

PAEC questions on notice – Justice Connect

1. **Ms Pauline Richards - I am interested in finding out what these projects do and gaining some additional insights into how this will make a difference to those organisations.**

About Justice Connect's Women's Homelessness Prevention Project

Justice Connect is grateful for the Victorian government's recent allocation of \$175,000 in vital core funding for the Women's Homelessness Prevention Project (**WHPP**) through the Integrated Services Fund.

Since 2014, the WHPP has kept women and children safely together in housing through integrated legal and social work assistance. It is the only service of its type in Victoria, and the WHPP's model was cited by the Law Council of Australia's Justice Project Final Report (August 2018) as best practice for successfully preventing and reducing homelessness. In five years, the WHPP has proven highly effective in breaking the links between housing insecurity, family violence and poverty, including by:

- holistically helping 280 women and 391 children through wrap-around legal, housing and social work supports;
- achieving an 84% success rate in finalised legal matters;
- preventing eviction into homelessness of 148 women and 202 children.

The WHPP provides intensive legal representation to prevent evictions into homelessness and advocate for victim-survivors with tenancies affected by family violence, as well as resolving debts and fines that are barriers to secure housing and keeping women and kids together. This intensive legal help is combined with the WHPP's social worker, who expertly helps women and their children to navigate tribunals and courts, to avoid the crisis of homelessness, and to stay safely together. Our social worker also directly links women and their children with WHPP partner organisations for family violence case-management, financial counselling, employment supports, housing services and community connections.

In September 2019, Pitcher Partners prepared a pro bono report that costed the benefit of the WHPP to be 6.3 times the level of investment, with a cost saving to government of \$4.9 million. The WHPP has also directly leveraged 19,256 hours of pro bono legal representation.

The Victorian government's recent funding allocation will enable the WHPP to continue assisting women such as Robyn to stay safely housed, which has never been more important than in the context of COVID-19.

Single mother and daughter facing family violence create new tenancy & regain financial independence

Robyn is a single-mother with a two year old daughter. She and her husband had been living in their private rental property for three years. When Robyn met with the WHPP, her husband had just been excluded from the property due to family violence. Robyn's husband was controlling and would not allow her to be on the lease or have any involvement in their finances, which caused the family to be solely reliant on the husband's income. When the family violence IVO was issued, the husband cancelled all credit cards and blocked Robyn from accessing the family's bank accounts.

WHPP lawyers successfully advocate for Robyn to stay safely in her property

Robyn was empowered to understand her legal rights and non-legal support options through advice from the WHPP lawyers and social worker. Through extensive legal advocacy, Robyn was able to have her husband's name taken off the lease and was able to enter into a new tenancy agreement in her name. The WHPP lawyers and social worker negotiated for the landlord to change the property's locks & install a security camera, including by sourcing brokerage.

WHPP social worker connects Robyn with financial counselling and employment support

Our social worker connected Robyn with financial counselling and material aid providers to help manage her bills, and assisted with funds towards her rent. The trust built by the WHPP social worker also led to Robyn disclosing her desire to return to work, having been prevented from doing this by her husband since 2011. We then connected Robyn with our job-readiness partner agency. Robyn has since secured part-time employment as an accountant, with her ability to remain safely housed and connected to her local community being key factors in her and her daughter regaining financial independence.

WOMEN'S HOMELESSNESS PREVENTION PROJECT



Over the past five years, we've kept women and children safely housed through intensive legal representation and social work support.

Our work has saved the Victorian Government and wider community **\$4.9 million** in cost savings.

Of finalised matters,
84%
were resolved successfully

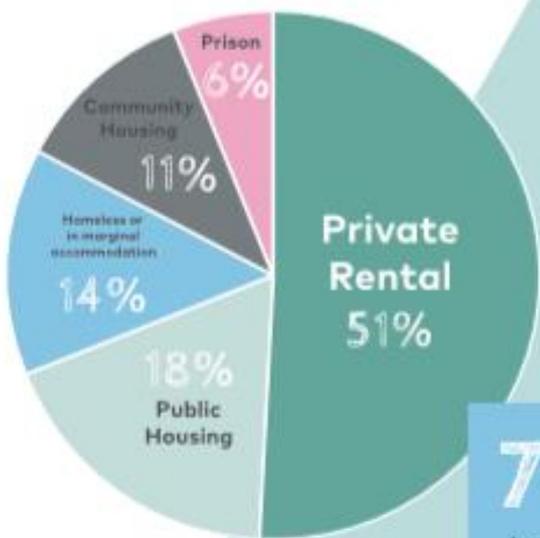
148
women and their children directly avoided eviction into homelessness



