



**Royal Commission**  
into Family Violence

**WITNESS STATEMENT OF JENNY SMITH AND SARAH TOOHEY**

I, Jenny Smith, Chief Executive Officer (**CEO**), and I, Sarah Toohey, Manager of Policy and Communications, of the Council to Homeless Persons, 2 Stanley Street, Collingwood, in the State of Victoria, say as follows:

1. We are authorised by the Council to Homeless Persons (**CHP**) to make this statement on its behalf.
2. We make this statement on the basis of our own knowledge, save where otherwise stated. Where we make statements based on information provided by others, we believe such information to be true.

**Current roles**

3. Jenny is the CEO of CHP and is responsible to CHP's Board for sustainably managing CHP's operational performance, and for representing the views of its members in public debate and discussions.
4. Sarah is the Manager of Policy and Communications and is responsible for leading CHP's policy and strategic communications efforts, including policy research and development and media and communications strategy.

**Background and qualifications**

5. Jenny's working life has been in the public sector, in direct service, policy and management roles. Jenny has worked across health, mental health and community health sectors.
6. Jenny has Masters Degrees in Social Work and in Public Policy and Management and she is also a graduate of the Australian Institute of Company Directors. Jenny is a Board Director of St Mary's House of Welcome and of Homelessness Australia. She joined CHP in 2011.

7. Sarah has worked in social policy and advocacy roles for the last eight years. This has included policy development and advocacy in the areas of energy and water, housing and urban planning issues at the Victorian Council of Social Service, and for the national campaign, Australians for Affordable Housing. Sarah joined CHP in October 2012.

### **Council to Homeless Persons**

8. CHP was established in 1972, and is the peak Victorian body representing organisations and individuals with an interest in and commitment to ending homelessness.
9. CHP works to end homelessness through leadership in policy, advocacy, capacity building and consumer participation. CHP currently:
  - 9.1. seeks to influence Federal and State government policy and approaches to ending homelessness;
  - 9.2. provides the Homelessness Advocacy Service, which is Victoria's homelessness services sector's pioneering complaints service;
  - 9.3. leads consumer participation within Victoria's homelessness service sector through the Peer Education and Support Program;
  - 9.4. produces Parity, Australia's leading national publication on homelessness; and
  - 9.5. enhances the capacity of Victoria's homelessness and broader service sectors through the provision of training and forums and dissemination of current policy, practice and research information.
10. CHP's members are predominantly homelessness service providers. A number of our members would also be members of Domestic Violence Victoria (**DV Vic**), in recognition of the overlap between homelessness and family violence.
11. CHP receives a small amount of its funding through membership fees, however we are predominantly State government funded.
12. We develop CHP's policy positions in consultation with the homelessness sector, and garner the sector's support, to the extent that that is possible in a sector with 150 service providers.

### **Intersection of the homelessness and family violence systems**

13. Of the 150 homelessness service providers in Victoria, we estimate that around 20 are solely family violence focused, including family violence refuges, and then another 20 to 30 are homelessness service providers with specific family violence services attached.
14. The majority of family violence support services are funded through the housing and homelessness services portfolios of the Department of Health and Human Services (DHHS). This has an impact on service delivery, with many family violence support services operating with a similar case management framework to specialist homelessness services.
15. While there are clear overlaps between family violence and homelessness services, which we expand upon in our statement below, the two sectors have distinct specialist foci: safety and shelter. In case management both services will seek to secure safety and shelter, however the fundamental rationale for each system is different and informs an appropriately distinct approach.

### **The role of family violence in homelessness**

16. Family violence is the single biggest cause of homelessness in Victoria, however not all family violence results in homelessness.
17. Many women come into contact with the homelessness service system as a result of family violence. This contact can be early in the process of leaving their home, or many years down the track as a result of the trauma caused by the experience, as an alternative to seeking a specialist family violence service, or because they do not identify mental, emotional, psychological, and/or financial abuse as family violence.
18. It is difficult to accurately quantify the number of people presenting at homelessness services for family violence reasons, due, in part, to the time that can elapse before assistance is requested. Services will see people five or ten years down the track, where instability caused by family violence has not resolved or has spiralled. Further, men that present at homelessness services may not disclose the involvement of family violence in their circumstances. Men might say "I need a bed, I don't have a place to stay tonight", rather than "I was forced to leave by Police". Anecdotally, we understand that men who are excluded from the home are less

likely to become homeless, because they rely on friends and family, or they have the finances to live elsewhere.

