

Inquiry into Homelessness in Victoria

Ms Michelle Thompson

Organisation Name:Family Access Network

Your position or role: Manager

SURVEY QUESTIONS

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

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

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

Working in Homelessness services

Are there any additional themes we should consider?

YOUR SUBMISSION

Submission:

Do you have any additional comments or suggestions?:

FILE ATTACHMENTS

File1: [5e585cf662147-Homelessness Inquiry submission FINAL.docx](#)

File2:

File3:

Signature:

Michelle Thompson

DRAFT submission to Parliamentary Inquiry into Homelessness

1. Changing scale and nature of homelessness

More and more young people are presenting to Family Access Network (FAN) who are experiencing long periods of homelessness. Homelessness is no longer a single, short-lived event, but has become a recurrent state of living for thousands of people in the eastern suburbs of Melbourne alone.

Factors contributing to this recurrent state of homelessness include family violence, inadequate financial support, insufficient and/or unsafe crisis accommodation, insufficient transitional accommodation, insufficient social housing, unaffordable and inaccessible private rentals, discrimination, and a lack of wrap-around support services to address people's complex and intersectional needs, particularly in these long periods of stress and instability.

A recent snapshot undertaken at FAN showed that 100% of our clients reported family violence as a contributing reason to their becoming homeless. Other primary reasons were a lack of affordable housing and inadequate financial support, such as Newstart payments. LGBTIQ+ young people in particular have all presented at FAN as a result of family violence and discrimination, and the waitlist for LGBTIQ+ safe housing at FAN has more than doubled in the last 12 months.

Specialist Homelessness Services are extremely limited in what support they are able to offer due to a lack of accommodation and funding. For the LGBTIQ+ community this lack of services is compounded by a lack of *safe* services. LGBTIQ+ people seeking homelessness support continue to face discrimination, rejection and violence both from service workers, and from other service users in accommodation facilities. While more organisations are undertaking LGBTIQ+ inclusive practices, sometimes with the formal recognition of Rainbow Tick accreditation, the gap between community experiences and service provision is still far too wide. In 2017, 43% of transgender young people accessing crisis accommodation felt that their gender identity was not respected (*Trans Pathways: the mental health experiences and care pathways of trans young people*, Telethon Kids Institute, Australia). These experiences contribute to compound trauma, increasing the complexity of client needs and undermining service aims.

2. Social, economic and policy factors that impact on homelessness and government policies that impact on service delivery

Lack of appropriate emergency accommodation

There is a severe lack of emergency accommodation services, as existing services are stretched thin and the levels of suitable emergency accommodation drops. The number of emergency housing options available in the eastern metropolitan region has dropped severely as properties are bought-up for private property developments.

While waiting for transitional housing, young people and children are often put up in low quality (and at times unsafe) motels and caravan parks. Emergency accommodation is

particularly unsafe for vulnerable minority groups such as the LGBTIQ+ community, who frequently experience violence in public spaces, and whose cultural safety cannot be assured by such facilities as motels, rooming houses, and caravan parks. There is currently no LGBTIQ-specific emergency accommodation in Victoria, despite this community experiencing homelessness at much higher rates than their peers.

For all young people the exorbitant rental price of caravan parks and rooming houses makes saving near impossible, trapping these young people in long-term homelessness.

Lack of social housing

There is a severe lack of social housing to prevent those who cannot afford to enter the private rental market from entering homelessness. Waitlists for social housing are astronomical. FAN clients listed as Homeless with Support housing (a priority category for vacancies in social housing) still encounter long wait times to access housing, with most waiting at least 2 years before being offered housing. With higher priority given to the victims of the recent bushfires, this will cause further delays for clients awaiting housing and further congest the THM system, leaving other vulnerable people sleeping rough and languishing in crisis.

Social housing is currently prioritised for children and families; with the current lack of social housing available it is unrealistic for a single person to expect to enter social housing at all. Single people make up over 50% of FAN's clients, and with an increasing unlikelihood of ever gaining access to social housing their only possible pathway to exit the homelessness system is to obtain private rental in an inadequate, expensive, and discriminatory private market.

Lack of affordable private rentals

Homelessness has its root causes in Australia's housing market. The low supply of housing makes it difficult for people on low income to access long-term sustainable housing. Victoria has the lowest level of public housing stock in Australia. Between 1994-95 and 2017-18 the number of households experiencing rental stress doubled (*Vulnerable private renters: evidence and options*, Productivity Commission Research Paper, September 2019, Australian Government Productivity Commission).

Over 60% of clients who seek services from FAN do so due to inadequate or inappropriate housing. These clients experience high levels of discrimination in trying to access private rentals, having either no source of income or being recipients of Centrelink payments – they are seen as being less-desirable tenants, even in shared accommodation. For example, just this month FAN was working to support a young person experiencing homelessness to access private rental. The client had successfully applied for and been offered a place by a real estate agent, but this offer was then withdrawn when the agent learnt the young person was a client of a homelessness service.

Inadequate transitional housing system

Transitional housing systems provide time and resources for people experiencing homelessness, supporting them to get into sustainable long-term accommodation. Transitional housing is particularly important for families on the social housing waitlist as it prevents children and their parents from entering homelessness. Unfortunately the system is often at full capacity due to the lack of houses available, with clients often denied appropriate support. Council to Homelessness Persons reports that 99 people (1 in 6 clients) are turned away from homelessness services every day due to a lack of housing and resources (AIHW, Specialist Homelessness Services Collection, 2016-2017). Certainly at FAN we often have to put clients on a waitlist, leaving them lingering in inappropriate, unsuitable, or even unsafe accommodation, and/or refer them on to other services in the hope that they might have the resources to help.

