

Submission to the Royal Commission on Family Violence

Executive Summary

The analysis and recommendations outlined in this submission are based primarily in our experience as a Specialist Homelessness Service, in particular working with adult women who have experienced or at risk of family violence.

Economic and related barriers are likely the most common reasons that women remain in violent relationships (Cameron 2014). Housing costs are the most important contributor to this financial stress. Women escaping a violent relationship too often find themselves on the horns of an impossible dilemma: stay with the violent partner, or leave the partner and become homeless. Both involve risks to both physical and mental health of the woman and her children.

Early intervention and access to housing is crucial to allowing women to leave a violent relationship without entering homelessness.

As a specialist homelessness service provider we have found that a gendered response to homelessness is effective, in part due to the gendered nature of intimate partner violence, which is relatively common among the homeless population. Our approach allows a family violence informed response that empowers women to break the cycle of returning to and seeking out violent partners. This is an important element of the complexity faced by women experiencing or at risk of homelessness.

Recommendations to the Commission

- develop and implement a statewide affordable housing strategy
- consider how to create more channels for women, including those with children, to enter stable, affordable housing directly from the family violence sector
- consider prioritising public housing transfers for people who have experienced or are at risk of of family violence (see CHP Submission to RCFV 2015)
- explore lessons from Canada on prioritising people at risk of family violence for entrance into the social housing system
- prioritise service responses to women's homelessness which consider a gender lens in order to support women with a complex past to break the cycle of family violence

Introduction

██████████ welcomes the opportunity to make a submission in response to the Victoria Labor government's Royal Commission on Family Violence.

██████████ is a Specialist Homelessness Service that has been operating in ██████████ since 1982. We operate a drop-in centre for women, with an average of 25 women presenting every day. We also operate a women's crisis accommodation ██████████ which provides 6 weeks crisis accommodation for 11 women at a time, as well as access to on-going accommodation and support.

Although this submission focuses on *family* violence, representing our clients also means noting that this is *not* the only, and not necessarily the primary, type of violence that people we work with have experienced and are at risk of. Much of the violence is outside of the remit of this royal commission: this includes the physical, sexual and emotional violence that the homeless population in general experience regularly, including while sleeping rough or living in unsafe rooming houses. It also applies to our clients more broadly including those involved in sex work both through barter and monetary exchange.

In terms of family violence, many of our clients have also experienced or witnessed physical, sexual or other forms of violence as have most of the long-term homeless population. Witnessing or experiencing family violence is an early traumatic event with significant psychological repercussions. We work with clients in a trauma-informed manner to support them to deal with a difficult past and build a more stable future. In recognising the long-term effects of such trauma we commend the Royal Commission on Family Violence for its focus on prevention including men's behavioural change programs and combatting gender norms that validate violence.

Despite the wide-reaching implications of family violence, it is a gendered issue: 87% of domestic violence victims are women (Australian Bureau of Statistics 2012) and most perpetrators are men. The analysis and recommendations outlined in this submission are rooted in our experience as a Specialist Homelessness Service, in particular working with adult women who have experienced or at risk of family violence.

Affordable housing

Women in Victoria return to a violent partner an average of seven times before escaping permanently. This means an average of seven periods of stay in crisis or refuge accommodation, along with all the associated costs. If it were possible to reduce the average number of times women escape family violence before eventually fleeing permanently, this may free up space in the system to support more women overall.

While some women will return to a violent partner due to psychological reasons that are unavoidable, finding safe, affordable and appropriate accommodation post-separation is

women's single biggest concern when leaving situations of domestic violence (Braaf and Meyering 2011).

In 2015 the Council for Homeless Persons demonstrated that there is only one suburb in Melbourne that is affordable for a working mother to rent a two-bedroom house (CHP 2015b). Reducing this financial hardship through creating more affordable housing may reduce the number of times that a woman returns to a violent partner. Affordable housing access creates a safe exit channel from the family violence system. It may also save lives.

A whole-of-government effort to address the housing affordability crisis is a crucial part of the response to family violence. And this is not something that may only be addressed through more government spending.

Preventing homelessness of women escaping family violence

Due to overcrowding within the refuge system our homelessness services too often catch women *at risk* of or *escaping* family violence who have nowhere else to go. This spillover into the homelessness system catches those who were meant to enter the refuge system and indeed would have been eligible to do so in the past.

One problem with this is that it puts women at greater risk. While our facilities are much safer than most other housing options we do not have the protections required for women who are assessed as having a high-risk of physical violence; yet due to bottlenecks in the family violence system ours is often the safest available option.

The homeless sector has different concerns and has evolved to target clients with complexity not present among most who have experienced or who are at risk of family violence. Family violence services must be aware of this fact when referring people to homeless services.

Rapid re-housing programs for women escaping family violence and private rental brokerage is essential for this cohort of women to be empowered to escape family violence without entering the homelessness system (see CHP Submission to RCFV 2015).

