

Submission to the
Royal Commission into Family Violence
on behalf of



by:

Karen Sherry
Project Officer
Yarra Community Housing
PO Box 2251
Footscray 3011



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Introduction

This submission outlines the experience of the H3 Wyndham alliance in western metropolitan Melbourne in working with people seeking assistance from homelessness services, of which family violence is a leading cause. We outline some recommendations, particularly the urgent need for Crisis Accommodation, to the Royal Commission, that we believe will provide a better systemic response to family violence.

What is H3 Wyndham?

H3 Wyndham is an alliance of organisations that brings together youth services, community law, mental health, women's health, community health, housing, homelessness services and other groups that support people in the Wyndham municipality, in Melbourne's outer west. Alliance member organisations have considerable experience with people who lack appropriate accommodation and support as a result of family violence.

The following are participating organisations, represented by their respective CEO / Senior Management level delegates:

- Cohealth
- Open Family Australia /Whitelion
- Salvation Army Wyndham City
- UnitingCare Werribee Support and Housing
- Werribee Mercy Health – Saltwater Clinic
- Women's Health West
- Wyndham City Council
- Wyndham Legal Service
- Yarra Community Housing

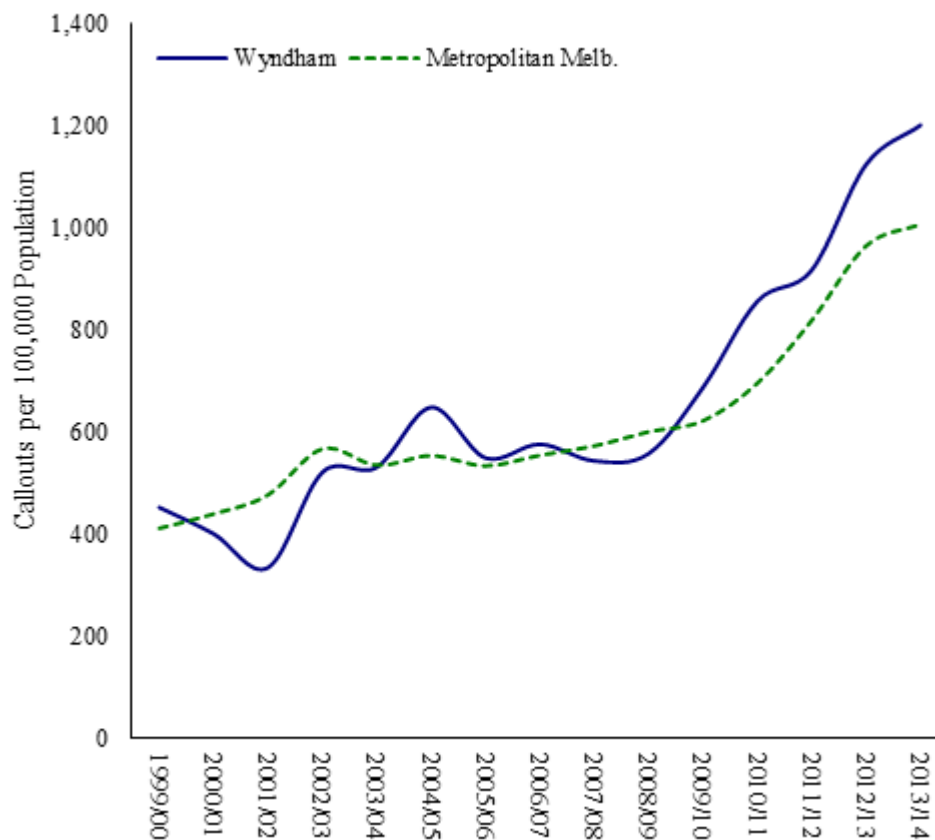
Family Violence in Wyndham

Wyndham has experienced the largest and fastest growth in all Victorian local government areas and is the third fastest growing in Australia. The official forecasted population for Wyndham City is approximately 201,000 as at June 30, 2015. It is estimated that the residential population will increase by 91% from its current figure to exceed 384,000 by 2036. Wyndham is a young municipality. Approximately 37% of Wyndham's population is under 25 years of age and there has been a 2.6% increase in births from 4,015 in 2013 to 4,120 in 2014. On average, 11 babies are born each day. It is also a diverse community, with around 25% of its residents born overseas. Countries of origin include the United Kingdom, New Zealand, India and etc,. The main languages spoken at home are English, Hindi and Punjabi.¹

¹ http://www.wyndham.vic.gov.au/aboutwyndham/wyndhamcity/demographicsandpopulation/demographics/profiling_wyndham

Reports of family violence per 100,000 of population in Wyndham have followed the Melbourne metropolitan patterns but have generally exceeded the Melbourne metropolitan average as Chart 1 shows.

