

TRANSCRIPT

LEGISLATIVE ASSEMBLY ENVIRONMENT AND PLANNING COMMITTEE

Inquiry into the Supply of Homes in Regional Victoria

Traralgon – Thursday 22 May 2025

MEMBERS

Juliana Addison – Chair

Martin Cameron – Deputy Chair

Jordan Crugnale

Daniela De Martino

Wayne Farnham

Martha Haylett

David Hodgett

WITNESSES

Jelena Djurdjevic, Executive Director, Response, Policy and Evidence, Safe and Equal; and
Page Williams, Manager, Family Violence, Quantum Support Services.

The CHAIR: Welcome to the public hearing, our last session in Traralgon today. We look forward to hearing from Safe and Equal. Before we begin I will run through some important formalities.

All evidence taken today will be recorded by Hansard and is protected by parliamentary privilege. This means that you can speak freely without fear of legal action in relation to the evidence you give. However, it is important to remember that parliamentary privilege does not apply to comments made outside the hearing, even if you are restating what you said during the hearing.

You will receive a draft transcript of your evidence in the next week or so to check and approve. Corrected transcripts are published on the committee's website and may be quoted from in our final report.

Thank you for making the time – and particularly travelling from Melbourne, Jelena – to present to us today and have this important discussion. My name is Juliana Addison. I am Chair of the committee and Member for Wendouree, representing central Ballarat.

Martin CAMERON: Martin Cameron, Deputy Chair, Member for Morwell, right here in Latrobe Valley.

Jordan CRUGNALE: Jordan Crugnale, the Member for Bass – Bass Coast shire down to Koo Wee Rup over to Pearcedale, that area.

Daniela DE MARTINO: I am Daniela De Martino. I am the Member for Monbulk, which covers the Dandenong Ranges.

Wayne FARNHAM: And I am Wayne Farnham. I am the Member for Narracan this time. I cover West Gippsland.

The CHAIR: Terrific. Today we have had a really interesting day. We have heard from the Gippsland Family Violence Alliance, so it is great to have you here, Page, from Quantum. We have been hearing some of the good things that have been happening, but we have also heard the very high rates of family violence in Gippsland. Having the opportunity to talk with you today, from Safe and Equal, to try and continue to develop our understanding of the challenges in the regional housing space for people fleeing family violence and also for the users of family violence what housing options there are, we would be really keen for your insights. Marty, do you want to kick it off?

Martin CAMERON: Thank you very much for coming in and presenting to us. Before we were sitting down and listening to a bit of data around family violence and noting that East Gippsland and Latrobe are number one and number two, which is not a good place to be on the scale. I would love for you to outline, especially because we are here in Morwell – and I know Morwell is one of the more targeted areas of family violence – issues that are going on and the troubles of not having enough emergency crisis housing to get victims of domestic violence into. Could I throw it open to either of you to lay it on the line for us, please. As we have said to everyone else, do not pull any punches. Tell us how it is, please.

Jelena DJURDJEVIC: Wonderful. Well, thank you very much for the opportunity to be here. Before I start I would like to acknowledge that this is Gunaikurnai land and pay respect to elders past and present and acknowledge that sovereignty of land and waters has never been ceded.

My apologies, I am very soft-spoken at the best of times but the dry room is affecting that as well, so I will try to keep watered while I am moving through. My name is Jelena Djurdjevic. I am the Executive Director for Response, Policy and Evidence at Safe and Equal. Safe and Equal is the Victorian peak body for family violence, and that is across the continuum from prevention through to response and recovery. We have approximately 80 full members across the state, and when you add our associate members in, that is about 120 organisations and individuals that we represent on the issue of family violence. We are really pleased to have Page here today; Quantum is one of our member services, and I am sure Page will have a lot of regional

insights to provide as well. As has already been noted, housing and the interface with family violence is absolutely huge, and for our members, there are really two main ways that occurs. The first is the impact that the lack of housing has on the victim-survivors of family violence that they are walking alongside. The second manifold aspect of that is the workforce impact that can occur in rural and regional areas and how that manifests as well due to the lack of housing.

