



16<sup>th</sup> April 2021

## Victorian Aboriginal Child Care Agency submission 'Ten-year social and affordable housing strategy'

The Victorian Aboriginal Child Care Agency (VACCA) welcomes the opportunity to provide input into the newly announced ten-year strategy for social and affordable housing in Victoria. VACCA's submission seeks to advocate for the housing and social needs of Aboriginal peoples whilst reinforcing the important role of Aboriginal Community Controlled Organisations (ACCOs) within the social housing sector. 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.

VACCA's submission outlines key messages, a background to the disproportionate over-representation of Aboriginal children and peoples in social housing and facing homelessness and responds to the discussion paper questions directed at;

- Focus Area 1: Pathways
- Focus Area 4: Partnerships

Lastly our submission provides Homes Victoria with an overview of VACCA and our service delivery across Victoria.

### **VACCA key messages in response to the Strategy**

- Strategy needs a stronger commitment to self-determination including within the strategy vision and principles
- New strategy must align with *Mana-na woorn-tyeen maar-taarkoort: Every Aboriginal Person has a Home*, the Victorian Aboriginal Housing and Homelessness Framework (VAHMF)
- Strategy should align with the new National Agreement on Closing the Gap in order to progress priority reform areas and targets over its ten year span
- Allocation of funding for housing and homelessness services should be proportionate to the number of Aboriginal peoples accessing services
- Social housing must adopt a holistic approach, considering not only their housing needs but also their cultural, health, social, employment and education needs
- ACCO and community consultations are required at the local, regional and state level throughout the strategy development

### **Background**

Over 4,000 Aboriginal households, roughly one in five, have sought social housing through the Victorian Housing Register and roughly another 4,000 are currently accommodated by Aboriginal Housing Victoria (AHV) and public housing<sup>1</sup>. Aboriginal peoples make up 10 per cent of peoples accessing homelessness services, a 6 per cent increase over the past ten years<sup>2</sup>, giving Victoria the highest and fastest rising rate of Aboriginal people contacting homelessness services in Australia. The number of Aboriginal peoples requiring housing is only going to grow. This trajectory and mounting crisis cannot be understated and must be considered and incorporated within the ten-year strategy for social and affordable housing.

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<sup>1</sup> Aboriginal Housing Victoria. (2020). *The Victorian Aboriginal Housing and Homelessness Framework*. Melbourne, Victoria.

<sup>2</sup> Legislative Council Legal and Social Issues Committee. (2020). *Inquiry into homelessness in Victoria: Final Report, Parliament of Victoria*.



VACCA is extremely disappointed with the recent Final Report for the Inquiry into Homelessness in Victoria; after highlighting the impact of past government policies and systemic racism on the ability for Aboriginal peoples to access housing, the Legal and Social Issues Committee then neglected to include any recommendations pertaining to these issues. This is a fundamental flaw in the scope, process and accountability of this inquiry.<sup>3</sup>

Aboriginal young people leaving care in particular are more likely to require social housing and more often than not, have experienced family violence, poverty, poor mental health, childhood trauma or have had involvement in the justice system. Social housing needs to consider the often-complex needs of tenants and incorporate intensive supports capable of meeting social, health, employment and education needs.

### **Focus area 1: Pathways**

*What actions will enable people to access social housing, sustain their tenancies, and move between different housing options as their needs change?*

#### **Addressing institutional racism and systemic bias**

Institutional racism and systemic bias within the housing sector and social systems more broadly is evident not only amongst Aboriginal Victorians but First Nations peoples all around the world<sup>4</sup>. Resulting in many Aboriginal peoples, families and households being repudiated from both social housing and housing services<sup>5</sup>. 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<sup>6</sup>. These barriers and systemic bias is entrenched in the current housing sector and flare whenever Aboriginal peoples attempt to access social housing, sustain a tenancy or move between housing option.

The current housing service system is difficult to navigate for the general population, let alone for Aboriginal communities who are concurrently experiencing discrimination and institutional racism. It is the responsibility of all Victorians, but most importantly the Victorian Government to address systemic bias and systems that create a cycle of disadvantage and barriers to maintaining stable and affordable housing.

#### **Culturally appropriate housing options and support services**

There is currently a lack of culturally safe housing options and support services for Aboriginal peoples and families. In order to find and sustain tenancies, it is pivotal to consider the cultural and social needs of tenants and respond by linking them in with long term, trauma informed supports. Programs such as VACCA's Kurnai Youth Homelessness Program and Wilam Support Service are examples of community led, culturally appropriate services that recognise no one size fits all and prioritise connection to family and culture.