Chart 1: Family violence callouts rate per 100,000 population Wyndham and Melbourne metropolitan 1999/00 – 2013/14



Source: Statistical data for Victorian Communities, 2014

The causes for increases in reports of family violence in regions are not easily attributed. These may be related to activity that increases the accuracy of prevalence measures – such as increased reporting, changes to access or system response – or they may be related to increases in incidence, such as sudden population growth.² Wyndham’s number of incidents has grown over the last five years (2010–2014) – up from 1,176 to 2,362. This is by far the highest rate of growth in the western metropolitan region.³

² Victorian Family Violence Database Volume 5 1999–2010, page 109

³ <http://www.crimestatistics.vic.gov.au/home/crime+statistics/year+ending+31+december+2014/download+data>

Lack of infrastructure in western growth corridor

In a population growth context, whilst more affordable housing may be located in growth areas, there is clear evidence that community and social infrastructure are not keeping pace with the needs arising from the strong rate of growth and development. There is not the availability or range of services to meet the changing needs of the community. This is contributing to poorer health and wellbeing outcomes for residents through lack of access to locally based services. Many individuals and families who have experienced family violence and cannot return to their homes immediately need a place of safety whilst legal processes such as intervention orders and court proceedings take their course.

H3 Wyndham contends that a lack of crisis accommodation facilities in the western metropolitan region exacerbates the problems associated with family violence, such as:

- People staying in inappropriate accommodation due to no other options
- People not accessing early intervention services due to a lack of infrastructure in the western metropolitan region
- Dislocation from community and personal supports
- Dislocation from schools and employment

As reported by the Western Homelessness Network, of 2,289 clients (inclusive of 747 accompanying children) requiring assistance from homelessness support agencies in the western metropolitan region, 63% had experienced family violence. For 48% of clients, family violence was the primary cause of their homelessness. In addition, on a typical day, over one hundred individuals can present to Homelessness Access points in the region, requiring accommodation and assistance. One hundred and three individuals presented to the two Homelessness Access Points servicing the western metropolitan region on April 16, 2015. Of these, 33% had experienced family violence.⁴

At present, there is no emergency accommodation in Wyndham. There is also a severe lack of crisis accommodation options in the western region that adjoins the municipality of Wyndham. Specialist homelessness services in Wyndham therefore have few options for people in crisis, particularly families and young people. Women and children from the region are required to be relocated to private motels and government funded services often in the inner eastern or southern metropolitan areas – far from their community. Single young people may be fortunate if they obtain a place in a youth crisis facility, but this will be a long distance from current places of education, part time employment and local supports. This is inappropriate accommodation for people who need ready access to adequate specialist support services and resources in their local community.

⁴ Western metropolitan local area service network (LASN) Family Violence Snapshot 16 April 2015. Homelessness support workers, from the Western Homelessness Network, provided data on all consumers in their caseload. The data was drawn from worker knowledge and assessment of their clients' experiences. It did not include data from the homelessness funded family violence services but did include data from one women's specific service. Initial Assessment & Planning (IA&P) workers from the two Homelessness Access Point Services in the West provided data on those people who presented for homelessness assistance on 16 April 2015.

H3 Wyndham contends that the lack of appropriate emergency accommodation has particularly negative impacts on school-aged children. To minimise the effect of this crisis on children, many parents remain in a temporary situation until appropriate accommodation can be secured, or they can return to their main place of residence. This means Wyndham families in crisis resort to:

- Splitting up the household, separating parents and children
- Couch surfing with various relatives or friends
- Squatting
- Camping in cars
- Camping outdoors or staying in caravan parks
- Staying in expensive unregistered rooming houses which pose a safety risk

It is also noteworthy that the number of unregistered rooming houses in Melton-Wyndham has grown from 1 to 35 in the past five years, with a corresponding increase in rooming house resident population from 9 people to 264 people.⁵ The same research indicates that the number of people living in rooming houses may be significantly undercounted in Census statistics. For-profit rooming house operators are increasingly establishing operations in outer suburbs as a response to accommodation issues.⁶

In addition in the last financial year approximately \$200,000 in private rental brokerage money was taken away from the Western region by the Department of Health and Human Services. This greatly impacts the capacity of the service system in the western metro region to offer resources to people who may require assistance with securing accommodation, after they have experienced family violence.

H3 advocates that the most effective early intervention for people in a crisis situation is to offer them short-term accommodation, with access to appropriate formal and informal supports. It also advocates for a service facility that is useful for and reaches out to meet the needs of the region in which it is located. The outer western metropolitan region lacks this infrastructure.

