

Submission to Legal and Social Issues Committee:
Inquiry into Homelessness in Victoria
The Victorian Aboriginal Child Care Agency
February 2020

Victoria has the highest and fastest rising rates of Aboriginal people contacting homelessness services in Australia. Almost half of those presenting to homeless services are already homeless.

Aboriginal children and young people are significantly over-represented in rates of out of home care and are extremely vulnerable to homelessness. This submission highlights the correlation between housing and homelessness with the high rates of Aboriginal children in out of home care.

Family violence and intergenerational poverty contribute to high rates of homelessness as well as over-representation in out of home care as Aboriginal children and young people can be forced to stay in violent households due to no alternative safe, affordable accommodation.

After Aboriginal children young people are removed from their family and placed in out of home care, they become at greater risk of becoming homeless after leaving care due to;

- Forced independence when leaving care at the vulnerable age of 18
- Insufficient financial support from Centrelink
- Shortage of safe, stable and secure housing options and infrastructure
- Lack of culturally appropriate housing and support services

For the purpose of this Inquiry submission, the term Aboriginal is used to refer to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people in Australia. When referring to official data sets or legislation, the use of Indigenous is used to maintain consistency with these sources.

Introduction

The Victorian Aboriginal Child Care Agency (VACCA) welcomes the opportunity to provide input into the Legal and Social Issues Committee Inquiry into Homelessness in Victoria. VACCA hopes to contribute to discussions on the challenges of homelessness for Aboriginal people in Victoria and the potential strategies, approaches and investments that will build and sustain the social and emotional wellbeing and safety of our most vulnerable community members. When responding to these challenges, any strategy or approach must be informed by a rights-based framework, in particular the principle of self-determination.

About VACCA

VACCA is the lead Aboriginal child welfare organisation and the largest provider of Aboriginal family violence services in Victoria. 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 deliver over 50 programs across a wide range of program areas including family violence, integrated family services, child protection, cultural strengthening programs, mental health, financial services, justice, early years and homelessness services. Offering a broad range of services helps to:

- Ensure child safety and community wellbeing
- Provide targeted support for Aboriginal children, young people and their families
- Maintain and build strong connections to Aboriginal culture
- Promote culturally specific ways of raising Aboriginal children.

VACCA's submission is based on our unique position as an ACCO providing a suite of services across the state. We hope to highlight the key role that safe, secure housing has on successful outcomes in education, health, justice, child protection, family violence and employment. Despite this being well known and outlined in the Victorian State Governments Rough Sleeping Action Plan¹, until now there has been no coherent, concerted approach to addressing homelessness and housing for Aboriginal people in Victoria at either the State or Commonwealth level². [Note: The Victorian Aboriginal Housing and Homelessness Framework prepared by the Aboriginal community under the auspice of Aboriginal Housing Victoria (AHV) has now been presented to the Government and will be launched in February 2020. VACCA supports this framework and endorses all recommendations.

Understanding the over-representation of Aboriginal peoples in rates of homelessness

Victoria has the highest and fastest rising rates of Aboriginal people accessing homeless services in Australia 17,000 per 10,000 or 17%. Of this 17%, 44% present to the services already homeless (AIHW, 2019). This scale of homelessness would not be accepted in the mainstream.

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 education³.

¹ Victorian Government. (2018). *Rough sleeping action plan*. Melbourne: Department of Health and Human Services.

² Samms, J. (2018). An Aboriginal housing and homelessness framework for Victoria [online]. *Parity*, 31 (5),42.

³ AIHW. (2018). *Housing assistance in Australia*. Canberra: Australian Government.

Aboriginal Victorians are missing out on the human right to adequate housing more than any other group in Victoria. On any given night, over 24,000 Victorians are homeless, including families with children, young people, elderly people, people with disabilities, couples and single adults⁴. This is due to a number of structural factors 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 markets⁵. Within the homelessness population, Aboriginal people are disproportionately over-represented comprising more than 10% of clients using homeless services in 2017-18 even though they make up less than 1% of the Victorian population⁶.