Housing is needed, as has been mentioned, right through from crisis accommodation to affordable long-term accommodation for people. Regional services are really struggling to be able to recruit staff from out of area, which is an important workforce pipeline, due to that lack of affordable housing for people. Housing is one of the most common issues impacting victim-survivors, both in terms of their immediate safety but also the aspect of their pathway to recovery long term from family violence. One of the ways that we know that is that we have been collecting data from our members since about 2021. In an annual demand and capacity survey in our 2024 report, which is due to be released next month, 98 per cent of the services that responded said housing was one of the top issues facing victim-survivors as they came through their services, so it is absolutely huge. We were not astounded by that number, but it is great to have that data there in that report as well in terms of those anecdotal reports we have been hearing for a long time from our member services.

Quite often victim-survivors are in a position where they are forced to choose between staying in a violent relationship and becoming homeless. That is a reality that occurs all the time, and that is a really, really difficult situation for a family to be in when they are thinking about their safety and recovery and what their options might be. We do also have a network of family violence refuges through the state. Part of what is happening in the housing ecosystem is that it is creating kind of the perfect storm of circular bottlenecks that happen, whether you are looking at crisis accommodation, whether you are looking at those refuge services or again those more long-term options. When there are no housing exit pathways, what happens in family violence refuges is that there are extended stays when there does not need to be because there is nowhere for people to go; no places for new clients who might need to enter, who are at the very highest risk and might need that protective hiding; and an increased reliance on motels for emergency accommodation, which unfortunately is a key feature of our system, but in principle we all know motels are not somewhere that you would want to be sending someone who is experiencing family violence. Then the increase in rents in the private rental market also impacts those exit pathways because when they are more affordable it does provide a viable option for victim-survivors who are exiting in that way.

We know hearing from our services that there are a number of additional challenges in rural and regional areas. The lack of crisis accommodation and the limited availability of long-term housing means that victim-survivors might need to leave their area. When they do that, they lose all of their social supports and those systems that they have and ecosystems to help support them, again in safety and recovery. A couple of other things that I am sure are not new to the committee, but we just like to restate: reliance on tourism also has an impact on emergency accommodation, which may become unavailable and unaffordable for clients seeking services in peak periods because it is being rediverted to those more high-paying clients; severe weather events, which also place additional demands on limited emergency accommodation; and not a new phenomenon, but since COVID some of that tree change and moving to rural and regional areas. One example of that is Shepparton hospital and Shepparton high school are being expanded, so staff are moving to Shepparton and pricing local families out of that market.

The other issue for rural and regional too is the lack of public transport, so although housing might be more affordable in some of those outlying areas, the public transport is not as good and that has an impact as well. The other aspect too we would like to table is just the higher proportion of people on low incomes, so limited availability also means that people who are in substandard rentals may not raise issues for fear that there might not be other accommodation there and that they might get pushed out. Working people seeking homelessness assistance actually grew 14 per cent across the state last year, and 12 of the top 20 LGAs with the highest numbers of working people seeking assistance were in rural and regional areas. Women also accounted for more than 70 per cent of employed people seeking homelessness assistance. There are likely to be more working mothers unable to pay the rent because of the housing and cost-of-living crises as well.

The other thing that we just wanted to highlight to you is young people. There is often limited, if any at all, suitable crisis accommodation for young people as well. No private rental is affordable for someone on a youth allowance or apprentice wages, for example, who cannot live at home, and the fact is that young people in rural and regional areas are more likely to have to leave the family home to seek work and study.

In terms of the workforce impact that I mentioned before, feedback from our members, again, is that lack of suitable available housing, and that is significantly impacting on the workforce they are able to attract and retain. We have actually been given examples from member services of having successfully hired someone and then that offer having to be declined because the person could not find anywhere to live in the region, which is really heartbreaking in terms of finding the right person and the right fit and not having that be able to eventuate.

