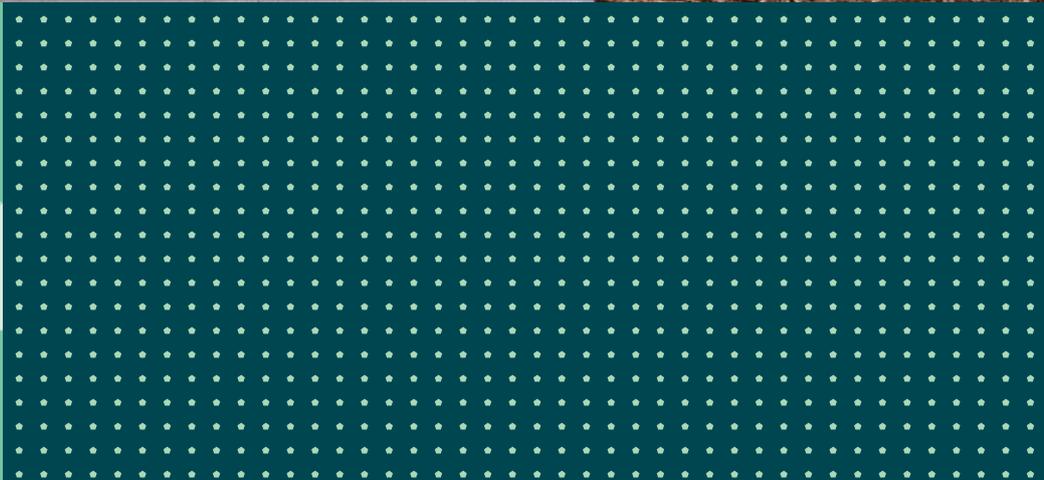




**Council  
to Homeless  
Persons**

# A plan to end homelessness in Victoria



## Acknowledgements

We respectfully acknowledge the traditional owners of this land. We pay our respects to elders past and present.

We appreciate and celebrate diversity in all its forms and believe diversity of all kinds makes communities stronger and more effective.



Council to Homeless Persons

2 Stanley Street  
Collingwood Victoria

/ T 03 8415 6200

/ E [admin@chp.org.au](mailto:admin@chp.org.au)

/ W [chp.org.au](http://chp.org.au)

Find us on:

Twitter [@CHPVic](https://twitter.com/CHPVic)

Facebook [@counciltohomeless](https://www.facebook.com/counciltohomeless)



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## CEO's message

During Covid lockdowns, Victoria demonstrated that it is possible to end homelessness. We now need to build on this experience, by delivering the housing and support needed to enable every Victorian to have the home they need to thrive.

This document maps out the housing and support needed to end homelessness in Victoria, tailored to the differing needs of particular groups. These groups, include young people, people who have been sleeping rough or who have had repeated experiences of homelessness, victim survivors fleeing violence, and First Nations Victorians.

We identify the investments needed to prevent homelessness before it occurs, and to deliver the amount of social housing needed to provide homes for Victorians squeezed out of Victoria's increasingly unaffordable rental market.

We also call for fairer treatment of people without homes in the legal system.

Lastly, we ask for a continued focus on addressing the workforce challenges experienced by the specialist homelessness services (SHS) sector.

Hundreds of people from across Victoria provided input to the development of this platform. I extend my thanks to all with a special thanks to contributors with the lived experience of not having a home and of accessing homelessness services.

Jenny Smith, CEO, Council to Homeless Persons

# Recommendations

## The next Victorian Government should:

- Build 6,000 social housing properties per year for ten years by ensuring that a share of all new housing developments is social housing, as well as providing continued Government investment.
- Deliver an online mechanism for social housing applicants to apply for social housing of their choice.
- Increase Victoria's homelessness prevention capacity by delivering 22 new homelessness prevention workers in access points, and the brokerage that they will need to provide 40,000 additional instances of support.
- Provide an additional 3,000 support periods through Tenancy Plus so all social housing tenants facing eviction can receive support.
- Extend the *From Homelessness to a Home and Homes for Families* programs to provide ongoing capacity to deliver 2,000 Housing First packages, providing housing and support.
- Fund a peer worker program in each of the nine Department of Families, Fairness and Housing regions.
- Fund 23 additional case managers for people without homes.
- Deliver five accommodation outreach teams to provide support at emergency accommodation with high numbers of highly vulnerable residents.
- Fund three LGBTIQ+ housing pathways programs across Victoria, and one safe housing facility.
- Deliver the social housing that is needed for women and children and young people experiencing family violence and provide a housing guarantee to victim survivors of family violence.
- Bring Victoria's women's refuge capacity up to 320 households per night and provide specialist crisis accommodation for young people fleeing violence.
- Expand case management support to women and children, and young people escaping violence.
- Fund new therapeutic programs for children who have experienced homelessness in each of the nine Department of Families, Fairness and Housing regions across Victoria.

- Develop a youth-specific homelessness strategy.
- Deliver 5,000 social housing properties over four years for young people, and support for the young people living in them.
- Provide 49 additional case managers for young people experiencing homelessness.
- Deliver Housing First for Youth programs, including housing and support, for 250 young people.
- Expand the Community of Schools and Services model to at least four new metropolitan and three new regional sites.
- Provide 2,000 young people and their families per year with support to reconcile.
- Provide youth refuge accommodation in parts of Victoria that are under serviced and those that lack it entirely.
- Deliver 600 new social housing properties to Aboriginal Community Controlled Organisations each year and develop a plan to ensure that social housing access for Aboriginal people keeps pace with population growth.
- Implement the *Blueprint for an Aboriginal-specific Homelessness System in Victoria*.
- Support kinship responsibilities by ensuring that people can't be evicted for taking in Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander kin, building larger social housing, increasing rent flexibility in social housing when a person is staying temporarily, and supporting Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander home ownership.
- Continue to fund the partnership between Government and the Specialist Homelessness Sector (SHS) to implement the *SHS Workforce Development Strategy* to address growing workforce challenges.
- Conduct a review of poverty offences, implement a Protocol for People Experiencing Homelessness in Public Places, and implement the recommendations of the Fines Review Advisory Board.
- Provide for alternative bail conditions that don't discriminate against people who don't have a stable home.
- Add a right to housing to the *Victorian Charter of Human Rights and Responsibilities* and empower VCAT to consider that right in social housing tenancy matters.