Whilst the invasion of Aboriginal lands, of what we now know as Australia, occurred over 230 years ago, the impact has transcended generations, touching all aspects of Aboriginal people's lives. The ongoing effects of colonisation and its transmission across generations, has created significant systemic and social disadvantage, hindering Aboriginal people's ability to thrive within their communities and creating intergenerational poverty amongst families and communities⁷ (Patrick, 2014).

This provides an explanation as to why there is a disproportionate number of Aboriginal people at risk of or experiencing homelessness. Historic factors such as the taking of land and deliberate exclusion from the economy has led to significant displacement and dispossession of Aboriginal communities creating not only physical homelessness but also spiritual homelessness⁷.

This disadvantage is evident in Victoria with the highest rate of Aboriginal homelessness across all states and territories⁸ in Australia and has been steadily increasing over the past five years⁹. In 2019, 17% of Aboriginal Victorians received homeless services in comparison to less than 2% of all Victorians¹⁰. 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. Most data is based on homeless service usage, and therefore does not include those staying with kin, transient or those who are sleeping rough but have not accessed homeless services. The fact that most people who enter the homeless support system homeless, also exit the system homeless, diminishes the likelihood that they will return to a service system which has proved unable to meet their needs.

⁴ Council to Homeless Persons. (2018). *Homelessness in Victoria*. Retrieved from <https://chp.org.au/homelessness/>

⁵ 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.

⁶ AIHW. (2018). *Specialist homelessness services annual report 2017-18*. Canberra: AIHW.

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⁸ Aboriginal Housing Victoria. (2019). *The Victorian Aboriginal housing and homelessness summit: Report of findings*. Melbourne: Aboriginal Housing Victoria

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Productivity Commission. (2019). *Report on government service 2019: Housing and homelessness*. Canberra: Australian Government.

The likelihood of Aboriginal children and young people slipping through the cracks of support services and becoming homeless is greater compared to non-Indigenous young people¹¹. This is due to; Aboriginal children and young people being more likely to come from families facing extreme disadvantage or poverty, insufficient housing, substance abuse or violence¹². Secondly, they are significantly disadvantaged in obtaining stable, well-paying jobs as they are less likely to have obtained formal or tertiary qualifications¹³. Thirdly, 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 OOHC¹⁴ and lastly, Aboriginal young people experience marginalisation in additional ways to non-Indigenous young people through oppression, racism and disconnection from culture and Country. These experiences have been linked to homelessness as well as higher rates of suicide, violence, depression and substance abuse¹⁵.

Previously, Australia has had a housing market that majority of Australians could afford to buy a house, the private rental market offered a transitional tenure while people saved for their own house and social housing was available for the most disadvantaged¹⁶. However, this has been changing over the past two decades as private ownership has declined and share of social housing as a tenure in the housing market has fallen. Victoria in particular has a lower proportion of social housing and the lowest rate of investment in social housing than any other state or territory¹⁷. This concern is further deepened by the recent decision of the Federal Government to not continue funding for remote Indigenous housing, leaving a \$6 billion gap. Resulting in even more responsibility of state-based agreements to meet the housing needs of Aboriginal Victorians¹⁸

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

Both research¹⁹ and VACCA's experiences as a child welfare organisation highlight the impact that inadequate housing and homelessness has on the removal and placement of Aboriginal children and young people into OOHC, as well as undermining future prospects of young people when leaving care.

¹¹ Baskin, C. (2007). Aboriginal youth talk about structural determinants as the causes of their homelessness. *First Peoples Child & Family Review*, 3(3), 31-42.

¹² Aboriginal Housing Victoria. (2019)

¹³ Peters, E. J., & Robillard, V. (2009). "Everything you want is there": The place of the reserve in First Nations' homeless mobility. *Urban Geography*, 30(6), 652-680.

¹⁴ Productivity Commission. (2019). *Report on government service 2019: Community Services*

¹⁵ Patrick (2014). Aboriginal homelessness in Canada: A literature review. Toronto: Canadian Homelessness Research Network Pres.

¹⁶ AHV. (2019). *The Victorians Aboriginal housing and homelessness summit: Background paper 3 Determinants of housing outcomes*

¹⁷ Ibid

¹⁸ "Government Looks to First Nations after Repeating Failings in Closing the Gap." *NITV*, February 12, 2020.