My wonderful colleagues at Safe and Equal have prepared quite a lot of data and information, but I am going to call it there because I know that a lot of this data is not going to be new to the committee. But we are actually asking for three main things that we think would make a really big impact. The first one is doubling specialist family violence refuge capacity across the state – so moving that from 170 households up to 340. We think that that would have an impact in that really high risk area of family violence. The other thing that we are calling for is increasing social housing in Victoria to meet the national average of 4.5 per cent. We think that would look like building an additional 7990 social housing units per year for the next 10 years, with approximately 25 per cent of those prioritised for victim-survivors of family violence. Our third ask would build on the social housing ask: committing to building an additional 377,000 social housing units by 2051, with victim-survivors needing approximately 83,000 of those social housing units by that time.

Those last two asks that I have discussed are from a report that was recently released by the Victorian Council of Social Service as part of the Victorian Housing Alliance. We actually contracted SGS Economics & Planning to develop that methodology for us and look at what could happen across that timeframe and in that period to make a difference and to position Victoria much better and, again, to meet that national average that is happening. I might pause there and see also whether Page wants to add anything.

Page WILLIAMS: I can only speak from our local, regional perspective. We certainly do see housing in our family violence support. Within Quantum we provide specialist family violence support across the spectrum, from our intake and partnership with the Orange Doors within both inner and outer Gippsland, and we also have our own local intake through a ‘no wrong door’ model. We also provide case management support for victim-survivors to establish or re-establish their lives and assistance with that practical support. We do have a core-and-cluster refuge, also based in Latrobe, so we are able to receive referrals from across the state for victim-survivors needing to flee and have that extra layer of security placed around them. We also have a pilot program at the moment, which I oversee, supporting recovery – that is long-term support – from experience of family violence. So they may not be at risk right now, but it is the impact and how that experience of family violence impacts all areas of life across housing, mental health, legal et cetera.

I absolutely agree 100 per cent with what Safe and Equal have put forward. Housing for us is our number one. I have worked in Morwell for 10 years now. When I first came to Morwell I was astounded. Housing was affordable; we could get houses. Where I came from, Frankston, there was an indefinite waitlist. I came to Morwell, and the relationships with our housing office were amazing. Seeing over that time the increase in demand for housing has been phenomenal. It is now to a point where we are nearly at indefinite, regardless of the priority that is in place, also looking at our private rental market and not only the cost within the private rental market but also the availability and the accessibility of that. All of this is very, very crucial for people experiencing family violence because we need to be able to create a safe and risk-free future for them, and I think a lot of times we do not consider children within a homelessness context as well. We have got layer upon layer of trauma that is being experienced. We have got the trauma of family violence but then we have also got the trauma of homelessness, and that has lifelong implications.

The CHAIR: It absolutely does.

Martin CAMERON: A question from me: we just had the councils in before, and Wellington shire brought up a stat that with the switch to renewable energy and with the government having to gear up to do it there could be an influx of 1800 new workers needed to do what they need to do to bring it on line. In the scheme of things, if we are not building enough houses down here to keep up with that and the workers have got to come and they are starting to take over the rental properties and staying in the motels, where does that leave you trying to get people into emergency accommodation? What pressure points is that going to put on us?

Page WILLIAMS: We have seen it in the past. I think when we have big events at the power stations – I do not know what they are – we find that there is an influx of work –

Martin CAMERON: When they have a shut-on, yes.

Page WILLIAMS: Shut, that is it. For us to try and get crisis accommodation for people during those times is almost impossible, so we have to go further afield, which then could take that family outside of our area of support. Not only do we have to find accommodation for somebody, but we have to try and find another agency that is able and has the capacity to take that on. We also see it, as Jelena said, within tourist and peak times – and you know that with Bass. Again, it is very, very difficult. We do not oversee the Bass area, but our colleagues with the Salvation Army – trying to find crisis accommodation in Phillip Island or even in South Gippsland during summer is almost impossible. So we start to have those reciprocal relationships with that understanding.

