
26. Often the people we work with do not identify when they are experiencing 'family violence', but rather they simply refer to themselves as currently homeless. Family violence is, however, the reason for their homelessness, whether by way of a victim escaping a family violence situation, or a perpetrator having been forced to leave the family home by police. In addition, we run one of the area-based brokerage services

for rehousing male perpetrators of violence that are located at a number of homelessness entry point services in Victoria.

27. We give a high priority to housing women who have experienced family violence, especially if they are in a high risk situation and when there are children involved. An integral part of our service is to ensure that women receive both the most appropriate available housing and to link them to the specialist family violence support that they require.
28. We also provide brokerage support services to women who have been able to stay in their family home, but are not in a financial position to sustain the rent or bills. Unfortunately we cannot assist with mortgage payments at this stage.
29. In comparison to the victims of family violence, we give a lower priority to housing perpetrators of family violence as the perpetrators are more likely to be men who have an income and are able to afford private housing. However, our intention is to assist all people who require housing, and so we do what we can in each case.

Integration between Homelessness Services and Family Violence Services

30. Under the current model, homelessness services and family violence services in Victoria are too separate. Originally the two service types were much closer together in their operations. This was largely due to the genesis of the funding, given the number of family violence incidents that result in homelessness or housing issues, the two services were bundled together and traditionally had a common stream of the funding, Commonwealth-State grants for the Supported Accommodation Assistance Program (**SAAP**). There are still considerable overlaps as much family violence assistance is still funded and contract-managed through the homelessness area of the Victorian Department of Health and Human Services, and there is a fair bit of operational level awareness of each other's services.
31. Nevertheless, it is critical that the two services communicate and refer to one another better, but it is important to note that there are family violence issues which do not involve homelessness, and equally, there are housing issues which do not involve family violence.
32. The two services should remain separate, as they specialise in separate areas, but they need a rapid and accurate referral system to ensure that all the needs of any person presenting to a homelessness or family violence service are met.

Integration of further support services

33. A key model we have implemented is to ensure there is an integration of services is placing a Launch Housing worker who is part of our larger Entry Point team at the Neighbourhood Justice Centre in Collingwood. The worker can make initial assessments and can refer back to the relevant Launch Housing program.
34. Launch would like to place an outreach worker at all Victorian crisis centres so the outreach worker can then utilise the resources of the main Launch offices but assist on site at the crisis centre. Ideally we would have a worker at as many entry points as possible and that worker would build relationships with family violence workers, police and sexual assault services in that area.
35. Single access points for accessing multiple specialised services and a reliable referral service is essential in assisting people with multiple needs, including people who have experienced family violence.

Rural homelessness

36. Rural areas require a somewhat different approach to urban areas as they present different housing and homelessness challenges. Particular issues for rural and regional areas include the availability of private rental or other appropriate transitional housing. Whilst rental properties are less expensive in rural areas, they are still often too expensive for a low income family and there are still a myriad of complexities around the tight knit communities witnessing the trauma of the ramifications of a family violence incident. More attention should be paid to women in rural areas experiencing homelessness having affordable and long term housing options, as well as discreet options for attending these premises.

Refuges

37. Currently, refuges in Victoria do not allow occupants to continue to work whilst living onsite. They also prevent children who are staying with their mothers at the refuge from going to school. This can be hugely disruptive for the children's education and wellbeing and adds to the trauma arising from family violence incidents. It also means that women do not have a steady stream of income, which could assist them in entering the rental property market. Additionally, real estate agents are more likely to house employed people.

38. The strict security rules imposed at refuges are often another reason women avoid refuges. I understand that there are often a large amount of empty beds at refuges due to the above and to the rules, which, if breached once, can result in women being excluded from the refuge system entirely.
39. Often, women are told that they are not allowed to contact anyone whilst staying at a refuge, which prevents them from contacting support networks which may be of comfort and assistance during a time of crisis.
40. Each of these factors creates a clear dis-incentive for women to go to a refuge, which prevents them from using the housing, counselling and further referral services that refuges provide.
41. Many of the current Victorian refuges were founded approximately 50 years ago. The justice system in Victoria has changed substantially since that time, with both the provision of family intervention orders and the capacity to place perpetrators on remand. This means there is significantly less need for high security refuge services in Victoria. There is still a need for a small number of high security refuges, but proportionally, there should be fewer high security refuge facilities and a range of more diverse accommodation options available to women who have experienced family violence.

