



**Royal Commission**  
into Family Violence

**WITNESS STATEMENT OF SIMONE DOODY**

I, Simone Doody, Senior Specialist Homelessness Services Worker, of St Luke's, Echuca, in the State of Victoria, say as follows:

1. I make this statement on the basis of my own knowledge, save where otherwise stated. Where I make statements based on information provided by others, I believe such information to be true.

**Current role**

2. I am the Senior Specialist Homelessness Services (**SHS**) Worker at St Luke's in Echuca, a role I have been in for nearly two years. I provide support to the manager of our Echuca office and supervise our homelessness team.

**Background and qualifications**

3. My Qualifications are a Diploma in Community Welfare; from Wodonga Institute of TAFE, as well as a Certificate 4 in Social Housing; from the NSW Federation of Housing Associations. I have also completed many other work related training, such as Common Risk Assessment Framework (**CRAF**) training, working with clients with complex needs, etc.
4. I completed the Certificate 4 in Social Housing via correspondence in Deniliquin in New South Wales, where I worked for Homes Out West, prior to commencing at St Luke's. My role at Homes Out West was in community housing, and primarily involved tenancy management of community housing properties. I also worked very closely with the local SAAP Service, Vinnies Services Deniliquin. I managed the tenancies of the Vinnie's crisis accommodation units, working closely with the client and Vinnie's Homelessness worker to accommodate the client and assist to secure more long term, safe accommodation.

## **St Luke's**

5. St Luke's is a division of Anglicare Victoria – a community services organisation. We assist people to make positive changes in their lives, to be better connected and contribute to their communities.
6. St Luke's provides support to the many children, young people and families in the communities of central and northern Victoria and southern New South Wales.
7. We do this directly through services such as kinship care, youth homelessness and housing programs, educational support for disengaged young people, parenting education and support, community mental health services (NSW), as well as indirectly through family and community support services such as financial counselling and gambler's help.

## **Homelessness services**

8. Our office in Echuca is an access point for individuals to enter the homelessness system in Victoria.
9. We have a number of people walk through our front door, requesting assistance with housing. We also receive a number of referrals from Centrelink, job network providers, and the Police; from anywhere people may go to say that they have nowhere to sleep.
10. We also take on referrals from the St Kilda Crisis Service. When people call their 1800 hotline, or if they call our service after hours, and they are from our region, they will be referred to us.
11. We see around 330 clients with our SHS service. Our service has a full time intake worker, who sees people initially. My position was created two years ago to support our intake worker and other housing staff, and to provide case management support to our clients. We have a youth support worker, and a youth and general homelessness worker.
12. We address homelessness in two ways:
  - (i) a component of our service is providing an immediate, crisis response; and
  - (ii) we then case manage people to explore accommodation options which ultimately lead to them securing long term accommodation.

***Crisis response***

13. There is no refuge accommodation for people experiencing homelessness in Echuca. Our service offers a crisis response by providing people brokerage money to access crisis accommodation, if that is what they are seeking.
14. All of the crisis accommodation in Echuca is provided by local motels and caravan parks: anywhere that we can find a bed. Finding crisis accommodation is probably one of our biggest problems.
15. Our brokerage is quite limited. We really have to work hard to use it in the most appropriate way that we can. This is difficult because of the sheer cost of accommodation in Echuca: it is quite a heavily based tourist town. Most of the motels in Echuca are at 80+% capacity at any given time. They have plenty of money coming in and therefore don't really want or need to accept our clients. From time to time our clients may experience a break down in their supported accommodation arrangement, leading to refusal on the behalf of the provider to work with our service on future occasions. Whilst we maintain positive relationships with local businesses and support can be cyclic, the number of motels that are willing to support our clients is, in recent times, in decline.
16. Some of the motels that we are able to access are quite unsuitable for the safety of some of our clients. One particular motel in the area is known to have drugs being dealt out of its rooms, so we try our best not to send women and children there out of concern for their safety. Another motel we use charges \$350 per week for a family room; that would be used for a larger family group, such as a single mother with two children. That is a considerable amount of her income gone on accommodation, and it may not be sustainable. We need to consider how she will be able to provide the other basic necessities for herself and the children, such as food, transport and childcare, etc.
17. On occasion we are required to send our clients out of town to access other accommodation providers. I think that women do feel safer if they leave town, because it can be harder for a perpetrator to find them. In a small community, people always tend to know where you are. However, people often prefer to stay because of friends and family supports, as well as not wanting to remove the children from their school. This is a real Catch 22. The accommodation available to women out of town may not necessarily be better than the options available in

Echuca. I am aware of one particular accommodation provider in a smaller town that charges a \$400 deposit for caravans and cabins. Nine times out of ten this will be prohibitive to our clients. If they do manage to afford to pay the deposit, there is usually a reason that the accommodation provider is able to refuse giving that deposit back.

