



Women's Property Initiatives congratulates the Andrews Labor Government in establishing Australia's first Royal Commission into Family Violence.

We are pleased to make the following contribution to the Royal Commission focusing on our area of expertise of developing and providing affordable rental housing for disadvantaged women headed households, the majority who have escaped Family Violence.

1. Our Purpose

To build a secure future for women and children in need by developing and providing good quality, long term affordable housing

WPI is a community housing developer creating homes that enable women and their children to live with dignity as contributing members of local communities. WPI redresses evident discrimination towards low income women and in particular low income/disadvantaged women with children in relation to accessing good quality, safe and affordable housing.

2. Our History

WPI, formerly Victorian Women's Housing Association, was established in 1996 to develop innovative mechanisms that provide a range of housing options for disadvantaged women and their children to prevent and address homelessness. WPI was established after a study revealed the lack of availability of long term appropriate and affordable housing options for women headed households. We are governed by a voluntary Board of Management and supported by highly skilled professionals on a pro bono basis, including an external Advisory Panel of members with legal, financial and property expertise.

3. Our Impact

Empowerment: WPI's tenants are empowered through the stability the housing provides to be confident and maximise their life opportunities. They return to study, access employment, become involved in their children's lives and the community they live in. **The women and children are empowered by living in a safe environment free from domestic violence and relationships where they have suffered physical and emotional violence from partners imposing their power and control over them.**

Many of the children we house have lived transient lifestyles for the majority of their life, disrupting their education, social relationships, and sense of safety and security. The housing/homes we provide have turned around the lives of these children as demonstrated through independent SROI Research.



4. Social Return on Investment: Key Findings

'WPI's housing contributes to breaking the generational cycle of poverty'

'WPI delivers \$3.14 of social value for every \$1.00 invested.'

These outcomes were determined and measured by:

- reduced re-entry into correctional institutions
- improved mental health of children
- improved academic performance of children
- increased employment and return to study for women
- improved family relationships
- significant saving to the government and taxpayer through avoided costs of welfare, counselling and rehabilitation
- reduced expenditure on homelessness services

5. Avoiding homelessness for women escaping domestic violence

Need for sustainable, safe affordable housing for women escaping domestic violence.

Domestic violence is identified as the main reason for homelessness among women with dependent children, with over half of clients who access supported accommodation services being female. Hence, access to safe and sustainable housing arrangements is a key necessity. Facilitating this access can, however, be challenging due to a shortage of both crisis accommodation and stable, secure, affordable, long term housing.¹ Hence the lack of affordable housing contributes to many women staying on, or returning to, an unsafe social environment that puts them and their children at risk of violence. The May 2015 Federal Senate Inquiry stated that *"an adequate supply of social housing would mean that women escaping domestic violence would not be forced to stay in motels or, worse still, remain in abusive relationships. Unfortunately, social housing is in short supply and waiting lists are long"*.²

Women and children who leave their home to escape a violent relationship experience 'considerable social and personal disruption and financial disadvantage'.³ The extent of this disruption is considerable with some women having to move multiple times before gaining longer term safe housing.⁴

Moreover, some women and children are more vulnerable to ongoing housing difficulties post separation. Tually⁵ et al in their Australian AHURI synthesis report found that women escaping Domestic Violence with little financial independence, who are indigenous, come from a Culturally and Linguistically Diverse (CALD) background, or who live with a disability are overrepresented in homelessness figures and research.

¹ Meyer S. 2014, Victims' experiences of short-and long-term safety and wellbeing: Findings from an examination of an integrated response to domestic violence, *Trends and Issues in Crime and Criminal Justice* Issue 478. June 2014, Australian Institute of Criminology

² Commonwealth of Australia 2015, Economics References Committee *Out of reach? The Australian housing affordability challenge*

³ Chung, D., Kennedy, R., O'Brien, B., Wendt, S., with assistance from Cody, S. 2000, *Home safe home: the link between domestic and family violence and women's homelessness*, Partnerships Against Domestic Violence, WESNET and the DFaCSIA, (www.wesnet.org.au/publications/reports/0011HomeSafeHome.pdf) pg 46

⁴ Chung et al., 2000, p. 48.

⁵ Tually, S., Beer, A. and Faulkner, D. 2007, *Too big to ignore: future issues for Australian women's housing, 2006–2025*, report prepared for the Women's Housing Caucus of SA, (<http://www.socsci.flinders.edu.au/ahuri.src/docs/toobigtoignoreReportFIN...>)



Whilst it is recognised that there is no one solution to domestic and family violence related homelessness, the **provision of safe, secure and affordable housing** is seen as a critical component required to support and assist women to re-establish their lives post violence.⁶

The literature suggests that a number of key factors is currently limiting the housing options available to women who separate from a violent partner, including:⁷

- Insufficient refuge accommodation to respond to the number of women and children requiring crisis accommodation post separation from the violent partner
- A severe general shortage of available and affordable housing, including a shortage of social housing and affordable rental accommodation
- The shortage of long-term affordable housing prevents women making the transition from temporary accommodation in homelessness services to permanent housing
- Poverty, often resulting from the abusive relationship itself, is also a significant obstacle to leaving the home and to sustaining housing
- Moreover, certain groups of women such as Indigenous, culturally and linguistically diverse and refugee women, women with disabilities and women from rural and remote areas may be additionally disadvantaged with reduced access to refuge accommodation and other housing options meeting their specific needs.