Child protection

42. The public housing system was originally introduced as a response to the child rescue and slum clearance campaigns during the early part of the century. Known cases of family violence often led to the children being taken permanently from the family and placed in an orphanage. This was the earliest form of the child protection system.
43. There was subsequent recognition of the need to provide decent housing to mothers as well as enabling them to stay with their children. But there was no appropriate housing which had been designed or built for this purpose. From this insight, public housing developed.
44. A number of the mothers that present to Launch Housing still think that if they approach the child protection system, it will mean their children will be removed from their care and placed in the public foster care system.

45. If a child is removed from their mother's care through the child protection system, there are orders which allow women to have custody of their children if they have reliable and secure housing.
46. If there was an appropriate amount of affordable accommodation where a woman could stay with her children, in some circumstances, child protection would not need to remove children from their mother or could much more quickly return them.
47. Women and children need a range of different accommodation options. The model needs to support women and children in situations where merely getting away from their partner is not sufficient as they need to be connected to additional support.

A solution - housing models to assist women with children who have experienced family violence.

48. Launch Housing, in partnership with Kildonan Uniting Care, is working on a model of families' supportive housing, a type of accommodation for women who have experienced family violence and are at a risk of homelessness which allows them to stay with their children. The ability for women to feel they have the capacity to mother effectively and protect and shelter their children is at the very foundation of helping women heal after they have experienced trauma
49. The proposed model is based on that adopted at Broadway Housing in New York which provides long term housing for vulnerable women and their children combined with support services tailored to the needs of the occupants. The model is a variation of the Elizabeth Street Common Ground that Launch Housing has operated since 2010 for high needs single people.
50. Under the proposed model, the accommodation would take the form of a purpose built apartment building for women who have experienced family violence. The woman and her family could live in the apartments on a long term basis and have access to counselling and support services, such as sexual assault support, training in financial literacy, support to train and enter employment and enriched educational services for the children.
51. It is designed for a small number of very high needs families who have compounding issues of poverty, homelessness and disrupted parenting. Without such support, the women will be unlikely to be able to look after their own children, who will then require state care with all the short and long term consequences of that predicament. It is

important to note that the great majority of survivors of family violence need less intensive forms of housing assistance.

Submission recommendations

52. HomeGround and Hanover (now Launch Housing) have made Submissions to the Royal Commission into Family Violence, as summarised below:

52.1. The homelessness sector requires an appropriate referral system to all specialist support and legal services.

52.2. There is currently a lack of long term housing options in the state. Long term housing is a fundamental platform for responding to family violence, either by safely and affordably retaining existing accommodation or by offering a rapid rehousing response.

52.3. There needs to be an integrated system whereby child protection, Victoria Police, schools, family violence services, sexual assault services, medical and homelessness agencies can work together. There is currently an inconsistent and fragmented service response within the sector which needs to be addressed.

52.4. There should be guidelines to ensure that there are appropriate referrals made to medical and psychological services. There are also a lack of counselling services provided to assist victim survivors of family violence on an ongoing basis. There are a lack of resources more generally to follow up clients who have experienced family violence, and it is critical that continued counselling and support are provided on an ongoing basis.

52.5. Housing and homelessness staff state wide require training and education on recognising signs of family violence and having knowledge of appropriate referral channels. Many people present to Launch Housing simply saying they are homeless, and not disclosing that they are victims of family violence. At times this may be because they are not asked, or the worker does not recognise the signs of family violence. As homelessness services are regularly the first point of contact for people who have suffered family violence, and may not have accessed other essential services, homelessness and housing staff require clear guidelines and training to identify whether referral to further

support services is required. The Common Risk Assessment Framework (**CRAF**) goes some way to answer this need but more is required.