18. To a point, these accommodation providers are taking advantage of people's situation: they just name their price. But there is no remedy for that. We would be in an even worse situation if they refused our clients.
19. We have two sources of brokerage funding at St Luke's. One lot of funding comes from Haven, the affordable housing provider in our area. We apply for that funding from them, via email, and their accounts person sends out a cheque. We also have our own allocation from the Housing Establishment Fund (**HEF**). This funding comes from the Department of Health and Human Services (**DHHS**), and is divided between our Bendigo and Echuca services. Echuca is allocated \$787.50 per month, or \$9450 per year. We complete reports on our HEF usage, and there is a clear policy on what these funds can and cannot be used for. For example, it cannot be used to address arrears in DHHS properties.

### ***Transitional housing***

20. There are eleven transitional housing properties in Echuca. There is one unit that we have allocation rights for. We will often have clients living in transitional housing for anywhere between 12 months and two years: the movement through these properties can be slow. We are finding that our clients get stuck in those properties, waiting for public housing or a suitable alternative. It is great that we have transitional housing, however we certainly need more.

### ***Case management***

21. We provide case management services for our clients by assisting them to attempt to find long-term, secure housing. This may involve completing applications for public housing on our clients' behalf: usually it is either a supported application or an insecure housing application. Or it may involve linking our clients to real estate agents.

22. We also refer our clients to other services, if the case plan that we develop with them identifies other supports that they need. These referrals may be to other services in the local community or services that outreach to Echuca.
23. We do our best to remain engaged with a client until they are permanently accommodated, and even after that.
24. DHHS prefers prospective public housing tenants to be engaged with a service for support. The application process is also rather difficult for an individual to negotiate without us: there are different applications, different evidence that an applicant needs to provide, and often DHHS will ring and say they are not happy with particular details and request supplementary information. The insecure housing application in particular requires a date by which the applicant has to leave their current accommodation. When the applicant is homeless, or they're living in a motel, they effectively have no end date, but DHHS policy insist you provide one. In turn, they also require a letter from the accommodation provider saying that they have until this date to leave. This undermines our clients' sense of security; they cannot think 'well at least I've got this place, I am safe for the time being', because the DHHS requires them to state when that will end.
25. Victoria's public housing application process is considerably more complicated than in New South Wales. NSW has an application supplement, a housing supplement, then requires evidence from both the client and support worker to demonstrate priority. This involves evidence to support risk of, or homelessness; evidence of the client applying for private rental properties with real estates; as well as a supporting letter from the support worker explaining the client's current situation, and any issues related to the client and the barriers they face to secure long term accommodation outside of public housing.
26. We are required to complete public housing applications for our clients. SHS workers; and other support workers are the gatekeepers into that system. The only application that a client can complete independently is a general application and, given the shortfall in available public housing, the reality is no one is ever going to be housed following a general application.
27. An individual is able to be a client of ours for as long as they want to be. There may come a point where, if that client stopped presenting and was no longer wanting

support, we would then have to close a file. However they often will then come back and we would open another support agreement.

### **Family violence and homelessness**

28. Of the 199 women and 134 men who attended our service from 1 July 2014 until 26 June 2015, 68 of those gave family violence as a reason that they were seeking support, and 30 gave family violence as the main reason for seeking support. 19 of those 333 clients' also listed other violence, so non-family related violence, as a reason for seeking support.
29. I am a little concerned about the accuracy of those figures because, as a specialist homelessness service, we generally always note "housing crisis" when people are presenting to us. We can also select "family violence", amongst a number of other reasons why people may present but not every worker will record every reason, where there are multiple presenting factors, for a client's presentation as homeless or at risk of homelessness.
30. I definitely have a sense that the statistics above underreport the incidents of family violence amongst our clients. I would estimate that 80% of the women we see are in our service have family violence as a contributing cause of their homelessness. Often we see people who have fled their property because of violence, however when they present to us, their immediate need is housing. They haven't been supported to stay in a tenancy, so they come to us homeless, often with a debt behind them. Sometimes you will say to people, "well, can you tell me what happened in your previous tenancy?" and it is then that they tell you "Oh, well there was violence there. I didn't feel safe, so I just walked out, or had to get out fast".
31. If the men presenting at our service are doing so because of family violence, that is normally not disclosed to us, and they do not give us copies of any intervention orders. Perhaps only 10% of the men we see would tell us they have been excluded from the home. More often we see younger men who may have assaulted a family member, then being removed from the property by the police; it is violence within the family, but not intimate partner violence.
32. We do our best to accommodate clients who have experienced family violence, as we do with all of our clients. There is no priority given to victims of family violence, however we would never allow someone to leave knowing that they would be sleeping in their car or knowing that they had no other option, unless we could find

no option ourselves. Often we can accommodate them and we do. Unfortunately that accommodation can be short term and then we are faced with the same issue again a week or two later.

### ***Complex clients***

33. I would estimate that 75% of the people we see at St Luke's present with complex needs, particularly issues around mental health. When we are talking to someone, it is rarely ever just a problem around homelessness. We make referrals for that person to see other support services in the region, as appropriate.

