



SUBMISSION TO THE NATIONAL PLAN TO END HOMELESSNESS

Centre for Non-Violence

‘The most effective and important change we can make to end homelessness is preventing people from becoming homeless in the first place.’¹

The Centre for Non-Violence (herein ‘CNV’) is Central Victoria’s leading family violence prevention and crisis and support service. With offices located on Dja Dja Wurrung, Yorta Yorta and Taungurung Country in Bendigo, Echuca, Kyneton and Maryborough, the organisation provides a range of programs and services that respond to and work to prevent family violence and homelessness across the Loddon region. With more than 30 years of operation, the organisation has helped thousands of women and children to escape family violence, and has worked with men who use violence to address behaviours and attitudes that have led to acts of family violence in the home.

Key Recommendation:

1. Every person has the right to a safe place to call home.
2. The most effective and important change we can make to end homelessness is preventing people from becoming homeless in the first place.
3. The National Housing and Homelessness Plan needs to include policy areas in scope that can achieve:
 - universal prevention to reduce the overall number of people at risk of homelessness
 - targeted prevention to reduce risk of homelessness for people who are more vulnerable to becoming homeless
 - crisis prevention to prevent homelessness for people at imminent risk of homelessness
 - Support the important work of homelessness, housing and family violence services in providing emergency responses and support for people to gain and sustain housing.
4. The National Plan must address major drivers of homelessness across the population, including racism and discrimination, the adequacy and security of income support, people’s access to affordable housing and importantly safety and wellbeing.
5. Prevention requires the Federal Government to address gaps in other human service systems that cause homelessness, such as provision of family violence prevention and support services, adolescent mental health supports, and tenancy and legal advice.
6. Homelessness services simply do not have the capacity to provide support for everyone in need:
 - this has devastating consequences for people who are turned away.
 - has system consequences including missed opportunities for prevention of homelessness and for prevention of re-entry to homelessness, and,
 - creates significant costs and pressures on other service systems, such as family violence, acute health, child protection and justice services

¹ Homelessness Australia 2023. ‘The 10 Year Housing and Homelessness Plan: Key Messaging and Submission Guide’, August: available from: [Submission Guide Homelessness Plan \(homelessnessaustralia.org.au\)](https://homelessnessaustralia.org.au) [accessed: 11 October 2023]

Introduction:

There is a significant need for greater investment and long-term policies that see more families in safe and secure homes.

Australia is facing an unprecedented tightening of the rental market and a serious shortfall of social and affordable housing. This, coupled with a cost-of-living crisis and an increase in mortgage defaults, also means re-homing people who have lost their home is extremely difficult.

This challenge is exacerbated by the fact that many more people are becoming homeless than ever before. These are individuals and families, who, if they had access to affordable housing, would not need to engage in support services that are already at critical capacity.²

We know, from working in and alongside housing services, that the only way forward is to reduce the number of people seeking homelessness and housing support.

While the Federal Government does recognise that communities in regional settings are at most risk of insecure and unaffordable housing, what we need is more than recognition. We need place-based action that has long term investment and support at the federal level. And importantly, recognises that factors contributing to homelessness is not simply a housing issue'. The National Plan therefore must not simply be about investment in housing services, but take into account and devise policies that seek to stop homelessness from occurring in the first place. This will require extensive engagement in other social support services, such as health, disability and family violence services.

Homelessness, Housing Security and the Intersect with Family Violence:

Family violence is the leading cause of homelessness in Australia. Of all adults seeking housing support as a result of family violence in 2018-2019, 90% were women³; and with soaring rents, low vacancy rates, interest rate rises and housing affordability at an all-time low, we know the situation is only getting harder for women and children seeking safety, wellbeing and a life free from violence.

1. Every Person has the Right to a Safe Place to Call Home

A safe, affordable, and decent home for our clients is the foundation for a safe, nourished life free from family violence.