- 52.6. There should be education for both children and adults about family violence and healthy relationships. Teachers also need to be trained in recognising signs of family violence in schools and require knowledge of appropriate referral methods.
- 52.7. There is a lack of funding for the provision of accommodation for men who leave their households due to perpetrating family violence. If there was appropriate housing for men who have perpetrated family violence incidents, this would afford a greater chance for the woman to stay in the family home. There needs to be further housing options available to men who are perpetrators of family violence on a short to mid-term basis that have access to behavioural change programs.
- 52.8. Waiting times for refuges are prohibitively long, which means that people who require support often end up in the 'crisis' system which can be inappropriate for their needs. Refuges provide counselling and further housing support, and if there is no capacity at the refuges to house women requiring these services, they can often be placed in motels. This overflow measure means it becomes much more difficult to access appropriate support services.
- 52.9. There are gaps in the current crisis support system and after hours response is currently insufficient. Crisis accommodation that is appropriate for mothers and children must be made more available, as well as separate crisis accommodation that is appropriate for perpetrators of family violence.
- 52.10. There needs to be a system in place to provide financial grants and counselling to women escaping family violence, and psychological assessments for children suffering from family violence and are settled in safe, secure and permanent long term housing.

Further Recommendations

53. In addition to the recommendations made in the submissions, I make the following further comments about ways in which I believe the system could be improved.

54. While there is currently demand pressure on the temporary accommodation facilities, they are essentially a stop gap measure during the wait for long term accommodation. If there was sufficient affordable long term housing available, the need for temporary accommodation would be greatly reduced. However, there is a significant lack of long term social housing, mortgage relief products and affordable private rental available in the state. If more long term housing was made available, this would assist the swift re-settlement into permanent housing for people affected by family violence. Settlement as quickly as possible in long term housing is crucial for women with children as it affects whether the mother considers that she can effectively shelter and protect her children.
55. The refuge system requires further funding to provide more facilities to house women in crisis. There should also be a review of the current high security rules common amongst the refuge facilities, including the rules that women are restricted from work, and children are restricted from attending school.
56. There are insufficient funds dedicated to assisting women who suffer from financial abuse or who simply have no independent income because of childcare responsibilities or lack of opportunity, including mortgage rescue services or interest free loans to assist women to be able to support themselves.
57. Due to uncertainties in funding, there are often times when knowledgeable housing workers leave their jobs, or are made redundant. The expertise that is lost each time a qualified housing worker leaves is extremely detrimental to the sector. The funding stream for housing workers needs to be addressed.
58. Housing and homelessness response services should be appropriate for the needs of each particular catchment or community area. Using respective data in an open process with other services, including the Department of Health and Human Services, we should create a realistic and appropriate plan for the best response to housing and homelessness issues within the state. The focus should be on the prevention of homelessness and the provision of a variety of support services and accommodation options available for people at risk of homelessness. The aim should be to place all people with housing and homelessness issues in long term, secure and affordable housing.

59. The early intervention care team model of family violence, family support, financial counselling and housing workers that has been piloted by Families@Home should be replicated in other areas.
60. Affordable housing must be made available in the right numbers according to the need by area. Models such as the families supportive housing project and specialist youth foyers for young mothers need to form part of this housing response.
61. Programs that sustain women and children in their own housing, such as SHASP for social housing, must be expanded.
62. Irrespective of where a woman first seeks assistance, the links between homelessness entry points and family violence specialist services must be strong and timely. Women going into the family violence services very often need housing assistance and correspondingly, women approaching via the homelessness services need ready access to specialist family violence services.
63. It is now time to separate the homelessness and family violence funding so that focussed planning can be done in each area, while still paying attention to the services available in each of these funding streams and ensuring that they are well connected.



Heather Margaret Holst

Dated: 13 July 2015