The CHAIR: Page, can I ask – and I am referring to this amazing document; I love a good one-pager: it says that:

Quantum is also leading the development of Gippsland's first youth foyer to work with our young people to embed strong community connections and give them skills to lead independent successful lives.

We have heard today that there is no youth foyer currently in Gippsland. Could you just tell us about what work you are doing for a youth foyer?

Page WILLIAMS: That is within our housing and homelessness programs. I am not the expert on this obviously; I am from Family Violence. But we have certainly been working within the youth foyer model that will be able to put youth and housing at the forefront of a young person's ability to progress and succeed moving forward. We have a Housing First model – you are aware of Housing First. And we also have our – the name escapes me at the moment. A lot of work has been taking place around being able to break that cycle of homelessness and poverty. I cannot go into detail; my apologies.

The CHAIR: No, that is all right. I will look into it more. But it is just interesting it has been raised a couple of times today.

Martin CAMERON: I think we catch up with Mitch tomorrow.

Page WILLIAMS: Mitch Burney, yes.

The CHAIR: Terrific. That will be great.

Page WILLIAMS: Mitch will have it all, yes, absolutely.

Daniela DE MARTINO: Jelena, this is probably more a question for you because you have got that statewide view. What does regional versus metro look like in terms of housing for victims of family violence? Is it a much harder issue to tackle in the regions in terms of housing options, or is it worse in metro?

Jelena DJURDJEVIC: It is certainly what we hear from members, that it is more acutely felt in rural and regional areas, absolutely. That is just geographical – the vastness sometimes of getting around to clients and being able to move them into different areas, and yes, the supply. I would say it is felt more in rural and regional, for sure. I do not have any data I can put behind that, but it is definitely what we anecdotally hear from members.

Daniela DE MARTINO: We are hearing that across the board. Thank you.

The CHAIR: Wayne.

Wayne FARNHAM: Page, I am curious. We understand there is a lack of housing, especially for people escaping domestic violence. Of the victims that come to see you, how many end up going back to the situation they are in? I know it might be hard to put a percentage on it, but how many do you try and help but because they have no option they are just going straight back?

Page WILLIAMS: I think, Wayne, probably what the question to me means more is: who don't we see because they have not left? So those people that remain in a violent relationship, in a violent home, who do not feel that they have any option other than to be there, because what they are facing is homelessness and they are acutely aware of that. I think what is more important to me is those people we do not see within the line of work

that we do. For the people that we do see, we talk about motel accommodation as being a go-to and certainly not an ideal one. But looking at those people that have had the courage – because it takes immense courage to leave a violent relationship – they have had the courage to leave, they have reached out for support, only to find that their option is in a one-room motel accommodation with their three children, so then they return. I cannot put a percentage on it for you, but I think there are certainly two sides of the coin there as far as who stays and we do not see, which is concerning, and then who has the courage to leave but feels there is no option other than to return.

Jelena DJURDJEVIC: Or if the option is out of area and also that cultural and community connection that people do not want to give up, which is extremely valid as well, so sometimes people are making the choice in that circumstance to return or make do or try to figure out other options so they can keep those connections.

Page WILLIAMS: Absolutely. One of the beautiful things with our core-and-cluster refuge, however, is that we are able to work with people from our community to be able to put that extra security in place but they do not have to leave the community that they have more than likely been born and raised in and have those supports in place. Once upon a time, if you needed to go to refuge, you needed to leave your community and you were out, so we have got a few more options there now.

Jordan CRUGNALE: Jelena, when you speak about doubling the refuge from 150 to 300 or whatever the numbers were, how do you see that? Is there land where those places are now that can be, you know – how do you see that doubling?

Jelena DJURDJEVIC: It is a ‘yes, and’. There is some work happening right now with the national housing innovation fund. Some of that has been earmarked for family violence, so some of our member organisations are looking into that because they have already done some work where in moving to that core-and-cluster model, they have realised that they have certain properties that can be redeveloped, either fit for purpose or expanded. That is one aspect, but that would not necessarily meet the 340. There would be an aspect of needing new builds and new things looked at to create that full expansion, so kind of two processes, really.

