

Inquiry into the Rental and Housing Affordability Crisis in Victoria

Victorian Aboriginal Child Care Agency

June 2023



VACCA
Connected by culture

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VICTORIAN ABORIGINAL
CHILD CARE AGENCY

Acknowledgment

We acknowledge the many Traditional Owners of the lands across Victoria that we work on, and pay our respects to their Elders, both past and present and to their children and young people, who are our future Elders and caretakers of this great land.

Notes on Language

- We use the term **Aboriginal** to describe the many Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples, Clans and Traditional Owner Groups whose traditional lands comprise what is now called Australia.
- We use the term **Indigenous** as it relates to Indigenous peoples globally as well as in the human rights context.
- The terms **First Peoples and First Nations** are employed in the Australian context, by recognising that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples are the First Peoples/First Nations of this land, it directly relates to their inherent un-ceded sovereignty.

About VACCA

Established in 1976, the Victorian Aboriginal Child Care Agency (VACCA) is the lead Aboriginal child and family support organisation in Australia and the largest provider of Aboriginal family violence, justice support and homelessness services in Victoria. We work holistically with children, young people, women, men, and families to ensure they have the necessary supports to heal and thrive. We do this by advocating for the rights of children and providing everyone who walks through our doors with services premised on human rights, self-determination, cultural respect and safety. With over 40 years of experience and expertise as an Aboriginal Community Controlled Organisation (ACCO), VACCA supports and advocates for the needs of Aboriginal children, young people, families and communities. VACCA's vision is Aboriginal self-determination - Live, Experience and Be. Our purpose is supporting culturally strong, safe and thriving Aboriginal communities. We believe in the principle of the right of Aboriginal people to self-determination and the rights of the child as well as a strong commitment to upholding Victorian Aboriginal cultural protocols. Our values are: Best Interests of the Child, Aboriginal Cultural Observance, Respect, Self-determination, Healing and Empowerment and Excellence.

We provide support services to over 4,500 children and young people, and their families and carers each year. VACCA provides support services for Stolen Generations through



Link-Up Victoria, which has been in operation since 1990. Across our six regions, we deliver over 80 programs tailored to the needs of the communities we serve including child and family services, child protection, family violence and sexual assault supports, youth and adult justice supports, early years, education, homelessness, disability, alcohol and other drugs, cultural programs and supports for Stolen Generations. We employ over 1000 staff, making us one of Victoria's biggest employers of Aboriginal people. Our Aboriginality distinguishes us from mainstream services and enables us to deliver the positive outcomes we achieve for our people.

VACCA is guided by *Cultural Therapeutic Ways*, our whole-of-agency approach to our practice of healing for Aboriginal children, young people, families, community members and carers who use our services. The framework acts at the intersection of cultural practice with trauma and self-determination theories. The aim of this practice is to integrate Aboriginal culture and healing practices across the organisation and guide our service delivery approach to be healing, protective and connective.

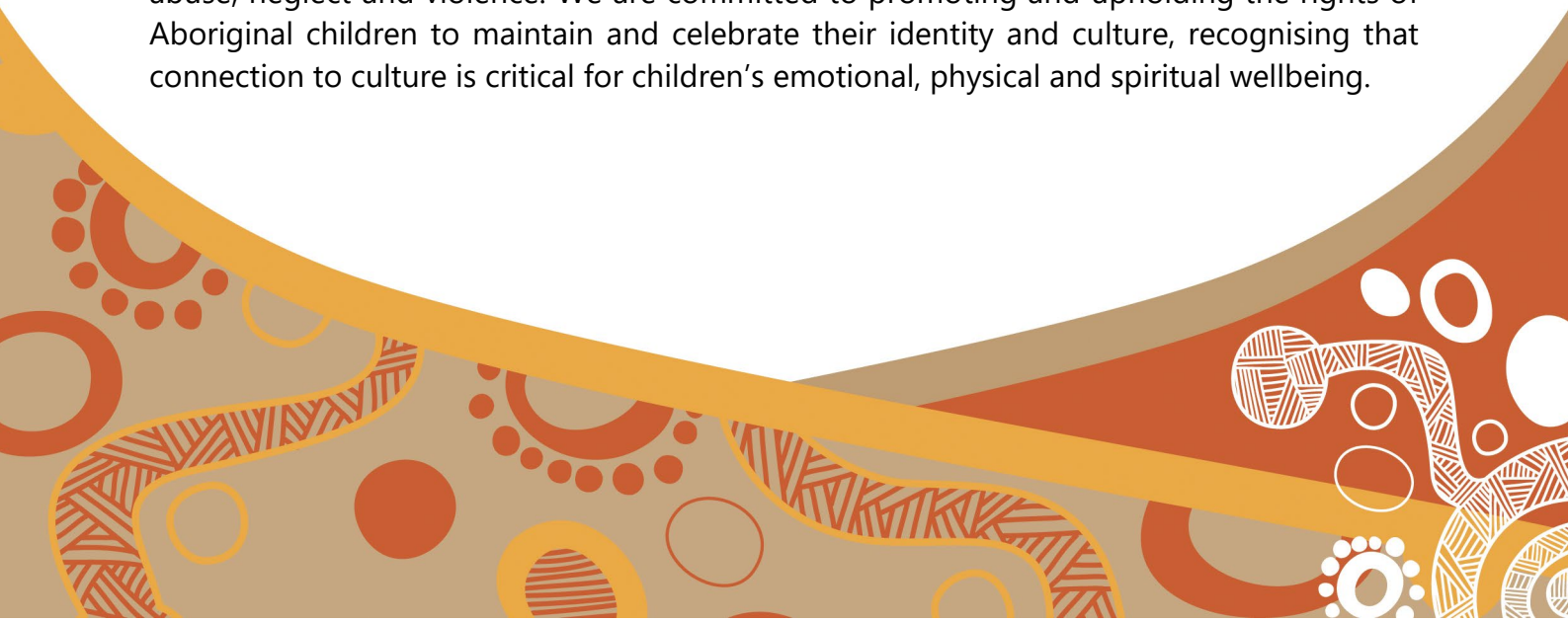
Summary of recommendations

1. That the Victorian Government provide a dedicated funding of \$800 million for the housing needs of Aboriginal Victorians and commit to building 300 houses a year, as called for by the Aboriginal Housing and Homelessness Forum.
2. That the Victorian Government commit to providing \$7.6 million per annum to the 'More than a Landlord' program and \$10.5 million per annum to extend the 'Aboriginal Private Rental Assistance Program' with statewide coverage, as called for by the Aboriginal Housing and Homelessness Forum.
3. That the Victorian Government extend the Big Housing Build to meet the projected demand in population growth and commit to tracking more accurately the allocation to Aboriginal community
4. That the Victorian Government invest further in ACCOs to provide tangible supports to case manage and help vulnerable cohorts secure culturally safe, secure, affordable and long term housing. Cohorts include:
 - Aboriginal Elders (people aged 55 years plus) to age in place
 - Aboriginal young people exiting out-of-home care
 - Aboriginal people escaping family violence
 - Aboriginal young people and adults exiting prison
 - Aboriginal people with a disability

5. VACCA seeks an increase in all housing brokerage funding by at least 10% and/or to include housing brokerage funding into agreements for ACCOs providing family violence supports, children leaving care, homelessness and housing services and supports to Aboriginal people leaving the correctional system.
6. That the Victorian Government fund Aboriginal led family violence crisis accommodation across all regions.
7. That the Victorian Government invest in ACCO led housing programs across the state alongside increased housing stock, to ensure culturally safe support for Aboriginal people to move into long-term housing and sustain tenancies.
8. That the Victorian Government invest in longer-term and sustainable funding for homelessness service providers, increasing the amount of time a service user can reside in supported in accommodation.
9. That the Victorian Government treat crisis accommodation and social and affordable housing as essential social infrastructure and commit to long-term funding for a new Aboriginal housing supply that meets demand.
10. That the Victorian Government provide adequate resources to achieve the goals and aspirations of Mana-na worn-tyeen maar-takoort: Every Aboriginal Person Has a Home.
11. That the Victorian Government embed Aboriginal housing targets in mainstream policies, strategies and programs and strengthen housing targets in the Victorian Aboriginal Affairs Framework, as recommended by the Aboriginal Housing and Homelessness Forum.