- An absence of affordable housing options **increases the likelihood of victim survivors remaining** with a violent perpetrator.
- The **risk of homelessness** when considering whether or not to leave abusive partners or family members is paramount:

² Pedlar C 2022. 'Bendigo's rental affordability worse than rest of regional Victoria', *Bendigo Advertiser*, 1 December. Available from: <https://www.bendigoadvertiser.com.au/story/8000397/regions-rental-market-deemed-unaffordable-in-new-report/> [accessed: 25 July 2023]

³ Safe and Equal 2021. 'Fast Facts', produced in conjunction with Respect Victoria. Available from: <https://safeandequal.org.au/resources/fast-facts-2022/> [accessed: 5 July 2023]

- 100% of victim survivors at CNV have had to make an assessment of whether to stay in the abusive relationship, or risk housing insecurity and/or homelessness (short term decision making on when or possible to leave)
- Between 70-90% of victim survivor clients have had to consider housing affordability (rental prices, mortgage repayments) as part of their journey from family violence (short to medium term decision-making)
- On average, **more than 65 per cent of CNV victim survivor clients** face a lack of safe and affordable housing
- A significant number of victim survivor clients either have to remain in relationship or are **forced to return** to the abusive relationship in order to avoid homelessness/housing insecurity and the flow on effects of unaffordable/unavailable housing (ie. associated rising cost of living, loss of community (where a move from the region to a more affordable/available housing market)
- Our staff are increasingly finding it **difficult to provide quality support to victim survivors and their children** if they do not have a safe or reliable place to call home. Across the family violence sector, and CNV is no exception, staff face significant pressure as a direct result of the housing crisis. Finding affordable, safe and secure housing has become a primary focus for many of our Specialist Family Violence Practitioners shifting focus from family violence and safety. Significant time is spent providing necessary support to women and children victim survivors, and, men who use violence to find housing (including both short term emergency housing, and longer-term private rentals) in order to reduce the risk in escalation of family violence.⁴
- The current lack of affordable housing options, inclusive of rental properties, **inhibits victim survivors' safety and recovery** as they continue to face uncertainty. A choice between facing homelessness or risking a return to the home of the perpetrator is no choice at all.

2. The most effective and important change we can make to end homelessness is preventing people from becoming homeless in the first place.

As stated, family violence is the leading factor for homelessness in Australia. As a family violence prevention and support service we see daily the impacts that a housing sector in crisis is having on women, children and diverse communities experiencing family violence. Women and children are overrepresented in homelessness data as a result of family violence.

Within this context, we must address the gendered drivers of violence against women and girls, children and diverse communities through effective policy and project development. This will require significant systems change in addressing racism and discrimination. We know that our legal and government systems are not always working towards equality, and in order to reduce the number of people experiencing or at risk of homelessness we must begin to dismantle barriers to equality and justice through targeted legislative reform.

⁴ In Australia, an estimated 3 per cent of women (275,000) experienced violence by a current partner whereas 15 per cent of women (1.4 million) experienced violence by a previous partner <https://safeandequal.org.au/understanding-family-violence/statistics/#> Sourced from: ABS (2016) Personal Safety Survey [accessed 11 July 2023]

3. The National Housing and Homelessness Plan needs to include policy areas in scope that can achieve:

- **Universal prevention to reduce the overall number of people at risk of homelessness**

This includes long term commitment to building more social and affordable housing, and a nationalisation of policies that support diversity, inclusion and culturally safe policies and frameworks to better inform the real estate sector, especially within the private rental market.

- **Targeted prevention to reduce risk of homelessness for people who are more vulnerable to becoming homeless**

The National Plan needs policy development that takes into consideration the oftentimes complex and intersectional needs of people facing homelessness. Within the family violence sector we understand that those at most risk of harm due to a lack of safe, accessible and affordable housing are women and children experiencing family violence. This is exacerbated for First Nation women and those from diverse communities, as well as for women living with disability.

- **Crisis prevention to prevent homelessness for people at imminent risk of homelessness**

The family violence sector requires a better, and more targeted response to crisis, emergency and transitional housing for victim survivors and their children. The use of hotels and motels is not a viable, safe or financially sustainable option – and the sectors over-reliance on the private hotel and motel industry to provide emergency accommodation to some of our most vulnerable community members is simply not appropriate. The sector is calling for specialised crisis, emergency and transitional housing options that are able to provide trauma informed support and management.