Women's safety and housing stability may improve immediately after the initial separation from an abusive partner, partly due to access to crisis accommodation. However this is often not sustainable because of the financial struggle of maintaining safe and stable housing arrangements experienced by some women⁸.

It is crucial for governments (Federal and state) to invest in affordable, safe and sustainable housing solutions specifically for women with dependent children escaping domestic violence, as women have been excluded from general affordable housing initiatives. For example, initiatives such as the National Rental Affordability Scheme or private rental brokerage schemes, have excluded a large proportion of women and children affected by domestic violence as potential tenants, because their financial means are often too restricted to enter the private rental market.⁹

Additionally many women affected by domestic violence are excluded from (re)-entering the private rental market due to their:

- limited financial means
- being blacklisted due to prior evictions, rental arrears and rental property damage caused by the abusive partner throughout the course of the abusive relationship.¹⁰

⁶ Department of Social Services Women, Domestic and Family Violence and Homelessness: A Synthesis Report <https://www.dss.gov.au/our-responsibilities/women/publications-articles/reducing-violence/women-domestic-and-family-violence-and-homelessness-a-synthesis-report?HTML#sum>

⁷ Centre for Gender-Related Violence Studies (CGRVS) and Social Policy Research Centre (SPRC) 2013 *Final Evaluation Report for Long-Term Accommodation and Support for Women and Children Experiencing Domestic and Family Violence* <http://www.housing.nsw.gov.au/NR/rdonlyres/388D987B-35FA-4AA6-A931-2C44FFD82BFA/0/LongTermAccommodation.pdf>

⁸ Meyer. S. 2014, Victims' experiences of short-and long-term safety and wellbeing: Findings from an examination of an integrated response to domestic violence, *Trends and Issues in Crime and Criminal Justice* Issue 478. June 2014, Australian Institute of Criminology

⁹ Edwards, R. 2004, *Staying home, leaving violence: promoting choices for women leaving abusive partners*, Australian domestic and family violence clearinghouse, Sydney, (www.austdvclearinghouse.unsw.edu.au/PDF%20files/SHLV.pdf).

¹⁰ Meyer *ibid*



Research shows that some women, especially those with highly dangerous (ex)-partners who cannot be deterred through legal mechanisms from repeatedly threatening the victim, may not feel safe remaining in the family home or in the vicinity of the family home.¹¹

Long term housing solutions are imperative to ensure ongoing safety and wellbeing of women and children. Long term housing needs to be integrated with long term tangible support that assists women to establish safe and sustainable housing for themselves and their children after the crisis accommodation response. These integrated long term housing and support responses are needed now to prevent women and children returning to unsafe housing, violent relationships or sub-standard unhealthy housing.

6. Positive Impact of WPI Housing: Case Study

Mary (not her real name) left a domestic violence situation where her husband was controlling to the extent that she could not go shopping alone, she even had to hang the clothes on the line after dark, so she would not be seen by the neighbours.

When she eventually left, she had nothing, her husband kept everything except the children. For a year she and her three youngest children moved 5 times. Prior to moving into a WPI owned house, 4 of them were living in one room. She was in jeopardy of losing custody of her children due to the crowded and unsuitable living arrangements.

WPI has provided Mary and her family with a new life, a new start, a new home and a new area. Mary and her children feel safe and secure and the rent is affordable. This is the first time she has been independent in her whole life. She finds it a great community where she lives, the kids really like it and have made good friends. Having the house has ensured that she has custody of the kids, which was in doubt when they were all just sharing one room, and being transient.

Since being housed she has got her driving licence (her older, independent children assisted her with the purchase of a car).

She has also undertaken three courses at the local TAFE, improving and empowering her life. She is now a confident woman contributing significantly to the lives of her children and the community in general. Mary and her children will have a productive future and most importantly are safe from violence. The stability provided through the provision of long term, good quality, safe, secure, affordable housing has been paramount in addressing this Family Violence situation for the long term.

Long term housing as provided to Mary is needed but currently exists to a very limited degree. Mary and her family are one of the few lucky ones. Moreover, the savings in other sectors, including the health sector (both physical and mental), education, transitional housing and police services are considerable when women and their children can be housed in long term, safe, secure, affordable housing.