<https://www.sbs.com.au/nitv/article/2020/02/12/government-looks-first-nations-after-repeat-failings-closing-gap-0>

¹⁹ Lewis et al., (2019); Campo, M., & Commerford, J. (2016); Mendes, P., Baidawi, S., & Snow, P. C (2014).

Coming into care

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. This may be due to the presence of risk factors such as; poverty, family violence, child abuse or neglect²⁰. Taskforce 1000 revealed that 88% of Aboriginal children and young people in OOHC had experienced family violence, 87% had been exposed to parental alcohol or substance abuse and almost 50% had experienced neglect²¹.

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 family members wanting to leave a violent household, there is a lack of housing options available and those leaving often need safe, secure and specialised housing.

Family violence

Family violence is one of the main reasons for homelessness within Aboriginal communities²². Aboriginal children, women and families are disproportionately over-represented in rates of family violence, with Aboriginal women are 15 times more likely to access homelessness and crisis housing than non-Indigenous women²³. 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.

For children and young people, family violence is the leading cause of homelessness and can have a detrimental impact on their life trajectory, affecting their educational, physical, mental and emotional wellbeing and development²⁴. This is because having access to safe housing significantly impacts on a family's ability to provide healthy support and care for their children²⁵. 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-

²⁰ 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.

²¹ Commission for Children and Young People (CCYP). (2016). *Always was, always will be Koori children: Systemic inquiry into services provided to Aboriginal children and young people in out-of-home care in Victoria*. Melbourne: CCYP.

²² 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

²³ 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>

²⁴ DiNicola, K., Liyanarachchi, D., & Plummer, J. *Out of the shadows: Domestic and family violence: A leading cause of homelessness in Australia*. Mission Australia.

²⁵ Lewis, et al. (2016).

representation of Aboriginal children and young people placed in OOHC as well as to high rates of homelessness.

Poverty

A major impact of colonisation has been systemic structures and systems that create a cycle of disadvantage and poverty for Aboriginal peoples. Poverty plays a detrimental role in the high rates of homelessness amongst Aboriginal families as well as in the removal of young people into OOHC. Research has found several circumstances associated with poverty are directly correlated with homelessness²⁶. 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 communities²⁷.

Although family poverty does not immediately warrant involvement from child protection or the removal of children, studies have identified poverty to be a key indicator for involvement from child protection²⁸. Whilst living in poverty contributes to the likelihood of young people experiencing adverse events such as family violence, maternal distress and reduced parental responsiveness, a child's access to learning opportunities and their quality of care are all factors correlated with poverty and could be reduced through support to overcome disadvantage.²⁹ This is extremely problematic, as after being removed from their families and placed in OOHC, young people become highly vulnerable to homelessness when leaving care³⁰. Without provision of affordable housing for vulnerable Aboriginal families this damaging cycle will continue.

Leaving care

Young people leaving care have been widely reported as one of the most disadvantaged and vulnerable groups in society³¹. Compared to young people without experiences in OOHC, they 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 illness³². Each of these challenges becomes exacerbated when at the age of 18 they are forced to leave home and they are not developmentally ready, prepared for independent living and/or do not have stable, safe accommodation that is appropriate to their needs.

²⁶ 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

²⁷ Combat Poverty Agency. (2004). *What is poverty?*

²⁸ Lewis et al., (2019).

²⁹ Ibid

³⁰ 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.

³¹ Ibid

³² Campo, M., & Commerford, J. (2016). *Supporting young people leaving out-of-home care* (CFCA Paper No. 41). Canberra: Australian Institute of Family Studies

The over-representation of Aboriginal young people in OOHC and over-representation in the homeless population within a year of leaving care (at a rate of more than one in three) in part explains why more than half of Aboriginal people in contact with homeless services in Australia are under 25 years of age (Campo & Commerford, 2016).

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 housing³³. Having inadequate life skills to manage living alone or with other young people with challenging behaviours often leads to homelessness. Whilst legislation requires all young people in OOHC to have a transition plan 12 months prior to leaving care, a survey identified only 46 per cent of care leavers and 22 per cent of young people in OOHC reported having a transition plan³⁴. In order to reduce the number of Aboriginal young people leaving care and entering homelessness, significant policy reform is required to address the following.