Introduction

VACCA welcomes the opportunity to provide a submission to the Inquiry into the Rental and Housing Affordability Crisis in Victoria. VACCA's feedback is based on our unique position as a Victorian ACCO providing a suite of services across the state supporting children, young people, families and community members. We have protected and promoted the rights of Aboriginal children and families for over 40 years. VACCA believes that all children have a right to feel and be safe and live in an environment that is free from abuse, neglect and violence. We are committed to promoting and upholding the rights of Aboriginal children to maintain and celebrate their identity and culture, recognising that connection to culture is critical for children's emotional, physical and spiritual wellbeing.



Both research and VACCA's experiences as a child welfare organisation highlight the impact that inadequate housing and homelessness has on the Aboriginal community, in particular Aboriginal young people, those exiting out-of-home care (OOHC) and Aboriginal people fleeing family violence. Whilst Aboriginal peoples have demonstrated decades of resilience and strength, their healing journey is severely disrupted when there is no safe, affordable housing available to meet their needs and they are faced with significant financial hardship and poverty as a consequence. Whilst it has always been difficult to access affordable, safe and long-term housing, the combined factors of the COVID-19 pandemic, the rise of interest rates and the rising population has driven Victoria into a housing crisis, which is particularly acute for Aboriginal people.

VACCA's submission takes a right-based approach centred in Aboriginal self-determination, to respond to the issues identified by the Terms of Reference and makes recommendations for reforms and investment to respond to the housing crisis.

The factors leading to low availability and high costs of rental properties

Recommendation 1: That the Victorian Government provide a dedicated funding of \$800 million for the housing needs of Aboriginal Victorians and commit to building 300 houses a year, as called for by the Aboriginal Housing and Homelessness Forum.

Recommendation 2 : That the Victorian Government commit to providing \$7.6 million per annum to the 'more than a landlord' program and \$10.5 million per annum to extend the 'Aboriginal Private Rental Assistance Program' with statewide coverage, as called for by the Aboriginal Housing and Homelessness Forum.

Recommendation 3: That the Victorian Government extend the Big Housing Build to meet the projected demand in population growth and commit to tracking more accurately the allocation to Aboriginal community.

Background

Access to adequate housing is a human right, as detailed in Article 11 of the International Covenant on Economic Social and Cultural Rights (1966). It recognises that everyone has the right to adequate housing where they live in peace, security and dignity. Having stable housing helps to support and sustain positive outcomes in employment, health and

improvement in education.¹ Aboriginal Victorians are missing out on the human right to adequate housing more than any other group in Victoria. In 2019, 17 per cent of Aboriginal Victorians received homeless services in comparison to less than 2 per cent of all Victorians, with the state having the highest rate of representation for homeless assistance by Aboriginal people anywhere in Australia². In 2021, Aboriginal people were experiencing contact with homelessness services at ten times the rate of other Victorians, depending on social housing at ten times the rate of other Victorians and facing growing exposure to a private rental market in which around half of low-income earners experience housing stress.³ It must be noted that it is also expected these figures under-represent the actual number of people facing homelessness, as much of the problem is hidden and often under-estimated in data collection.⁴ Most data is based on homelessness support service usage, and therefore does not include those staying with kin, transient or those who are sleeping rough but have not accessed homelessness support services. ABS data from 2016 suggests that at least 17 per cent of Aboriginal people were not accounted for on the census night, highlighting the challenges with adequately estimating those in transitional housing, staying with kin or sleeping rough.⁵ Further to this, some data around the number of Aboriginal people who experience homelessness is based on mainstream homeless service usage and therefore does not capture those who have not accessed homeless services due to fear of stigma, lack of services in regional or remote areas, or apprehension of accessing services that may be culturally inappropriate.⁶

Historically, Aboriginal households have had significantly lower rates of home ownership than the broader population, which results in less opportunity for gaining the benefits of wealth creation from home ownership. As home ownership has become increasingly expensive and out of reach for many, a vast majority of people are relying on private rental as a long-term option rather than a transitional home.⁷ For Aboriginal Victorians, reliance on and use of the private rental sector has significantly increased in recent decades. Data

¹ AIHW. (2018). Housing assistance in Australia. Canberra: Australian Government.

² Productivity Commission. (2019). Report on government service 2019: Housing and homelessness. Canberra: Australian Government.

³ Mana-na worn-tyeen maar-takoort, Every Aboriginal Person has a Home, Victorian Aboriginal Housing and Homelessness Framework (2021).

⁴ Aboriginal Housing Victoria. (2019). The Victorian Aboriginal housing and homelessness summit: Report of findings. Melbourne: Aboriginal Housing Victoria.

⁵ ABS. (2016). ABS 3238.0.55.001 - Estimates of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Australians.

⁶ Aboriginal Housing Victoria (2019).

⁷ Stone, W.M., Goodall, Z.A, Peters, A. and Veeroja, P. (2021) Aboriginal Private Rental Access in Victoria: “Excluded from the Start”, A Report Commissioned by the Consumer Policy Research Centre, Swinburne University of Technology, Melbourne.

from the 2016, 2011 and 2006 Census years indicated that the proportion of Aboriginal Victorians renting privately has increased in this period, from 27.9 per cent to 35.4 per cent of the population.⁸ The private rental sector is also the site of the worst affordability outcomes in the Australian housing system, with the median to low-income private renter household spending 36 per cent of its income on rent in 2019-2020, and approximately 20 per cent of this cohort spending over half their income on rent.⁹

The housing market in Victoria

A number of structural factors are affecting the housing market, such as lack of affordable housing (including crisis, transitional social housing and private rental), alongside broader policy, social and economic forces leading to chronic housing need, inappropriate architecture and planning, as well as shifting dynamics in job and housing markets.¹⁰ This includes a lack of investment in social and affordable housing, and continuous policy choices prioritising housing as an economic commodity rather than an essential entity. For Aboriginal Victorians, a lack of access to adequate housing can be traced back to colonisation and the invasion of lands, which has created generational impact alongside significant systemic and social disadvantage.¹¹ Historic factors such as the forceful land acquisition and deliberate exclusion from the economy has led to significant displacement and dispossession of Aboriginal communities creating not only physical homelessness but also cultural and spiritual homelessness.¹²

Across Australia, Aboriginal households are half as likely to own their own home (with or without a mortgage).¹³ For Aboriginal people in Victoria, securing home ownership rates are 25 percentage points lower than other Victorians.¹⁴ For Aboriginal families with a

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Martin, C., Lawson, J., Milligan, V., Hartley, C., Pawson, H. and Dodson, J. (2023) Towards an Australian Housing and Homelessness Strategy: understanding national approaches in contemporary policy, AHURI Final Report No. 401, Australian Housing and Urban Research Institute Limited, Melbourne, <https://www.ahuri.edu.au/research/final-reports/401>, doi: 10.18408/ahuri7127901

¹⁰ Anderson, J. T., & Collins, D. (2014). Prevalence and causes of urban homelessness among Indigenous peoples. A three-country scoping review. *Housing studies*, 29(7), 959-976.

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Productivity Commission (2022) In need of Repair: The National Housing and Homelessness Agreement – Study Report

¹⁴ Victorian Aboriginal Housing and Homelessness Framework. (2022). 2022 Annual Report Card, p. 13. Retrieved from Weblink

mortgage, recent increases to interest rates, coupled with the rise the rate of inflation are contributing to significant financial stress as reported by VACCA staff.