This overwhelmed system is further stressed by extended turnover times between tenancies – currently rooms are unavailable for lengthy periods waiting for routine maintenance between tenants. For example, FAN currently has a room that has remained empty for a year because the property has not yet been serviced and returned by the Transitional Housing Manager, and several other rooms that have been empty for three months for the same reason. That there are rooms sitting empty while the waitlist of clients grows shows that this is a system in failure.

The LGBTIQ+ community is particularly underserved by the transitional housing system. As a community who frequently experience rejection, bullying and violence from the public and peers, having LGBTIQ-exclusive accommodation is necessary and life-saving. FAN is the only service to offer LGBTIQ-exclusive transitional housing in Victoria, since 2006. FAN has just 6 beds exclusively for the use of young people from the LGBTIQ+ community, and a waitlist that's 19 people long. In 2019 VincentCare opened Ozanam House with some beds that are LGBTIQ-safe and inclusive, finally servicing a much needed gap in specialist services for LGBTIQ+ adults experiencing homelessness, but there are still many more beds needed, and much more work to address the root causes of homelessness (family violence, income poverty, lack of public housing and lack of affordable private rentals).

Inadequate income support

Newstart and Youth Allowance payments are far too low for young people to be able to afford to rent in the private rental market, especially alongside the increased cost of living, with spiking food and utility prices and increased education fees (such as textbooks and technology). Whilst rental prices increase every year, Newstart and Youth Allowance payments have long ago plateaued. These insufficient payments entrench young people in poverty, making accessing education and employment difficult to impossible. This entrenched poverty is particularly felt by marginalised groups such as the LGBTIQ+ community, who further experience income poverty and discrimination in employment.

People experiencing homelessness and needing to access transitional housing support are also required to pay a portion of any Centrelink and income payments in rent. The fact that people experiencing homelessness have to pay for transitional housing is a sign of a broken and heartless system, and it further congests and entrenches the homelessness cycle as

young people struggle to save up sufficient money to be able to afford private rental and exit the system.

Young people on welfare are also under onerous conditions to sustain their payment. Young people are to report their fortnightly income, even if homeless and without access to public transport or phone and internet connections – failure to report may result in suspension or cancellation of payment. Inconsistent income reporting may result in young people mistakenly receiving incorrect debt notices. The design of the welfare system wards young people off Newstart and Youth Allowance, denying them any source of income and making it more difficult to transition out of homelessness.

Lack of opportunity to develop the necessary skills to transition out of homelessness

Current educational and social institutions are not always successful in equipping young people with the appropriate life skills to successfully transition into adulthood. Often, throughout young people's pathway into homelessness, they are not provided with the opportunity to develop the life skills required to cope with the demands of their situation. Young people at risk or experiencing homelessness are often without support and are having to manage their health, employment, transport, accommodation and personal finances.

Young people who've had traumatic and distressing experiences, such as family violence, are still expected to manage co-living relationships without having been taught and modelled the appropriate personal and social skills. Life skills need to be developed to ensure that they are able to set and enforce healthy boundaries, treat others respectfully, and productively manage hostility and conflict. Underdeveloped social skills may impede on the person's ability to live collaboratively with other people, and lack of life skills greatly affects the likelihood of a person to sustain tenancy in either transitional housing or private rental. As such these young people are at high risk of eviction, and often placed back into precarious living situations.

The age and circumstances in which clients of FAN are experiencing homelessness often mean they have not had the opportunity to obtain their driver's license. For them, obtaining a driver's license is an important step to being more self-sufficient, and having personal access to transport would assist them greatly in managing the aforementioned demands of young adulthood. In particular, the young mum's at FAN find it difficult to rely on public transport to get their children to appointments. These clients already often face pre-judgement from health professionals that they may not be able to look after their children. As single parents living in transitional housing (which is not always close to public transport and services), trying to get young children to appointments on time via public transport is difficult, expensive, and stressful. If clients are late or cancel appointments due to transport, it then affects the treatment they receive. Ultimately this transport barrier places clients and their children at risk of accessing the vital healthcare they need.

3. Solutions

- Increase income support to an amount which allows people to live above the poverty line.
- Provide affordable housing options for young people and young families.
- An extended care guarantee for young people leaving care.
- Better emergency accommodation options, particularly for highly vulnerable groups such as young people.
- LGBTIQ-exclusive options in all forms of accommodation, to assist in client safety and build peer support and connections, improving client wellbeing outcomes.
- Establish a state-wide LGBTIQ resource program (such as the Children's Resource Program) to support Specialist Homeless Services in upskilling their service inclusivity for LGBTIQ people.
- Continue to fund and expand programs that have proven to work to reduce homelessness, such as early intervention programs for young people, LGBTIQ-specific family violence support, and Private Rental Assistance Program (PRAP).
- Increased funding for community programs which focus on the development of personal and social skills and encourages community and social connectedness.
- Expand the L2P program and the accompanying volunteer program to ensure program availability.
- Establish a low/no-cost car share scheme where people with low incomes and/or experiencing homelessness are able to access a vehicle short term.