Raising the age of leaving care

Living independently requires social skills and the ability to take care of one's physical and mental health³⁵. Young people in care have often experienced trauma and struggle to secure healthy connections or know how to approach community networks³⁶. Healthy and necessary living skills are often not transferred to young people by the age of 18 and consequently struggle to maintain or build healthy relationships, access housing or monitor their own health without support³⁷. Young people in OOHC have also often faced disrupted education and as a result do not acquire formal qualifications. Poor transition planning and poor education outcomes directly correlates into low employment rates, creating challenges for young people trying to financially support themselves and afford rent³⁸. Whilst the Victorian Government provides funding for post-care support places for young people leaving care, these positions are limited and often too restricted in scope³⁹.

A solution to address this concern is raising the age of leaving care and legislated guaranteed rights to extended care. The benefits of this has been widely researched and found to be one of the most effective ways of improving outcomes for young people in OOHC. Anglicare Victoria found extending care to 21 allows for additional time for personal and financial support and has been linked to the prevention of homelessness⁴⁰. This is in part due to a longer period to prepare for leaving care, with many

³³ Ibid

³⁴ Muir, S., & Hand, K. (2018). *Beyond 18: The longitudinal study on leaving care Wave 1 Research Report: Transition planning and preparation*. (Research Report). Melbourne: Australian Institute of Family Studies.

³⁵ Cashmore, J., Paxman, M., & Townsend, M. (2007). The educational outcomes of young people 4-5 years after leaving care: An Australian perspective, *Adoption and Fostering*, 31(1), 50-61.

³⁶ Mendes, P., & Moslehuddin, B. (2009).

³⁷ Heerde, J., Hemphill, S. A., Broderick, D., & Florent, A. (2012). Associations between leaving out-of-home care and post transition youth homelessness: A review. *Developing Practice*, (32), 35-52.

³⁸ Mendes, P., & Moslehuddin, B. (2009). Transitioning from state care to state prison: A critical analysis of the relationship between leaving out of home care and involvement in the criminal justice system. *Social Alternatives*, 28(3), 51-56.

³⁹ CHP. (2018). *Victorian homelessness election platform 2018*. Collingwood, Melbourne: CHP.

⁴⁰ Anglicare Victoria. (2016). *Raising our children: Guiding young Victorians in care into adulthood*. Deloitte Economics Pty Ltd.

organisations arguing that most young people do not leave home at 18 so why should young people living in OOHC be expected to.

An evaluation of the Staying Put Program in the UK was conducted to determine whether extending care has a beneficial effect on education outcomes, a successful transition into adulthood and homeless rates⁴¹. They found after three years, homeless rates halved, and education engagement doubled. This practice is being piloted through the Home Stretch Campaign in Victoria, promoting changes to leaving care arrangements for young people, through the option of remaining with their carer until the age of 21⁴². In 2018, the Victorian Labor Government announced funding for 50 young people over a five-year period to remain with their carer until their 21st birthday. This recognises that majority of young people remain dependent on their parents or adult support after the age of 18 and into their 20's. Whilst this pilot provides an opportunity for policy change that can have a long term, beneficial impact on housing outcomes of young people leaving care, such small numbers pale to the demand of those most vulnerable. Given there is extensive research in Australia and internationally on the benefits of this policy reform, the additional three years should be immediately conferred on all young people in OOHC.

Newstart Allowance

Another contributing factor to homelessness rates amongst young people leaving care is the accessibility and inadequacy of Newstart payments. Requirements to receive Newstart payments are often unrealistic or unattainable for young people leaving care. When a young person is experiencing or at risk of homelessness, attending regular appointments with Centrelink and meeting deadlines may be challenging due to the cost of public transport to attend, access to internet or a lack of support in accessing the service. Missing deadlines results in the termination of payments and perpetuates a cycle of homelessness and unstable housing. Young people are faced with financial hardship and unable to afford rent, leading to significant challenges in meeting requirements for Newstart, the inability to pay rent and therefore remaining homeless.

