

Inquiry into Homelessness in Victoria

Ms Paula Westhead

Organisation Name: Emerge Women and children's support Network

Your position or role: Executive Officer

SURVEY QUESTIONS

Drag the statements below to reorder them. In order of priority, please rank the themes you believe are most important for this inquiry into homelessness to consider::

Housing affordability, Family violence, Mental health, Rough sleeping, Public housing, Services, Employment, Indigenous people

What best describes your interest in our Inquiry? (select all that apply) :

Working in Homelessness services

Are there any additional themes we should consider?

YOUR SUBMISSION

Submission:

Do you have any additional comments or suggestions?:

FILE ATTACHMENTS

File1: [5df078823eac8-Homelessness paper Emerge.doc](#)

File2:

File3:

Signature:

Paula Westhead

A broken homelessness system

About Emerge

Emerge Women & Children's Support Network is an independent organisation delivering 24/7 housing and support services to women and children at a time of crisis; and provides vital outreach to women and children living in the community, often with perpetrators in their own home.

Founded over 40 years ago, Emerge is the leading family violence and housing service in southern metro Melbourne, supporting women and children from across Victoria. We offer a safe place to live and support women while they navigate the myriad of services to start again.

As part of our refuge and outreach services, we offer tailored programs aimed at assisting women to rebuild their lives and learn new personal and professional skills as they begin their journey towards independence.

We support the mental wellbeing of children and infants through arts therapy, afterschool and therapeutic play programs.

We promote the use of a gender lens across service provision to ensure services are effective for the populations for which they are intended.

Our interest in housing and homelessness

Family violence is the number one cause of homelessness in Victoria.

Emerge supports women and their children who have escaped family violence and who are homeless or at risk of homelessness in different ways including refuge and crisis accommodation, transitional housing and through partnerships with real estate agents.

The last year has seen Emerge supporting a total of 309 women and children including 83 being housed in crisis accommodation and transitional homes, with many experiencing homelessness before coming to Emerge. Five women and children were sleeping rough as they believed this to be a safer option to returning home.

In the last year, none of the women we supported ended up homeless or returned to the perpetrator. This is a success story: The national average of women returning home to violence is up to 7 times before finally leaving.

Data collected through the year shows that:





- 100% of women and children were experiencing homelessness prior to being supported through Emerge's housing options.
- 36 clients were in short term emergency accommodation before coming to Emerge.
- 51 of the clients accommodated by Emerge were children under the age of 18, with ten being infants (0-2years).
- Family violence (all presenting) housing crisis and housing affordability, stress and relationship/family breakdown continue to be the highest reasons for seeking refuge, and six said they were unable to return home.

Trends

- Younger mothers – in 2018, the most common age range for women was between 30-34 years (18%) compared with 22.5% aged between 26 and 35 in 2019.

Our interest from a national perspective on homelessness and family violence

Anglicare's recent affordability snapshot found that throughout Australia, there were only TWO rental properties deemed 'affordable' for those on the pitifully low Newstart allowance. This scarcity of affordable housing has significant consequences for women, whose wages are on average lower, and who are more likely to be caring for children.

Further, many women live their lives on the brink of homelessness. It only takes an illness, a job loss, even 2just a car breakdown for them to fall into homelessness.

Family violence is the primary reason why women are now more likely to be homeless than men — 61 per cent of those seeking assistance from homelessness services.

Homelessness and Victoria

Victoria's response to growing rates of homelessness is poor:

- Social housing units available in Victoria have declined by 200 since 2014.
- Almost 20,000 Victorians, including those facing family violence, are stuck on the 'priority' access list for social housing.
- There are only 423 government-funded crisis bed for people who are homeless. When these are full, many others are instead placed by crisis services into low end motels and private rooming houses.

Against this backdrop, it is important to recall that the Royal Commission into Family Violence specifically recommended that women should be able to access stable housing 'as quickly as possible and with a minimum number of relocations... [and] not be accommodated in motels and other ad hoc



accommodation.' It is disturbing that women are still facing this scenario three years after the report was handed down.