19. Notwithstanding the above, the data suggests that approximately one third of people presenting at homelessness services are doing so as a result of family violence.
20. However, we suggest that this may not reflect the full extent of the impact of family violence amongst those experiencing homelessness.
21. Recent research into youth homelessness found that 56% of young people experiencing homelessness had to leave the home at least once due to violence, and 90% had witnessed violence in the home.<sup>1</sup> Family violence is a strong trigger for youth to leave the home.
22. Australia's first longitudinal study of people at risk of experiencing homelessness found that those who have experienced homelessness long term (four or more years), 64% had experienced physical violence in the home, and 72% had experienced some form of abuse as a child.<sup>2</sup>

### **The Specialist Homelessness Services System**

23. The homelessness service system was designed to secure housing for people at risk of or experiencing homelessness, through meeting immediate material needs and working with people within a case management model to address any issues that have contributed to their homelessness. The model trajectory through the system includes:
  - 23.1. an immediate crisis response, in either crisis accommodation or more often emergency accommodation purchased in a motel, rooming house or caravan park;
  - 23.2. case management, with or without access to transitional housing, intended to stabilise households, complete with housing applications; and finally, long term housing.

<sup>1</sup> Flatau, P, Thielking M, Mackenzie D, Steen A, 2015, *The Costs of Youth Homelessness in Australia: Snapshot report 1*, Centre for Social Impact, Sydney.

<sup>2</sup> Scutella et. al, 2014, *Journeys home research report No.4 August 2014*, Melbourne Institute, Melbourne.

24. The homelessness service system has approximately 17 designated Initial Assessment and Planning (**IAP**) services that provide access to homelessness assistance across Victoria. Every region has its own IAP, and those regions often have outposts; for instance, Rural Housing Network has offices in Wodonga, Shepparton and Wangaratta.
25. Access points are responsible for maintaining the 'prioritisation list' and referring people to a particular service provider when vacancies arise. The support service might provide crisis accommodation, case management, transitional housing or a combination of those services.

### ***Crisis accommodation***

26. When an individual presents at an IAP and they require immediate accommodation, that is, they require a bed that night, they may be referred by the IAP to crisis accommodation. If the IAP worker identifies the need for accommodation in a family violence refuge, they will refer to Safe Steps. However it is most likely that a service will purchase emergency accommodation, in a motel, caravan park or rooming house as the refuge and crisis accommodation system cannot meet demand. There are no dedicated crisis accommodation facilities at all in many rural and regional areas. In smaller rural or regional communities, where people tend to know each other, it may be more difficult for women to remain safe, and many women are forced to leave for crisis or refuge accommodation in the city. Women will often catch the train to access crisis accommodation, however as the train timetable is publicly known, issues can arise around safe transport.
27. There needs to be an assessment of what crisis accommodation is required in rural and regional Victoria.
28. For women with disabilities, finding crisis accommodation is even more challenging. Many family violence refuges were purchased by community organisations in the 1970s, and as such, few are built for purpose and only three are fully accessible for women with disabilities. Funding constraints mean that it is also more challenging for refuges to meet any additional needs that women with a disability may have, and a congregate model of accommodation might not be suitable for all.
29. For women who cannot access immediate accommodation in the form of crisis accommodation or refuge, IAPs have access to funds to purchase emergency