Research has found several circumstances associated with poverty are directly correlated with homelessness.¹⁵ Circumstances such as limited opportunities for education, disability, financial stress, debt, reliance on public housing, social exclusion and living in sub-standard accommodation all make sustaining stable housing extremely difficult. These experiences flow through generations of family, creating an intergenerational impact and a cycle of homelessness amongst Aboriginal families and communities.¹⁶

Aboriginal people leaving care are a particularly vulnerable group to homelessness and housing stress. This is evident in data showing that more than half of Aboriginal people in contact with homeless services in Australia are under 25 years of age.¹⁷ Further, Aboriginal young people are overrepresented in the homeless population within a year of leaving care (at a rate of more than one in three).¹⁸ Inadequate income support payments not only play a significant role in financial hardship but the *Adequacy of Newstart* report also found that lower payment rates for young people under 22 years of age contributed to the rise of youth homelessness.¹⁹

Over the past decade successive Australian Governments have used home ownership grants and concessions totalling \$20.5 billion to encourage lower income first homeowners to enter the market.²⁰ Contrary to the aims of this policy approach, evidence suggests these loans assisted households already close to accessing a home and fed into higher house prices, resulting in cycles of intergenerational wealth and intergenerational homeownership, whilst locking others out of the market.²¹ Several factors make the

¹⁵ McCaughey, J. (1992). Where now? Homeless families in the 1990's (Policy Background Paper No. 8). Australian Institute of Family Studies. Melbourne; Homelessness Australia. (2016). Homelessness and poverty. Homelessness Australia

¹⁶ Tilbury, C. (2015). Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families in Australia: Poverty and child welfare involvement. In *Theoretical and empirical insights into child and family poverty* (pp. 273-284). Springer, Cham.

¹⁷ Campo, M., & Commerford, J. (2016). Supporting young people leaving out-of-home care (CFCA Paper No. 41). Canberra: Australian Institute of Family Studies

¹⁸ Campo, M., & Commerford, J. (2016). Supporting young people leaving out-of-home care (CFCA Paper No. 41). Canberra: Australian Institute of Family Studies

¹⁹ Commonwealth of Australia (2020) Adequacy of Newstart and related payments and alternative mechanisms to determine the level of income support payments in Australia, Senate Community Affairs References Committee, Parliament House, Canberra.

²⁰ Australian Housing and Urban Research Institute Limited. (2023).

²¹ Ibid.



Australian housing market unique to other countries, including that the market relies extremely heavily on private homeownership, with half of private rentals owned by a landlord who has a single dwelling, and 90 per cent by landlords who have fewer than four.²² Housing legislation is heavily weighted toward the interest of landlords, and by international standards it is light regulation that affords power to landlords to manage the majority of details as they see fit, including appointing tenants and managing the length of a lease agreements. Alongside this, Australia currently has properties and owners churn in and out of the sector rapidly, which makes the housing sector structurally insecure.²³

The housing crisis has become particularly acute in Victoria. According to the Department of Families, Fairness and Housing (DFFH) median rents in Melbourne increased by more than 14.6 per cent in the year to March 2023 due to increased demand for rentals fuelled by population growth and immigration, alongside the continuous interest rate hikes across the country, with rents increasing seven times faster than wages.²⁴ The availability of social housing has not kept up with demand, with an estimated 119,000 people being kept multiple years on the Victorian Housing Register, while the rental vacancy rate has reached a record low of 0.8 per cent.²⁵ In Victoria, just 3 per cent of housing stock is registered as social housing, with the national average being 4.2 per cent.²⁶ In addition, findings from the Productivity Commission in 2019 showed that Victoria was spending less than half as much on social housing than New South Wales, in 2017-2018 Victoria spent \$83 per person, in comparison to the national average of \$167.²⁷ These factors have combined to create the crisis we are now witnessing, resulting in an increase in homelessness and the use of insecure and unsafe housing, which is particularly pronounced for Aboriginal Victorians.

Victorian Government Response

²² Ibid.

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ The State Government of Victoria, Department of Families, Fairness and Housing, Annual Report, 2021-2022.

²⁵ PropTrack Rental Report, March 2023 Quarter (2023), <https://rea3.irmau.com/site/pdf/85724293-2285-4c8a-9c91-463f515c364d/PropTrack-Rental-Report-March-2023.pdf>

²⁶ Community Housing Industry Association Victoria, Victorian Social Housing Investment Fund would deliver 20,000 homes over the next decade (2022), <https://chiavic.com.au/media-release-victorian-social-housing-investment-fund-would-deliver-20000-homes-over-the-next-decade/>

²⁷ The Australian Government Productivity Commission, Report on Government Services 2019, Housing and Homelessness (2019), <https://www.pc.gov.au/ongoing/report-on-government-services/2019/housing-and-homelessness> .

In response, the Victorian Labor Government committed to several areas of reform in their 2022 election platform, surrounding partnering with ACCOs, working with the not-for-profit sector to increase housing stock for Aboriginal people and increase the amount of housing staff to respond to Aboriginal people. These targeted initiatives include with the 'More Than a Landlord' program run through Aboriginal Housing Victoria (AHV), the 'Aboriginal Private Rental Assistance Program' (APRAP) run through a number of ACCOs and the 'HomesVic Aboriginal Victorians Shared Equity Program'. Preceding this, in 2020 the Big Housing Build was announced, allocating \$5.3 billion to build more than 12,000 new homes across the State, with 10 per cent of all net social dwellings allocated for Aboriginal Victorians.²⁸

The programs targeted to Aboriginal Victorians have seen success in responding to homelessness and housing insecurity and have been found to show early promise as a bridge between discriminatory and exclusionary processes and practices, providing better housing futures for Aboriginal Victorians. The APRAP program is currently undergoing expansion to four DFFH areas across the state including Bayside Peninsula, Outer Gippsland, Goulburn and Brimbank Melton. The More than a Landlord program facilitated the transfer of title of public housing stock from the Victorian Government to AHV, and facilitated new forms of engagement between AHV, its tenants and service providers, giving the opportunity for Aboriginal people to access a service more consistent with Aboriginal cultural values and responsive to their specific needs.²⁹ Prior to accessing the program, 50 per cent of households reported living in insecure, transitional housing at risk of homelessness, with 78.8 per cent saying they felt like they were at home when they moved into an AHV managed household.³⁰ In the year 2022-2023, the program helped more than 1000 Aboriginal Victorians to achieve and sustain their tenancies.³¹ Despite the success of this program, it was not re-funded under the most recent Victorian State Budget, and has left a large gap in the housing response for Aboriginal Victorians, at time when accessing housing is largely unattainable.

²⁸ Homes Victoria, the Big Housing Build, accessed June 2023, <https://www.homes.vic.gov.au/big-housing-build>.

²⁹ First 1000 Days Australia & Aboriginal Housing Victoria 2018, More than a Landlord Household Pilot Study: Report, Indigenous Health Equity Unit, The University of Melbourne and Aboriginal Housing Victoria, Melbourne.

³⁰ Ibid.

³¹ Aboriginal Housing Victoria, State Budget housing crisis response excludes Aboriginal Victorians (2023), <https://ahvic.org.au/comms-news/advocacy-news/state-budget-housing-crisis-response-excludes-aboriginal-victorians>.

In addition, the Big Housing Build is currently not meeting demand, as homelessness rates continue to rise and the Victorian population growth continues to grow without housing builds meeting the demands. Victoria is projected to be the second fastest growing state in Aboriginal population by 2026 and increase by over a third, with an annual growth rate of 2.5 to 2.6 per cent.³² Demand for intensive family services is forecast to rise to 1,700 Aboriginal families by 2028, and demand for non-intensive family services is forecast to be 5,500 Aboriginal households by 2028.³³ The demand for these services will be highest in the suburbs of Loddon, Mallee, Central Highlands, Inner Gippsland, Barwon, Bayside Peninsula, North Eastern Metropolitan and Southern Metropolitan. Correspondingly, access to social and affordable housing should be prioritised in these growth corridors of both population and increased service demand to ensure Aboriginal families have access to safe, secure and affordable housing alongside appropriate services.