# Provide the housing Victoria needs to end homelessness

**Victoria needs to build 6,000 new social housing properties each year to end homelessness.**

## Build more social housing

The major problem creating homelessness in Victoria is that people on low incomes can't find housing they can afford. In the past year, private sector rents in Melbourne have increased 7.5% in Melbourne, with regional areas experiencing even higher increases. And vacancy rates have plummeted, down to 1.5 per cent in Melbourne and below 1.0% across regional areas.<sup>1</sup>

More people are being squeezed out of the housing market and into homelessness. But when they seek social housing, it is not available to them. Even those given the highest priority face an average wait of 13.9 months.<sup>2</sup>

In the past year, only 3,828 new allocations were made to social housing,<sup>3</sup> but 37,784 Victorians came to homelessness services needing long term housing.<sup>4</sup> 36 per cent of these were women and children fleeing domestic and family violence. Of those who needed long term and low-cost housing, it was only provided directly to 4 per cent. More than 70 per cent missed out, with long-term housing not provided.

We know that without housing other issues in people's lives escalate, causing enormous harm, and with significant cost to government. By failing to provide adequate housing, the Victorian Government increases demand on already stretched acute health and mental health services, child protection, and justice services.

Researchers at Swinburne University have costed the foregone wider social and economic benefits of inadequate social housing supply in Victoria at \$141.2 million per annum. These costs will increase to \$263.7 million by 2036.<sup>5</sup>

While the Big Housing Build investment is helping, adding 9,300 new properties to the social housing stock, Victoria will still have far less social housing proportionally than other Australian states and territories.

To deliver the housing that Victoria urgently needs to release the pressure valve in the housing market, and to end homelessness, the Government needs to increase the pipeline of new housing to 6,000 properties each year.

This can be achieved by extending and increasing the Big Housing Build and by mandating inclusionary zoning to ensure that a share of all new housing in Victoria is social housing.

As new social housing is developed it also needs to better align with the profile of need for

housing, including from families fleeing violence and young people, singles and larger families. Currently, the one bedroom waiting list is more than three times the size of the next longest waiting list, and 37 per cent of those on the waiting list are seeking a one-bedroom home.<sup>6</sup>

**The next Victorian Government should: build 6,000 social housing properties per year for ten years by ensuring that a share of all new housing developments is social housing, as well as providing continued Government investment.**

### Choice based letting

Victoria provides social housing applicants with only a very limited choice of housing. Applicants who decline two offers are removed from the priority list. This means that a person who declines two unsuitable offers of housing faces additional years of waiting for a home.

The result of these arrangements is that people are allocated homes which don't meet their needs, increasing the number of unplanned exits from these homes. Choice based letting would also see "hard to let" properties filled more quickly by applicants who prioritise rapid access to a property over the amenity of the home.

Choice-based letting gives more control over where someone will live to the person who will live in the property with a positive impact on tenant outcomes. Tenant choice and control over which housing they accept is a critical element of the world-leading Housing First model for ending enduring homelessness.<sup>7</sup>

Choice-based letting for social housing is increasingly common in other jurisdictions. It has been operating in parts of the Netherlands for three decades, and many UK housing providers have embraced it over the past 20 years.<sup>8</sup> Immensely popular among social housing service users, this relatively modest reform has the capacity to greatly improve how social housing operates in Victoria.

**The next Victorian Government should: deliver an online mechanism for social housing applicants to apply for social housing of their choice.**



# Prevent homelessness before it happens

**In most cases, we can stop homelessness before it even starts.**

## Case management for homelessness prevention

Victoria's homelessness services are remarkably successful at homelessness prevention. Almost two thirds of people who come to homelessness services do so before they become homeless, and over 87 per cent of this group are supported to remain housed.<sup>9</sup>

Interventions to prevent homelessness can involve workers helping to resolve conflicts with landlords, supporting people to access Centrelink entitlements, to submit rental applications, or assisting with arrears. Case managers might work with young people to resolve conflict at home so they can return or assist people to navigate other services they need, such as health or mental health, the NDIS, or family violence services.

However, the lack of capacity to undertake prevention work in SHS means that opportunities to make critical and time sensitive interventions are missed, and people lose their homes even where tenancies could be saved.

These resource constraints are now severe. 30,000 more people came to homelessness services last year than did so in 2011, yet homelessness services have not seen an ongoing increase in entry point workers since 2009.

Not only does this mean that there isn't capacity to undertake time critical prevention work, but it also means more people being turned away altogether. In the last year alone, the number of people turned away from homelessness services each day due to a lack of staffing grew from 108 to 133. Even this number is an underestimate, as many homelessness services are now so overwhelmed that don't have the staffing to return phone calls to people in need.

Expanding case management for homelessness prevention, is early intervention at its best and is a critical step in a plan to end homelessness.

**The next Victorian Government should: increase Victoria's homelessness prevention capacity by delivering 22 new homelessness prevention workers in access points, and the brokerage that they will need to provide 40,000 additional instances of support.**

## Case management to prevent tenancies at risk failing

Social housing is intended to provide people with long-term stable housing. Yet, 27 per cent of social housing tenancies end in the first year.<sup>10</sup> Social housing landlords initiated over 3,700 eviction proceedings at VCAT in 2019.<sup>11</sup> While few of these resulted in eviction orders, many renters believe that a landlord has an outright right to evict, and as a result, leave the home that was supposed to be theirs.

Currently programs that provide support to social housing tenants when their tenancies are at risk face long wait lists, and many people who urgently need support to prevent an eviction or unplanned exit from social housing miss out. Vulnerable tenants in need of support then cycle back into rough sleeping or rooming houses, and to homelessness services. Agencies reported to the recent Parliamentary Inquiry into Homelessness, that they need to nearly double their existing capacity to meet the needs of people on their waiting list.<sup>12</sup>

Providing the right amount of support at the right time will result in vulnerable people sustaining tenancies for longer, increasing their wellbeing, and reducing the pressure of tenant conflict in social housing.

These programs also reduce the costs to social housing providers of tenancy churn.

Evictions from social housing are especially likely to result in homelessness, given the vulnerability of tenants. Homelessness is estimated to cost the community around \$25,000 per person without a home per year, largely through greater use of government services.<sup>13</sup> By contrast, Victoria's successful Tenancy Plus program supports social housing tenancies at risk, for a cost of around \$2,000 for each six-month support period.<sup>14</sup>

An expansion of social housing tenancy supports could both help people in a timely manner when their tenancy is in trouble and help highly vulnerable renters to sustain their tenancy through and beyond the critical first year.

**The next Victorian Government should: provide an additional 3,000 support periods through Tenancy Plus so all social housing tenants facing eviction can receive support.**



# End rough sleeping and recurring homelessness

With the right housing and supports anyone can make a home.