Mental health, family violence and homelessness

- In 2017-2018, across Australia, over half (54%) of those who were homeless and reported a mental health issue also experienced these additional vulnerabilities: three in 10 (30% or 24,300 people) reported both mental health issues and experiences of domestic and family violence
- However, housing, homelessness and mental health operate under 'essentially separate' policy systems which rarely interact.
- For women, their experience of homelessness, is linked to poor mental health and substance abuse, and has cumulative and lasting impacts on mental health.



**How Emerge works to prevent homelessness:
a continuum of care based on Housing First and outreach**

Refuge and crisis

Our refuge and crisis accommodation offers women and their children a safe community in which to live while they regain their health and wellbeing, rebuild their family and community connections, develop their independent living skills and begin their journey towards independence.

While in our housing, women and children are provided with emotional support and practical assistance with legal, medical and financial matters to help women assess their next steps and feel free and safe to make choices.

Step one: refuge

Emerge has operated a refuge for over 40 years. Due to our track record and lead position in the southern network, Emerge was chosen by the Victorian Government to be funded for one of the few family violence refuges offering 24/7 support for women and children. The new Emerge refuge, just about to be opened, includes state of the art one, two and three bedroom units with disability access. There are common areas, including a communal kitchen, living room as well as a support hub for women in outreach. The gardens have been properly landscaped together with a children's playground, offering increased support and security for women and children.

Step two: Crisis

Our crisis accommodation is an important final step for the women and children leaving refuge to integrate into the community and be supported while seeking other housing. Emerge has several crisis houses for women and children who are leaving refuge and need short term accommodation. They are fully supported by our outreach services while in these properties.

Step three: Transitional

Transitional housing provides a longer stay option to crisis accommodation and is often the first step back out into the community for our families. Emerge has the rights to nine transitional properties for women and children to live after they seek refuge. These houses assist women and children in building links within the local community and provide access to other support services. These houses are a crucial step in the path to recovery for women and their children, giving them the option to safe housing if they are not yet ready to live independently.

Step four: Outreach



Our outreach program includes arts therapy, financial counselling, child care in magistrates' courts, a volunteer support program, and regular get-togethers for women and children in community.

This continuum of care:

- Prevents financial duress and instability assisting women to develop pathways to financial independence so that they will be safe from violence; securely housed; financially independent as they are able to be employed or study
- Prevents homelessness and further violence.
- Prevents further damage to children through our child-minding service in Moorabin Magistrates' Court which enables mothers to organise intervention orders and access their legal rights

Some of our initiatives, which are supported through philanthropy or community donations, to assist women and children:

Links with real estate agents

- Emerge works with local real estate agents and housing services to help women and children find housing and keep them safe to help combat the homelessness that is so often experienced by women and children escaping family violence.

Financial counselling

- Many women coming to Emerge have been prevented from accessing their own bank accounts, their personal property has been secretly pawned off, and often they have debts/fines or credit cards taken out in their name that they are not aware of. Through philanthropic funding, Emerge employs a financial counsellor who assists women to gain control of their finances, and to eliminate debts that have incurred because of family violence. The program has been running since January 2017. We have worked with over 45 women who are part of our outreach program, those living in our refuge and crisis accommodation and women who have been referred to us. Most of these women's cases are complex, requiring advocacy and casework.

Outreach case management and utilising flexible support packages

We assist women and children to stay in their own homes by safety planning and working with the Salvation Army and Victoria police to keep women and children safe at home.



Flexible Support Packages assist women and children when they choose to stay at home by providing duress alarms, screen doors and secure locks for windows and doors, and when they first move into their new home to keep them safe. This allows them to have more money.

However, one concern is that after 12 months this funding runs out and the devices no longer work, or have to be upgraded, they require another flexible support plan to take up the funding again. This needs to be reconsidered.

Rental bond support

This year Emerge has established the Fresh Start Fund to provide women with the initial money they need to secure a private rental property. Each fresh start costs \$3,500. The funding has been made available through the philanthropic The Funding Network. Fresh Start Fund is needed because it is too hard to find public housing, and trying to secure private rental without the funds to pay upfront costs is impossible.