Housing organisations across Victoria, alongside the Aboriginal Housing and Homelessness Forum, have called for an increase in the Big Housing Build and a further commitment to tracking the allocation of housing to Aboriginal community. It is imperative that housing stock can service the rapidly growing demand in the State, including further investment in social and affordable housing, which is severely lacking in Victoria. Aboriginal Victorians are six times more likely to live in social housing than the general population, while social housing only accounts for five per cent of the Australian housing sector.³⁴ Data from the most recent DFFH annual report shows there were 86,887 social housing dwellings across Victoria as of 30 June 2022, which is only a net increase of 74 dwellings since June 2018, despite the Big Housing Build.³⁵ At the same time, the social housing waitlist in Victoria has grown by 45 per cent.³⁶

The adequacy of the rental system and its enforcement

³² Northern Western Melbourne Primary Health Network, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Area Profile, 2017, <https://nwmphn.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2020/01/NWMPHN-Aboriginal-Torres-Strait-Islander-Area-Profile-2018.pdf>.

³³ SVA Consulting, Demand for services for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people in Victoria (Report prepared for the Aboriginal Executive Council), 2019, <https://aal.org.au/wp-content/uploads/AEC-SVA-ServiceDemand-forecasting-report-FINAL.pdf>

³⁴ Aboriginal Private Rental Access in Victoria: “Excluded from the Start”, 2021.

³⁵ Department of Families, Fairness and Housing, Annual Report 2021-2022, <https://www.dffh.vic.gov.au/sites/default/files/documents/202209/FINAL%20DFFH%20Annual%20Report%202021-22.pdf>

³⁶ Ibid

Recommendation 4: That the Victorian Government invest further in ACCOs to provide tangible supports to case manage and help vulnerable cohorts secure culturally safe, secure, affordable and long term housing. Cohorts include:

- Aboriginal Elders (people aged 55 years plus) to age in place
- Aboriginal young people exiting out-of-home care
- Aboriginal people escaping family violence
- Aboriginal young people and adults exiting prison
- Aboriginal people with a disability

Recommendation 5: That the Victorian Government invest in ACCO led housing programs across the state alongside increased housing stock, to ensure culturally safe support for Aboriginal people to move into long-term housing and sustain tenancies.

Recommendation 6: VACCA seeks an increase in all housing brokerage funding by at least 10% and/or to include housing brokerage funding into agreements for ACCOs providing family violence supports, children leaving care, homelessness and housing services and supports to Aboriginal people leaving the correctional system.

Recommendation 7: That the Victorian Government fund Aboriginal led family violence crisis accommodation across all regions.

Barriers to accessing housing

Aboriginal Victorians have historically faced barriers in accessing the private rental market, due mainly to prejudice and discrimination as well as structural disadvantage.³⁷ A report on the accessibility of mainstream services for Aboriginal Victorians outlined barriers to accessing mainstream services including racism, affordability, lack of culturally safe services, shame and fear, a lack of awareness of available services and complex administrative processes.³⁸ A major impact of colonisation has been the structures and systems that create a cycle of disadvantage and poverty for Aboriginal people. Poverty

³⁷ Ibid.

³⁸ Victorian Auditor General's Office. (2014). Accessibility of Mainstream Services for Aboriginal Victorians. Victorian Government. No 325.

plays a detrimental role in the high rates of homelessness amongst Aboriginal families as well as in the removal of young people into out-of-home care (OOHC). Research has found several circumstances associated with poverty are directly correlated with homelessness.³⁹ Circumstances such as limited opportunities for education, disability, financial stress, debt, reliance on public housing, social exclusion and living in sub-standard accommodation all make acquiring and sustaining stable housing extremely difficult. These experiences flow through generations of family, creating an intergenerational impact and a cycle of homelessness amongst Aboriginal families and communities.⁴⁰

A vast amount of Australian research into housing issues notes that Western models and structures of housing are pushed by governments onto the Aboriginal community, which preferences a nuclear family model rather than housing for larger or multi-generational families.⁴¹ The Australian Human Rights Commission argues that the housing sector 'preferences a Western-centric idea of a household and disregards Aboriginal cultural norms', which continues to operate as a barrier and point of discrimination against aboriginal people in the housing market.⁴² Currently, applicants for private rental must undergo 'screening' and 'ranking' based on employment and rental histories to secure a property.⁴³ While screening according to employment status and rental history raises concerns about discrimination and privilege, it is even more difficult to discern if someone is rejected from a rental property based on factors outside of those formally assessed by a rental provider, including the makeup of their family or racial discrimination. 'Excluded from the start' a 2022 report on Aboriginal private rental access in Victoria found that Aboriginal people often experience discrimination along every stage of the rental journey, including attending inspections, talking with real estate agents, applying, and requesting maintenance once residing in a rental property, but discrimination is particularly pronounced at the 'applying' stage.⁴⁴ Along this journey Aboriginal renters are faced with a lack of culturally safe services, complex administrative processes and a lack of affordable and appropriate options for themselves and their families. Compounding these

³⁹ McCaughey, J. (1992). Where now? Homeless families in the 1990's (Policy Background Paper No. 8). Australian Institute of Family Studies. Melbourne; Homelessness Australia. (2016). Homelessness and poverty. Homelessness Australia.

⁴⁰ Combat Poverty Agency. (2004). What is poverty?

⁴¹ Aboriginal Private Rental Access in Victoria: "Excluded from the Start", 2021.

⁴² Ibid.

⁴³ Ibid.

⁴⁴ Ibid.

experiences is the increased competition posed by the low vacancy rate of private rentals, and the disruptions caused by the COVID-19 Pandemic. The groups most affected by these barriers are as follows:

Aboriginal young people

The likelihood of Aboriginal young people slipping through the cracks of support services and becoming homeless is greater compared to non-Indigenous young people.⁴⁵ This is due to; Aboriginal children and young people being more likely to come from families facing extreme disadvantage or poverty and insufficient housing and Aboriginal young people experience marginalisation in additional ways to non-Indigenous young people through oppression, racism and disconnection from culture and Country.⁴⁶ These experiences have been linked to homelessness as well as higher rates of suicide, violence, depression and substance abuse.⁴⁷

These factors are compounded to make access to the private rental system increasingly difficult for Aboriginal young people. Research indicates that students and young people and people who are deriving all or most of their income from Centrelink, which often includes students and young people, can be prevented from accessing the private rental market due to discrimination based on myths and stereotypes that they will not pay rent on time or look after the property well.⁴⁸ The system relies on stable employment, the ability to navigate a complex application process and pay large amounts of money upfront and increasingly on demonstrating rental history.⁴⁹ These factors often lock young people out of the rental system and contribute to high levels of homelessness and insecure housing. In 2021 8,830 young people approached homelessness services in Victoria, with 5,060 turned away due to a lack of service capacity.⁵⁰ When young people do access private rental and experience difficulties such as staying on top of rental payments, they face the risk of eviction and the possibility of being 'blacklisted' on a tenant database for owing the rental provider money, jeopardising their chance at finding a private rental property in the

⁴⁵ Baskin, C. (2007). Aboriginal youth talk about structural determinants as the causes of their homelessness. *First Peoples Child & Family Review*, 3(3), 31-42.

⁴⁶ Productivity Commission. (2019). *Report on government service 2019: Community Services*.

⁴⁷ Patrick (2014). *Aboriginal homelessness in Canada: A literature review*. Toronto: Canadian Homelessness Research Network Pres.

⁴⁸ Victorian Equal Opportunity and Human Rights Commission, *Locked out – Discrimination in Victoria's private rental market* (2012).

⁴⁹ *Aboriginal Private Rental Access in Victoria: "Excluded from the Start"*, 2021.