In order to achieve this and in-line with the Victorian Governments commitment to self-determination<sup>7</sup>, funding should be transferred to ACCOs, rather than allocated by mainstream organisations. ACCOs know what works best and should have the capacity to be able to respond to

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<sup>3</sup> Ibid

<sup>4</sup> AHV. (2019). *The Victorian Aboriginal housing and homelessness summit: Report of findings.*, Patrick, C. (2014). Aboriginal homelessness in Canada: A literature review.,

<sup>5</sup> AHV. (2019). *The Victorian Aboriginal housing and homelessness summit: Report of findings.* Melbourne: Aboriginal Housing Victoria

<sup>6</sup> Victorian Auditor General's Office. (2014). *Accessibility of Mainstream Services for Aboriginal Victorians.* Victorian Government. No 325.

<sup>7</sup> <https://www.aboriginalvictoria.vic.gov.au/governments-commitment-self-determination>

the needs of community. Building the ACCO sector is also one of the priority reform areas for the recently refreshed Closing the Gap Agreement and will help to build capacity to be able respond to the needs of the Aboriginal community<sup>8</sup>.

**Recommendation:** transfer resources and funding to ACCOs proportionate to the number of Aboriginal peoples accessing social housing and housing services

### **A holistic social housing system with tailored supports**

Often people entering social housing require additional supports other than accommodation such as health, mental health, financial advice, education and employment. In particular, these support services are essential during times of change such as moving into social housing, between housing or when trying to enter into the private housing market.

Housing stress including rental debt and difficulty managing finances are significant barriers to accessing and sustaining tenancies. Whilst VACCA case managers reported advocating for their clients, they found rental debts meant they often missed out. Individuals or families facing these barriers must be supported to overcome these challenges with supports such as financial advice and knowledge on how to budget.

Equally important, is the need for tailored supports that recognise the individual persons history and their needs. Women fleeing a violent partner, a young family or an Elder all require different forms of support. Young people leaving care are significantly more likely to end up in social housing as well as more likely to have experienced trauma, disruption to their education and potentially without a stable income. Wrap around supports must be incorporated to ensure young people do not become at risk of losing their housing or placements due to symptoms of these needs that may present as challenging behaviours.

**Recommendation:** 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

### *What are the most important features of affordable housing?*

#### **Accessibility to support services and public transport**

Often the families VACCA work with who are accessing or trying to access social housing do not drive and rely heavily on public transport. Aboriginal peoples have a right to exercise choice and access preferred, culturally safe services rather than forced to use a service due to a lack of accessibility. Public transport is also key to ensuring tenants can maintain employment, attend appointments, shop and visit family and friends.

#### **Affordable housing options**

Depending on a young person, individual or families circumstances, their housing needs may vary and options should be available rather than having to resort to the only option regardless of suitability. For young people leaving care and previous experiences, housing preferences may vary including moving into a lead tenant property, sharing a private rental property, staying in a youth foyer program or living independently in social housing. If an individual is placed in housing that is not suitable and does not meet their needs, they are unlikely to be able to maintain their tenancy. Options for independent, shared and supported housing is needed.

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<sup>8</sup> <https://www.closingthegap.gov.au/priority-reforms>



**Recommendation:** Increase brokerage funding for ACCOs providing leaving care, homelessness and housing services to allow for flexibility

**Recommendation:** build infrastructure to meet housing needs including social housing, transitional, crisis and long-term housing

### **Culturally safe mainstream housing and homelessness services**

A lack of culturally safe housing means Aboriginal people are more likely to slip through the gaps and miss the opportunity to access housing or participate in the private rental market. Mainstream services need to include mandatory cultural awareness training for all staff to ensure regardless of service, Aboriginal peoples have access to culturally safe services, capable of meeting their needs.

**Recommendation:** for cultural awareness training to be mandated across the housing sector

*What actions will support people to find and obtain an affordable home?*

### **Knowledge of housing sector**

ACCOs and mainstream services need to build stronger networks and have greater knowledge of referral options and pathways. Organisations need to have a strong understanding of housing options, support services available and what the most appropriate option is for their client. Without a coordinated response across the housing sector, Aboriginal peoples are more likely to fall through the cracks and rates of homelessness will continue to climb.