### ***Outreach family violence services***

34. Where family violence is identified, we would always be referring that client on to a specialist service for further support, if that is what they wished to do. We tend to refer these clients directly to the Centre for Non-Violence in Bendigo, which also has access to crisis accommodation.
35. In our experience, it is not often that the Centre for Non-Violence is able to accommodate our clients. That is not a criticism. They are faced with the same issues in Bendigo that we are here in Echuca: the motels are quite difficult to source, and the costs involved in sourcing them are difficult to meet. We know that service delivery is all about resourcing.
36. The Centre for Non-Violence does not have the capacity to outreach here as much as people would like them to. Our clients can simply walk into our office every day if they choose to. Whereas when they are working with a specialist outreach service, they're waiting for a worker to come up here and often those workers are overworked and under-resourced. When they do come up, they may only be here for a day and have a number of clients that require their assistance. It may then be some time before they return to follow up with those clients.
37. Our clients are having to turn to us for assistance that they would otherwise be getting from a specialist family service provider, because there is just not that regular access to that specialist support. We do our best to assist them; we advocate on their behalf, but we are dealing with a lot of clients as well. I do not have specific training how to assist a woman with issues arising from family violence, and I don't have the time to do full risk assessments, but we do our best. There are definitely gaps in the services women are getting in the Echuca region.

***Police response***

38. I am concerned about the police response to breaches of intervention orders in Echuca, and that breaches are not actually being addressed. I have a particular client who has a long history of experiencing family violence, and when she is completing change over with their child, her former partner becomes abusive. She will go and talk to police, but given the history of that relationship, the police have really had enough and are sick of it. People need to be made to feel safe, and that there will be consequence for a breach of an intervention order, otherwise it is just a piece of paper.
39. Police have indicated that a large proportion of their time is spent responding to family violence incidences. I think that we need greater resources out there to support women to be safe.

**Regional solutions*****Specialist services***

40. When funding arrangements are changed, being in a regional or rural area, services tend to be moved to larger cities or larger rural towns. So the smaller towns are really losing out on some of the on the ground supports. Without dedicated specialist services in your town, there are necessarily waiting times and limitations on the availability of those services.
41. Echuca has lost its mental health service and psychiatric disability rehabilitation and support service; that is now based in Bendigo, and given the number of clients we see with mental health problems, that change has had a significant bearing on our clients. Similarly, drug and alcohol counselling funding was cut, and the intake for that is now in Bendigo also.
42. Simply being able to walk into a family violence service's office here in Echuca would make a big difference to people.

***Brokerage & financial flexibility***

43. I think that greater brokerage funding for crisis accommodation would certainly be of assistance to regional and rural service providers.



44. To give a practical example of the shortage of brokerage we face, on the 26<sup>th</sup> of June, a new client presented and asked for assistance with payment for accommodation at a local motel. We had \$2 left in one of our funds, and \$80 left in the other. Even for one night, \$80 is not going to assist a family. I had to say to the client "I'm sorry, I actually don't have the money". She told me that she did not have to check out until Monday, so I said to her "come back then and I will talk to the provider, and tell them I will have a cheque drawn up a day or two after that".
45. We spread our brokerage out to make sure that we have some funding for each month. We have to be quite inventive about the way we make things work for people.
46. We would be assisted if other agencies would show a little bit more flexibility in their dealings with our clients. I have a client at the moment who was forced to flee from the family home and left her children behind with her husband. She finally secured a private rental property; however she cannot access a bond loan, because she does not have the children on her Centrelink income statement, to demonstrate she is entitled to family tax benefits. But she is unable to get her children on her Centrelink income statement before she has a property. So she is in a catch-22 situation. And her entitlements on Newstart are insufficient to allow her to save for a bond either. This is the second client in six months I have seen in this situation.
47. I have spoken with the worker who processes the bond loan applications on this woman's behalf, and she tells me that her computer will not allow her to override the system and provide the loan. I think we need greater flexibility about how people are able to be supported. I try to do my best to think creatively and say, "well, if we do this or access this, or if we go around that", but I and my organisation really can't be flexible around a \$1,000 bond loan because that would deplete my entire month of brokerage and more. I would definitely argue that if policies could be made to be just that little bit more flexible in their processes that would help people secure their longer term housing needs.

### ***Affordable housing***

48. More transitional properties would certainly help our clients, as would a greater stock of public or affordable housing as well. The wait alone for public housing means that it is not really a practical solution for most people, and because of this people that do get placed into transitional housing are stuck there for months or

years before being offered housing. This prevents us from being able to refer new clients to transitional properties.

49. The private rental market is difficult for the people we see at St Luke's. 95% of our clients are reliant on benefits, and so they have very little money to spend on housing.
50. The affordable housing that we do have in Echuca can be difficult for our clients to access, as it is only suitable for a certain demographic. When they advertise, they indicate an income bracket applicable to each property. I recently saw a property that had an income bracket requirement of between \$50,000 and \$99,000. If you earn income under that bracket, you are not eligible to apply for the property, and that would be the vast majority of our clients. Addressing the affordable housing problem, from my perspective, is really the central issue for our clients.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'S. Doody', written over a horizontal dotted line.

**Simone Doody**

Dated: 20<sup>th</sup> July 2015