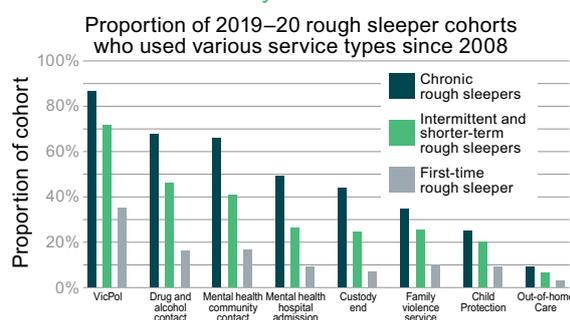
## Extend From Homelessness to a Home and Homes for Families

People with more complex needs, such as experiences of trauma, family violence, mental illness and/or substance misuse alongside housing issues, are only one fifth of all people accessing homelessness services but receive over 40 per cent of all SHS support resources.

Those with more complex needs, typically cycle in and out of rough sleeping, rooming houses, couch surfing and acute services, such as hospitals, mental health services, and the justice system. The risks and insecurity of housing instability cause immense personal harm to people who have already typically suffered multiple traumatic events.<sup>15</sup> It is also enormously costly to, and adds to pressure to already stretched health, child protection, family violence and justice services.

Analysis of the service use history of long-term rough sleepers reveals that at some point in the last 12 years approximately 70 per cent will have had contact with drug and alcohol services, 50 per cent have had mental health hospital admissions, and over 40 per cent have had custodial terms end.<sup>16</sup> (see Figure 1).

Figure 1. Rough sleeper cohorts by service use<sup>17</sup>



Providing long term housing and ongoing flexible support to people who have experienced long term and recurring homelessness is more effective, and ultimately less costly, than failing to respond to their need for housing.<sup>18, 19</sup>

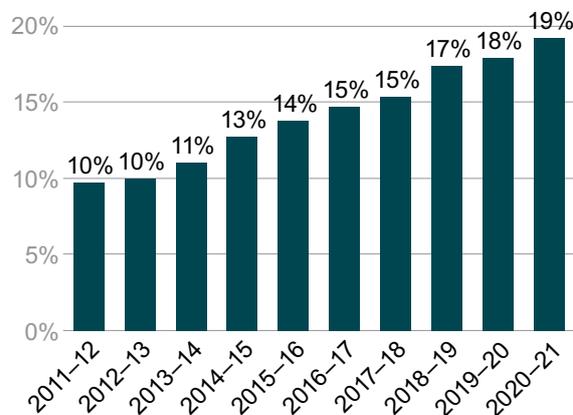
Victoria made an important investment in 2021 to Housing First informed programs *From Homelessness to a Home and Homes for Families*, to provide long term housing and ongoing flexible support to around 2,000 households. Many have stabilised their housing, and been able to reengage with employment, and/or strengthen their health and wellbeing.

Yet despite this success, these important programs are limited to those who were in hotel accommodation during Covid, with a strict cut off period for eligibility. Limited funding for case management and lack of access to long term housing alongside soaring demand means homelessness services can only provide new clients who seek support after the cut off for these programs, with short periods of support and short-term accommodation.

Even those currently in From Homelessness to a Home and Homes for Families may not get the support they need in future as the programs are only funded to mid-2023.

There is clear evidence of the need for a significant ongoing Housing First program capacity in the Victorian homelessness service system. As Figure 2 demonstrates the proportion of people presenting to homelessness services with complex needs has been growing rapidly.<sup>20</sup>

**Figure 2. Percentage of clients presenting with two or more of mental illness, family violence, and substance misuse<sup>21</sup>**



The numbers of people returning to homelessness services is also increasing.

**The next Victorian Government should:** extend the *From Homelessness to a Home and Homes for Families* programs to provide ongoing capacity to deliver 2,000 Housing First packages, providing housing and support.

**Figure 3. Victorian Specialist Homelessness Service users, new and returning<sup>22</sup>**



Source: Specialist Homelessness Service Collection (SHSC) unpublished data

Extending the existing From Homelessness to a Home and Homes for Families programs to provide an ongoing capacity to deliver 2,000 Housing First packages of housing and support would provide a strong foundation for sustained housing outcomes to be achieved for people who are currently stuck in a revolving door of homelessness, ill health and service use.

Ongoing investment is required to allow the intensity of support provided to be reduced over time as people's housing stabilises and increase again when needed to prevent a recurrence of homelessness.

A continued and growing program would also require a pipeline of additional housing and support vacancies to meet the needs of new clients.

As *From Homelessness to a Home and Homes for Families* have demonstrated, we can end homelessness for people with complex and long term needs if housing and ongoing support are properly resourced.

## Peer workers

People who have been homeless for a long time often face challenges sustaining housing, and stress adjusting to exiting homelessness, as the mental health impacts of trauma surface after the chaos of homelessness subsides.

They describe experiencing anxiety, loneliness, being overwhelmed and feeling out of place in their community.<sup>23, 24</sup>

With support capacity so constrained, gaining housing often also coincides with a withdrawal of case management support, leaving people to manage these challenges alone.

Having access to peer workers, who have experienced the journey out of homelessness and into housing, has been shown to be an effective way to help people recover from the trauma of homelessness, and adjust to their new home and community.

A small number of peer support workers are currently working in Victorian homelessness services. Scaling up these programs and enhancing the support and supervision for the unique and important role of peer workers, will build on this success and further strengthen the capacity to end homelessness in Victoria.

**The next Victorian Government should: fund a peer worker program in each of the nine Department of Families, Fairness and Housing regions.**

## Providing the support people need to gain and sustain housing

Each year 35,000 Victorians who are already homeless come to homelessness services for help. Lack of support capacity means around 15,000 do not receive case management support,<sup>25</sup> and hence their experience of homelessness is likely to be more damaging and to become more entrenched.<sup>26</sup>

Long wait lists for case management, and funding arrangements for limited periods of

support, mean that homelessness services face pressure to end support and move on to new clients in crisis, even where people would benefit from longer support periods.

Providing greater case management support capacity in the SHS will not just increase the number of people without homes who receive case management, but also allow SHS providers to provide more appropriately tailored support periods to the people who receive their help.

**The next Victorian Government should: fund 23 additional case managers for people without homes.**

## Health and support outreach to emergency accommodation

Across Victoria there are a small number of motels, apartment complexes, and large rooming houses known for providing short-stay emergency accommodation to highly vulnerable single people without homes. This may include people leaving prison, people with drug or alcohol addictions, or with mental health issues. Despite the significant support needs of many residents, these accommodation options lack adequate support for residents. Consequently, many residents have negative experiences.