For those who do receive Newstart, rental affordability remains a significant concern and a key cause of homelessness. Anglicare Victoria's 2019's Rental Affordability Snapshot looked at 15,750 private rental listings to determine what proportion were suitable for households on minimum wage, a Commonwealth pension or income support⁴³. The report found that only 2% of properties were suitable for at least one household type living on income support and in metropolitan Melbourne, only 83 households were suitable for at least one household type living on income support payments⁴⁴. This report shows that for young people who are leaving care who are and much more likely to be financially disadvantaged, and receiving Newstart payments, are still extremely unlikely to be able to afford rent⁴⁵.

⁴¹ Munro, E., Lushey, C., Maskell-Graham, D., Ward, H., & Holmes, L. (2012). *Evaluation of the staying put 18+ family placement programme pilot final report*. London, United Kingdom: Department for Education.

⁴² Create Foundation. (2018, September 25). Victorian labor government will support young people leaving foster care. *Create Foundation*.

⁴³ Anglicare Victoria. (2019). *Rental affordability: 2019 Victoria snapshot*. Melbourne: Anglicare Victoria.

⁴⁴ Ibid.

⁴⁵ Osborn, A., & Bromfield, L. (2007). *Young people leaving care*. AIFS (NCPC Brief no. 7).

The latest Rental Affordability Index Report also calculated that the rent on a one -bedroom apartment in Melbourne would absorb 106% of the income of a single person on Newstart.⁴⁶

Lack of infrastructure

Finding secure, safe and affordable accommodation is one of the toughest challenges facing young people leaving OOH and a key contributor to homelessness. Safe accommodation is one of the most crucial factors for a successful transition to independent living and positive outcomes in social connections, health, employment and education⁴⁷. 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 infrastructure⁴⁸. Currently, there is a lack of housing options for young people leaving care, in particular a significant lack of culturally appropriate accommodation for Aboriginal young people.

A young person leaving care is more likely to succeed if they are able to live in their desired housing option rather than having their agency removed and forced into accommodation that is not suitable. In order to be able to respond, Aboriginal organisations delivering the Aboriginal Leaving Care Program need to be provided with adequate support and funding and to be linked in with housing providers who can help meet housing needs of these young people (AHV, 2019)

Housing needs and preferences often vary for Aboriginal young people depending on their experiences prior to and whilst in care including lead tenant properties, sharing a privately rented property, staying in a youth foyer or living independently in social housing⁴⁹. In order to address this issue, a range of support options and structural assistance must be available⁵⁰. To reduce rates of homelessness, there needs to be a number of accommodation options that are able to meet the specific needs of young people and the different types of support required including supported, transitional or independent accommodation through either private or public dwellings⁵¹. Tailored approaches that address the individual needs of the young person, that embeds the “voice of the child” would better reflect a system that is based on the rights of the child; including their right to self-determination.

Culturally appropriate housing and support services

Across Australia, 62 per cent of Aboriginal people seeking homeless assistance have sought support in the previous five years and only 67 per cent of Aboriginal people seeking emergency accommodation received it (AHV, 2019)

⁴⁶ SGS Economics and Planning. (2019). *Rental affordability index report-November 2019*.

⁴⁷ Mendes, P., Baidawi, S., & Snow, P. C. (2014). Young people transitioning from out-of-home care in Victoria: Strengthening support services for dual clients of child protection and youth justice. *Australian Social Work*, 67(1), 6-23.

⁴⁸ CHP. (2018). *Victorian homelessness election platform 2018*. Collingwood, Melbourne: CHP.

⁴⁹ Council to Homeless Persons. (2014). *Preventing homelessness for young people leaving out of home care*. CHP. Retrieved from <http://chp.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2014/12/CHP-leaving-care-proposal.pdf>

⁵⁰ Mendes, P., Baidawi, S., & Snow, P. C (2014).

⁵¹ Ibid

Another 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 markets⁵². The impact of systemic racism on access to housing is evident not only amongst Aboriginal Victorians but First Nations peoples around the world⁵³. AHV identified racism to be an entrenched challenge for Aboriginal peoples, masked better than ever, particularly in the private rental market⁵⁴. This undermines housing aspirations and locks many Aboriginal families and households out of the private rental market.