For Aboriginal clients, this communication must be culturally appropriate with referrals prioritised to ACCO's. VACCA believes in advocating for the families we work with but also supporting them to be masters of their own destiny. Homelessness services need to flow seamlessly through to long term accommodation, social housing and the private market. In order to do this, ACCOs and the families must have access to all the necessary information. Improving knowledge of the housing sector will not only help to improve pathways between accommodation into the private rental market but will also relieve pressure on the social housing system

**Recommendation:** improve networks and collaboration between housing providers, utilising structures such as the Victorian Aboriginal Housing and Homelessness Framework Implementation Working Group

**Recommendation:** educational and brokerage programs to help navigate the housing sector including the provision of rental brokerage programs to give people a start in the private rental market and shared equity programs for people in stable employment to help them buy modest houses, particularly regional Victoria

### **Increase Job Seeker allowance**

On 31 March 2021, the Federal Government cut the Job Seeker allowance, forcing many Aboriginal peoples back into poverty. The insufficient allowance of \$150 was highlighted during the COVID-19 pandemic and consequently was increased to \$200 a fortnight starting 1 April 2021. This is still a grossly inadequate amount and completely unrealistic for an individual to survive on.



Not only is the amount for the Job Seeker allowance inadequate but often requirements to receive payments are unrealistic or unattainable, particularly for young people leaving care. When a person is facing homelessness or unstable housing, attending regular appointments with Centrelink and meeting deadlines is challenging due to cost of public transport, access to internet or technology or a lack of support in accessing the service. Whilst requirements were temporarily put on hold, at the beginning of March, face to face servicing with providers recommenced. Missing deadlines results in the termination of payments and perpetuates a cycle of homelessness and unstable housing as well as poverty and debt.

**Recommendation:** for the Victorian Government to advocate to Commonwealth to raise the Job Seeker allowance to match the cost of living and rental prices

### Housing infrastructure

There is currently a lack of affordable housing infrastructure and long wait lists for social housing, crisis and transitional accommodation and private rentals. This is one of the toughest challenges and is pivotal to ensuring the cycle of disadvantage experienced by many Aboriginal people is disrupted. Even for those on a minimum wage or who receive Job Seeker payments, 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 support<sup>9</sup>. 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 payments<sup>10</sup>. This report shows that for young people leaving care and Aboriginal families who are more likely to be financial disadvantaged, they are still extremely unlikely to be able to afford rent<sup>11</sup>. 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 (now Job Seeker).<sup>12</sup>

In Victoria, there are a number of initiatives and strategies underway with the intent to increase housing and infrastructure across the state and ensure all Victorians have access to safe, secure and affordable housing. Last year, the Big Housing Build was announced, allocating \$5.3 billion to build more than 12,000 new homes across the state. Including 10 per cent of all net social dwellings allocated to support Aboriginal housing needs.

Infrastructure Victoria is currently in the process of developing a 30-year infrastructure strategy<sup>13</sup>, with a number of draft recommendations focused on growing and upgrading social housing as well as a specific recommendation to 'Co-design an Aboriginal Community-Controlled Infrastructure Plan'<sup>14</sup>.

Lastly, Target 9 of the new National Agreement on Closing the Gap is '*by 2031, increase the proportion of Aboriginal and Torres Islander peoples living in appropriately sized (not overcrowded) housing to 88 per cent*' with an outcome of secure appropriate, affordable housing that is aligned

<sup>9</sup> Anglicare Victoria. (2019). *Rental affordability: 2019 Victoria snapshot*. Melbourne: Anglicare Victoria.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid.

<sup>11</sup> Osborn, A., & Bromfield, L. (2007). *Young people leaving care*. AIFS (NCPC Brief no. 7).

<sup>12</sup> SGS Economics and Planning. (2019). *Rental affordability index report-November 2019*.

<sup>13</sup> Infrastructure Victoria. (2020). *Victoria's draft 30-year infrastructure strategy*, Victorian Government. <<https://www.infrastructurevictoria.com.au/wp-content/uploads/2020/12/Victoria-s-Draft-30-Year-Infrastructure-Strategy-Volume-1.pdf>>.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid, pg. 22.



with priorities and need. As part of this, work is currently underway to develop a Victorian Implementation Plan, an opportunity to establish state based responses tailored to the needs of Victorians. It is important for housing and infrastructure strategies to align with one another, and leverage of work already underway.

**Recommendation:** align all housing strategies and initiatives to leverage off work already underway

**Recommendation:** map the current social housing sector, including assessing the condition and suitability of current accommodation in order to establish what is needed in the social housing sector to progress Target 9 of Closing the Gap

## **Focus area 2: Partnerships**

*How do we strengthen our partnership approach to build a stronger and more effective social and affordable housing system?*

### **Self-determination**

The strategy needs a stronger iteration and commitment to self-determination in the Vision and Principles of the strategy. Whilst the discussion paper notes ten per cent of all new growth in social housing delivered through the Big Housing Build as an action underway towards 'placing self-determination at the heart of the way the housing system operates'<sup>15</sup>, it is imperative to recognise that this alone is not sufficient to embedding self-determination throughout the housing system, particularly given the length of the strategy.