There is significant practice evidence demonstrating that healthcare workers can play a critical role in fostering client engagement,

by delivering direct services that people need immediately, and leveraging this into a support relationship. During the period of “stay at home” public health orders, many people with very complex needs were placed in hotels. In response to similar concerns about those sites, the Victorian Government provided hotels accommodating 20 or more people without homes with emergency response teams.

These teams did much to not only improve the cohesion of these facilities, but to link people into healthcare and support. The success of this approach should be continued by providing ongoing outreach capacity to highly vulnerable people in emergency accommodation.

**The next Victorian Government should: deliver five accommodation outreach teams to provide support at emergency accommodation with high numbers of highly vulnerable residents.**

## LGBTIQ+ safe housing

LGBTIQ+ people are far more likely to be without a home than other Australians. Research shows that one in three LGBTIQ+ Australians have experienced homelessness,<sup>27</sup> and that LGBTIQ+ Victorians are homeless at almost three times the rate of the general population.<sup>28</sup>

LGBTIQ+ people often face homelessness alongside complex needs, including childhood trauma, abuse, substance misuse, poor mental health, and suicidality.<sup>29</sup> For their part, LGBTIQ+ service consumers report that a poor understanding of their circumstances can lead to inappropriate responses.<sup>30</sup>

In Victoria, some homelessness services have developed specialist responses to support LGBTIQ+ people. But lack of resources, combined with the high level of complex needs among this client group has meant that few such programs have been able to continue or to scale up. Dedicated resources are required to develop a suite of specialist programs to meet people’s needs, irrespective of their gender identity or sexuality.

LGBTIQ+ people also need access to dedicated housing options. LGBTIQ+ people experiencing homelessness need housing options that can keep them safe from violence, affirm their identity, provide space from the pressures of homelessness, and allow them to move forward with confidence.

**The next Victorian Government should: fund three LGBTIQ+ housing pathways programs across Victoria, and one safe housing facility.**



# End homelessness for women and children and other victim survivors of family violence

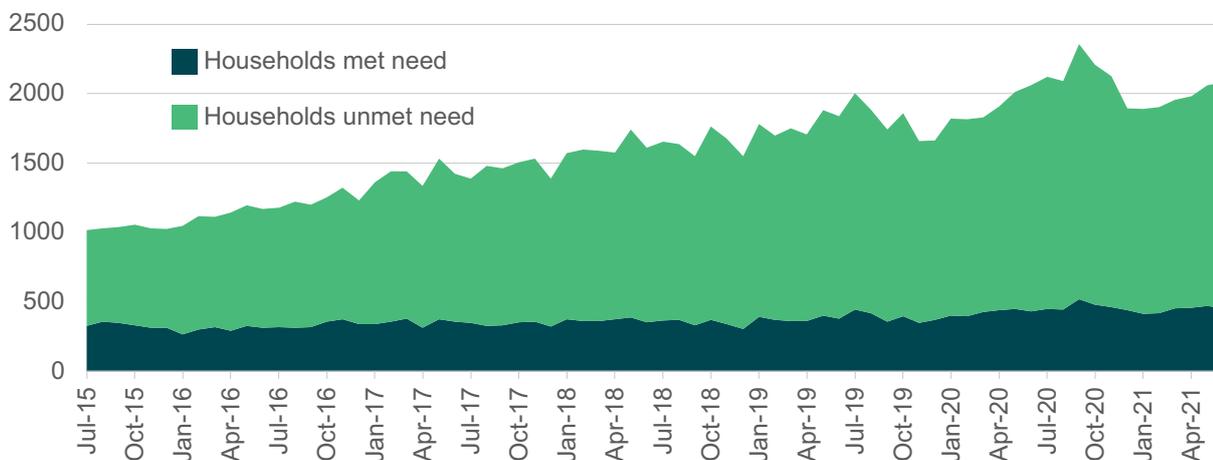
Complete the work of the *Royal Commission into Family Violence* and end homelessness following family violence.

## A housing guarantee for victim survivors

Victoria led Australia with the ground-breaking Royal Commission into Family Violence, and the Family Violence Housing Blitz. These investments achieved positive outcomes, providing safe homes for women who would

otherwise be homeless. Yet the level of violence continues, and social housing has not grown adequately to meet need. As a result, unmet need for long term housing by women, children, and young people fleeing family violence and other victim survivors has continued to grow (see Figure 4 below).

Figure 4. The number of households requesting long-term housing due to family violence whose need is unmet<sup>31</sup>



Lack of safe housing has devastating consequences for women and children and other victim survivors. Every year an estimated 7,690 women across Australia return to perpetrators not having anywhere affordable to live; and 9,120 women become homeless after leaving their homes due to domestic and family violence and being unable to secure long-term housing. Around 45,000 women in Australia want to leave a violent home but don't, because they can't afford to leave or have nowhere to go.<sup>32</sup>

Without safe housing, mothers risk child protection involvement and the prospect of their children being removed. This risk falls most heavily on Aboriginal families, with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Island children already overrepresented in statutory care.

Housing is of fundamental importance for families. The costs to families and children, as well as to other expensive government services,

such as child protection, are so significant, that there cannot be any justification for continuing the shocking situation in which women have to choose between violence and homelessness.

The Victorian Government conducted the research called for by the Royal Commission in 2018 to "quantify the number of additional social housing units required for family violence victims who are unable to gain access to and sustain private rental accommodation",<sup>33</sup> but has not ever publicly released the findings, nor built the quantum of homes required to meet need.

The next Victorian Government needs to break the cycle of homelessness for women and other victims fleeing violence, and provide victim survivors with a housing guarantee, alongside investment to build the quantum of additional social housing identified in the research.

**The next Victorian Government should: deliver the social housing that is needed for women and children and young people experiencing family violence and provide a housing guarantee to victim survivors of family violence.**

### **Increasing capacity for appropriate crisis accommodation**

Creating more housing options for women and children escaping violence will also improve the operation of Victoria's short-term family violence refuges, allowing for women to exit refuge as soon as they're ready.

Refuge investment since the Royal Commission reported, has largely focused on re-design. Refuges have been rebuilt into the best practice 'core-and-cluster' design. However, this has not significantly added to capacity. Victoria's current refuge capacity of 160 households means that an average of 97 households are accommodated in emergency accommodation, typically low-cost motels, every night by Safe Steps. This does not include the many other victim-survivors whose emergency accommodation is funded through homelessness or local family violence services.

Recently, funding has also been made available to build two new refuges and expand capacity at other sites, increasing overall capacity by around 40 households. While these are positive steps, the scale of unmet need remains high.<sup>34</sup> Too many families continue to receive unsafe and unsupported motel accommodation when they leave a violent home.