Martin CAMERON: We talk often about what the issues are, but we want to know what the solution is. As in, if you had the magic wand – I know the end goal is to not have any domestic violence, but we are not going to get there tomorrow. For the people that are coming to you wanting housing – and you have touched on it a little bit, the couple of bits and pieces that are needed – what is it that government can do, tangible stuff that we can do to make changes that will unlock safety and security for the mums and children and people that are fleeing domestic violence that you know in your heart would work? Is there anything?

Jelena DJURDJEVIC: I think that is why we have asked for the three things that we are asking for today. We think that would have impact. It would not solve everything, but it would definitely improve what is happening, and particularly with that refuge capacity, because we actually do not know whether there are people who do need that protective hiding that just are not getting it. Refuges save lives, and they support people who are at that highest risk, which is why we think it is really critical to further expand that network.

The CHAIR: Jelena, can you just expand: how long might someone and their family be in a refuge for?

Jelena DJURDJEVIC: There are some families that have been in refuge for 700 days, and we know that from our report last year. Some of that is also –

The CHAIR: What does that look like? Is that them being in the equivalent of a motel room, or is it them being in a house? What does it look like?

Jelena DJURDJEVIC: The refuges themselves – most of them now are core and cluster, as Page responded to, so they are kind of their own self-contained units. They have bedroom, kitchen, all of those things in place. Often they will have an outdoor area. The people that are staying the longest tend to be victim-survivors who do not have permanent residency, and there are a whole lot of challenges around that. But the average stay is increasing, again, because of that housing bottleneck. I do not have that number to hand. We do have some of that in our 2024 report, so we can definitely share that post the hearing in terms of what those numbers look like on average stays from the people that participated in that survey. Ideally, they should be moving out after about 12 weeks. It would be very rare for that to happen these days.

Page WILLIAMS: The refuge is certainly important, but we need to consider each of the three, because one without the other is only going to bottleneck. So we need that flow to go through. We go into refuge. The person or family might stay there for 12 weeks or what have you, then they might go into one of our crisis accommodation properties, or CAPs, as we like to call them. They will stay there for another eight to 10 weeks. Generally speaking, in that time we still have not found a long-term private rental. If we are lucky enough, we can get that person into a transitional managed property or a THM, a transitional housing management property. There they can stay for 12 months. With the changes to the tenancy Act there have been some changes in how long people can stay in properties. So we need that flow-through, because if we have got people that are staying in refuge for –

Jelena DJURDJEVIC: Seven hundred days.

Page WILLIAMS: extended periods of time, as Jelena said, that means that people that need to come through have not got the opportunity to do that. Each one of those areas is just as important as the other, and we need to strike the balance to be able to continue to have – and no-one wants it, but we need to keep that flow moving.

Martin CAMERON: With the set-up in your organisations, as in workers, feet on the ground, in the organisations to help the people coming through, do you have a set-up where if someone comes in you are then looking for a house, or have you got someone that is forward scouting – looking for X amount of houses, so when they move through the process, ‘Yes, we do have one’?

Page WILLIAMS: I can speak to our case management program. What we are looking at now with Quantum is what we are calling specialisation within specialisation. This is what community services workers need to do. No-one ever has one area of complexity in their life. Housing is such a major part of the work that we do as family violence support workers, and we have got to maintain our focus on risk because we know when we speak of risk we are talking of death or serious disability. So we need to keep the focus on risk, but a lot of the work that is needed to be done is around housing too, which is a specialisation in its own right. So that is what we are looking at: seeing whether or not we have those specialisations within specialisations so we have got a dedicated housing worker within our family violence team to be able to do all of that very, very intense work to try and move forward and get faster results, I guess.