- accommodation from the Housing Establishment Fund (HEF) to pay for accommodation in a motel, rooming house or caravan park.
30. Every organisation allocates their HEF somewhat differently. Some organisations allocate an amount daily, on a first come first served basis, others allocate a monthly amount. HEF itself is allocated unevenly across the State: some organisations have more to distribute than others. The rationale for the current distribution of HEF across the State is not clear. The consequence is that you are more likely to be able to access HEF at 9.00am at one access point, than you are if you walk through the door in the afternoon, at another.
  31. The type of crisis response and ongoing assistance available can vary based on household type. As demand for assistance exceeds available services, households are prioritised. A woman presenting as homeless due to family violence is likely to get a crisis response in some form through the IAP, and ongoing assistance, particularly if she has a child. A single man may get an immediate accommodation response, but is less likely to get ongoing support or transitional housing. For a man who has been excluded from the home for family violence reasons, the likelihood of getting access to crisis accommodation is not high. Following an analysis of homelessness data, we found that of those with an identified need for a family violence service, it is young women aged 18 – 24 who are most likely to not have that need met.<sup>3</sup> Some of these young women will be referred to the youth refuge system, rather than family violence services.
  32. The quality of the immediate response will vary based on the resources available. IAP services will do their best to keep women and children out of rooming houses, and so they are more likely to be placed in a hotel or motel, but that is not always possible. If you're a single woman, it is possible that you will be referred to a rooming house. While services do prioritise family violence, given resource constraints, it may not always result in an appropriate outcome.
  33. Where a woman identifies as a victim of family violence at an IAP, she will be assisted towards a specialist family violence response. Safe Steps has its own allocation of HEF, as a specific, family violence response. However some women elect not to go through the family violence system, and to stay in the general homelessness system. Often a woman will present to the homelessness service

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<sup>3</sup> Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, 2015, *SHS Support Services National Datacube*, Canberra.

system with family violence as just one of many co-occurring and complex issues. Other reasons that woman may access homelessness rather than family violence services are the safety restrictions in some family violence refuges that require women to cease employment while in a refuge; curfews; or if the woman has male adolescents in her care.

### ***Transitional housing & case management***

34. In addition to providing a crisis response, IAPs also prioritise individuals for support services on a matrix that considers risk, on one axis, and vulnerability, on the other. The prioritisation list is used to allocate the limited case management resources and transitional housing properties available within a particular region. If you are a mother with children, your risk and vulnerability will be rated as high, whereas if you are a male and alone, your risk and vulnerability will usually be assessed as lower, and so you are less likely to receive that assistance. The prioritisation list also takes into account the amount of time that a person has spent on the list.
35. There are approximately 3,700 transitional housing properties available across Victoria. The properties are all held by organisations that are transitional housing managers, and service providers can refer people for transitional housing vacancies. Prior to 2008, transitional housing properties were allocated through support services to particular target groups, including people escaping family violence. After reforms in 2008 designed to allocate vacancies to the most in need, properties are for the most part no longer allocated to particular groups.
36. In the past, transitional housing provided a pathway out of refuge and crisis accommodation, however the average tenancy is now 12 months rather than the intended three month stay, as fewer households exit into social housing or the inflated private rental market.
37. It is difficult to say if the crisis response and the mid-term, transitional response is adequate in the absence of an adequate long-term response. The shortage of long-term properties creates a bottleneck in different parts of the system: people are stuck in transitional who should be in long-term; people are in crisis because they can't get into transitional; and people are in hotels because they can't get into crisis. It is not flowing as it is supposed to be. If the system was flowing, we might find that there is enough crisis and transitional accommodation, however we suspect there is not, because the number of those properties has not kept pace with

population growth. Again, in a lot of regional areas there is no crisis accommodation at all.

### ***Long-term housing***

38. In Victoria, approximately 3.8% of all housing is public housing, compared to a national average of 5%. According to Judy Yates, for Victoria to remain static at 5% public housing, we would need to be building about 2,000 dwellings a year, just to keep up with population growth. Victoria is currently building about 500 properties a year, and that does not take into account the properties that are sold to finance the ones we are building. That is not to suggest that if 5% of properties in Victoria were public that would solve the problem, either. It would be terrific, but it would still leave us with a shortage.
39. The unaffordability of property in Victoria has a cascading effect. People who are on a good income are stuck in the private rental market because they can't afford to buy. They occupy lower cost dwellings in the rental market and that pushes out people who could otherwise be there, for instance, single mothers with one child, who are on the verge of being able to afford something privately, but cannot successfully compete for the property.
40. We believe that a range of long-term housing needs to be made available in Victoria. Firstly, we are in favour of social housing, including community managed housing, operated by not-for-profit providers. We also support subsidised housing, through a model like the National Rental Affordability Scheme, and more affordable housing generally would assist as well. We need to see a growth in all of those types of response, as well as public housing.

### **Intersection of homelessness and poverty**

41. It needs to be recognised that a lot of women approaching homelessness services for family violence reasons are poor. There is a real issue of economic disadvantage. The Australian Institute of Health and Welfare (**AIHW**) reports that just 19% of women seeking help from homelessness services due to family violence are employed, and that the majority are not in the labour force. Attached to this statement and marked "**CHP-1**" is a copy of the AIHW report, 2014, *Housing outcomes for groups vulnerable to homelessness*.