A lack of specialist secure refuges for young people fleeing family violence means young people at significant risk are often accommodated in youth refuges or motels, without the security or specialist family violence support necessary for them to be safe.

Greater refuge capacity is needed alongside the affordable private rental and social housing that allow it to work effectively as a safe and immediate option.

**The next Victorian Government should: bring Victoria's women's refuge capacity up to 320 households per night and provide specialist crisis accommodation for young people fleeing violence.**

## Support for women and children and other victim survivors escaping family violence

Family violence is the number one cause of homelessness for women, children and young people.<sup>35</sup> Support services can help victim survivors to navigate not just the housing affordability crisis, but the other obstacles that stand between them and a life free from violence. Yet currently, too many women and other victim survivors are turned away unassisted from services who don't have enough staff to help.<sup>36</sup>

Even when safely rehoused, victim survivors may need support to overcome matters associated with the violence they experienced. Once the family is safe, and homelessness has been addressed this can be when the trauma, legal proceedings, and children's support needs create more challenges.

With the right resources, we can help victim survivors stay safe at home by excluding the perpetrator, avoid homelessness if they do need to leave, and build a life free from violence.

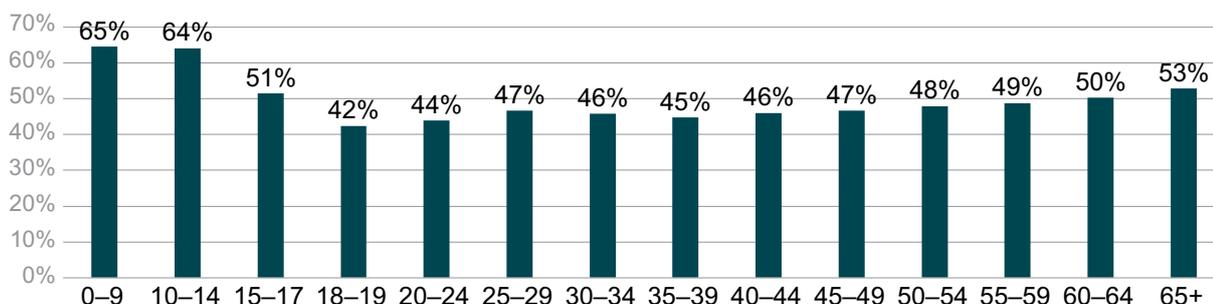
**The next Victorian Government should: expand case management support to women and children, and young people escaping violence.**

## Support for children experiencing homelessness

When children experience homelessness, the impacts can last long after they're safely rehoused. Homelessness can impact on children's physical, mental and social development, and lead to mental health and/or behavioural problems.<sup>37, 38</sup> These impacts can have lifelong consequences.

Children currently receive the lowest rates of case management at homelessness services (see Figure 5 below). To be treated as clients in their own right, with their particular needs for support recognised and addressed, more supports must be made available.

Figure 5. Percentage of Specialist Homelessness Service users who don't receive case management, by age



Alongside immediate case management support, children also need ongoing therapeutic programs to support ongoing recovery. Children's therapies are an evidence-based means of supporting children who have experienced trauma and can assist

their healthy physical, cognitive and psychosocial development.<sup>39</sup>

These therapies can also support parents to better understand how homelessness has impacted their child, providing the family with the holistic support needed to thrive.<sup>40</sup>

**The next Victorian Government should: fund new therapeutic programs for children who have experienced homelessness in each of the nine Department of Families, Fairness and Housing regions across Victoria.**



# End youth homelessness

**Young people need support, as well as accommodation.**

## A youth homelessness strategy

Young people experience homelessness at extraordinarily high rates. In 2020–21, one in six homelessness service clients were aged 15 to 24; and 13,000 of those young people were presenting alone.<sup>41</sup>

The pathways young people follow into homelessness differ from older groups, with family violence, family breakdown, neglect, or abuse the major causes of young people fleeing a familial home. These experiences

cause significant disruption and trauma during a time of life that is already characterised by change. Supporting young people to exit homelessness and to achieve their life goals, often in the absence of parental support, requires specialist and often intensive supports.

A youth-specific homelessness strategy is needed to maximise the opportunities for prevention of youth homelessness, and to effectively respond to young people without a home.

**The next Victorian Government should: develop a youth-specific homelessness strategy.**

## Housing for young people

To get back on their feet after experiencing homelessness, young people need a safe home and support to recover and work towards their goals, but they face enormous challenges securing affordable and appropriate housing, and support capacity is too limited for all young people to get the help they need.

In 2020–21, more than 8,800 young people sought medium- or long-term housing, but only 24 per cent were provided with a home. A further 19 per cent were referred to housing providers. More than half of all young people who needed a home missed out.

Securing affordable and appropriate housing for young people is challenging because they have much lower incomes than older adults, they face discrimination in the rental market, and they often need support to sustain a tenancy. On average, it requires deeper subsidies to provide social housing models that meet the specific needs of young people relative to older adults.

Currently in Victoria only 541 transitional and 66 long term properties are designated for young people, and in 2021 young people were allocated only 238 public housing tenancies.<sup>42, 43</sup>

Figure 6: Public housing designated for or occupied by young people

Singles youth (long term)	66
Transitional housing — Youth	459
Transitional housing — Care leavers	50
Transitional housing — Juvenile detention leavers	32
General public stock tenanted by young people	238
<b>Total</b>	<b>845</b>

Without a housing option young people become stuck in a cycle of homelessness. Young people often move between couch surfing, refuges and other emergency accommodation,

**The next Victorian Government should: deliver 5,000 social housing properties over four years for young people, and support for the young people living in them.**

### Support for young people to thrive

Young people who can't live with their parents need more than stable accommodation. They also need the support to develop life skills and manage transitions that other young people would receive in a supportive family, as well as extra support to recover from the trauma, violence or neglect that resulted in them becoming homeless.

Providing the support vulnerable young people need is the most effective way to maximise their opportunities to succeed and achieve their life goals.

Yet currently, most support periods for young people using homelessness services are short — almost half last for less than six weeks. 12 per cent, nearly 2,200 young people, receive support for a single day, and over 3,000 young people were turned away unassisted altogether. Many support periods are connected to accommodation, so when young people leave a youth refuge, they lose support as well as accommodation.