In five years, we helped
280
women
with **391** children in their care

Our social worker made
307
targeted referrals to support services

Who we helped:



10%
identified as Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander

76%
had mental health issues

84%
experienced family violence

94%
relied on Centrelink or had no income

About Westjustice's Multidisciplinary Settlement Justice Partnership (MSJP)

Newly arrived people are vulnerable to a multiplicity of legal and non-legal problems. Shortly after arrival in Australia they are required to negotiate everyday yet complex civil law issues, particularly: consumer issues (including credit, debt and unfair contracts), housing and tenancy, energy and utilities, employment (including discrimination), insurance, driving-related and other infringements and motor vehicle accidents.

To overcome barriers in access to justice, WEstjustice proposes to pilot an integrated Multidisciplinary Settlement Justice Partnership (MSJP) in partnership with select settlement agencies in the West. The MSJP will deliver multifaceted legal information, advice, and complex casework to newly arrived people through services embedded in key trusted settlement agencies. MSJP clients will have access to a range integrated multidisciplinary support.

While WEstjustice currently provides some civil legal services to newly arrived communities we cannot meet growing demand with the current model. An integrated MSJP will allow us to increase our reach and impact by more efficiently and effectively providing holistic client-centred services - streamlined, early intervention and timely assistance that targets the most vulnerable clients.

In addition, the MSJP project will strengthen the settlement services sector through an exchange of professional skills and knowledge. Lawyers will provide training and secondary consultations to build the capacity of settlement agency workers to provide timely, information, support and referrals, and settlement workers will provide cultural appropriate support and training to lawyers. This will include inclusion of our legal health check to assist with warm referrals and early identification of multiple legal issues.

2. Mr Sam Hibbins: After the six-month no-evictions period do you have any concerns in terms of increased evictions and increased risk of homelessness post that evictions period being over?

- Victoria's temporary Residential Tenancies provisions provide important protections to tenants, helping them to stay safely housed during COVID-19, including through:
 - A rent reduction negotiation process and dispute resolution scheme for tenants and landlords, recognising COVID-19 financial hardship, with built-in financial relief for tenants and landlords, which will assist Victorians to remain in rental properties on reduced rents;
 - Better safeguards for tenants to ensure evictions are an option of last resort, and are reasonable & proportionate in the circumstances.
- However, one of the key issues that the community legal sector are seeing regarding these COVID-19-related tenancy protections is that tenants are not aware of their rights and options, including where to get support. This means that tenants are often accruing significant rental arrears, feeling compelled to leave a tenancy because they can't afford the rent, or accepting agreements to defer rental payments rather than have their rent reduced. This is placing Victorian tenants at risk of having large rental arrears debts in the COVID-19 recovery period.
- Given this, we are concerned that the current surge in tenants facing housing insecurity will continue to increase once the moratorium ends and restrictions are lifted.
- In addition, without critical financial supports such as the JobKeeper Package and the continuation of an increased JobSeeker rate, more Victorians are likely to find themselves in financial insecurity over the next 12 months. This is likely to cause an increased number of tenants to be at risk for eviction for rental arrears after the temporary COVID-19 tenancy protections end, which is likely to cause further increased demand for government, community legal, housing, homelessness and health services.

- There needs to be an integrated and preventative response to avoid a rapid escalation of evictions and homelessness at the end of the legislated timeframe. This will need to incorporate consideration of better tenancy protections, which at a minimum, should include ensuring that there is no gap between the end of the COVID-19-related tenancy provisions (currently scheduled to conclude on 29 September 2020), and Victoria's Residential Tenancies reforms (currently scheduled to commence on 1 January 2021). As the COVID-19 response continues to develop over the coming months, it will be beneficial for the Victorian government to consider whether additional eviction safeguards are necessary to prevent homelessness from being heightened post-COVID-19.
- There will also need to be consideration of financial protections and relief for tenants at the end of the rent reduction period so that tenants are able to pay their normal rent and deal with any outstanding rental arrears in an affordable way.
- Finally, tenants will continue to need access to integrated legal, social work and financial assistance to deal with tenancy issues, debts and other compounding problems, such as family violence.