- **Support the important work of homelessness, housing and family violence services in providing emergency responses and support for people to gain and sustain housing.**

The crisis of housing affordability **increases demand on specialist family violence services** and is ultimately costly for the service system and those who use it.

The demand on services is significant. For example, the Centre for Non-Violence provided over 14,000 nights of crisis accommodation support for victim survivors of family violence during 2022-2023.⁵

- **Short Term Emergency accommodation is not meeting the needs of the community.**

It is failing to appropriately address victim survivor safety and wellbeing during the most high-risk post separation time period.

Our staff have unanimously reported on the difficult and time-consuming effort required to find emergency accommodation. This is further impacted by the following factors:

⁵ Refer to Appendix One: Housing Needs in Response to Family Violence 2022-2023– A CNV Snapshot.

- Reliance on private market (ie motel accommodation) poses **significant risk considerations** for women and children fleeing family violence as these spaces are **not fit for purpose** (ie secure locks, visibility of vehicles from street etc)
- Due to competing emergency accommodation demand with other support services there are instances where both **perpetrators of family violence have been housed in the same motel as victim survivors** of family violence – this poses significant risk to safety and sense of safety and wellbeing for victim survivors
- Motels are not appropriate spaces for women with children to live in (ie. space for privacy, ability to cook etc is not available)
- **Women with more than 2 children** require family suites in motels which are often not available.
- Accessibility to emergency accommodation for **women and children who identify as Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander** is significantly reduced.
- Time that would be better spent addressing the support and service needs for clients by our specialist trained family violence practitioners is instead spent searching for suitable accommodation. Staff reported this takes on average in excess of 2-3 hours per case. And due to the short-term nature and lack of availability for longer term housing, it is an issue that often arises **several times** during a **single client case management**.

4. **The National Plan must address major drivers of homelessness across the population, including racism and discrimination, the adequacy and security of income support, people’s access to affordable housing and family wellbeing.**

Access to safe, secure housing is a gendered issue. Women and children are significantly discriminated against and have reduced access to safe and secure housing both in the private rental market and in home ownership. This is **not** simply an issue of housing availability, but significantly an issue of housing that is not available for women and diverse communities.

The private rental market has been of particular concern for our staff who have identified that real estate agencies have significant oversight of application processes including:

- Requirements for previous rental history (often women have not entered the rental market before or have not rented in their own name)
- Access to financial arrangements (notably income sources). There is significant discrimination against women receiving support and disability payments.
- Single women with no children and women with more than 2 children are most significantly impacted. This includes women who have secure employment.
- Accessibility to the private rental market is **further reduced** for women who identify as **Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander** and women from **migrant and refugee communities**. Prevailing discriminatory attitudes and larger family sizes place significant strain on women seeking safe and secure housing.
- Men who use violence (including clients and/or former partners of victim survivor clients) are **often able to secure a private rental in a shorter time-frame** – often within a few weeks/2-3 rental applications.
- Men who use violence have access to accommodation programs such as ‘A Place for Change’ (CNV and Haven Home Safe partnership) which provides the opportunity for longer term housing to be purchased for perpetrators. In this program the partnership is able to

purchase long term housing – ie., serviced apartments for up to 6 months to house perpetrators. It is imperative to extend this type of funding for victim survivors. Our statistics are telling us that it is women, not men, adversely affected by the housing crisis and therefore are in greater need of dedicated housing investment.

- There must also be an **urgent review into the adequacy of income support payments** and social support services including health and disability services. When working with our clients, a significant number of women who face homelessness have complex needs that can include reliance on income support streams. This is then further exacerbated for First Nation women, women from diverse communities as well as women with disability who are experiencing family violence (inclusive of direct family members as well as carers), who are at even greater risk of harm, compounded by a lack of accessible and affordable housing.⁶

5. Prevention requires the Federal Government to address gaps in the provision of family violence prevention and support services.