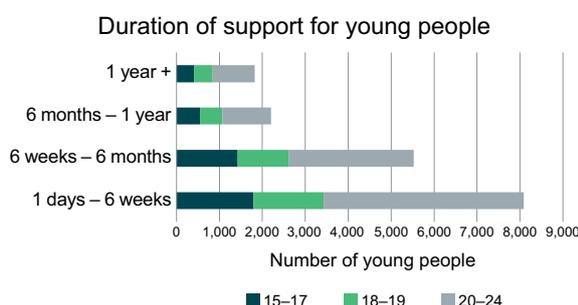
**The next Victorian Government should: provide 49 additional case managers for young people experiencing homelessness.**

and rooming houses. While homeless, young people face risks of violence, sexual exploitation, and abuse, compounding any previous trauma, and making participation in education and employment almost impossible.

The longer young people are homeless the more likely they develop serious health and mental issues and have contact with the justice system.<sup>44</sup> This causes significant harm, and results in enormous long-term costs to government.<sup>45</sup>

A diverse range of housing models is needed as some young people will thrive in independent units with minimal support, while other young people achieve great stability in shared living arrangements and need more intensive support.<sup>46</sup>

Figure 7: Duration of support for young people<sup>47</sup>

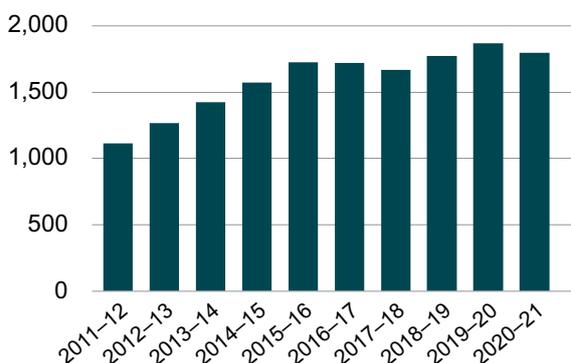


These short and inconsistent support periods mean opportunities to intervene early, and help young address health or wellbeing issues, and achieve their educational, economic, social and personal goals are missed. The longer young people remain disconnected from education or employment, the more challenging it is to reconnect, and more likely they experience negative life outcomes. To help young people to thrive, the next Victorian Government needs to support young people experiencing homelessness with consistent and longer-term support that follows them irrespective of their accommodation.

## Housing the most vulnerable young people

A proportion of young people attending homelessness services have experienced significant trauma and have very high support needs. Each year around 1,800 young people attend Victoria’s homelessness services with concurrent mental health needs, and substance misuse.<sup>48</sup>

Figure 8. Young people presenting to Victorian homelessness services with both mental health issues and substance misuse<sup>49</sup>

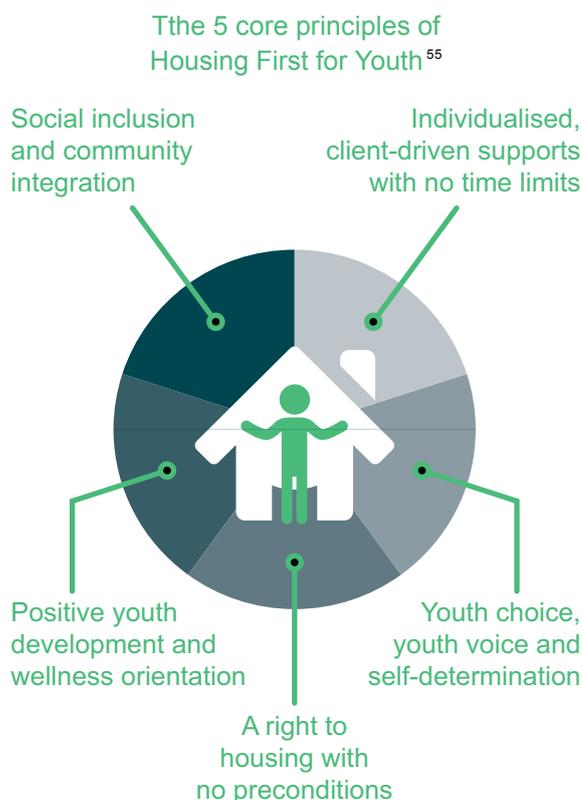


Of all homeless young people, this group are most likely to have poor life outcomes, including ongoing poor health, long term unemployment, and contact with the justice system. But a different future is possible if they get the support and housing needed to recover and to set and achieve personal goals.

Innovative programs that have adapted Housing First models to young people have demonstrated significant success in housing and wellbeing outcomes for the most vulnerable young people without homes.<sup>50, 51</sup> One such program overseas achieved 100 per cent of young people remaining engaged with their supports, and 92 per cent maintaining their tenancies — some with supported moves. They reported better mental health, and critically, all but one of the highly vulnerable young people who have participated in the program identified feeling like they were doing well in life.<sup>52</sup>

In this model young people choose housing that suits their needs and have consistent and intensive support and encouragement to drive their care plan, become active in their community, and thrive.<sup>53, 54</sup>

Despite Victoria’s recent adoption of Housing First principles for those experiencing long-term homelessness, Housing First for Youth has yet to become a feature of Victorian service delivery. But for many young people, particularly those whose concurrent homelessness, mental ill-health, and substance misuse require intensive interventions that are not currently delivered, Housing First for Youth is the answer.



**The next Victorian Government should: deliver Housing First for Youth programs, including housing and support, for 250 young people.**

## Intervening early to prevent young people becoming homeless

The best way to prevent youth homelessness is to support young people to thrive in their communities. When young people have functioning family relationships, are engaged in education or employment, have a sufficient household income, have strong healthy relationships with their peers and feel well within themselves, they are far less likely to experience youth homelessness.

The Community of Schools and Services (COSS) model works through schools to

provide housing support for families, educational support for young people, and assistance with family conflict. The result in the Victorian community that has implemented this model has been a 40 per cent reduction in adolescent homelessness across not just that neighbourhood, but the region.<sup>56, 57</sup>

The recent Victorian Parliamentary Inquiry into Homelessness recommended that the Victorian Government expand the COSS model to at least four new metropolitan and three new regional sites.<sup>58</sup>

**The next Victorian Government should: expand the Community of Schools and Services model to at least four new metropolitan and three new regional sites.**

## Support young people to resolve family conflict

Given that most young people live with their parents, it's no surprise that the major pathway into homelessness for young people is through family conflict.<sup>59</sup> Young people don't choose homelessness — they choose, or are told, to leave their home to stop the conflict.