Ensuring the family violence sector is housing-savvy may further help to achieve these ends. Perhaps partnering between family violence service responses and housing services could potentially support this goal through assisting clients navigate the housing system where necessary, or developing more effective housing and financial plans.

██████████ and her three children were subjected to extreme emotional, psychological and financial violence for several years. When she eventually decided to leave she was unable to access the family violence system or refuge accommodation due to the fact that she did not meet the criteria for the high level of *physical* risk required. She was also unable to access family crisis accommodation due to long waiting lists there. Prior to leaving her violent partner ██████████ was working part-time in a decent job. Her lack of access to affordable housing ended up in a downward spiral into homelessness and mental health issues for herself and her children. This ultimately had important economic costs

as she was unable to work and may have cost more to the services system than early access to affordable housing; more importantly, it resulted in an unnecessary human cost.

After moving away from her violent partner ██████ developed mental health issues due to the violence she had experienced, which was exacerbated by the stress of experiencing homelessness. She took an extended leave from work in order to deal with it. It took some time for her to get Centrelink benefits put into her bank account rather than that of her partner. Due to her financial circumstances, including the fact that her leave was unpaid, she was not able to go straight into private rental and instead had to wait for appropriate transitional housing. As a result she and her children were lived in motel accommodation for a month or two as significant cost. The prolonged time that it took for her to eventually get into private rental meant that she spent longer in the homelessness system with her children which in turn increased her stress and impacted on all of their mental health. She was ultimately unable to return to her job and thus unable to maintain private rental as a single mother on Centrelink. She and her children finally found a spot in public housing. They have since spent considerable time and resources dealing with the mental health issues developed during this period of instability.

Accessing an adequate housing response directly through a family violence service may have been a more effective service response to ██████ and her children's needs.

Addressing family violence as part of homelessness complexity

As a specialist homelessness service provider we work with women presenting with multiple or complex issues including mental health, trauma, substance abuse or experience of violence, especially intimate partner violence. It is in part this complexity that characterises women who belong in the homelessness sector as opposed to the family violence sector. This is in addition to the focus on risk, as mentioned above.

Many clients with a history of homelessness have also experienced family violence, such as physical and sexual violence in childhood. As adults, family violence becomes a gendered issue as mentioned above: women are more likely the victims of intimate partner violence and men more likely the perpetrators. Among the long-term homeless population that we work with it is also more likely to see women who experience family violence as a result of their homelessness, rather than the other way around—women enter physically or sexually violent relationships for the purposes of shelter. Some women experiencing long-term homelessness may also have developed patterns of interaction that allow this violence.

This means that women's specific homelessness services are an important part of homelessness services. Over the past three years, 70% of women who have left our crisis accommodation ██████ have not returned to violent relationships.

We believe that it is our unique service response, combined with access to stable housing, that enables us to support women out of the cycle of family violence. The long-term relationships we are able to develop with women while they are staying in our crisis accommodation or coming to our drop-in services are crucial to the empowerment necessary to break the cycle of victimhood and violence.

Our drop-in centre in particular allows a safe space for women to feel greater social inclusion and interact with workers on their own terms. Those with significant mental health, trauma or other issues may visit for some time before even speaking to workers—for example, recently a woman came for meals over several weeks before first engaging with workers. Few public spaces welcome people with complex histories, and even fewer reserved specifically as a safe space for women, yet these gendered spaces are important for women escaping violent heterosexual relationships. Sometimes women travel from all over Melbourne for the comfort of this unique space.

In both of these areas that comprise our women's services we provide significant transitional support as women rebuild community support networks, work on remodeling relationship behaviours including building healthy attachments with children, and address trauma or mental health issues (although not limited to those that have arisen as a result of violence).

Our workers make a conscious choice to share power with clients. They are intentional about using language to encourage women to assert choice, control and responsibility. This often involves the worker herself abdicating a sense of control. It means sitting with the uncomfortable risk that the client will make poor choices. As opposed to seeing choice as a means to an end (and attempting to strongly intervene in order to encourage a different choice), it involves seeing that choice as an end in itself. Empowerment necessitates choice and agency.

Sometimes women who use our services for this reason do not even recognise that they have experienced family violence, rather, they present as experiencing financial disadvantage or housing stress. We often find out only after a woman is engaged with our services that family violence was one of the triggers for her homelessness. This is through a long process of education regarding expressions of family violence and its cycle. Again, it is only through this process that the cycle of family violence may be broken.

This may have been the first time in someone's life that she has actively participated in this type of relationship. Over time she learns to be comfortable in a respectful yet challenging relationship. Breaking these deeply entrenched patterns that have developed from youth often takes a long time.