⁵⁰ Australian Government, Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, *Australia's Health* (2022).

future and locking them into a cycle of insecure housing.⁵¹ Young people may also require access to other services, such as counselling or financial support. Whilst services such as assertive outreach, multidisciplinary supports and case management are important, these approaches are crisis driven and cannot create long term change without permanent housing infrastructure.⁵²

Aboriginal young people leaving out-of-home care

Aboriginal young people leaving care are a particularly vulnerable group to homelessness and housing stress, and have been widely reported as one of the most disadvantaged and vulnerable groups in society.⁵³ Aboriginal children and young people are over-represented in the child welfare system, with Victorian statistics finding them to be 16 times more likely to be living in OOH. Data indicates that more than half of Aboriginal people in contact with homeless services in Australia are under 25 years of age.⁵⁴ Further, Aboriginal young people are overrepresented in the homeless population within a year of leaving care (at a rate of more than one in three).⁵⁵ Inadequate income support payments not only play a significant role in financial hardship but the *Adequacy of Newstart* report also found that lower payment rates for young people under 22 years of age contributed to the rise of youth homelessness.⁵⁶

Young people leaving care are faced with challenges in accessing employment, education and housing in addition to being at a greater risk of early parenthood, becoming involved in the criminal justice system, drug and alcohol abuse and developing a mental illness.⁵⁷ Each of these challenges becomes exacerbated when they leave care and require stable,

⁵¹ Tenants Victoria, Tenant Databases or 'blacklists', accessed June 2023, <https://tenantsvic.org.au/advice/ending-your-tenancy/tenant-databases-blacklists/#:~:text=There%20are%20only%20two%20reasons,for%20the%20property%20%5Bsection%20439E%5D>

⁵² CHP. (2018). Victorian homelessness election platform 2018. Collingwood, Melbourne: CHP.

⁵³ Mendes, P., Michell, D., & Wilson, J. Z. (2014). Young people transitioning from out-of-home care and access to higher education: A critical review of the literature. *Children Australia*, 3(4), 243-252.

⁵⁴ Campo, M., & Commerford, J. (2016). Supporting young people leaving out-of-home care (CFCA Paper No. 41). Canberra: Australian Institute of Family Studies

⁵⁵ Campo, M., & Commerford, J. (2016). Supporting young people leaving out-of-home care (CFCA Paper No. 41). Canberra: Australian Institute of Family Studies

⁵⁶ Commonwealth of Australia (2020) Adequacy of Newstart and related payments and alternative mechanisms to determine the level of income support payments in Australia, Senate Community Affairs References Committee, Parliament House, Canberra.

⁵⁷ Campo, M., & Commerford, J. (2016). Supporting young people leaving out-of-home care (CFCA Paper No. 41). Canberra: Australian Institute of Family Studies.

safe accommodation that is appropriate to their needs. A range of leaving care supports are available until 21 years of age however these do not always meet the needs of Aboriginal young people leaving care; given high caseloads, late referrals, and limited resourcing of ACCOs to provide culturally appropriate support. A lack of housing support and forced homelessness are common challenges for young people leaving care due to poor transition planning and a shortage of affordable housing.⁵⁸ In 2019-2020 more than 300 young people exited out-of-home care into the homeless services system in Victoria, with one in six being Aboriginal.⁵⁹

This is where VACCA's Better Futures program, alongside the suite of targeted support services for Aboriginal young people including Targeted Care Packages, Lead Tenant and Navigator Programs, has provided much needed support. In 2021 the Victorian government announced the extension of support for care leavers to the age of 21 through the provision of Better Futures which delivers the Home Stretch brokerage⁶⁰. Better Futures is the case management program of leaving care which can be accessed by young people from 15'9 months-21 years, even if they have left care. There is brokerage under Better Futures to support the individual's needs.

VACCA and the Victorian Aboriginal Children and Young People's Alliance have recently finalised the Better Futures Our Way: A Practice Guide for Aboriginal Community-Controlled Organisations. The guide provides background information about the Better Futures program as well as practice wisdom and guidance for practitioners and their managers about how the program can be delivered the Aboriginal way. It also describes the procedures, tools and templates that guide and resource the work of ACCO based Better Futures workers. The immediate value of the Guide is in providing ACCOs with a thorough understanding of the Better Futures program. It also shares practice tips and ideas to help workers find new and creative ways to support Aboriginal young people on their journeys, working in the Aboriginal way, and shares Aboriginal culturally centered way of delivering Better Futures. This is based on the understanding that self-determination and cultural connection as central to healing and to supporting a successful

⁵⁸ Ibid.

⁵⁹ Victorian Aboriginal Housing and Homelessness Framework. (2022).

⁶⁰ *Child, Youth and Families Act, 2005(Vic)*, Chapter 2, s16; and Premier announcement 'Home Stretch Helping More Youth People Leaving Care' 22 June 2021. [Home Stretch Helping More Young People Leaving Care | Premier of Victoria](#)

transition from out-of-home care. Ultimately, the Guide aims to help build positive outcomes for Aboriginal young people, including strengthened connection to their families, community and culture, a known protective factor in transitioning from care to supported independence.

While we welcome the guide and know it will better support Aboriginal young people accessing these services, we know that Better Futures is not without its problems. Where the transition from leaving care to living independently is not done well, Aboriginal kids suffer. They are at greater risk of being exploited and or in unsafe relationship and experiencing family violence. They also face greater likelihood of entering the justice system and becoming homeless. The Aboriginal Better Futures Development Project found that ACCOs were receiving referrals from Child Protection, or even from within ACCO case0contracted programs where a young person's Cultural Support Plan was either lacking or inadequate, which mean the young person was significantly culturally disconnected. We also know that workers have high caseloads with clients with complex needs and high levels of trauma, late referrals, and limited resourcing of ACCOs to provide culturally appropriate support. A lack of housing support and forced homelessness are common challenges for young people leaving care due to poor transition planning and a shortage of affordable housing.⁶¹

The intersection of family violence and homelessness

Family violence is one of the main reasons for Aboriginal young people, women, families and men enter homelessness.⁶² There are a number of complex and compounding reasons why individuals, in particular women and children, are forced to remain in unsafe housing, with a key issue being no alternative, affordable accommodation. For affected family members seeking to leave a violent household, there is a lack of housing options available and those leaving often need safe, secure and specialised housing. For children and young people, family violence is the leading cause of homelessness and can have a detrimental

⁶¹ Ibid.

⁶² Closing the Gap Clearinghouse (AIHW & AIFS). (2016). Family violence prevention programs in Indigenous communities (Resource sheet no. 37). Produced by the Closing the Gap Clearinghouse. Canberra: AIHW & Melbourne: AIFS.

impact on their life trajectory, affecting their educational, physical, mental and emotional wellbeing and development.⁶³ Aboriginal children, women and families are disproportionately over-represented in rates of family violence, and Aboriginal women are 15 times more likely to access homelessness and crisis housing than non-Indigenous women.⁶⁴ Everyone has the right to secure housing and somewhere they feel safe. Family violence undermines this right and pushes victims to leave their home and find accommodation elsewhere. However, many women who seek specialist homelessness services request assistance as they do not have the financial stability to acquire housing and consequently their options are extremely limited, impacting on their ability to leave a violent environment.

As detailed in VACCA's submission to the inquiry into the extent and nature of poverty in Australia⁶⁵, we note that while poverty can be a contributing factor for family violence, experiences of family violence can also increase the risk of housing stress and homelessness and therefore poverty. Unaffordable or insecure housing means that those fleeing violence, in particular women and children, are often economically dependent on users of family violence. In addition, financial abuse is a highly prevalent issue in Australia with severe impacts on women and children⁶⁶ yet is often not given the adequate weight it deserves in family violence prevention and response.

Anne Summer's report 'The Choice: Violence or Poverty' articulates what is so often the experience of Aboriginal women, that they are faced with living with family violence or entering policy induced poverty,⁶⁷ identifying the insufficient social security payments contribute to the experience of financial hardship.⁶⁸ This is why the provision of Aboriginal-

⁶³ DiNicola, K., Liyanarachchi, D., & Plummer, J. Out of the shadows: Domestic and family violence: A leading cause of homelessness in Australia. Mission Australia.