Case study: Sarah

Sarah (not real name) felt safer sleeping in her car with her two young children, one of whom is disabled, than she did staying in her family home or in the motel that she was sent to by another family violence service provider. She eventually came to Emerge where she received support in legal, emotional, medical matters and finally in finding a rental property. Today, Sarah has gained the confidence to start her own cleaning business and is financially supporting her children on her own. Sarah wouldn't have been able to start her business while living in her car.

Policies and practices from all levels of government regarding service delivery to the homeless.

What does work for some women:

Safe at Home

Victoria introduced Safe at Home, an initiative to keep women safe in their own homes – either existing or new. For some women, the scheme works well. However, the reality remains that women are largely unable to return home safely because the legal powers available to remove the perpetrators from the family home are not regularly used by the courts and even when they are, failure to enforce intervention orders means women remain in danger.

Nevertheless, the initiative – which has the hallmarks of success if systems were connected effectively – works well in New South Wales (see recommendations below). Improving the system would go a long way to keeping women and children both safe and out of homelessness.

Recently, Safe at Home has been extended to include the Personal Safety Initiative which provides security upgrades for women separated from violent partners, who have their Intervention Order (IVO) in place and who are at risk of the intervention order being breached. Upgrades included the provision of a smart track safety device, and upgrades to security for the home. The initiative delivers on recommendation 17 of the Royal Commission into Family Violence.

The expansion of the Personal Safety Initiative follows a trial in inner and outer eastern Melbourne, as well as Gippsland, exploring the uses of technology and security responses. Findings showed how effective technology and safety planning can be to keep women and their families safe.

This expansion is being supported by the Federal Government, who are contributing \$2.6 million for 17 Personal Safety Coordinators to ensure personal safety technology is used consistently and effectively as part of a broader plan for the safety and wellbeing of women and children.

Case study:

Sofia (not her real name) and her two children know only too well what it is like to live in extreme fear. After escaping violence, she fled her partner and was living in temporary accommodation. For a while she thought she was safe until her former partner found her in a shopping centre. Fortunately, she was referred to Emerge, and through its involvement in Safe at Home, a Victorian Government initiative, Sofia and her children are being supported in many ways. Through Emerge's close relationship with the Victoria Police, Sofia was able to receive Safe at Home funding to install a new screen door, flood lights and heavy duty locks on the doors and windows."

What is not working currently

Specifically, the following policies and practices have a bearing on delivering services:

The importance of closing the gaps

Our experience highlights that many of the women we support are shocked by their predicament, they don't know how to navigate the system, and they are unaware of the assistance they may be able to receive.

While homelessness and family violence policies emphasise the principle of 'No Wrong Door', meaning that people who are homeless and/or experiencing family violence should be able to access help from any service; with 'Access Points' having a co-ordination function, this is not happening effectively enough.

Other constraints are:

- The current system of supporting people who experience homelessness is fragmented, poorly resourced and does not provide long-term solutions.
- The systems require better coordination and collaboration
- Front line staff, including health practitioners and Centrelink staff, are not aware of services available to people who are homeless or, if they are, do not always offer advice unless asked.
- Lack of safe, secure, affordable and available public, social and private housing, and private rental accommodation
- Limited to no training for frontline staff about homelessness, family violence (including elder abuse) and how to identify and assess and refer appropriately
- Limited support for children with mental health issues, especially those affected by both family violence and homelessness

Recommendations

- A public education campaign about homelessness and family violence in general, and to promote a better understanding of what homelessness is and why it happens.
- Money should be made available from the Victorian Stamp Duty revenue to house one million Victorians by 2029 through a massive expansion of public housing and social housing
- There is an urgent need for the Federal Government to commit to funding housing for all Australians. A national long-term, constant and consistent strategy is urgently required, and it should be properly funded.
- Increased government funding for rental support, and streamlined processes and pathways for anyone who is homeless or at risk of homelessness to navigate more easily.
- Service providers should be funded in multi-year blocks of 5 years or more with capacity to build multi-disciplinary teams
- Funds should be set aside to improve data collection systems and a regular evaluation of what's working well, or now.
- An improved "Safe at Home" strategy so that women's and children's right to stay in the home after family violence is viewed as the norm, and accepted as a community responsibility: the NSW government strategy: *Staying Home, Leaving Violence* should be explored for replication in Victoria.