During homelessness, young people are more susceptible to a range of negative outcomes including violence and victimisation, deteriorating mental health, exposure to drug cultures, and contact with the justice system.<sup>60</sup> Prolonged youth homelessness is also a powerful predictor of a lifetime of episodic homelessness.<sup>61</sup>

In some instances, the family home is not safe, and young people should always be involved in a safety assessment prior to engaging in family reconciliation. But for most young people whose family home is free from violence, reconciling with family and returning

home is not only the safest option, and the one that would immediately end their homelessness, but it's also the option most likely to help them achieve good outcomes, like finishing their education.<sup>62</sup>

*“Youth (can) remain at home with the promise of support ... nobody wants to be a bad parent, families don't want kick their kids out, but they believe they are out of solutions.”<sup>63</sup>*

Importantly, often the young people and parents themselves want to reunify under the same roof, if the conflict could be managed.<sup>64</sup> Yet, evidence-based approaches to mending family relationships<sup>65</sup> are provided inconsistently in Victoria and many young people do not get the support they need, meaning unnecessary and often prolonged episodes of homelessness.

Family mediation and reconciliation should be available whenever its needed. The starting point for ending youth homelessness, should be to fix things at home.

**The next Victorian Government should: provide 2,000 young people and their families per year with support to reconcile.**

## End the postcode lottery for youth refuge accommodation

Young people account for a sixth of people attending homelessness services.<sup>66</sup> Yet for the 17,600 young people seeking homelessness assistance this year there will be too few safe accommodation options. Currently Victoria has 21 youth refuges, totalling 183 beds.<sup>67</sup> These services have been developed in a piecemeal fashion over the decades,<sup>68</sup> with many parts of Victoria missing out, and others provided with far too few beds compared to the population of their catchment.

Young people who don't have refuges available locally, need to choose between seeking safety

outside of area or remaining unsafe closer to home. This choice can be more consequential than many people appreciate. Young people experiencing homelessness are at significant risk of violence and exploitation,<sup>69</sup> and moving out of young people's local areas can distance them from school and existing supports.

Safe, staffed, and supported accommodation needs to be available for young people across Victoria. Not only will it help to keep young people without homes safe, but it can also help them continue their education, and even reunite with family. Youth refuges should be available no matter where you grow up.

**The next Victorian Government should: provide youth refuge accommodation in parts of Victoria that are underserved and those that lack it entirely.**



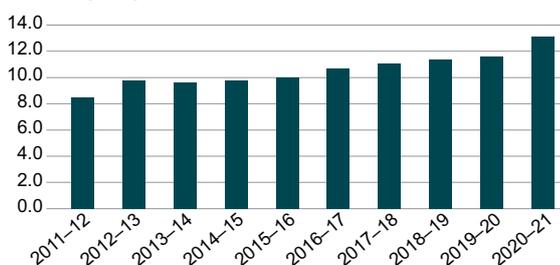
# End Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander homelessness

**Implement the Victorian Aboriginal Housing and Homelessness Framework, Mana-na woorn-tyeen marr-takoort.**

## Aboriginal housing

Last year, more than one in six Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Victorians experienced homelessness. By contrast, the rate was fewer than 1 in 76 non-Indigenous Victorians. This disparity, already shocking, is growing worse. Ten years ago, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Victorians were 8.5 times more likely than non-Indigenous Victorians to experience homelessness. As Figure 9 below shows, in just ten years, that ratio has blown out by more than half, to 13.1 times.<sup>70</sup>

Figure 9. The ratio of over-representation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people at homelessness services



As the number of Aboriginal households in Victoria is growing rapidly, the housing need of the community is projected to continue to increase. On Census night there were around 34,000 Aboriginal households in Victoria.<sup>71</sup> By 2036 it is expected that there will be more than 50,000.<sup>72</sup>

The most effective way to reduce homelessness is to provide access to housing that people can afford. Aboriginal Community Controlled Organisations in Victoria have long histories of providing housing for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. Despite this long history, today there are just 1,562 Aboriginal community controlled social housing properties.<sup>73</sup> It is positive that 1,448 of these properties have recently been transferred from the Victorian Government to Aboriginal community control. But we need to continue to grow Aboriginal community-controlled housing options to address the very high rates of homelessness experienced by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Victorians, and to keep pace with population growth.

**The next Victorian Government should: deliver 600 new social housing properties to Aboriginal Community Controlled Organisations each year and develop a plan to ensure that social housing access for Aboriginal people keeps pace with population growth.**

## Fund Aboriginal Community Controlled Organisations

With one in six Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Victorians attending a homelessness service each year,<sup>74</sup> it isn't enough to only end homelessness when it occurs — we need to bring this number down and prevent homelessness.

There are currently very few SHS provided through Aboriginal Community Controlled Organisations (ACCOs). Much of what is provided by ACCOs to people experiencing homelessness was initiated by ACCOs themselves in response to the needs of their communities and operates outside of Homes Victoria funding arrangements. Yet ACCOs are eager to address the over-representation of Aboriginal people in homelessness.

Victoria's largest Aboriginal community-controlled housing provider, Aboriginal Housing Victoria, has recently released a Blueprint for an Aboriginal-specific Homelessness System in Victoria, the result of extensive consultations with ACCOs and mainstream service providers. It provides a path for greater Aboriginal community control of homelessness services.

Greater funding and support to empower ACCOs to deliver homelessness services will not only result in more homelessness support for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Victorians, but also better outcomes. Aboriginal Community Controlled Organisations are shown to be highly effective not only at tailoring services to clients, but at improving outcomes for their consumers.<sup>75</sup> This means prevention and re-housing outcomes that stick, lowering the rate of homelessness among Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Victorians.

**The next Victorian Government should: implement the *Blueprint for an Aboriginal-specific Homelessness System in Victoria.***

## Housing flexibility for kinship carers

In Victoria, inviting a relative to live with you without a landlord's consent is grounds for eviction. This can be a particular problem for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander renters, many of whom have kinship responsibilities to support family.<sup>76</sup> This especially impacts on women's housing, as many are called on to provide care and support in their communities.

Victoria should amend rental laws to ensure that landlords, including government and non-profit social housing landlords, can't evict people for meeting their kinship obligations.

To further support kinship care, the next Victorian Government should consider how the

built form of social housing can support kinship responsibilities. By supporting Aboriginal Community Controlled Organisations to build bigger homes, by encouraging social housing organisations to decouple rent from total household income in instances where a relative might be staying temporarily, and by supporting Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander home ownership, we can improve the capacity of the housing system to recognise kinship responsibilities. This will reduce homelessness among Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, and also allow people to be supported within their families, reducing pressure on government funded support programs.