⁶⁴ Braybrook, A. (2016). Family violence in Aboriginal communities. Extract from submission to the Victorian Royal Commission into Family Violence. Retrieved from <http://www.dvrcv.org.au/sites/default/files/Family-violence-in-Aboriginal-communities-FVPLS.pdf>.

⁶⁵ Submission 81, Senate Standing Committee on Community Affairs, 'The Extent and Nature of Poverty in Australia'. https://www.aph.gov.au/Parliamentary_Business/Committees/Senate/Community_Affairs/PovertyinAustralia/Submissions

⁶⁶ Deloitte Access Economics and Commonwealth Bank (2022). The cost of financial abuse in Australia. [Weblink](#)

⁶⁷ Summers, A. (2022). The Choice: Violence or Poverty. University of Technology Sydney p22

⁶⁸ Australia's National Research Organisation for Women's Safety. (2022). *Economic security and intimate partner violence: Research synthesis*. ANROWS.

specific, culturally safe, affordable and accessible housing is key to addressing the cycle of poverty, family violence and homelessness. This must also be combined with ACCO-led, wrap-around, trauma informed responses that support the specific needs of Aboriginal families affected by family violence.

Currently, there are only 423 government funded crisis beds across Victoria, yet the state experiences more than 9,500 instances of emergency accommodation required each year.⁶⁹ Alternative crisis accommodation consists of options which are not culturally safe or long-term, including motels, boarding houses, hostels and caravan parks. This lack of stable and safe accommodation is resulting in victim-survivors being more likely to return to violent partners, and users of violence are often unable to engage fully in behaviour change programs due to the lack of accommodation options.

VACCA's Orana Gunyah program is one example of community-led service delivery embedded in Aboriginal self-determination and the rights of women and children. It supports Aboriginal women and children, women with Aboriginal children or carers with Aboriginal children fleeing family violence. All clients that seek refuge receive full therapeutic and case management, including administrative support to complete public, social and private rental housing paperwork. Since its conception, Orana Gunyah Outreach has supported 370 women and 527 children. The crisis accommodation aspect of the program has housed 139 women with children, and while some have returned to the situation they left, most have moved to other refuges, to stay with kin or acquired public housing or a private rental. The correlation between family violence and homelessness for Aboriginal women and children has in the past remained a hidden issue as Aboriginal women are apprehensive to approach mainstream services due to fear that if they disclose the presence of family violence, their children may be removed. Yet, when access to an Aboriginal specific, culturally appropriate, and wrap-around response is available there is an increase in the number of Aboriginal women and children seeking assistance. A culturally safe response supports women's willingness to come forward, fosters empowerment and allows women to see a positive future for themselves and their children. Orana Gunyah is only in one of VACCA's regions, we know there is community

⁶⁹ Australian Government Productivity Commission, In need of repair: The National Housing and Homelessness Agreement Study Report (2022).

need for crisis accommodation across all VACCA regions, VACCA recommends that government fund Aboriginal led family violence crisis accommodation across all regions.

Aboriginal people exiting prison

As outlined by Aboriginal Housing Victoria's Housing and Homelessness Framework, Mana-na woorn-tyeen maar-tako, inadequate or insecure housing can precipitate offending and recidivism.⁷⁰ Aboriginal people are often detained within the custodial justice system unable to access bail, parole or a corrections order due to their inability to demonstrate access to secure housing.⁷¹ Moreover, under Victoria's harsh bail laws, Aboriginal people, particularly women, are often incarcerated on remand for several months for minor offences, and are at increased risk of losing their housing during this time. Aboriginal people often exit prison into unsafe hostels and boarding houses from private providers. This type of short-term, unstable and unsafe accommodation, or no housing at all. People who are released into the community with no home, no resources and no support inevitably re-enter the cycle of offending and subsequent incarceration.

VACCA provides a number of prior to and post release support programs that include support in finding suitable housing. These include;

Youth Through Care (YTC) Program

VACCA's YTC program draws on strength and connection to culture and community, creating an opportunity to engage with children and young people in custody prior to and post release. The YTC program is an intensive, client-centred, holistic, culturally appropriate, trauma-informed program, with a strong connection to Country and family that supports Aboriginal and young people's exiting detention. The program provides an effective model for YTC provider organisations and aims to reduce the rates and severity of recidivism. The YTC program utilises a theory of change which illustrates the elements of an effective model of through-care. Trusted, well qualified YTC Case Workers provide appropriate and holistic therapeutic case management and deliver it in a culturally safe, client centred and trauma-informed manner.

VACCA's YTC program is client led and voluntary, with a strong intention that the young people they work with have to want to engage. The extended scope enables the option to

⁷⁰ Aboriginal Housing Victoria, Mana-na woorn-tyeen maar-takoort: Every Aboriginal Person Has a Home (2020). Available at: https://www.vahhf.org.au/cms_uploads/docs/victorian-aboriginal-housing-and-homelessnessframework_complete_26_02_20.pdf

⁷¹ Ibid.



work with young people for approximately two years, whether on a youth justice order or not. One of the key points of difference between YTC's approach and other justice support services is a commitment to remaining committed, non-judgmental and trauma-informed, often working for six months with a young person before seeing their engagement.

Our program knows that each young person is at a different stage of their cultural journey, so they adjust their approach to recognise the differing needs and goals. The program includes the following core elements:

- Support pathways
- Education/employment pathways
- Safe and secure accommodation
- Health and social and emotional wellbeing
- Youth specific AOD services
- Case management
- Pre-release case management
- Administrative logistics
- Coordinated post-release planning
- Intensive case management
- Client-centred and gender appropriate
- Family community and culture
- Cultural strengthening
- Family, kin, Elder support and advocacy
- Supporting positive social networks

Beyond Survival Program

VACCA delivers the Beyond Survival program across Victorian prisons including Tarrengower and Dame Phyllis Frost Centre. It is a 3-day group program that provides trauma informed facilitation of narrative group work for prisoners including yarning circles to support healing and to strengthen each person's connectedness to family, community and culture. The program also provides a point of contact post release to support people to navigate and access Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal services and to help connect them to family, community and culture. In doing so, creating wrap around supports that will help sustain the positive changes made in prison, build their protective factors to maximise effective reintegration into the community and reduce the likelihood of reoffending.

VACCA's Beyond Survival program has received consistent positive feedback from participants and justice staff for many years. Programs are well attended, with participants

often asking for longer programs. Participants have reported that the program has given them an opportunity to let go of past traumas and begin to heal, as well as given them a deeper understanding of their own and their families stories to find forgiveness and healing. They have also reported that they love the way the program is delivered, with trust and safety underpinning the program.