Across the state I do not believe there is a blanket approach that fits all across metro and regional. What works in metro does not necessarily work in the regions, and what may work in the regions does not work within metropolitan Melbourne, so a blanket approach very rarely works. I am so grateful for the focus to be on a regional approach to this issue.

Wayne FARNHAM: At any point in time, through Gippsland, how many people trying to escape domestic violence will we have looking for emergency accommodation?

Page WILLIAMS: Within our case management, across Wellington, Baw Baw and Latrobe, we would be working with currently well over 500 people.

Wayne FARNHAM: On any given night?

Page WILLIAMS: No, not on any given night. Not all of those people would be experiencing homelessness. I have not brought the numbers with me. It is constant.

Wayne FARNHAM: And that is just across those three local government areas; that is not East Gipps and Wellington?

Page WILLIAMS: That is not including East Gippsland. Gippsland Lakes take care of – we do Wellington, TSA do Bass and South Gippsland, and then we have got our refuge as well. Our refuge is generally full at all times. The Orange Door, who are our primary intake point – case management cannot keep up with the demand. We certainly need more resources – as you said, people on the ground there working and ready to assist – but then work can only be done with the resources that we have at hand. I think we have got to, as I said, strike that balance.

The CHAIR: Page, could you give us a sense of your clients' age demographic? I know family violence impacts all strata of society; no-one is immune from it. But in terms of the people needing crisis care or crisis support, who are they? Can you put some faces on the data to make it feel more tangible for us?

Page WILLIAMS: Yes, for sure. I think age-wise we are probably looking at between 25 and 45. As you just said, it happens to anybody. As I said earlier, it is making sure that we are seeing children as victim-survivors in their own right and we start moving away from language that says children 'witnessed' or 'were present' – they are experiencing. We are also looking at older women, women that are coming through into their 50s, who may have been in a relationship, married or otherwise, for a very, very long time and find themselves in a place where they are brave enough to leave. It is across the board. We are seeing a lot of particularly younger people experiencing intimate partner violence. I guess the crossover is: where is that a child protection issue, or where is that a family violence support response? It really is across the board, I would like to say, and from all demographics as well.

The CHAIR: What I have heard from a service provider in Ballarat that has really stuck with me is that, because of the cost-of-living crisis and the shortage of available private rentals, people are getting together and moving in quicker before getting to know who someone is and then finding themselves in a violent relationship but literally having nowhere to go and therefore staying because they have given up their place because they were going to save some money: 'We see each other all the time anyway.' Would that be something that you could say is happening in Gippsland as well?

Page WILLIAMS: I could not say definitely one way or the other why people start to live together. That would be one reason. We see a lot of co-dependency and behaviours and lifestyles that are co-dependent. I think something within affordability and housing is we can certainly give examples of, say, a mother who has had child protection intervention, possibly because of the family violence that she has experienced for no fault of her own, where her children have been removed from her care. She may have been on a parenting allowance. That parenting allowance is now taken away from her, and she is on – what is it called?

The CHAIR: JobSeeker.

Page WILLIAMS: JobSeeker. So now she is down to JobSeeker, and she is homeless. Now she has no ability to afford the three-bedroom property that she needs to set up to show evidence to child protection that she is able to have her children back in her care. And that is devastating – absolutely devastating. And if it is devastating for us, what is it for her?

The CHAIR: It is also creating the next generation of people who are going to need your services.

Page WILLIAMS: Yes.

The CHAIR: What a morbid and solemn way to finish, but obviously these are issues that we want to talk about, because we are only going to address them in our inquiry when we explore them. Thank you for the work you do ultimately and for making the time to come and present to our inquiry. It is very compelling. To be here in Gippsland to hear about Gippsland – we know it is a statewide problem, but when we look at the data and we see the impact on families across Gippsland, it is so important that we have heard from you, so thank you. If there is any additional information that you would like to provide – I know, Jelena, you said that you had lots of data – we would love to receive it. Please be in contact with our secretariat, because we would really welcome any additional information. Thank you very much.

Committee adjourned.