42. For these women, relying on Centrelink incomes, just three in 100 two bedroom homes would be affordable to a single parent with one child, and less than one in 200 would be affordable to single women on Newstart.<sup>4</sup>
43. Employment does not guarantee that housing will be affordable, due to casual and part time employment and lower female earnings. Just over half of the women in the Australian workforce (51%) are employed full time.<sup>5</sup> The average total female earnings in Victoria is \$843 per week. This income would only secure affordable housing (under 30% of weekly income) in seven out of 30 municipalities in Melbourne for a one bedroom property. For every other housing type a woman would be paying more than 1/3<sup>rd</sup> of her income on rent. This highlights not only the challenge of finding housing, but also the challenge of sustaining it. This does not factor in expenses incurred in travelling to work.
44. If you are in a marginal circumstance: if you are not the major bread winner, or you are on the average wage, and you find yourself single or with children, you are going to struggle.

### **Complex clients**

45. Homelessness services see poverty and family violence among a range of other really complex issues, like acquired brain injury, drug and alcohol abuse, mental illness and intellectual disability. There are layers of disadvantage.
46. At the moment the resources within the system do not match up with that complexity of need.
47. The homelessness sector would like to see its capacity to pay attention and respond differentially to the needs of children, and to family violence greatly increased: Children's workers have heightened our awareness that we need to attend to children's needs. However the capacity to do that as part of an IAP response is limited. We understand the importance of doing it, but how much services have the resources to actually be able to do it in practice is limited.

<sup>4</sup> Department of Human Resources (DHS), 2015, *Rent Report December 2014*, State of Victoria, Melbourne  
<sup>5</sup> Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2015, *Average Weekly Earnings, Australia Nov 2014* CAT no 6302.0, Commonwealth Government, Canberra

## Addressing the housing problem

48. CHP has made a submission to the Royal Commission that contains further details of the housing problem in Victoria, and how that problem should be addressed. Attached to this statement and marked “CHP-2” is a copy of CHP’s submission to the Royal Commission into Family Violence, dated May 2015.
49. In summary, what is required is a broadening of the suite of housing options available for women.
  - 49.1. We advocate for an extension of Safe at Home programs, which prevent homelessness by ensuring that people affected by family violence can remain safely in their own home, by removing the perpetrator. With that approach, you need legal and financial support, effective police responses and you need a sophisticated assessment of an individual’s financial potential or capacity. The financial support should be used to assist a woman to sustain the home and to bridge the gap between employment and unemployment.
  - 49.2. Some women will not want to remain in the home and for those women, a short stay in a refuge or crisis accommodation should be followed by rapid rehousing: a response that minimises the disruption of multiple temporary accommodation moves on women and children. This can be done in the private rental market or in community housing. An expansion of private rental brokerage programs, which we understand have not been reviewed since the allocation in 2005 and are considerably under-resourced, would assist more people into secure long term accommodation. Rapid rehousing should also include a short term subsidy to make the property affordable. Support services would then work to support women to improve the household income to sustain the tenancy in the long term.
  - 49.3. More social housing is also necessary because for some people, the trauma of what they have experienced means the likelihood of them re-entering the workforce is low, or they may have caring responsibilities. Public and community housing are an important part of the housing mix.
  - 49.4. CHP believes that every effort should be made to assist women who have experienced family violence to retain a connection to the work force, should they wish to do so. Supportive and well informed workplaces and family

violence leave are central to making sure women can safely remain employed and reduce their risk of homelessness.

- 49.5. Reforms around rental security would also be very helpful: allowing people to know that they can stay in a tenancy for periods of longer than 12 months, and that rental increases will be predictable over that two, three or five year term.
50. The above programs need to be underpinned by a broader affordable housing strategy. This would have huge flow on benefits for family violence victims because they, and likely everyone else, are effected by the broader housing market.
51. Immediate solutions, like financial brokerage, are important, but the government must implement long-term fixes to the housing problem in Victoria. Otherwise we just keep going around and around on this merry-go-round. We want to see the government do the job of ending homelessness, and not perpetuate women in a cycle of violence.



**Jenny Smith**

Dated: 14 July 2015



**Sarah Toohey**

Dated: 14 July 2015