



THE ROLE OF HOUSING IN OUR RESPONSE TO FAMILY VIOLENCE

**A submission to the *Victorian Royal Commission into
Family Violence* by Women's Housing Limited**

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Contents

Introduction	1
Victorian Royal Commission into Family Violence	2
Family Violence	3
Women and Housing	4
Women's Housing Limited: how we can help	6
Housing in responding to family violence: ways forward	8
Conclusion	9

“ I haven't been able to plan anything. Without knowing where I'm going to be living, I can't even apply for a job... with a home, I will be able to start again.”



Introduction

Women's Housing Limited (WHL) welcomes the *Victorian Royal Commission into Family Violence*. This issue has been sidelined for too long and it is now time to refocus community and government attention on how we can best address the impact of family violence on the lives of so many women and children in Victoria. What can we do to improve life for victims beyond the initiatives in place today? What can we do better?

Without a safe place to call home, no victim of family violence can hope to rebuild their lives, or the lives of their children. So while support and justice initiatives are clearly essential, housing must be the other central plank in any successful response.

Headline-grabbing events have helped drive an increase in the preparedness of victims to step forward and say: "Enough is enough." Today, WHL calls for more housing to meet the growing demand for practical help. Victoria desperately needs new housing and models of practice to expand upon the many proven approaches in operation today.

Without a significant increase in the supply of housing for those escaping family violence, many women will leave abusive partners – only to find they have nowhere to go.

Victorian Royal Commission into Family Violence

In considering how it will frame its recommendations, the *Victorian Royal Commission into Family Violence* has identified a number of goals. We believe that the provision of safe, secure and affordable housing for victims of family violence can make a significant contribution to many of these, including:

- Ensure the safety of people who are or may be affected by family violence, by:
 - Providing fast, effective responses to those who report family violence;
 - Providing effective protections to adults and children who have been affected by family violence in the past, and remain at risk of family violence; and
 - Supporting adults and children who have been affected by family violence.
- Develop and improve the means by which solutions to family violence are implemented and assessed.

Housing in a variety of tenures (crisis, transitional and long-term) will be essential if we are to provide these most vulnerable citizens with real options for escape from violence and pathways to a better future. Victoria, with its rich history of innovative social housing, has a portfolio of proven housing options that provide a robust foundation for expansion of the supply. Now we need to make it happen.

“ I am grateful for the garage I live in, but at the end of the day, it is still a garage ”...said with tears running down her face.



Family Violence

Over the past ten years, disclosure of family violence has grown rapidly and significantly. The *Victorian Royal Commission into Family Violence* has now been established to identify how Victoria's response to family violence can be improved.

As part of the background material provided, the Royal Commission has identified that:

- 17% of all women have experienced family violence;
- 31% of homicides in Victoria were classified as domestic homicides;
- 45% of assaults and 34% of rapes in Victoria relate to family violence;
- Victoria Police attended 65,000 family violence incidents in 2013-14, **an increase of 83%** since 2009-10; and
- A third of all people accessing the Victorian homelessness system did so as a result of family violence. This figure is increasing at 9% annually.

“ I just found my nail clippers in my bag. He went away for a weekend and I just grabbed whatever I could and ran...”

Women and Housing

Women are particularly vulnerable to housing stress. This is driven by the fact that generally:

- Women's incomes are usually lower than men's;
- Women are over-represented in part-time and casual employment;
- Women are the primary carers for children, older relatives and those with a disability and hence have long periods out of the workforce;
- Women make up the majority of sole parent and single person households;
- Women are more concentrated in public and private rentals in areas of higher housing stress;
- Women most likely to experience housing stress include older women nearing retirement with limited superannuation, women with disabilities, elderly women, women with young children who don't have access to affordable childcare that enables them to be suitably employed, and *women who are forced to leave their home because of domestic violence.*



The scale of demand for family violence services is putting extreme pressure on the provision of all support services, including housing. Indeed, family violence is now identified as the key driver for homelessness and is behind the growing demand for homelessness services.