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 processes⁵⁵. Consequently, AHV have identified an urgent need for Aboriginal specific social housing and transitional housing, with demand expected to continue to grow⁵⁶.

Programs such as VACCA's Kurnai Youth Homelessness Program and Wilam Support Service, along with Ngwala Willumbung Ltd, a specialist homelessness service for Indigenous men, women and families, provide culturally strong and community-based support. 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 so⁵⁷. 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 increase⁵⁸. Services and housing support for Aboriginal young people leaving care needs to be culturally safe and prioritise connection to family and culture.

It is also essential for Aboriginal young people residing in supported living to receive wrap-around support through culturally appropriate, trauma informed services including; family mediation, legal assistance, education and training, employment support and mental and primary health services. Young people in OOHHC have often experienced trauma, family violence, mental health concerns or drug and

⁵² AHV. (2019). *The Victorian Aboriginal housing and homelessness summit: Report of findings*. Melbourne: Aboriginal Housing Victoria

⁵³ AHV. (2019). *The Victorian Aboriginal housing and homelessness summit: Report of findings.*, Patrick, C. (2014). Aboriginal homelessness in Canada: A literature review.,

⁵⁴ AHV. (2019). *The Victorian Aboriginal housing and homelessness summit: Report of findings*

⁵⁵ Victorian Auditor General's Office. (2014). *Accessibility of Mainstream Services for Aboriginal Victorians*. Victorian Government. No 325.

⁵⁶ Mendes, P., Baidawi, S., & Snow, P. C (2014).

⁵⁷ AHV. (2019). *The Victorians Aboriginal housing and homelessness summit: Report of findings*

⁵⁸ Ibid

alcohol issues and are not connected to their culture⁵⁹. Without wrap-around supports suitable to their individual needs, young people become at risk of losing their housing or placements due to symptoms of these needs that may present as challenging behaviours.

Reform is required to move towards ongoing and consistent staffing models that can create positive attachments and mentoring relationships as an alternative to rostered staff models that inhibit reliable connections⁶⁰. New models of support are essential to supporting young Aboriginal people in stable housing and to ensure a successful transition to independence.

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 consequently faced with significant financial hardship and poverty as a consequence.

⁵⁹ Commission for Children and Young People (CCYP). (2016).

⁶⁰ Mendes, P., Baidawi, S., & Snow, P. C. (2014).

Recommendations

VACCA supports the implementation of the VAHMF and strongly encourages 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.

VACCA also recommends the Victorian Government to undertake the following reforms;

- Increase the maximum age of leaving care to at least 21 in line with evidence that extending transition from state care promotes better outcomes
- The provision of a culturally safe drop in service or youth foyer like Front Yard or Jesuit Connections specific for Aboriginal young people that provides trauma informed, wrap-around services
- A youth guarantee, preference or nomination rights for housing young people leaving care
- Increase access to safe, secure and affordable housing for Aboriginal young people
- Build infrastructure to meet housing demands, including social housing, transitional and crisis housing options
- Increase brokerage funding for ACCOS providing leaving care and homelessness support.
- Aboriginal hostels and facilities funded and recommissioned
- Homelessness services to flow seamlessly through to long term housing
- For the Victorian Government and media outlets to challenge negative perceptions of people facing homelessness, including addressing systemic racism
- Relieve pressure on the social housing system through;
 - o Rental brokerage programs to give people a start in the private rental market
 - o Shared equity programs for people in stable employment to help them to buy modest houses, particularly in regional Victoria
- For the Victorian Government advocate to the Commonwealth to increase the rate of Newstart allowances to match the cost of living and rental prices.
- For the Victorian Government to endorse all recommendations outlined by Aboriginal Housing Victoria at the homelessness inquiry public hearing.

VACCA looks forward to supporting and working with the Committee for this Inquiry to ensure the progress of this important and necessary reform. For further information please contact Nigel D'Souza, Director, Office of the CEO nigeld@vacca.org or on 03 9287 8800.