**The next Victorian Government should: support kinship responsibilities by ensuring that people can't be evicted for taking in Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander kin, building larger social housing, increasing rent flexibility in social housing when a person is staying temporarily, and supporting Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander home ownership.**



## Address skills shortages in the SHS

Victoria's human services workforce is under considerable pressure, with sectors competing for a finite skilled workforce. The development of housing first informed specialist homelessness services (SHS), such as Homeless to a Home (H2H), and the impact of the COVID 19 pandemic has seen the unmet demand for skilled SHS workers increase exponentially.

In 2018, the Victorian Government supported Council to Homeless Persons (CHP) to develop the SHS Transition Plan (2018–2022). In subsequent years the Victorian Government has continued to fund CHP to implement this Plan. Implementation has included the development of a SHS Workforce Development Strategy (2020–2025).

Implementation of the SHS Workforce Development Strategy has included the:

- *Workforce Pathways and Specialist Homelessness Services Project Report*, which identifies the work to be undertaken to improve recruitment and retention of staff in the SHS. Particular emphasis is given to the work to be undertaken to define and strengthen the pathways from tertiary education into SHS employment

- *Who is the Specialist Homelessness Workforce in Victoria? A pathway to reliable and reproducible homelessness workforce insights*, which identifies the work to be done to be able to reliably and consistently collect numerical and demographic data about the SHS workforce
- *Aboriginal Homelessness: An Aboriginal Cultural Safety Framework for the Specialist Homelessness Sector*, which aims to improve Aboriginal people's access to and outcomes in the specialist homelessness sector (SHS) by embedding Aboriginal cultural safety, accountability and monitoring in all aspects of the SHS system.

CHP and specialist homelessness services have also worked in partnership with the Victorian Government and the tertiary sector, to provide jobs in specialist homelessness services for unemployed Victorians. Around 130 additional jobs were provided for six months during the Covid-19 pandemic. This program and considerable development and testing has underpinned the current Jobs Support Program for the SHS.

**The next Victorian Government should: continue to fund the partnership between Government and the Specialist Homelessness Sector (SHS) to implement the SHS Workforce Development Strategy to address growing workforce challenges.**



# Improve the legal system's treatment of people without homes

**Homelessness isn't illegal, but it can result in legal trouble.**

## Fair treatment before the law for people experiencing homelessness

People without homes are subject to over-policing by state and local authorities. When you live your life in public, as those without homes must, you're far more visible, including to law enforcement. Normal, even unavoidable activities, such as parking your car for the night, going to sleep, or having belongings (if left on a footpath), can get you into trouble if you're living in public.

Termed 'poverty offences'<sup>77</sup>, these laws do little to maintain public safety, but contribute heavily to the isolation of people without homes.

Poverty offences result in fines levied on people who are least able to pay them, and hence many of these fines go unpaid.

These unpaid fines ultimately end up in the courts, or in other enforcement actions, creating significant expense and adding to the workload of an overburdened court system. Many hours of pro bono legal support are directed towards supporting people avoid sanctions from poverty offences.

The fear of having to find the money for fines that can add up to thousands of dollars can seriously hamper people's recovery once stably rehoused and drag on for years.

The next Victorian Government should review poverty offences, with a view to ensuring fewer fines are issued to people without homes.

This would include not just the *Summary Offences Act* (in which many are contained), but also a review of local government and police powers. This should include a Protocol for People Experiencing Homelessness in Public Places, seeking to ensure that police and enforcement agency powers are used in a way that promotes the health and wellbeing of those without homes.

In addition, faster, cheaper, clearer mechanisms need to be made available for people without homes to contest fines. The Fines Review Advisory Board recently delivered a series of recommendations aimed at improving the operation of Victoria's fines ecosystem, especially for those who are unable to pay fines. These recommendations should be adopted in full.

Lastly, more legal support should be made available through specialist homelessness community legal programs.

These changes would reduce the extent to which people without homes are over-policed, resulting in better outcomes for them, reduced costs to Government, and eased pressure on overburdened courts.

**The next Victorian Government should: conduct a review of poverty offences, implement a Protocol for People Experiencing Homelessness in Public Places, and implement the recommendations of the Fines Review Advisory Board.**

## Bail reform

While Victoria's bail and remand settings don't explicitly keep people incarcerated due to homelessness, in practice, homelessness is often the reason people are behind bars. Fully 43 per cent of Victorian prison entrants didn't have a stable home prior to entering prison, and judges are usually unwilling to provide bail to people without a fixed address.<sup>78</sup>

Where just 18 per cent of prisoners were unsentenced in 2010, by 2020 that proportion was 35 per cent, and 46 per cent among women.<sup>79</sup> This has coincided with a 57 per cent increase in the number of people in Victorian prisons between 2010 and 2020.<sup>80</sup> Keeping a person incarcerated costs Victoria \$377.60 per day<sup>81</sup> — over \$137,000 per year.

Where people without homes are provided bail, bail conditions that require them to reside at a

certain address, such as a rooming house or motel, make them more likely to breach their bail conditions. Often people move on from these forms of accommodation because they aren't safe, or they can no longer afford the high cost of the accommodation. This puts them in breach of their bail conditions.

The next Victorian Government should develop options to provide fairer bail outcomes to people without homes, including addressing the underlying problem of lack of affordable housing, as well as creating alternative bail conditions than residing at a fixed address in instances where a person does not have a stable home. This change would improve justice outcomes for people experiencing homelessness, reduce the prison population, and ease costs on the justice system.

**The next Victorian Government should: provide for alternative bail conditions that don't discriminate against people who don't have a stable home.**

## Housing as a human right

The recent Parliamentary Inquiry into Homelessness found that housing should be a human right in Victoria.<sup>82</sup> Adding a right to housing to the *Victorian Charter of Human Rights and Responsibilities* would mean that public authorities would be required to consider how their actions impacted on peoples' housing. The Committee conducting the Inquiry noted their belief that this would contribute to the consideration of the right to housing in future policy and legislative decisions.<sup>83</sup>

A human rights approach to housing could further ensure that VCAT takes people's right to housing into account when making decisions in tenancy matters with public and community housing providers. This would add an additional protection to social tenancies, recognising that social housing is housing of last resort, especially for people with histories of homelessness, and many tenants would have poor prospects of securing a private rental property if evicted from social housing.

**The next Victorian Government should: add a right to housing to the *Victorian Charter of Human Rights and Responsibilities* and empower VCAT to consider that right in social housing tenancy matters.**

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### A PLAN TO END HOMELESSNESS IN VICTORIA

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# Council to Homeless Persons

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Persons is the peak body for  
homelessness in Victoria.

**2 Stanley Street  
Collingwood Victoria 3066**

**/ P 03 8415 6200  
/ E [admin@chp.org.au](mailto:admin@chp.org.au)  
/ W [chp.org.au](http://chp.org.au)**

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