What's needed now is more housing – including crisis, transitional and long-term tenures. The best housing programs also link women to support services, including education and employment services, which can help them to rebuild their lives and enhance their social and economic participation.

What's also urgently needed is more robust data collection so we can understand the full scale of the problem. We know that some services put up hundreds of women in motel rooms each year; others provide rental subsidies to help women into a safer environment; still more like WHL are providing accommodation directly.

We all know the system is at overcapacity – but not to what extent. Today, funding is urgently required to support the collection of data across all agencies and organisations involved in the provision of services to victims of family violence, in order to inform the future supply of housing stock (across the different tenures - crisis, transitional and long-term affordable housing) the provision of support services and long-term strategic planning for the sector.

“ Is this true, is this really true? I have had a sad life, but this is the best day I have had so far.”

... said through an interpreter



Women's Housing Limited: how we can help

WHL focuses on human rights, particularly the basic rights of women (and their children) to housing, healthcare, education and employment. Since establishment in 1997, we have been listening to and validating women's experiences, and acting as their voice in the housing sector. Our long history in the transitional and affordable housing space has given us a specialised understanding of the needs of women, and it is our experience that women are particularly vulnerable to housing stress.

WHL has a reputation for excellent practice as a transitional housing manager and for providing information and referral services to women experiencing a housing crisis. Today, we are the lead agency in the provision of female-specific housing (and the delivery of aligned services) including:

- The management of 96 WHL-owned dwellings;
- The operation of eight rooming houses and twelve detached units (200 tenancies) under lease from the Department of Human Services; and
- The operation of 103 dwellings and associated homelessness services under the Transitional Housing Program agreement with the Department of Human Services.

“ Thank you Women's Housing. I didn't even know anything like [WHL] existed...thank you from the bottom of my heart!”



Women's Housing Limited also has a strong track record in developing and delivering affordable housing projects:

- **Bayswater** – 27 units – Won the Urban Development Industry Award for Excellence – Affordable Development (2012)

Completed in 2012, this project is home to 27 mostly young women and their children who plan to live there for the long term. Most of the families escaped domestic violence and were living in women's refuges, in their cars or couch surfing with family or friends.



- **Bentleigh** – 49 units

Completed in 2013, this is a mixed income development that houses 49 women-headed households. Over 60 per cent are either working full or part time. Most of those on Centrelink-only incomes are older women. While most of the women living here came from private rentals, they had been under extreme financial pressure with many going without essential items and food just to make sure they could pay rent.



- **Meadow Heights** – 8 townhouses

Completed in 2010, most of the women living here have escaped family violence. One woman was living in a garage with her children before being offered her new home.



Housing in responding to family violence: ways forward

There are a number of ways in which better housing responses to family violence can be embedded within existing policy directions, principally by designating stock generated as Family Violence specific stock (with a range of tenures). These policy directions include:

- Capital funding of purpose-built safe community housing;
- Stock transfer of public housing targeted at women escaping family violence;
- Housing estate renewal; and
- Affordable housing generated by Places Victoria.

WHL, like a number of other social housing agencies, has established a number of highly successful housing programs for women and children who have experienced family violence. These models can be scaled up quickly and robustly – a critical consideration given that many women in the Victorian community still lack access to family violence-related services, including crisis and transitional housing.

“ I am so sorry, but I can't stop crying...you don't know what this means for me.”



Conclusion

The people and Government of Victoria, indeed of Australia, have resolved to address family violence and, in doing so, have encouraged women to step forward for help. They have done so in significant numbers. Many will leave their family home and will need new housing options, albeit only for short periods in some cases. Women's Housing Limited stands ready to work with the Victorian Government and community to deliver more of the successful housing models and services we offer today. If we do not provide this housing, we will potentially be sending these women and their children back to violence or into homelessness.





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