¹¹ Wilcox K & McFerran L 2009. Staying home, staying safe: The value of domestic violence protection order provisions in homelessness strategies. *Reform Housing* 94: 24–26



Recommendations:

1. The Victorian State Government invest in long term affordable rental housing for women and children who have escaped family violence. There should be a minimum annual budget allocation of at minimum \$50 million for this purpose. Such a government investment supports the 2015 Federal Senate Economics References Committee Report recommendation 27 *“that women and children escaping domestic violence are housed in secure and appropriate housing with the necessary support network that would allow them to remain in a safe environment. This approach would mean that women and their children would experience as little social and educational disruption as possible and that the pathway to more permanent housing would be easier”*¹²
2. The funding for affordable long term housing should be allocated to registered Community Housing Agencies who can demonstrate their ability, capability and track record in developing and providing integrated long term affordable rental housing for women and children who have escaped Family Violence.
3. The Victorian Government should extend clause 16.02-2 of the Victorian Planning Provisions Planning Scheme,¹³ to include the development and building of long term affordable rental housing for women and children escaping family violence. This will reduce the delay and cost associated with public exhibition and deals associated with objections as well as ensure that the housing is not identifiable as housing for women and children who may be escaping family violence.

¹² Senate Economics Reference Committee’s Report ‘Out of Reach’, The Australian Housing Affordability Challenge May 2015 op.cit. Recommendation 27

¹³ 16.02-2 Crisis accommodation and community care units Objective *To encourage the establishment of crisis accommodation and community care units in residential areas and to ensure that their location is kept confidential.*



Measuring the Toll: The Family Violence Index

WPI is pleased the Victorian Labor Government has commissioned Australia's National Research Organisation for Women's Safety (ANROWS) to produce a Family Violence Index.

As noted in the email sent out, The Family Violence Index could include a range of data such as the crime statistics, the number of children in out of home care and the rates of homelessness due to family violence, the number of perpetrators convicted as well as the number of women who present at hospital emergency rooms.

WPI understood that the Royal Commission is interested in measuring the impact and cost of family violence and where possible, the program outcomes of those services established to address family violence.

We have provided feedback directly to ANROWS but thought we would include our suggestions and feedback in our submission as well.

Measuring Family Violence and Program Outcomes

In order to assess the impact of any programs to reduce the incidences family violence it is imperative that indicators of occurrence of family violence be measured across Victoria and by local areas. Once agreed, the range of indicators can become benchmarks to assess the change in occurrence of family violence over time and by local area.

It is proposed that any range of indicators need to developed and measured by year for

- Victoria
- Metropolitan Melbourne
- Local Government Area
- Suburb (nominated by postcode)
- Where possible by Statistical Area - SA1.

The preferences is for data at SA1 level as this allows for very localised assessment of occurrences. As postcodes encompass more than one suburb and often cover more than one local government area, the resulting analysis is a less precise assessment of localised occurrences. In addition to this, one postcode can have areas of both low and high socio-economic disadvantage (SEIFA).

Using the data gathered from the proposed sources listed below it is proposed that a scale of incidences be developed for both Victoria and Metropolitan Melbourne. For example in establishing a level of occurrence of incidences in local areas for each data source a scale (quintile or quartile) of incidences occurring in all small areas (SA1) or suburbs be established across all metropolitan Melbourne for the period. This metropolitan Melbourne (quintile or quartile) scale could then be applied to SA1 in each metropolitan local government to assess whether the occurrence of incidences is high or low across that local government area. Similarly a scale of occurrence of an incidence could be developed for rural regions by developing the scale by using the data across all regional local government areas then applying the scale to specific rural local governments. The index would have one for metro Melbourne and a complimentary one for regional Victoria, (that is, taking Melbourne and regional Victoria separately whilst still combining it into the one index).

This methodology could be used for all of Victoria i.e. scale of occurrence be developed by assessing the data across all small areas or suburbs in Victoria and developing a scale of occurrence that could be applied to any local government or smaller area (SA1 or suburb) in Victoria.



The data sources that could be used to assess the occurrence of incidences of family violence, specifically violence against women and children including:

Victorian Police Data by: SA1; by the number children under 18 in attendance; gender of victim; age range of victim; alcohol or drugs present

- Law Enforcement Assistance Program (LEAP) including information on
 - Family Violence Related Crime,
 - Breaches of Intervention Orders (IO),
- Computer Aided Dispatch Database (CAD) data.

Ambulance data, by suburbs or SA1 if possible; family violence related; alcohol or drugs present

- Admissions to emergency hospital

Magistrates Court grant of intervention orders: by suburb; by gender of applicant; number dependent children of the applicant

Family Court

- supervised access orders: by suburb of primary custodial parent: by gender; number children
- breaches of supervised access orders by suburb of primary custodial parent: by gender; number children

Hospital data admissions related to family violence: preferred by SA1 of the patient (otherwise by suburb); gender, age, number of dependent children; alcohol or drugs present

Community Health Centres presentation or service provided where family violence incidence: by suburb, age, gender, number of dependent children

General Practitioners presentation or service provided where family violence incidence: by suburb, age, gender, number of dependent children

Safe Steps Family Violence Response Centre: by postcode; by age; number children

SAMIS - Service and Mission Information System of the Salvation Army: by postcode; family violence related occurrences; by gender; age; number dependent children

Journeys Home service provided where related family violence incidence: by suburb, age, gender, number of dependent children

Another possible index could be a family violence service provision index. This index could set out the services available in an area by population for example:

- How many police are working in a local government area per head of population, for the local government area
- How many family violence support services DV services are working in a local government area per head of population for the local government area

The mechanism for assessing local government services would be similar to that proposed above for the Family Violence Index.