We have found that government support periods are rarely long enough to allow clients to develop the trusting relationships necessary to provide this level of support. For example, [REDACTED] is funded as a six week women's crisis accommodation service. Supporting clients out of significant complexity takes longer, and indeed women are more likely to be able to maintain their tenancy after a longer support period. If she does not effectively address her

underlying emotional, psychological issues including attachment and dependence issues, and remodel relationships with others, she may either return to a comfort of a familiar yet violent partner or enter into another violent or controlling relationship.

The additional support we provide is funded through opportunity shop revenue and philanthropic donations. We also support women to develop employment skills, for example through our environmental volunteer program [REDACTED].

Ensuring an adequate amount of support for women with complex needs requires intensive support such as that provided by the ICMI (Intensive Case Management Initiative). Part of this support is access to stable housing.

Better housing access for people escaping family violence

In terms of housing policy, there may be some ways to tweak the social housing system to encourage better outcomes for women. For example, we strongly support the Council for Homeless Person's recommendation to prioritise women already within social housing for transfers within the system (CHP 2015). Without requiring any new resources, this would be a considerable boost to safety for many of the clients we work with.

[REDACTED] was living in an Office of Housing property. She developed a relationship with a man who had experienced long bouts of homelessness; he convinced her to let him move in with her. After time he began perpetuating significant violence against her—proven by police reports and multiple incarcerations due to assault and breaches of the IVO.

When she applied to transfer her housing due it being unsafe the Office of Housing advised that she would not be prioritised on the application and the wait would be a matter of years. She was thus forced to relinquish her tenancy and make herself homeless in order to be prioritised within the housing system. Her housing application was then moved up as a priority after becoming homeless. Allowing her priority transfer may have reduced the complexity involved in navigating the housing system and perhaps even the casework that she required overall. More importantly, it would have been much better for her mental health.

A complementary option would be to consider prioritising entry to the social housing system for people who are experiencing or at risk of family violence, in particular those with children or dependents. For this, lessons could be drawn from the experience in [some areas of Canada](#). This is particularly important in terms of ensuring that this option is limited to those who fit the housing or homelessness sector client demographic.

██████ came to Australia five years ago as a refugee with her husband and now has two young children. After several years of increasingly intense psychological and physical abuse she left her husband to seek safety in a refuge. After eight weeks she was told she must leave. With poor English language skills and little formal education in addition to having two children to care for. She returned to the relationship as she had nowhere else to go and her partner told her he would change. This happened seven times. Court-ordered men's behavioural programs had no effect on her husband. After she came back for the seventh time he pushed her down the stairs and she suffered a head injury. At this point she promised herself that no matter what he said she would never return—a serious injury to herself would also be devastating for her children.

The refuge she left to referred to her to the homeless sector. Once she was considered homeless, through living in short-term crisis accommodation, she was able to get on a priority waiting list for public housing. There were no spaces available for women to bring children to the crisis accommodation so she left her children with her partner and went herself. As a devoutly religious person her time in crisis accommodation was her first exposure to alcohol and drugs. She was disturbed and possibly traumatised by women yelling and arguing and presenting with mental health issues. She did not see her children for that year.

After her time in crisis accommodation she was able to access transitional housing and through a long battle was able to bring her children with her. As her husband had also been violent toward the children during that year she was away it was easier to bring them with her—otherwise she may have had to leave them with a controlling and emotionally abusive father.

She spent three years with her children in transitional and then eventually got in to public housing. The stress of multiple moves and the uncertainty of her housing and financial situation triggered mental health issues for herself and her children that are now ongoing.

Alternative ending

The fourth time she left her violent partner she was able to apply directly to the social housing system. The refuge helped her develop a safety plan and she went back to live with her partner and children until transitional housing became available. After a few months, when housing was available, she and her children left her partner and went straight into transitional housing and then public housing.

Conclusion

The bottleneck in Victoria's family violence response services contributes to too many women being trapped in violent relationships. A whole-of-government effort to make housing more affordable is a crucial element of any sincere family violence response. Early intervention and

access to housing is crucial to allowing people to escape family violence and prevent them from becoming homeless.

As a specialist homelessness service provider we see a considerable spillover from the family violence sector. We have also worked with many women with the set of complex issues that tend to arise in the homelessness sector, who have been with or are with violent partners. We believe that incorporating a gender lens within service delivery can be an effective way to responding to women at risk of or who have experienced family violence. It also helps women not to return to a violent partner or to seek out other violent partners.

We recommend that the Commission investigate the following policy changes:

- develop a statewide affordable housing strategy
- consider how to create more channels for women, including those with children, to enter stable, affordable housing directly from the family violence sector
- consider prioritising public housing *transfers* for people who are experiencing or at risk of family violence
- explore lessons from Canada on prioritising women escaping family violence for *entrance* into the social housing system
- consider the nature and effectiveness of innovative partnerships between the homelessness and family violence systems
- prioritise gendered service responses to homelessness in order to support women to break the cycle of family violence

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