The Dardee Djeetgun Women's Diversion Program

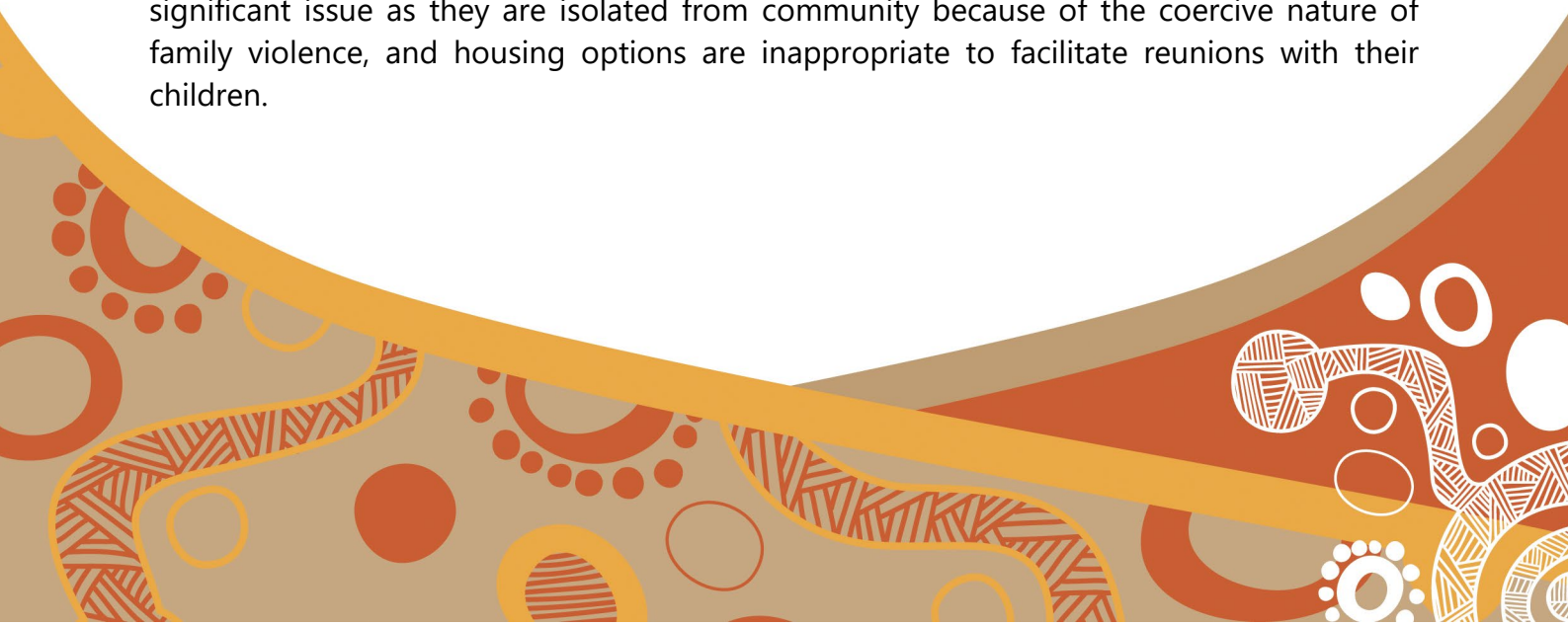
The Dardee Djeetgun Women's Diversion Program provides intensive case management, in a culturally and gender appropriate way for Aboriginal women and their families. Each year the program supports up to 16 women for up to 12 months depending on need (VACCA has previously assisted 26 women as we don't want to turn them away). The program adopts a holistic and trauma informed approach to addressing underlying factors contributing to the women's offending or reoffending. Support is provided to Aboriginal women in the Morwell area and Northern Melbourne who are on court orders, bail, community corrections and parole orders to:

- successfully complete their orders
- reduce the risk of reoffending
- be diverted from deepening contact with the criminal justice system and reduce risk of child protection involvement
- access referral pathways to programs and services
- navigate relevant service systems, including the justice system.

There is inconsistent brokerage available for this program, for instance Morwell has brokerage but there is limited access in the North.

VACCA staff shared that a high proportion of the women they support are mothers and do not have their children in their care. Currently of the eighteen in the program, only two have guardianship of their children. Staff also shared that most of the women are being held on remand, which forced some of their kids into out-of-home care. Of the eighteen women, 90 per cent have experienced family violence, many of whom were identified as the aggressor, and all present with complex mental health issues and trauma. VACCA staff raised concerns about the lack of consideration applied to these complex cases by the courts in determining sentencing and bail conditions, placing unreasonable expectations so as to placing them on remand.

For women leaving prison, majority in the program rely on their disability payment due to high levels of trauma and acquired ABI, as a result of family violence. Housing is also a significant issue as they are isolated from community because of the coercive nature of family violence, and housing options are inappropriate to facilitate reunions with their children.



The impact of short stay accommodation

Recommendation 8: That the Victorian Government invest in longer-term and sustainable funding for homelessness service providers, increasing the amount of time a service user can reside in supported in accommodation.

Recommendation 9: That the Victorian Government treat crisis accommodation and social and affordable housing as essential social infrastructure and commit to long-term funding for a new Aboriginal housing supply that meets demand.

At present, there is a large amount of short stay accommodation utilised by those who cannot access home ownership or a private rental arrangement, this includes motels, boarding houses, and hostels. The Inquiry into Homelessness in Victoria found that there has been a huge increase in people accessing homelessness services in Victoria, with 112,919 people seeking assistance from homelessness services in 2018-2019, a 22 per cent increase from 2012-2013.⁷² In 2019-2020 Aboriginal Victorians presented to homeless services at 10 times the rate of other Victorians.⁷³ Many people who present to homelessness services cannot be supported or referred to accommodation, due firstly to the lack of short-term accommodation options and secondly to the growing numbers of people using short and medium term accommodation for long periods due to being unable to access any long-term housing options.⁷⁴ The lack of transition into long term housing is having disastrous effects on homelessness services and the people who access them, and is having flow on affects to people seeking help from other services where accommodation is a requirement of support. For example, people leaving institutional care, those accessing programs where accommodation is a requirement and those exiting prison on bail conditions.⁷⁵ This has directly impacted programs run by VACCA, in particular for family violence men's behaviour change. VACCA Case Managers have been

⁷² Department of Health and Human Services, Victoria's homelessness service system: Presentation to the Legal and Social Issues Committee, p. 4.

⁷³ Mana-na worn-tyeen maar-takoort, every Aboriginal Person has a Home, Victorian Aboriginal Housing and Homelessness Framework, 2021 Annual Report Card (2021).

⁷⁴ Parliament of Victoria, Legislative Council, Legal and Social Issues Committee, Inquiry into Homelessness in Victoria, Final Report (2021).

⁷⁵ Ibid.

consistently faced with men unable to voluntarily partake in a program due to a lack of accommodation options and often have to use a large amount of funding for expensive options such as motels, when this could be better spent on achieving clients' goals through counselling or case management.

In addition, using short-term accommodation arrangements poses severe risks to Aboriginal people who may be fleeing family violence and families in contact with child protection. Often children and young people coming into care have been removed from their families and homes and placed in OOHC as Child Protection has deemed their living conditions unsafe. Family violence and out of home care are inextricably linked to housing, this is because having access to safe housing significantly impacts on a family's ability to provide healthy support and care for their children.⁷⁶ Compounded with housing stressors such as unstable housing tenure, homelessness, mortgage and rental stress, families become vulnerable and at risk of involvement from child protection and to child removal. A lack of safe and stable housing, particularly for families exposed to family violence, contributes to both the over representation of Aboriginal children and young people placed in OOHC as well as to high rates of homelessness.

The lack of long-term accommodation and early intervention options has also resulted in the sector becoming crisis orientated. Due to the exceedingly high demand for housing and lack of options the sector is inclined to focus more on the immediate needs of people who are homeless rather than people at risk of homelessness, including children and families.⁷⁷ VACCA agrees with the findings by the Inquiry into Homelessness in Victoria Committee that the Victorian Government needs to embed more flexibility into funding homelessness programs, so the amount of time an individual is supported for can be increased, and that a multi-disciplinary approach should be taken to ensure that services for people with complex needs can be met alongside their need for housing.⁷⁸

Recommendation 10: that the Victorian Government provide adequate resources to achieve the goals and aspirations of Mana-na worn-tyeen maar-takoort: Every Aboriginal Person Has a Home.

⁷⁶ Lewis, N., Weston, R., Burton, J., Young, J., Jayakody, N., Mastroianni, A., Wu Tan, W., Parolini, A., Shlonsky, A., & Tilbury, C. (2019). The family matters report 2019: Measuring trends to turn the tide on the over-representation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children in out-of-home care. Eltham: Postscript Printing and Publishing

⁷⁷ Inquiry into Homelessness in Victoria, Final Report (2021).

⁷⁸ Ibid.



Recommendation 11: that the Victorian Government embed Aboriginal housing targets in mainstream policies, strategies and programs and strengthen housing targets in the Victorian Aboriginal Affairs Framework, as recommended by the Aboriginal Housing and Homelessness Forum.