It is imperative that the lived experience of victim survivors is acknowledged through more sustainable policies that better address structural social and gender inequalities to address secure housing and risks to homelessness for women and children. Lives depend on it.

Our staff hold knowledge through expertise in the family violence sector of the structural inequalities and oppressions faced by women, children and diverse communities. This, coupled with a housing landscape that is largely inaccessible, presents challenging and often complex situations that can lead to workforce burnout, vicarious trauma and feelings of hopelessness and frustration⁷.

These are conditions that no worker should have to face on a daily basis. Our service is already seeing a rise in the number of people seeking housing help because they cannot afford private rental prices⁸ and after decades of failed housing policy, including a shortfall of 640,000 social and affordable homes⁹, we are leaving women and children, during one of their most vulnerable times, exposed to serious risk of harm and death.¹⁰ A greater commitment to investment in social, community and public housing is needed and requires strategic national and state

⁶ Refer to: Royal Commission into Violence, Abuse, Neglect and Exploitation of People with a Disability: Final Report, p.18. Available from: <https://disability.royalcommission.gov.au/system/files/2023-09/Final%20Report%20-%20Volume%203%2C%20Nature%20and%20Extent%20of%20Violence%2C%20abuse%2C%20neglect%20and%20exploitation.pdf> [Accessed: 18 October 2023]

⁷ CNV 2023. collated data from staff discussions and feedback workshop: 'Have Your Say – 'Housing Crisis and Impacts on Work'.

⁸ A Safe Place to Call Home - Mission Australia's Homelessness and Stable Housing Impact Report (2023) <https://www.missionaustralia.com.au/media-centre/media-releases/mission-australia-s-homelessness-impact-report-reveals-rising>

[-demand-for-services](#) [accessed 11 July 2023]

⁹ Quantifying Australia's unmet housing need: a national snapshot (2022) *Community Housing Industry Association* <https://apo.org.au/node/320820> [accessed 11 July 2023]

¹⁰ One woman a week and one child every two weeks is killed as a result of family violence. Leaving the relationship is one of the most dangerous times for women and children, and this is compounded when there is **nowhere** for them to leave to. For further information <https://www.safesteps.org.au/victoria-lights-up-in-purple-2023/> [accessed 11 July 2023] and <https://safeandequal.org.au/understanding-family-violence/statistics/#> [accessed: 11 July 2023]

government engagement: purpose-built housing that can offer stability and dignity for those most vulnerable in our community should never of been left to the private market to solve. Equally, the responsibility for the housing crisis should not fall on the shoulders of our staff, and yet they are holding themselves responsible for the safety and wellbeing of their clients.

6. Homelessness services simply do not have the capacity to provide support for everyone in need:

- this has devastating consequences for victim survivors who are turned away, with many forced to choose between homelessness or a return to the home of violence.
- **has system consequences including missed opportunities for prevention of homelessness and for prevention of re-entry to homelessness, and,**
- **creates significant costs and pressures on other service systems, such as family violence, acute health, child protection and justice services**

Concluding Notes:

CNV as a leading family violence prevention and support service has been advocating for greater and sustained investment in safe and affordable housing that considers the client journey from to emergency and transitional housing, to long term housing: a safe place to call home.

We are, as an organisation deeply concerned with the ongoing, and far-reaching impacts that a lack of affordable and safe housing is having on communities, including the impacts on our staff when trying to support families seeking a life free from violence.

As it stands, the housing sector, as the Federal Government is all too aware, is failing to meet the most basic of needs to those most vulnerable in our communities. The National Plan to end Homelessness must provide a comprehensive and coordinated approach to policy and legislative reform that considers the drivers of homelessness, and invests in and refers to the support systems and expertise of those working within the sector and with individuals and families at risk or experiencing homelessness.

In closing, CNV is seeking to encourage all levels of government and relevant sector representatives to work together in addressing the systemic issues facing communities at risk of homelessness.

APPENDIX ONE:

Figure 1: Housing Needs in Response to Family Violence 2022-2023– A CNV Snapshot.