Much more needs to be done within the next 10 years in order to progress self-determination within housing outcomes, including an Aboriginal voice at all stages of the strategy, spanning across the ten years. Ensuring the strategy is on track and achieving progress

**Recommendation:** for a mandated Aboriginal voice in decision making at all levels of the strategy, including ACCO and community consultations and an opportunity to review draft strategy and governance structures

**Recommendation:** in partnership with ACCOs, establish Aboriginal specific initiatives, measures and outcomes to include in the strategy that are Aboriginal designed and led

### **Building the ACCO sector**

As mentioned previously, building the ACCO sector is pivotal to creating a strong partnership and an effective social and affordable housing system for Aboriginal peoples. This must include the transfer of resources from mainstream services and greater investment in ACCOs to deliver housing and homelessness services. Particularly in regions where there is no ACCO or Aboriginal specific housing available. Rather than resourcing mainstream to deliver housing and services, ACCOs need to be resourced and empowered to put forward an Aboriginal voice. Funding must be allocated according to proportional equity to reflect the percentage of Aboriginal people needing housing and homelessness services.

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<sup>15</sup> Victorian Government. (2021). *Establishing a 10-Year Strategy for Social and Affordable Housing*, Melbourne, Victoria, pg. 24.



### **Build on existing frameworks and structures**

To build a partnership approach with Aboriginal communities and the Aboriginal housing sector, the Strategy must align with work that is already being progressed through the VAHMF. Rather than being 'informed' by the VAHMF, it should be driven by the framework, helping to ensure a community led response that is responsive to the needs and interests of the Aboriginal community.

**Recommendation:** for the Strategy to be driven by the VAHMF and work already underway as part of the VAHMF Implementation Working Group

### **Input from the local, regional and state level**

Local Aboriginal Networks (LANs), mainstream networks and communities across the state must be consulted with to ensure the strategy considers and is reflective of the needs of all those impacted. This must not be a one-off opportunity, but a continuous conversation across local, regional and state levels. How information is disseminated to ACCOs and the Aboriginal community is also critical to ensuring sufficient input and consultation.

**Recommendation:** for community consultations to be held across local, regional and state levels and information disseminated through pathways advised by community and housing providers

### **Other**

*How can we engage with you as we develop new initiatives over the course of this strategy?*

1. Specific community engagement and consultations throughout the strategy development. Guidance should be sought from housing providers and ACCOs on how to engage with community members currently living in social housing and those impacted by a social and affordable housing strategy
2. Input sought through a variety of pathways including reaching out to speak with relevant stakeholders, accessible community yarning circles, online forums and written submissions
3. ACCOs and relevant Aboriginal stakeholders to have opportunities to engage in the strategy, ensuring the strategy and Victorian Government are guided by and leverage off what works for the Aboriginal community
4. Seek sufficient input from Aboriginal Housing Victoria and the Victorian Aboriginal Housing and Homelessness Framework Implementation Working Group responsible for progressing the VAHMF.



## **About VACCA**

The Victorian Aboriginal Child Care Agency (VACCA) is the lead Aboriginal child welfare organisation and the largest provider of Aboriginal family violence services in Victoria. As an ACCO, we believe in the principle of the right of Aboriginal people to self-determination and the rights of the child. Our purpose is supporting culturally strong, safe and thriving Aboriginal communities and commit to upholding Victorian Aboriginal cultural protocols.

VACCA's key areas of work are in service delivery, advocacy and training. We work across the spectrum of early help, early intervention, targeted support and tertiary level services to deliver a broad range of services that seek to:

- ensure child safety and community wellbeing;
- Support youth people to make positive life choices
- targeted support for Aboriginal people and families;
- maintain strong connections to Aboriginal culture, and
- promote culturally specific ways of growing up Aboriginal children.

VACCA provides services to vulnerable Aboriginal children, families and communities, underpinned by principles of prevention, early intervention and therapeutic healing. They are premised on human rights, self-determination, promoting client voice, cultural respect and safety. Our services include supported playgroups, education, cultural support activities, emergency relief, homelessness services, drug and alcohol support, family mental health, out-of-home care (OOHC), justice services, family services, youth services, clinical services and family violence services including an Aboriginal women and children's crisis service.

We also deliver cultural training and develop resources for the Aboriginal community and for a range of organisations. We advocate at a policy level for better outcomes for Victorian Aboriginal children, families and community members for their right to be connected to culture and to ensure that their needs are represented in culturally appropriate ways through service delivery. A particular focus of our advocacy is for culturally based services that support social and emotional wellbeing and help to minimise involvement in tertiary systems such as child protection and justice.

## **Contact details**

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