Options to address insecurity, availability and affordability issues facing Victorian renters

Culturally appropriate support services

A concern and key component to addressing homelessness amongst Aboriginal young people and communities is the need for housing and support services that cater to social and cultural needs. A lack of culturally safe housing means Aboriginal people are more likely to slip through the gaps and miss the opportunity to access housing support or participate in the private rental market. Aboriginal children and families are often faced with racism and discrimination from mainstream organisations when attempting to secure accommodation resulting in many Aboriginal households being excluded from the opportunity for private rentals and repudiating them access to these markets.⁷⁹ The impact of systemic racism on access to housing is evident not only amongst Aboriginal Victorians but First Nations peoples around the world.⁸⁰ AHV identified racism to be an entrenched challenge for Aboriginal peoples, masked better than ever, particularly in the private rental market.⁸¹

VACCA currently offers two housing and homelessness support services; the Wilam Support Service in the Northern Metro area of Melbourne and the Kurnai Youth Homelessness Program offered across Inner Gippsland. Each program provides culturally appropriate crisis support and case management services to Aboriginal peoples who are at risk of or experiencing homelessness. The programs also provide support to non-Indigenous people with Aboriginal children. People accessing these services are assisted to find and secure housing, develop life and living skills and address the issues contributing to their homelessness through a case management model of support. The Wilam Support

⁷⁹ AHV. (2019). The Victorian Aboriginal housing and homelessness summit: Report of findings. Melbourne: Aboriginal Housing Victoria.

⁸⁰ AHV. (2019). The Victorian Aboriginal housing and homelessness summit: Report of findings

⁸¹ Ibid.

Service is not age specific; however, the Kurnai Youth Homelessness Program is targeted at Aboriginal young people aged 15-25.

Whilst these services provide examples of community based, culturally strong support, they are unable to manage the extent of the issue. Other Aboriginal agencies have the knowledge and services to become an entry and referral point, however they do not currently have the capacity and resources to do so.⁸² Housing support services should also recognise that no one size fits all and that housing responses must have the opportunity and ability to meet varying needs. For example, kinship care creates a need for extended housing and service support with consideration of rental arrangements when household numbers increase.⁸³ Services and housing support for Aboriginal young people leaving care needs to be culturally safe and prioritise connection to family and culture.

Case management and access to accommodation

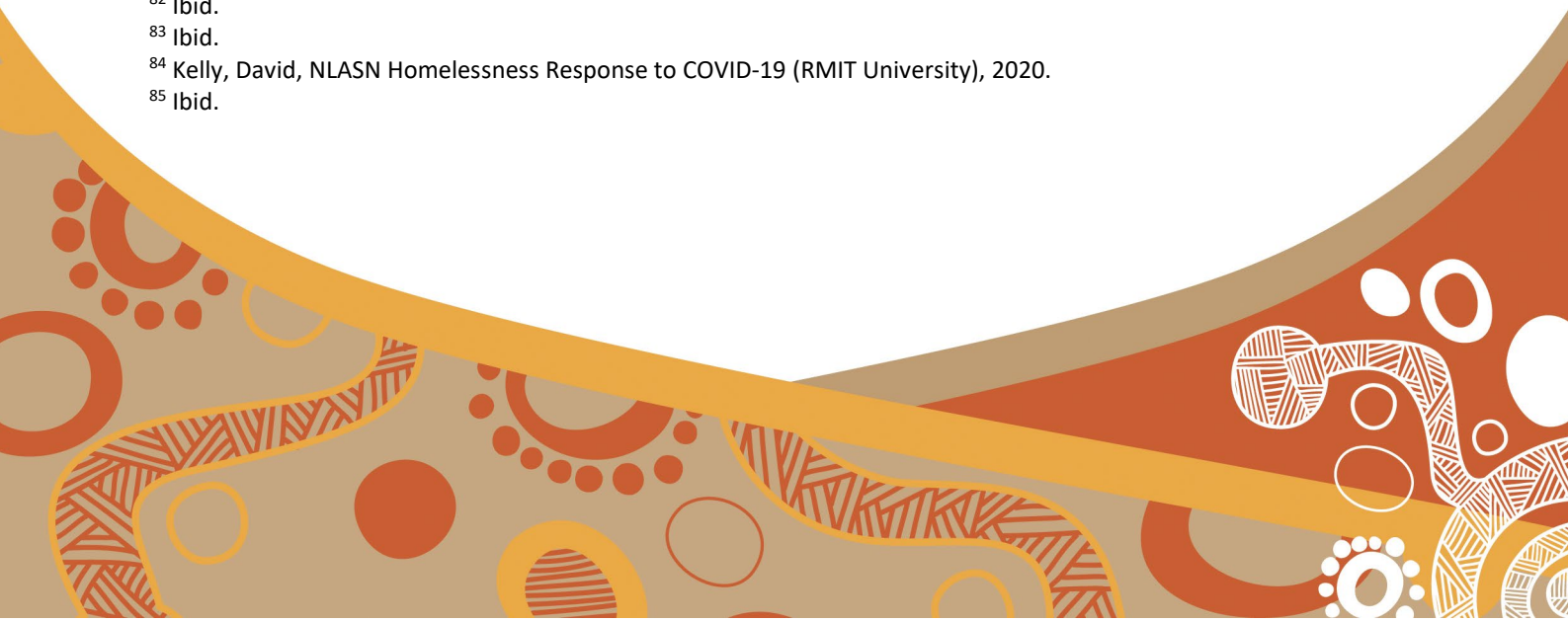
The Victorian government made efforts to keep people who experience homelessness safe during the COVID-19 pandemic by providing funding for Homeless Access Points and temporary accommodation. Aboriginal people who have been homeless for extended periods of time who have multiple related issues such as mental and physical illness, alcohol and other drug use issues and past trauma, are unlikely to successfully negotiate and sustain a pathway out of chronic homelessness without intensive resources and ongoing support. During the COVID-19 pandemic, emergency housing became more widely available due to the collapse of the tourism sector and resulting availability of bought hotel accommodation.⁸⁴ As part of the public health response to the pandemic the homelessness sector was instructed by the Victorian Government to provide ongoing emergency accommodation for people experiencing homelessness and support every person approaching the sector.⁸⁵ This meant an increased amount of Aboriginal people who had experienced complex barriers to accessing housing were able to be navigated into the housing system due to the coordinated and localised response of groups such as the Homeless Emergency Accommodation Response Team (HEART) who worked to proactively house anyone who was experiencing homelessness and provide them with intensive case management to sustain their housing.

⁸² Ibid.

⁸³ Ibid.

⁸⁴ Kelly, David, NLASN Homelessness Response to COVID-19 (RMIT University), 2020.

⁸⁵ Ibid.



As the pandemic continued funding for responses such as these declined, and we returned to an even higher rate of homelessness than pre-pandemic levels. It is evident that with the commitment of funding from the Government, availability of housing and coordination of services even the those experiencing the most complex barriers can access and sustain housing and improve their lives. It is important to note and learn from the responses during the covid-19 pandemic, which emphasises that with funding, the availability of housing and an integrated service approach everyone has the ability to be housed and overcome other barriers in their lives.

Aboriginal consultation

As homelessness and a lack of access to home ownership and the private rental system is more pronounced in Aboriginal communities, it warrants a self-determined Aboriginal specific response. Currently, Victoria has the Mana-na worn-tyeen maar-takoort every Aboriginal Person has a Home, Victorian Aboriginal Housing and Homelessness Framework. However, the goals and recommendations that underpin the strategy have not been adequately resourced, and in the most recent Victorian State Budget failed to address the deepening housing and homelessness crisis and tacking the worsening rates of Aboriginal homelessness and housing instability.

VACCA strongly supports the Mana-na worn-tyeen maar-takoort strategy and urges the Victorian Government to invest in the development of an integrated housing and homelessness approach that is rights based and guided by the principle of self-determination. All future policies, programs and reforms of the housing sector should include Aboriginal people as in formats, mentors and experts to ensure responses are culturally safe and Aboriginal led.

Contact

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