⁵ Chamberlain (2012) *Counting Boarding Houses: Reflections on Homelessness Research in Australia*

⁶ Dickson (2013), *Parity*, Vol 26, Issue 9: *Homelessness amongst housing development: the experiences of a growth area council in responding to homelessness*

Proposed solutions

As a starting point, H3 Wyndham proposes that a fully funded crisis intervention and service hub should be established in Wyndham run by the consortia of local agencies. It also advocates that a new women's only crisis facility be established in the western metropolitan region due to population growth and demand.

We recommend that these facilities would be a regional response that will contribute significantly to assisting people affected by family violence to maintain connections within their community, whilst receiving high quality assistance to address their crisis. The basis of the service delivery model would be a concentrated response through case-managed support in conjunction with relevant mainstream and specialist support services. This would be aimed at supporting not only people staying at these facilities but the whole of community. It is envisaged that these facilities would offer after hours support (support outside of normal businesses hours, such as evenings and weekends) and would also be situated on transport routes to allow easy access.

H3 Wyndham advocates:

- Implementing early intervention strategies that take place in the local community and represent minimal disruption to the lives of people affected by family violence
- Responding to the diversity of the people in the community (including families, women, children young people and CALD) and how the broad range of their needs (e.g. mental health, social isolation) are met
- Safe, secure accommodation for people dislocated as a result of family violence
- Rapid, available accommodation for both perpetrators and dislocated families
- Government funded community operated quality short term supported accommodation

Features of such facilities should be:

- Community engagement, a place where members of the community can visit and receive services
- Case management services for residents and outreach clients
- Direct links with specialist family violence support agencies & local mainstream services including Centrelink, employment, health, mental health, schools
- 24 hour on-site support
- Interview rooms
- Studio units for singles
- Family units
- Separation between families and singles zones
- Reception area
- full disability access including within accommodation units
- Security controlled access to each zone

In conclusion, the H3 Wyndham alliance in western metropolitan Melbourne contends that for people seeking accommodation assistance due to family violence, the needs in the outer west are high because infrastructure has not kept pace with population growth. Government investment in quality short term crisis accommodation and support in the region would go a long way to alleviating the problems facing people requiring services in outer western Melbourne.

Case Study: J■■■ and her family

What does J■■■ need?

J■■■ and her four children aged fifteen (■■■), eight (■■■), four (■■■) and two (■■■) are experiencing homelessness due to ongoing family violence, they have nowhere to stay and require crisis accommodation.

J■■■ is originally from the country and has few supports in the area. She doesn't have a car and the children usually walk to school as the property they were living in was in close proximity to the local primary school and high school. J■■■ cannot return to the property as the lease is in her ex-partner's name and it is unsafe for her to do so – her ex-partner drinks heavily and can become physically and verbally abusive. After a particularly violent event J■■■ has left with the children and they are sleeping in a friend's garage.

The nearest crisis accommodation is outside the municipality (South Melbourne or Geelong – both over 70 km's away), which means the children will struggle to get to school and risk disengaging from their education. J■■■ is concerned her children will be removed from her care if she is homeless – this has been a significant factor in why she has stayed in the relationship. J■■■ and her children require emotional support and counselling because of the ongoing abuse, and an effective referral cannot be facilitated whilst she is out of area.

The age of the children will mean that J■■■ is not eligible for a women's refuge.

J■■■ has no private rental history of her own. Further to this she has no income as her ex-partner has been working and controls the finances. She does not have money to pay for a private rental property and does not have her own bank account.

How would a crisis facility help J■■■ and her family?

J■■■ requires immediate support for herself and her children, in a local short term crisis facility where access to a worker can occur to assist J■■■ with her presenting issues:

- Assist with application for intervention order if relevant and required
- Assist J■■■ to apply for her own banking details
- Liaise with local real estate agents to assist J■■■ to obtain a private rental property in her own name, as well as secure brokerage with rent in advance and bond loan
- Work collaboratively with the school to ensure that the children do not disengage
- Assist J■■■ with setting up a new home, in terms of furniture, whitegoods and home wares with support of local material aid agencies
- Liaise with Centrelink to assist J■■■ in applying for income for herself and her children
- Make referral to an appropriate Legal Service to facilitate parenting orders

- Work with child protection addressing any concerns they may have
- Facilitate appropriate referral for emotional support and counselling
- Liaise with maternal child health nurse to ensure that Jane and her infant have been attending appointments, appropriate milestones been met for baby

Physical safety –Instead of staying in inappropriate accommodation away from supports, a crisis facility would secure J■■■■'s family's safety and sense of support in a time of crisis.